



All-inclusive and all good: The hegemonic ambiguity of leadership



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the reasons behind the popularity of leadership and leadership studies. We claim that at least part of the answer to why leadership is so celebrated and ubiquitous – in academia as well in society at large – can be found in how the term typically is (not) defined and presented. Leadership discourses are almost always persuasive; constructed to appeal and seduce audiences of the value and significance of leadership. Given their ambiguity, almost everything can be squeezed in and benefit from the aura of leadership. We propose the concept of hegemonic ambiguity to capture this and point at some basic problems associated with it, and argue for a more reflexive approach in relation to the signifier.

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1. Introduction

Leadership studies is a popular field of knowledge that has grown exponentially. Given its huge expansion and by the assumed logic of accumulated wisdom, it surely must be a successful field and a relevant topic, enthusiasts may feel. Some leadership scholars, such as Grint (2010) is however questioning the value of the massive development of texts on leadership: '[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' (p. 1). There are of course other, even more critical voices (e.g. Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Calás & Smircich, 1991; Collinson, 2005; Crevani, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2010; Fryer, 2012; Gemmill & Oakley, 1992; Knights & Willmott, 1992; Tourish & Pinnington, 2002; Western, 2008; Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007) that in various ways are questioning the development and the conventional understanding of leadership. The supposition that leaders lead people and organizations in need of (and benefitting from) being led still dominates the majority of the leadership literature as well as the broad, societal discourse on the subject (Hunter, Bedell-Avers, & Mumford, 2007; Pye, 2005). The assumption of leadership as a – indeed *the* – recipe for a range of good things in life seems now more popular than ever. It is however not self-evident that this leads to more insights, better 'truths' or a body of knowledge leading to improved organizational practices.

Leadership thinking is of course contingent upon its historical, cultural and ideological context. The current hype is possibly a product of post-world war II North-American management thinking and vocabulary (Stewart, 2006, 2009; Turnbull et al., 2011) and colonization of corporate perspectives into others spheres of life (Fleming, 2014), constructing peoples' relations in a specific way, where the need for 'leadership' is viewed as strong. Whether the hype will survive the current era of self-inflation (Alvesson, 2013) and general 'interregnum' (Bauman, 2012) is of course hard to tell and largely speculative.

There is a historical 'stickiness' of the idea that a leader leads followers. Already Plato believed that 'societies, much like ships, need to be steered, and he depicted the ideal leader, the philosopher-king, as someone able to see beyond the shadow world most people regard as their reality and able to lead them towards true goals' (Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2012, p. 863). Leadership is not just an ancient human construct, but sometimes even by many (social science!) scholars regarded as something 'natural' and an inevitable fact of life, thereby seemingly immune to constructionist questioning or sociological imagination (Wright Mills, 1959): 'From insects to reptiles to mammals, leadership exists as surely as collective activity exists . . . [I]t 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, Piccolo, & Kosalka, 2009, p. 855). This is, however, too broad and vague, as 'leader' may mean so many things and it is important to avoid historically and culturally insensitive understandings of leadership. The signifier might be the same, but the meaning can differ significantly. Machiavelli's (1532/1993) views of the 'leader' are for example very different from what most leadership theories of today preach. And

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ideas of leadership as psychotherapy or support are rather different from leadership as the taking of a clear hierarchical position and emphasizing strong subordination or followership.

Leadership as an academic field is thus notoriously messy and the relationship between various uses of leadership discourse are tenuous, to say the least. So is the case even if we, as we do in this paper, restrict it to the domain of management and organization studies (not addressing political or social movement leadership). A vast number of different (often quite vague) definitions flourish, and many leadership studies do not define leadership at all (Rost, 1991 cited by Palmer & Hardy, 2000 found that 2/3 of all texts did not include a definition), making the relationship between leadership texts and what they are supposed to refer to rather uncertain and arbitrary. We have not systematically investigated the contemporary situation,¹ but often one search in vain for a specification of what an academic author actually means by leadership. And as we will see, recent literature often express very vague views of what they refer to as 'leadership'. Depending on the definition – or general view – of leadership, and in particular all the associations and taken-for-granted assumptions, implicit theories, and so forth, around the use of the signifier, 'reality' will come out quite differently. This means that researchers with different definitions (or pre-understandings) and preferences studying roughly the same empirical setting are likely to come up with quite different knowledge claims based on their enterprises. There are scholars that see a virtue and beauty in this, proposing that we should view leadership as nothing but a floating or empty signifier (Kelly, 2014). The same can of course be said about many other (or even all) topics or phenomena, for example 'management' or 'strategy' (see e.g. Blom & Alvesson, 2015; Stewart, 2009). The problem is that by just resigning to the fact that these labels have no ontological foundations of their own, we run the risk of continuing creating confusion among us selves as scholars as well as among practitioners (as we indeed also would do if we would go on by naively assuming that there is a fixed ontological foundation behind the signifier (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Kelly, 2014). If we, as scholars, can negotiate and articulate local meanings among ourselves for a start – not built upon naive realist ideas of an essence of leadership, nor on to stretched meanings/usage of the signifier – then perhaps the intellectual confusion surrounding the term can be reduced.

Our aim in this article is therefore to explain and problematize the attractiveness and ubiquitous usage of the signifier and elaborate on the consequences, especially in terms of what we in the discussion section will refer to as the 'hegemonic ambiguity' of leadership. This seemingly oxymoronic concept draws on Gramsci's (1971) notion of cultural and/or linguistic dominance at the expense of other alternative expressions and vocabulary. Ambiguity refers to vagueness and uncertainty associated with multiple, incoherent meanings attributed to the phenomena in question (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003b, p. 978). We will also propose a way forward in order to mitigate the negative effects and counteract this hegemonic ambiguity.

Critics have for a long time highlighted the power effects of leadership (Gemmill & Oakley, 1992; Collinson, 2005, 2011; Knights & Willmott, 1992; Western, 2008) due to vested interests and pointed out the sometimes limited need for leadership (Kerr & Jermier, 1978) and questioned its importance as an organizational practice (Pfeffer, 1977). But in contrast to many previous critical texts on leadership focusing on the power relations and identity constructions in

organizations (Collinson, 2011), we will in this article instead critically examine the effects in terms of confusion and poor scholarship due to the tendency of (a) describing leadership as something per definition good and necessary (where bad/toxic/destructive/inauthentic, and other similar inferior versions of leadership tend to be seen as exceptions, or not really leadership) and (b) including almost any organizational practice (and thereby repressing alternative vocabularies). Without going further into the complicated epistemological relationship between academic knowledge and phenomena 'out there', we will in this paper focus our attention on academic leadership studies rather than leadership practice, even if the two of course to a certain degree are interrelated.

Given the popularity and wide distribution of the leadership label, it seems like a futile project to vacuum-clean the whole leadership literature for all possible exceptions from what we are claiming in this article. We of course acknowledge that deviations from what we claim here exist, but focus our analysis on typical, dominant and influential academic texts on leadership within the academic management literature. This is a huge area. In order to mitigate idiosyncrasy and ensure that we are addressing the 'core' of leadership studies we have systematically considered highly cited publications on leadership in leading scientific journals (see Appendix 1). We work with two broad analytical categories in order to make sense of the texts: etic and emic-based understandings of leadership (see next section). We see the distinction between etic and emic as valuable for sorting the literature, but will also later problematize it.

This article thus extends the sceptical or moderately critical literature that questions the dominant position of 'leadership' in organizational research (and indirectly, possibly in practice, as further discussed in the last two sections of the paper). Our main point is that the aggregate of all-inclusive and goodness-oriented views of leadership make it appear as very important and as *the* solution (to a wide set of, if not all, problems), but that this also leads to the leadership field(s) being intellectually highly problematic and to some extent also a source of ambiguity and confusion. We thereby contribute to the problematization and reflexivity of leadership studies.

The remainder of our paper is structured as follows. First we expand on how leadership typically is presented. We will here separate etic-based from emic-based understandings. The paper ends with a discussion on the consequences, implications, relevance of our findings, what we see as a constructive way forward and a concluding section.

2. Leadership presented: all-inclusive and irresistible definitions

One way of looking at suggested meanings and definitions of leadership is in terms of the anthropological concepts of etic and emic (Headland, 1990). An etic view takes its starting point from theories, perspectives, and concepts from outside the setting being studied: 'Etic constructs are accounts, descriptions, and analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the community of scientific observers' (Lett, 1990, p. 130). An emic approach on the other hand, departs from the subjects being studied: 'Emic constructs are accounts, descriptions, and analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the native members of the culture whose beliefs and behaviors are being studied' (Lett, 1990, p. 130). Definitions and representations of leadership could be based on either etic or emic approaches (or combinations of the two), with their respective strengths and weaknesses. Let us start with some influential etic-concepts of leadership, and then move to emic versions and later point at some problems with the dichotomy.

¹ Our literature review presented in Appendix 1 indicates a somewhat higher number of definitions (often with reference to 'transformational leadership') compared to e.g. Rost (1991). The deviation might, at least partly, be explained by our much more narrow sample.

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