Philosophical positionings of leadership: What paradigms best serve critical leadership studies?

Abstract

Taking a definitive philosophical position early in the research stage is important in defining the role of the researcher, the appropriateness and nature of methods used, the level of interpretation during analysis, and the types of inferences that can be made from the empirical material. Early scholars of leadership took a clear positivist stance to studying leadership. This approach established a dichotomization between the leader and the follower, and a separation between the organizational actors and their environment, contending that the leader’s actions can have an isolated, quantifiable, causal reaction by followers. Critical leadership studies have set out to challenge a number of such assumption in mainstream leadership studies. Yet, as a growing body of literature, authors of critical leadership studies have not been explicit about the philosophical underpinnings of such research. This leaves the field vulnerable to criticism, and further poses limitations on the impact of emerging critical leadership studies. This article discusses the role of positivism, realism, critical realism, and interpretivism, and their respective relevance to critical leadership studies, ultimately concluding that paradigms are not mutually exclusive, and that critical leadership studies can draw on a number of paradigms, while being explicit about the choices thereof.

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Introduction

The importance of taking a definitive epistemological and ontological stance in the early stages of a research project have been discussed for many decades. The most prominent reasons being that the way the world we think the world is (ontology), and what we think can be known about it (epistemology; Fleetwood, 2005), have significant implications in defining the role of the researcher in the discovery process, the appropriateness and nature of methods used, the level of interpretation during analysis, and the types of inferences that can then be made from the empirical material (Pratt, 2009; Laughlin, 1995). Additionally, as no research is impartial (Tourish, 2013a), it is better to be clear about potential biases before presenting empirical detail (Laughlin, 1995).

A positivist perspective has been the dominant approach in the natural sciences (Burrell and Morgan, 1979), and is traditionally associated with quantitative methods. Early research in the social sciences followed this tradition. Likewise, leadership studies have traditionally drawn on a positivist approach (Collinson and Grint, 2005). In the current paper, I demonstrate the limitations of such a positioning for the field of (critical) leadership studies. In doing so, I demonstrate that predominant beliefs in critical leadership studies (e.g. social construction, leadership as a process, leader and follower are intertwined within situations and contexts, distributed leadership, etc.) reject fundamental assumptions that have been developed and continually reinforced by positivist research (e.g. simplistic dichotomizations of ‘leader-follower’, unidirectional top-down influence, etc.).

With critical leadership studies shifting how the field views leadership, a re-examination of ontological and epistemological positions is necessary. Given the
complexity of the social world “it is hardly possible that one paradigm could ever dominate” (Patomaki and Wight, 2000, p 226). In this paper I thus discuss the relevance of alternative positions, such as realism, critical realism, and interpretivism. In doing so, it is clear that such positions are not mutually exclusive or self-contained (Sayer, 1992), and that most studies do not fit neatly within any one particular paradigm. Despite the fact that multiple paradigms can underpin critical leadership studies, I maintain that researchers need to be explicit of what their position(s) ex anti.

Positivism

Positivists maintain that hypotheses can be verified or falsified. Researchers with a positivist position contend that there is “a reality out there to be studied, captured, and understood” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p 11). From this perspective, the researcher searches for a set of universal (causal) laws to explain the reality of what is being observed (Collis and Hussey, 2009; Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Of importance to researchers subscribing to this positioning are logical reasoning, precision, objectivity, and rigor, in an attempt to minimize subjectivity and intuitive interpretation (Collis and Hussey, 2009). A positivist perspective has been the dominant paradigm in the physical sciences, and was later adopted by early social science researchers. Such a position appeared relevant when leadership was viewed as a simplistic unidirectional cause and effect – a contention critical leadership studies had dismissed.

Alternatively, anti-positivists claim that social sciences cannot be studied by positivism, as social realities stress the importance of inter-subjective experiences of individuals in the creation of the social world whereby individuals create, modify, and
interpret the environment in which they find themselves (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Interpretivism emerged in response to criticisms that positivist approaches are unable to properly address phenomenon in the social sciences (Bryman and Bell, 2011; Collis and Hussey, 2009). In the social sciences, it seems erroneous to presume that organizational actors can be separated from the social context, reality is objective and singular, research is unbiased, and that it is possible to capture complex organizational phenomenon in a single measurement (Collis and Hussey, 2009; Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Positivist research has therefore been criticized for having strict methodological rules that are independent of the context of the particular research focus (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

Naïve Realism

In this sense, realism has often been posed as a (slightly relaxed) alternative to hard positivist positions. Realism is often categorized as either empirical/naïve realism or critical realism (Bryman, 2012). The presuppositions of a realist are relatively more conducive to qualitative research. In this sense, the interviewer and respondent are encouraged to engage in a fluid dialogue to generate observations and experiences relevant to the overarching research agenda (Smith and Elger, 2014). However, realists share with positivists a belief that the social sciences can still be studied through the same methodological approaches used in the natural sciences (Bryman, 2012; Laughlin, 1995). Furthermore, realists also claim that the external world exists “out there” external to our knowledge of it (Sayer, 1992; Burrell and Morgan, 1979). For this reason, realism and positivism are ontologically similar (della Porta and Keating, 2008; Fleetwood, 2005). In this respect, realists claim that participants are “born into” the external world, which has an existence of its own (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Such a position does not allow for
the discovery of a world that is socially constructed or influenced by multiple organizational actors, both of which I have contend as being important for the examination of leadership.

_Critical Realism_

Critical realism has been argued to be a middle range alternative. Middle range alternatives have been gaining grounds as an alternative to either the positivist or interpretivist ends of the spectrum. Middle range thinking recognizes that “generalizations about reality are possible, even though not guaranteed to exist, yet [maintain] that these will always be “skeletal” requiring empirical detail to make them meaningful” (Laughlin, 1995, p 81). Critical realists similarly believe an entity (e.g. material or social reality) can exist, although not guaranteed to exist, independent of the participant’s or researcher’s knowledge of it (Fleetwood, 2005).

Critical realists claim that the “world is composed not only of events, states of affairs, experiences, impressions, and discourses, but also of underlying structures, powers, and tendencies that exist” and that scientific explanation entails “providing an account of those structures, powers and tendencies that have contributed to, or facilitate, some already identified phenomenon of interest” (Patomaki and Wight, 2000, p 223). Hence, critical realists are able to recognize that social actions take place within the context of pre-existing social structures, whereby the actors make decisions within the circumstances directly encountered, but also that such circumstances and history would not exist without such actors (Smith and Elger, 2014). Therefore, from a critical realist perspective, “in contradistinction to a purely positivist perspective, the socially
The constructed nature of our knowledge about the world is acknowledged” (Tourish, 2013a, p 9). In addition, satisfying the presuppositions of positivists, knowledge is not totally arbitrary and certain claims about realities are said to provide better accounts of knowledge than others (Patomaki and Wight, 2000). Critical realism is therefore promising for leadership studies as it recognizes the context in which organizational actors perform. In recognizing the significance of meaning construction, critical realists share some common ground with interpretivists (Smith and Elger, 2004).

Realist and critical realist perspectives are theory-driven and insufficiently acknowledge the possibility of rival narratives or critical evaluation of the empirical material (Smith and Elger, 2014). In realist and critical realist interviews the researcher therefore remains the expert about the issues being investigated, with the intention of either falsify or refine theory (Smith and Elger, 2014). Theory-driven interviews do not allow for challenging core assumptions, an aspect of which this paper argues as being important, yet often overlooked, in leadership studies.

**Interpretivism**

Instead of attempting to measure causal laws, an interpretivist approach is based on the belief that social reality is not objective but highly subjective (Collis and Hussey, 2009). For an interpretist, reality therefore does not exist, but is the interpretation of the social actors (Aram and Salipante, 2003; Morgan, 1980) whereby social reality is highly subjective, not objective (Collis and Hussey, 2009). Interpretivists, unlike positivists, have an appreciation for subjectivity of social life (Aram and Salipante, 2003).

Similar to critical realists, the researcher interacts with the respondent because it is
not possible to separate the social world from either the researcher’s or the respondent’s interpretation of the social world. In this regard, most social science research, with leadership being no exception, requires some level of interpretivism.

An interpretive approach attempts to explore “the complexity of social phenomena with a view to gaining interpretive understanding” (Collis and Hussey, 2009, p 57), and with the positioning that “the social world is no more than the subjective constructions of individual human beings who ... may create and sustain a social world of intersubjectively shared meaning” (Burrell and Morgan, 1979, p 261). Interpretivists are then less preoccupied with finding an underlying truth; instead, interpretivists focus on the origins, processes, methods, and meanings in which organizational actors construct, and maintain a particular socially constructed sense of reality (Gephart, 2004; Aram and Salipante, 2003). This resonates well with critical leadership streams such as the concept of the romance of leadership (Meindl et al., 1985), which suggests that leadership is socially constructed in the minds of organizational actors.

When analyzing the leadership process, it is important to realize that organizations are made of up feeling and thinking human beings with their own interpretations of the world (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Therefore, any definitive truth would be impossible to find in an organizational setting. Following this argument, universal laws to the study of leadership are unlikely to be obtained or practically relevant. The leadership process cannot be defined solely on discrete causal influences, but more of a processual influence (Tourish, 2014). In response to this debate, Hunt and Dodge (2001) problematize leadership by asking: “Does leadership have generalizable law-like relationships waiting to be discovered or will the subjective assumptions of the observer drive what is found
and interpreted?” (2001, p 440-441).

Conclusions

Critical leadership studies are starting to view leadership as a socially constructed (Meindl et al., 1985), fluid process (Tourish, 2014), influenced by multiple actors (e.g. followership, distributed leadership; Shamir, 2007; Gronn, 2002), intertwined with contextual factors (Ford, 2010). This suggests that the complexity of leadership (Collinson, 2014) is best served by an interpretive approach. I similarly subscribe to a more recent critical perspective that argues “there is no essence of leadership divorced from particular social, organizational and temporal contexts” (Tourish, 2014, p 81). It can then be argued that positivist and naïve realist positions do best serve (critical) leadership studies.

Recognizing that organizations are co-created and co-defined by multiple actors (Tourish, 2013b), in this paper I take the stance that leadership involves social actors and to generalize or to claim that a definitive truth can be discovered would be a considerable leap of faith (Laughlin, 1995). While organizational studies has been overly preoccupied with defining strict boundaries among paradigms (mostly positivist orientations), I argue such positions are not mutually exclusive. Most research purported to be interpretivist, for example, has aspects of critical realism, with critical realism have some relevance to leadership studies. Most importantly, in this paper I demonstrated how a shift in how researchers view the leadership process requires an explicit discussion and recognition of ontological and epistemological shifts.
References


