The Fallacy of Misplaced Leadership

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Abstract

Conventional ideas of leadership tend to hold an instinctive conviction about the characteristics of key people independently from the cultural and institutional settings that shape the meanings and interpretations we use to apprehend leadership behaviour. This normative position accords an ontological privilege to the absolutely distinct individual. Contemporary management research has now begun to pay attention to leadership as a process in context. However, the full implications of this insight are seldom drawn out. The paper will explore how a perspective of process metaphysics challenges ideas of both possessive individualism and differential relations that can be simply located. The aim will be to see how the study of leadership shifts from these partial expressions to a more thorough understanding of its complete relation. The paper will explore some methodological implications of this way of thinking for future leadership research.

Keywords: becoming, difference, identity, leadership, process metaphysics

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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 management studies, with significant debate concerning the problem of understanding the nature and role of leadership (Gemmill and Oakley, 1992; Hosking, 1988). For example, 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 key people 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 following questions. First, are leaders able to alter their style to suit the situation? Second, are assumptions about the significance of maturity allocated to the individual follower objectively or subjectively measured? Third, 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 (Burns, 1978). Such individuals ‘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 fill followers with longing and desire, and so ultimately represent an avowed retreat to the ‘discredited heroics’ (Gronn, 2002, p. 426) of stand alone leaders.

A problem with these conventional ‘individualistic’ approaches is the psychological origin of much of the theory and data. They assume that leaders have certain ‘essential’ qualities and capabilities that can be identified, measured and developed. This literature tends to perceive leadership in individual terms, and assumes leadership can be best studied by assigning its ‘appearance’ to a few key people. 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 (Hosking, 1988; Smircich and Morgan, 1982). It is leaders who inspire others, leaders who create opportunities, and leaders who influence values. Leaders are thus seen as Prime Movers rather than as effects 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.
The paper attempts to draw out the fuller implications of these criticisms of our excessive preoccupation with the psychological approach to leadership. It starts with the conjecture, inspired by 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 (1910; 1911; 1912), that our experience of leadership manifests itself as a continual state of flux, as a continuous flow of becoming, which cannot be divided up endlessly. Bergson (1910) believes that the phenomena of our experience are internally related – the flow of experience does not reveal a discrete series of unrelated parts: the parts come as related. The continuity of experience, according to Bergson, cannot be subordinated to an infinitely divisible continuum; it must be understood as an irreducible event that has no gaps between its parts. Similarly, Whitehead (1925) points to the qualities of an enduring individual part already pervading the constitution of those parts that succeed it. The paper discusses the possibilities of these underlying qualitative relations, processes, and differences, before using them to call into question the dominance of more omniscient models. At this stage the discussion is meant to be suggestive rather than conclusive. Its limited aim is to make a plausible case for a point of view that is not often considered in management and leadership research.

**Process Studies**

Process philosophy formulates a vision of reality, not as ‘here, now, immediate, and discrete’ (Whitehead, 1933, p. 180), but as an indeterminate and unfinished event. It rests on the premise of openness in the progress of human life and civilisation: an openness that admits the incompleteness of our knowledge, which expresses our coping with ambiguities, complementarities and tensions, and points out a willingness to try new perspectives. From this viewpoint, both life and society have a tendency toward infinite complexity, dynamic self-organisation, and a constant elaboration of novel forms without end. The implication is that ‘process is the concrete reality of things’ (Griffin, 1986, p. 6, original emphasis). Process philosophy presupposes an essential ‘interconnectedness of things’ (Whitehead, 1933, p. 227), in which a thing must appeal to another thing in order to complete itself. However, it is precisely because this relation seems so ineffable and
mysterious that our theories of movement and endurance have a tendency to ‘divide’ open reality into concrete ‘things’, each of which can then be more easily elicited. What must be borne in mind, from the point of view of process metaphysics, however, is that it is this elicitation that exhibits the concrete things of which we think the world is made and not the underlying ‘substantial’ things themselves. Concrete things – for example, leaders, followers, and organisations – are surface effects, inevitable illusions (Deleuze, 1994, p. 126). They are blunt divisions we employ to create stability, form, and finitude, but under whose supposed necessity the complexity of the world is forgotten.

By this illusory means, the dominant tradition of research continues to see leadership as here and now, instantaneous, and ‘concretely in itself without transition’ (Whitehead, 1925, p. 49). We may be thinking of business gurus, policy makers, political leaders, spiritual teachers, fashion icons, pop idols, and sporting heroes, but in all these senses ‘leadership’ means an inherent capability residing in an individual subject. We distinguish a subject from everything that it is not; as being one thing but not another – a self-identical ‘It’ that is both discrete and enduring. In doing so we leave out the sense of the subject’s internal qualitative relatedness to others. What is missing is the mode of togetherness, the mutual immanence, or ‘difference in-itself’ (Deleuze, 1994, p. 50) of leadership.

For example, we often establish the personality characteristics of leaders in relation to a set of differences. These differences, can fill followers with longing, desire, and envy that in turn require regulation, control, denial, exclusion, or, alternatively, sublimation and catharsis. However, by focusing on the figure of the leader as the omniscient character of those differences, we might be colluding in these extant power relations. This individualistic way of thinking, according to Whitehead (1925), is an example of the error of mistaking our abstract conceptualisations for the concrete things themselves: the fallacy of misplaced concreteness (Whitehead, 1925, p. 51). Whitehead’s point is that an individual leadership figure is always ‘a mode of attention’ that only ‘provides the extreme of selective emphasis’ (Whitehead, 1933, p. 270). In contrast to the conventional view that leadership ‘identity’ can obtain in a secure and concrete sense, without any
reference to prior and following events, Whitehead’s more positive emanation contends that leadership is a ‘process’ of difference, alive with movement and change, constantly being formed and reformed.

The critical issue in process studies, therefore, is not the actual qualities of a particular leadership figure, but how such a figure ‘condenses within itself … a multitude of social dimensions and meanings’ (Cooper, 1983, p. 204). Looked at this way, leadership is not located in ‘the autonomous, self-determining individual with a secure unitary identity [at] the centre of the social universe’ (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000, p. 98). On the contrary, the emergence of leadership is more properly described as a ‘systematic complex of mutual relatedness’ (Whitehead, 1925, p. 161), one in which our conceptual interpretations are always ‘an incompleteness in the process of production’ (Whitehead, 1929, p. 327). Leadership is found neither in one term or the other, but in ‘the point of difference’ (Cooper, 1983, p. 204), at which each turns around the other. In this sense, leadership is a ‘complete’ relation: each part necessarily referring to the other, but there is no ‘completion’ in a straightforward way. Leadership cannot simply be determined at one particular point or another. Rather, it is consistently ‘in flow’ and continuously emerging from those processes ‘in’ the ‘between’ of points.

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, p. 961). This individualistic way of thinking is now widespread. Consider the BBC’s recent search for the ‘Greatest Briton’ (Greatest Briton, 2002), the Council for Excellence in Management and Leadership’s (CEML, 2002) strategy to ensure that the UK has the best managers and leaders for the future, and the current UK National Health Service (NHS) Leadership Qualities Framework (DoH, 2003), 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.
It is the same with charismatic-, effective-, visionary- and transformational-leadership. These myths of leadership often attribute power to individuals and therefore it is individuals that cause events (Gemmill and Oakley, 1992). Moreover, those whom are led often find the responsibility a leader assumes for the authorship of events to be important and comforting (Bolman and Deal, 1994). 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. For example, leaders may seek to extend managerial control in the name of practical autonomy through a project of strengthening or changing an organisation’s 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). The instinctive conviction lying behind these projects, however, is the existence of an order of ‘completed’ things through which the individual figures of our perceptual experience are apprehended (Whitehead, 1925, p. 27).

But the leader ‘is always social first and only mistakenly claims the personal self as the origin of experience’ (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000, p. 97). 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 and it is through them that we apprehend the self-identical person. In other words, the individual is the material of which we predicate the qualities and characteristics. Furthermore, some of these personal qualities and characteristics are relatively enduring: male and European, but others are more changeable. The person may not always be charismatic, for example, and will certainly not always be young. If we want to determine whether a leader is charismatic we might ask in what sense is their charisma a personal quality? Apart from other people would the leader be charismatic? Logically not, as no leader is 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 reality. Their
abstraction is a purposive emanation from the ‘indeterminate ultimate reality’ (Griffin, 1986, p. 136).

Gilbert Simondon (1992) takes up this line of indeterminate 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 extant figures. 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). According to Simondon, however, the problem of individuation 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 completion – mechanism or finalism – that would explain a particular leadership figure. The first, mechanistic, view takes the absolutely distinct individuality as an already given. In this it looks a lot like conventional leadership research, which treats the substantial appearance of leaders as unproblematic and sees the process of their individuation ‘as something to be explained rather than as something in which the explanation is to be found’ (Simondon, 1992, p. 299). These normalised strategies ‘aim toward achieving a presence of person qua the ideal of the classical subject’ (Day, 1998, p. 96). Each ‘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 such figures are created. The second view does not presuppose any absolutely distinct individuality, but does assume a teleological matter-form relation that puts the principle into effect. 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; Burns, 1978), all call to mind a clear idea of cause and effect. Here, the finite circumstances in one term provide a model for the other to aspire to. In the above examples, ‘charisma’, ‘service’, ‘intelligence’, and ‘transformation’, are all preconceived conditions or functions that anticipate being realised in present leadership behaviour.
The origin of the principle, therefore, is thought to be either an already given figure exercising its influence on external circumstances, or a preconceived circumstance capable of being individuated. Either way, the process of individuation is not thought to be capable of supplying the principle itself. Simondon (1992) argues that in both cases, the tendency is to understand the problem of individuation retrospectively from the principle of things already given, rather than from the perspective of the process of individuation that explains the detail of their correlation as things continually in the making. It is this point that normative constructs of leadership often miss. They typically focus on the omniscient leadership figure exclusively. They forget that this figure has been formed out of the process of individuation, and that this process must be considered before the development of an individual figure can be understood.

Process as Ontology and Epistemology

Contemporary management research has now begun to pay attention to leadership as a process of individuation, rather than as a definite figure (see, for example, Barker, 2001; Gemmill and Oakley, 1992; Gronn, 2002; Hosking, 1988; Yukl, 1999). Such approaches variously define leadership as ‘a process of transformative change’ (Barker, 2001, p. 491), a created socio-cultural ‘myth’ to ward off feelings of uncertainty, ambivalence, and instability (Gemmill and Oakley, 1992). Hosking (1988) points at leadership as a skilful process of reality constructions and shifting influence, and Yukl (1999, p. 292) emphasises how this process is shared, thereby ‘enhancing the collective and individual capacity of people to accomplish their work roles effectively’.

Gronn (2002) proposes distributed leadership as a suitable, alternative, analytical focus. Distributed leadership involves the sharing and performance of leadership functions by a set of people. Gronn’s focus on a negotiated division of labour, is timely because ‘the retention of a [normative] unit of analysis incorporating the two conventional binaries [leaders and followers] precludes an accurate analysis and understanding of leadership practice’ (p. 425). His dissatisfaction with individualism leads him to suggest distributed
leadership as a technical solution to the normative figure of a leader, as a creating and influencing subject, set apart from followers. He defines leadership as relations of ‘reciprocal influence’: A_B and B_A and sees distributed leadership as a ‘concertive action’ that extends the existing unit of analysis to include leadership as joint action, rather than simply aggregated or individual acts. He suggests renewed interest in ‘distributed leadership … offers an exciting window of opportunity for qualitative longitudinal field studies’ as ‘one of a number of structuring reactions to flows of environmental stimuli’ (Gronn, 2002, p. 445).

Pettigrew (2003), operating in the allied fields of strategy and organisational change, expresses a closely related point. He perceptively argues that process is ‘a sequence of individual and collective events, actions and activities unfolding over time in context’ (p. 309). On his view, process is epistemology that can be put to work in explaining strategy and organisational change: to ‘catch reality in flight’, so to speak (Pettigrew, 2003, p. 306). However, this outlook maintains an existent matter-form relation that importantly fails to recognise the ontological character of process (cf. Chia, 1996, p. 195-204; Chia, 1999; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). It is also a very different conception to that offered by Whitehead, for whom process is actually constitutive of reality. From a process-as-ontology perspective, Pettigrew’s (2003) contribution does not in itself overturn the principle of process as something that can be completed. In other words, rather than recognising the completeness of the material world ‘in flight’, his process-as-epistemology attends only to those aspects of concrete experience that lie within some teleological scheme. Pettigrew sees process as bounded by human agency and employed as a mode of attention or critical factor in understanding events, actions and activities over time. As such, he does not explain the dynamic character of existence, whose essential open-endedness consequently requires a rethinking of ontological priorities. Gronn’s, Pettigrew’s, and the others’ contributions have considerable merit in helping us to rethink our epistemological commitments. However, the full implications of their insights ‘will be drawn out only if their calls for a greater attention to process lead to a consistent reversal of the ontological priority’ (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002, p. 570).
Two important problematisations of the epistemological focus on process in management and leadership studies have been Hosking’s work in a relational perspective (see, for example, Brown and Hosking, 1986; Dachler and Hosking, 1995; Hosking, 1988; Hosking, 2001; Hosking and Morley, 1991) and Barker’s (2001) definition of leadership as a process of transformative change. Hosking uses the terms ‘processes’ and ‘relations’ in order to point out the ongoing connections that relate, in some way, to construct social realities. Here, her concern is with asking how relational processes are involved in the development of leadership. This relational perspective strongly resembles a ‘moderate’ social constructionist philosophy of enquiry (Burningham and Cooper, 1999) and expresses a closely related line of argument to Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) original thesis of reality construction. However, Hosking does not start with the presumption of relations between bipolar terms (for example, A_B and B_A), and, therefore, has to find some other way to speak of what is related to what. By refusing to reproduce certain taken-for-granteds about what can be known about processes and relations, Hosking leaves their nature open to conjecture, and so begins to explore questions of ontology.

Barker (2001) also attempts to provide important metaphysical support for this endeavour. He too believes the problem of studying leadership as some form of stabilisation of various unpredictable social processes lies in the, perhaps inevitable, tendency to separate leaders from ‘the complex and continuous relationships of people and institutions’ that surround and suffuse them (Barker, 2001, p. 483). He too argues the error is made with the assumption that isolating a ‘centred’ leader can explain the complex and continuous ‘nature of leadership’. Leadership, as we experience it, he continues, is actually a continuous social process. Barker claims it is precisely the complex and continuous relationships of people and institutions’, which ‘must be the foci of the explanation of leadership’ (Barker, 2001, p. 483). He proposes a ‘new framework for leadership studies’, one ‘built upon a direct, phenomenological experience of leadership’ (Barker, 2001, p. 483) as a ‘dissipative system … continually renewing itself within a dynamic context (Barker, 2001, p. 487). The ‘structure’ of a dissipative system is not a solid, tangible structure, but a process structure: what Jantsch (1980 cited in Barker, 2001, p. 486) refers to as a dynamic regime. Whatever we experience as leadership is
itself transforming as a part of the system; the macro-system continually changes as a part of the transformation.

It is this ontological, rather than epistemological, character of process and relatedness that we can invoke to appreciate the continuous character of leadership. Appropriating Cooper’s (1998, p. 171) terminology, the process of leadership is ‘always momentary, tentative and transient … [it] occurs in that imperceptible moment between the known and the unknown’. In other words, the determination of leadership is the conformation of subjective form to a set of advantageous circumstances. It is the introduction of emotional clothing, ‘which changes the dim objective datum into a clear Appearance: an association that becomes identical with Reality’ (Whitehead, 1933, p. 248). Instead of approaching leadership simply as the has/has not objective characteristics of individual leaders – whose conduct may be termed ‘leaderful’ by their conformation to the perfection of some hoped for ideal, or else by reason of some fortunate spontaneity within a situation – it is the relation, the both/and sharing or ‘vacillating interaction’ (Cooper, 1987) itself that is our logical subject.

As we have already seen, the advantage of confining our attention to self-identical figures is that we confine our thoughts to clear-cut definite things with clear-cut definite relations. However, nothing in our immediate experience actually possesses the character of simple location. To so confine our attention is an example of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness to which Whitehead (1925) refers. It is this mechanistic view that presupposes ‘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). It has a disadvantage, however, in that it tends 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), and one that does not explain the dynamic character of experience.

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.
Our continued focus on leadership figures may well be preventing us from articulating alternative ways of thinking and formulating new conceptual configurations. If we want to trace the dynamic character of leadership, we can start by paying attention to the process of individuation itself. Here, our concern is with understanding its internal relations in all their variety. We might start from the position that leadership does not have the limitations of being just in this person and no other, or of being just in this place and no other. Our perception of leadership might only ever be fleeting glimpses of a vital process, one perpetually in relation to itself, and with a certain ‘internal resonance requiring permanent communication’ (Simondon, 1992, p. 305), but we can, at least, draw attention to the movement going on, and not simply to the individual figure obtained. Reaching an understanding of this unceasing transformation will require a rethinking both of our ontological priorities and our epistemological interests.

**The Emanation of the Excluded Middle**

The principle of the excluded middle is an example of classical Aristotelian logic. It requires that an object be thought as either having or not having a certain determination (i.e. that A is either B or not B) (Andrews, 1996). In the current discussion, this amounts to saying there is some persistent quality or substantial character to a particular leadership figure, one resolving itself within an either/or binarism. The principle of the excluded middle also suggests the concept of ‘exclusion’: to shut out; to hinder from entrance or admission; to debar from participation or enjoyment; to deprive of; to except, etc., which appears to rule out the possibility of a middle ground between is/is not and either/or axioms, as a third state, or mediating position.

Hegel’s dialectical synthesis offers a partial solution to this problem. For Hegel, once the substantial figure is no longer treated as a thing-in-itself, it ceases to have any quality or essence. Any subsequent quality is marked only in the process of negating its nothingness. To continue to be determined, a figure must actively engage with (negate) what it is not. For example, A is not B and B is not A. This reciprocal determination allows Hegel to declare that all differences can be mediated in an Identity of identity and
opposition: without this opposition ‘being will fade into nothingness’ (Hardt, 1993, p. 3-4). This dialectical synthesis, however, also consolidates the place of the opposite and identifies it – the ‘not B’ is itself an identity. Thus the Hegelian displacement of quality or essence is only partial, since it rests on the premise that all of reality is already given, and in which each empirical figure ‘through its own nature relates itself to the other’ (Hegel, quoted in Houlgate, 1999, p. 99).

From a process-as-ontology perspective the movement of negation is a false notion of difference. Hegel’s ‘dialectic of negation … fails to grasp the concreteness and specificity of real being’ (Hardt, 1993, p. 4). The necessary quality of leadership we can outline here is positive difference, ‘a positive internal movement’ (Hardt, 1993, p. 14). This necessary quality is not determinism but, rather, a vital, internal indeterminism. According to Bergson (1911, p. 230) our mistake ‘is due to the fact that the “vital” order, which is essentially creation, is manifested to us less in its essence than in some of its accidents … like it, they present to us repetitions that make generalization possible’. However, as Bergson (1911, pp. 230-231) continues: ‘There is no doubt that life as a whole is an evolution, that is an unceasing transformation’. In other words, it is undoubtedly continuity that defines the composition of the world. Its ‘accidents’, by contrast, are simply a juxtaposition of points that ‘imitate’ this vital order. Consequently, the question to ask is why we assume a priori a determination and not indetermination of leadership? Determinacy exists as a fact of perception, Bergson points out, but indeterminacy seems to exist in and of itself, by right. On Bergson’s account, therefore, it is determinacy, and not indeterminacy, that is the problem to be analysed.

As such, we might consider the hitherto excluded middle as a kind of indeterminate order, one that does not determinately stand for either the singular terms A (for example, the designated leader), or B (for example, the followers), nor, for that matter, the dialectical synthesis mediating between one and the other. The ontological status of the excluded middle, its ‘essence’, is an open field of movement in which leadership is recognised as part and parcel of the vital process of continuity and not simply the juxtaposition of leaders and followers, ‘which are only arrests of our attention’ (Bergson,
Understanding leadership in this way, we ought to start to take seriously the indeterminate middle that sweeps one and the other away (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). This discussion of leadership is not directed toward distinguishing a state but rather toward the identification of an essential movement, in which what endures is internal qualitative difference: the being-itself of difference, and not the sameness of identity. The idea of simple, objective location has gone and the relation as a thing itself is brought to the fore. We must come to grips with this relation, the hitherto excluded middle, within which individual terms stand, rather than delineating an independent being-for-itself (A) from the dependent being-for-another (B), if we are to reframe our understanding of leadership.

Contemporary leadership thinking can go beyond both Aristotelian ideas of determinate identity location and Hegelian negative dialectics. The nature of leadership can be seen as a creative process, one within which particular leadership figures are only syntactical conveniences; ‘technologies of representation [that] convert the inaccessible, unknown and private into the accessible, known and public’ (Cooper, 1992, p. 267). 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 differential relationships between A and B (A_B and B_A). It is, rather, the indeterminate middle, or the ‘in’ of the ‘between’ (A_B), where both A and B are ‘inseparable moments’ (Deleuze, 1983), each necessarily referring back to the other. This internal qualitative relation is not structured by any singular determination of leadership, but rather by its very indeterminacy.

We are not used to this way of thinking, however. When we think and perceive leadership, we do so ‘only through a mist of affective states’ (Bergson, 1911, p. 231). Because indetermination is thought as an absence, we are keen to recover some determination, we are interested only in the determination of leadership and not its indetermination. Hence, for example, when The Economist (2003, p.4) talks of a ‘gap between expectations and reality’ and ‘a “crisis of confidence” in corporate leadership’, it means the perception of an absence of satisfaction and an apparent lack of certainty – we
look for determinacy but find indeterminacy. We always express indeterminacy as a function of determinacy; an absence of determinacy, rather than as itself: ‘it is indeterminate’. This, Bergson reasons, is because indeterminacy is assumed to have no ‘it’. The assumption is there is something – ‘some things’ – in a determination, but indetermination is empty, it is an absence of things; it contains ‘no things’. So, Bergson (1911, p. 334) maintains, the mind ‘swings too and fro, unable to rest’ between two, irreducible kinds of order – determination/indetermination and presence/absence. We tend to affirm the first and shut our eyes to the second. It does not occur to us to detach ourselves from the partial expression and attend to the complete relation in order to grasp this irreducibility.

As a further example, consider the following headline from the UK newspaper the Daily Mirror: ‘CHILD SUPPORT BOSS DUMPS WIFE AND KIDS … and leaves them with a load of debts’. What is real or determined here? The substance of the statement: the child support boss, or, his subjectification within the statement as betrayer, Lothario, or simple cheapskate? We can suggest this is not an example of his determinate substance, but of a strange involvement, an ingression of one into the other; a continuous flow of becoming, which cannot be divided up easily. The substance has become the subject, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) would say. It is like the frame of a painting, which, although separating itself not only from the body proper of the work, but also from the wall on which the painting is hung, also connects the one to the other (Derrida, 1987).

**Processes of Becoming**

These examples allow the possibility of developing an awareness of the processes of becoming, within which the continuity of leadership unfolds. What a pity, therefore, that received thinking on leadership has a tendency to assume that the endurance of a particular leadership figure must mean ‘undifferentiated sameness’ (Whitehead, 1925, p. 133) – that is, for those who hold that for something to have meaning or sense it requires a determinate individuality, which is, however precariously, a natural thing-in-itself, enduring through time and across space. But what if endurance does indicate an indeterminate pattern of relations and difference 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 make only limited sense on their own, but can make a great deal of difference when referred beyond themselves to relations and differences that constitute the tune – even middle ‘C’ is importantly relational in this respect: our sense of ‘C’ only comes from its relations to others and not by simply segregating it from the endless complex of audible notes that are ‘not C’. We do not simply hear the ‘C’, but we hear it as a continuous flow from the ‘E’ played a moment before. Individual notes do not exist in discrete juxtaposition, therefore, but rather intermingle and penetrate each other. This displacement of individuality and simple location relates to leadership in the sense that those who are aware of themselves as centred ‘inside’ an insulated container, for example – free from the contamination of the threatening ‘other’ which is located on the ‘outside’ – miss the subtle relations within and between things. They 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. These private predicates of experience, however, no longer have to be thought as the determinate individuality of strictly segregated things, but as a middle, as always in the middle. This middle must always be enigmatic and paradoxical. It is the non-individual as such, and being unlocalisable cannot anchor the place of an individuality defined against it.

According to Bergson’s (1912) metaphysical doctrine of the generation of things we are incapable of seeing experience without pre-existing forms that appear relatively enduring – the linear word-space structure of phonetic writing being a good example. The prime function of such an intellectual abstraction, Bergson 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 already made between relatively structured mechanisms, which, in turn, exist independently of the relation between them. However, Bergson’s metaphysics starts at the opposite end from the simple location of enduring subjects. His starting point, like that of Whitehead, is ontological. He focuses on the emergence of enduring patterns that have to be seized from the original flow of process. Patterns enjoy no individuality of content, being more properly conceived as ‘succession without distinction’ (Bergson,
Bergson 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). Our experience of reality manifests itself as a continual change of form, where ‘form is only a snapshot view of transition’ (Bergson, 1911, p. 302).

Notwithstanding this, it would be a mistake to say there is no possibility of succession without distinction in writing. There can hardly be a text written, in which there is not some small trace of the time and labour of its writing (Derrida, 1978), or else some personal mark left by its author. This time and labour, and these personal marks, put thoughts and words, as well as readers and authors like you and I, into an irreducible relation, one with the other, in a way that implies a primary process. Moreover, there is an additional sense in which a text is also a relationship to itself. The moment a text is written there is evidence of a selection, and therefore of organisation, and this organisation already implicates some previous disorganisation. In other words a text’s determination is always in dynamic relation with an indeterminism preceding it. Furthermore, Bergson (1911) himself admits that whilst it is inescapable that writing is representational, it can do this in two ways: first, by representing states, or, second, by representing a concern for relations, processes, and differences. In general, Bergson argues, we too easily use writing to represent states rather than movement. Certainly, the tendency to abstract and represent has practical utility, but we can seek to do this from within the moving reality. Bergson advocates writing in verbs as this calls up the ‘inner work’ of movement rather than ‘ready prepared’ states (Bergson, 1911, p. 11; cf. Bohm, 1980). Derrida (1978, p. 219) advocates writing ‘theoretical fictions’, within which there can be ‘no sovereign solitude of the author’ (p. 226). Both views chime with Whitehead (1978, p. 182), for whom ‘imaginative writing’ opens the world to our senses, precipitating endless feelings and thoughts and enabling us to bring our whole self to reading.

The important point is, although the shortfalls of intellectual abstraction can never be wholly avoided, we can still gain considerable leverage by affirming the indetermination of the leadership relation and not its determination as an object of nature. The latter
allows the possibility of supplementing the intellect with intuition (Bergson, 1911). This is valuable because the intellectual perspective of the determined object finds it impossible to conceive the complete relation. The intellect ‘will always settle on ‘the conceptual forms … it is accustomed to see’ and, therefore, ‘will always neglect the part of novelty or of creation’ (Bergson, 1911, p. 270). By adopting the rhythm of its ‘relational essence’ (Whitehead 1925, p. 160) we find it difficult to divorce leadership from any reference to a social context or to some communistic processes. For example, the essence of leader ‘A’ is always indeterminate, fluxing, it always conjointly involves an ingress with, and not simply the recognition by, an other: ‘B’. Accordingly, the original being of leadership is properly described as a ‘systematic complex of mutual relatedness’ (Whitehead, 1925, p. 161). These processes are leadership. That is to say the becoming of leadership is affirmed as its being. Leadership is a becomingness, in which the fixity of ephemeral arrangements conversely comes and goes (Bergson, 1946).

The psychologist, Edgar Rubin’s incompatible imagery is exemplary of this continual movement. Rubin’s Double Profile (Figure 1) is an illustration that shows more than one thing at the same time (Ehrenzweig, 1967, p. 23):

**INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE**

In the contours of the image we tend to see the profile of one or the other of two faces, each partially cancelling the other out because of the incompatibility of their appearance. If we glance at the image more diffusely, however, we are simultaneously able to see the profile of both faces as they try to kiss each other. The originally incompatible images are grasped as a fluid and freely interpenetrating vision. The separate identities of the profiles ‘give way to a mutual coming and going, uniting and separating; and in which particular figures simply resemble, seem, feign, pretend’ (Cooper, 1998, p. 110, original emphasis).

Another great exponent of this underlying undifferentiation is the English romantic artist Joseph Mallord William Turner, a pioneer in the study of light, colour and atmosphere. He was so exhilarated by the strong sensations of rail travel in the 1840s that he replicated his experiences of a train ride in a rainstorm in the painting *Rain, Steam and*
Speed (Figure 2). Instead of offering sharp and precise images, Turner used ‘swirls and slashes, and smears and sprays of paint’ to simulate the interpenetration of rain, steam and speed, and to capture the ongoing rush of the locomotive as it ‘interrupts into view’ (Langmuir, 1994, p. 327).

Accordingly, we can treat all individuated appearances as transient abstractions, as a mode of attention, or symbolic fixing of this continual flow and not the apprehension of the distinct elements themselves. Furthermore, we might begin to ask how we might attend to the processes of creation that lie behind the appearances of leadership we value so highly.

Implications for Studying Leadership
Let us summarise the argument so far. Normative studies of leadership give us absolutely distinct individualities, but this is argued increasingly to be a false notion. The alternative analytical focus on collective or distributed leadership is only a partial and relative resolution, in which it is determinate things, rather than indeterminate relations, that continue to endure. From the process-as-ontology perspective, however, real endurance is difference in-itself and not determinate identity. Process studies do not start from the position of leadership as self-identical, existing in itself, pure and simple, but as a permeable condition of mutual relatedness, or uninterrupted change constituted by the double force of it’s being ‘in-tension’ and ‘in-fluence’.

Epistemological Development
The epistemological problem is not to seek to understand the private world of passions, intentions and influence of individual figures, or the preconceived operation of individuation, but rather to explore the values associated with the emerging differences. Consider, for example, the appropriateness of the sentence ‘It is leadership’ (Bohm, 1980, p. 29). Adapting Bohm’s (1980) enquiry into the subject-verb-object structure of
language once more, we might ask what is the ‘It’ that is doing the leading? Following Bohm, wouldn’t it be more accurate to say ‘Leadership is going on’? Similarly, instead of saying ‘Leaders act on followers’, we can more appropriately say, leadership is going on within difference, a relation that makes any bracketing of the abstractions customarily called ‘leaders’ and ‘followers’ difficult to sustain.

With this in mind, a particular leadership figure cannot be construed as an isolated thing present at hand that gets caught up in life. The figure does not ‘find itself’ in relation to its ‘environment’, but rather the on-going ‘relation’ itself is an intrinsic feature of the figure’s being. Moreover, the figure comes to be spoken in terms of ongoing movement or becoming and not in terms of absolutely distinct ‘individual specimens’. 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, 1987, p. 293). The ‘essence’ of leadership is not the self-evident figure but the relations of almost imperceptible directions, movement and orientations, having neither beginning nor end.

The original work of the biologist Lynn Margulis (Margulis and Sagan, 1986) on symbiogenesis provides a prime illustration of such undivided movement. Evidence from the fossil record suggests that evolution from the ‘primordial soup’ did not occur by separate entities competing with one another in the struggle for life, but rather through a cooperative life process. Life forms multiply and increase complexity in symbiosis with other forms, not just by killing them. The merging of organisms into new collectives involves a gradual coming together leading to physical interdependence and a permanent sharing of cells and bodies. The direct example Margulis and Sagan offer is of the intracellular organelle, the mitochondrion, whose DNA is incorporated into its mammalian successors and is now a ‘normal’ constituent of the latter’s cells, to the extent that it is hard to decide where one starts and the other stops.

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 never will be, singular, clean, and contained units. Rather, our bodies are dynamic domains, ‘nothing more than a set of valves, locks, floodgates, bowls, or communicating vessels’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 153), even though we continue to prioritise concepts for singular objects and static structures.

The phenomenon of symbiogenesis also accounts for the interconnected environment of people, information systems, commercial markets, and so on. New technologies restructure 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 are ‘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 and the Internet (Brigham and Corbett, 1997). Symbiogenesis thus enables an understanding of leadership similar to that of process studies. Both enable a conception of leadership as a cycling through of (de)formation and (de)stabilisation. This concern implies a widening of the prevalent research emphasis from its conventional insistence on the authoritative
accounts of individual figures, and toward an understanding of their identification as temporary stabilisations drawn from a network of relations, constantly in tension.

Methodological Considerations

A process approach to leadership studies might be consistent with Foucault’s genealogical method (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982), and particularly his complex analysis of power (Foucault, 1980), as well as with ideas from critical management research, which emphasise leadership as a social field of activity (Alvesson, 1996; Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). Process methodology starts from two, interrelated axioms. First, like power, leadership is always an internal qualitative relation, and always enmeshed in social practice, rather than in a clear-cut, definite figure. This focus brings the space of the stage or scene to the centre of analysis and not the unambiguous leader who can be simply located, or the differential relations, which obtain between leaders and followers, in specific places. Like power, leadership is constantly ‘in-tension’ and subject to a myriad of ‘meanings, values, ideals and discourse processes’ (Alvesson, 1996, p. 472).

Second, the enduring figures we come to recognise in a specific social context are not the inherent qualities or substantial characteristics of leadership as it really is, but an endlessly complex set of interrelations we must attend to if we are to reach an understanding of the events in a particular social field, here and now. The methodological concern, therefore, is not with any reductive, a priori manifestations, but with ‘freeing the conditions of emergence’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 127) already complete within leadership.

According to Foucault (1972) it would be easy to assume leadership, like power, could be processed by an individual actor, if it were reducible to such an objective figure, ‘whose jurisdiction extends without contingence’ (Foucault, 1972: 128). But, as we have argued, a mistake of conventional research is exactly this mechanistic treatment and finalistic realising of leadership as if it were ‘synonymous’ with an underlying figure, immediate and individual. Again, like Foucault’s discourse on power, leadership is not an a priori, empirical figure that can enter into relations with others, but whose own sovereignty is not dependent on those relations, or on something else other than itself. From a process-
as-ontology perspective, leadership lies in the nexus between ‘subjective’ form and ‘objective’ datum, and it is this relation that should be our logical subject. Leadership, on this view, is the conformation of the mode of togetherness, the relatedness, or mutual immanence of the relation between form and data. We can more appropriately call it a ‘point of contact, place of insertion, irruption, or emergence, domain or occasion of operation … a specific regularity’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 128).

As such, and continuing the Foucaultian theme, the emergence of leadership can be more properly described as an ‘Event’ (Foucault, 1972). Exploring leadership as an Event implies a methodological focus on relations, connexions, dependences and reciprocities: the set of advantageous circumstances that becomes identical with the ‘objective’ subject of leadership. In other words, through such a focus, it is difficult to maintain the simple exteriority of leadership, as a clear object of study, from the whole domain of institutions, economic processes, and social relations, within which an individual leadership figure obtains. Instead, we are dealing with a ‘density of discursive practices, systems that establish [leadership as] events’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 128). Process methodology is, therefore, a counterproposal to the neo-empiricist ‘treatment of theory and interpretation as separate from data’ (Alvesson, 1996, p. 456). Such approaches are ‘appropriate in order to get information about simple relatively fixed issues, where the meaning can be standardised and quantified’ but not ‘more complex issues … [such as leadership, which] cannot be translated into abstract, standardised forms and language’ (Alvesson, 1996, p. 461). Instead, process thought holds that a particular period, encounter, issue, or situation, rather than shared behaviour patterns, attitudes or traits should be our focus. The problem now is how, methodologically, we can constitute the Event: define its boundaries at the same time as preserving the continuity of its relations.

Practically speaking this means attending to the withdrawn or background processes of individuation. This type of mise en scène implies the deployment of a qualitative, interpretive and ethnographic research strategy, with a strong ‘situational’ focus (Alvesson, 1996). Such an approach seeks to emphasise the degree and form of permeability of a leadership individuality, the principle of its articulation and the ‘tangle of continuities and discontinuities, modifications’ and ‘discursive formations’ (Foucault,
1972, p. 176), through which it is effectively maintained. It means opening up leadership from multiple angles, searching the ‘small details, minor shifts and subtle contours’ (Dreyfuss and Rabinow, 1982, p. 106) of its surface to see how it was realised. Research questions will emphasise the ambiguous and the precarious quality of leadership as a complete relation and acknowledge the role of social/institutional norms and their constraints: of variations and contingencies in accounts. The focus is on leadership as a practical accomplishment, constituted in event places, and so avoids the pathological distinction that leaves leaders ‘out there’. What is interesting, from a process studies perspective, is how continual patterns and divergent processes form a discrete body, or appear to obtain in a substantial set of characteristics.

**Conclusion: Leadership as Process**

Process studies provide a clear demonstration of the thesis that ‘successful leaders’ are not already constituted individuals, nor a preconceived operation of individuation that can be simply located. Leadership is construed as a selective abstraction from the continual movement of flux. Traditionally leaders have immersed themselves in the transcendent principle of individualism. They have done this by having certain ascendant characteristics ascribed: 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 self-identical figure. We should adduce no such veritable distinction, however, between ‘leaders’ and their ‘environments’. What is primary is the being of becoming. Leadership is constituted as successful/unsuccessful only in dynamic and processual terms and in which emphasis is placed on the internal qualitative relation expressing difference in-itself.

When viewed in processual terms, absolutely distinct individuality becomes problematic. What becomes important is the indeterminate and relational process of individuation. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) introduce the term ‘involution’ to express a relaxation of natural, obvious and reified forms and the corresponding emergence of a complex field of heterogeneous combinations and novel alliances, which cut across and beneath seemingly
fixed figures. Such aggregations are a non-localisable line of becoming, a middle, or an in-between that recognises the continual participation of individual parts within each other. The notion of leadership does not, therefore, refer specifically or exclusively to the transformational, charismatic or visionary figure of transcendent leaders, nor does it focus entirely on the behaviour of followers, or the differential relations between one and the other. Becoming connotes the endless movement through which leadership frees itself from being necessarily associated with a ‘thing’ that moves. Instead, leadership is movement, open and dynamic process, whose objective determination can never be completely realised. It is only a tendency – a tending toward that is never completed (Bergson, 1911).

In conclusion, leadership studies, as a body of knowledge and understanding, faces the pressing problem of raising the status and bringing to bear new and imaginative ways of thinking, so as to gain new conceptual leverage. Leadership researchers, for the most part, have not drawn out the full implications of Bryman’s (1986) call for engagement with ideas from different enquiry paradigms. We have sought to extend current understanding by according ontological priority to internal leadership processes, relations and differences. The pressing methodological difficulty now is refining ways of researching the internal relationality adequate for the removal of the individual figure sui generis without destroying the relation’s complexity and the leadership that depends on it. This complexity should be recognised, however, if we are to avoid the fallacy of misplaced leadership.

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