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Leadership, more or less? A processual, communication perspective on the role of agency in leadership theory

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Abstract

'More' or 'better' leadership remains a popular panacea for business failure, climate change, educational underachievement and myriad other world problems. Yet there has been a growing concern that traditional approaches to the subject have naturalised oppressive power relationships, particularly in the workplace. Scholars have therefore put more stress on the creative contribution of 'followers' as co-creators of organisational reality. It is now normal to find calls for shared leadership, less leadership or no leadership. This article argues that even when couched in emancipatory terms, many of these perspectives still tend to diminish the contribution of organisational actors who do not occupy formal leadership roles. Communication and process theories of organisation are employed to suggest that leadership could be more usefully envisaged as those practices which see leaders occupying transitory roles within fluid social structures, in which there is no essence of leadership apart from the discursive constructions of organisational actors and in which the facilitation of disagreement and dissent holds the same importance as a traditional stress on the achievement of cohesion and agreement.

Keywords

Transformational leadership, followership, process theory, communication

Introduction

Leadership has been extolled as 'the' solution to competitive disadvantage and the need for further economic growth for many years. Rather than 'the Great Recession' calling such notions into question, it largely continues to be assumed that 'better' or more refined models of leadership are needed to enable renewed growth and prosperity. Some scholars,

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recognising the limitations of previous approaches, have stressed the importance of 'good' followership as well as 'good' leadership. This article takes a more critical approach. It suggests that leadership, as widely envisaged, is a key part of the problems we now face rather than the solution. The widespread faith in such leadership may be viewed as another instance of 'The God That Failed'.¹ Drawing on process (Langley and Tsoukas, 2010; Langley, 2009) and communication (Putnam and Nicotera, 2009) based theories of organisation, it challenges dominant frames of reference within the debates about leadership. In particular, I argue that transformational leadership theory (Bass and Riggio, 2006), widely regarded as the dominant approach within leadership studies over several decades, suffers from an implicit model that puts 'the leader' at the centre of more or less solid hierarchies and stable networks in which greater agency is attached to the leader than to followers. Functionalist perspectives on followership have not overcome this problem.

Agency is defined here as the capacity to take action. A crucial aspect of such capacity is the actor's sense of both their own power and that of others (Stones, 2005). When power is mobilised for action, it is a reflection of a deeper power that is embedded in the identities to which organisational actors subscribe, and in wider social relations of dominance, submissiveness and resistance (Clegg et al., 2006). Leadership theories that stress the agency of leaders but diminish that of others legitimise differential power relations between leaders and followers and endorse the associated concentration of decision making in the hands of managerial elites.²

Utilising the analytic lens of dissent in organisations (e.g. Banks, 2008; Kassing, 2011), I therefore conceptualise leadership in terms of networks of interaction between organisational actors. This suggests that such networks are likely to reach more effective decisions when follower dissent is institutionalised into the theory and practice of leadership and offers greater space for voices of resistance. It follows that the premium often placed on organisational consensus is misplaced, since it tends to view follower dissent as 'resistance to be overcome' rather than useful feedback (Mumby, 2005; Tourish and Robson, 2006). This encourages excessive leader agency, including, often, when the perspective in question appears to advocate the opposite. A more processual and communication oriented perspective of leadership yields theoretical and applied possibilities beyond what the field has so far offered. In particular, this article explores the following propositions:

- Leadership can best be viewed as a fluid process emerging from the communicatively constituted interactions of myriad organisational actors. It is not a finished category, standing apart from the complex organisational processes that produce it.
- Power and agency are widely dispersed (rather than concentrated in the hands of leaders) and are marshalled by both non-leaders and leaders to co-construct leadership and followership identities. Actors may self-certify themselves as leaders, but leader claims only find traction when they are recognised by others.
- While leadership is presented by some leadership scholars, consultants and practitioners as a panacea for all kinds of problems, its significance is also downplayed by many organisation theorists. I propose that it should be regarded as a first-order process rather than of organisational life. It is a primary means by which the agency of organisational actors is enabled and constrained.
- It follows that we must distinguish more consistently between the notions of a leader as an individual who occupies a formal role, and leadership as a communicative process that produces leader-follower categories, identities and relationships.

- Recognising the co-constructed nature of organisations and leadership processes, theories of leadership and followership should place more emphasis on the promotion of dissent, difference, and the facilitation of alternative viewpoints than the achievement of consensus, or the promotion of an organisational view wholly originating in the perspectives and values of formal leaders.
- It therefore follows that there is no essence of leadership divorced from particular social, organisational and temporal contexts and therefore no set of best practices that can be universally implemented, or taught on leadership development programmes.

Accordingly, I explore the extent to which dominant approaches to leadership give undue emphasis to leader agency at the expense of other organisational actors. Having problematised leadership in this way, I then consider how communication and process based perspectives can provide a useful rejoinder to the widespread calls that we face for either ‘better’ and more ‘effective’ leadership, or, alternatively, for ‘shared’, ‘less’ and ‘no’ leadership.

Leader agency (at expense of) followers

Extant models of leadership tend to unreflexively privilege leader agency over that of other organisational actors. As Banks (2008: 11) puts it:

Conventionally, leaders show the way, are positioned in the vanguard, guide and direct, innovate, and have a vision for change and make it come to actuality. Followers on the other hand conventionally track the leader from behind, obey and report, implement innovations and accept leaders’ vision for change.

It tends to be assumed that visionary leadership is powerful, exciting and necessary, with leaders acting as a force for good whose efforts invariably produce positive outcomes (Collinson, 2012). Much of this attributional process is vested in the persona of the CEO. Their charisma, reputation and symbolic power are assumed to impact positively on corporate reputation (Cravens et al., 2003) and firm performance (Pollach and Kerbler, 2011; Rajagopalan and Datta, 1996). Influential practitioner journals such as *Harvard Business Review* regularly devote space to the need for ‘better’ leadership. They provide forums in which influential CEOs proclaim their business ‘secrets’ and methods of doing management as models that should be more widely applied (see article by CEO of Heinz, (Johnson, 2011), and Hansen et al.’s (2010) discussion of ‘The best-performing CEOs in the world’ for typical examples). Such accounts give little consideration to context. Rather, universal panaceas are proposed that it is claimed will lead invariably to success. Consistent with this, there has been a growth of rhetoric around what has been described as ‘leaderism’ (O’Reilly and Reed, 2011) in the public sector, in which it is assumed that some form of leadership – drawing heavily on private sector models – is vital for improved effectiveness (Martin and Learmonth, 2012).

Thus, Weber’s (1968) interest in charisma as a form of domination rooted in the relationship between a leader and the leader’s followers has been supplanted by a narrowly functionalist perspective, with most research focusing on its ‘effectiveness’ and how this can be measured (Conger and Kanungo, 1998). Transformational leadership theory, in particular, stresses how charismatic leaders can inspire, intellectually stimulate and radically reorder the values and actions of others (Van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013). Such leaders act *on* others rather than *alongside* them. They decide on a vision and then align followers’

mindsets with goals that are consistent with the vision (Hartnell and Walumbwa, 2011). It is an approach that has long been criticised for seeing organisational influence in unidirectional terms (i.e. flowing from leaders to more or less compliant followers), advocating the achievement of corporate cohesion and a monocultural environment to the detriment of internal dissent and exaggerating the role of charismatic visionaries in the achievement of corporate goals (Tourish and Pinnington, 2002; Tourish et al., 2010).

The assumption of dominant leader agency is also a given in much of the literature on organisational failure. Amar et al. (2012: 69) assert that 'The reason organizations fail to respond to market conditions is the inability of their senior leaders to manage their organizations to the complexity and dynamism of their business environment'. In then arguing for more distributed forms of leadership to deal with this problem, they suggest that

The right approach for responding to these changes requires vesting the authority to lead where it is needed for quick reading and responding. A management style consistent with this principle will allow employees at every level to assume leadership roles, make decisions and manage their part of the business like the top managers of the organization manage corporate strategy, compliance and other corporate tasks.

Agency is viewed as totally in the hands of leaders in terms of responsibility for problems. Paradoxically, in critiquing 'poor' leadership practice, the exaggerated view of agency that accompanies it may reinforce the problem that is at issue – our tendency to see agency in organisations as primarily a matter of leadership, with followers cast in the role of compliant but relatively powerless disciples. Thus, simultaneously, in Amar et al.'s (2012) conception, leader agency remains intact in terms of deciding what authority (if any) should be relinquished. It is also assumed that formal leaders retain exclusive oversight of the key directional issues that confront organisations. Those forms of 'empowerment' that are considered relate exclusively to how those in 'follower' roles can make the vision and strategies of their leaders more effective. In such literature, the co-construction of goals and strategies and associated stakeholder models of organisational participation, as advocated for example by Deetz (1995), is typically not considered. Rather, the assumption remains intact that organisational leaders need 'to do the same things they always have done – demand compliance from those in less powerful positions' (Stohl and Cheney, 2001: 387).

It is likely that theories which privilege the agency of those who hold formal, hierarchically based leadership positions above that of others will have an intuitive appeal for many actors, including business school students. The theory finds traction because it legitimises dominant power relations, which is appealing to those who either hold power or covet it. Those relations in turn further legitimise and promote a theory which appears to simply describe 'what is,' and which therefore (surely?) must lie beyond interrogation. Theory and practice may thus become mutually constitutive. In addition, by legitimising the concentration of power in elite hands, much leadership theory can contribute to the on-going crisis in society, however inadvertently. It is obvious by now that concentrating power in the hands of a few, whether in countries or organisations, has not been a successful experiment in decision making. Can we do better, in our theorising, pedagogy and practice?

The liberating potential of followership?

One answer to this question has been an increased focus on the notion of 'followership'. However, the dominant, functionalist approach offers little conceptual clarity on how

followership might offset the problem of excessive leader agency in organisations. While there has been some suggestion that followership is consistent with the notion of ‘participants’ or ‘collaborators’ (Uhl-Bien, 2006), the term is most often employed as a synonym for ‘subordinate’ (Crossman and Crossman, 2011). Kellerman (2008: xix) critically notes that subordinates are typically conceived as those ‘who have less power, authority and influence than do their superiors and who therefore usually, but not invariably, fall into line’. Thus, scholars frequently invoke the term ‘followership’, but in doing so they continue to reify and naturalise hierarchy, thereby reaffirming leader agency. Accordingly, ‘Followership is a relational role in which followers have the ability to influence leaders and contribute to the improvement and attainment of group and organizational objectives. It is primarily a hierarchically upwards influence’ (Carsten et al., 2010: 559). Asymmetrical power is taken for granted. It is simply assumed that ‘group’ and ‘organisational,’ as opposed to sectional, objectives exist, and that leaders are the prime arbiters of what they should be – albeit while remaining open to an unspecified degree of influence. Moreover, followership is viewed as being what *assists* in the ‘improvement’ and ‘attainment’ of such objectives, rather than what might fundamentally interrogate them.

While critical perspectives are much more nuanced on these issues (e.g. Chaleff, 2009; Collinson, 2006), functionalist approaches tend to presume that dissent and resistance are somehow incompatible with the notion of ‘good’ followership. Rather, ‘good’ followers are those ‘to whom a leader can safely delegate responsibility, people who anticipate needs at their own level of competence and authority’ (Kelley, 1988: 144).³ Not only do they follow instructions from powerful others, they are endowed with the mind-reading skills that enable them to anticipate what these might be. Followers therefore ‘display competences that mirror those of their leaders’ (Cunha et al., 2013: 87), rather than develop contrary competences of their own.

There is a wholly imbalanced view in this literature of the nature of agency. On the one hand, leader agency is assumed to be absolute. On the other hand, ‘follower’ action is robbed of much of its agentic potential. Rather, the behaviour of followers is viewed as wholly dependent on the structural constraints that are determined by leaders. A process-oriented perspective would challenge the traditional separation in the literature between leaders and followers (Collinson, 2006). It can help to rebalance our view of agency in leader–follower interactions and therefore contribute to forms of organising that are less likely to inflict social, organisational and economic harm. Since critique bereft of an alternative often disables the urge to action, and therefore reinforces those power relations that it seeks to challenge, I see this article as answering the call for a ‘critical performativity’ approach to leadership (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: 368). This recognises ‘the potentially positive value of functional exercises of authority’, and seeks to intervene in specific management debates with a view to improving both theory and practice.

A processual, communication perspective

Process perspectives suggest that ‘the organization is constituted by the interaction processes among its members’ (Langley and Tsoukas, 2010: 4). This interaction is fluid, ongoing, evolving, creative and without any definite endpoint (Langley et al., 2013). It follows that organisations can be viewed as simultaneously differentiated and integrated, on a number of dimensions. In communication terms, this view is best captured by the work of what has become known as the Montreal School, and which is discussed by Fairhurst and

Connaughton (2014) in the current issue of this journal. As Cooren et al. (2006: 2–3) express it:

organization emerges in the interplay of two interrelated spaces: the textual-conceptual world of ideas and interpretations and the practical world of an object-oriented conversation directed to action... The resulting image of organizational interaction is of an essentially fluid and open-ended process of organizing, in which inherited positions of strength are exploited creatively by the participants.

Consistent with this view, some communication theorists have suggested that we replace the notion of organisation as a single entity by one in which it is constituted ‘by its emergence as an actor in the texts of the people for whom it is a present interpreted reality’ (Robichaud et al., 2004: 630). Interlocking patterns of communication can therefore be viewed as the driving force behind many organisational phenomena, including leadership. Yet leadership is not conventionally theorised in this manner. Rather, we have a stress on solid entities (the organization), stable procedures, determinate causal outcomes (the impact of Leader A on Organization B) and the downplaying of follower agency in favour of that of leaders. While some organisational communication scholars have been eager to explore the implications of this approach for leadership (see Fairhurst and Connaughton, in 2014, for further discussion), it seems to me that the majority have not. For example, Robichaud and Cooren’s (2013) edited text is a detailed consideration of the Montreal School’s theoretical positioning and its on-going implications for the field of organisational communication and organisation theory more widely. Leadership is mentioned only four times in the text, and then in passing. I suggest that this is to view leadership as an epiphenomena of organisational life. Rather, I argue here that it is more fruitful to view it as a *first-order process* whereby the agency of actors is constrained or enabled, and to consider how this is communicatively accomplished.

In line with this, the recognition that sensemaking, agency and the processes whereby co-orientation between organisational actors is mediated through language means to acknowledge that organising is ‘an act of juggling between co-evolutionary loops of discursive phenomena’ (Guney, 2006: 34). The metaphor of ‘juggling’ suggests tension, including between leaders and followers, and an omnipresent prospect of breakdown. Organisations therefore struggle to create shared meanings between organisational actors. Yet functionalist perspectives usually neglect to explore the ways in which different actors attribute varied meanings to leadership (Alvesson and Spicer, in press). But to acknowledge the reality of variegated meaning is to challenge the view of leadership as having a taken for granted existence, separate and apart from its discursive constructions. Rather, the organisational world can be depicted as a plenum of agencies (Cooren, 2006). What has been termed the ‘communicative constitution of organization’ (McPhee and Iverson, 2009: 49) in turns means the communicative constitution of leadership. ‘Leadership’ therefore emerges through the interaction of organisational actors and has a contested, fluid meaning for all of them, in a given social situation for determinate amount of time. It is fundamentally an on-going process rather than a finished accomplishment. Meaning is constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed between those in leadership positions and those that they lead (Fairhurst, 2007; Fairhurst and Grant, 2010; Smircich and Morgan, 1982). Leadership is not a discrete phenomenon with easily observable causal relationships, inherently powerful and charismatic leaders, measurable outcomes and clear demarcations between categories of meaning and behaviour.

Our perspective on leadership shifts, once we view organisation as dealing with how 'socially constructed institutions are reproduced and transformed by the accounting activities of people in interdependent (joint) action as they make sense of what they do together' (Varey, 2006: 191). It means accepting that 'communication generates, not merely expresses, key organizational realities' (Ashcraft et al., 2009: 2). Accordingly, the reputations of powerful leaders, particularly CEOs, emerge as a phenomenon that is co-produced and co-reproduced (within certain limits) by the discursive interactions between organisational actors (Sinha et al., 2012). This perspective draws attention to what has been described as 'the dance between leader and led and its language of connectedness, temporalness, and embeddedness' (Fairhurst, 2007: 24).

The study of dissenting or critical communication from followers to leaders is a useful illustration. Much of the literature on employee 'voice' focuses on those forms of expression most calculated to assist in the implementation of goals that, although determined by managers, are assumed to express a unitarist interest (Morrison, 2011a). When a broader approach is adopted scholars report that non-leaders typically find their opportunities for dissent from leaders constrained (Kassing, 2011). This has been described as the 'hierarchical mum effect' (Bisel et al., 2012: 128) and can be seen as a situation in which 'moments of contestation are precluded by power imbalances' (Deetz and McClellan, 2009: 446). But to stress only this misses crucial processes of co-construction that also occur. For example, ingratiating behaviour by followers, in which they exaggerate how much they agree with the opinions of leaders, contributes to exaggerated self-belief, narcissism and the adoption of ultimately destructive forms of leader action (Tourish and Robson, 2006). Leaders also often experience personally negative outcomes from the dynamic of ingratiating. One study, among many similar studies, has found compelling evidence that poor performance, resulting from the behaviour of CEOs who have internalised the overly positive feedback delivered by their followers, increases the likelihood of them being fired (Park et al., 2011).

We can see here that the identity (and fates) of leaders as leaders, and that of followers as followers, is the result of a mutually constitutive interaction between the two. For followers, the decision not to offer critical feedback is a demonstration of agency manifest in silence, based on an often justified calculation of self-interest. But silence remains a form of communication, and hence has a co-constructive impact on its recipients in formal positions of leadership. Organisational actors can never fully relinquish the power to manage meaning, since any attempt to abstain from communication itself becomes a form of communication. In Fairhurst's (2007) terms, drawing on a Foucauldian perspective, this casts leaders as the subjects of influence attempts by others, as well as agents who make things happen to other people. In essence, this approach suggests that organisational phenomena, including leadership, are regarded 'as (re)created through interacting agents embedded in sociomaterial practices, whose actions are mediated by institutional, linguistic, and objectual artefacts' (Langley and Tsoukas, 2010: 9). Moreover, the attribution of leader and non-leader identities is something to which most actors attach considerable importance. Such attributions have implications for resource allocation, decision-making authority, voice and much else. It is difficult to see how they could be regarded as a secondary aspect of organisational life.

Leadership as a first-order communicative process

Recognising its importance, I therefore wish to revisit the proposition that leadership can be viewed as a first-order organisational process, to suggest that these ideas can be taken

still further. Nicotera (2013), in looking at how it can be said that organisations are communicatively constituted, argues that what is constituted is

- (a) the collectivity, (b) the social significance of the collectivity as an entity whose interests are represented in individual and collective activity, and (c) the distinct *entitative being* that transcends and eclipses any individual and the collective itself as it is attributed both identity and authority. (p. 67)

Essentially, organisations do not exist independently of communication since it is through communication that they find entitative form. From a leadership perspective, however, it is primarily leaders who claim the entitative status for those organisational structures that institutionalise their role as leaders. But this only works to the extent that the entitative claim is recognised and responded to by others. Anyone can claim leader status in an organisation, but this claim will only acquire agency if it is granted, however reluctantly, by others (DeRue and Ashford, 2010). Leadership is therefore a communicative process whereby agents claim entitative status for emergent social structures. Moreover, without such claims being made, negotiated and formalised there would be no over-arching organisational entity within which leaders emerge from leadership processes.

Such processes are both discursive and material, in that the tangible architecture and artefacts that we see in organisations are also employed to bolster entitative claims (Ashcraft et al., 2009). As Ropo et al. (2013: 379) have argued, 'places and spaces construct and perform leadership,' albeit in interaction with the non-material. Thus, the imposing symbolism of a CEO's office transforms the discursive dynamics between its occupant and those in 'subordinate' positions who visit to report, account for themselves, engage in discussion – but rarely to critique. Non-leaders are complicit in the performance of leaders who assert entitative claims for social structures that facilitate their exercise of agency. This co-constructive complicity is manifest every time they follow instructions, embrace organisational rituals or acknowledge the primacy of formal leaders. Leadership is therefore a first order means whereby the entitative claims of organisational actors are both disputed and enacted, and by which their sense of agency is enabled and constrained.

The example of Enron

Enron is one example of these processes writ large. The organisation imploded in 2001 as the largest bankruptcy to that point in US history. Several of its top leaders were subsequently convicted of fraud. The discursive and sociomaterial strategies that they employed to manufacture high levels of organisational identification, subordination and discursive closure have been documented extensively (e.g. Tourish and Vatcha, 2005; Turnage, 2010). Thus, employees came to regard themselves as 'Enronians'; they worked extraordinary hours in pursuit of corporate goals, subordinating the rest of their lives to this purpose; numerous issues were regarded as 'undiscussable,' with their undiscussable status itself becoming undiscussable. But processes of co-construction were constantly at work. While leader power was certainly in evidence, followers generally displayed behaviours of acquiescence and enthusiastic participation, in the belief that they too could accrue great wealth. Dissent, while present, was minimal. The outlandish visions and corrupt business practices of their leaders received the vindication of endorsement and enactment, encouraging them to further develop risky business models increasingly constructed from fantasy.⁴ When the organisation crashed so did

the reputations, livelihoods and liberties of its leaders – again, the identities and fates of leaders and followers were co-constructed and destructively intertwined.

This reading resists an account of Enron's failure simply in terms of the agency of its leaders, for this agency drew considerable strength from the agency of others. Indeed, leader agency would be neutered without an accompanying social context in which dissent is muted and/or active endorsement is offered by significant numbers of other organisational actors. Agents within Enron can therefore be said to have drawn extensively upon their knowledge of the structural context in which they operated (including their knowledge of established rules, precedents and modes of legitimisation) when they engaged in purposeful action, or inaction. Their utilisation of such knowledge reinforced the social structures and power relationships from which they were derived, in another instance of co-construction at work.

Leadership as a dialectical nexus of fluid relationships

As outlined here, a communication and process perspective recognises what Collinson (2005: 1435) has described as the

deep-seated asymmetrical power relations of leadership dynamics.... From this perspective, control and resistance are viewed as mutually reinforcing, ambiguous, potentially contradictory processes. Followers' resistance is one such unintended outcome. In its various forms, dissent constitutes a crucially important feature of leadership dialectics, requiring detailed examination by researchers.

Leadership is less one person doing something to another (with their more or less willing compliance). Rather, it is a *process* whereby leaders and non-leaders accomplish each other through dynamics of interaction in which mutual influence is always present. As Weick (2007: 281) has argued:

To treat leading and following as simultaneous is to redistribute knowing and doubting more widely, to expect ignorance and fallibility to be similarly distributed, and to expect that knowledge is what happens between heads rather than inside a single leader's head.

It follows that accounts of leadership, including those that attempt to ascribe causality, need to be embedded in deeper process studies of preceding and succeeding events, mediated through linguistic and non-linguistic artefacts.

By contrast, leaders are often tautologically presented as leaders simply because they are (charismatic) leaders, who act on relatively inert 'others'. In such approaches, leadership is not a process of on-going co-construction. Thus, conventional leadership research explores causal mechanisms whereby leaders exert influence on others, or how followers exert influence on leaders (to a lesser degree). But 'leadership' and 'followership' are assumed to be dichotomous categories rather than complex, non-linear processes. From a processual, communication perspective, it is not possible to isolate causal variables in leadership research and produce much more than modest observations and small-scale predictions that only hold on a mini-canvas. To illustrate, I took three articles on transformational leadership at random. I found that they dealt with such issues as the impact of a rater's personality on perceptions of transformational leadership (Bono et al., 2012), the impact of perceived androgyny on leader effectiveness (Kark et al., 2003) and how transformational leadership impacts on positive emotions and levels of customer service (Chuang et al., 2012). These may be worthy questions. But they simply take transformational leadership as a construct for

granted, focus their efforts on resolving ‘gaps’ in incidental aspects of its theory and completely miss the larger issues of agency, power and control, and the processes whereby transformational leaders are co-constructed as such by varied organisational actors.

Such research overstates leader agency and diminishes the agency of others. It represents a preoccupation with leaders rather than leadership. This has real-world consequences, since it encourages the over attribution of agency to leaders by myriad organisational actors and hence has the tangible effect of reinforcing leader power at the expense of others. If, by contrast, we view organising ‘an on-going encounter with ambiguity, ambivalence and equivocality’ (Czarniawska, 2013:12), then this sensibility must be extended to leadership, with radical implications for both scholarship and practice.

In the messy and complex world that we see around us, as opposed to that depicted in most leadership research, leaders and followers are interacting organisational actors, whose identities as leaders and followers are simultaneously constructed and deconstructed by the force of their on-going respective struggles to realise their agentic potential. Leadership therefore cannot be depicted as a force that stands separate and apart from complex systems, neutrally exerting varied degrees of influence and control to achieve putatively positive outcomes – the approach envisaged by Solow and Szmerekovsky (2006) and McKelvey (2010), among others. Rather, it is a process that is itself an integral component of the complexity that it is increasingly recognised constitutes organisational action. In communication and process terms, it is a twofold category mistake to use ‘leader’ as a synonym for ‘leadership’ and to describe complex systems while positioning leaders/leadership as independent agents standing apart from organisational complexity. Rather, we need to step back and see how leaders are themselves complexly constructed and deconstructed over time.

This standpoint offers a dynamic conception of power dynamics, since from a communication perspective, ‘power is conceptualised primarily as a struggle over meaning: the group that is best able to “fix” meaning and articulate it to its own interests is the one that will be best able to maintain and reproduce relations of power’ (Mumby, 2001: 601). Recognising this, I advocate an approach in which leader agency is acknowledged to exist, but in which it is balanced by a view which takes fuller account of the agency of other organisational actors, and the degree to which this agency is complicit in the construction of leader agency and action. Greater attention is therefore placed on the positive value of dissent and resistance, and on the notion of followers as knowledgeable and proactive agents with multiple prospects for action and deep vestiges of power at their disposal.

The view of leadership that emerges from a processual communication perspective is more inclined to see it as an unstable, continuously evolving social construction embedded in what Gergen (2010: 57) has characterised as ‘turbulent streams or conversational flows’. There are no finished, static entities: rather, there is only endless *process* (Hernes, 2008). Once leadership is conceived in these terms it ceases to be a discrete ‘event’, an observable interaction within clearly bounded organisational structures or a uni-directional flow of influence in which A has a causal impact on B. Rather, it is a communicatively organised, fluid process of co-orientation and co-construction between myriad organisational actors, whose ‘essence’ varies of necessity between each occasion of its occurrence. There is no essence of leadership waiting to be discovered, and then summarised in formal definitions, or lists of competencies and desired behaviours that are torn from particular social, organisational and temporal contexts (Ford and Harding, 2011). It follows that discursive closure is neither a desirable outcome of leadership practice nor of leadership theorising. Theories and research methods (such as laboratory experiments) that seek intense precision in their approach can become so

constrained by the need for ‘tightness’ in the specification of dependent and independent variables that they may be blindsided to leadership’s most distinctive feature of all: it is inherently protean, and therefore lacking in any clearly defined and context-free essence.

This suggests that leadership theories and practices should place more stress on the promotion of dissent, difference, and the facilitation of alternative viewpoints than the achievement of consensus, or the promotion of an organisational view wholly originating in the perspectives and values of formal leaders. This is not to imply that those in formal leadership positions should avoid seeking consensus, or refrain from advocating particular points of view. But it is to argue that they should also recognise the productive potential of dissent, be wary of excessive agreement (particularly at an early stage of decision making) and value critical ideas that emanate from non-leaders. It follows that followership could be conceived in terms of differentiation and alternative positioning, while leadership is seen as those practices that facilitate such creative expression. Overt consensus is likely to mark covert dissent, since it is unlikely that followers will ever feel completely free to express the full range of their disagreements with leaders. The illusion of such consensus can therefore be held to denote leadership practices that are insufficiently sensitive to follower feedback, rather than a rational endpoint of healthy information exchange processes. While leadership actions that only facilitate the creative expression of divergent viewpoints would be likely to undermine cohesion in a manner at least as destructive as that delivered by excessive conformity, the approach outlined here simply argues that leadership should be rebalanced so that more (but not exclusive) emphasis is placed on communication processes that validate dissent. This would help to ‘promote empathy for differing ideas, opinions, and worldviews’ (Eisenberg, 1994: 282). Eisenberg goes on to suggest that ‘Perhaps the greatest obstacle to progress in most organisations is the stubborn belief on the part of those in power that their view of organizational reality is the one, correct view’ (p. 282). I would argue here that this view of the ‘correctness’ of a particular organisational view is also often found among non-leaders, and that the invitation to embrace dissent and show empathy therefore needs to encompass actors at all points of the power-powerless continuum.

The contribution of Habermas

Here, I wish to consider how this stress on constitutive interaction and co-construction between leaders and non-leaders can be advanced by considering the work of Habermas. I do so because of Habermas’s theoretical focus on communication, and because other leadership theorists (e.g. Fryer, 2011) have suggested that his approach can resolve some of the issues I discuss here. As argued below, this is not a conclusion I would share.

In key writings, Habermas has focused on communicative action and discourse ethics, developing such notions as ‘ideal speech acts’ and considering how these might promote more rational human behaviour and forms of communication. What he saw as ‘the autonomy of the individual, with the elimination of suffering and the furthering of concrete happiness’ (1974: 254) was central to this preoccupation, and became even more manifest in his later work on communicative action (1984, 1987). For Habermas, communication is bound up with attempts to create the shared understandings and cooperative relationships that underpin enduring forms of social organisation. Morrison (2011b: 159) sees such an approach as a means whereby leaders sensitised to complexity theory can re-energise ‘employees by valuing them as human with freedoms, voice, equality and openness to participation’.

Habermas's (1984, 1987) notion of *communicative action* is particularly pertinent for this discussion. Central to this is the idea of the ideal speech situation. This puts a particular stress on how validity claims are raised and the degree to which they may be challenged. All 'speech acts' invite a listener to accept a person's authority to raise issues, put some trust in the accuracy of the speaker's content and have some conception of what the speaker hopes to achieve by it. But it also follows that people have the right to query such claims. In leadership terms, shared understanding could be envisaged as a goal of collaborative action. But this will only be achieved to the degree that followers respect the speech acts of leaders in the terms described here. They therefore have the right to query the validity content of a leader's communication, thereby embarking on a process of negotiation to construct some kind of shared meaning. From this perspective, a leader's 'vision' is there to be openly challenged rather than blindly acclaimed (Clifton, 2012). Habermas would acknowledge that disagreement inevitably results from such debate, but then assumes that it will be mediated constructively through the normal processes of human communication. Critically,

Rationality carries with it connotations based ultimately on the central experience of the unconstrained, unifying, consensus-bringing force of argumentative speech in which different participants overcome their merely subjective views and, owing to the mutuality of rationally motivated conviction, assure themselves of both the unity of the objective world and the intersubjectivity of their life world. (Habermas, 1984: 10)

Thus, the normative legitimacy of leadership (or anything else) does not derive from the existence of absolute moral standards or universally agreed definitions of right and wrong. Rather, it is determined by the degree to which all organisational actors are able to advance and challenge the validity claims of others – in Habermas's terms (1984: 115), on the degree to which we have 'reciprocally raised validity claims'. The challenge to notions of leadership which put undue stress on leader agency is obvious. In Habermas's (1990) terminology what he describes as a normatively legitimating speech act occurs when

Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in the discourse.
Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.
Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.
Everyone is allowed to express his or her attitudes, desires and needs.

Relating this notion to what he terms facilitative leadership, Fryer (2011: 31, 32) asserts that such leadership

would include active processes for individual and collective self-determination, critical self-reflection and associated self-transformation... the status of a leader should not be taken for granted... Habermasian ideal speech offers more than a framework for organizational decision-making; it also offers a constitutional procedure by which a leader's right to occupy their roles needs to be justified.

The clear implication is that followers should be able to challenge, and perhaps even disobey, the commandments of their leaders.

Problematising Habermas

However, applying Habermas to the context of leadership needs to be problematised. The difficulty lies in the asymmetrical power relations that characterise most if not all

organisational contexts. It may be that *some* form of domination – among much else – is inherent to any leader–follower relationship, or indeed to any human relationship at all. In an absolute sense, it may be difficult or even impossible to enact ideal speech acts as proposed by Habermas. Thus, Fryer (2011: 37), echoing Habermas, suggests that facilitative leadership should seek to promote situations in which, for example, ‘all are able to introduce any assertion whatsoever into organisational discourse’. Most actors in most organisational situations would hesitate before taking this proposition at face value. Indeed, most human interaction – from parenting, to work, to civil partnership, to marriage – might become problematic were this injunction to be indiscriminately applied.

As the discussion of critical upward communication above has argued, the constrained communicative actions of those in lower-status positions in organisations is partially induced by leader positions of dominancy, but also (in a dialectical sense) by followers’ own interests in ingratiating with authority and therefore in avoiding overt challenges to managerial power. Silence as a form of followership can thus be viewed as one means of avoiding responsibility for organisational decisions (Grint, 2010) – a conscious positional choice, in pursuit of perceived self-benefit. Leaders often inadvertently enhance this effect, since an excessive stress on their indispensability for effective decision making further ‘mitigates the responsibility and accountability of followers’ (Bligh, 2011: 428), and thereby diminishes the significance of follower voice. Silence, of course, may also have a more oppositional intent, depending on the circumstances in which it occurs, and the motives of those involved.

Such communicative hesitations could be regarded as examples of what Habermas (1984: 332) referred to as ‘*systematically distorted communication*’ (his emphasis). He goes on to argue that

Such communication pathologies can be conceived of as the result of a confusion between actions oriented to reaching understanding and actions oriented to success. In situations of concealed strategic action, at least one of the parties behaves with an orientation to success, but leaves others to believe that all the presuppositions of communicative action are satisfied.

However, even when leaders and followers have a primary purpose of reaching understanding, the inherent complexity of their role will most likely continue to frustrate the full accomplishment of ideal speech acts. Moreover, paradox arises from the fact that any decision reached in an organisation also communicates that it could have been different, and that it is therefore subject to further challenge and debate (Knudsen, 2005). Communication is uncertain, contested and ambiguous. It produces disjunctions and dissonance, as well as rapprochement and consensus (Kuhn, 2012). Leadership, when viewed as a never ending communicative process rather than the formal position of an individual within an organisational hierarchy, is therefore not the resolution of difference and critique, since the potential for critique is embedded in the act of deciding. The quest for discursive closure, implied by the notion of absolute understanding between organisational actors, is inherently self-defeating. This can only be regarded as distorted communication if one ignores the perceived self-interests of leaders and followers in sustaining these patterns of communication, and the benefits that both believe flow from it – that is, if one abstracts theories of communication from any context in which it ever occurs. The ‘ideal’ is always distorted when it encounters actually occurring leader/non-leader interaction. As the poet TS Eliot once wrote,

'Between the idea/And the reality/Between the motion/And the act/Falls the Shadow' (Eliot, 1925 [2007]).

Upward communication serves, once more, as a good instance. It is hard to see the reluctance of employees to be openly critical of leader action as irrational, in that it is often a display of perceived self-interest. For example, in the run up to the banking crisis in 2008, senior executives from the Halifax Bank of Scotland (HBOS) in the UK actively discouraged feedback and took punitive action against their own risk advisers who suggested that problems loomed (Collinson, 2012). One employee, Paul Moore, who publicly voiced his concerns at HBOS's risk management procedures, was sacked for his efforts. From an organisational and societal standpoint, this illustrates how constraints on dissent can prevent learning from mistakes or crisis, thereby facilitating other crises in the future. But from the standpoint of many HBOS employees, who would have observed Moore's fate with more than a smidgeon of self-interest, a decision not to express dissent could be viewed as a rational decision to prioritise self-preservation. Deciding not to contest the validity claims of organisational actors who possess considerable powers of sanction is thus often a display of power and agency, albeit one that violates what Habermas would see as the conditions needed for an ideal speech act. An insistence on the contestation of the validity claims of more powerful organisational actors can easily become another form of imposition ("You must always tell me what you really think"), once more couched in emancipatory terms. Communication and process perspectives can ameliorate some of these problems if, rather than aspire in the first instance to the creation of fresh normative conceptions of leadership, they focus on capturing leadership dynamics in a more fluid, contested and multi-faceted manner than has so far been seen (Tourish, 2013).

This means, amongst much else, drawing on Habermas as a means of further understanding leadership dynamics rather than seeking prescriptions for practice that exaggerate the potential for consensus. A dialectical perspective 'focuses on the dynamic interactions or push-pulls between opposing forces that enact social reality' (Putnam, 2013: 24). It recognises that *contradiction* is inherent to all forms of communication and leadership (Collinson, 2014). This is often manifest in unequal power relations that are resistant to consensus. Ideal speech acts as the foundation of more facilitative forms of leadership are therefore beside the point. While Habermas's emphasis on the role of validity claims, and his criticism of any assumption that some communicative actors should have privileged rights in making such claims is useful, a dialectical approach would problematise his emphasis on agreement as a precondition for rationality or the basis for the construction of less contested forms of leadership. It would see the mutual contestation of validity claims as an enduring feature of leader-follower relations, rather than a prelude to resolution.

Thus, leadership can be defined by what 'is' – what leaders do, believe and intend. But it is also defined by what is not, by what can be and by what actors think ought to be. It is necessarily born from conversation, ideological positioning and hence conflict. It is a perpetual clash between the 'real', if 'real' is defined as 'what is', and the 'ideal' – if ideal is defined as the multitude of other possibilities that always exist. Our awareness of these possibilities is mediated through communication. If, as Latour (2013: 42) suggests, we should recognise that 'to organise is always to *reorganize*', and organisation is thus viewed as an on-going but never completed process, it follows that leadership can be best understood as a temporally bounded communicative process of becoming and unbecoming, enacted in transient human interactions, during which differences between actors can be explored but will never be fully resolved.

Implications for practice

Among the major implications for practice of this approach, I would highlight the following key points:

- *The context in which leadership is practiced is critical.* There is little point in implementing generic (and usually expensive) forms of ‘leadership development’ that fail to recognise this. Development must always be situation and organisation specific, if it is to have any real impact on an organisation’s fortunes (Tourish, 2012).
- *It needs to be accepted that leadership is inherently complex, contradictory, iterative, adaptive and contested.* There is no one right way to lead or follow, no universal set of competencies or behaviours to adopt, and no short course, book or article that can teach us what to do. Effectiveness, invariably elusive and transitory, is rooted in a profound appreciation of context, an understanding of the limitations inherent to leader agency and an acknowledgement of the agency of others.
- *There needs to be more emphasis on the role of followership as opposed to an infatuation with leadership.* But followership needs to be conceived much more broadly than it has in the past, and to encompass the notion of proactive dissent. It follows that those who occupy formal leadership roles need to entertain a view of their role that embraces a culture of dissent and disagreement, rather than pursue the illusory goal of a unified corporate culture, invariably characterised by excessive degrees of conformity around leader decreed values and norms (Tourish, 2005).
- *Leaders and non-leaders need to embrace uncertainty and renounce their mutual quest for discursive closure.* This means accepting that ambiguity and conflict are enduring traits of all organisational life, including interaction between leaders and non-followers.

Conclusion

I suggested at the outset of this article that traditional models of leadership can be viewed as further examples of ‘The God That Failed’. Much was promised, but little delivered. A continued stress on unbridled leader agency is likely to produce further imaginary Gods who fail to meet the impossible expectations of their followers. Arguably, the greater the euphoria that greets a new leader’s appointment the more quickly disillusionment is likely to set in, as fantasy clashes with reality. Yet this does not mean that the potency of leader-centric visions has diminished. As Lipman-Blumen (2008: 40) observes, it is often the case that ‘crisis provokes followers to turn to God or human leaders willing to play God... Followers, shaken to their foundations by a crisis for which they have no ready answers, seek protection from an all-knowing, strong leader’. The dangers are considerable and include the potential for a swing to authoritarian forms of leadership in both organisations and wider societies.

A different view of agency is central to any reimaging of leadership that can help avert such destructive outcomes. It is one that confronts the tendency to see almost all power and agency as vested in the hands of a few leaders and that depicts other organisational actors as the more or less powerless recipients of leader action. This challenges the hope that a leader will emerge who offers a transcendental sense of purpose and promises to save the planet, while somehow also doubling GDP. In doing so, it recognises how crucial agency is when it

is vested in non-leaders, acknowledges the productive potential of dissent and sees leadership and followership as co-constructed phenomenon embedded in fluid social structures that we have barely begun to understand.

Notes

1. 'The God That Failed' is the title of a celebrated 1950 collection (Crossman, 1950), anthologising the writings of several influential former Communist Party members or sympathisers, such as Arthur Koestler, in which they reflect on their earlier infatuation and subsequent disillusionment with Communism.
2. I discuss the contested nature of the term 'followership' later in this article. For now, I use it as a term of convenience to mean all those within organisations who are perceived by others or themselves to hold non-leadership roles.
3. Kelley et al.'s article was published in *Harvard Business Review*. Above its title appeared the caption: 'Not all corporate success is due to leaders'. The clear implication is that although followers could claim some credit for success most could still be attributed to leaders.
4. For example, Enron draped a huge banner at its entrance less than a year before its bankruptcy proclaiming its latest vision – 'FROM THE WORLD'S LEADING ENERGY COMPANY – TO THE WORLD'S LEADING COMPANY'. Such hyperbole was a normal part of its discourse by this stage (see Tourish and Vatcha, 2005, for further discussion).

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