The Fallacy of Misplaced Leadership

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Abstract

Common ideas of leadership hold an instinctive conviction about the characteristics of leaders separately from the cultural and institutional settings that shape perceptions and expectations of leadership behaviour. This normative position accords an ontological privilege to the self-determining individual. Cross-fertilisation of ideas from inter-related disciplines such as organisation studies, cultural theory, and process philosophy might lead to this substantialist affirmation of an ‘individualistic’ leader becoming regarded as a misplaced fallacy. From a process perspective leadership qualities remain undecidable. Individual leaders are put into a consistent relation with the various attitudes, behaviours, values, abilities and beliefs held in social networks and institutional structures, so that leadership has to be explained from the point of view of the process of individuation. The paper reconsiders the leadership phenomenon using process theory before exploring the implications of this way of thinking for future research.

Keywords: becoming, concrescence, leadership, process theory, mutual relatedness.
Introduction

What leadership is has been an enigma of social democracy since the classical philosopher-kings of Plato (Grint, 1997). It also remains a perennial issue in organisation studies, with significant debate concerning the problem of understanding the nature and development of leadership (Grint, 2000; Hosking, 1988): Are leaders (extraordinarily) necessary? Do leaders pull their followers or do those behind push them? Are our theories of leadership too static and individualistic?

Early approaches treated the individual personality traits of the leader as critical – the so-called ‘great man’ or ‘qualities’ approach – (Stogdill, 1950). Stogdill concluded, however, that leadership could not be pinned down through the isolation of a set of traits. This led to a twofold focus on styles and acquirable skills rather than inherited qualities. The contingency model, for example, allocates significance to the personality characteristics of the individual leader and the context of the environment, in the belief that both determine the kind of leadership behaviour required (Fiedler, 1967). Similarly, transactional models define a good leader as someone who integrates getting the job done with concern for those actually doing the work (Blake and Mouton, 1964).

Modern leadership theories extend this focus on the transactions between leaders and followers. For example, situational analyses allow the individual leader a degree of flexibility in generating a repertoire of styles (Hersey and Blanchard, 1977). Hersey and Blanchard’s (1977) model centres on the contingency of follower maturity as an indicator
of necessary style from directing to supporting and delegating. Unfortunately results are largely inconclusive and beg the questions (1) are leaders able to alter their style to suit the situation? (2) are assumptions about the significance of maturity allocated to the individual follower objectively or subjectively measured? (3) if they are subjective, whose view is taken? Elgie (1995) suggests that although leadership style makes a difference, this is exercised within a context of macro social and institutional structures, whose norms and rules govern individuals’ behaviour. Heifetz (1994) anticipates this, arguing that the critical issue is whether people have the ability, motivation, and perhaps the freedom to intervene in those situations requiring ‘adaptive’ responses (i.e. leadership). Furthermore, the shift in emphasis over recent years, from planned goals to visions from communication to trust, from traits to self awareness, and from contingency to effective presentation, distinguishes between economically driven models of transactional-leadership and the transformational, and sometimes transcendent, appearance of leaders (MacGregor Burns, 1978). Such leaders ‘move followers to go beyond their self-interests to concerns for their group or organisation’ (Bass and Avolio, 1997, p. 202). Transformational leadership may simply mark a ‘sanitised’ return to neo-traitism (Rickards, 1999), however, elevating those qualities that followers identify with and want to emulate, and so represent a retreat to the ‘discredited heroics’ of stand alone leaders (Gronn, 2002, p. 426).

A problem with conventional ‘individualistic’ approaches is their normative assumption that leaders have certain ‘essential’ attributes that can be identified, measured and developed. This literature tends to perceive leadership identities in individual terms,
leading to the assumption that leadership can be best studied by assigning its ‘appearance’ to separate ‘individuals’. It presupposes that only certain individuals can be leaders, that certain leaders are appropriate for certain contingencies, or that individuals can have sufficient flexibility in their leadership styles to match the needs of a number of different situations. Furthermore, this viewpoint represents the dominant and 'seductive game' (Calás and Smircich, 1991) of leaders as meaning creating subjects (Smircich and Morgan, 1982). It is leaders who inspire others, leaders who set challenges, leaders who build teams, and leaders who create opportunities. Leaders are thus seen as Prime Movers rather than the product of a collective effort. These identity-locating attributes turn out to be more prescriptive than descriptive, however. Managers may well need to do these things, but simply doing them does not privilege them as ‘leader’ nor as someone who can be the cause of ‘leadership’. Such prescriptions simplify and may not be the most appropriate units of analysis within the climate of complexity, interdependence, and indetermination that characterises new and ‘virtual’ modes of organising, whose working practices are increasingly decentralised or weakly coupled.

In an attempt to problematise the normative position on leadership, this paper draws on the ‘process’ studies of the British mathematical physicist and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1926, 1929, 1933), as well as those of his contemporary Henri Bergson (1912), to articulate an alternative, less omniscient, approach to leadership theorising. Whitehead’s philosophy formulates a vision of reality, not as ‘here, now, immediate, and discrete’ (Whitehead, 1933: p. 180), but as an ambiguous and unfinished process. His approach rests on the premise of openness: an admission of incompleteness in our
knowledge, coping with ambiguities, complementarities and tensions, and a willingness to try new perspectives. Whitehead understood the idea of the open system as one in which entities – people, ideas, and things – require each other for their existence. An open system is one that exhibits dynamic ambiguity, self-organisation and unpredictability. This sort of openness presupposes an essential ‘interconnectedness of things’ (Whitehead, 1933: p. 227), one in which individual activities – for example, leadership – are concepts we employ to create stability, form, and predictability. The implication here is that ‘process is the concrete reality of things’ (Griffin, 1986: p. 6). From this alternative viewpoint, leadership is nothing other than a relation – a relation of myriad influences – and not the property of a self-determining individual. Before we can arrive at an individualisation of leadership we must first abstract its constitutive characteristics from the open reality of process. It is these purposive abstractions that Whitehead calls ‘concrescence’.

The critical issue in process studies, therefore, is not the deeds of self-determining leaders, but how leadership is as much an undetermined outcome of organisational processes as the agent for them (Hosking, 1988). The a priori individualistic embodiment of leadership is considered, therefore, as an error of thinking. Leaders can no longer be thought of as distinct individuals. The emergence of leadership qualities can be more properly described as a ‘systematic complex of mutual relatedness’ (Whitehead, 1925, p. 161), one in which leadership is always social and not subordinated in the actions of the individual subject. Thus, although the identity of both leaders and followers can be temporally established, the finite meaning and significance of their appearance and
functions remains indeterminate. Leadership and followership are each ‘an incompleteness in the process of production’ (Whitehead, 1929, p. 327). The thesis is that leadership identities are consistently ‘in flow’ and have to be apprehended through social processes of mutual relevance. A leader is not ‘the autonomous, self-determining individual with a secure unitary identity [at] the centre of the social universe’ (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000: p. 98). Leadership continuously emerges out of those processes ‘in’ the ‘between’ of subjects and objects, leaders and followers, and so forth (being neither one or the other); it is both constituted and constituting.

The Misplacing of Leadership

That leaders make things happen is an obvious and rarely questioned way of thinking. Indeed, it is inherent in normative leadership research to consider ‘the leader as consistent essence, a centred subject with a particular orientation’ (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003: 961). Myths of leadership often attribute power to individuals and therefore it is individuals that cause events. Moreover, those whom are led find the responsibility a leader assumes for the authorship of events to be important and comforting (Bolman and Deal, 1994). Leadership is therefore a form of reality management. People often look to a leader to frame and concretise their reality (Smircich and Morgan, 1982). What gets to count as real, however, is often a consequence of incipient power. Leaders may, for example, seek to extend managerial control in the name of practical autonomy through a project of strengthening or changing the culture. They might try to promote quality,
flexibility and/or responsiveness improvement by ensuring subordinate commitment to an instrumental structure of feeling and thought (Willmott, 1993).

This individualistic way of thinking is now widespread. Consider the BBC’s recent search for the ‘Greatest Briton’, the Council for Excellence in Management and Leadership’s (CEML) strategy to ensure that the UK has the best managers and leaders for the future, and the recent UK National Health Service (NHS) Leadership Qualities Framework endorsing a set of fifteen key personal characteristics, attitudes and behaviours in areas of strategic importance that leaders should aspire to in delivering NHS modernisation. The instinctive conviction lying behind these projects is the existence of an order of things out of which the real entities of our perceptual experience – leaders and followers – are constructed (Whitehead, 1925, p. 27). Contemporary research has now begun to consider leadership as a process, but this tends to deal with the phenomenon as an extrinsic process – the relative cause and effect of ‘leaders’ and ‘followers’ on one another – and ignores leadership’s intrinsic processes. Whitehead (1925) refers to this continued mode of thought as ‘scientific materialism’. Scientific materialism proposes ‘the ultimate fact of a brute matter, or material, spread throughout space … following a fixed routine imposed by external relations which do not spring from the nature of its being’ (Whitehead, 1925, p. 17). This passive rendering of the material world, however, attends only to those aspects of concrete experience that lie within some arbitrary or imposed scheme and not to the dynamic character of existence. We habitually assume the discontinuous existence of things in space as obvious – each ‘thing’ is accorded a definite period in which it ‘is’ in its full concreteness. Relations are
explained as between one discrete thing and another discrete thing, each with the property of ‘simple location’ in space and time, ‘each instantaneous, each concretely in itself without transition’ (Whitehead, 1925, p. 49). Simple location is the characteristic by which a leader can be said to be here in space and be here in time in a perfectly definite sense and to have these ‘relations of position’ quite independently of other entities; the entity endures, undivided through time and across space. On Whitehead’s view, therefore, it is a fallacy to think of individual leaders as being simply located – here, now, immediate, enduring, and discrete – without any reference to prior and following events. This anthropocentric way of thinking is based on the error of mistaking the abstract for the concrete: the fallacy of misplaced concreteness (Whitehead, 1925, p. 51).

Whitehead, for example, asks in what sense is its scent the property of the rose. He points out that apart from noses there would be no smells. Likewise without eyes there would be no colours, without ears, no sounds. These are all constituted qualities and it is the organisation/ordering/abstracting of certain sensations: seeing, hearing, touching, etc. that constitutes the order of nature:

These sensations are projected by the mind so as to clothe appropriate bodies in external nature. Thus the bodies are perceived as with qualities which in reality do not belong to them, qualities which in fact are purely the offspring of the mind. Thus nature gets credit which should in truth be reserved for ourselves: the rose for its scent: the nightingale for its song: and the sun for its radiance. The poets are entirely mistaken. They should address their lyrics to themselves, and should turn them into odes of self-congratulation on the excellence of the human mind. Nature is a
dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless; merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaningless.

(Whitehead, 1925, p. 54)

It is the same with charismatic-, effective-, visionary- and transformational-leadership. The leader ‘is always social first and only mistakenly claims the personal self as the origin of experience’ (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000: p. 97). The conception of a unitary self is only a particular case and not the ultimate fact (Marx, 1973). We observe certain characteristics of ‘leaders’; there is something about them that we note. Perhaps they are male, Caucasian and European, young and charismatic. We perceive somebody who possesses these qualities or characteristics. It is through them that we apprehend the personal self. In other words the individual is the material of which we predicate the qualities and characteristics. Some of these qualities and characteristics are relatively enduring: male and European, but others are more changeable: young and charismatic. The person may not always be charismatic, for example, and will certainly not always be young. Similarly, when we determine a leader is charismatic we must also ask in what sense their charisma is a quality of the person. Apart from other people would the leader be charismatic? Logically not, as a leader cannot be charismatic in a vacuum. In other words, charisma, effectiveness, vision, and transformation only appear as personal attributes because we have mistaken our abstraction of them for concrete realities. Their abstraction is a purposive emanation from the ‘indeterminate ultimate reality’ (Griffin, 1986: p. 136).
Now, the advantage of confining our attention to the independent existence of things in space is that we confine our thoughts to clear-cut definite things with clear-cut definite relations (e.g. leaders and followers). Nothing in our immediate experience, however, actually possesses the character of simple location. To so confine our attention is an example of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. The disadvantage of this confinement is that we have a tendency to exclude events and functions important to our experience. The result is a ‘one-eyed reason, deficient in its vision of depth’ (Whitehead, 1925, p. 59). So, whilst we may not be able to think without the selective pressures that elicit clear-cut definite things, we ought to become more critical of our basic distinctions and divisions. Such is the case for our consideration of the individual capabilities (for example, charismatic/visionary/transformational) of leaders in abstraction from the cultural and institutional settings that shape perceptions and expectations of leadership behaviour. By revising the dominant organisation of our abstractions we can, perhaps, articulate alternative ways of thinking and formulate new conceptual configurations to explain the leadership phenomenon. These start from the position that leadership does not have the limitations of being just in this person and no other, or in just this place and no other, but which recognise the individual ‘leader’ as a particular case and not the ultimate fact; having no independent existence outside our purposive abstractions.
The Principle of the Excluded Middle

The proposition is that leadership, in the guise of a self-evident individual, has an essential reference to others. The person designated as ‘leader’ can only be grasped as such within an essential relation. Such a relation, however, is not a dialectical recognition, in the Hegelian sense, between individual things, for example ‘A’ and ‘B’, in space:

\[
\begin{align*}
A & \rightarrow B \\
B & \rightarrow A
\end{align*}
\]

This is because Hegelian dialectics necessarily denotes the oppositional force of one or more things on each other (i.e. there must be at least two things). The general term ‘thing’ means to be one of the ‘many’ (A, B, C …, and so on), each of which ‘through its own nature relates itself to the other’ (Hegel, quoted in Houlgate, 1999: 99) as a mere object. From a processual point of view, however, the idea of simple, objective location has gone. You cannot extract leaders from their environment without destroying their relational essence. This means that instead of delineating the independent being-for-itself (A) from the dependent being-for-another (B), we must come to grips with the intervening milieu, within which these individual terms stand, in order to reframe our understanding of leadership. Thus:

\[
A \leftrightarrow B
\]
Contemporary leadership thinking, to be effective, must go beyond common ideas of simple identity location. Leadership is really a process, one within which the self-determining individual ‘leader’ is only a subordinate instance. The proposal is that leadership is not located in A where it is apparent (i.e. the designated leader), nor is it simply at B from where it is being recognised (i.e. in the ‘mind’ of followers). Neither is it a series of bi-directional relationships between A and B (A→B and B→A). Rather it is the indefinite middle, or the ‘in’ of the ‘between’ of both (A←B), where A and B are ‘inseparable moments’ (Deleuze, 1983), each necessarily referring back to the other. This essential relatedness is not structured by the self-determination of the ‘leader’, but rather enters into the very nature of leadership. It is within the relation that leaders’ affirm their certainty of self.

Received thinking on leadership, however, continues to assume that the endurance of a secure unitary identity must mean ‘undifferentiated sameness’ (Whitehead, 1925, p. 133), enduring, undivided through time and across space. But what if endurance indicates a reiterating pattern of relationality, rather than undifferentiated sameness? A tune, as distinct from a succession of detached notes, is an example of such an unfolding pattern. The individual notes have no endurance in isolation, but in terms of a complex unit in a continuous chain of other notes. Thus, in common analyses, the continual error is of seeing leaders as concrete, relatively fixed entities. Those who are aware of themselves as centred ‘inside’ an insulated container – free from the contamination of the threatening ‘other’ which is located on the ‘outside’ – are captured by an illusion generated by the mechanisms of ‘ego protection’ (Battersby, 1998, p. 52), safeguarding them from
examination as reifications of organising processes. This presupposes the Aristotelian ‘subject-predicate’ and it is the metaphysical doctrine of the simple location of secure identities, each qualified by their private predicates, in a community of external subject-object relations. It is also reminiscent of the Cartesian discrimination between matter and mind, in which Mind becomes the Prime Mover. These private worlds of experience, however, no longer have to be thought of as either the beginning or end of the ego-protected individual, but as a middle, as always in the middle, as an indefinite interbeing.

The process of individuation is also at the centre of Bergson’s (1912) metaphysical doctrine of the generation of things. According to Bergson we are incapable of seeing experience without pre-existing forms that appear relatively enduring. The prime function of such abstract thought, he argues, is to force on us a static conception of the world in which the idea of, for example, leadership is grasped as a relation between relatively structured mechanisms that exist independently of any relation between them. Bergson’s metaphysics starts at the opposite end from the simple location of enduring subjects. His starting point is from the analysis of process. He focuses on the emergence of enduring patterns that have to be seized from the flow of process. Patterns enjoy no individuality of content, being more properly conceived as ‘succession without distinction’ (Bergson, 1910, p. 100). He describes a complex relationship that involves a living interpenetration connecting all ‘things’ at all places and times and which ‘adopts the very life of things’ (Bergson, 1912, p. 53). What is real is the continual change of form, where form is only a ‘snapshot’ view of transition. This, again, brings us to the point that our understanding of leadership is always framed through social processes. A leader cannot be divorced from his or her reference to a context or community of others, as the two aspects were not
separate in the first place. In other words each individual leader has a ‘relational essence’ (Whitehead 1925, p. 160): they have no secure identity independent of these processes. I mean by this that these processes shape the individual leader. Thus the essence of leader ‘A’ must always be indeterminate, fluxing, it must always conjointly involve an *ingression* with, and not simply the recognition by, an other: ‘B’. Accordingly, the original *being* of an individual leader is properly described as a ‘systematic complex of mutual relatedness’ (Whitehead, 1925, p. 161), that is to say their being is affirmed in becoming, it is a *becomingness*.

Rubin’s ‘double profile’ (Figure 1) is exemplary of this mutual relatedness, ‘in which the separate identities of the parts give way to a mutual coming *and* going, uniting *and* separating; and in which identities as self-contained units simply *semble*, seem, feign, pretend (Cooper, 1998, p. 110, original emphasis).

The true problem for apprehending the origin of leadership is, therefore, to discover the continual processes of becoming through which the secure identities of designated leaders are seen as mutually related. Accordingly, we must treat all appearances as transient abstractions, as a mode of attention, or symbolic division of this mutual relatedness and not the apprehension of an enduring individual. Furthermore, we might begin to ask why it is that we value the unproblematic presence of leaders ahead of the
incomplete and ambiguous processes of creation that lie hidden behind stable and predictable appearances.

The Process of Individuation

Simondon (1992) takes up this line of thought in his essay *Genesis of the Individual*. For Simondon, what is required is a complete change in mental habit, one in which the process of individuation is considered in place of a mistaken focus on existent individuals. As he puts it: ‘… to grasp firmly the nature of individuation, we must consider the being not as a substance, or matter, or form, but as a tautly extended and supersaturated system’ (Simondon, 1992, p. 301). Despite this the problem of individuation, according to Simondon, continues to be formulated in either ‘substantialist’ terms of the already constituted individual, or, the ‘hylomorphic’ operation of individuation. Both views assume we can discover a ‘principle of individuation’ (Simondon, 1992, p. 297) that would explain the individual. The first takes the already constituted individual as a given. The second does not presuppose a secure and unitary identity, but does assume a necessary bipolar matter-form relation that puts the principle into effect. Here the origin of the principle is thought to be *either* something capable of being individualised *or* the self-present individual exercising their influence, because the *process* of individuation is not thought to be capable of supplying the principle itself. Simondon argues that in both cases, the tendency is to understand the problem of individuation retrospectively from the principle of the already given
individual, rather than the need to understand the individual from the perspective of the process of individuation that has made their existence possible. It is this point that normative constructs of leadership often miss. They typically focus on the deeds of the individual leader exclusively, before any philosophical questions about the process of their individuation have been asked.

Normative leadership research treats the self-presence of individual leaders as unproblematical and sees the process of individuation ‘as something to be explained rather than as something in which the explanation is to be found’ (Simondon, 1992: p. 299). Normalised strategies ‘aim toward achieving a presence of person qua the ideal of the classical subject’ (Day, 1998, p. 96). The received way of thinking is, for example, oriented toward the knowing, unitary, autonomous leader, whom it then seeks to account for. It ‘presumes that leadership is all about the person at the top of the hierarchy’ (Barker, 2001, p. 471), or else provides examples of a ‘first among equals’ (Gronn, 2002, p. 430) in a way that bypasses the necessary processes through which clear leader-followership identities are fixed. Terms such as ‘charismatic leadership’ (Conger and Kanungo, 1998), ‘servant leadership’ (Greenleaf, 1977; Greenleaf and Spears, 1998), ‘intelligent leadership’ (Hooper and Potter, 2000) and ‘transformational leadership’ (Bass, 1997; MacGregor Burns, 1978), suggest certain qualities that prefigure the dominant principle of individuation and indicate the neoclassical distinction of two ‘things’: subjects and objects, leaders and followers, and so on, each with definable beginnings and ends. In order to trace the relations of subject and object and leader and follower beyond the appearance of autonomous, self-determining individuals, however,
we must pay attention to the necessary relation, which exceeds any such secure and unitary identities: the process of individuation itself.

Here, the concern is to try to grasp the unfolding individuation in all its variety. The self-evident leader is understood as having only a relative identity, occupying only a certain phase or category within a system, and not being its exclusive centre. The focus on the characteristics of the individual leader exclusively, without allowing for their necessary relation to the contextual circumstances from which they were abstracted, may well prevent us from adequately representing the process of individuation and from accurately according the individual leader their proper place in the system within which they are ‘inextricably compounded’ (Chia, 1998, p. 11). The border between leaders and followers is continually being crossed, not in the sense of an interaction between secure unitary terms, but rather as a system perpetually in relation to itself with a certain ‘internal resonance requiring permanent communication’ (Simondon, 1992, p. 305). The implication is of a pre-individual state, full of latent potentials and forces ‘in-tension’, which lead to individuation. Individuation can be thought of as a partial and relative resolution to ‘the self’s attempts to differentiate and detach from its surroundings in order to attain a measure of autonomy and independence’ (Chia, 1998, p. 10). The process of individuation therefore needs to be seen as a becoming that is a dimension of a leader’s being: the becoming of being.
Becoming Leader

Let us summarise the argument so far. Normative studies of leadership give us self-evident subject-agents, but this is a false notion. The enduring identity of an individual leader is only a partial and relative resolution, the being that is affirmed in becoming. There can be no leadership independent of the complex social, material and technological milieu in which it is grounded. What endures is identity of pattern, not the existence of leaders as already constituted individuals. The real problem is, therefore, not to seek to understand the private world of passions and originating thoughts of self-evident leaders but rather the value associated with the emerging individual – the pattern that endures. As such we must begin to allow in the milieu that co-constitutes leaders, and our analysis should lie in the mutual relatedness of both. As Whitehead (1925, p. 206) puts it:

> You may obtain individual specimens of fine trees either in exceptional circumstances or where human cultivation has intervened, but in nature the normal way in which trees flourish is by their association in a forest … A forest is the triumph of the organisation of mutually dependent species … In the history of the world, the prize has not gone to those species which specialised in methods of violence, or even in defensive armour … every organism requires an environment of friends, partly to shield it from violent changes, and partly to supply it with its wants.

Whitehead explores what he calls the ‘mutual dependence’ of individual identity. This he finds to be an immanent system of heterogeneous ‘associations’ and one that makes any bracketing of the individual, behind a ‘defensive armour’ of determinate functions, difficult to sustain. In this sense, an individual entity cannot be construed as an isolated thing present at hand that gets caught up in life. The individual does not ‘find itself’ in
relation to its ‘environment’, but rather the ‘relation’ itself is an intrinsic feature of the becoming of the individual. The individual comes to be spoken in terms of ongoing associations or becomings and not in terms of ‘individual specimens’. A becoming suggests that leadership is an indeterminate, ‘non-localisable relation sweeping up the two distant or contiguous points, carrying one into the proximity of the other’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p. 293). The ‘essence’ of leadership is not the relatively enduring identities that represent it but the relations of almost imperceptible directions, movement and orientations, that have neither beginning nor end.

Such a position challenges the notion of leaders as autonomous individual entities that can be simply located. Becoming functions through assemblages of heterogeneous alliances and populations, in which the only entity is a ‘symbiotic’ or sympathetic relation between terms, species, standard classifications, and so on. The usual view of leaders is that they are self-determining individuals with key personal characteristics, attitudes and behaviours. However a leader lives or dies in a system of relations, in which it is impossible to determine with any degree of fixity where the ‘individual’ begins or ends. Thus a leader can only be understood in terms of these constitutive relations, and not simply in terms of a concretely existing subject-predicate.

The biologist Lynn Margulis (Margulis and Sagan, 1986) uses her original work on symbiosis to challenge the view that natural selection provides the prime explanation of self-determination. Evidence from the fossil record suggests that evolution did not occur through members of a species competing with one another in the struggle for life, but
rather through an ancient life process. Life forms multiply and increase in complexity by co-opting others, not just by killing them. The merging of organisms into new collectives involves a gradual coming together that leads to physical interdependence and the permanent sharing of cells and bodies. The fundamental component of life is an emergent symbiosis between heterogeneous objects and processes that organise themselves and ultimately become totally dependent on each other, so that it is hard to decide what are the individual and what is not. This is an unsettling view, however, because it challenges ideas of individuality, uniqueness and independence, in which humans see themselves as ‘discrete physical beings separated from the rest of nature’ (Margulis and Sagan, 1986, p. 35). As Rackham (2002, p. 4), quoting Margulis and Sagan, tells us, ‘symbiosis has a filthy lesson to teach’. Rather than being the ‘masters of life perched on the final rung of an evolutionary ladder’ (Margulis and Sagan, 1986, p. 195) human beings are always already a collective phenomenon, in continuity with ‘the flows and flux of matter, information, and energies’ (Margulis and Sagan, 1986, p. 152). The human is an integrated colony of cell gorging, aborted invasions and merged beings. We are involved with our symbiotic partners – plants, animals, and bacteria – and proliferate with them. We have never been, and will never be singular, clean, and contained units. Our bodies are ‘nothing more than a set of valves, locks, floodgates, bowls, or communicating vessels’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p. 153), even though we continue to favour single, familiar, egocentric images.

The phenomenon of symbiosis also accounts for the interconnected environment of people, information systems, commercial markets, and so on. New technologies are
restructuring organisational and social environments so that human beings are no longer separated from the rest of life. In reality we are a biological extension of the larger-than-human networks that surround and suffuse us. The much vaunted characteristics and behaviours of individual leaders, for example, are increasingly constructed, coordinated and consumed in ‘without walls’ organisations. One impact of these new and ‘virtual’ modes of organising has been to blur leader-follower divisions. Dispersed satellite offices are now administered through increasingly decentralised structures and emerging networks, which simultaneously ‘automate and informate’ (Zuboff, 1988), in a kind of organisation ‘sans frontiers’. Leaders have been ‘ingested’ into self-managing teams and groups, whose organisational working practices are constituted, renegotiated and extended by advanced information and communication technologies such as e-mail (Brigham and Corbett, 1997). Thus leadership behaviour is at the interface of previous experiences and new circumstances that necessarily evoke novel patterns of involvement. The individual abilities of a leader to envision, to transform, and to communicate, have become integrated with bio-technical systems that are simultaneously individual and collective, inside and outside, decentralised and centralised, and social and technical. The individual leader becomes a kind of ‘cyborg’, born at the interface of automation and autonomy (Wood, 1999).
Implications for Studying Leadership

Understanding the processual nature of the leadership function implies a widening of the research emphasis away from a description of the authoritative accounts of leaders themselves. The methodological drive toward superficial, causal explanations, its insistence on subject/object demarcations and self-image tends to over-simplify in this regard. In their different ways normative research strategies take leaders to be self-determining individuals. But being a leader has an indeterminate ‘real’, rather than just a self-evident appearance. As such these strategies fail to answer important questions about the process of leadership. Normative studies recognise the objective value of leadership as an intervening process between background context and later change, while treating the individual leader as a ‘black box’ between input and output factors. In order to open this objectivity up to conjecture, leadership research must begin to spotlight these concealed black boxes and examine the other socio-political 'actors' and their collective role in shaping a particular leadership phenomenon.

Process studies precisely set up this epistemological challenge to the normative concern with establishing validation frameworks to fix substance, reconcile identity, and establish consensus. The approach is consistent with previous social studies of science ‘in action’ (Latour, 1987), ethnographic accounts of the precarious ‘modes of ordering’ by which leaders and followers constitute themselves (Law, 1994), and ideas from critical management research emphasising the already social nature of leaders and their realities (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). Process studies start from two interrelated axioms: (1) that
the concrete appearance of leaders is conceived as a process of individuation rooted in everyday experience, instead of as clear-cut definite individuals, and that (2) the individuations we ascribe are determined by their relevance to the kind of leadership we require here and now, and not merely by essential reference to the qualities or characteristics of leaders as they really are. Several points can be summarised about the epistemological approach involved.

First process studies seek to elucidate the ongoing nature of reality. They give primacy to inter-relatedness and flux, ahead of the materialistic belief in the nature of things. Looked at this way, leadership is better seen as a system of mutual dependence, rather than a self-evident entity. This is important, as common analyses tend to reduce the complexity and uncertainty of process in favour of the certainty of order, structures and individual subjects. Such accounts start by making certain judgements about the nature of the phenomena they wish to investigate or understand. A process approach, in contrast, avoids taking ‘leaders’ for granted, in an absolute way, treating them instead as accomplishments of social processes that are continually going on. It attempts to open up the indeterminacy of leadership situations from multiple angles, burrowing into them, taking them apart and seeing how they were realised. What is interesting from the process point of view are the ways in which patterns and processes become naturalised as taken for granted forms and individuals.

Second, process studies place emphasis on understanding how leadership comes to be rather than what it is. The latter remains preoccupied with Hegel’s totalising dialectic.
Conversely, a process point of view protests against closure and pleas for openness. Here, theories are validated more pragmatically: ‘does it work’, not ‘is it true’. In other words process thought remains open-minded about the dynamics of forms, creative ideas, and the interplay of understandings. It talks of the open systems in which each of these possibilities occurs, without holding on to any of them dogmatically as ‘truths’. The idea is to focus on the heterogeneous aspects of social processes and ‘leadership action’, without the teleological insistence upon summing up, bringing together, or of reducing to an individual point. The temporality of ideas and of reality creates a challenging postponement of closure. From this perspective, the dominant view of leaders as natural and self-evident becomes problematic. As Alvesson and Deetz (2000, p. 152) describe, it is a re-definition and ‘casting of new light on the something that earlier has either escaped serious attention or been understood in a conventional and thus partly conservative way’.

Third and consequently, the aim of a process approach is to explore the ‘intellectual sympathy’ leaders and followers have with one another. As such, the reality of leadership cannot be understood simply as the result of the intentions or influences of an individual leader, nor the independent confirmations of followers. Process research does not start from the position of leaders or followers as independently existing things in themselves, but as a never-to-be-completed process, in which each is grasped ‘in-tension’ and ‘influence’. That is, the extent to which each depends upon the other for it’s being: their mutual relatedness. Drawing on ideas from Bergson and Whitehead, process studies display an explicit commitment to a becoming ontology. They suggest leaders and
followers are not separable, but enfolded into each other. This character of leader-followership as a continuity of material, historically constituted, and subjectively-selected relations needs to be recognised if the pathological distinction between leaders and followers that leaves both leaders and followers ‘out there’ is to be transcended.

**Conclusion: Leadership Unbound**

Process studies provide a clear demonstration of the thesis that ‘successful leaders’ are not autonomous, self-determining individuals, independent of any relation to others. The notion of the individual leader must be construed merely as a selective abstraction from the continual flux of things. Traditionally leaders have immersed themselves in the transcendent principle of individualism. They have done this by ascribing themselves certain ascendant characteristics: I am a visionary, I communicate well, I encourage participation, I build teams, I am clear what needs to be achieved, and so on. It is the dominance of the prefix ‘I’ in these statements that epitomises the view of the individual leader as substantial and discrete, with an essence of being and self-centeredness. We should adduce no such strong coupling, however, between ‘leaders’ and their ‘environments’. What is primary is the process of individuation. Leaders are constituted as successful/unsuccessful only in dynamic and processual terms and in which emphasis is placed on the open milieu of symbiotic relations. It is the symbiotic process of mutual relatedness that I propose as an alternative to common ideas and familiar egocentric images of leadership.
When viewed in symbiotic terms a clear principle of individual leadership becomes problematic. What becomes important is the indeterminate and relational process of individuation itself. Deleuze and Guattari (1988) introduce the term ‘involution’ to express the relaxation of natural, obvious and reified forms and the emergence of a complex field of heterogeneous combinations and novel alliances, which cut across and beneath fixed and instantaneous identities. Such aggregations are a non-localisable line of *becoming*, a middle, an in-between that recognises the continual participation of identities *within* each other. Becoming denotes the movement by which leadership frees itself from the idea of simple location and renders individual leaders indiscernible. The notion of leadership, therefore, does not refer specifically or exclusively to the transformational, charismatic or visionary agency of self-positing leaders, nor does it focus entirely on the behaviour of followers. It concentrates instead on the mutual relatedness of the leader-followership compound.

In conclusion, leadership studies, as a body of knowledge and understanding, faces a pressing need to 'relevate' new and imaginative ways of thinking so as to gain new conceptual leverage. I have sought to extend current understanding of the phenomenon of leadership by 'relevating' the process of mutual relatedness. The difficulty, however, is conceiving the mutual relatedness adequate for the removal of the individual without destroying its complexity and the leadership that depends on it. This complexity must be recognised if leadership studies is to avoid continued subjugation by an individualistic canon.

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1 The term 'relevate' was first coined in discussion with Robert Chia and Jonathan Gosling. A derivation of the verb elevate and the noun relevance it refers to the practice of raising the status and bringing to bear that which appears, in the first instance, to be 'irrelevant' to the world of leadership studies and practice.
References


Figure 1: Rubin’s Double Profile