Essay

Leadership: Convergence and Divergence in Leadership Relations

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Abstract

The article argues for theorizing and studying the significance of how so-called leaders and followers converge or diverge in their views and understandings of the leadership/followership relations they may be part of. Divergence or misfits may be common yet missed by the researcher who takes only one party's view of leadership into account and/or assumes that people involved define the relationship in a similar way. The article identifies and illustrates four typical forms of shared/diverse meanings regarding leadership: high-alignment leadership (shared meanings), value misfit (diverse assessment), construction misfit (different views of what goes on), and multiple breakdowns (high level of confusion of what goes on and how to assess it). Given variations in views of leadership, this article makes a case for considering "divergent relationalities"—in some opposition to common ideas about "smooth" leadership/followership relations based on convergent meanings.

Keywords

leadership, qualitative research, power and politics

Introduction

The majority of leadership texts share an assumption about convergence of meaning or shared assessment of the relation between the manager/leader (or informal leader) doing leadership and those supposedly being influenced by this. Group members and leaders are believed to agree on the meaning or image of the leadership exercised, that is, the overall character of the relationship and the form of influencing work. People involved are assumed to share an understanding of the leadership as being transformational, transactional, participatory, coaching-oriented, relational, servant, visionary, or whatever. There is seldom a consideration that the manager may see the leadership as for example delegating while subordinates view it as laissez-faire, that the former thinks she or he demonstrates engagement while subordinates read this as an unbalanced overreaction, or that the manager believes she demonstrates authenticity while subordinates may have doubts about the sincerity, goodness, or self-awareness of the person claiming authentic leadership. Or that a manager believes that she is a leader over followers, while (formally) subordinates see her as an administrator and do not think of themselves as followers. More recent relational approaches to the study of leadership pay attention to meanings within a relation, less to behaviors, traits, and isolated or self-contained individuals. They also assume a shared view of the phenomenon, emphasizing "co-constructions" (e.g., Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014; Raelin, 2011; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012) or "relational practice" (Hosking, 2011). Social constructions tend to be seen as converging coconstructions, although words like contestation are also occasionally mentioned.

Much leadership research within various camps does not take seriously the idea that there may be considerable discrepancy in the understanding and experience of leadership and behavior/acts between leaders and those that are supposed to follow these. Instead, convergence remains as an unchallenged and dominant assumption. As with many dominant assumptions this is not made explicit, but should not be taken for granted or be reproduced. Arguably the complexity and dynamics of the social world means that ambiguity, differentiated worldviews, variations in expectations and cognitive processing, and so on lead to variation in meaning and interpretation. Interesting research is characterized by the identification and calling into question these kinds of underlying, implicit dominant assumptions in favor of suggesting alternative ones (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011; Davis, 1971). Challenging the view of convergence in the meaning of leadership could be done by exploring the variations of the experiences and interpretations between leaders and followers. Beneath researcher's labeling of leadership behavior there may be meaning-divergence among those involved in leadership as relation and interaction, making the "leadership behavior" much more problematic than regularly assumed

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by most leadership researchers, viewing the "objective" behavior as a determinant of effects or view dialogue and relational responsiveness as key in leadership.

Recently, there has been some attention paid to this incongruence between the views of leaders and followers. The critical literature emphasizing power and conflict has a somewhat different focus, but touches upon this theme (e.g., Collinson, 2005, 2014). Some leader–member exchange studies find variations in the perceptions of the relations (Cogliser, Schriesheim, Scandura, & Gardner, 2009; Erdogan & Bauer, 2014), as do studies of self-other rating agreement (Fleenor, Smither, Atwater, Braddy, & Sturm, 2010). Other studies focus on more basic issues such as whether the supposed "leader" and "followers" define themselves in these ways, which sometimes happens and sometimes doesn't (Seers & Chopin, 2012).

The aim of this article is to develop a better understanding of the significance of convergence and divergence of the meanings of managers and subordinates in constructions of leadership. The focus is *not* on specific, individual acts and interactions, even though the framework suggested here is equally relevant for understanding situations, events, acts, and other specific examples of leadership–follower interactions. The article addresses the more overall or holistic views or constructions of the character of the leadership, that is, key aspects of a relationship including leadership and followership. It is argued that this is a central but neglected theme. Forms and sources of divergence are indicated and a case is made for well-functioning leadership to involve creating converging, shared meanings, alternatively to clarify divergence in meanings, in terms of key areas of the leadership relation. Here, the view of the subordinates is often crucial, but managers doing leadership may be more or less in tune with these. The article argues that *divergent* and *frictional relationality*—differences and tensions in how people engage/disengage in a relationship—need to be considered for understanding leadership/followership (or the absence of these roles), calling for conceptualization and inquiry. The article makes a theoretical point and briefly illustrates and supports this with empirical work. The article is relevant for leadership more broadly, including political and informal leadership, but it is predominantly focused around managers (and subordinates) doing leadership (involved in leadership/followership relations). The article aims to contribute to leadership more generally, and argues that the key points are valid for most leadership theory, but makes some specific contributions to theory emphasizing relational, coconstructionist understandings of leadership (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012).

On the Issue of Shared Meanings of Leadership

It is a widely shared belief that leadership is about relations and interactions (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Fiedler (1996) even says this is our most important lesson about leadership. Ospina and Uhl-Bien (2012) write that "many leadership scholars now acknowledge that both leaders and followers are 'relational beings' who constitute each other as such—leader and follower . . . " (p. xix). It could be argued that leadership ("real" and "good") would mean that there are shared meanings about vital aspects of the relationship and that all involved view the leader/manager and the leadership produced in broadly similar ways. Often this is viewed as heavily driven by the leader. The following statements are typical for understandings of leadership, that is, how the leader (in most cases a manager) leads followers (subordinates).

> To build follower efficacy and to help followers recognize their own efficacy requires good coaching by the leader. Effective leaders provide subordinates with direction and support (i.e., coaching) that helps them to accomplish their goals. (Chemers, 2003, p.11)

For all this building, direction and support to work - not only leaders but also subordinates presumably need to have a broadly shared view on the elements involved and agree upon their value, for example, the meaning of "coaching", and that this is what the "leader" is doing. For it to work, the follower needs to be interested in, and relate to, this coaching. If the "leader" thinks she is doing "coaching" and the "follower" thinks this is friendly small-talk or subtly expressed instructions, or that she or he does not benefit from the coaching efforts, all the good things Chemers points to will not be accomplished. Leadership is the management of meaning, as emphasized by researchers on symbolic and transformational leadership (Bryman, 1996; Fairhurst, 2005; Ladkin, 2010; Sandberg & Targama, 2007; Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Here, the idea is that the leader's talk or action tends to be accepted by subordinates broadly adapting their understanding to those of the leader. This view can be given a monologic or dialogic framing, the latter suggests that the definitions of the situation are less one-sidedly defined by the leader but are a result of negotiations and mutual influence by those involved (Fairhurst, 2009; Ladkin, 2010). However, whether there is a (shared) meaning of leadership accomplished is neither obvious nor explored.

A shared view of leadership is also implicit in studies explicitly emphasizing relationality. Many authors highlighting relationality emphasize the relationship—rather than separate individual "entities"—and the social construction (coconstructions) as a joint accomplishment as key (e.g., Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). This relation is assumed to be "positive." Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey (2007) talk about adaptive leadership, an emergent, interactive dynamic leading to learning, innovation, and adaptability. This is about "a complex interplay from which a collective impetus for action and change emerges when heterogeneous agents interact in networks" (p. 299). Raelin (2011) sees leadership

as "a shared process focusing more on the collective capacity of people to accomplish their work together" (p. 200). We can broadly refer to this view as coconstructing or the convergence of meaning. Words like shared, intersect, responsive, dialogue, and accomplish dominate. Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014) summarize a constructionist view by noting that "leadership actors are reflexive practitioners who shape and are shaped by realities they co-create. They also have the capacity for morally grounded, relationally responsive action as they account for their action to themselves and others" (p. 22). Similarly, Hosking (2011) suggests that leadership is "a relational practice, on-going in and supportive of dialogues, emergent processes, relational responsiveness, multiplicity and appreciation" (p. 462). Frequent expressions are "dialogue" and "relational responsiveness," indicating a convergent, aligned view of leadership relations, although "possible contestation" is also mentioned (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). I will come back to limits of all this assumed convergent coconstruction and suggest alternative thinking.

The conventional "leaders lead followers" and the "alternative" coconstructing camps diverge in many respects (also internally) but tend to share the view that leadership is about a relationship and interaction and that there is a high degree of shared meanings by those involved. This is the case irrespective of leadership is being viewed as more or less leader-driven (leadership behavior does the work) or coconstructed (relational responsiveness is central). I therefore refrain from the convention of relating and adding marginally to a specific sub- or subfield of the leadership—the dominant logic of find and fill the gap to a specific subset of literature is problematic, as it adds so little and contributes to the fragmentation of research (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). Instead, this article tries to address a theme that is potentially of broad interest to those interested in the theory and practice of leadership: the often complicated and problematic nature of its relationality, sometimes a matter of ambiguity and divergence of understandings more than direct conflict. But as said, I will more specifically link to social constructionist relational views of leadership emphasizing mutuality and coconstruction.

Acknowledging Divergent Meanings

The creation of shared meanings and leader-driven/coconstructing of leadership, as assumed by most leadership scholars, may happen only to some extent and more or less frequently. Even roughly or partly shared meanings may be hard to accomplish in turbulent times and where people involved have different backgrounds (ethnic, gendered, professional) or personal characteristics and individualized expectations or experiences. Also within stable and homogeneous groups individuals may develop quite different views of a manager–subordinate relationship in terms of leadership and the meaning of the leadership desired to be practiced. Views may also change as circumstances change, people mature, or conflict erupts. There may also be various situational issues leading to mixes of convergence and divergence in meanings of people involved in leadership.

Even where managers and subordinates both think they have fairly good relations this does not necessarily mean that they understand each other's social realities—including leadership—in similar ways. People may think they agree, but this does not exclude the possibilities of diverse meanings, perhaps creating problems that are not understood and not attributed to the variation of meaning. There is a lot of ignorance of what may go on and how people relate beyond surface appearance within organizations (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015; Jackall, 1988; Schaefer, 2014). The slipperiness and multiple, context-dependent meanings of language implies that shared and stable understandings are difficult to establish (see various language theories on organizations and social life, that is, Cooper & Burrell, 1988; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Of course, completely different worldviews are perhaps not so common and would undermine positive relations, but there is still the possibility of considerable variation in meanings, sometimes leading to ambiguities and misunderstandings rather than a direct clash or conflict. In one case of teamwork, views of team members ranged from "like a family," "very united," and "the best team ever" to the leader thinking that there was a "lack of respect towards others" and quite a lot of "unacceptable behaviour" and one person at the end of the project being "happy not to have to work with the others anymore" (Einola, 2017). I refer to this low overlap in the meanings and images of the leadership (and other collaborative) relation as misfit or divergence.

Also traditions emphasizing relations, such as leader–member exchange theory, relational and shared leadership theory do not focus on issues of meaning in any distinct or precise sense but rather the overall quality of the relation (e.g., in terms of trust, loyalty, or respect, affect or something else broadly and vaguely positive; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Erdogan & Bauer, 2014; van Breukelen, Schyns, & La Blanc, 2006). Whether a relation is bad or good, consensual or conflictual is not the same as the degree of alignment of meaning, even though there is a tendency for the latter to facilitate positive relations (managers and subordinates may agree that the relation is instrumental and result-oriented, which does not mean that they see it as particularly positive.)

According to Antonakis, Cianciolo, and Sternberg (2004),

> Most leadership scholars would agree, in principle, that leadership can be defined as the nature of the influencing process—and its resultant outcomes—that occurs between a leader and followers and how this influencing process is explained by the leaders' dispositional characteristics and behaviours, follower perceptions and attributions of the leader, and the context in which the influencing process occurs. (p. 5)

This would imply a strong interest in both what the leader brings in and does *and* how followers relate to these inputs and acts. But these two elements are often conflated in leadership research and seldom targeted for careful scrutiny. When the concept of leadership includes both the influencing process and the resultant outcome (as in the definition just cited), a common error is achieved. An effort to influence does not necessarily lead to a desired outcome. But when leadership—or, and perhaps often better (less mystifying), influencing—is in focus, researchers often place the intention, the act, and the outcome in the same box. As Sandelands and Drazin (1989) point out, this kind of reasoning is common in organization studies. Research on transformational leadership is for example full of tautologies (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2016; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013; Yukl, 1999). This is also the case for many coconstructionists. When Uhl-Bien et al. (2007) see learning, innovation, and adaptability as what emerges from leadership, there is also a tendency to combine act and outcome and to define leadership through positive consequences. Given a "positive" definition of leadership, one could perhaps say that any experience of less positive qualities would mean that then it is *not* about leadership, but if leadership is neutrally defined as "a social process of influence and guidance," it may equally well lead to "bad" and "good" consequences (Kaiser & Craig, 2014, p. 261)—or perhaps more frequently outcomes that are difficult to assess in these terms. People involved may have different views on learning/bad ideas or what is the adaptable/wrong course.

Combining intention, act, and outcome in leadership encourages thinking and research that produces built-in results and insensitivity to processes and relational issues. It also neglects the possibility of diversity in views of people involved. It is important to open up and study what is happening—and not over-pack leadership with a set of possibly quite diverse elements, from intentions to behavior, to responses, and feedback. Relying solely on one party's response to questionnaires or interview questions is as common as it is dubious (Bryman, 2011; Hunter, Bedell-Avers, & Mumford, 2007). As the study of the entire leadership process and the complexity of its relational qualities—despite the enormous leadership research—is so rare, important issues around the (lack of) alignment of meaning of the leadership has not really been theorized or empirically studied.

Take typical examples of leadership as "task oriented" or "relations-oriented" (e.g., Yukl, 2011) or transformational or transactional leadership (Diaz-Saenz, 2011) as various styles. These are treated as if there were objective phenomena and that the leader, the subordinates, and the researcher all agreed upon this, although it is generally recognized that it may be difficult to accurately measure the leadership and its effects (Fleenor et al., 2010; van Knippenberg & Stam, 2014). But is a certain set of leader behavior intended to show for example "planning work activities" or "consideration" necessarily perceived as such by subordinates (or by a researcher)? Or is managerial behavior involving defining clearly or closely what the follower should do, read as a focus on task and result and not people? Some people, particularly the young, inexperienced and uncertain, may read what for some perhaps appear to be about "initiating structure" as expression of consideration and strongly people-oriented (helpfulness, support). The same managerial behavior may be viewed as being about distrust and control or as support and close contact. Carefully motivated wage-setting may for a manager be seen as part of a transaction, but the subordinate may feel this is "individual consideration" and thus more transformational in character. What is authentic for some, may be socially insensitive (too personal or rude) or even inauthentic for others. Whether a specific overall, abstract formulation of what a unit is supposed to do and accomplish is viewed as a "vision" or not, or if this is really part of "visionary leadership" may be understood quite differently between people by the researcher thought to be involved in "visionary leadership." Servant leadership is about "leaders lead followers for the followers' own ultimate good" (Sendjaya, Sarros, & Santora, 2008, p. 403). The servant leaders do very "good" things, that is, lead authentically, display humility, "treat all with radical equality," and form relationships marked by "shared values, open-ended commitment, mutual trust and concern for the welfare of the other party" (p. 407). But whether presumed followers see it in the same way is often an open question. They may not agree that the leader's only concern is for their own good or that she or he has superior insights about what is the best for followers. It can also be debated whether shared values, radical equality, and so on normally follow from the servant leadership.

This issue is not just a matter of first objectively measuring qualities and then looking at assessments/perceptions as a separate quality (another variable). The specific language used in measurements leads to diverse responses. As constructionists emphasize, finding a true meaning or phenomenon "beyond discourse" is not easy, even if one does not accept a strong "discourse constitutes reality" view. Trying to fix meaning through a specific set of questionnaire items is not neutral, but tends to distort the chances of subjects expressing their views on a particular matter. So, for example, if a question is about "genuine concerns for others," then how would a person who feels that the manager probably tries to show this, but also that this is not the best way to deal with the matter, respond? Being forced to respond to a specific formulation may not sensitively reveal meaning. Positivistic and also many qualitative methods often conceal variations of meanings, in ambitions to find a pattern (Alvesson, 2011; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). A similar response to the same question may conceal different meanings. A manager trying to express "visionary leadership" in social activities may get positive responses because subordinates like the manager or the social events in which the

vision is communicated, rather than the vision itself. The issue of meaning convergence or divergence is thus not easy to address and calls for more sophisticated attention that is common within leadership research—and many other areas as well.

The Need to Take Meanings of Those Studied Seriously

One of the many peculiar and problematic features of leadership research is its leader-centric focus. A lot of research assumes that through focusing on the manager (labeled a leader) then you study leadership. It is of course possible to study what managers believe about their leadership—or at least how do they like to talk about this topic in interviews, educational settings, and so on, but the relevance of this for their practices is doubtful (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). And even if this would be stretched to be seen as indicating some information about practices, this does not say anything about how followers perceive and attribute meaning to these practices.

There is some work done on followership (e.g., Bligh, 2011; Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2017), including on the attribution of leadership (Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, & McGregor, 2010; Meindl, 1995), and there are calls for the studies of the imaginative consumption of culture, including leadership (Linstead & Grafton-Small, 1992). One possibility is of course to study the attribution/construction/consumption processes of leadership disconnected from the leader's intentions and acts and observable leader–follower interactions. This is interesting and important work, but "follower" centric as a separate addition to leader-centric work is not sufficient for a study of leadership as conventionally defined (and as exemplified with the quotation of Antonakis et al. above), as a social influencing process. It is insufficient to study only one part of a social relation. A problem of much follower-work is the a priori categorization of "non-leaders" as "followers"—many formally subordinate persons are not necessarily well described as followers (Alvesson, Blom, & Sveningsson, 2017; Learmonth & Morrill, 2017).

Some researchers are more into taking the relation seriously, perhaps more so conceptually than through empirical work. Some work on shared or distributed leadership broadens the spectrum of those leading and loosens the leader–follower distinction (Gronn, 2002; Pearce & Conger, 2003), although it sometimes seems to be more teamwork or peer collaboration than something that benefits from being labeled "leadership" (Ford & Harding, 2017). Removing the key quality of followership away from a positive, optimistic notion of leadership, being all there is, as everyone is doing "leadership," invites questions about the point of using this term (Learmonth & Morrill, 2017). Work on the dialectics of leadership upgrades the role of followers and draws attention to "the complex, interactional relationship between leaders and followers" (Collinson, 2005, p. 1425) or talks about "leadership as a more relational process, a shared or distributed phenomenon occurring at different levels and dependent on social interactions and networks of influence" (Fletcher & Käufer, 2003, p. 21). Some authors see "the basic unit of analysis in leadership research as relationships, not individuals" (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 662). This highlights the need to look at interactions and the mutuality of influencing in the leader/follower dyad and also to go beyond that level and consider systemic aspects (Küpers & Weibler, 2008) and includes "a consideration of how leadership arises through the interactions and negotiations of social order among organizational members" (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 672). Similar works emphasize how leadership is a construction involving those concerned (Ospina & Sorensen, 2006; Raelin, 2011). In addition, there is a large amount of work looking at specific verbal interactions between managers and others in workplaces based on conversation and discourse analysis (see, for example, Fairhurst, 2007, 2009, for overviews). For example, Gronn (1983) used conversation analysis to demonstrate "talk as the work" or how administrative work is achieved, in part, by the ways in which conversational sequences both tighten and loosen the reins between a school principal and his teachers. Use of observational methods and highly detailed analysis of specific verbal interactions are important strengths, but this body of work does not focus on the "overall" meanings/images of the leadership targeted in the present article—meanings/images rarely stand in a one-to-one relationship to specific verbal exchanges. How people involved interpret these is often not clear just based on their conversations—talk may just express lip service or have a highly local, situation-specific character and vary between different situations.

It is rare with studies of leadership as a relation that interactions as well as the meanings of those involved are taken seriously. Most leadership research is positivistic and leader-centric. A typical example is a study of "transformational leadership" by Seltzer and Bass (1990) based on a questionnaire to 84 managers participating in an MBA education asking them to instruct three subordinates each to respond to it. It is difficult to see how that part of "transformational leadership" that is associated with the leader's dispositions or behavior, is being captured in a study based solely on questionnaires. Also in qualitative research emphasizing the relation or the interaction researchers seem to think it is sufficient just to get the interview or questionnaire material from one party. For example, Cunha, Cunha, and Rego (2009), in a study with the title "interaction," only interviewed subordinates about events in the past where the manager did something (mostly negative things, according to those interviewed). In a study of distributive leadership in U.K. schools, Currie, Lockett, and Suhomlinova (2009) only interviewed principals and deputy principals. Also in studies with an explicit focus on the relational, this quality is grasped only

from one part. Carroll, Levy, and Richmond (2008) advocate a practice view on leadership which is "inherently relational and collective" (p. 368), but then report a study of 54 participants in a leadership development programs coming from various organizations and interviewed about their individual experiences. Also Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) studied relational leadership, but reported the views of mostly managers with only a few interviews with subordinates who were from different parts of the organization and therefore failing to address specific leadership relations.

This gives a narrow and biased picture. As mentioned, studies quantitatively comparing managers' and subordinates' ratings showed a moderate correlation (Cogliser et al., 2009; Gerstner & Day, 1997; van Breukelen et al., 2006). When different sources (e.g., the manager and someone else, like a subordinate or the manager's own superior) are used, the emotional intelligence self-ratings of the managers and the transformational leadership ratings of other people (their managers or subordinates) "do not correlate significantly" (Lindebaum & Cartwright, 2010). It is therefore uncertain whether one party expressing a "truth" about a relation says something about the "objective" relation or the other party's view. One could add that these studies often, at best, measure attitudes and do not address the richer aspects of how people involved relate to each other or the leadership/followership. Taking relationality seriously may point at combinations of shared and diverse meanings in terms of values, understandings, and perceptions of the manager and subordinates involved.

More generally, within leadership studies as a whole, one sometimes wonders how much understanding of leadership has actually been accomplished despite the thousands of perhaps too frequently one-sided and reductionist studies. Without seriously considering the convergence/divergence of basic meanings of what leadership is about as held by the people involved ("leader" respectively "follower"), a crucial aspect is missed.

The Problem of an Ideology of Harmony and Good-Doing

A major reason behind this neglect of ambiguity and incoherence of meaning of leadership and leadership relations is the ideological nature of the great majority of leadership studies (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2016), associating leadership with goodness (Kaiser & Craig, 2014). It is easy to recognize in the heroic views of powerful (and good) leaders leading passive followers, for example, "Leaders transform followers. That is, followers are changed from being self-centered individuals to being committed members of a group" (Sashkin, 2004, p. 175). Also the critical, "counter-ideological" literature tends to deny ambiguity in favor of powerful critique, emphasizing alienation (Gemmill & Oakley, 1992), or struggle (Collinson, 2006).

But also much of "progressive," coconstructive leaderships are into ideologically celebrating (the right form of) leadership. Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011), who address "relational leadership," claim that this is "an inherently moral and dialogical practice" (p. 1428) characterized by "collaboration, empathy, trust, empowerment" (p. 1430). The authors claim, based on an empirical study, that four main conceptual threads run through relational leadership: "leadership is a way of being in the world, encompasses working out, dialogically, what is meaningful with others, means recognizing that working through differences is inherently a moral responsibility; and involves practical wisdom" (p. 1433). The authors do not give much space for uncertainty or diverse meanings about vague qualities such as empathy, trust, empowerment, and dialogue. Good dialogue is supposed to accompany a positive relationship. One cannot, however, rule out that openness and clarity may involve or lead to conflicts as much as harmony.

Many researchers paint leadership in bright colors. The domination of a morally reassuring, aesthetic view of leadership discourages us from exploring its contradictions and ambiguities. In research guided by ideological commitments, there is an inclination to see and emphasize the harmonious (Fleming & Mandarini, 2009). All the good things go hand in hand and the not-so-good are marginalized and demonized as something else, for example, tyranny (Jackson & Parry, 2008). Of course, there are other approaches, but the ideological and normative ambitions in combination with the use of "ambiguity-denying" methods focusing on one source lead to the marginalization if not denial of diversities of meanings of leadership/followership relations. Only if we assume a very high level of transparency, harmony, and consensus, it makes sense to assume that interviews or questionnaires with one part would be sufficient to illuminate a relation and capture the nature of the leadership. A manager or a subordinate may believe that the relationship is clear-cut and there is full agreement on its meaning, but the other part may not fully share this understanding.

Varieties of Relationality: Aligned, Divergent, and Frictional

Leadership may seemingly easily be categorized in a number of conventional ways. What is of interest in this article is whether people involved see the key themes or aspects—authenticity/hypocrisy, serving/exploiting, laissez-faire/manipulation, healthy/toxicity, or whatever of leadership—in similar ways. However, the use of these labels and dichotomies may be problematic (Collinson, 2014). This is often the case for analytical reasons, but in this article, I make a case for focusing on construction and cognition of the leadership as well as the evaluation of this by those involved. The key to leadership is how the people involved construct and relate to an asymmetrical relation.

Here, an endless number of themes or domains could be considered: values, the experienced need for leadership, identities of people involved, their actual closeness-distance, emotions, cognitions/sense-making, and so on. Two fairly broad dimensions seem relevant to proceed from how the leadership (acts and relations involving social influencing within an asymmetrical relation) is constructed and how it is assessed in the light of values/ideas about what is good and productive. These have emerged not following from strict inductive (empirical) or deductive (theoretical) work, but as a combination. My case and other qualitative studies on leadership and managerial work indicated that people involved often see the same process, relation, or episode in different ways and they also sometimes have different values and frames for evaluating these. Ambiguity is a key aspect of any nontrivial phenomena, and leadership is seldom crystal clear (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Martin, 2002). Readings of poststructuralist literature offer a sensitivity to inconsistencies, fluidities, and fragmentations, as well as an interest in the complexities of meanings. This opens up to an interest in different understandings, although it is important to consider both the possibility of harmony, integration, and patterns as well as disruptions, conflicts, and fragmentations. Cognitive constructions and emotional/axiological ways of relating are also two "evergreens" in terms of human functioning. These two basic dimensions allow the consideration of various more precise aspects and themes of leadership, but exactly which become key for the leadership relation may vary. In various cases of leadership issues around, for example, support, authenticity, vision, charisma, asymmetry, teambuilding, pedagogy, coaching, or delegation may be more or less relevant, but the specific issues can be captured within the two broad dimensions highlighted here.

Key Dimensions in Alignment-Misfit

One central aspect concerns the *degree of* convergence/divergence of meaning (*alignment*) between managers and subordinates view of the leadership, that is, what it is and should be about. Convergence or alignment refers to shared meanings, for example, similar views on the issues of relevance and ways of relating to the leadership relation. This dimension may involve extremes such as a high level of convergence (high alignment, coherence between people) or radical divergence (misfit, diverse, conflictual, or very confused meanings) or, and probably most common, something in between, for example, vague or partial (dis-)agreement or a degree of ambiguity.

There are two dimensions here. The first is the construction or *understanding of the character of the leadership/followership relation*. What is this about? This may be seen in similar or divergent ways. Managerial acts and subordinate responses (or responsiveness) do not come with subtexts. The same behavior may be given different meanings and thus people may see the relationship differently. Is a manager spending limited time on a subordinate—as an expression of trust, shortage of time, delegation, or simply a lack of interest?

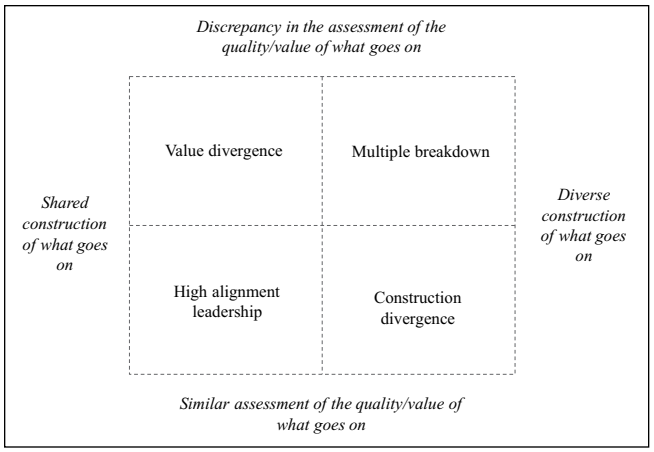

Figure 1. Key dimensions in alignment-misfit.

The second dimension is the degree *of overlap or diversity in the assessments* of quality/value of influencing efforts (leadership). This concerns the value/relevance of these and/or their quality/effectiveness. For example, people involved may agree that the manager tries to do teambuilding, but diverge in their view of whether this is important and effective or not. Also what is viewed as competent teambuilding may be disliked, if people prefer working independently. Or both parties may agree that active and supportive leadership is needed and that efforts are made, but have varied views of whether this is accomplished or not. This all concerns the "goodness" of the leadership efforts.

The two dimensions may sometimes be difficult to separate, but should not be conflated. One may imagine situations where the assessment is positive, although meanings of the situation may differ. The manager may be close to a subordinate and believe this is necessary and important because monitoring and control is called for, while the subordinate may think that the manager is supportive and considerate which may also be defined as appropriate and be much appreciated. Here we also have a limited shared meaning of character of the relation (divergence of construction), but the feeling of satisfaction/assessment is more significant (convergence of assessment). The key is here that people form a positive relationship, despite a diversity of meanings. Feeling good about something is not the same as a convergence of constructions.

The broad framework picture in Figure 1 relates the two key dimensions and shows a possible landscape of leadership (leader/follower relations):

The two dimensions form continuums. They do not represent fixed positions, often leadership relations can change, that is, from various forms of misfit to alignment, perhaps as

a result of effective leadership (and/or active followership). For space reasons, I do not address dynamics much in this article, but briefly comment on this later.

Four Versions of Leader–Follower Convergence/Divergence

The conceptualizations of leadership relations are primarily emerging from broad overviews of behavior and social science, but are also supported by empirical close-up studies of leadership (or efforts to do leadership), some reported in the literature and some conducted by the author, although it is rare to find studies where both the manager and his or her subordinates have been interviewed about the leadership relationship.

High-alignment (strong convergence) leadership means that there are shared meanings between leader and followers of the leadership carried out (or possibly not carried out) and how to assess the value of the leadership (efforts). People involved understand and evaluate the nature or content of the leadership relation in broadly similar terms.

An illustration to this is the relation between Sigmund, a senior middle manager in a large high-tech firm, and his subordinates (Blom & Alvesson, 2014). The subordinates are well-qualified engineers and junior managers who generally don't expect or want that much leadership. Sigmund is not very active as a manager doing leadership.

> Well, mostly it is them [the subordinates] that contact me when they need help with some issue . . ., but generally I do not think they need or want any interference from the boss. I have received a lot of feedback that confirms this.

This is confirmed by interviews with the subordinates. One, for example, says that "My work has seldom received much leadership. Something which I appreciate (laughter)!" Here, we find a high degree of alignment of meaning about the relationship. Both the manager and his subordinates agree upon the latter having a lot of discretion and that the former becomes engaged in his senior capacity mainly on the initiative of the others. They all perceive this as positive. In this case, we can consider the low degree or passivity of leadership (in terms of engagement, focus, identities). Both the manager and the subordinates downplay the centrality of leadership engagement and activities. The manager does not define himself strongly as a leader and the subordinates do not adapt a follower identity (Blom & Alvesson, 2014).

A medium sized IT consultancy firm with a corporate culture emphasizing "fun and profit," having a very good social climate, tight social relations, a downplaying of hierarchy and formality, expectations of managers to be liked and appreciated by coworkers, for example, had a distinct leadership model, embraced by the founders-owners, managers, and subordinates. The latter had a strong say in the appointment of new managers who were expected to fit into the culture. As a consequence, there was a high degree of shared understanding and assessment of leadership within the firm (Alvesson, 1995).

Value divergence indicates that the parties have a broadly similar understanding of the leadership (or managerial work) conducted, but vary in assessment of the quality or relevance. The perceptions and cognitions converge, but the assessments differ. Leader and followers may see the leadership as dominant and authoritative, but assess this quite differently, as good ("powerful leadership") and respectively bad ("old-fashioned and demotivating"). Leadership intending to be delegating may be assessed as laissez-fair or lacking involvement and support.

An illustration of this is an engineering unit in a high-tech firm (Alvesson et al., 2017). George, the manager, is eager to do leadership, clarify boundaries, and facilitate collaboration and development. He expects that him being open, honest, and considerate—an authentic leader—shines through in how others view him as a leader, but the subordinates seem to be less interested in what George is doing and are not that impressed by his ambitions. When asked about the leadership of George, a subordinate says,

> Hmm . . . what do we do really? We go to his meetings and answer his questions, and beyond that . . .

The rest of the sentence is left unsaid and indicates that not much comes out of this.

Here, we have a misfit in terms of the view of leadership and the relevance of this kind of work. George thinks that leadership is good and wants to do a lot of things for or targeted at the coworkers, but they see this as nonsignificant and almost as a disturbance. The leader-wannabe in search of followers meets professional technicians wanting autonomy, preferring the manager to do some admin and arrange parties and not interfere in their work so much. People understand the leadership ambitions of George in similar ways, but assess the value of this quite differently.

Another illustration of value divergence is a case of a call center where managers tried to create a positive, playful climate, but where some subordinates found this almost insulting and did not want to be treated as children expected to play and did not like to be encouraged to participate in what they saw as a workplace turned into a kindergarten (Fleming, 2005). People involved understood the leadership in a broadly similar way, but valued it very differently.

Construction divergence (or perception misfit*)* would indicate that the parties have different views of what goes on, but are still similar in their assessment of the value of a specific leadership ideal. The manager may feel she is very inspirational and persuasive; the subordinates may value this but not share the view that the manager exhibits these qualities in leadership efforts. Or a manager may view the leadership as

very participation oriented, while subordinates may feel that the manager, despite space for discussion, is still in control and the participation is fake.

The case of a CEO illustrates a strong *construction divergence* of managerial leadership (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). The CEO emphasizes the importance of authenticity and claims a very high moral position:

> You have to be authentic in your management, or you won't be credible. You can't fake an interest in people because they'll see through you.

The subordinates agreed with this ideal, but did not always recognize this in the CEO's behavior. They thought he frequently adapted and subordinated himself to the interventions of the owners, seeing him as a yes-man. They also felt that he often gave praise to people without much thoughtfulness or distinction, doubting if his demonstrated appreciation was genuine. In this case, all involved expressed a positive view of the importance of reliability and honesty as well as confirming others, but coworkers did not understand him to be or act in line with these ideals.

A new CEO in an insurance company tried to launch a new symbol for creating harmony and integration, but the subordinates interpreted it in the opposite direction, underscoring diversity and lack of coordination in the firm (Smircich, 1983). In an organizational change program in a large high-tech firm, the lack of positive results could be traced to different views of senior and junior managers of what should be done and by whom. This reflected quite different meanings of the roles and identities of senior managers. Junior people tended to see these as change agents while the latter were more inclined to view themselves as strategists, designing a loose framework for change that the junior people were expected to work with (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). But people understood each other and themselves in divergent ways and junior people saw top managers as hypocrites, only talking about change and not doing anything ("just bread and butter for the people").

Multiple breakdown means that there is a divergence in both respects—what's done and how this is evaluated. There is variation in how the respective parties view what is done in terms of leadership and the assessment of this also varies. There is thus a high degree of ambiguity and confusion around the leadership.

Milt is a sales manager in a firm selling advanced office equipment (Alvesson et al., 2017). His case illustrates a multidimensional breakdown in meanings of leadership. He described himself in quite varied ways, but mainly as a man with many leadership styles and with an ability to adapt to the situation. He claimed to understand business and being able to coach and inspire people. He pointed to excellent results after he took over the job as a manager. This was accepted by some—one subordinate claimed that Milt was an excellent leader—but not confirmed by others around him. According to another subordinate, Steve, Milt was more or less a redundant floater. Improved results were unrelated to him:

> When we (group of employees) talk we all agree upon that these figures we could've done without Milt. He's totally offside. The only thing he says is: Full speed forward!

A superior manager was also rather skeptical toward Milt, saying that how Milt can deliver such good results was a "mystery" to him:

> I don't see Milt as an analytically strong person or a strong communicator . . . He can jump between subjects and then we are all lost. . . I cannot belittle the fact of his results and how his team feels. But it's a mystery how he does it . . . Milt is in some way the pal type. He can run his team members' errands . . . I haven't seen him being a manager in his relations to his team members. (Carl)

We see here considerable variation, confusion, and the clash of meanings both in terms of what the manager does and its possible impact.

A similar example is a team where the selected leader blames herself for being a poor leader, too concerned about a nice group climate, saying that "I had difficulties giving negative/constructive criticism" while another person thought that she always knew best and was in fact a very good leader (Einola, 2017).

Although high-alignment may be seen as the best and multiple breakdown as the worst in terms of effective or positively experienced leadership relations it is not necessarily so. Such high-alignment leadership is typically an advantage but this does not necessarily mean that it is always "good." The first high-alignment example above (Sigmund) may be indicating a manager who is perhaps too passive or reactive and his subordinates may be too independent in their work for the good of the company. Still, it is normally an advantage that the people involved work on the same cognitive planet.

It is important to try to avoid the conventional trap of conflating the various inputs or practice components in leadership with a positive outcome. The two dimensions here addressed are not exhaustive for how leadership works. One can imagine situations of high-alignment but still mediocre leadership and also breakdowns in cognition and assessment still working reasonably well despite the diversities of meaning involved. (Milt's unit had good results.) It is also possible that sometimes productive conflict between manager and subordinates about type or degree of leadership may be a good thing—different views may encourage critical reflection and awareness of different possibilities. Productive dissensus may be positive (Deetz, 1992; Tourish, 2014), although creative dissent may also be possible if leader and

follower agree that leadership is about initiating and supporting debate, so high-alignment may not prevent dissensus and debate. There may be consensus about leadership issues, but dissensus and conflict about other issues.

Process and Situation

Of course, the framework and concepts are not only relevant to understand leadership as a "quasi-stable" relation, that is, how people involve relate on a more overall level. Change and variation may occur over time, but also across different interactions or in different regards. Conflictual issues or new challenges may lead to revisions of constructions and evaluations of leadership. Processes may not be clear moves from one state to another but may include fluctuations and reversals as various contingencies and issues trigger different constructions of those involved.

The framework and concepts in this article may be valuable to understand the "overall" theme of leadership as constructed by people involved (leader and followers) during a particular time, but also what is happening during a limited period, like a workday. Following a manager (or an informal leader) and subordinates at close range in terms of leadership themes may reveal instances of alignment, multiple breakdowns, and so on in specific micro-instances, as issues of client-relations, technical problem-solving, administrative concerns, or social conflict become fore-respectively backgrounded in the interactions and sense-making of the manager and the subordinates.

Variation between subordinates in views of leadership is not uncommon. Within a leadership relation, there may be subordinates who are happy to take a follower position and those who are relatively autonomous (Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2007) (if really or fully autonomous, then there is no leadership relation as there are no followers; Alvesson et al., 2017). The construction of the leadership efforts may also vary between different followers, depending on various situational, cultural, and other contingencies, for example, gender, age, ethnicity, professional background, work tasks, and stress factors.

The point of this article is not to highlight processuality, situation-specific variations, or subordinate differentiation. Space makes this impossible. I am only mentioning this theme here, partly to show that fairly stable meanings are only part of the issue as one needs to consider also the possibly fluidities of leadership, and partly to show additional research tasks. In many leadership contexts, we have fluctuation variation in terms of alignments, value divergence, construction divergence, and multiple breakdowns over not only long but also short-term dynamics and in different leader–follower relationships. It is perhaps not so meaningful to pinpoint all variations in any micro-interactions, but rather than assuming and finding an overall stable pattern of leadership, it may often make sense to consider dynamics, differentiation, and variation. Sometimes, fragmentation and variations could be emphasized over patterns.

Is Misfit a Significant Issue in Leadership?

One could argue that good or effective or even "typical" leadership means that alignment of meanings of the intentions, acts and responses is accomplished and that only bad or failed leadership includes misfits. Assumptions about such high-alignment relationality dominate leadership studies, across both "leaders lead followers" and "leadership is a co-construction process" camps. This would imply a strong convergence of main elements in the leadership and only marginal or temporal divergence. But to assume that this is always or even normally the case reflects an ideological and romanticized view on the subject matter, underestimating ambiguity, divergence, and fragmentation of meanings. As mentioned above, quantitative research on leader–member exchange indicates a rather low correlation of how the relationship is assessed (Cogliser et al., 2009; Erdogan & Bauer, 2014; Gerstner & Day, 1997). That some studies found that people find it easier to refer to examples of ineffective or bad leadership than the opposite also indicate that meanings of leadership within a relationship do not converge (Bryman & Lilley, 2009; Cunha et al., 2009). Laurent (1978) observed that the managers he interviewed claimed to involve their subordinates in change work, while they said that their own superior managers did not. This indicates inconsistencies in outlook between managers and subordinates. Bartolomé and Laurent (1986) asked superior and subordinate managers to describe their expectations of each other and found that these "differed sharply." These studies do not indicate the specific nature of the divergence or misfit, that is, if they concern constructions, values, or multiple breakdowns, but broadly point at the relevance of considering these.

Also, some studies of individual managers' view on their leadership show that their views are unclear or inconsistent. A study of middle and senior managers indicated that they thought they were working with strategic issues, developing cultures, working with visions and values, and other slightly grandiose and important things, while administrative, operative, and technical issues actually dominated their work (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). Carroll and Levy (2008) point at the uncertainty and ambivalence that managers express about the meaning of leadership.

Also *within* specific individuals, there may be much more varied, contingent, fragmented, and fluid constructions than assumed by conventional wisdom trying to press people into types or styles of leadership, often relying on rigid dualisms. Many researchers neglect the possible complex and ambiguous nature of leadership, including divergence *within* the various constructions and values of individual managers (supposedly those doing typical leadership in organizations)

and subordinates (doing the following) and *between* the manager/leader and subordinates/followers in a leadership relation.

Leadership?

To repeat the central point of this article, if we do take seriously that leadership is not just about "objective" behavior with more or less mechanical effects, but a relationship in which interaction based on the meanings of social influencing efforts of those involved is central, then leadership theory needs to take the alignment/misfit issue seriously. Leadership can be defined as *a social influencing process based on the convergence and alignment of meanings in terms of definition and assessment of a leader/follower relationship.* Without such an alignment, when there are significant misfits, there is no functioning leadership. "Authentic leadership" without followers confirming and appreciating the authenticity is hardly leadership. There may be leadership efforts, intentions, hopes, and fantasies, from the side of the manager/leader, and there may be attributions or perceptions from subordinates, but without convergence, there is no, strictly speaking, leadership. The latter calls for the connection of intentions, behavior, reception, somebody influencing, and somebody being influenced converging in terms of meaning—and relational responsiveness, to use the phrase of relational leadership theorists (e.g., Hosking, 2011).

The degree of alignment is seldom really investigated. Convergence is taken for granted, and then research in many cases tends to confirm the worldview. There is hardly any mention of the possibility of *relational unresponsiveness*. There may be no, weak, negative, or unexpected responses. Sometimes there is distancing, disinterest, or active resistance. Even if not so dramatic, lukewarm (un)responsiveness may follow from subordinates when managers try to do leadership or from managers when followers signal wishes for attention, consideration, caretaking, praise, and taking a nap at the office.

If there is a strong degree of divergence, the concept of leadership and the idea of a leadership/follower relationship appear as irrelevant and useless to describe relations between managers and subordinates. This is illustrated in Figure 2, indicating that the less convergence the more problematic and irrelevant and misleading the idea of leadership becomes. Often there is a mix of convergence and divergence and some ambiguities, creating something we could refer to as frictional or partial leadership.

There are reasons to assume that leadership is much less common and a much less usual concept than conventionally believed. The idea of closely matching leader follower constructions of the situation and of themselves often clash with the diversity and messiness of organizational life, and of a leader's ability to fully impress followers and of the disinclination of many subordinates to adapt a leader-affirmative follower identity. As Ford and Harding (2017) write,

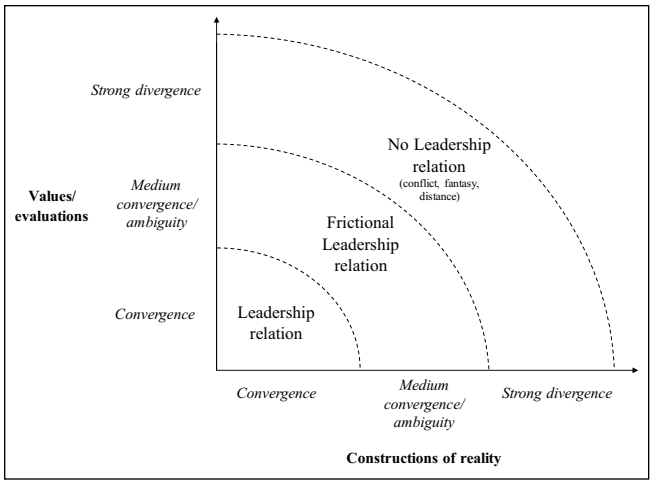

Figure 2. Convergence/divergence in relation to (non) leadership.

> Organizations are staffed by fallible human beings. They are places rife with politics, ill-temper, controls, resistance against those controls and so on. Anyone attempting to maintain the absurdly high ideals outlined for leaders (and not-leaders) in this theory are therefore doomed to failure. (p. 12)

This means that aspiring leaders often fail to impress subordinates or form a relationship where there is a high level of convergence of meanings of leadership.

Many subordinates do not see themselves as followers or are in other ways unresponsive to leaders' ideas of having visions, being authentic, doing vital supportive work, and so on (e.g., Alvesson et al., 2017). This is denied by dominant leadership thinking as "popular discourse on leader/follower also airbrushes out any sense of consent or relationality. If a senior executive is axiomatically a leader, those below are axiomatically followers" (Learmonth & Morrill, 2017, p. 3). It may well be so that informal leadership includes a higher degree of convergence than leadership efforts as part of a manager–subordinate relation. Indeed, without convergence there is little backup for informal leadership, while the formal authority being a key element in managerial leadership is no guarantee of convergence.

Coconstructionist leadership views are more open for local meanings and understandings of leadership, and although many researchers realize that there may be dispute over meanings they typically assume that construction processes converge. They emphasize that "processes of social construction and emergent practices that reflect common understandings through which leadership gains legitimacy and produces outcomes" (Ospina & Uhl-Bien, 2012, p. xxii). There is an assumption of there being "a reciprocal relationship" and something "inherently relational" (Fletcher, 2012, p. 84). Of course, all constructionists realize that not all relationalities or coconstructions are entirely positive. Fletcher

refers to "pseudo-relationality" or "relational malpractice" exemplifying this with "protecting incompetence rather than confronting it" (p. 96). Here, there is the common marginalization or trivialization of something clearly inferior to the norm. There is also an idea that "incompetence" is an objective fact and that "real" relationality means confronting. Of course, some people in a relation may not construct something as "protecting incompetence," but as being considerate, supportive, or caring, and "confronting" as authoritarian or ruthless. If *one* of these constructions, "confronting incompetence" or "protecting people," is shared, there is relationality in the sense of convergence and shared meanings. (Whether this is "objectively good" in the eyes of the researcher is another matter. Relational can't be equated by good or functional, although it facilitates social interaction.)

Understanding leadership as social construction and relationality needs to proceed not from an idea of "good," convergent, or high-alignment coconstructions and relations, but realize that leadership is often a theme where constructions of what goes on and how to assess this vary. The social constructions may be "a-social" in the sense that they are not shared within the "leadership" relation. Collinson (2012) argues that managers are often inclined to "excessive positivity" and that this is picked up by subordinates responding with skepticism, suspicion, and distancing. Ford and Harding (2017) argue that leaders, often exposed to the persuasive leadership literature's inflated promises, "compare followers to the fantasy of an ideal(ized) follower that exists only in their minds, and judge the follower against this impossible model, blinding themselves to how that person actually behaves" (p. 2). This would indicate that many managers have limited understanding of how the followers (to the extent that is an appropriate term) are and respond to leadership intentions and there often being a divergence of views.

Relationality may be highly partial or include a mix of converging, diverging, and ambiguous elements, making leadership not fully realized as a social influencing process, irrespective of this is seen in conventional leader-driven or in more relational (coconstructive) terms.

This is of course not to deny relationality or construction processes. But the occurrence of positive relational responsiveness does not prevent the relation from being conflictual, ambiguous, and/or pseudorelational (not in Fletcher's sense above, but in the sense that the relating is weak, confused, contradictory, and seen differently by actors). Sometimes, people believe they agree but their beliefs may be misleading.

Social constructions of leadership may impact various actors differently. Managers are often attracted by leadership ideologies, while subordinates are less persuaded by these and may reject or be ambivalent about follower identities, contributing to divergence on leadership relations. Often managers have self-inflated ideas of themselves as leaders (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). Sometimes "leaders" have their fantasies (Ford & Harding, 2017; Grint, Jones, & Holt, 2017), not being shared by others who do not follow them. We cannot therefore assume the existence of processes of successfully negotiated follower and leader identities, as subordinates may not take on and act in line with a follower identity "in their engagement with leaders" (Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2017, p. 152). This engagement may be limited, partial, or confused.

Leadership as a social, relational phenomenon (not a fantasy, ideology, managerial identity project or questionnaire-response counting research exercise) includes "potential struggles over meaning wrought by diverging relational, organizational and socio-historic influences" (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012, p. 1046). Such struggles may be more than minor hurdles to be overcome and instead be the key element of leadership efforts and expectations, affirmations, resistance, or simply neglects in hierarchical relations (managerial–subordinate relations) at work. There is no reason to deny that "if leadership is a social construction, it follows that identities are potentially affirmed and reaffirmed with each communication opportunity" (p. 1054). But here one can add unconfirmed. There are strong reasons to acknowledge the partial revision, rejection, or parallelism of identities in communication opportunities. Leader's claims on follower identity and responsiveness are not necessarily confirmed, and subordinate's (follower) claim on leader "delivery" (of authenticity, service, and so on) are not necessary met. Leadership is complicated and inflated expectations of harmony, responsiveness, mutual confirmation, and happy dialogue may fall flat in a real world full of drivers for divergence of constructions of reality and of values and evaluations.

This could open for a range of interesting research on leadership as more or less (un)successful form of construction of leader and follower relations, where the meanings of people involved in terms of their views of what goes on and how this is valued are explored. This is fundamental for understanding successful, moderately effective, or failed influencing work. It calls for careful exploration of various actors, construction processes, and sense-making. Interviews of paired sets of managers (or informal leaders) and their subordinates (informal followers) are central here, supported with some ethnographic work, like observations of manager/subordinate interactions or background talk of subordinates referring to managerial influence (or lack thereof). An interesting, although difficult, project would be to shadow a manager and then interview her and subordinates (or superiors) after each significant interaction that seemed to involve leadership. Key themes in interviews could include the following: How do you see your manager (subordinate) in terms of possible leadership? What are the key themes? How would you characterize the relation? Would you say there are clear leader/follower identities (roles)? How would you value the leadership (followership)? Are

there problems, disagreements, confusions? Of course, the researcher needs to work hard on getting good access and get subjects to talk also about nuances and sensitive interpersonal relations and issues.

Conclusion

Leadership is typically defined as a relationship, but this is often neglected in a field dominated by "leader-centricism," both as an ideology and an empirical focus of convenience. The assumption is that the leader forms the relation, perhaps moderated by situational and follower characteristics. Ideas emphasizing more symmetrical relationality often assume a fairly close and positive relational quality, based on productive coconstructing and mutuality (e.g., Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006) including shared, convergent views of the leadership. The upgrading of the interest in relations and followers tends to be accompanied by an emphasis on how leaders and followers constitute each other, and accomplish a degree of shared meanings of leadership, through negotiations and coconstructions of a common reality. Collinson (2006), for example, concludes that "the identities of leaders and followers are frequently a condition of one another" (p. 187). But as meanings and definitions of each other may vary or even be contradictory and/or decoupled, there is no simple and straightforward interaction effect. Although managers want to adopt the identity of leader, many formal subordinates may not see themselves as followers (Alvesson et al., 2017; Learmonth & Morrill, 2017). This may be about power struggles and conflict, but may also reflect different and nonsupplementary identity projects, priorities, outlooks of reality, and specific workplace concerns. We need to study how "followers" (that may not be best described as followers) relate to leadership issues more in depth, including whether and how they confirm or reject ideas and ambitions of managers and informal leaders and how they accept, drive, and create conflicts around or bypass leadership/followership relations. In cases of divergent constructions (misfit), people involved may develop identities other than leader and follower or develop a fantasy leader identity disconnected from a leadership relationship as "followers" do not see them as such. There are social constructions but also a-social constructions. Sometimes, there is no confrontation or clarification of meaning, so divergent constructions can coexist without people in a relationship being aware of this.

Leadership, to the extent this label makes sense, is a relation, but many efforts to do leadership do not result in a complementary or mutually constituting one forming a convergent relationality based on highly aligned meanings. The possibility of managers and subordinates developing not necessarily conflictual but loosely, frictional, or even disconnected meanings of leadership is scarcely addressed by the existing literature.

Without a high degree of aligned meanings between leader and followers, there is no "real" leadership. (There may be management, obedience, and so on, but that is another matter; Alvesson et al., 2017.) Leadership can be defined as *a social influencing process based on the convergence and alignment of meanings in terms of definition and assessment of a leader/follower relationship.* With this definition, leadership may be much less common than assumed by most researchers dividing up managers and subordinates into leaders and followers and thus a priori seen as establishing leadership relationships. The routinized, taken for granted talk about leadership means an ordering that may mystify relations at work.

Based on the divergence of meanings around "leadership" by those supposed to form the relationship, we may ask about the relevance of abstractions embraced by the majority of the leadership industry: transformational, transactional, laissez-faire, charismatic, initiation structure, and authenticity. For who, if for anyone, and, if so, how are these qualities present and relevant? Neat and clean categories do not always correspond with a complex and messy reality, viewed and enacted in diverse ways by various subjects. One could argue that for these constructions to make sense, academically, and function, practically, as conventionally assumed, then those involved need to view a leader's overall intentions, behavior, follower response, and attribution in broadly similar ways. Also from a social constructionist view, talk of coconstructions need to take seriously other tendencies than smooth relational responsiveness. The latter does not presume perfect consensus and harmony, but that people in leadership relations do define and evaluate leader and follower in broadly similar ways.

This article has emphasized managerial leadership (over informal or emerging leadership) and, to some extent, leadership over followership. Most of the points made are equally relevant for informal leadership even though this tends to have a higher degree of alignment as there is a spontaneous, voluntary ingredient, where followership is integral with the emergence of informal leadership. Managerial leadership is different as there is a drive coming from the managerial position and the social expectation of leadership, not necessarily confirmed by the formal subordinates. At the same time, the divergence indicated in this article may also sometimes characterize informal leadership, so ideas in this article are arguably also relevant for informal leadership. In terms of followership, one could focus more heavily on meanings of followership and theconvergence and/or divergence in how leaders and followers (or managers and subordinates) define and evaluate the followership (rather than the leadership) issue. Informal leadership and followership could then be studied in line with the framework suggested in this article, but for space reasons, I have concentrated on (managerial) leadership.

The article identifies and illustrates four "types" (or tendencies) of shared/diverse meanings. Convergence or *high-alignment* leadership means that there are shared meanings between leader and followers of the leadership carried out and the assessment of this. *Value-misfit* indicates that the parties have a broadly similar understanding of the leadership (or managerial work) conducted, but vary in assessment of the quality or relevance. *Construction misfit* would indicate that the parties have different views of what goes on, but are still similar in their assessment of the quality and value of what the manager does. *Multiple breakdown* means that there is a discrepancy or strong ambiguity in both respects—what's done and how this is evaluated. It is unclear or there is variation in how the respective parties view what is done in terms of leadership—and how to value this.

This article has some clear implications for organizational practice. A high degree of alignment in the meanings of and responses to leadership is an accomplishment, possibly a difficult and rare one, not something just being there as part of business as usual. Apart from managing meaning and installing/negotiating values and visions for subordinates, any manager wanting to have an impact needs to pay careful attention to the meanings, cognitions, and emotions attached to the relation and interactions. The same goes for people with leader ambitions, that is, those wanting leadership. A key aspect of leadership would be the engagement in social processes to clarify and reflect upon this, and doing so by addressing the relational preconditions for leadership and actively striving for convergence. As demonstrated in this article, there are often good reasons to engage in such processes, *if* one is concerned about leadership—formal as well as informal. There are of course other ways of organizing work and workplace relations than through leadership, but it is beyond the scope of this article to address these (see Alvesson et al., 2017).

Convergence/divergence then appears as a crucial basic aspect of leadership meriting close attention—in academic as well as practical-managerial contexts. We need to move away from a one-sided focus on aligned or convergent relationality where coconstruction means the existence or emergence of agreement of meaning. Relationality in leadership may also be quite partial, loose, or weak. Misfits of meaning indicate this. Concepts like divergent and frictional relationality—not so much referring to conflicts as incongruence and loose couplings in the views of those making up the leadership relations—can be used to better understand leadership as a complicated relation. Relational unresponsiveness and frictional leadership relations haunt many managers and others hoping for leadership.

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