Dan Kärreman and Mats Alvesson, The Ideology of Leadership

This paper engages with the role of ideology in scientific success. Our case in point is the peculiar success of transformational leadership research in leadership studies. We have chosen this case for several reasons. Leadership studies is considered to be an important field with a lot of research activity. For a long time it was mostly characterised by fragmentation, and contradictory and confusing empirical findings. For instance, Sashkin & 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’ (Andriesen and Drenth, 1984:514).

However, the last two decades have demonstrated a considerable consolidation of ideas, epitomised in the idea of transformational leadership. In this sense, advocates of transformational leadership (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 towards ‘management of meaning and a recognition of a greater range of research styles’ (p 289). Avolio et (2003:277) 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 & Bryman (2006:464) add that ’such a remark is unlikely to be heard nowadays’ and emphasize how ’exciting and productive field that leadership has become’.

Some of the optimism comes from the (questionable) idea that leadership is replacing management, both in theory and practice (Ford & Harding 2007, 2011). Most of it, though, comes from the amazing ‘success’ of transformational leadership (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 2008:31).

The first and major aim with this paper 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 lacking both descriptive and normative (practical) value. The move from the perception of failure to a sense of great success and optimism of academic leadership studies over a decade or so can be seen as a mystery in need for an explanation (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011).

How has this quantum leap 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 its success. To the contrary, we argue for the opposite: it is rather the bracketing of such qualities that have facilitated the success. A second aim, and overlapping theme, is thus to offer a critique of the ideological overtones of the most influential forms of contemporary leadership studies and argue for a more open-minded
view of leadership. Overall, our contribution is to develop a more sophisticated view of how ideology is built into research design and thus prestructures outcomes.

The focus of this paper is the academic leadership approaches that articulates appealing views of successful leadership. We pay particular attention to the case of transformational leadership although it is difficult, and not necessarily productive, to be very distinct here, as transformational leadership often overlap or are related to, for example, charismatic, authentic, and servant leadership (see also Bass & Steidlmeier 1999). Having said that, there are also diverse elements calling for specific attention, like hero-worship in TFL and transparency in authentic leadership. The overall majority of LS studies is quantitative (Bryman 2011; Mumford et al 2009). Large parts of the more interpretive and discursive literatures (Alvesson & Spicer 2011; Fairhurst 2007; Ladkin 2010), including ‘follower-centric’ approaches (Bligh 2011; Meindl 1995) as well as critical approaches (Alvesson & Sveningsson 2012; Collinson 2011, Harding et al 2011) deviate from this dominant body of work, but can hardly explain the ‘success’ of leadership as an academic field. This kind of work is occasionally mentioned but, for space reasons, not highlighted in this paper.

Ideology in organization and leadership studies

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, while 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 no stranger to organization studies, although the most recent peak of interest is more than two decades away (Alvesson 1987, Barley & Kunda 1992, Czarniawksa-Joerges 1988, Kunda 1992). The perhaps most well-known take on ideology in organization studies is provided by Barley & Kunda (1992). They take a particular interest in managerial ideology and define it as a stream of discourse that spreads assumption about how managers are about to direct organizations. They distinguish between normative and rational ideologue ies and argues that rhetoric about management practice is mainly driven by swings between updated versions of these basic ideologies. In their telling, these basic ideologies never go away. Rather they co-exist, although moving in or out of fashion.

Surprisingly, but also perhaps tellingly, ideology is rarely evoked in leadership studies. One exception is Holmberg & Strannegård (2006) who uses Barley & Kunda’s (1992) conceptual apparatus to discuss the implications of the so called ‘new economy’ for leadership practice. Another example can be found in Vangen & Huxham’s (2003) study on partnership managers in the public sector, who uses ideology as a concept for articulating idealized forms of collaboration. However, these are exceptions to the rule. We may think of leadership as an inherently ideological activity, at least in conversation with colleagues of a critical bent, but this idea is rarely, if ever, committed to serious study.

In this paper we use ideology to refer to the painting of a positive and appealing picture, legitimising 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 inde-
terminacy 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 favour of far more impressive and ego- and status-boosting activities. Managers caught in administrative and technical work in bureaucracies – where the deliveries and the maintenance of the corporate machinery calls for a lot of their efforts to function – can frame and fantasize about themselves, their work and their contribution through the leadership discourse (Alvesson & Sveningsson 2003; Sveningsson & Larsson 2006).

Rather than being a bastion against ideology, a so called scientific methodology may reproduce and reinforce it. We pay specific attention in this paper to how ideology imprints the research design and guides the production of for the researchers advocating TFL theory favorable data. We aim to show that behind the production of seemingly reliable results the ideological construction of data is at play. The next section of this paper 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.

Transformational leadership: what it is and why it is problematic

Transformational leadership (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. Transformational and charismatic leadership are for example seen by various authors 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, 2004:175).

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 while follower agency, as well as social conditions, do not matter much. The literature is full of strong claims about the grandiose accomplishments of TFL people:

‘After crafting an image of what the leaders want the organization to achieve, they charismatically communicate their vision to their followers … Moreover, transformational leaders connect followers’ self-concepts to the organization’s mission and vision
through idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration …’ (Hartnell & Wallumbwa 2011:232)

‘Transformational leaders construct cultures that foster effective management of change. They do this by defining and inculcating in organization members the belief that they can effect, if not control, their environment, including government regulation, market competition, and technological change’ (Sashkin 2004: 194).

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 & Sitkin (2013). Yukl (1999) points at ambiguity about underlying influence process, overemphasis on dyadic processes, ambiguity about transformational behaviours, insufficient specification of negative effects and heroic leadership bias. Van Knippenberg & Sitkin (2013) echo many of these points, summarizing their (devastating) 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)

Below we build upon and expand parts of the critique, making the case that the ‘success’ of TFL – and also leadership studies 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 that the combination of the key elements in TFL appears to be incoherent. 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 all go together? One would assume that a person being specialized in idealized influence – including efforts to get respected and admired (perhaps through media training and staged performances) - and doing a lot of it, would not necessary be particular skilled in or devoting much time with individualized consideration. Giving priority to communicating and persuading people about a specific and common vision can be incoherent with, participation and dialogue (Alvesson & Spicer 2012; Tourish 2014). To consider the unique, individual situation of one’s subordinates is quite time-demanding, and reduces time for other managerial and leadership work. This is not to argue that a manager or another leader can not combine the ingredients assembled in the TFL formula, but it is not easy and it appears unlikely that these four typically should go together in a leader’s behaviour 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 behaviours. 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 behaviours typically omitted from many TFL transformational behaviours lists. One could also point at other forms of people-oriented leadership creating a positive workplace atmosphere that may lead employees to positive affective involvement with the organization (Härtel & Ashkanasey 2011).

**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:

‘Transformational leaders direct employees’ attention to valued group and organizational outcomes … leaders’ behaviour and attention communicate to followers those behaviours that are appropriate and valued’ (Hartnell & Wallumbwa 2011:232).

The idea is that the TFL person is the centre 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 behaviour 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. Meindl 1995; Howell & Shamir 2005; Uhl-Bien & Pillai 2007) and some ethnographic work (e.g. Lundholm 2011; Smirich 1983). This is perhaps understandable since most studies on followers downplay the great impact of leaders.

**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. Less superficial studies often indicate the significance of organizational context. Roberts & Bradley (1988) for example showed how a senior manager in one context appeared as charismatic but that this quality disappeared when she got a new position and faced a very different organizational situation.

**Disregard for social dynamics.** A key characteristic such as ‘communicating a vision’ is typically seen as the TFL developing and communicating the ‘vision’, 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). The assumption that good leaders transform others may be misleading – good ‘leaders’ may be receptive to the views of others and may ‘allow’ them to be transformed by ‘followers’, making the conventional categories misleading.

**Tautology in description and explanation.** We also have the more fundamental problem of tautology where input and output are simply combined; where a behaviour, ability or practice is defined by the effects it creates. A person that is said to be into work that ‘Empowers and develops potential’, ‘Encourages critical and strategic thinking’ and is an ‘Inspira-
tional networker and promoter’ (Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe 2001) must per definition be better than one that dis-powers, does not develop (but hinders) potential, discourages critical and strategic thinking and is un-inspiring. Someone offering intellectual stimulation or inspirational motivation in a managerial/leadership position are surely better than someone that does not. Someone assessed to have ‘extraordinary’ qualities will probably not be assessed as having poor results. There is little point in arguing that a clearly better person accomplishes better results than someone inferior or that a behaviour assessed as good/successful leads to good /successful 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 honourable work – as professional or even as subordinate. Jackson & Parry (2008) believe that qualities like confidence, integrity, connection, resilience and aspiration ‘are particularly effective to promote effective leadership’ (p 17). According to Hunt (2004) research has found that leader traits include emotional maturity, integrity, cognitive ability and task-relevant knowledge. The list of factors being part of TFL by Alimo-Metcalfe & 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, e.g. discursive approaches (Fairhurst 2007; Kelly 2008), relational theory (Uhl-Bien 2006), follower-centred approaches (Meindl 1995; Uhl-Bien & Pillai 2007), dialogic, dialectical and critical understandings (Collinson 2005; 2011; Fryer 2011) as well as management of meaning/sense-making versions without the strong emphasis on the transformational impact of the leader (Smircich & Morgan 1982; Ladkin 2010). But also many ‘non-heroic’ views express a strong emphasis of leadership as ‘good-doing’ (e.g. Cunliffe & Eriksson 2011; Fairhurst 2007). Osipina and Sorensen (2006:188) suggest ‘that leadership happens when a community develops and uses, over time, shared agreements to create results that have collective value’. Uhl-Bien el al. (2007:298) frame ‘leadership as a complex, interactive dynamic from which adaptive outcomes (e.g. learning, innovation, and adaptability) emerge’.

The mentioned ‘alternative’ views are considered to be outside of mainstream TFL, charismatic and authentic leadership studies – highlighting the point that ideology de-contest rather than contradict and thus facilitates the marginalization of critique, rather than refuting it – and they should not divert attention from the key point of this paper: 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 contribute 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 rein-
forces 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 leadership studies: 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 in order to build and maintain a positive, celebrating, even glamorous view of organizational relations, naturalizing and freezing (asymmetrical) social relations. Leadership as ideology is framed in ways that are seductive and easy to sell. This brings about comfort and faith and the uncritical production and reproduction of leader-follower identities and an organizational reality based upon a certain social differentiation supporting elitism and a general legitimation of some parts of the social order.

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 the tendency to paint leadership in pink and gold rather than grey and black that is addressed, to manage and massage meaning, or as observed by Spoelstra & 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. 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 2009:331). All the good things go in hand and the not so good is marginalized and demonized as ‘toxic’, inauthentic leadership or not really leadership but something else, e.g. 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 2013:12)

**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 all the
difference (e.g. Collins 2001), but it also frames many academic leadership studies of today. The leader – the strong, powerful, superior individual – enters the situation and transforms worried, selfish, bewildered followers into self-confident, committed and focused people capable of doing what is expected from them.

Leadership is, within the leadership ideology, viewed as absolutely crucial, also in cases where the extreme hero-worshipping is avoided. It is, like health, good: ‘leadership is vital for healthy organizations’ (Western 2008:5). It is crucial for the functioning of institutions like firms, schools, hospitals, welfare agencies, the police, etc. We always are told things such as ‘a leader is responsible for direction, protection, orientation, managing conflict and shaping norms’ (Heifetz & Laurie 1994: 127). This may sound uncontroversial, but the statement implies that others are not responsible for, and in need of, direction, protection, orientation, etc. Perhaps ‘non-leaders’ often can take responsibility for and are not in need of direction, protection, etc. 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 et al 2002). More generally, non-leaders are often reduced to objects or recipients of the leader’s impressive acts.

‘organizational leaders instill their values, beliefs, and assumptions within an organization’ (Hartnell & Wallumbwa 2011:232)

Transformational leaders cause followers to become highly committed to the leader’s mission, to make significant personal sacrifices in the interest of the mission, and to perform above and beyond the call of duty … (Shamir et al 1993: 577, cited in Tourish & Pinnington 2002)

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 1994:78; see also Hartnell & Wallumbwa 2011, Schein 1985, Sashkin 2004 and others seeing leaders as heroic culture creators).

Although leadership studies have always been informed by a degree of hero mythology, the academic field was much more modest in this respect 30 years ago – at the time when the area was heavily plagued by lack of progress and self-doubt (as mentioned in the introduction to this paper). The trait and behaviour approaches, situational and contingency models that dominated then (Yukl 1981) have a considerably lower profile in terms of ideology and idolization, although some trait ideas have re-emerged in contemporary authentic, transformational and ‘level 5’ leadership ideas.

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 favourable identity constructions. Somehow leadership is supposed to introduce some of these heroic qualities into organizations. This ingredient is also pre-
sent 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 in order 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 followship. 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 is not only, as in case of TFL and other leadership celebrating approaches reach peak levels, but also is 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 glamour 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 loose ground contact – feedback may be weaker and narcissism may flourish, leading to a less well-functioning moral compass (Kets de Vries 1980).

Much leadership studies 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. Reassurance of the qualities of our elites – in a time full of moral uncertainty, doubt and worries leadership ideas offers us comfort. Leaders, at least those deserving to be seen as ‘real’ leaders, are not only powerful, they are powerful in a right, moral way. Effective leadership is for example married with integrity – as Palanski & Yammarino (2009) write, this is almost an axiom in leadership studies. 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, in-authentic, managers and so on (Burns 1978; Jackson & Parry 2008). Leaders and leadership – at least ‘true’ and not pseudo or in-authentic - are preserved for something pure and morally high-standing. The transformational leader ‘must incorporate moral values as a central core’ (Bass and Steidlmeier 1999).

Bass and Steidlmeier (1999), who according to Parry & Bryman (2006:453) have partly rectified the problem of insufficient attention to the negative aspects of TFL, distinguish between authentic and pseudo-transformational leadership. This is not a matter of behaviour 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, while the pseudo TFL highlights ‘our’ values against ‘their’ values, manufactures crises where there are none and develops submissive disciples (Bass and 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; Alvesson 2011a). In the simple authentic and pseudo-transformational leadership divide we find the good vs 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: 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 to 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’.

In ideas on ‘servant leadership’ (Greenleaf 1977) we find statements like ‘servant leadership requires that leaders lead followers for the followers’ own ultimate good’ (Sendjaya et al. 2008: 403) and that ‘the sine qua non of ‘servant leadership is followers’ holistic moral and ethical . . . development’ (p. 403). Servant leaders are said to put ‘followers first, organizations second, their own needs last’ (p. 403).

The good leader then is a figure capable of consistently scoring high on moral performance and avoiding all the vulnerabilities that characterize the large majority of the population and somehow avoiding the pressures of most organizations in order to primarily contribute to results or to keep the boss happy. One would also assume that managers putting their followers first would not last long as most senior managers or customers/clients would not necessarily agree about such a priority.

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 et al 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 saviour, in the form of the saint like leader. The underlying assumption here is that financial and environmental scandals would avoidable if only we had the (morally) right leaders at the top, doing servant leadership or something else laudable (Sendjaya et al
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 leadership studies

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 leadership studies. 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-wannabees, possible also saving us from the messiness, ambiguities 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 leadership studies are not, as is the case with management more generally, ideologically neutral is not an original point (Alvesson & Willmott 2012; Gemmill & Oakley 1992; Knights & Willmott 1992). As Trice & Beyer (1993) for example have argued, the ‘persistence of widespread beliefs in leaders and leadership has ideological overtones’ (p 254).

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 labelled ‘leaders’ rather than other people) and has some impact on how leadership behaviour is exercised – through publications and education.

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 behaviour and demands for being flexible in moral terms are salient (Jackall 1988; Watson 1994). Most leadership studies 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 being 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 forces the transformation-inclined manager to engage also or mainly in transactions are 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 leadership studies – 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-driven (Holmberg & Tyrstrup 2010; Lundholm 2011).

Of course, leadership theory has always had a rather strong ideological undertone, but compared to earlier, fairly modest versions – focusing on traits, style, situativeness, leader-member exchanges etc (Yukl 1981) – the now popular versions that have ‘saved’ leadership studies from its 70’s and 80’s 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 farreaching 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).

Of course, behind all the growth and faith in leadership – and a general relaxation of critical and scholarly orientation in some respects within the field – we find a Zeitgest favourable to overt ideology. There are social and economic macro changes, such as the switch of the economy of the Western world from an emphasis on production to the engineering of expectations and symbolism associated with service and knowledge work, being low on tangibility and high on ambiguity. Here high expectations and appealing images are targeted for persuasive efforts, giving a range of phenomena a flavor of grandiosity (Alvesson 2013).

Supervisors and managers are replaced by leaders, small business people with entrepreneurs, plans with strategies, personnel administration with human resource management, we are told. Many areas are regularly labelled as ‘strategic’. Boring ideas of supervision being about direction and support and contingencies are replaced by transformational authentic, servant, visionary leadership. Rather than situation-specific contingency theories, promises of generally superior approaches such as TFL and level 5 leadership (Collins 2001) are easier to create (naïve) enthusiasm for. The need for selling more and more appealing images of products, services and activities in a world in a stage of ‘post-affluence’ (50 years after the publication of the Affluent society, Galbraith 1958) is strong, and the large and expanding leadership industry is very much caught by this logic (Alvesson 2013). This is a key part of the macro context of the expansion and optimism of leadership, but we only briefly mention it here as our focus is on how leadership academics ‘internally’ have managed to move from the depressed state of the 1980’s to the current optimism about the field and its prospect.

Triggering the tautology trap: the role of empirical studies in TFL

Apart from these macro-conditions, we can see how the academic leadership studies 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, leadership studies follows its research logic, on the whole dominated by positivism (Antonakis et al 2004; Mumford et al 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 leadership studies 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 …) characterising the unit the manager (leader) is leading.

It is claimed that there is rather strong support for TFL, e.g. ’A rich stock of studies suggest that TFL can be a very effective form of leadership’ (Lindebaum & Cartwright 2010:1320) and that ’numerous studies’ have demonstrated the positive effects of TFL on various levels’ (Fu et al 2010:225). 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 behaviour. Responses to abstract formulations in questionnaires are usually remotely distanced from actions, events, feelings, relations, articulations of opinions, etc. emerging in every day 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 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 LMX show low or moderate correlation between manager and subordinate ratings of the relationship (Cogliser et al 2009; van Breukelen et al 2006) as do research on self-other ratings (Fleenor et al 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. We can understand the findings of Seltzer and Bass (1990) through compliance with norms for how we fill in questionnaires. 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, simple because language rules point to a strong correspondence between these statements. It appears odd to report that one feels proud of an manager heading an ineffective unit. The halo effect can be expected to be strong and it seems difficult to draw any conclusions beyond noting that this is probably at play here.

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'.

Popular leadership studies 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 the researcher studying the subject is compelled to conforming to the language convention mandated by the ideology in the first place. Sashkin (2004) for example summarizes House et al’s view that powerful leaders use their need for power: 'by means of exciting speech and actions, they motivate followers by arousing appropriate motives’ (p 180). Here we find 'exciting speech’ – presumably speech that some may find exciting (but this is an outcome, a response to the speech, not the speech itself, in most cases responses vary between and also within audiences). 'Arousing’ is addressed as both an act and an effect. 'Appropriate motives’ are motives that are identified as appropriate. If such 'appropriate motives’ are not triggered then the idea of the ‘powerful leader’ would fall to pieces but as the definition of this leader is about arousing appropriate motives all is fine. (The ‘Hitler problem’ of a powerful leader arousing unappropriate motives is bypassed.)

When leadership – or, and perhaps often better (less mystifying), influencing efforts – is in focus, the intention, the act and the outcome are often coupled and placed in the same box, e.g. intellectual stimulation or idealized influence. This involves a lot of ambiguity around the leader's behaviour and the underlying influencing processes (Yukl 1999). This seems to be an accepted, but problematic, convention in 'mainstream'/dominant leadership studies. 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 and claim that the empirical basis is quite weak and uncertain We agree with the more technically focused, ‘intra-paradigmatic’, assessment of Van Knippenberg & 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) amongst leadership researchers more recently? While we agree with Bryman that there are some positive theoretical developments, e.g. 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 leadership studies, based on the enthusiasm of much more heroic views such as transformational, charismatic and authentic leadership.

Indeed many alternative approaches profit from the popularity of ‘leadership’ and invoke the label without relating to what is conventionally understood as leadership. Empirically rich studies of the management of meaning have a tendency not to fully support TFL ideas, but rather tend to indicate difficulties in getting a high degree of acceptance of managers’ efforts to radically put imprints on the values and orientations of their subordinates (e.g.
Lundholm 2011; Pye 2005; Smircich 1983; Sveningsson & Larsson 2006). Organizations are full of people with diverse interests and perceptions, not necessarily that easily transformed into enthusiastic embracers of a vision invented and communicated by a leader (Bolden et al 2011). In order to understand the popularity of TFL and related approaches, we need to search outside the sphere of questionable theoretical qualities and weak empirical support relying mainly upon same-source inquiries involving tautologies and halo effects, producing significant correlations that do not say much beyond how people tend to respond to questionnaire formulations.

In their fundamental critique of TFL, Van Knippenberg & Sitkin (2013) show that the continued support for, indeed celebration of, this theory for so long fairly undisturbed by basic critique is contingent on referring to earlier, often modest, critique focusing on either conceptual problems or measurement problems, assuming that these difficulties could be fixed. TFL could then, it was assumed, develop, expand and ‘save’ leadership studies, also allowing other, equally intellectually problematic leadership approaches to flourish, riding on the success wave of TFL. However, in their analysis, Van Knippenberg & Sitkin make short shrift of both concepts and empirical work and suggests 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 rigour. TFL and, as this is the major approach and vehicle lifting the field of leadership studies more generally, have boomed very much due to its ideological appeal. Also many seemingly ‘progressive’ versions of leadership, emphasizing constructions, relations and ‘post-heroic’ elements draw upon and benefit from this broad ideological appeal. The seductive power of TFL, within leadership studies 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 1980’s 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 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.

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 what constitute ideas, empirical evidence, rigorous research protocols 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 paper 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 studied, that the field over a fairly short period moved from being 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 paper makes two contributions. The first contribution of the paper is to show the ideological nature through which leadership studies are carried out. This is not a new idea, but we update, deepen and specify understandings of this. A lot of leadership research is about the detailed investigation of specific theories, aiming to add to the literature. Few studies take a deep and close 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 make predictable ‘results’ almost guaranteed. A basic problem is that TFL, for example, ‘has been imbued with just such intangible qualities for which there are no appropriate methodological measurement tools’ (Lakomski 2005:8). Empirical documentation may serve as ‘rhetorical support in persuading others to adapt to a particular world view’ (Astley 1985, p 510). Many studies of TFL and similar approaches can be seen in this business.

The paper shows how appealing, but intellectually unimpressive images put strong imprints on influential versions of leadership theory. Through images, theories and vocabularies that give the impression of researchers paying tribute to ideology rather than researching organizations, TFL and other streams have a strong popular appeal. Spoelstra & 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, messiness and ambiguities of managerial work and profit-driven, bureaucratic and sometimes not so Sunday school like organizations are not supposed to ruin this cosy picture. This seriously affects the theoretical value of (key parts of) the leadership field: ideals like realism, rich description and accounting for complexity are sacrificed.

A second contribution concerns the ‘theoretical-methodological’ implications for leadership studies. The paper encourages 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, 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 behaviour, saying more about available leadership ideologies than specific leadership practices and relations.
To put it bluntly, to a significant degree leadership studies have followed a success formula where ideology + tautology + ignorance = popular leadership ideas. This is not to say that there is not promising and interesting work in leadership studies. We partly agree with Parry & Bryman (2006) about progress in variations and developments (attribution theory, relational leadership ideas, management of meaning, critical leadership studies). Still, there is a strong imprint of ideology and wishful thinking which is central in the move to recent ‘success’ in leadership studies. Also ‘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, although ideology-free studies are impossible, texts can be ‘ideologically’ disrupting and unruly rather than reinforcing comforting thought patterns. Eventually, 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.

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