Intellectual Failure and Ideological Success in Organization Studies: The Case of Transformational Leadership

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Abstract

This article discusses the current self-confidence and apparent success—at least by market/popularity measures—of leadership studies (LS) in general and transformational leadership (TFL) in particular. An alternative interpretation is offered, suggesting that it is the ideological character of these approaches that account for their "success," at least in quantitative terms. Their wide appeal needs to be understood against the background of the fragmentation in the field before the entrance of these much more popularly appealing, but theoretically questionable ideas which lack credible empirical support. The article concludes that the currently popular streams are strongly structured by ideology—drawing on hero and religious mythologies—and suggests some ways to reduce the ideological overtone and the resulting tendency to produce tautologies and biased results.

This article engages with the role of ideology in scientific success. Our case in point is the peculiar success of transformational leadership (TFL) research in leadership studies (LS). We have chosen this case for several reasons. LS are considered to be an important field with a lot of research activity. For a long time it was viewed by many as close to failure. For instance, Sashkin and Garland (1979) claimed that "by any objective measure, the study of leadership has failed to produce generally accepted, practically useful, and widely applied scientific knowledge" (p. 65). Another review of the research pessimistically concluded that "the only point of agreement is that existing approaches have largely lost their usefulness for the further development of the field" (Andriessen & Drenth, 1984, p. 514).

However, the last three decades have demonstrated a considerable consolidation of ideas, epitomized in the idea of TFL. In this sense, advocates of TFL market the approach as an unequivocal example of scientific success, despite fundamental flaws (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013; Yukl, 1999). Bryman (1996) allocates the "much greater optimism" to the shift of leadership toward "management of meaning and a recognition of a greater range of research styles" (p. 289). Avolio, Sosik, Jung, and Berson (2003, p. 277) noted that earlier at conferences people sometimes remarked that "never has a construct been studied so much that we know so little about" but that such opinions now are both obsolete and wrong. Parry and Bryman (2006, p. 464) add that negative remarks are "unlikely to be heard

nowadays" and emphasize how "exciting and productive field that leadership has become."

Most of the optimism is associated with the amazing "success" of TFL and other positive-sounding leadership versions, like charismatic, servant, and authentic leadership or emotional intelligence as a key element in good leadership. TFL is often perceived to have "generated an impressive cachet of findings and has made a great impact on the study of leadership" (Jackson & Parry, 2008, p. 31).

The first aim with this article is to explore how we can understand the boosting of leadership and the perceived success, including of its leading stream, TFL, and its overlapping or related approaches, despite these being quite problematic in terms of realism and thus being questionable in terms of both descriptive and normative (practical) value. The move from the perception of failure to a sense of great success and optimism of academic LS over a decade or so can be seen as a mystery in need for an explanation (Alvesson

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& Karreman, 2011). How has this quantum leap from a broad sense of misery to one of great enthusiasm and success been accomplished? It can't be taken for granted that it is the intellectual qualities, as carefully monitored by a critically minded research community (Bernstein, 1983) that accounts for the perceived success of LS. To the contrary, we argue for the opposite: It is rather the bracketing of such qualities that have facilitated the success.

A second aim is to offer a critique of the ideological overtones of the most influential forms of contemporary LS and argue for a more open-minded view of leadership. Overall, our contribution is to show how ideology is built into research design and thus prestructures outcomes and suggest ways of "de-ideologizing" leadership. The focus of this article is the academic leadership approaches that articulate appealing views of successful leadership. We pay particular attention to the case of TFL.

Ideology in Organization and LS

Ideology is a widely used concept in social science, sometimes pejoratively (in an older Marxist tradition) used to refer to false beliefs covering up a dominant social order, sometimes viewed more neutrally as a system of ideas and values (Freeden, 2003; Hartley, 1983). Geertz (1973) distinguishes between an interest and a strain theory of ideology, where the interest theory uses the concept of ideology to explain a group's search for power, whereas the strain view considers ideology as a means to reduce stress and anxiety due to lack of cultural resources (see also Kunda, 1992).

The concept of ideology is sometimes, but not so frequently, used in organization studies, sometimes critically (Alvesson, 1987; Alvesson & Willmott, 2012), sometimes less so (Barley & Kunda, 1992; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1988; Kunda, 1992). Surprisingly, but also perhaps tellingly, ideology is rarely evoked in LS (Holmberg & Strannegård, 2005; Vangen & Huxham, 2003 are exceptions). We may think of leadership as an inherently ideological activity, but this idea is rarely committed to serious study.

In this article, we use ideology to refer to the painting of a positive and appealing picture, legitimizing certain interests and a specific social order (Alvesson, 1987). Ideology also offers avenues for decontestation (Freeden, 2003)—making essentially contestable concepts less contentious. In this sense, ideology is a device to cope with ambiguity and the indeterminacy of meaning. Ideology orders, patterns, and suppress surplus meaning. An ideology may have many effects: *legitimation*, portraying reality in a brighter light, inserting hope, offering *ideals* worth striving for (Alvesson, 1987). It offers *clarity* and *comprehension*. It offers *identity material* for managers (and other leader-wannabes, like students), where the mundane, instrumental, and operative sides of managerial work are forgotten in favor of far more impressive and ego- and status-boosting activities.

Rather than being a bastion against ideology, a so-called scientific methodology may reproduce and reinforce it. All social scientists have good reasons to address how ideological commitments and ambitions to support certain "good" causes may guide and sometimes counteract open inquiry and qualified understandings. We pay specific attention in this article to *how ideology imprints the research design* and guides the production of the researchers advocating TFL theory favorable data. We show that behind the production of seemingly reliable results, the ideological construction of data is at play. The next section of this article will review leadership research in broad terms. We will pay particular attention to the emergence of TFL, and critically review its main claims. A discussion on the role of ideology in TFL, and in research in general, follows, with some concluding suggestion on potential remedies.

TFL: What It Is and Why It Is Problematic?

TFL is often equated with effective leadership. It is the theoretical flagship in the great armada of the booming area of leadership—also including authentic, charismatic, self, and many other versions of leadership, much of this is (or was) summarized as "new leadership" (Bryman, 1996), but the label is perhaps a bit dated by now. All these streams making up "the new" can be seen as broadly similar or fairly distinct. Various authors for example see transformational and charismatic leadership as the same (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013), similar/overlapping (Sashkin, 2004), as siblings (Jackson & Parry, 2008), or as quite different (Yukl, 1999). This implies some vagueness and confusion. Despite this, they are seen as key and related parts of a highly influential leadership research field.

TFL is often seen as being about how leadership accomplishes something really extraordinary:

> Leaders transform followers. That is, followers are changed from being self-centered individuals to being committed members of a group. (Sashkin, 2004, p. 175)

There are different views of what TFL includes (Sashkin, 2004), but typically individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, idealized influence (charisma), and inspirations are seen as ingredients. TFL advocates assume that the so-called leader has significant influence on followers' self-confidence, enthusiasm, identification with the group/organization, and voluntary compliance. The leader stands for agency whereas follower agency, as well as social conditions, do not matter much. The literature is full of strong claims about the grandiose accomplishments of TFL, for example, "transformational leaders connect followers" self-concepts to the organization's mission and vision . . . " (Hartnell & Walumbwa, 2011, p. 232).

Despite its popularity, TFL has, until recently, only to a limited degree been exposed to critique. In a review article, Diaz-Saenz (2011) mentions idealization of leadership, technical issues around measurements, insufficient attention to context, and misunderstanding of charisma. The most prominent critique has been offered by Yukl (1999) and van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013). Yukl (1999) points at ambiguity about underlying influence process, overemphasis on dyadic processes, ambiguity about transformational behaviors, insufficient specification of negative effects, and heroic leadership bias. van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) echo many of these points, summarizing their critique as follows:

> The conceptualization of the construct is seriously flawed, with no definition of charismatic-transformational leadership independent of its effects, no theory to explain why it consists of the dimensions proposed and how these dimensions share a charismatic-transformational quality that differentiates them from other aspects of leadership, and no theoretically grounded configurational model to explain how the different dimensions combine to form charismatic-transformational leadership. (p. 45)

In the following, we build on and expand parts of the critique, making the case that the "success" of TFL—and also LS as a whole—is not primarily a matter of its scientific qualities in terms of theoretical clarity or empirical support, but is related to its ideological appeal and how this has been built into research design, leading to attractive "findings."

Incoherent Constructs

A major problem is the arbitrary and incoherent combination of the key elements in TFL. One example is charisma and TFL. As Yukl (1999) points out, "The developing and empowering behaviours associated with TFL seem to make it less likely that followers will attribute extraordinary qualities to the leader" (p. 299). Also, why should idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration co-exist? It appears unlikely that these four typically should go together in a leader's behavior or "style" (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013).

Arbitrary Exclusion

One may also wonder why certain things are *not* on the various lists of TFL traits and behaviors. Yukl (1999) mentions for example facilitating agreements about objectives and strategies, mutual trust and cooperation, and building group identification as important group level work as well as articulating a vision and strategy for the organization, guiding and facilitating change, and promoting learning at the organizational level as important behaviors typically omitted from many TFL transformational behaviors lists.

Leader-Centricism

Often TFL—and many other leadership theories—embrace what could be referred to as the sheep view on managing. The leader leads, the others follow almost mindlessly and without much will or ability. The idea is that the TFL person is the center of the organizational universe and has far-reaching impact. As leadership is about influencing processes, then how those who are supposedly influenced understand and respond to the intentions and behavior of the manager appears to be central. However, the interest in taking this really seriously appears to be weak, with the exception of the follower-centric literature (e.g., Howell & Shamir, 2005; Meindl, 1995; Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007).

Denial/Minimization of Social Setting

Most of the popular leadership ideas assume the existence of the sole leader forming a stable and robust entity with fixed traits and skills operating on others being shaped and improved as a function of the leader's essence being put into operation. Context is regularly neglected (Fairhurst, 2001). An illustration is that only three of eight influential views of TFL reviewed by Sashkin (2004) actually explicitly see context as part of the picture, and then mainly as organizational culture being something that the TFL creates or controls.

Disregard for Social Dynamics

A key characteristic such as "communicating a vision" is typically seen as the TFL developing and communicating the "vision," while others receiving and being transformed by it. This fails to take into account that organizations are full of communications and influence processes in all directions. One study found that managers viewed their subordinates—not their superiors—as their most significant source of feedback (Kairos Futures/Chef, 2006). Researchers have rarely addressed the issue of how managers and subordinates influence each other (Liden & Antonakis, 2009).

Tautology in Description and Explanation

We also have the more fundamental problem of tautology, where input and output are simply combined; where a behavior, ability, or practice is defined by the effects it creates. A person that is said to be into work that "Empowers and develops potential," and is an "Inspirational networker and promoter" (Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe, 2001) must per definition be better than one that dis-powers, does not develop (but hinders) potential, and is un-inspiring. Someone offering intellectual stimulation or inspirational motivation in a managerial/leadership position is surely better than someone that does not. Someone assessed to have "extraordinary" qualities will probably not be assessed as having poor results.

Do Good-ism

Many efforts to specify good leadership say rather little specifically about the topic: Often the list of characteristics/dimensions would seem to indicate success for any person doing honorable work—as professional or even as subordinate. Jackson and Parry (2008) believe that qualities like confidence, integrity, connection, resilience, and aspiration "are particularly effective to promote effective leadership" (p. 17). The list of factors being part of TFL by Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe (2001) include genuine concern for others, empowers and develop potential, integrity, trustworthy, honest and open, accessibility, and approachability. Of course, this sounds really good and most people may want this from their nurse, therapist, teacher, and brother-in-law as much as from their manager—or their subordinate.

To sum up, popular and influential descriptions of leadership such as TFL and related streams show several weak spots. One would assume that any serious academic subject would critically address these issues. Not surprisingly, there are considerable efforts to develop alternative approaches, for example, discursive approaches (Fairhurst, 2007; Kelly, 2008), relational theory (Uhl-Bien, 2006), follower-centred approaches (Meindl, 1995; Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007), dialogic, developmental, dialectical, and critical understandings (Collinson, 2005, 2011; Fryer, 2011; Helsing & Howell, 2014; Latham, 2014), as well as management of meaning/sense-making versions without the strong emphasis on the transformational impact of the leader (Ladkin, 2010; Smircich & Morgan, 1982). But also many "non-heroic" views express a strong emphasis of leadership as "good-doing." Ospina and Sorenson (2006, p. 188) suggest "that leadership happens when a community develops and uses, over time, shared agreements to create results that have collective value." Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey (2007, p. 298) frame "leadership as a complex, interactive dynamic from which adaptive outcomes (e.g., learning, innovation, and adaptability) emerge." Leadership is defined by its good outcomes.

The mentioned "alternative" views are considered to be outside of mainstream TFL, charismatic and authentic LS, and they should not divert attention from the key point of this article: Understanding the "success" of the leadership field as dominated by TFL and similar formulations, despite their obvious flaws. Arguably, much of what is published under the label of leadership contributes to strengthen, rather than undermine, the ideology of leadership legitimizing and supporting a faith in leader-elites doing the good thing. Many researchers find a market for work using the popular signifier "leadership" because TFL and other mainstream approaches have made leadership fashionable.

Many efforts to develop "alternative" views thus at the same time partly break with and reinforce the domination of "leadership" (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014). Nuances involved in the efforts to revise "leadership" are easily lost as the major framing reinforces a dominating "mega-discourse," weakening others. For example, this reinforces an understanding that the alternative to leadership is *leadership*, not peer relations, professionalism, autonomy, co-workership, organizing processes, or mutual adjustment offering alternative framings and understanding than what the leadership vocabulary invites to.

The Ideological Content of LS: Heroes and Saints

If the theoretical value of streams like TFL and all the empirical studies demonstrating support for it is less than impressive, how can we understand their popularity? We argue that contemporary leadership ideas offer two contributions of a broadly speaking ideological and, for managers and (other) leader-wannabes, identity-boosting nature: the fuelling of hero and saint fantasies.

Drawing on Geertz's (1973) distinction between types of ideology, there is both an interest and a strain-reducing element in our argument. Managers, management writers, and educators use leadership in an ideological way to promote their interests *and*, simultaneously, evoke a broad attribution of faith in positive forms of leadership leading to harmony, effectiveness, and moral order. Ideology in the context of leadership suggests that managers and others positively disposed to leadership use the term to build and maintain a positive, celebrating, even glamorous view of organizational relations, and naturalizing and freezing (asymmetrical) social relations. Leadership as ideology is framed in ways that are seductive and easy to sell.

There is a critical element in this view, pointing out that the seemingly neutral science of leadership denies the ideological element. But ideology does not refer to false consciousness—the distinction between false and true consciousness seems dated and difficult to maintain. Rather it is about the tendency to paint leadership in pink and gold, or as observed by Spoelstra and ten Bos (2011): "Leadership scholars generally produce all sorts of beautiful images of leadership" (p. 182). The domination of this morally reassuring view of leadership discourages us from exploring the contradictions and problems within leadership discourse.[1]

In research guided by ideological commitments, the ideal "structures observations so thoroughly that researchers come to actually believe that they are observing harmonious systems" (Fleming & Mandarini, 2009, p. 331). All the good things go hand in hand and the not-so-good is marginalized and demonized as "toxic," inauthentic leadership or not really leadership but something else, for example, tyranny (Jackson & Parry, 2008). "True leadership" is "good." Here, invoking transaction leadership (really referring to management) "as the dull, mechanical, carrots-and-sticks leadership

that would be more ordinary and customary—(forms) a background against which charismatic-transformational leadership shines all the more brightly" (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013, p. 12).

Hero-Worship and Other Forms of Leadership Celebration

In much influential leadership, there is an undertone of heroic mythology—where heroic individuals of true grit get followers in shape and performing as the leader intends. Of course this is most obvious in all the pop-management and *Harvard Business Review*-type writings targeting the mass market were the sole founder or CEO of a firm makes the big difference (e.g., Collins, 2001), but it also frames many academic LS of today. LS people seem to have seen too many John Wayne movies.

Leadership is, within the leadership ideology, viewed as crucial, also in cases where the extreme hero-worshipping is avoided. We always are told things such as "a leader is responsible for direction, protection, orientation, managing conflict and shaping norms" (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997, p. 127). This may sound uncontroversial, but the statement implies that others are not responsible for, and in need of, direction, protection, orientation, and so on (Blom & Alvesson, 2014). Perhaps "non-leaders" often can take responsibility for and are not in need of direction, protection, and so on. But this possibility is marginalized in the most influential leadership theories. Also in knowledge-intensive, innovative contexts—where one would assume non-managers to be competent professionals, capable of autonomy and initiative—leadership authors emphasize an almost endless number of tasks and functions for leaders to do (Mumford, Scott, Gaddis, & Strange, 2002). More generally, non-leaders are often reduced to objects or recipients of the leader's impressive acts:

> Leaders instill their values, beliefs, and assumptions within an organization. (Hartnell & Walumbwa, 2011, p. 232)

Before or without the Leader, there were uncertainty, bewilderment, chaos, selfishness; after or with the Leader the confused get direction, the weak become confident, the egoistic or shortsighted can now see the light (the vision). The heroic template is here, copied and slightly transformed so that it fits into the academic leadership genre. All the powerful influence of the leader calls for a larger than life character—appealing more to fantasy and wishful thinking than a realistic view of what a manager in an organization can be and accomplish. Leadership researchers produce long lists of impressive things that leaders should do for and with their subordinates (e.g., Mumford et al., 2002), including an ability to "define the parameters of the corporate culture" (Kets de Vries, 1994 p. 78; see also, Hartnell & Walumbwa, 2011;

Sashkin, 2004; Schein, 1985 and others seeing leaders as heroic culture creators). Compared with earlier times more modest views of leadership—often emerging from studies of supervisors—contemporary ideas of leadership are much more grandiose (Alvesson, 2013).

The heroic template for how to deal with the hardships of the world offers support for managers and others in contemporary bureaucracies in terms of day-dreaming and fantasies and, thereby, more favorable identity constructions. Somehow leadership is supposed to introduce extraordinary qualities into organizations. This ingredient is also present in so-called post-heroic leadership, where ideas such as shared or distributed leadership are mainly a matter of the re-phrasing of teamwork or mutual adjustment, but where the signifier "leadership" is used, arguably to have more appeal (e.g., Gronn, 2002; Pearce & Conger, 2003). Through labeling team work and mutual adjustment "leadership," there is a minor element of heroization of peer relations and any form of influencing act. Here, everybody can do leadership—nobody is supposed to do followership. How organizations are supposed to work and all the carrying out of tasks calling for compliance is supposed to be done is conveniently left aside. An appealing and positive view full of the good things associated with leadership thus dominates and basic contradictions are denied.

We can here see how ideology does not only, as in case of TFL and other leadership celebrating approaches, reach peak levels, but is also broadly distributed to cover almost all aspects of organizational life, ranging from strongly heroic versions to alternative, "post-heroic" ones were still everybody, in principle, get a sprinkle of the glamor of being portrayed as being a leader or involved in leadership (and not just a self-going employee or a peer).

Saint-Canonization

But just being powerful or adding strong individual qualities like transforming the selfish or confused into altruistic and self-confident organizational members is not sufficient. Powerful individuals may be bad, indeed with a strong power position it is probably easy to lose ground contact—feedback may be weaker and narcissism may flourish, leading to a less well-functioning moral compass (Kets de Vries, 1980).

Much LS have a strong religious, messianic overtone (Alvesson, 2011; Spoelstra & ten Bos, 2011; Tourish & Pinnington, 2002), often overlapping with hero qualities, but authenticity can also be addressed without directly invoking heroism in the sense of powerful action and heroes don't have to exhibit transparency. Reassuring us of the qualities of our elites—in a time full of moral uncertainty, doubt, and worries – leadership ideas offers comfort. Leaders, at least those deserving to be seen as "real" leaders, are not only powerful, they are powerful in a moral way. Effective leadership is for example married with integrity—as Palanski and

Yammarino (2009) write, this is almost an axiom in LS. If leaders are power-oriented, it is only for the good of the organization. Good leaders are authentic; they have integrity and a sense of moral purpose making them capable of increasing the moral standards of followers. If people in powerful positions are not of true grit, they are not really leaders, but something else: tyrants, inauthentic, managers, and so on (Burns, 1978; Jackson & Parry, 2008).

Bass and Steidlmeier (1999), who according to Parry and Bryman (2006, p. 453) have partly rectified the problem of insufficient attention to the negative aspects of TFL, distinguish between authentic and pseudo-TFL. This is not a matter of behavior per se, but rather the noble respectively murky motives driving the leader. The authentic leader focuses on universal values, addresses real threats, and develops followers into leaders, whereas the pseudo-TFL highlights "our" values against "their" values, manufactures crises where there are none, and develops submissive disciples (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Problems with the distinctions include the need for distinguishing between us (our values) and them (their values) being central for community and social identity; crises are not just objectively there but call for construction/framing (Grint, 2005) and the very idea of leadership—including TFL—means the subordinates taking much more of follower than leader positions, thus encouraging a form of submission.

People's "true motives" are notoriously difficult to unpack—rather what is perhaps interesting is the vocabularies of motives (Mills, 1940). In the simple authentic and pseudo-TFL divide, we find the good versus the bad in a form that may fit the Sunday school better than commercial organizations, driven by profit motives and career interests. One major problem in the reasoning is its tautological and ideological nature:

> The assumption is that leadership must be something good. And in the event that it turns out to be bad, one might always argue that one did not witness the true concept of, let us say, 'transformational' or 'authentic' leadership. The concept is never to blame. Its beauty is always conceptually guaranteed because it is self-referentially true. (Spoelstra & ten Bos, 2011, p. 183)

Another key problem is that the enthusiasm of devoted followers may have little to do with Bass and Steidlmeier's idea of what is authentic and not. As Grint (2010) claims,

> There is preciously little evidence that admiring followers of Mao, Stalin, Hitler or Osama bin Laden followed their leaders because they were psychopaths . . . and much more evidence that they followed them because these followers assumed they were ethical. (p. 57)

If one looks at the key quality of TFL—that followers are motivated to do more than expected and be driven by the good of the collective/organization/society—then one could say that the bad persons mentioned by Grint outscore all business leaders, who appear as TFL midgets compared with the giants. But TFL and other leadership writers are typically very eager to distance themselves from non-positive characters, thus denying the complexities and ambiguities of "real (organizational) life" (Jackall, 1988). One gets the feeling that Disney is more of an inspiration than corporate reality for many leadership academics.

Many authors emphasize the payoff of high-moral leadership arguing that high integrity and honesty can create efficiencies (Salam, 2000). However, it is probably better to see moral and efficiency as standing in a complex relationship, with no easy solutions for how to get world full of only good things together (Bolden, Hawkins, Gosling, & Taylor, 2011). The large and expanding literature on authentic leadership and servant leadership preach extreme moral virtues of a saint like quality (Alvesson, 2011). In an often morally questionable business world we need the savior, in the form of the saint like leader. The underlying assumption here is that financial and environmental scandals would be avoidable if only we had the (morally) right leaders at the top, doing servant leadership or something else laudable (Sendjaya, Sarros, & Santora, 2008). Anything systemic such as institutions, capitalism, political (de-)regulations, and consumer culture encouraging maximization of self-interest and greed are all downplayed.

Ideology as Facilitator of Decontestation in LS

Contemporary leadership theories stress that effective leadership means (a) powerful influence and is (b) guided by high morality. The positive formula of leadership = power + morality accounts for the success story of contemporary LS. This sounds really appealing and may be difficult to resist by people wanting a safe, harmonious world where good things go hand in hand, and the good and the strong can save us and/or offer the identification template for ourselves as leaders or leader-wannabes, possible also saving us from the messiness, ambiguities, immoralities, and imperfections of the corporate world, including the power and politics that otherwise are seen as key elements in organizations.

One could thus make the claim that it is the ideological value of these leadership ideas that accounts for their success. That LS are not, as is the case with management (and social science) more generally, ideologically neutral is not an original point (Alvesson & Willmott, 2012; Gemmill & Oakley, 1992; Knights & Willmott, 1992; Trice & Beyer, 1993). Social science involves studying value-laden phenomena of which the researcher is a part. The idea of studying effective leadership is hardly neutral. The ways we conceptualize and write about issues such as leadership do not just mirror external realities existing independently of

our conceptions and writings about them, nor do we offer neutral tools for people to use as they see fit. Leadership research creates ways of seeing and valuing, normalizing subjects through suggesting idealized templates for being, supporting certain interests (normally those labeled "leaders" rather than other people) and has some impact on how leadership behavior is exercised—through publications and education (Foucault, 1980).

While large parts of leadership research are implicit in political and ideological bias—the strengthening of asymmetrical social relations and the construction of social relations alongside a leader/follower dichotomy and providing people with reassuring promises of good, effective leadership taking care of all problems—key parts of it are close to being openly propagandistic. This is the case for a lot of TFL and related streams, like authentic leadership. In-depth studies of organizations give a very different view on moral performances in management—here political behavior and demands for being flexible in moral terms are salient (Jackall, 1988; Watson, 1994). Most LS are, however, protected from close contact with reality as it can only to a modest degree be represented in questionnaire forms (or even in interviews with single persons supposed to be capable of telling how the leadership relations "really" is like).

Representations of leadership practices emerge from ideologies as much as from the traits, values, or motives of managers. Ideology influences consciousness, aspirations, and an inclination to see and express coherence and harmony. But it has often a more ambiguous impact on the level of everyday practice. Whether people are particularly willing to be transformed by the leader, or insist on high wages, interesting job content and promotion possibilities that force the transformation-inclined manager to engage also or mainly in transactions, is perhaps partly a matter of the organizational and occupational context. The majority of such contexts probably offer substantive material for clashes between leadership ideology and practice, but awareness of such confrontations seems to be rare in LS—ideology as expressed in publications and education and also the espoused values and beliefs of managers is often disconnected from managerial practice in organizations (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). It is easy to miss that frequently leadership is event-driven rather than intention- and style-driven (Holmberg & Tyrstrup, 2010; Lundholm, 2011).

Of course, leadership theory has always had a rather strong ideological undertone, but compared with earlier, fairly modest versions—focusing on traits, style, situatedness, leader–member exchanges, and so on (Yukl, 1981)—the now popular versions that have "saved" LS from its 70s and 80s depression are much more ideologically potent and provide leverage for ideas and claims of questionable intellectual value. The relationship between ideological and intellectual value is often negative as the former sacrifices empirical description and theoretical explanatory sharpness

in favor of positive-sounding (or possible demonizing) formulations, overemphasizing a harmonious state of affairs or reachable future. Leadership of the "right" kind combines power, morality, and far-reaching influence over followers doing excellent work and being very satisfied. This is not caricature, but the picture conveyed by influential leadership research (Bolden et al., 2011).

Triggering the Tautology Trap: The Role of Empirical Studies in TFL

Thus, the academic LS field not only adapts to and benefits from this appeal to fantasies about being extraordinary and remarkable, but also actively contribute to this. As an academic field, LS follows its research logic, dominated by positivism (Antonakis et al., 2004; Mumford, Friedrich, Caughron, & Antes, 2009) and ideologically guided questions, with strong normative hints (e.g., about "intellectual stimulation"), that allows for the merger of "scientific procedure" and ideology. Many of the seemingly impressive results of LS is rather an effect of this ideology being built into research designs, encouraging respondents (typically in one-source questionnaires) to report as if positive views to the manager go hand in hand with other positive things (fine climate, effectiveness, teamwork . . .) characterizing the unit the manager (leader) is leading.

It is claimed that there is rather strong support for TFL, for example, "A rich stock of studies suggest that TFL can be a very effective form of leadership" (Lindebaum & Cartwright, 2010, p. 1320) and that "numerous studies" "have demonstrated the positive effects of TFL on various levels" (Fu, Tsui, Liu, & Li, 2010, p. 225). As shown above, definitions tend to guarantee "positive" outcomes, so empirical studies in TFL and other "positive" theories tend to be exercises in confirmation bias and tautology. But what about "the rich stock" of studies?

The predominant way of studying TFL (and leadership in general) is through the use of questionnaires (Diaz-Saenz, 2011). Sometimes one even gets the impression that leadership "as such"—practices, interactions, relations—is of less interest for researchers than questionnaire filling behavior. Responses to abstract formulations in questionnaires are usually remotely distanced from actions, events, feelings, relations, articulations of opinions, and so on, emerging in everyday life situations. That a person is asked to put an X in a particular response alternative from among the five or so possibilities in a questionnaire may say rather little of what or how that person feels or thinks or behaves, in the various situations he or she encounters and which the questionnaire tries to reflect (Alvesson, 1996). Two other reasons for why mainstream research is poor are the *same-source bias*, and *tautology* built into studies.

There is a large body of research on TFL and emotional intelligence relying on the same source, showing strong

correlations. But when different sources (e.g., the manager and someone else, like a subordinate or the manager's own superior) are used, the emotional exchange (EI) self-ratings of the managers and the TFL ratings of other people (their managers or subordinates) "do not correlate significantly" (Lindebaum & Cartwright, 2010). Also, studies of leader-member exchange (LMX) show low or moderate correlation between manager and subordinate ratings of the relationship (Cogliser, Schriesheim, Scandura, & Gardner, 2009; van Breukelen et al., 2006) as do research on self–other ratings (Fleenor, Smither, Atwater, Braddy, & Sturm, 2010).

Another problem with a large part of the leadership research is that includes an element of tautology—not only in theory, as addressed above, but also in research designs—and an inclination to avoid cognitive dissonance. Popular LS are very much about marrying an ideology-laden leadership vocabulary with other forms of language use thus creating cognitive and linguistic coherence and avoiding dissonance. Thus, ideology frames empirical study in such a way that those studied tend to conform to the language convention mandated by the ideology in the first place. If a person agrees with statements such as "my manager makes me proud to be associated with him/her" and "provides advice to those who need it," he or she is probably inclined to put an X on a high score on "overall work effectiveness of your unit" and the supervisor's effectiveness (Seltzer & Bass, 1990), simple because it appears odd to report that one feels proud of a manager heading an ineffective unit.

Similar problems turn up in Conger et al. (2000). Here, charismatic leadership is expected to be positively related to a follower's sense of collective identity, perceived group performance and feelings of empowerment. The sample was asked to answer a "questionnaire assessing a supervisor's behaviour" (p. 753). If a person tends to say that "I hold him/her (the leader) in high respect," they may also agree with statements such as the leader is "inspirational," "influences others by developing mutual liking and respect," and "often expresses personal concern." And if they do, it would hardly come as a surprise that they tend to agree with statements like "we see ourselves in the work group as a cohesive team" and "I am keen on our doing well as an organization."

When leadership is in focus, the intention, the act, and the outcome are often coupled and placed in the same box, for example, intellectual stimulation or idealized influence. This involves a lot of ambiguity around the leader's behavior and the underlying influencing processes (Yukl, 1999). This seems to be an accepted, but problematic, convention in "mainstream"/dominant LS. It encourages a tendency to produce in-built results and insensitivity to process and relational issues. For these reasons, and despite considerable efforts of TFL researchers to find efficient and reliable ways of using their questionnaires (Antonakis et al., 2004; Mumford et al., 2009), one can doubt how much all the empirical studies of TFL really tell, although there are a few more solid studies (e.g., Fu et al., 2010). We agree with the more technically focused, "intra-paradigmatic" assessment of van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013): "The vast majority of studies have relied on a measurement approach for which there is overwhelming evidence of its invalidity" (p. 45).

The popularity of TFL and related streams can't be seen as simply reflecting their intellectual qualities, credible empirical support or practical relevance and value. What is actually the basis for the "much greater optimism" (Bryman, 1996) among leadership researchers more recently? While we agree with Bryman that there are some positive theoretical developments, for example, management of meaning (Ladkin, 2010; Sandberg & Targama, 2007; Smircich & Morgan, 1982) and more relational and dialectic approaches (Collinson, 2006; Uhl-Bien, 2006) that are interesting, these are hardly accountable for broadly shared feelings of the improved position of LS, based on the enthusiasm of much more heroic views such as transformational, charismatic, and authentic leadership.

Remedies: Re-Contesting and De-Ideologizing Leadership Research

In their fundamental critique of TFL, van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) make short shrift of both concepts and empirical work and suggest that TFL people need to start from scratch. We agree with the critique, but see the fundamental issue as more profound than matters of conceptual precision and empirical rigor. TFL has boomed very much due to its ideological appeal. Also many seemingly "progressive" versions of leadership, emphasizing constructions, relations, and "post-heroic" elements, draw on and benefit from this broad ideological appeal. The seductive power of TFL, within LS as well as business and society as a whole, in combination with the eagerness to move out of the disappointment of the field in the 1980s have lead to the acceptance and celebration of poor scholarship on a broad scale. Ideology, positive portrayals of what exist and what should be done to enchant audiences and bracket the critical and intellectual orientations that normally is supposed to guide academic work and the assessment of theory and empirical studies. In the case of TFL, ideology has triumphed over intellectual concerns.

Nevertheless, values, worldviews, and specific labels always guide studies in such a way that certain interests, institutions, and sets of ideas are reproduced/challenged or reinforced/weakened. This cannot be avoided or marginalized through "objectivity" or, as we have shown, by adhering to established methodology and theory. What we can do is to work with ideology in far better ways than is done by the majority of researchers in the "successful" leadership field—a field easily dismissed as mainly ideological. Below we offer a framework for moves toward a "de-ideologization" of LS—and also potentially for other areas:

- Avoid strongly positive and persuasive terms. Find more neutral/less seductive ones and, when difficult, indicate the potential negative side of also positive-sounding words.
- Minimize and problematize the setting up of the good versus the bad. Apart from steering away from "pure goodness" (and pure badness) acknowledge that the seemingly good may go hand in hand with the less good: the fundamental problem of cognitive dissonance. Point at the imperfections of reality, where the good and the bad often may go hand in hand or ambiguities rule over clear styles, values, practices, or outcomes.
- Avoid overpacking leadership (and other vocabularies) with performative verbs and separate intention, practice, and outcome. This includes being careful with tautologies.
- Be careful about relying on informants producing data with a strong ingredient of "moral storytelling," that is, presenting themselves and their ambitions and accomplishments in explicit or subtle self-celebrating terms. Source-critique and caution in taking empirical material from interviews and questionnaires at face value is vital.
- Use language (in particular in writing) so there is awareness that there may be other possible better ways of constructing/representing the subject matter. Challenge, at least occasionally, favored language and point at alternative vocabularies.

It is important to be clear that counter-ideology does not really offer a useful alternative. Consider, for example Gemmill and Oakley (1992) who provide the flip side of the coin in arguing that leadership is a social pathology. For them, leadership is a social myth that propagates alienation, reification, learned helplessness, and other pathologies, in the name of anxiety suppression and consensus formation. Their argument is that leadership operates as an ideologically charged sledgehammer that is used to smash autonomy and collaborative action, and to provide cover for power grabs from particular social elites, such as executives and other managerial groups. Again, highly loaded terms such as alienation, pathology, and deskilling are mobilized; a Manichean worldview is constructed, although reversed in the sense that leadership is bad and everything else is good; all types of authority is conflated into leadership; the article constructs a straw person, with no empirical support; and there is no space for the play of opposites and irony.

Although Gemmill and Oakley's (1992) argument is thoughtful, and can be viewed as a useful corrective to the gushing of leadership proponents, they end up with nowhere to go. This is particularly clear in the latter parts of their argument where they attempt to experiment with new paradigms for the understanding of the leadership phenomena. After their previous demolition job of the concept, the attempts to push in more constructive directions appear futile. The problem here is that the counter-ideological argument is in itself too ideologically charged to allow for constructive engagements with the concept. It is too categorical to allow for fruitful experimentation with new ideas.

De-Ideologizing LS: Two Illustrations

Moving on to our major theme—popular LS—we will now illustrate how ideologically saturated texts can be de-masked and de-ideologized. Zhu, Newman, Miao, and Hooke (2013) argue that two basic types of trust mediate the relationship between transformational leaders and followers: affective trust and cognitive trust. Affective trust emerges when followers develop a strongly personal, intimate, and emotional bond to the leader. Cognitive trust, on the other hand, emerges at a distance, where the follower makes an assessment of the leader's character, based on the leader's performance as viewed from the "outside." Zhu et al. finds that although affective trust is an unequivocal social good, cognitive trust is more problematic and associated to underperforming employees. Hence, they conclude that trust is not always good from a managerial perspective; managers would benefit from research the kind of trust that is deployed, and basically try to minimize cognitive trust while maximizing affective trust.

Apart from drawing on the inherently Manichean TFL worldview, with its strong focus on loaded and overpacked vocabulary and moralizing storylines, the article also set up a "good" kind and a "bad" kind of trust. Good trust comes from vibrant, emotional, and personal relationships, whereas bad trust comes from cool, distant, and calculative relationship, fermenting social loafing and free-riding on the capable and competent transformational leader. The strong ideological framing of the article makes the interpretation of the data almost self-evident. Trust might look double-edged at first glance, but not when properly unpacked.

However, a less ideological interpretation of Zhu et al.'s (2013) data is that they capture more of how relationships are characterized by reciprocity and patronage. As the job performance evaluation is based on supervisor's subjective reports, it is not surprising that they have stronger and more personal and intimate relationships with people they deem high performing. This perhaps makes the leaders into less of transformational leaders, who after all perhaps would view low performers as excellent turn around targets for TFL, but renders them more like humans: malleable and driven by shared interests. It also shows how dynamics of inclusion and exclusion drives human interaction and, arguably, leadership practices.

In a more schematic form, Zhu et al. would have benefitted from

- Not immediately accepting transformational leaders awesome capacities, and allow for more nuance in what drives leaders and followers
- Assuming that "affective" and "cognitive" trust may signify deeper relationship issues and discrepancies that are worthy of including in the interpretation. For example, "affective" trust may be a result of long-term patronage and collaboration, whereas "cognitive" trust may indicate excluded, marginalized, and stigmatized groups and individuals.
- Having a skeptical or at least more open attitude toward the managerial evaluation of job performances. Managers hardly always evaluate subordinates on objective and fair grounds; people with low evaluations might be potential whistleblowers or dissenters.
- Allow for the tension between various forms of trust to be explored more deeply, and allow for the irony that some forms of trust might lead to low performance to play out for longer.
- Not necessarily going for saving the concept of TFL but rather using the data to question the basic tenets of TFL: Why do transformational leaders develop strong ties of trust with people who are already high-performing? Perhaps what may appear as "transformational" is an outcome of subordinates being "high-performing." What are the barriers for followers that are excluded from developing affective trust to leaders?

Ideology is of course not only afflicted to TFL and TFL-based studies. Consider for example Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011), who address "relational leadership." This is "an inherently moral and dialogical practice" (p. 1428) and is in the entire article presented in uplifting ways, for example, through terms like "collaboration, empathy, trust, empowerment" (p. 1430). The authors claim, based on an empirical study, that

> four main conceptual threads run through relational leadership: leadership is a way of being in the world, encompasses working out, dialogically, what is meaningful with others, means recognizing that working through differences is inherently a moral responsibility; and involves practical wisdom. (p. 1433)

The article is full of expressions like "relationally responsive dialogue," "the need to be respectful, establish trust, and for people to be able to 'express themselves'," "to treat people as human beings, of having a 'heart,' appreciating others, and encouraging them to grow and learn from each other" (p. 1433). While all the people interviewed, most of them managers, expressed their ideals and practices in line with these themes, others, not included in the study, were occasionally referred in a less flattering term. The article

acknowledges that there may be a "myriad of seemingly conflicting interests" but this appears to be handled without much problems through "understanding that relationships are intricately entwined, embedded, constantly shifting and unique as we interact with others" by "relational leaders (who) are open to the present moment and to future possibilities" (p. 1437).

Thus, the article is drawing on strongly rhetorically loaded concepts; setting up the good relational leader against the bad heroic one, the dialogic (talking with people) versus monologic discourse (silencing and marginalizing); conflating somewhat different phenomena (e.g., relational integrity); rely heavily on informants describing themselves in very positive ways; showing no signs on engaging with irony or breakdowns in understanding, but advocates relational leadership as a superior mode of leading; and assuming and implicitly claiming that all the good things go hand in hand and there are no negative aspects of all this worth mentioning.

A less ideological re-imagining of their argument and issues to be considered in empirical inquiry might look something like this:

- The "relational leader" pay much attention to establishing good human relationships, which may occasionally lead to complicated social relations with high expectations on an almost quasi-therapeutical quality and some neglect of technical, economical, and administrative concerns. The costs of "full-fledged" relationality need to be considered.
- Relational qualities and orientations may range broadly and many of these may not co-exist. Relationality may include alignment of interest and meanings, but relational qualities may be perceived quite differently, involving conflict, distance, or disinterest. The relational is perhaps not only something positive. Relational and integrity may be integrated or dis-connected. Integrity may call for some distancing and downplaying of empathy and responsiveness. Nepotism and favoritism may be part of relationality.
- The informants in the study speak of themselves, their motives, and practices in generally very positive terms. Others are referred to in less flattering ways. For example, "we listened to everybody" (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011, p. 1441) whereas "I have heard horror stories where the FDS misrepresented the facts" (p. 1440). It may be true that the people interviewed are "better" than others—within the framework of the article—but the accounts may be an outcome of moral storytelling and self-serving bias. Some critical assessment—source critique—is motivated.
- Considering alternative vocabularies than the preferred one is a way of not being caught in a particular ideological commitment. "Understanding the importance of relational integrity: respecting and being

responsive to differences, being accountable to others, acting in ways that others can count on us" (p. 1444) could be reformulated in less celebratory ways, for example, accepting (rather than work actively with) variations in opinions, meanings, and moralities, adapt to a high degree to the demands and judgments of others, refrain from the creation of shared meanings.

- Ideals easily clash and needs to be highlighted and not avoided. Yes, it is fine with "relational leaders (who) are open to the present moment and to future possibilities," but sometimes closure is motivated: focus, agenda-setting, direction, and avoidance of over-stimulation may be beneficial for getting the work done.

Of course, following a de-ideologization route would create considerable problems for LS. Those neat results "proving" the value of TFL, appealing reasoning of the value of authenticity, emotional intelligence, relationality, or the pathologies of leadership, for that matter, would be undermined. The apparent relevance and value for practitioners wanting to have positive news and an appealing formula for good leadership would be reduced. The LS community may be back into bewilderment and depression.

Ideology has its advantages and the attractions are strong. We cannot eliminate ideology, but a social science worth its name need to be committed to an intellectual agenda and work hard to avoid the temptations of seductive terms and formulations, tautologies and a worldview where some things are simply good and go hand in hand with other good things without anything disturbing the rosy ideal. There is plenty of space for interesting, challenging LS navigating around ideological peaks, although this calls for serious reconsiderations of what the LS field is up to.

Conclusion

The basic story of progress in organization studies, and social science in general, is straightforward. Worthy ideas consist of coherent constructs supported by empirical evidence, unworthy ideas does not, and the difference is decided through rigorous research protocols. In actual practice, things are much more muddled. Some of this is because almost every word of the one sentence outline of scientific progress above is contested one way or another. There is no or little consensus on what constitute ideas, empirical evidence, rigorous research, and so on. And maybe the story is problematic, too.

Despite the lack of clarity, more or less cohesive research areas emerge, and can arguably be understood as being successful in this respect. In this article, we have suggested that such success can be explained by other factors than those suggested by the standard story of scientific progress. It is broadly claimed, by people in leadership studies, that the

field over a fairly short period moved from being in a sad state to one of optimism and progress, from a sense of failure to self-confidence and success. We have indicated that this is not self-evidently explained by good and better ideas and results, but could be seen as a mystery calling for looking for non-obvious ways of explaining this.

More specifically, this article makes two contributions. The first is to show the ideological nature through which LS are carried out. A lot of leadership research is about the detailed investigation of specific theories, aiming to add to the literature. The underlying ideological nature of the entire enterprise tends to be neglected. Few studies take a deep and closer look at the subject matter. There is a lot of black-boxing of what actually happens in leadership, defined as but seldom directly studied as an influence process carried out in interaction within a specific context. In-built ideological tendencies and tautologies account for many of the results: Good things go together in a harmonious whole. Language rules, social norms, and the inclination to avoid cognitive dissonance in many cases facilitate predictable "results."

The article shows how appealing, but intellectually unimpressive images put strong imprints on influential versions of leadership theory. Spoelstra and ten Bos (2011) argue that "all leadership necessarily needs idolization, precisely because the sublime object of leadership is constituted through idolization" (p. 195). We claim that this idolization is much stronger in the leadership approaches leading the field's move into its current, seemingly happy and optimistic state. The complexities of managerial work and profit-driven, bureaucratic and sometimes not so Sunday school-like organizations are not supposed to ruin this cosy picture.

A second contribution concerns the "theoretical-methodological" implications for LS. The article provides a guideline for scholars of leadership to resist ideological and normative appealing ideas and formulations and research designs protecting the researcher from deviations from a harmonious world of the good (TFL, authentic, servant, relational, Level 5) leadership leading to good results through the good leader making people into followers and turning these into (morally and effectively) good workers. A qualified understanding of leadership and contribution to valuable knowledge in an imperfect world, with imperfect people is arguably much better accomplished by researchers going to the field of ("ordinary") workplaces and manager–subordinate interactions rather than consulting ideologically soaked holy texts. The field may be far less glamorous and comforting to draw inspiration from, but leadership researchers eager to score higher intellectually than ideologically need to take a serious interest in the real world—beyond the sphere of questionnaire filling and interview responding behavior, saying more about available leadership ideologies than specific leadership practices and relations.

To put it bluntly, to a significant degree LS have followed a success formula where ideology + tautology + ignorance =

popular leadership ideas. This is not to say that there is no promising and interesting work in LS. We partly agree with Parry and Bryman (2006) about progress in variations and developments (attribution theory, relational leadership ideas, management of meaning, critical LS). And we would not necessarily deny that TFL could be inspirational for managers and sometimes lead to positive effects in organizations. Still, there is a strong imprint of ideology and wishful thinking that is central in the move to recent "success" in LS. Even "non-heroic" views of leadership are influenced by, and benefit from, the general ideological appeal of "mainstream" leadership. Promoting ideology is obviously very different from promoting new and exciting research ideas, but, although ideology-free studies are impossible, texts can be "ideologically" disruptive and unruly rather than reinforcing comforting thought patterns. If unchecked, research becomes subsumed to ideological closure, ultimately only offering a claustrophobic chorus of conformism around the significance and positive nature of the "right" kind of leadership. Against this, we need research that is seriously committed to efforts to de-ideologize leadership.

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Note

1. We should of course also consider the opposite tendency, an inclination to paint the world in gray and black, common in critical work that sometimes draw on an ideology of free, equal members of a happy community not in need of managers and leaders. Our article may be read as ideological in this sense. Our purpose is not, however, to deny the value of senior people exercising leadership, but to point to some serious problems of dominant ideas on leadership as exemplified by transformational leadership (TFL) as part of an effort to understand the transition of leadership studies (LS) from perceived failure to perceived success and then question the latter. The ideology of TFL—not the ideology of (the small group of) critical scholars—is here in focus.

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