



## Leadership in small-scale societies: Some implications for theory, research, and practice



Christopher von Rueden <sup>a,\*</sup>, Mark van Vugt <sup>b,c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Jepson School of Leadership Studies, 28 Westhampton Way, University of Richmond, VA 23173, USA

<sup>b</sup> Social and Organisational Psychology Group, VU University Amsterdam, Van der Boechorststraat 1, 1081 BT Amsterdam, Netherlands

<sup>c</sup> Institute for Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology, University of Oxford, UK

### ARTICLE INFO

Available online 2 November 2015

Editor: Chet Schriesheim

#### Keywords:

Leadership  
Followership  
Small-scale society  
Evolution  
Anthropology

### ABSTRACT

Leadership studies concentrate on large-scale societies and organizations with formal hierarchies, large power differences, and diverse membership. Much less is known about leadership in small-scale, homogeneous, and relatively egalitarian societies in which humans have spent most of their existence. We summarize the anthropological literature on leadership from traditional, small-scale societies in terms of (1) the functions and roles of leaders; (2) the traits and behaviors conducive to leader emergence and effectiveness; and (3) the motivations and incentives to assume leadership positions. We address how studies of leadership in small-scale societies inform theory development. By viewing leadership and followership in light of our evolutionary history in small-scale societies, we shed new light on outstanding questions in leadership research and on challenges for leadership practice.

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### Introduction

Leadership is a primary mechanism by which groups resolve coordination and motivation problems. We define *leaders* as individuals who have differential influence within a group over the establishment of goals, logistics of coordination, monitoring of effort, and reward or punishment strategies (Bass, 1990; Day & Antonakis, 2012). Leadership can be distributed across multiple group members or concentrated in a single individual, and can range from passive influence to active motivation of followers (Yukl, 2014). However, leadership is not a panacea for organizational problems. Leadership can crowd out cooperation if it is considered illegitimate or if it provokes fear of abuse of power, status envy, or greater competition for rank (Anderson & Brown, 2010). The tension between leadership and dominance – the dark side of leadership – is indicative of a deep evolutionary history of living in groups with dominance hierarchies. In nonhuman primates, dominant individuals use force or threat of force to gain privileged access to food, territory, and mates (Cowlshaw & Dunbar, 1991; de Waal, 1982). Dominance hierarchies also shape human societies, but humans frequently level these hierarchies through collaborations enabling them to form – more or less – voluntary leader–follower relations (Boehm, 1999; Van Vugt, 2006).

It is important to stress that the theories that organize much research in leadership studies (e.g. contingency leadership: Fiedler, 1967; transformational leadership: Bass, 1990; leader–member exchange theory: Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) were inspired mainly by observations of leadership in the business, military, and political bureaucracies of modern, industrialized, large-scale societies (LSSs). While leadership is ubiquitous across human societies, leadership tends to be less institutionalized, more egalitarian, and more situational in small-scale societies (SSSs) (Hooper, Kaplan, & Boone, 2010; von Rueden, Gurven, Kaplan, & Stieglitz, 2014a). These societies, in which humans spent more than 95% of their history as a species, are in general characterized by small

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [cvonrued@richmond.edu](mailto:cvonrued@richmond.edu) (C. von Rueden), [m.van.vugt@vu.nl](mailto:m.van.vugt@vu.nl) (M. van Vugt).

communities, pooling of resources within and across extended families, food production in the absence of significant technology (e.g. foraging), and few formal institutions governing group life.

Can *knowledge about SSSs* inform the study of leadership in large-scale societies? Much leadership in LSSs still occurs informally within households, churches, sports teams, or other community organizations. The face-to-face, spontaneous nature of leader–follower interactions in these contexts is fairly similar to those in which leadership often emerges in SSSs. But the contribution of SSSs to leadership research does not only hinge on descriptive similarity, but rather on its theoretical importance. What we observe of leader–follower relationships in SSSs helps us formulate hypotheses of leadership and followership in *any* context. This is because ethnographically recent SSSs are more representative than LSSs of the range of social environments in which the human mind evolved. By studying leadership within and across modern SSSs, we gain insight into how the minds of leaders and followers in any society operate as they do, including in formal, complex, modern organizations.

Whereas LSSs with extensive bureaucracies emerged only ~10,000 years ago with the spread of agriculture, humans have lived in SSSs for ~200,000 years, and our hominid ancestors for several millions of years (Diamond, 1997). With agriculture, populations became larger, denser, and more culturally diverse (Livi-Bacci, 1997), which are properties that tend to increase intra-group conflict and the difficulty of coordination (Johnson, 1982; Olson, 1965; Ostrom, 1990). LSSs that resisted collapse from conflict and coordination failures were those who adopted bureaucracies with multi-tiered, formalized leadership structures to help solve the problems of life in large groups (Johnson, 1982; Richerson & Boyd, 1999; Richerson, Boyd, & Henrich, 2003). Yet the recency of LSSs suggests that much of the evolved decision-making underlying leadership remains tailored to group life in SSSs (Petersen, 2015; Price & Van Vugt, 2014; Spisak, Homan, Grabo, & Van Vugt, 2011; Tooby, Cosmides, & Price, 2006; Van Vugt, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2008a).

### Evolutionary approaches to leadership

Our approach to leadership unites an evolutionary perspective – which considers “why” minds evolved as they did – with a proximate perspective – which considers “how” minds operate in present circumstances (Scott-Phillips, Dickins, & West, 2011). Human minds are not blank slates upon which experience is impressed, but are equipped with evolved decision rules – sometimes referred to as cognitive adaptations – that regulate our motivations and beliefs (Pinker, 2002; Tooby & Cosmides, 1992). Evolved decision rules were built by natural selection to solve problems that (1) were recurrent over evolutionary time-scales and (2) had repercussions for our ancestors' reproductive success. The currency in evolution is reproductive success, i.e. representation of genes in subsequent generations. By design, evolved decision rules are often inaccessible to consciousness and highly context sensitive (Kenrick, Li, & Butner, 2003; Tooby & Cosmides, 1992), aligning behavior to changes in reproductive status (Gildersleeve, Haselton, & Fales, 2014), energetic status (Aarøe & Petersen, 2013), social reputation (Sznycer et al., 2012), group structure (Schacht & Borgerhoff Mulder, 2015), or inter-personal and inter-group threats (Gneezy & Fessler, 2011). They shape how we learn (Richerson et al., 2003) and the cultural information we generate and transmit, from art to literature to leadership and religion (Sperber & Hirschfeld, 2004).

An evolutionary perspective is not meant to supplant the theories that currently dominate leadership studies, which describe the mechanisms by which leaders emerge and affect group performance. Rather, an evolutionary perspective can integrate existing theories into a coherent framework, which considers why leadership exists at all and how evolved decision rules contribute to leader emergence and effectiveness in our modern organizations (Van Vugt & Ahuja, 2011). Furthermore, evolutionary theories make novel, testable predictions that can potentially explain previously unexplained phenomena, for example, why leaders are often granted influence well beyond their domain of expertise (see section Leader effectiveness in LSSs).

While evolved decision rules continue to play a role in determining leadership in modern LSSs, an evolutionary perspective suggests they do not necessarily result in optimal decision-making. The “mismatch” hypothesis (Van Vugt, Johnson, Kaiser, & O’Gorman, 2008b) argues that the decisions of followers and leaders are shaped by evolved decision rules designed in the contexts of SSSs, and can be mismatched to the evolutionary novel environments of LSSs. The mismatch hypothesis can explain why, in LSSs, upper body strength shapes people’s abstract political decisions about warfare (Sell, Tooby, & Cosmides, 2009a) and income redistribution (Petersen, Sznycer, Sell, Cosmides, & Tooby, 2013), and why people show preferences for tall, strong and masculine leaders in politics and business (Spisak et al., 2011; Stulp, Buunk, Verhulst, & Pollet, 2013). Such physical cues should be irrelevant in modern societies in which leadership is rarely a physical activity and where leaders derive their legitimacy from formal, often democratic institutions.

We discuss why these and other leader preferences evolved, based on a review of leadership across currently existing SSSs. These small-scale societies vary in their exposure to markets and state-level institutions and are fast disappearing. A few societies still pursue a largely foraging lifestyle in the Amazon, central and eastern Africa, and south-east Asia, and horticulturalists and pastoralists occupy these and other remote regions of the globe. Modern small-scale societies are not “living fossils.” Rather, they enable educated inferences about early humans, and help us develop hypotheses about how leadership developed in the course of human evolution. In this review we describe (1) the functions of leaders in SSSs, (2) the traits and behaviors conducive to leader emergence and effectiveness in SSSs, and (3) the motivations and incentives that drive individuals to lead or follow in SSSs. We then discuss implications for understanding leadership in LSSs, noting similarities and differences between leadership in SSSs and LSSs. This analysis will hopefully stimulate further theory and research development and contribute to understanding leadership practice.

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