EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Complexity has been described as ‘one of the fastest growing topics of research in the natural and social sciences’ (Morrison, 2011: 1). In this paper, I pay particular attention to its implications for leadership studies. Traditionally, leadership scholars have tended to ‘assume that the leader is at the centre of change, manoeuvring and motivating players and directing organizational response as issues arise’ (Marion and Uhl-Bien, 2011: 395). In particular, the dominant leadership theory of the past thirty years has been that of transformational leadership (Van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013).

Key assumptions embedded in this research include the notions that causal relationships can be identified between leader behaviours and organizational outcomes (Shamir et al, 1993); that formal leaders, such as CEOs, exercise a decisive influence on organizational processes (Hansen et al, 2010); that leadership behaviours deemed to be effective in one situation can be readily applied to many others (Amar et al, 2012); that influence mostly flows uni-directionally from powerful leaders to less powerful followers (House et al, 1999); and, that leadership is something residing in individuals rather than in wider social systems (De Rue, 2011). A primary task of leadership research is therefore to identify the traits and skills of individual leaders, so that organizations can seek to recruit as leaders those who possess the traits associated with success, and provide development opportunities for them to improve their use of such skills as the projection of charisma (e.g. Antonakis et al, 2011).
Such approaches have been criticised for exaggerating the extent to which leaders can control events (Gemmill and Oakley, 1992). They put the leader in the role of ‘the big star while everybody else comes through as followers who are directed, protected, helped in terms of avoiding conflict and beholden to the norms shaped by the leader’ (Alvesson, 2013: 171). The implicit metaphor is that of the organization as a machine, with its leader(s) as both engineer and driver, and its employees as the moving parts who respond more or less automatically to directives received from central command. Thus, leaders act to realise strategic plans, to achieve missions, to create visions, and to influence others in pursuit of said mission and visions. The leader is thereby separated off from the dynamic processes where missions and visions emerge, are contested, adapted, forgotten and transformed by the interactions of organizational actors. In line with systems theories, this exaggerates the extent to which organizations have clearly defined ‘boundaries’ that distinguish them from their ‘environments’ and within which causal processes occur (Czarniawska, 2013). All of these assumptions are disturbed by complexity theories of organization.

Complexity posits a view of organizations as ‘dynamic systems governed by nonlinear relationships’ (Thietart and Forgues, 1995: 22). The stress is on how such systems are inherently hard to predict, although prediction remains one of the key objectives of most positivist approaches to social science (Griffin et al, 1998; Anderson, 1999; Hernes, 2008). In contrast, complexity theories stress the nonlinear nature of organizational processes, the potentially infinite number of variables that are at play, and the porous boundaries of organizations which further confuses the challenge of delineating definite causal relationships within clearly defined social systems (Morel and Ramanujam, 1999). Although constraining and enabling structures exist, Osborn et al (2002: 823) point out that ‘Each time an agent interacts with another the agent is free to follow, ignore or slightly alter the institutional arrangement… Where the organization faces a dynamic and unpredictable environment, the
feedback is nonlinear. Small changes could have very large consequences (the butterfly effect) for subsequent operations.’ The result is uncertainty about such issues as how systems can behave collectively, when it is composed of unpredictable parts; how any system interacts with others; difficulty in delineating the environment in which it finds itself; and, in any attempt to describe how elements of the system change over time (Allen and Boulton, 2011). This perspective challenges leadership theories which stress the role of active, purposeful leaders guiding relatively compliant organizational actors to predetermined and predictable outcomes through the reliable use of particular techniques, since the social world may be more irrational, unpredictable and unresponsive than they are inclined to acknowledge.

**Explaining discontinuity and continuity in organizations**

A problem for such perspectives is to explain both discontinuities in organizational systems (randomness and uncertainty) and also what lends them continuity (pattern and stability). Organizations are complex but not chaotic. Certain norms of behaviour and rules endure as constraining and enabling influences on individual, group and organizational behaviour, to however limited an extent. As Tsoukas (1998: 292) expresses it, ‘unpredictability does not imply the absence of order… recurrence does not exclude novelty.’ Acknowledging this, complexity theorists have tended to describe complexity in terms of complex adaptive systems (Surie and Hazy, 2006; Panzar et al, 2007) that are the product of interacting parts that produce higher levels of organization (Juarrero, 2011). Complexity resides in the interaction of the parts, however so defined, rather than (as we suggest in this paper) as a property ingrained within the parts themselves.

Some leadership scholars have suggested that the cooperative dynamic created by shared goals and outlooks is what enables continuity as well as discontinuity in organizations
(e.g. Uhl-Bien, 2007). For example, Kupers (2001: 16) proposes that complex adaptive systems can be thought of as ‘a system of semi-independent agents that interact more or less randomly to influence each other’s behaviour. The agents must realise when their interactions have left them better or worse off according to a fitness criterion.’ This assumes that there is some objective criterion whereby performance and outcomes can be judged. But it also assumes that organizational actors will readily cohere around the criterion in question, since they share an overwhelming unitarist interest. In turn, this frequently leads to the suggestion that leaders should relinquish their preference for stability and predictability, and instead see themselves as ‘catalysts’ who facilitate the emergence of complex networks capable of offering complex solutions for complex problems (Juarrero, 2011). The stress is on how leadership unifies people into social groups, rather than the foregrounding of processes of domination and control (e.g. Hazy, 2011). Rather, we are back in a traditional leadership concept whereby powerful leaders set visions and strategy, and establish ethics and identities. Complexity, here, is conceived in such a way that conflict is under-stated. It is still assumed that such issues as ethics and identities can be unproblematically established for relatively compliant followers by more or less powerful leaders.

My contribution in this paper is to critically interrogate such assumptions. I argue that they are an attempt to draw too fixed a boundary around the notion of complexity. They over-rely on mechanical models of organizations to suggest that leaders have much greater agency than they do. Thus, I argue that the ‘parts’ of organisations (individuals, small groups and larger sub-systems) are themselves inherently complex phenomenon. Complexity resides at the micro as well as meso-level of organizational life. Leadership theories therefore need to see leadership as a process rather than conflate it with the actions of individual formal leaders, and explore more critically how leaders are socially constructed by myriad organizational actors for finite amounts of time in constrained social situations.
This process perspective is also enhanced by the explicit utilization of a communication lens, which illustrates how such leadership processes are communicatively accomplished through the discursive interactions of various participants. Such an approach enables us to put more emphasis on how the interests of actors are differentiated as well as integrated. They heighten our appreciation of the productive and creative role of conflict and resistance in leadership dynamics. Complexity leadership theorists have understated these issues in favour of stressing how leaders can articulate universal interests to ensure organizational coherence, while still ‘enabling’ complexity to flourish in a unitarist organizational interest. This reflects the continued influence of mechanistic models which depict organizations as machines rather than social processes that, by definition, are never fully accomplished. By rethinking leadership as a communicative process that is distinct from the existence of formal organizational leaders our understanding of complexity leadership and organizations more widely is significantly enhanced. It helps us to understand more fully how pattern and order emerge over time, in a given context and for finite periods. I therefore outline some key elements of processual communication theory from a leadership perspective, and then utilise them to problematize complexity leadership theory and suggest some modifications to its core tenets.