Leadership studies—A Scandinavian inspired way forward?

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A B S T R A C T

This paper highlights three important problems characterizing much of current leadership studies: the hegemonic ambiguity problem, the idyllic problem, and the methodological problem(s). I suggest three broad routes forward – taking the *concept*, the *ideological aspects*, and the *epistemic challenges* more seriously - which in various ways address, and in best case mitigate, the three problems. Recognising that this is an on-going, global debate within leadership studies with many distinguished non-Scandinavian scholars taking part, I highlight some interesting, important, and rather recent Scandinavian/Nordic voices and new thinking that in various ways bring hope and suggest possible ways forward.

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In a recently published article in this journal Mats Alvesson and I pointed at what we see as important and fundamental problems with much of the current leadership research (Blom & Alvesson, 2015). In this paper I continue where we ended with some future oriented suggestions for leadership studies, partly guided by the promising work of other Scandinavian scholars. I thereby hope to contribute and add to the discussion on how leadership studies can be (re)vitalized and made more relevant.

The paper is structured as follows. I start by highlighting three significant problems or challenges with current (especially mainstream) leadership studies. I then outline three broad ways forward that in different aspects deal with the previously described problems/challenges. The paper ends with a short concluding section.

1. The hegemonic ambiguity and other problems with leadership studies

'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark' echoes Marcellus famous words to Horatio in Shakespeare's play Hamlet. Could the same be said about the state of current leadership studies? Despite the impressive number of empirical studies during the last three decades some scholars seem all put positive about the progress in terms of useful insights (Andriessen & Drenth, 1984; Perrow, 1979; Rost, 1991; Yukl, 1989), and some even claim that 'we know little if anything more about leadership' (Barker, 1997). More recently, Grint (2010, p. 1) noted that '[a]s I read more material, I realized

that all my previous "truths" were built on very dubious foundations, so my understanding decreased as my knowledge increased'.

One important reason behind all the frustration and confusion is that the signifier 'leadership' tends to refer to a variety of various and often contradictory things as pointed out by Kets de Vries (1994):

'When we plunge into the literature on leadership, we quickly become lost in a labyrinth: endless definitions, countless articles and never-ending polemics . . . it seems that more has been studied about less and less, to end up ironically with researchers studying everything about nothing' (p. 73)

In addition, a clear definition of leadership is often lacking in many writings on the topic (Rost, 1991). If a definition is included, it is usually rather vague and all embracing (Blom & Alvesson, 2015). This makes of course the relationship between a leadership study and what it is supposed to relate to (empirically) rather uncertain and arbitrary. The many views that exist in parallel lead to 'tribe-ism' within the fragmented field. This of course makes it hard for a leadership scholar from one tradition to evaluate and comment on the scientific value of a study within another tradition—both claiming to study 'leadership'. As a result, fragmentation (of the unproductive sort), 'boxed-in research' (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2014) and scholarly confusion prevail.[1]

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[1] Variation and competing (or complementing) views can often be motivated and fruitful in research, not least within social sciences. But when it comes to leadership studies this has most likely been taken too far without any deeper intellectual considerations.

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Another major problem with many leadership studies is the tendency of linking the signifier with the undisputedly good (Blom & Alvesson, 2015; Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2012; Spoelstra & ten Bos, 2011) and conflating leadership and ethics (Mumford & Fried, 2014). The idea of leadership as something per definition or inherently good is for example explicitly formulated by one of the world's most cited leadership writers, Burns (2003), as:

'I believe leadership is not only a descriptive term but a prescriptive one, embracing a moral, even a passionate, dimension. Consider our common usage. We don't call for good leadership—we expect, or at least hope, that it will be good. 'Bad' leadership implies no leadership. I contend that there is nothing neutral about leadership; it is valued as a moral necessity.' (p. 2)

Taken together, the all-inclusiveness and the bias towards goodness create what we refer to as the 'hegemonic ambiguity' of leadership (Blom & Alvesson, 2015). By this, we refer to the 'vagueness and uncertainty associated with multiple, incoherent meanings attributed to a phenomena' (p. 486). Its common association with goodness makes it hard to resist, creating a jump on the bandwagon effect. In addition, the more alternatives *within* leadership discourses, the more empty and meaningless the term becomes and the more confusion it creates. The crowding out effect of a popular signifier – such as leadership – at the expense of alternative vocabulary contributes to its hegemonic position in scientific (and overall societal) discourse.

Another problem, related to the goodness issue described above, is the idyllic assumptions that often characterize much contemporary leadership research. The subordination of followers is seen as natural and are often taken for granted:

'From insects to reptiles to mammals, leadership exists as surely as collective activity exists . . . it is fair to surmise that whenever there is social activity, a social structure develops, and one (perhaps the) defining characteristic of that structure is the emergence of a leader or leaders' (Judge et al., 2009, p. 855).

There are of course critical streams of research that have been questioning and challenging this natural and idyllic view on leadership, for example Banks (2008),Calas and Smircich (1991), Collinson (2005, 2011), Gemmill and Oakley (1992), Gordon (2011), Jermier, Knights and Nord (1994), Knights and Morgan (1992), and Zoller and Fairhurst (2007). Within the leadership literature, there has also been a strong critique against the mainstream omnipotent view of leaders (e.g. Gabriel, 1997; Knights & McCabe, 2015), unhealthy dependencies (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007; Sveningsson & Blom, 2011; Tourish, 2011), the 'romance' of leadership (Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985; Pfeffer, 1977; Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007), and following that, the general ignorance or neglect of followership (Bligh, 2011; Hollander, 1992; Kelley, 1988; Riggio, Chaleff, & Lipman-Blumen, 2008) and complex relationships (Hosking, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2011). Also outside the leadership tradition (it is of course hard to draw a hard line here) there have been critical notions on the phenomenon, often in terms of its power effects (e.g. Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Hardy & Clegg, 1999; Jackall, 1988) or the naïve overestimation of its importance (e.g. Perrow, 1979; p. 98–112).

How leaders and followers come into being is not always a matter of harmonious claiming and granting of identities (cf. DeRue & Ashford, 2010). A leader – formal or not – is arguably the more privileged part in relation to his/her followers (at least in terms of influence over time). Common and potentially significant 'downsides' of followership, e.g. in terms of reduced autonomy and negative identity (Alvesson & Blom, 2015) are often ignored or glossed over by ideologically infused texts viewing the order of leaders-followers as obvious and natural.

The third problematic feature I would like to draw attention to is the notorious difficulty of studying the phenomena in question. This observation is of course all but new. Many scholars have brought forward the epistemic and methodological difficulties related to empirical leadership studies (e.g. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c; Barker, 1997, 2001; Bryman, 2004; Crevani, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2010; Wood, 2005). To reduce a complex social phenomenon such as leadership into various forms of quantitative indexes or scales (see for example Collins, 2005; Liden & Maslyn, 1998; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996; Scandura & Graen, 1984) is problematic. Surveys that traditionally have dominated mainstream leadership research are less suitable for capturing relationships, interactions, meaning making, and other central dimensions that we usually associate with leadership. These dimensions are even hard to study based on qualitative methods such as interviews and observations (Alvesson, 2003; Bryman, 2004; Bryman, Stephens, & Campo, 1996; Conger, 1998). Nevertheless, the fundamental problems with actually studying leadership are seldom recognized and discussed in current journal publications. Instead, technical issues on data sample, data analysis procedures, and the degree of rigour are often extensively discussed.

As we have seen the problems and challenges associated with leadership studies are significant. The question is what we can do about it?

2. Some potential ways forward where Scandinavian leadership scholars might show the way and serve as inspiration

I suggest three important and – hopefully – constructive ways of responding to the five challenges outlined above. Notable is that all three areas to a large extent are inspired by Scandinavian (or more correctly Nordic since some scholars referred to are based in Finland) leadership research, some of it published in this very journal.

2.1. Taking the concept of leadership more seriously

In order to mitigate the intellectual confusion caused by the increasingly hegemonic position of leadership as a concept (Blom & Alvesson, 2015), we need to think carefully about what it should refer to; it needs to be reasonably distinct in order to not cover everything and thus nothing. The task in this paper is not to argue for – and impose – yet another definition of leadership on the reader, but to encourage the student of leadership to carefully delimit its meaning and its reach in a way that is useful for advancing our understanding of the phenomenon it is supposed to represent (as well as other similar/nearby phenomena, then hopefully *not* vaguely covered by the leadership label).

A good starting point is to actively consider and work with alternative signifiers. When for example trying to make sense of how formal superiors plan, provide instructions, allocate resources, control behaviour and/or output, hire and fire, the concept of 'managerial work' can provide a better point of departure than 'leadership'. Of course, it may be the case that we at a certain point of time realize that leadership actually captures what is going on in a better way than management or managerial work, but the point is that this should not be taken for granted a priori (to be compared with the much less risky notion that managers most likely conduct some form of 'managerial work'). If we instead – based on opportunism, habit and/or conceptual affection – depart from 'leadership' when studying and describing the activities outlined above and stick to that notion, we run the risk of contributing to the dilution of leadership as a useful and informative concept. It is for example common to conflate and include both the organic, emergent, and largely voluntary process of leadership/