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What is This?

Dialectics of leadership

David Collinson

ABSTRACT   Mainstream leadership studies tend to privilege and separate leaders from followers. This article highlights the value of rethinking leadership as a set of dialectical relationships. Drawing on post-structuralist perspectives, this approach reconsiders the relations and practices of leaders and followers as mutually constituting and co-produced. It also highlights the tensions, contradictions and ambiguities that typically characterize these shifting asymmetrical and interdependent leadership dynamics. Exploring three interrelated 'dialectics' (control/resistance, dissent/consent and men/women), the article raises a number of issues frequently neglected in the mainstream literature. It emphasizes that leaders exercise considerable power, that their control is often shifting, paradoxical and contradictory, that followers' practices are frequently proactive, knowledgeable and oppositional, that gender crucially shapes control/resistance/consent dialectics and that leaders themselves may engage in workplace dissent. The article concludes that dialectical perspectives can provide new and innovative ways of understanding leadership.

KEYWORDS   control/resistance/consent ▪ dialectics ▪ dualisms ▪ gender

Introduction

In contemporary western societies leadership issues are frequently understood in binary terms. For example, leaders are often viewed either as 'heroes' or 'villains', elevated or blamed, seen as the solution or the barrier to organizational success. In the UK, the notion of the 'leader as saviour' is

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currently in vogue, exemplified by the plethora of recent publications promoting 'excellence' in leadership policy, practice and development. The converse perspective of the 'leader as villain' is also prevalent, fuelled by recent cases of corporate fraud and corruption at companies like Enron and WorldCom in the US and Guinness and Maxwell in the UK. Informing these apparently polarized perspectives is a shared assumption that complex organizational problems can and should be solved by leaders themselves.

Meindl et al. (1985) were early critics of this tendency to develop overly heroic and exaggerated views of what leaders are able to achieve. They suggested that in the context of causally indeterminate and unpredictable events, 'romanticizing leaders' merely provides a reassuring, simplified way of understanding complex organizational processes. For them, leaders' contribution to a collective enterprise is inevitably somewhat constrained, closely tied to external factors outside a leaders' control such as those affecting whole industries. Yet, many, possibly most studies of leadership display a similar tendency to separate 'leaders' from 'followers' and privilege the former as the primary agents in these dynamics.

More recently, a number of writers have begun to question the dualistic assumptions in much of the leadership literature. Gronn (2002) criticizes the 'leader–follower' and 'leadership–followership' binaries that remain 'sacrosanct' within leadership studies. In the context of schools, he advocates the importance of distributed leadership, which emphasizes interdependence, coordination and the reciprocal influence between teaching colleagues. Ray et al. (2004) criticize traditional studies for presenting the leadership relationship as 'an unremarkable dualism' in which leaders are given voice while followers are rendered silent. Similarly, Prince (2005) argues that the subject–object dichotomy, so pervasive in western thinking, artificially divorces 'leaders' (as powerful subjects) from 'followers' (as passive objects).

Fairhurst (2001) problematizes several 'important dualisms' in the leadership communication literature (e.g. leadership/managership, transformational/transactional, organic/mechanistic and participative/autocratic). Identifying the primary dualism as that between the individual and the collective, she argues that studies typically concentrate either on leaders, in ways that overlook the dynamics of the collective, or on the latter thereby neglecting the former's basis for action. Fairhurst advocates dialectical forms of inquiry that go beyond these seemingly oppositional binaries to explore their 'dynamic tension' and 'interplay'. Rejecting 'either–or' thinking, she recommends a reframing of the literature based on a 'both–and' orientation in which the individual and the system are each viewed as constitutive elements of leadership.

Fairhurst's arguments build on Baxter and Montgomery's (1996)

'relational-dialectics' approach to personal communication where social life is viewed as a 'dynamic knot of contradictions, a ceaseless interplay between contrary or opposing tendencies' (p. 3). Together, the foregoing writers criticize the recurrent dualistic tendency in leadership studies to rely upon over-simplified binaries that elevate one side of the dichotomy whilst marginalizing the other. Typically, these critics of leadership dualisms propose an alternative based on some variant of dialectical thinking.

Apparently opposing binaries can occur in many forms, including: rationality/emotion, material/symbolic, male/female, wealth/poverty, public/private, nature/nurture, production/consumption, home/work, theory/practice, quantitative/qualitative, micro/macro, change/stability and local/global. On the one hand, identifying structures, distinctions and boundaries is clearly important for making sense of the world, helping to create meaning and clarity (Surman, 2002). Language itself typically embodies dualistic understandings based on subject–object separations (e.g. 'leader' and 'follower'). Yet, on the other hand, problems arise when complex relations and interwoven processes are reduced to overly simplified binary oppositions. In such cases, distinctions and dichotomies can be reified as seemingly concrete, independent and ontological 'representations of reality', whilst interrelations and asymmetries are denied or underestimated. Baxter and Hughes refer to this privileging of one 'side' of the binary at the expense of the other as 'the inevitable hierarchization implicit in dualistic construction' (2004: 363).

While debates about dualism(s) and dialectics are a relatively recent development in leadership studies they have a much longer history in social theory (e.g. the work of Hegel, Marx, Adorno and Derrida). In organization studies a number of writers have also begun to question dualistic forms of analysis (Mumby & Stohl, 1991). For example, while Knights (1997) draws on postmodernist perspectives to recommend the complete 'eradication' of dualisms like structure and agency (see also Willmott, 2005), critical realists emphasize the value of retaining clear distinctions between such categories (e.g. Reed, 1997; Fleetwood, 2005).

Challenging the individual/society dualism in social theory, Giddens (1979, 1984, 1987, 1990, 1991) emphasizes an intrinsic relation between agency and power within all social relations. Seeking to re-think the 'dialectics of power relations', he argues that human beings are knowledgeable social agents who, acting within historically specific (unacknowledged) conditions and (unintended) consequences, always retain a capacity to 'make a difference'. Giddens's notion of 'the dialectic of control' holds that, no matter how asymmetrical, power relations are always two-way, contingent and to some degree interdependent.[1]

With regard to leadership an important implication of the dialectic of

control is that leader-led relations can be understood as fundamentally characterized by interdependencies and power asymmetries. Since asymmetrical power relations are always two-way, leaders will remain dependent to some extent on the led, while followers retain a degree of autonomy and discretion. In addition, if we re-think followers as knowledgeable agents, we can begin to see them as proactive, self-aware and knowing subjects who have at their disposal a repertoire of possible agencies within the workplace. Accordingly, dialectical power relations between leaders and followers are likely to be interdependent as well as asymmetrical, potentially contradictory and contested.

Elements of this kind of dialectical thinking can also be discerned in 'new' ideas about leadership. Here it is often argued that 'flatter hierarchies', 'empowered workers', digital technologies and intensified globalized competition are producing more flexible and informal leadership practices, less tied to hierarchical position and more focused on shared power and responsibility (e.g. Pearce & Conger, 2003). It is now increasingly common to view effective leadership as 'post-heroic', 'shared', 'quiet', 'post-transformational', 'follower-oriented' and/or 'project team-based' where leaders act as 'servants' rather than as commanders and controllers. This new thinking treats leadership dynamics as more relational and group-based, dependent on fluid, multi-directional social interactions and networks of influence. Leadership is increasingly seen as being distributed up, down and across hierarchies.

Against this background, the following article suggests that a dialectical perspective can facilitate new ways of thinking about the complex, shifting dynamics of leadership. The argument draws on post-structuralist and feminist organization and management studies to foreground the importance of (gendered) power dynamics. For, it is not just the artificial separation of leaders from followers in ways that neglect their dynamic interactions that is problematic in dualistic accounts. It is also that much of the mainstream literature rarely treats as significant the typically asymmetrical nature of leadership interactions. A more dialectical approach focuses on the simultaneous interdependencies and asymmetries between leaders and followers as well as their ambiguous and potentially contradictory conditions, processes and consequences.

This article examines three interrelated dialectics of power/resistance, consent/dissent and men/women, arguing that these are mutually reproducing features of leadership dynamics. It begins by critically reviewing the tendency in mainstream leadership perspectives to separate and privilege leaders above followers. The second section explores questions of power in leadership dynamics and argues for the need to treat control/resistance as a

dialectic rather than a dualism. This also suggests that control and resistance are often inextricably linked, frequently in contradictory ways. A post-structuralist examination of resistance practices in the third section highlights a further dialectic between consent and dissent. The final section examines the dialectic between women and men, revealing not only the contradictory and ambiguous, but also intensely gendered nature of control, resistance and consent. It also illustrates that leaders themselves may engage in oppositional actions and raises important questions about how to address the interrelations between multiple leadership dialectics.

Leaders or followers?

It is often stated that the essence of leadership is followership (Bjerke, 1999), that without followers leaders do not exist (Kelley, 2004) and that leadership only exists in the interaction between leaders and followers (Grint, 2000). Yet, the full implications of these frequently articulated dictums are rarely incorporated into leadership studies. Informed mainly by functionalist assumptions,[2] mainstream studies have concentrated on 'successful' leaders' personas, thoughts and actions. Seeking to make causal links between leadership and organizational performance, research has tended to adopt a pseudo-scientific mode of enquiry, drawing on positivist epistemologies, using laboratory methodologies.

The key concern of mainstream researchers has been what makes an effective leader? Yet, persuasive answers have proved elusive, findings have been inconclusive and inconsistent. Many studies have simply assumed that leaders are powerful and in control while followers are largely powerless, passive and predictable. Little research attends to followers and their interactions with leaders. For example, situational leadership holds that 'effective leaders' deploy a mix of directive and supportive behaviours compatible with followers' 'developmental levels' (Hersey & Blanchard, 1996). This approach tends to reduce followers to static and objectified categories.[3] Path-goal theory suggests that leaders must choose leadership styles best suited to followers' experience, needs and skills (House, 1971). It thereby treats leadership as 'a one way event – the leader affects the subordinate' (Northhouse, 2004: 113).

Transformational studies argue that charismatic leaders can inspire followers to greater commitment by satisfying their needs, validating their identities (Shamir et al., 1993; Lord & Brown, 2003) and effectively managing 'proximity' and 'distance' (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). Yet, transformational studies typically draw on highly gendered, heroic images of

the 'great man', viewing leaders as dynamic agents of change and followers as passive and compliant (Fulop et al., 2004). They leave unquestioned the view that leaders are able to manipulate followers' needs and identities in order to exercise control.

Leader–member exchange theory (LMX) more explicitly addresses relationships between leaders and followers. It emphasizes that both followers and leaders mutually determine the quality of their relationship. LMX observes that leaders tend to be open and trusting with 'in-group' followers, but distant with 'out-group' members (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Yet, in concentrating on the dyadic leader–follower relationship, LMX says little about followers per se, about the ways they may influence the leader–member relationship or about the group and organizational dimensions of these relationships (Howell & Shamir, 2005).[4]

Hence, while mainstream leadership theories have produced useful insights, they continue to prioritize leaders, addressing followers only in relation to their susceptibility to certain leader behaviours or styles. They do not consider the more active role followers may play in leadership processes. By and large, 'followers' have been viewed as unproblematic and predictable cogs in the (leadership) machine. Hence in their overall search to render leadership a predictable practice and leadership studies a prescriptive endeavour, mainstream approaches tend to portray followers as 'an empty vessel waiting to be led, or even transformed, by the leader' (Goffee & Jones, 2001: 148).

In contrast with this large swathe of leadership research, there is also growing interest in 'followership'. A number of writers highlight the importance of 'exemplary' and 'courageous' followers for 'successful' organizations (for example, Kelley, 1992, 2004; Chaleff, 2003; Raelin, 2003). They argue that in the contemporary context of greater team working, 'empowered, knowledge workers', and 'distributed' leadership, 'good followership' has become crucial. Emphasizing the importance of followership, Meindl (1995) proposed that researchers should no longer be concerned at all with leaders. Rather, he suggested that we should examine followers' (romanticized) views of (charismatic) leaders and of themselves (as followers) primarily for what they reveal about their own thought systems. Yet, by eschewing *any* consideration of leaders in favour of an exclusive focus on the social psychological dynamics operating within followers, Meindl inverts, but then reproduces, a similar dualism between 'leaders' and 'followers'.

The same could be said about the foregoing writers on followership. Reacting against the one, currently dominant side of the polarity (leaders), they shift to the other (followers). Rather than replace a 'leader-centric' approach with a 'follower-centric' analysis as Meindl advocates, this article

argues for a more dialectical understanding of the complex, interactional relationships between leaders and followers. It also suggests that leadership dynamics are typically more asymmetrical than the foregoing studies acknowledge. Leader or follower-centred approaches share a tendency to underestimate questions of control and resistance.

Control/resistance

Assuming that the interests of leaders and followers coalesce, orthodox leadership studies tend to see power and control as unproblematic forms of organizational authority whilst resistance is viewed as abnormal or irrational. When considered at all, power is conceived narrowly as either positive (in the sense of leaders empowering followers) *or* negative (seen as synonymous with coercion). Mainstream studies typically prefer to explore 'influence' (positive) and distinguish this from power (negative). In so doing, they fail to appreciate that the former is one aspect of the latter or that control is a historically specific, deeply embedded condition and consequence of leadership dynamics.

A small number of more critical leadership studies recognize the importance of power (Gordon, 2002). Viewing leadership as a process of power-based reality construction, Smircich and Morgan (1982) reveal how leaders exercise control by 'managing meaning' and defining situations in ways that suit their purposes. However, by concluding that leaders create situations in which followers are 'crippled' by powerlessness and are complicit in 'surrendering' their autonomy, Smircich and Morgan's 'mono-logical approach' fails to appreciate how meaning is co-constructed through dialectical forms of talk that are 'essentially contested' (Fairhurst, 2001).

Other critical studies of leadership make similar assumptions about the absence of follower resistance. Calas and Smircich (1991) contend that leaders are inevitably successful in 'seducing' followers. Knights and Willmott (1992) argue that leaders' hierarchical power enables them to provide rewards, apply sanctions, gain access to expertise and secure follow-ers' consent. Gemmill and Oakley (1992) contend that 'leadership' induces 'massive learned helplessness' resulting in people becoming 'cheerful robots'. In his study of followers' fantasies about leaders, Gabriel (1997) takes for granted that the latter retain a psychological grip on the former.

These critical studies reveal the symbolic, hierarchical, existential and psychoanalytical basis of leadership power relations. They also show how power relations are not so much a 'dependent variable' as a deeply embedded and inescapable feature of leadership structures, cultures, practices and

relations. Yet, by focusing almost exclusively on leaders' power, they retain a rather deterministic feel that underestimates followers' agency and resistance. In this sense, they paradoxically mirror the dualistic approach of mainstream studies.

Critical studies of management and organization present more detailed and extensive accounts of power and control in the workplace.[5] If we take seriously the notion of distributed leadership, then the critical literature's focus on management control becomes highly relevant to the study of leadership. This approach demonstrates that leaders' and managers' power can take multiple economic, political and ideological forms. Critical perspectives suggest that leaders exercise considerable control through, for example, constructing corporate visions, shaping structures, influencing cultures, intensifying and monitoring work and by making key strategic and HR decisions. They also suggest that forms of control typically produce resistance (Hardy & Clegg, 1999).[6]

Two of the most influential critical perspectives on power and control in the workplace are labour process theory and post-structuralism. Labour process theorists point to management's economic power, particularly the capacity to hire and fire workers (Braverman, 1974). Arguing that management's control strategies often generate a counter-response from subordinates, they view employee resistance as a consequence of the contradictory forms of management control that treat workers as both disposable and dependable and of the extraction of surplus value through deskilling and work intensification.

Drawing particularly on Foucault's (1977) ideas about the mutually reinforcing relationship between power and knowledge, post-structuralist writers seek to show how contemporary workplace control is often exercised through new forms of surveillance and how these disciplinary processes significantly impact on employees' identities. Foucault explored the 'disciplinary power' of surveillance that produces detailed information about individuals, rendering them visible, calculable and self-disciplining subjects. He argued that by shaping identity formation, power is enabling and productive as well as subordinating. One implication of Foucault's ideas is that leaders can exercise power by measuring, evaluating and rewarding followers' performance.

Equally, Foucault highlighted the dialectical relationship between power and resistance, asserting that 'resistance is never in a position of exteriority to power' (1979: 95). While power creates the conditions for its own resistance, opposition draws on the very power it rejects. Even in the most totalitarian of power regimes, cleavages and contradictions arise that provide opportunities for resistance, especially in the form of localized acts of defiance. As Foucault argued, 'where there is power, there is resistance' (1979: 95).

Despite its neglect in leadership studies,[7] there is also a considerable literature in organization studies indicating that employees often draw on strategic agencies and cultural resources to express disaffection in the workplace. An early study by Mechanic (1962) argued that despite having little formal authority, 'lower participants' in organizations can still exert considerable 'informal power'. Researchers have also drawn on Hirschman's (1970) ideas to argue that resistance enables subordinates to 'voice' dissent (e.g. Graham, 1986). Hirschman argued that in conditions of organizational decline individuals are likely either to resign (exit) or try to change (voice) products or processes they find objectionable. He suggested that voice is less likely where exit is possible and more likely where loyalty is present and when exit opportunities are limited.[8]

Critical researchers have revealed that oppositional practices can take numerous forms (Jermier et al., 1994; Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999; Fleming & Spicer, 2003). These include strikes, 'working to rule', 'working the system', output restriction, 'whistleblowing' and sabotage (Edwards et al., 1995).[9] In exceptional cases, subordinates may even (seek to) depose leaders (Mole, 2004). As Prince (1998) outlines, there is a long history of outright rebellion, mutiny and spontaneous acts of 'follower' dissent even in the particularly disciplinary context of the military.

In relation to this growing literature, Mumby (2005) observes that many studies still dichotomize power and resistance through 'an implicit binary opposition that privileges either organizational control processes or employee resistance to such mechanisms' (p. 20). He suggests that many writers either adopt a 'reproductive model' that emphasizes management control but neglects resistance (e.g. Casey, 1995) or alternatively produce typologies of resistance but without locating these in their historical, discursive conditions and consequences (e.g. Hodson, 1995). Certainly, some labour process theorists have neglected resistance and/or treated control and resistance as rather separate processes (Burrell, 1988). Conversely, others have so tightly locked control and resistance together that it precludes other practices. So for example, from a leadership perspective we also need to know a great deal more about how, why and with what consequences followers conform, comply or remain committed to their organization and its leaders.

Post-structuralist perspectives have rarely considered leadership. Yet, it is argued here that this kind of approach opens up new ways of thinking about leader–follower relations. Post-structuralists assert that power/resistance are mutually implicated, co-constructed and interdependent processes that have multiple, ambiguous and contradictory meanings and consequences (Mumby, 2005). Viewing control and resistance as discursive, dialectical, contested and contradictory practices, they argue that the meanings of such practices are to

some extent open-ended, precarious, shifting and contingent. Central to this perspective is the idea of discourse, which presupposes that language constitutes our knowledge of the world. Emphasizing the dialectical interconnections between subject and object, this approach highlights 'the role of discourse in constructing what actors take to be the '"real" world' (Delbridge & Ezzamel, 2005: 607).

From a post-structuralist perspective, power is seen as both disciplinary and enabling while practices of control and resistance are viewed as mutually reinforcing and simultaneously linked, often in contradictory ways (Collinson, 1994). Challenging conventional notions of identity as a fixed and objective essence, post-structuralists also contend that selves are multiple, open, negotiable, shifting, ambiguous, insecure and potentially contradictory (Collinson, 2003). From this more dialectical perspective, the interplay of contradictions is understood to be an inescapable feature of social life and a basic driver of change (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

Post-structuralists also suggest that followers' resistance can take multiple forms, be shaped by various motives and be focused on diverse targets. Oppositional practices are understood as a way for employees to express discontent, to exercise a degree of control over work processes and/or to construct alternative, more positive identities to those prescribed by the organization (Jermier et al., 1994). Clearly, not all follower dissent is aimed specifically at leaders. The targets of dissent are likely to vary according to local conditions. Yet, even where resistance is only indirectly focused on leaders, such practices can produce significant workplace issues that leaders will have to address.

Conversely, many studies suggest that follower dissent does frequently focus directly on the leaders of organizations and particularly on the change programmes they seek to instigate.[10] This is especially the case when followers perceive leaders to be 'out of touch' with organizational realities and when they detect discrepancies between leaders' policies, discourses or practices. Where followers perceive such inconsistencies, they can become increasingly cynical about leaders (Fleming, 2005). In my own research over the past 25 years on various topics in diverse UK organizations, follower resistance has routinely emerged and has often been aimed specifically at leaders (broadly defined). While followers have complained about leaders being 'distant', their views of leaders have often been quite different to those leaders hold of themselves (Collinson, 2005a).

Research in a UK truck manufacturer, for example, demonstrated that a corporate culture campaign introduced by the new US senior management team to establish trust with the workforce had precisely the opposite effect (Collinson, 1992, 1994). Shopfloor workers dismissed senior management's

definition of the company as a team. Fuelled by perceived inconsistencies in leaders' practices and their own sense of job insecurity, manual workers created a counter-culture based on a deep-seated (dualistic) sense of 'us' and 'them'. Workers resisted by 'distancing' themselves, restricting output and treating work purely as a means of economic compensation. The company's leaders remained unaware of how their strategies produced contrary effects on the shopfloor. This study showed how control and resistance can be embedded within a complex, mutually reinforcing and dialectical vicious circle.

Post-structuralist studies suggest that dissent may be even more diverse than previously recognized and may be aimed at multiple audiences, such as the media (Real & Putnam, 2005). For example, employees sometimes express resistance towards customers (Van Maanen, 1991; Leidner, 1993). Those working outside organizations can also express dissent. NGOs like Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and animal rights organizations have successfully campaigned to change corporate policies. The campaign against Shell's plans to dispose of the obsolete Brent Spar platform by sinking it into the Atlantic Ocean illustrates how resistance can change leaders' practices. After a Europe-wide boycott of their petrol stations, Shell eventually dismantled the platform on land in Norway. Klein (2000) has explored global protests against the leadership of the World Bank, the IMF and the World Trade Organization as well as more specific campaigns against companies like Nike, Reebok, McDonald's and Pepsi.

A post-structuralist approach also recognizes that the oppositional 'voices' of these relatively independent 'followers' may be less constrained than those of employees who are inevitably more 'disciplined' by employment contracts. Conversely, this illustrates a less widely recognized dynamic that power may not only provoke, but also limit the resistance of employed followers. This in turn indicates that the distinction frequently drawn in the critical literature between dissent and consent (e.g. Noon & Blyton, 2002) may also be better understood as a dialectic (Mitchell, 1990).

Dissent/consent

A few post-structuralist writers suggest that power can simultaneously provoke and limit resistance. One of the reasons why opposition may be limited is because those who resist anticipate the disciplinary sanctions their actions may provoke and shape their actions accordingly. As Heifetz and Laurie (1997: 129) observe in their study of leadership, 'whistle-blowers, creative deviants and other such original voices routinely get smashed and

silenced in organizational life'. Where subordinates are particularly concerned to avoid sanctions, they may resist in disguised and partial ways that blur the boundaries between dissent and consent.

While followers might be highly critical of leaders' practices, they may decide to censor their views and camouflage their actions; a kind of resistance that 'covers its own tracks' (Scott, 1985). Subtle and routine subversions such as absenteeism (Edwards & Scullion, 1982), 'foot dragging' (Scott, 1990), 'disengagement' (Prasad & Prasad, 1998) and even irony and satire (Collinson, 2002) can be disguised and ambiguous, making them difficult for leaders to detect. Employees may even undermine leaders' change initiatives simply by doing nothing. Such inertia can result in leaders making all sorts of errors (Grint, 2005). Indeed in certain cases, even worker accommodation with managerial objectives can enable them to reassert control and conceal their resistance within the appearance of consent (Prasad & Prasad, 1998).

My own research suggests that disguised dissent is particularly likely to occur in contemporary organizations where surveillance has become increasingly pervasive and where hierarchical control is being reconfigured through performance targets. As a consequence of their increased awareness of being monitored, followers may engage in ambiguous oppositional practices that embody elements of both dissent and consent. In particular, they may conceal and manage knowledge and information.

Research on North Sea oil installations found that, despite extensive leadership commitment to safety, many offshore workers were either not reporting accidents and 'near misses' or else they sought to downplay the seriousness of particular incidents (Collinson, 1998, 1999). While company leaders talked proudly about the organization's 'learning culture', offshore workers complained about a 'blame culture' on the platforms. Believing that disclosure of accident-related information would have a detrimental impact on their appraisal and consequently pay and employment security, offshore workers felt compelled to conceal or downplay information about accidents, injuries and near misses. When a report based on these findings was presented to the company's senior managers, they expressed considerable surprise. Corporate leaders were unaware of followers' disguised practices or the contradictory impact of the assessment procedures that produced them.

Hence, recent post-structuralist research reveals that workplace power asymmetries can generate subtle forms of disguised dissent and that leaders' control strategies might not only produce, but also constrain resistance. Rather than being polarized extremes, dissent and consent may be inextricably linked within the same ambiguous practices. This focus on the power/resistance dialectic does not imply that followers will invariably engage in resistance (in a kind of mechanical or pre-determined way), or that

their opposition is necessarily effective. Control may indeed produce compliance, conformity and even consent while resistance can also have unintended and contradictory consequences. Equally, in certain circumstances managers may themselves be constrained by the very control systems they enact, and might even (subtly and indirectly) support employee resistance to control (Larson & Tompkins, 2005).

From a feminist post-structuralist perspective, Kondo (1990) criticizes the tendency in the critical literature to separate conformity or resistance into 'crisply distinct categories'. Arguing that there is no such thing as an entirely 'authentic' or 'pristine space of resistance' or of a 'true resister' (1990: 224), she contends that people 'consent, cope, and resist at different levels of consciousness at a single point in time' (1990: 224). Seemingly oppositional processes can turn out to be collusive, whilst apparently conformist practices may contain possibilities for change. Kondo's observations problematize the meaning of the term 'resistance' and warn us about the dangers of romanticizing followers' practices as well as those of leaders. While earlier radical writers might have been inclined to 'celebrate' workplace resistance, Kondo cautions against this tendency automatically to impute a subversive or emancipatory motive (or outcome) to resistance (see also Collinson, 2005b). Her analysis also highlights the importance of gender for understanding the control/resistance and consent/dissent dialectics of leadership.

Men/women

Post-structuralist gender studies illustrate how certain gendered, ethnic and class-based voices are routinely privileged in the workplace, whilst others are marginalized (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). They present some of the most effective accounts of the gendered, ambiguous and contradictory nature of control/resistance/consent dialectics. In a few cases, they also explicitly raise a number of important issues for theorizing leadership dialectics.

Since leaders and followers are inherently gendered beings, the dialectic between men and women, masculinity and femininity is an inescapable feature of leadership dynamics. Bowring (2004) emphasizes that the binary opposition between leaders and followers is reinforced by a gender dualism in which men are viewed as the universal, neutral subject and women as 'the other'. She argues that we need to move towards greater fluidity in leadership research by recognizing that people have multiple, interrelated and shifting identities.

Research on gender highlights the embedded-ness of masculine assumptions in organizational power relations, identities and practices. Writers

illustrate how managerial control is often sustained through the gendered segregation of jobs. Men remain dominant in positions of management, and masculinity continues to shape the models, styles, language, cultures, identities and practices of leadership (Collinson & Hearn, 1996). While notions of the heroic, 'tough' leader are saturated with masculinity, women continue to be largely excluded from senior positions (Sinclair, 1998). Male leaders' preoccupation with gender control can even be prioritized above (and be in conflict with) their commercial concerns (Collinson et al., 1990).

There is increasing recognition that the workplace is an important site for the reproduction of men's masculine power and status. Research suggests that masculinity can be embedded in formal organizational practices (e.g. recruitment and promotion) through to more informal, cultural dynamics (e.g. the social construction of skill). Central to men's valorization of 'work' is also a close identification with machinery and technology. Masculine dynamics at work can also be reproduced through men's sexuality and the sexual harassment of women.

Post-structuralist feminist research demonstrates that resistance practices can take gendered forms (e.g. Trethewey, 1997). Various studies describe how male-dominated shopfloor counter-cultures are typically characterized by masculine breadwinner identities, aggressive and highly sexualized forms of humour and the elevation of 'practical' manual work/engineering skills as a confirmation of working class manhood, independence and opposition to management (Collinson, 1992). Research on female-dominated workplaces suggests that women may also engage in aggressive, sexualized counter-cultures that resist managerial control strategies (Pringle, 1988).

In addition, gender studies disclose some of the contradictions of subordinate resistance. Cockburn (1983) illustrates how male-dominated shopfloor counter-cultures can elevate men and masculinity whilst subordinating women and femininity. Willis (1977) describes how working class 'lads' creatively constructed a counter-culture that celebrated masculinity and the so-called freedom and independence of manual work. Yet, this counter-culture then facilitated the lads' smooth transition into precisely the kind of shopfloor work that then subordinated them, possibly for the rest of their working lives. Kondo's (1990) study of gender relations in a Japanese factory also highlights certain paradoxes of resistance. While workers criticized management and questioned the dominant notion of the company as family, they simultaneously and paradoxically took pride in belonging to the organization. Kondo shows how, despite exposing managerial inconsistencies, the workers' counter-culture was also caught up in contradictions, simultaneously legitimizing as they challenged dominant organizational and gendered discourses.

These studies reveal how counter-cultures can symbolically invert dominant values and meanings of society and organization, but in ways that sometimes cut across emancipatory agendas, (unintentionally) reinforcing the status quo. Hence, while symbolic inversions of dominant dualisms may seem oppositional, a post-structuralist gender approach suggests that apparently oppositional practices may actually reinforce the very (dualistic) conditions that reproduce subordination. These studies also highlight important questions about the meaning of resistance, about who resists, how, why and when they do so, what strategies inform their practices and what outcomes occur.

A small number of recent feminist post-structuralist studies focus specifically on leadership issues. They suggest that it is not merely followers but also those (broadly) defined as occupying leadership positions who may engage in resistance. Sinclair (2005) focuses on the 'subversive leadership' of two Australian leaders, a woman Chief Commissioner of Police and an aboriginal school principal who achieved radical change in moribund systems. She observes that leadership has traditionally been constructed as an activity of 'brains without bodies'. Arguing that this 'mind/body dualism' privileges the former and neglects the latter, Sinclair demonstrates how these two leaders use their bodies (e.g. in relation to gender and race) and bodily performances (e.g. physical stature, features, stance, gestures and voice) to facilitate resistance and change. She concludes that bodies are central, yet ignored elements in the accomplishment of leadership.

In his study of US family firms, Jones (2005) argues that leaders are 'curiously subversive', particularly in their preference for the (moral) principle of kinship and rejection of the (amoral) market. Drawing on feminist economic theory, Jones argues that the very intellectual assumptions on which Cartesian dualisms rest reflect a particularly masculine way of thinking which needs to be reconsidered. He refers to one US family leader who was heavily critical of 'the runaway capitalism' and short-termism of Wall Street. This CEO viewed the family business commitment to the long term (e.g. through family inheritance) as a counter to the world of 'get rich quick' capital markets and publicly financed companies. Jones argues that because they operate outside 'the masculine arena of competitive capitalism', family firms 'resist participation in the symbolically potent space of "public" finance and capital markets' (2005: 276).

Similarly, Meyerson's (2001) research on 'tempered radicals' shows how senior managers can attempt to effect (gender) change whilst working within the organization. Tempered radicals are frequently women in senior positions who are committed to their organization, but also to a cause or ideology that is fundamentally at odds with the dominant workplace culture. Seeking to maintain a delicate balance between pursuing change, whilst also

avoiding marginalization, tempered radicals have to cope with various tensions and contradictions between potentially opposing 'personal' and 'professional' identities.

Ashcraft's (2005) research reveals how airline captains engaged in subversive practices in order to preserve their power and identity. Viewing the corporate enactment of a 'crew empowerment system' as a threat to their masculine authority and identity, pilots utilized numerous strategies to resist their loss of control, whilst also giving the appearance of supporting this change programme. These predominantly white professional men resisted the erosion of their authority by apparently consenting whilst actually resisting. Ashcraft's study provides a further illustration of how those in senior leadership positions can engage in (disguised) dissent.

Hence, operating within complex, ambiguous, shifting and contradictory workplace power relations, leaders typically retain a degree of discretion that can lead in certain circumstances to them resisting organizational imperatives.[11] Given their hierarchical position and its attendant ambiguities and contradictions, leaders' resistance is even more likely to be disguised and to blur distinctions between dissent and consent. That these workplace contradictions can result in leaders themselves engaging in resistance is an important implication of a post-structuralist, gendered and more dialectical approach to leadership dynamics.

Post-structuralist feminist studies also raise important questions about how to theorize the interrelations between multiple leadership dialectics. There remains a significant challenge to show how these multiple dialectics intersect and are embedded in one another. Such challenges become even more acute when we start to take account of other aspects of diversity like race and ethnicity as key aspects of leadership dialectics. To be sure, the three dialectics discussed here of power/resistance, consent/dissent and men/women should neither be reified and separated nor seen as exhaustive of the diverse dialectics in which leadership is situated. Rather, we need to re-think leadership dynamics in ways that can incorporate these and other dialectics, to explore how they may be mutually reinforcing and/or might cut across and be in tension with one another. Suffice it to say here, that post-structuralist feminism draws our attention to the multiplicity of leadership dialectics and the need to find new ways to theorize these ambiguous and potentially contradictory interrelations.

Conclusion

This article has sought to develop a more dialectical approach to leadership. Drawing on post-structuralist gender analysis, I discussed three dialectics

that have important implications for leadership studies: control/resistance, consent/dissent and men/women. These dialectics can facilitate new ways of thinking about the complex, shifting dynamics of leadership, raising a number of under-explored issues about what it may mean to be a 'leader' and a 'follower' in contemporary organizations.

First, a dialectical approach questions the prevailing view that leader-led relations are inherently consensual. The legacy of orthodox studies is a rather uncontested notion of leadership. Yet, in leader–follower relations there is always the potential for conflict and dissent. Leaders cannot predict or assume followers' motivations, obedience or loyalty. Given the asymmetrical nature of workplace power, it is hardly surprising that followers often do conform or comply, but from a leadership point of view we need to know a lot more about the conditions and consequences of such practices. For example, when leaders surround themselves with sycophants and stifle dialogue, producing 'destructive consent' (rather than 'constructive dissent') new ideas may well be blocked (Bratton et al., 2004).

Accordingly a dialectical approach suggests that studies need to acknowledge the deep-seated asymmetrical power relations of leadership dynamics. It recognizes that leaders exercise considerable control and that their power can also have contradictory outcomes which leaders either do not always understand or of which they are unaware (as indicated by the oil-rig case discussed earlier). From this perspective, control and resistance are viewed as mutually reinforcing, ambiguous, potentially contradictory processes. Followers' resistance is one such unintended outcome. In its various forms, dissent constitutes a crucially important feature of leadership dialectics, requiring detailed examination by researchers.

While followers can express opposition in numerous ways, they often seek to protect themselves from sanctions. Leadership studies tend to assume that it is primarily leaders who use impression management (e.g. Gardner & Avolio, 1998).[12] Yet, far from being passive 'followers' whose identities are shaped by charismatic leaders, employees at various hierarchical levels may manipulate information and identities to disguise their dissent.[13] Equally, while control can stimulate resistance, it may also discipline, shape and restrict the very opposition it has provoked. Disguised dissent incorporates self-protective practices that may conceal opposition within ambiguous practices that blur boundaries between resistance and consent.

Second, post-structuralist feminist analyses highlight the gendered nature of these ambiguous and contradictory leader/follower, power/resistance, and consent/dissent dialectics. In a few cases they also illustrate that even those in leadership positions may engage in resistance. In addition, they demonstrate that leadership dynamics are inescapably situated within, and reproduced through multiple dialectics. This in turn raises complex questions

about how we theorize the interrelations between multiple dialectics. It is quite possible for researchers in challenging one dualism to reproduce others. Just as resistance may paradoxically reproduce the very conditions that give rise to opposition, critical leadership studies may question certain aspects of dualism, but in ways that unintentionally reproduce other dichotomies and power asymmetries. For example, while some critical researchers challenge the leader–follower dualism, they simultaneously neglect important relations between power and resistance and/or gender and/or identity and so on. Accordingly, addressing the diversity of these dialectics as well as finding ways to theorize their interrelations constitutes a particularly pressing challenge for post-structuralist leadership studies.

Finally, a dialectical approach also raises questions about leaders' and followers' (gendered) identities. The notions of 'the leader' and 'the follower' are deeply embedded identities, especially in western societies. Yet, as this article has observed, there is a growing concern that such traditional dualisms and unitary identities are no longer sustainable. Leadership power relations and identities are increasingly recognized as being blurred, multiple, ambiguous and contradictory. Within distributed leadership programmes, for example, followers are encouraged to act as 'informal leaders'. Conversely, leaders in many contemporary organizations are subject to such pressures of accountability that they are themselves required to act as 'calculable followers'. For example, in the UK public sector those in senior positions are often tightly monitored, accountable to various external stakeholders and subjected to numerous performance targets and financial audits (Collinson & Collinson, 2005). Accordingly, there is a need for more research to examine these multiple, shifting, contradictory and ambiguous identities of 'leaders' and 'followers'. Exploring how these subjectivities are negotiated in practice within contemporary power relations should further enhance our understanding of leadership dialectics.

Notes

1 Giddens criticizes many social theories (especially Functionalism and Structuralism) for privileging structure and discounting individuals' motivations and 'transformative capacity', describing this deterministic tendency as 'a derogation of the subject'. Conversely, he is also critical of other social theories (like symbolic interaction and existential phenomenology) that under-estimate the impact of social structure and power dynamics on individual practices. Whilst Giddens's work has had considerable impact particularly in European social science, it has also been extensively critiqued. Suffice it to say here that Giddens addresses certain important dualisms (like individual/society), but has much less to say about others (e.g. male/female).

2 Although Functionalism remains highly influential in leadership studies, it has been heavily criticized in social theory for interpreting conflict purely in terms of its

contribution to social order and for aligning with the interests of the powerful (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). By also discounting agents' reasons for their actions, Functionalism, in Giddens's terms, tends to derogate the subject. Within leadership studies this is particularly evident in the recurrent neglect of followers.

3   'Enthusiastic beginners', 'disillusioned learners', 'reluctant contributors' and 'peak performers'.

4   Equally, Northhouse (2004) argues that by ignoring workplace power and inequalities, LMX theory appears to condone unfair and discriminatory practices.

5   There is a growing interest in 'critical approaches' to both organization and management studies (Fournier & Grey, 2000; Mingers, 2000). Broadly speaking, critical approaches share a concern to examine the reproduction of power asymmetries and inequalities and to explore possible forms of 'transformation' and 'emancipation'. But there is no unitary 'critical' position. Writers draw on a plurality of perspectives, ontologies and epistemologies from structuralism and neo-Marxism, to feminism, post-structuralism, post-colonial theory, environmentalism and psychoanalysis.

6   Hardy and Clegg (1999) demonstrate that views of power in organizations are themselves often polarized between functionalist and critical perspectives.

7   Given the neglect of power in mainstream leadership studies, it is hardly surprising that issues of conflict and resistance are rarely discussed. Thomas (2003) is one of the few writers on leadership who acknowledges the importance of resistance. He contends that even under conditions of close control supported by extreme sanctions, followers are still capable of 'effective' resistance.

8   Tending to neglect the asymmetrical workplace power dynamics that can both stimulate and constrain follower dissent, Hirschman's dualistic categories underestimate the costs and overestimate the possibilities for followers of both exit and voice. While he treats consumer and employee behaviour as synonymous, it is usually much easier for individuals to refuse to buy a product than it is to resign one's job. Assuming that managers will listen to employee voice and change their practices, Hirschman ignores the possibility of sanctions for those who risk dissent. Indeed where exit is possible, follower dissent may be more likely (rather than less as Hirschman contends).

9   In addition, other forms of follower agency could be characterized as more Machiavellian or unprincipled, including 'misbehaviour' (Vardi & Weitz, 2003), lying, deceit and subterfuge (Grover, 1997), aggression and violence (Neuman & Baron, 1998), retaliation (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997), and revenge (Bies et al., 1997).

10   These findings reflect recent research in the US where at least 50 percent of followers surveyed expressed deep dissatisfaction with their leaders (Fulop et al., 2004) and recent UK evidence suggesting much dissatisfaction with the quality of leadership inside organizations (CEML, 2002).

11   Given their access to corporate confidential information, it is unsurprising that many of those who act as 'whistleblowers' are also often leaders (La-Nuez & Jermier, 1994). The celebrated example of Stanley Adams is a case in point. Before resigning as world product manager for Hoffman-La-Roche he disclosed to the European Economic Community how the drug company used illicit and illegal market practices. Roche was fined $430,000 (Adams, 1984). Research suggests that whistleblowers often begin as conformists who only later feel compelled to resist the organization by taking their case outside its parameters (Rothschild & Miethe, 1994).

12   Although some studies of 'influence tactics' address subordinates' attempts to shape performance ratings (Wayne et al., 1997), the leader is, again, typically treated as the subject of the influence process with followers as its compliant object. As Fairhurst (2001: 389) comments, this approach is primarily a study of 'compliance gaining' with 'no parallel consideration of strategies for resisting another's influence attempts'. Although 'compliance resisting has not been explored in any systematic

way in the organizational influence literature' (2001: 392), Fairhurst predicts that such studies would reveal that followers' oppositional practices occur with some frequency in both hierarchical and lateral relationships.

13   Followers' disguised dissent demonstrates the continued relevance of Goffman's (1959) work for the critical analysis of the power/resistance dialectic. He argued that social interaction is like 'an information game' (1959: 20) in which individuals selectively disclose, exaggerate, conceal and/or understate information.

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