



Surviving a zombie apocalypse: Leadership configurations in extreme contexts

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journals.sagepub.com/home/mlq**David A Buchanan**

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Abstract

What can the classic zombie movie, *Day of the Dead*, tell us about leadership? In our analysis of this film, we explore leadership behaviours in an extreme context – a zombie apocalypse where survivors face persistent existential threat. Extreme context research presents methodological challenges, particularly with regard to fieldwork. The use of films as proxy case studies is one way in which to overcome these problems, and for researchers working in an interpretivist perspective, ‘social science fiction’ is increasingly used as a source of inspiration and ideas. The contribution of our analysis concerns highlighting the role of *leadership configurations* in extreme contexts, an approach not previously addressed in this field, but one that has greater explanatory power than current perspectives. In *Day of the Dead*, we observe several different configurations – patterns of leadership styles and behaviours – emerging, shifting and overlapping across the phases of the narrative, each with radically different consequences for the group of survivors. These observations suggest a speculative theory of leadership configurations and their implications in extreme contexts, for exploring further, with other methods.

Keywords

Extreme context, feature film, leadership, fictional narratives, process perspective, social science fiction, zombie apocalypse

Introduction

A group of survivors is cut off from society, threatened by zombies who feast on human flesh. There is no possibility of rescue or support. Compared with their attackers, they have superior intellect, mobility, weapons and other resources, but in zombie movies, most of the survivors die.

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Why? One answer is, ‘because that’s the story the writer wants to tell’. However, fictional narratives, by explaining how outcomes arise through a combination of factors interacting in a given context over time, are by definition implicit theories (Bell, 2008; Phillips, 1995; Savage et al., 2018; Wright, 1975). Our research question therefore is, what is the ‘theory on offer’?; how do leadership configurations in the zombie movie *Day of the Dead*, 1985 explain the poor survival rate in this extreme context?

Fictional narratives convey meaning from author to audience. Our approach thus adopts a constructivist perspective, in which interpretation of meaning is as important as authorship (Barry and Elmes, 1997; Czarniawska and De Monthoux, 1994). What follows, therefore, is our reading – one of several possibilities – of leadership themes in *Day of the Dead*. This fictional account is used as a source of inspiration, to trigger fresh thinking and ideas.

For initial purposes, an extreme context can be defined as a setting in which actors face persistent existential threat (we develop a more nuanced typology later). This can also be classified as a crisis situation, but most crisis research considers bounded incidents involving an immediate response and a return to normality. Our definition thus implies a crisis-as-process perspective, rather than crisis-as-event (Williams et al., 2017). Most commentators note that the fields of extreme context and crisis research lack shared definitions of terms (Buchanan and Denyer, 2013; Bundy et al., 2017; Hällgren et al., 2018). This lack of consensus arises, in part, because extreme contexts and crises are often socially constructed (Bundy et al., 2017; Lampel et al., 2009); an incident becomes a ‘crisis’, a context becomes ‘extreme’ when those involved interpret it as such.

Society has come to expect that any organizational setting can become extreme without warning, given contemporary geopolitical, religious, ideological and technological developments: for example, school shootings, extreme weather events, cyberattacks on healthcare systems terrorism in a shopping mall. And as Hannah et al.’s (2010) observe, ‘leadership in dangerous contexts is where effective leadership is indeed needed most’ (p. 181). Yet our understanding of crisis and extreme context leadership is weak. As the following review suggests, our knowledge relies on traditional concepts of focused and dispersed leadership. We will argue that these perspectives alone cannot capture the richness of leadership practice in extreme contexts, and that a complementary lens is required. The main aim of this article, therefore, is to begin to explore the nature of leadership configurations, through the zombie movie, *Day of the Dead*, and assess the implications of these configurations for the welfare of the survivor group. A further aim is to assess the research value of a zombie movie for advancing the theory and practice of extreme context leadership.

This article makes four contributions to our understanding of leadership in extreme contexts. First, we emphasize the significance of leadership configurations in extreme (‘surprising’) contexts, as an approach to understanding how leadership emerges and performs under such circumstances. Second, we illustrate how configurations emerge, overlap, and morph depending on circumstances. Third, we speculate with regard to the properties of leadership configurations, indicating a fresh research agenda, perhaps to pursue using other research methods, in other extreme, and routine, contexts. Fourth, taking the ‘evidence’ from this movie at face value, we identify implications for leadership practice in extreme contexts.

Leadership in extreme and crisis contexts

Extreme context leadership research has focused on leadership capabilities and styles, with some commentators suggesting that the required capabilities may reside in more than one individual. This approach reflects the familiar dualities of leaders versus followers, and focused (individual, heroic) versus distributed (dispersed, plural) leadership.

It is now widely recognized that leadership is often a collective effort (Buchanan et al., 2007; Denis et al., 2012; Gronn, 2011). In our own research (e.g. Buchanan and Moore, 2016; Jacobsson and Hällgren, 2016), we have seen how those traditional dualities fail to capture the complex realities of leadership practice in extreme contexts. Consistent with these observations, Fraher (2011) argues that in an extreme context, a high performing team ‘allows the most qualified individual to emerge and lead as required by operational scenarios’, and that, ‘if a team has a number of tasks to manage ... each member may exercise leadership at different times to accomplish the team’s goals’ (pp. 179–180). She concludes that teams that work well in a crisis allow the most qualified individuals to lead as required, with different members exercising leadership at different times. Baran and Scott (2010) similarly note that, ‘leadership necessarily involves all members of the organization with respect to their roles and the context in which they operate’ (p. 65).

Noting that individual and collective forms of leadership are both significant, and can coexist, Gronn (2009, 2011) argues that we should focus instead on *leadership configurations* as the unit of analysis. A configuration is defined as ‘a pattern or an arrangement of practice’ (Gronn, 2009: 383), which can involve different configurations of leadership attributes, behaviours and influence styles. This means that, ‘a hypothetical pattern of leadership in an organization may comprise some teams, networks and a series of individuals whose influence stems from their presumed charismatic inspiration’ (Gronn, 2009: 383). These configurations may include focused and dispersed leadership patterns, but can adopt many other forms, as our movie analysis shows. Just how these various leadership configurations emerge, the extent to which they ‘fit’ with (are appropriate to) the context and their different consequences have yet to be explored.

The actor-centric approach to extreme context leadership follows a well-established path. This tradition, starting in the early 20th century, generates lists of apparently necessary or desirable traits, abilities, characteristics and other attributes of good or successful leaders. For example, James et al. (2011) identify ‘obvious’ crisis leadership attributes: assertiveness, charisma, communication, confidence, decisive, determination, empathy, fast acting and unwavering assurance. James and Wooten (2005) identified six crisis leadership competencies: building trust, discouraging risky behaviour, identifying future vulnerabilities, making rapid decisions, taking courageous action and learning from crisis to effect change. From a survey of 1600 managers, Lane and McGurk (2009) explore ‘crisis-preparedness capabilities’ in relation to the financial crisis of 2008. These included dealing with ambiguity and uncertainty, having a realistic outlook and good relationships with employees, peers and external stakeholders, taking tough decisions, optimism, ability to inspire and align the team, knowing how to get things done informally and technical knowledge. In a survey of 2500 executives, Keller et al. (2010) explore turning around corporate crises. Leadership tactics appropriate for this context included setting aspirational targets, creating a structure, maintaining energy, focusing on achievements and engaging others.

From an analysis of ‘near misses’ where firefighters escaped injury or death, Baran and Scott (2010) identify eight crisis leadership themes: maintaining situational awareness, setting direction using formal and informal authority, facilitating sensemaking through verbal cues, drawing on past experience, behaving as expected to reduce ambiguity, adjusting behaviour to changing conditions, role modelling expected behaviours and trusting others when necessary. These themes describe a social process which they label ‘organizing ambiguity’. They conclude that, ‘groups within dangerous contexts must continually negotiate the ambiguous nature of their surroundings in an attempt to make sense of what is going on, what it means, and what the group should do next’ (Baran and Scott, 2010: 61).

Summarizing studies of combat leadership, Campbell et al. (2010) conclude that leadership effectiveness is enhanced by shared mental models, leader creativity, emotion management, a cohesive team climate and successful performance. One study involved Australian military

advisors who had served in the Vietnam War (Fisher et al., 2010). That research identified 10 ‘bright’ (desirable) competencies and 3 ‘shadow’ (negative) themes. The ‘bright’ competencies were as follows: courage, adventurous/risk-taking, learning orientation, caring ethos, leading by example, level of experience, stamina, expertise/control, self-reliance and humour. The ‘shadow’ themes were as follows: highly stressed, violent credo, and unlawful or unethical behaviour. They suggest that extreme contexts can encourage the expression of shadow themes:

in a context where excess violence occurs frequently and with ease, the development of a culture of violence may occur ... the lack of taboos and prohibitive rules found in war may allow leaders to rationalize behaviours that would be unacceptable in a different context. (Fisher et al., 2010: 106–107)

The settings for this research are hardly equivalent: financial crisis, corporate turnaround, fire-fighting and combat. However, from a constructivist perspective, those contexts are generally regarded by those who are directly involved, and by observers, as extreme in some dimensions, placing similar demands on leaders. It is thus perhaps not surprising that research in these strikingly different settings has identified some strikingly similar leadership attributes. Our contention, however, is that debating which leadership traits and skills are more important overlooks the more significant role of leadership configurations.

With regard to crisis leadership styles, Hannah et al. (2010) identify two perspectives, one advocating a directive leadership and the other a participative style. They conclude that a mix of styles may be appropriate – ‘complex adaptive leadership’ – and that the appropriate balance will vary with the nature or phase of the threat. Other research has also suggested that choice of leadership style is contingent (Williams et al., 2017). The contingencies impacting leadership in extreme contexts are not well understood (Hannah and Parry, 2014). From a study of 46 mental health crisis management teams, Alimo Metcalfe et al. (2007) advocate an ‘engaging’ style: ‘someone who encourages the development of an organization characterized by a culture based on integrity, openness and transparency, and a genuine valuing of others’ (p. iii). Engaging leaders are decisive – but they are also open and transparent, value others, are concerned with their well-being, are able to unite stakeholders in pursuit of a joint vision and encourage critical questioning. In this study, teams worked best with flat hierarchies and ‘whole team’ approaches.

These studies of attributes and styles suggest that it is not ‘obvious’ that crisis leadership should be assertive and directive. From an analysis of the 1996 Mount Everest disaster, in which eight climbers died, Kayes (2004) concludes that directive leadership was one of the causes of the tragedy. Fraher (2011) describes the USS Greenville disaster in 2001, in which an American nuclear submarine collided with and sank a Japanese fishing trawler, killing nine of her crew. She attributes the cause of this disaster to the charismatic submarine captain and his directive style, which discouraged the crew from questioning his orders.

We thus see two broad perspectives in current research. One focuses on identifying the characteristics, capabilities, behaviours and other attributes appropriate for leaders working in extreme contexts. Assuming a single formal leader, some commentators emphasize a directive style, some advocate a participative approach and others adopt a contingency perspective. But it seems that directive leadership is damaging – even fatal – in some circumstances. A second perspective focuses on leadership as a collective enterprise, suggesting ‘whole team’ or ‘best in team’ approaches to determining leadership roles to cope with the complexity, uncertainty and fluidity of extreme contexts which can overwhelm the abilities of any one individual. The contrasts and tensions within and between these two perspectives suggest the value of a complementary lens, focusing on different *patterns* of leadership behaviour or, following Gronn’s (2009) terminology, leadership configurations.

As we will show, leadership configurations are central to the narrative of the movie *Day of the Dead*. It appears that different configurations have different implications for the behaviour of those caught up in an extreme context, and for the outcomes. Leadership configurations are not necessarily stable, but evolve and shift with circumstances – and with the ways in which those involved interpret those circumstances. The concepts of focused and distributed leadership thus offer at best partial descriptions of complex interpersonal and group dynamics.

Methodological challenges and social science fiction

Extreme contexts and crises pose significant challenges for researchers. Often occurring suddenly and unexpectedly, such phenomena are difficult to study in real time. Observation is rarely an option. Proximity may expose researchers to danger. Access to crisis settings will usually be denied. There are ethical dilemmas in approaching those who may have been traumatized. Campbell et al. (2010) note that, ‘leadership research in dangerous contexts is nearly impossible’ (p. 2). James et al. (2011) note that, ‘it is unlikely that researchers can capture first-hand information from organizational leaders in the midst of crisis’ (p. 481). One of the research challenges therefore lies with methodological innovations that permit analysis while limiting exposure to danger (Hällgren et al., 2018).

The case for using ‘social science fiction’ as a research tool has a number of strands. First, movies and television allow researchers safely to observe behaviour in extreme contexts. See, for example, the studies of *Buffy the Vampire* (Cordesman, 2001), *Stepford Wives* and *Matrix* (Czarniawska and Gustavsson, 2008), the Swedish crime drama *Martin Beck* (Buus, 2009) and *Battlestar Galactica* (Fey et al., 2016).

Second, fiction serves as a

thought-provoking medium that researchers can use to get inspiration and ideas – a fruitful starting point for organizational analysis, as it gives a much different and more expansive view of organizational and institutional life than the prevailing scientific-professional manner of studying organizations. (Savage et al., 2018: 3)

Reed and Penfold-Mounce (2015) treat the television series *The Walking Dead* as ‘speculative fiction’, which asks, ‘what would happen if institutions and authority structures were to disappear – how would people respond?’ (p. 127). They argue that the fantasy setting exaggerates these issues, bringing them into focus. Phillips (1995) also noted that film narratives are often deliberately idiosyncratic, illustrating outliers and the extraordinary, which can be valuable from a research perspective.

Third, fictional narratives are implicit theories, explaining how outcomes are achieved through a sequence of events in a given context over time. Discussing Western movies, Wright (1975) argues that,

[A] narrative is not just possibly an explanation; it is inevitably an explanation. It explains how a certain situation came about from a prior situation. To explain this change, the story presents all of the information necessary to understand the change. (p. 128)

Hassard and Buchanan (2009) also argue that, ‘feature films can be viewed as theoretical narratives, case studies, and proxy documentaries, and as a source of primary data which can be useful with regard to theory development and testing’ (p. 632). They also note that film narratives often portray the extreme, the unusual and the inaccessible, rather than the typical (and more readily studied).

Penfold-Mounce et al. (2011) illustrate the use of social science fiction in their analysis of the television series *The Wire*. Asking if this is ‘better sociology’ than sociologists produce, they note that the action encourages viewers to conduct ‘thought experiments’, to explore and test ideas, possibilities, consequences and repercussions of particular decisions and actions. Holt and Zundel (2014) argue that the power of *The Wire* as a research vehicle lies with the way in which social conditions are ‘investigated and expressed using fiction, especially the opportunity to show passion (conviction), to evoke the world from within (expressive power), and to remind us of what is particularly human in the unfolding of events (tragedy)’ (p. 578). These are examples of what Czarniawska and Rhodes (2006) call ‘strong plots’ and ‘interpretive templates’, with plots unfolding over lengthy periods of time, in several locations, involving several people. Panayiotou (2015) observes that film becomes a learning tool by constructing interpretive templates, challenging dominant paradigms. Those templates, she suggests, have more influence on management practice than classroom conversations, and films ‘offer simultaneously the dominant organizational paradigms but also a fruitful ground through which these paradigms can be challenged, even subverted’ (p. 441).

The case for using fiction in research is underpinned by a challenge to the notion that ‘fiction is the opposite of reality’. In their study of laboratory work, Latour and Woolgar (1986) showed that what appears to be ‘hard science’ involves a subjective ‘fact-establishing method’ designed to persuade others, rendering meaningless the distinction between natural and soft social sciences. Also dismissing the ‘fiction versus reality’ argument, Savage et al. (2018) observe that fictions ‘hold real power over people in that they shape how people make sense of organizations and are thus rather than derivative or secondary impressions very much the essence of organizations’ (pp. 3–4). However, it is necessary to consider the *choice* of fiction that research can use as a source of inspiration and ideas.

A zombie movie as a source of inspiration?

Given the variety of fictional accounts available, why choose a zombie movie? Exploring the contribution of extreme context research to organization and management studies, Hällgren et al. (2018) differentiate between actual and potential events, and between events that are related or unrelated respectively to the activities of the local setting. They thus identify four types of extreme context: risky, emergency, disruptive and surprising (Figure 1).

Hällgren et al. (2018) observe that disruptive contexts (actual events, unrelated) are the least researched. Most research focuses on risky (potential, related) and emergency (actual, related) categories. As a theoretical possibility, the fourth quadrant (potential, unrelated) has received little or no attention, as this involves studies of unexpected incidents that have not yet happened, and which would not be related to an organization’s activities. This is a ‘surprising context’. A zombie attack is an iconic example of an event in this category, and a zombie movie can thus take us into a previously unresearched area.

To create realistic accounts, some movies and television programmes are based on field and documentary research. Examples include *13 Days* (directed by Roger Donaldson) and *The Wire* (lead author David Simon). *The Wire* has attracted several researchers interested in the sociological themes which it depicts. Zombie movies, in comparison, may be seen as having little or no value as they are surreal, exaggerated, gruesome and ‘off limits’. However, Barry and Elmes (1997) point out that effective narratives require two properties which are in tension: credibility (believability) and defamiliarization (novelty). Credible narratives can appear familiar and mundane, while novel narratives can be unbelievable. Zombie movies have a credibility problem. Nevertheless, novel narratives may be better able to trigger interesting, fresh ideas, by encouraging viewers to see

		Contexts activities	
		Related	Unrelated
Events occurrence	Potential	<i>Risky</i>	<i>Surprising</i>
	Actual	<i>Emergency</i>	<i>Disruptive</i>

Figure 1. Typology of extreme contexts (Hällgren et al., 2018: 117).

things in new and different ways. Even in zombie movies, the characters’ behaviour needs to maintain a level of realism to be accepted.

Zombies have been used to trigger fresh thinking in the cause of real-world training, education and development. Coker (2013) uses the zombie apocalypse novel, *World War Z* (Brooks, 2006), to teach strategic studies. The novel’s author lectures at the United States Navy College, and the book is now a film (*World War Z*, 2013). According to Coker (2013), the Sutter Roseville Medical Center in California has a zombie apocalypse drill, and in 2012, the US Department of Health Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published an online guide for dealing with the living dead; preparing for a fictional attack provides tips for dealing with real disasters. Drezner (2015) uses the example of a global zombie attack to explore theories of international politics. Reed and Penfold-Mounce (2015) use the TV series *The Walking Dead* to examine consumerism, interpersonal cooperation and conflict, and gender and race relations. Locatelli (2016) also interprets *The Walking Dead* as ‘speculative fiction’ exploring how survivors shape their individual and group relations. The US Strategic Command (2011) uses a training exercise, *Counter-Zombie Dominance Operations*, to stimulate creative thinking in response to unexpected threats and develop disaster preparedness. These examples show how the zombie metaphor can be used to generate propositions about human behaviour in settings that we have yet to experience directly, and inform strategies for dealing with the unpredictable.

The film director George Romero saw the zombie genre as ‘a blank canvas for social commentary and a way to explore what it means to be human’ (Accomando, 2017). His first zombie movie, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), was made during the cold war, echoing the apocalyptic expectations and the racism which characterized that era. The modern shopping mall inspired *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), which is a critique of mass consumerism. *Day of the Dead* (1985) was described by Romero as ‘A tragedy about how a lack of human communication causes chaos and collapse even in this little pie slice of society’.

Zombies have thus been seen as a metaphor for the apocalypse, or simply for ‘the anxiety of the day’, which might include class, race, gender, sexuality, consumer capitalism or uncontrolled immigration (Boluk and Lenz, 2011; Stratton, 2011). Our use of fiction in this article, therefore, also reflects the standpoint of Asma (2014) who regards monsters as ‘beneficial foes’, stimulating our imagination, and prompting us to consider how we might behave in surprising, threatening and chaotic extreme contexts. Our theory building is therefore speculative and propositional, based on the imaginative ‘what if’ scenario of a zombie plot, and does not seek to explain or describe actual social or organizational events. Our focus is with leadership configurations – but the genre, and this movie, is open to an analysis of other themes, including racism, sexism and inter-professional rivalry.

The central question of Romero's movies and other zombie narratives concerns how survivor groups will manage in such extreme situations, where normal authority structures and social institutions have collapsed. The answer is 'badly'. This is the starting point for identifying the 'theory on offer' in his movies, as subsequent questions then explore *why* the survivor group, with superior intellect and resources, do such a lousy job of protecting themselves.

Zombie movies are valuable, therefore, not because they portray everyday life, but because they challenge our assumptions, and allow us safely to study a rich and complex extreme context where we can observe the behaviours of those involved as they confront the multiple problems that they face over a prolonged period. Why do the zombies win? Under what conditions do survivors escape? Those assessments can inform individual, group and organizational responses to other threats. Paradoxically, the behaviour that we observe in movies may often be more realistic than the responses captured by researchers using traditional methods (interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, archives). 'Reel life' and 'real life' overlap (McCarty, 2004). Arguing that all research methods are flawed, McGrath (1981) advocates the use of an array of methods. Movies thus give us an additional method, another lens, through which to observe the behaviours in which we are interested. A story about a survivor group dealing with a zombie attack is a theory explaining their successes and failures. This perspective brings to life the characters and events involved, generating a rich, deep, culturally embedded, temporally sensitive and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon – leadership – in which we are interested (Langley and Tsoukas, 2010).

Analytical approach

We chose for analysis *Day of the Dead* (1985, director George Romero) for four reasons. First, leadership themes in general, and leadership configurations in particular, are prominent elements in the movie's narrative, as the analysis below illustrates. The platform for qualitative case research should be able to illustrate the chosen phenomenon (Flyvbjerg, 2006), and not all zombie movies portray leadership themes in this way. In *Day of the Dead*, the survivor group faces a sustained threat, and leadership configurations shift as the action unfolds. It is likely that these leadership patterns may be seen in other contexts. Second, the extreme context is one of social collapse where blue light services, healthcare and the military no longer function. Third, this classic movie established the stereotype of the undead flesh-eating zombie with which we are familiar today. And finally, as explained earlier, the movie allows a detailed study of leadership in a 'surprising' context which is not amenable to conventional research methods (Campbell et al., 2010; Hällgren et al., 2018).

Our analytical approach has four stages. First, we familiarized ourselves with the film, the cast and the narrative, making provisional analytical notes. Second, having discussed our respective notes, we turned to commentary on leadership configurations (Gronn, 2009, 2011) – which appeared to help explain the shifts in influence and leadership in the narrative. Third, we conducted a more detailed analysis using Langley's (1999, 2009) temporal bracketing strategy to structure the description of events, generating comparative units of analysis for exploring theoretical ideas. Finally, we identified the leadership configurations and behaviours illustrated in those segments to capture the movie's explanation for the survivor group's behaviour, and the outcomes. Each step served to validate the analysis of leadership and the usefulness of the case by repeatedly challenging our interpretation.

Who's in charge?

Our analysis explores two themes. The first concerns the leadership configurations that emerge in this context. The second concerns the links that are suggested by the narrative between leadership

configurations and the fate of the survivor group – the movie’s ‘theory on offer’. Our temporal bracketing strategy subdivides the film into four segments, identifying the leadership configurations illustrated in each. This approach also allows us to explore the crisis-as-process nature of the events unfolding over time.

The world has been overrun by zombies. Our 12 survivors are based in an underground army storage facility. This is an ‘impromptu’ group created at short notice, with no time to prepare (Jacobsson and Hällgren, 2016). The group comprises three teams: army (seven), scientific (three) and helicopter crew (two). The army role is to support and protect the science team. The task of the scientific team is to identify the cause of the zombie pandemic, and to find a way to cure or to reverse the re-animation process. At first, the teams appear to cooperate well, but only three of them survive. How does the narrative explain this tragic outcome?

Table 1 provides an overview of how leadership configurations emerge, shift and combine across the four segments of the narrative. These configurations can be defined as follows:

<i>Focused leadership</i>	a single person in charge – the traditional concept of leadership
<i>Ambiguous leadership</i>	unclear who is in charge, many giving orders simultaneously
<i>Competing leadership</i>	two or more individuals arguing that they should be in charge
<i>Network formation</i>	a step prior to forming a self-organizing team
<i>Leadership vacuum</i>	a complete absence of leadership, nobody in charge
<i>Self-organizing team</i>	leadership shared by group members who have common goals

Segment one: *Hello, is anyone there? (15 minutes)*

The helicopter sweeps across the countryside, looking for other survivors. There are none. The radio has a limited range. Nobody responds to their calls. There are four people in the helicopter: the pilot John (no surname), radio operator McDermott, one of the army privates, Salazar, and one of the scientists, Bowman. In this segment, leadership is initially focused: Bowman is in charge of the search.

Back at base, leadership becomes ambiguous, as Bowman and the three soldiers each think that they have the most expertise; the male soldiers feel that they have more authority than the female scientist. As a result, teamwork is poor, and almost disastrous. Focus is restored when Bowman takes charge again to protect Salazar. Bowman’s leadership style is at first resilient, assertive and caring. When she regains control, she is caring, autocratic, aggressive and fast acting. We see these shifting configurations in the dialogue.

Focused leadership

Bowman: ‘Send again’ [when there is no response to radio calls]
‘Right, let’s set down. Set down John’ [Bowman leads the search]
(back at base)
‘Miguel [Salazar], come on, let’s get below. Miguel, what can I do? Let me help you’ [sees that he is stressed and wants to help]

Ambiguous leadership

Rickles: ‘Jump in soldier, we gotta bring in two more dumb fucks’ [zombies, kept in a separate compound] ‘Get in here soldier’ [motorized cart for travelling around the facility]

Table 1. Leadership configurations and behaviours in *Day of the Dead*.

Segment	Leadership configurations	Leadership behaviours
1 00.00 - 00.15	<i>Focused leadership – single leader Bowman</i>	Resilient, ‘strong’, prepared to take risks, attention to detail, caring, leads by example, takes control of the situation and assertive – explains decisions
	<i>Ambiguous leadership</i>	Not clear who is in charge, chaotic, poor collaboration, fearful, anxious, highly stressed, insults and sexual harassment of sole female, and ineffective teamwork
	<i>Focused leadership – Bowman regains control</i>	Autocratic – threatens violence to save Private Salazar
2 00.15 - 00.45	<i>Focused leadership – Rhodes assumes command</i>	Clear, decisive, unwavering, aggressive, autocratic, intimidatory, verbal abuse and threats, violent and divisive, insensitive, not interested in views of others, nobody is allowed to challenge him, attempts to resolve tension are ignored, emotions are ignored, army and science team goals contradictory, and no mutual respect or collaboration
	<i>Competing leadership – Logan versus Bowman</i>	No shared goals among the science team, Logan wants to ‘domesticate’ the zombies, Bowman is looking for a ‘cure’ and is open to discussion, but they make no progress and lose credibility
3 00.45 - 01.15	<i>Network formation</i>	Bowman befriends the two helicopter crew members
	<i>Focused leadership – Rhodes is still in control</i>	Becomes even more aggressive, abusive, autocratic, empathy, respect, caring not part of his skill set, racial insults directed at John the helicopter pilot, shoots Logan and Fisher, refuses to give any more support to science group, forces an armed standoff, and puts McDermott and Bowman into the zombie compound
4 01.15 - 01.30	<i>Self-organizing team</i>	John, McDermott and Bowman cooperate to save Salazar; spontaneous collaboration, shared goal; no clear leader; their joint action forces Rhodes to stand down
	<i>Leadership vacuum</i>	Rhodes abandons his men, tries to escape alone, the army escape attempts fail and all die
	<i>Self-organizing team</i>	John, McDermott and Bowman are self-reliant, working together towards shared goal – helicopter to a safe island

Steele: ‘Get in here soldier’

Bowman: ‘Two of you can’t go in there alone, it’s too dangerous. I’ll go’

Bowman: ‘This shows it was the 15th the last time you [Rickles] took any out. That can’t be right. You’ve got to write them up. It’s essential’

Steele: ‘You’re [Bowman] not strong enough for up here. Send up the pole. I don’t want ya up here lady’

Salazar: ‘Let go of the pole. Let go of the goddam pole’

Steele: ‘Hook her [a zombie] up will ya, hook her. Come on, take the other one outa there’ (when another zombie is captured)

Focused leadership

Bowman: ‘Let him go Steele. He shouldn’t have been up there in the first place’ [when Steele attacks Salazar, accusing him of almost getting Rickles killed by the zombie]. ‘Stop

it. Let him go [pulls out her gun and aims it at Steele]. Let him go, dammit, or I'll cut you in half' [Steele backs down].

Segment two: I'm in command now (30 minutes)

In this segment, we see two distinct leadership configurations, and network formation. First, there is a change in focused leadership as the army Captain Rhodes assumes command. His style is clear and assertive, and his behaviour is intimidatory, aggressive and divisive; he becomes increasingly autocratic, abusive, insensitive and violent. Second, the two key members of the science team are pursuing different goals – Bowman and Doctor Logan. There is competing leadership, and as they have failed to make progress with the research, they begin to lose credibility with the army group. Third, in response to Rhodes' approach, Bowman befriends the two members of the helicopter crew, creating a support network with a common vision.

Focused leadership

Rhodes: 'You'll work with what you got Fisher [when the scientists complain about poor working conditions]. You and your playmates are running out of friends fast around here' 'I'm in command now, and you'd better start showing me some results. The way I see it, lady, I'm not so sure we need you at all. I'm not even sure just what the hell you're doing in there, just what the hell it is my men are risking their asses for' 'I'm calling a meeting for seven o'clock tonight. I want everybody present. Everybody, lady, including your boyfriend. Anybody else have any questions about the way things are going to run around here from now on?' 'You'd better start showing me some results and you'd better not piss me off. Nothing happens around here without my knowing about it. Anybody fucks with my command, they get executed'

Competing leadership

Logan: 'It can be domesticated, Sarah, can't you see? [showing Bowman the results of his work]. It can be conditioned to behave the way we want it to behave'

Bowman: 'I thought we were going to stop work on the neural-physical and concentrate on something more practical?'

Logan: 'These findings are central to the condition. I will not stop any work that might lead to an answer'

Bowman: 'You're just proving theories that were advanced months ago, and you're not proving them correctly. You're wasting time trying to define what's happening instead of looking for what's making it happen. We are losing the cooperation of the men. I'm not sure they won't try to shut us down'

Logan: 'I'll show them results. I'll show them that these creatures can be domesticated without the surgery. We've got to do this Sarah'

Network formation

John: 'Welcome to civilization, Sarah' [McDermott has steered Bowman away from squabbling soldiers. They return to where he and John are living in a old cabin called 'The Ritz']

Bowman: 'This is pretty nice. I came down here to get drunk' [they have a conversation about values, goals, sense of purpose]

- Bowman: ‘You have the protection of this facility, you eat our food, you drink our water, and you don’t lift a finger to help’
- John: ‘We don’t believe in what you’re doing here Sarah [laughing]. What you’re doing is a waste of time, and time is all we got left’
- Bowman: ‘What I’m doing – it’s all there’s left to do’

Segment three: Is this your progress? (30 minutes)

In this segment, we again see Rhodes’ focused leadership (aggressive, abusive, autocratic), and the creation of a self-organizing team. Rhodes displays his style on discovering that Logan has domesticated a zombie by feeding him body parts from dead soldiers. Rhodes’ leadership is challenged when attempt to capture some is more chaotic than the last. One zombie breaks loose and Salazar is bitten on the arm. With the help of John and McDermott, Bowman amputates Salazar’s arm to stop the infection from spreading – the self-organizing team’s first success. Rhodes, however, wants to execute Salazar on the grounds that he will become a zombie. This results in an armed stand-off. Rhodes and his men back down. When John refuses to help Rhodes and his men to escape, Rhodes shoots the scientist, Fisher, then forces Bowman and McDermott into the zombie compound where they escape through the tunnels, helping each other to fight off zombie attacks. There are now two teams in an adversarial relationship: Rhodes and his men, on the one hand, and Bowman and the helicopter crew, on the other. The latter start to form a cohesive three-person team.

Focused leadership

- Rhodes: ‘They’re dead, and you want to teach them tricks? Is this your progress?’ [after Logan demonstrates his ‘domesticated’ zombie Bub]
- ‘From now on, you ain’t getting shit from me and my men. Get outa there Steele, we got better things to do’ [backing down when Bill and John force an armed stand-off]
- ‘What are you giving him in there Frankenstein? [Logan’s nickname]. Those are my men in there [storage locker]’ [Rhodes shoots the doctor, then shoots Fisher to persuade John to fly the helicopter]

Self-organizing team. There is limited dialogue from this point onwards. Bowman, McDermott and John collaborate spontaneously to achieve the shared goal of amputating Salazar’s arm. This is the first example of successful (leaderless) teamwork in the film.

Segment four: Fly us to the promised land (15 minutes)

The configurations illustrated in this segment include a leadership vacuum, and the self-organizing team which scores its second success – escape.

Leadership vacuum. Next, Salazar opens the compound gate and leads the zombies to the elevator platform, which he activates before they devour him and enter the underground facility. When Rhodes is distracted, John overpowers him, takes his guns and follows Bowman and McDermott into the zombie compound. Steele and Rickles discover that they can’t repair the elevator, and they are trapped. When the zombies enter the facility, Rhodes abandons his men and makes a run for it. He locks a door behind him, trapping his men with the zombies. They are overrun and killed.

Rhodes is shot and wounded by Bub who chases him into the arms of a horde of hungry zombies who devour him.

Self-organizing team. In the zombie compound, John, McDermott and Bowman help each other to fight off their attackers. They find a ladder in the escalator shaft, continuing to help each other to fight off zombies as they climb, and reach the helicopter just before it is overrun. Leadership rotates naturally around the team as circumstances change. At the end of the film, having escaped ‘to the promised land’, we leave them on their desert island. Safe – for now.

Discussion

Rhodes and extreme context leadership

To what extent is Rhodes a model extreme context leader? He is in command for most of the movie. He displays the ‘obvious’ characteristics of a model crisis leader: assertive stance, determination, confidence, unwavering assurance, fast acting and decisive (James et al., 2011). However, he lacks many of the other capabilities that research indicates are desirable: dealing with uncertainty, realistic outlook, good relationships, able to inspire others, engaging others collaboratively, concern for others’ well-being, valuing and respecting others, establishing a shared vision, encouraging critical questioning, using formal and informal authority, using humour and managing interpersonal emotions (Alimo-Metcalfe et al., 2007; Baran and Scott, 2010; Fraher, 2011; Hannah et al., 2010; Lane and McGurk, 2009).

Not the model leader for this context, he instead demonstrates what to avoid – deploying autocratic, directive and divisive behaviours, and not balancing these with a more caring, engaging and collaborative style. Does Rhodes lack the capabilities and the personality to function effectively as a leader in this context? The army promoted him to the rank of Captain, so he must have displayed some desirable qualities. In the study of Vietnam veterans cited earlier, Fisher et al. (2010) identified two ‘shadow’ leadership themes – ‘highly stressed’ and ‘violent credo’. The expression of these themes, they argue, is encouraged in an extreme context where violence is normalized. It may thus be unfair to blame Rhodes for his inappropriate behaviour. He has been given an unusual army assignment (looking after a bunch of boffins), he faces the same threat as the others, he is as fearful, anxious and stressed as they are – and he holds the senior army rank. His leadership style and behaviours may thus be a consequence of the extreme context in which he is placed.

It is perhaps paradoxical that Rhodes’ dysfunctional leadership style encourages the formation of an informal friendship network which morphs into a successful self-organizing team. The three who survive do not have a leader. But they have a common goal – escape to a deserted island. They do not need someone ‘in command’ to direct them, or to explain how to achieve their goal.

Leadership configurations in a surprising context

Extreme context and crisis leadership research has focused on the capabilities and attributes of single leaders, with the role of distributed leadership being recognized more recently (Hannah et al., 2010). The main contribution of this article, however, lies with the manner in which *leadership configurations* emerge and develop in extreme contexts. In contrast with how researchers have used social science fiction in general, and films in particular (Bell, 2008; Panayiotou, 2015), we have chosen a genre and a movie that dramatizes events beyond what could be seen as realistic – a zombie apocalypse. But as we have shown, this represents a previously unresearched domain – a ‘surprising’ context (Hällgren et al., 2018), in which the role of leadership configurations is

particularly evident. A second contribution of this article, therefore, is to demonstrate what can be learned from surreal, exaggerated and ‘off limits’ movies. The power of *Day of the Dead* has three dimensions. First, the plot adopts a processual perspective that allows a plausible story to unfold. Second, social criticism concerning the brutality of human behaviour is evident, along with the illustration of how one group survives. Third, the action is driven by those whose with dominant (if dysfunctional) leadership characteristics.

Regarding this movie as ‘speculative fiction’ (Locatelli, 2016; Reed and Penfold-Mounce, 2015), *Day of the Dead* highlights the potentially significant role of leadership configurations in extreme contexts. It also hints at the roles which these configurations play, leading us to speculate with regard to extending Gronn’s concept with regard to *fluid configurations*, *effective configurations*, *configuration coexistence*, *self-leadership* and *equifinality*.

Fluid configurations. This narrative illustrates how different leadership configurations can emerge, succeed and fail, over time, as conditions change, and as participants’ understanding of their situation changes. Gronn (2009, 2011) argues that ‘configuration’ is simply a label, a category, an appropriate unit of analysis and that this is not a new type of leadership. The labels attached to the leadership configurations that emerge in this narrative include focused leadership, ambiguous leadership, competing leadership, network formation, leadership vacuum and self-organizing team. These configurations coexist and follow on from each other. Bowman takes charge again when ambiguous team leadership leads to potentially harmful violence. The anxiety, stress and uncertainty appear to trigger and to reinforce the appropriateness (for some members of the group) of Rhodes’ directive leadership style. But Rhodes’ increasingly intimidatory, abusive and violent behaviour encourages the creation of a small informal network, which then develops into a successful self-organizing team.

Effective configurations. What counts as ‘effective’ leadership is a controversial issue, as different stakeholders define this in different ways. Effectiveness can thus be regarded as socially constructed concept, influenced by the nature of the context. It is perhaps, therefore, not surprising that Gronn (2009, 2011) does not discuss effective and ineffective leadership configurations. Extreme contexts are not homogeneous but vary on several dimensions (Hällgren et al., 2018; Hannah et al., 2010); our zombie movie takes us into a ‘surprising’ context, allowing us to observe potential events that are unrelated to the setting. From our research review, it appears that focused leadership which combines an assertive, caring and engaging style – Bowman’s approach – is more *desirable* in the context of a zombie apocalypse. But, we cannot confirm that this approach is more *effective*, where effectiveness is defined narrowly in terms of survival. Bowman has no opportunity to demonstrate the consequences of her style. We can observe with some confidence, however, that a focused leadership style that is aggressive, directive and divisive may be dysfunctional in this extreme context, with fatal consequences.

Configuration coexistence. As Gronn (2009, 2011) observes, different patterns of leadership can operate at the same time in the same setting. Illustrating this phenomenon, *Day of the Dead* also shows how these patterns coexist uncomfortably, how they can overlap, how one pattern can displace another and how one pattern or leadership style can encourage another configuration to emerge. The term ‘configuration’ suggests a tidy, cohesive, consistent and unified pattern; that is clearly not the case in this context, which displays multiple, competing and shifting patterns of leadership.

Self-leadership. This is the leadership pattern which explains the survival of three members of the self-organizing team. With no clear single leader, the team’s behaviours display the mix of styles

advocated by, for example, Hannah et al. (2010); they have a shared objective, their actions are rapid and decisive, they each care for the well-being of their colleagues and they collaborate effectively to ensure that they all escape. It may be difficult to avoid the conclusion that the outcome would have been different had such a self-organizing team been able to form at the beginning of the narrative. The differing backgrounds of the three sub-groups – military, scientists and helicopter crew – would perhaps have made this difficult, but not impossible. That, however, would have led to a less interesting movie.

Equifinality. Speculating further, beyond this movie, discussion of leadership configurations has not considered the possibility that different configurations may in some contexts lead to the same outcomes. In other words, some leadership configurations may possess the property of equifinality. The positive outcome in this instance (three survivors) can be attributed to the emergent self-organizing team configuration. It is possible that a similar or better outcome could have been achieved had Rhodes and Bowman found some form of accommodation, and had been able to collaborate, combining Rhodes' military expertise and decisive style with Bowman's scientific knowledge and her engaging, caring approach. The characters as they are drawn in this film suggest that this scenario is unlikely, but this could apply in other (fictional and real) settings.

Conclusion

Our research question concerns the 'theory on offer' in the zombie movie *Day of the Dead*. How does this movie explain the poor survival rate in this extreme context? Our conclusion is that this movie suggests a provisional theory of leadership configurations. This theory incorporates aspects of focused and distributed leadership, but places the weight of explanation on the sequence and patterns of leadership configurations. Our key point is that traditional theoretical and practical perspectives do not capture the untidy complexities of leadership practice, particularly in extreme contexts. If we are to cope with extreme contexts the characteristics of which are as yet unknown, then an understanding of the potential contribution of leadership configurations may be imperative.

It appears from a review of the literature that extreme contexts call for specific individual leadership capabilities, but also for context-sensitive leadership configurations – as this movie suggests. Focused leadership, with command vested in a single individual, is only one of many possible configurations, but extreme context leadership research has focused on this possibility and largely overlooked other patterns. It also appears that, in a 'surprising' context, those who previously held traditional leadership roles should seek to encourage other configurations to develop as circumstances suggest, reinstating personal direction when appropriate. This suggestion is straightforward to express. But these are difficult judgement calls for a leader to make in any setting, and especially so in an extreme context, where as the movie illustrates it may be imperative to avoid a leadership vacuum, and situations where leadership is ambiguous or contested. Paradoxically, in an extreme context, there may be a perceived need for focused, directive leadership. However, to maintain group cohesion, a range of distributed, rotating, shared, network and self-organizing configurations may have to emerge.

Day of the Dead illustrates how an unbalanced focused leadership style, which is autocratic, directive and divisive, is dysfunctional and can put lives at risk. As other commentators have noted, the fear, anxiety and stress of an extreme context may contribute to an unbalanced leadership style, accentuating violent and autocratic behaviour. As a corollary, a balanced leadership style that combines directive and engaging behaviours may increase the chances of survival, and it is important to recognize that this combination of leadership behaviours may reside in more than one individual.

Unlike the lead characters in *Day of the Dead*, those who share leadership roles must be able to work with each other.

This movie also suggests that leadership configurations in extreme contexts are fluid and untidy. They emerge, succeed and fail over time depending on a combination of factors at different levels of analysis – individual personalities, interpersonal relationships, professional rivalries, contextual attributes and critical events. These untidy leadership patterns overlap, coexist, displace and follow on from each other in ways that may be unpredictable, but which could potentially be controlled by those involved, should they be able to collaborate to achieve this. The self-leading team, with command vested in none of the individual members, is another possible configuration which, in this instance, contributed to the survival of three of the characters. It is important to recognize that the effectiveness (in terms of survival) of this configuration is highly contextual, and we make no claims to the wider efficacy of this configuration in other ‘surprising’ contexts, where different configurations may be more appropriate.

This ‘theory on offer’ is speculative, inspired by one interpretation of the zombie movie, *Day of the Dead*. It would be instructive to explore these conclusions using other research methods, and in other settings – extreme and routine.

Limitations and implications for practice

This analysis relies on a single case. Our interest lies, however, with informing theory rather than with statistical generalization (Buchanan, 2012; Tsoukas, 2009). The analysis also relies on a zombie movie, which may be regarded as an inappropriate source. However, we hope to have shown the value of this movie in generating insights into leadership configurations in extreme contexts. Zombie movies should not be ‘off limits’ for organization and management researchers. They allow us to access extreme contexts, to observe behaviours and outcomes over time and to generate fresh thinking for further study.

What are the implications for leadership practice in extreme contexts? Pressures on time and other resources highlight the importance of shared goals, and the need to constantly clarify, update and share information about the context. The dangers of sustained, focused, directive leadership should be recognized, and participative, shared leadership should be encouraged. Group issues must be confronted to maintain well-being and morale. It is also helpful to recognize that the leaders who emerge in an extreme context may not be the ‘natural’ leaders in normal circumstances. Finally, if you are trapped in a compound surrounded by thousands of cannibalistic zombies, don’t fall out with the helicopter pilot.

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