Followers in Leadership Theory: Fiction, Fantasy and Illusion

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Abstract

This paper introduces a critical approach to follower/ship studies through exploring the unarticulated but highly influential implicit academic theory of follower/ship that informs dominant paradigms of leadership. Research into follower/ship is developing apace but the field lacks a critical account. Such an absence of critical voice renders researchers unaware of the performative effect of their studies, that is, how their studies actively constitute that of which they speak. So, do studies of followers (and leaders, it follows) constitute that very actuality they are studying? Analysis of seminal papers in three major categories of leadership, *leader-centric, multiple leadership and leader-centred,* shows that leadership theory is underpinned by the desire for power and control over the potentially dangerous masses, now labelled 'followers'. The etiolated perspective of the people called 'followers' undermines leadership theory, and we recommend the wisdom of leaving follower/ship unexplored.

Key words: Leadership, followers, critical leadership studies, power, transformational, distributed, servant leadership, implicit follower theory

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Introduction

The vast body of literature on leadership has until recently largely ignored followers, an omission that has now been recognised, leading to an emergent body of work, follower/ship studies. However, it would be wrong to suggest that leadership studies has been awaiting follower/ship studies' provision of its missing half. Rather, leadership studies is built on an implicit academic theory of followership, one that continues to inform the vast bulk of work in leadership studies. *Implicit followership theory* is defined as 'individuals' personal assumptions about the traits and behaviors that characterize followers' (Sy, 2010:74). These are 'lay' or 'naïve' theories, but are believed to influence relationships in practice, because leaders are understood to compare followers to the fantasy of an ideal(ised) follower that exists only in their minds, and judge the follower against this impossible model, blinding themselves to how that person actually behaves. Our aim in this paper is to disinter the implicit academic theory of follower/ship through a close reading of seminal texts in three influential theories of leadership: transformational, distributed, and servant leadership. This leads us to argue that leadership theory's unexamined core undoes the leadership theory that is built around it, and to conclude that this is a good thing. We thus bring a critical approach to the emerging field of follower/ship studies that it has previously lacked.

Followers and followership: an absent presence

A huge number of publications on leadership appear each year. Indeed, Grint (2005) identified (in Late October 2003) 14,139 items relating to 'Leadership' on Amazon.co.uk for sale and just two months later this had risen to 14,610. On this basis, he predicted 100,000 items by 2015. Whilst this huge figure was difficult to conceive at the time, the reality was grossly under-estimated, as a similar search conducted by us on 1st October 2015 actually listed 146,704 results – thus showing more than a tenfold increase in the twelve-year period. This vast body of literature pays considerable attention to leadership styles, behaviours, competences and mind-sets, and to how leaders look, what they believe in, their identities, and so on. This research is predominantly located in a positivist tradition in which quantitative research methods are preferred (Bryman, 2004; Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007). Followers appear in these studies, if they do, only as part of the very large sample populations that are asked to complete questionnaires in which they rate leader influence and effectiveness according to a list of pre-determined characteristics. That is, they participate as the passive and faceless 'other' to the leader (Bligh, 2011; Ciulla, 1998; Ford and Collinson, 2009; Jackson and Parry, 2011). While some, such as Hollander (1992; 1998) contend that this form of leadership research is replete with an understanding of followers, others argue that it demonstrates a general lack of interest; indeed Uhl-Bien and Pillai (2007) argue that the term 'follower' has almost pejorative implications, with followers seen as passive, helpless, conforming individuals, with little or no drive or aspiration until they are persuaded out of their sloth by the leader, and therefore, it would seem, lacking any merit as research subjects.

But a follower-centric approach to leadership studies is now emerging (Shamir et al, 2007) and a body of theory is developing that, like leadership studies more generally, is located in a unitarist perspective that assumes leaders and followers serve a common purpose (Challeff, 1998), and thus should morally elevate each other (Ciulla, 1998). One of the earliest contributors to follower/ship studies was Burns (1978) who argued leaders could improve their relations with followers through developing 'a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents' (Burns, 1978: 4). The major influence on the field is Meindl (1995) who critiqued the tendency of leadership scholars to place their faith in the heroic, transcendental leader who could achieve almost impossible organizational feats irrespective of contextual, social or environmental factors. He argued that this 'romance of leadership' ignored one half of the leader/follower dyad, that is, 'Leadership is considered to have emerged when followers construct their experiences in terms of leadership concepts' (Meindl, 1995:332). His work opened the door to a body of research that argues (a) charisma does not emanate from a leader but emerges in the minds of followers who *see* the leader as charismatic; (b) it is interactions between followers that influence how a leader is regarded, and (c) context is important. This follower-centred approach (Shamir et al, 2007) presumes a symbiotic relationship between leaders and followers that is held together by trust and loyalty and rooted in the leader's commitment to ethical standards.

Meindl's paper (1995) led to the rise of largely quantitative studies by leadership psychologists, and several taxonomies of follower/ship have been developed that summarise this research. Bligh and Knowles (2008) for example, identified three broad

categories: (i) follower attributes that are pertinent to the leadership process, including

such constructs as perceptions, identity, affect, motivations and values; (ii) leader-

follower *relations* including the active role played by followers on the leadership

dynamic; and (iii) *follower outcomes* of leadership behaviour, including performance,

creativity or other dependent variables and effects that leaders have on followers. In the

same year, Howell and Mendez (2008) identified three role orientations of followership:

interactive (in which followers complement and support the leader); independent (in

which there may be followers who substitute for leaders in contexts of highly skilled and

knowledgeable followers) and shifting (which reflects alternating leader/follower roles).

Stech (2008) meanwhile outlined another three approaches to the study of leaders and

followers: (i) the traditional approach of the leader/follower paradigm which focuses on

the leader as hero or exemplar; (ii) the leader-follower position paradigm which

emphasizes the formal, hierarchical and bureaucratic organization in which leaders are

defined by their position in the hierarchy; and (iii) the leader-follower state in which

leadership and followership are states or conditions that can be occupied at various times

by different people. In their analysis of the literature on followership, Crossman and

Crossman's (2011: 484) slightly broader categorization identifies four broad overlapping

classifications of leadership and followership literature within a fluid continuum: (i)

individualized or leader-centric theories that ignore the significance of followers in the

leadership context; (ii) leader-centred theories which rely on follower perspectives; (iii)

multiple leadership which encompasses what is often referred to as shared, distributed or

collective leadership and which privileges the role of followers, and (iv) the followership

literature *per se*. Their paper focuses on explorations of leadership and followership in

relation to each other, identifying that a "comprehensive review of followership literature (Baker, 2007: 56) made use of Heller and van Til's (1982) summation that: 'leadership and followership are best seen as roles in relation', a view which is also endorsed by Kelley (1998). Hollander and Webb (1955), too, provided an early definition of followership but drew attention to the difficulty of defining the term given that it might vary depending upon whether followership was approached from the perspective of a leader or a follower" (Crossman and Crossman, 2011, p.483). Our approach is located within the recently labelled Critical Leadership Studies perspectives, which has been defined as 'the broad, diverse and heterogeneous perspectives that share a concern to critique the power relations and identity constructions through which leadership dynamics are often produced, frequently rationalised, sometimes resisted and occasionally transformed' (Collinson, 2011, p.181). We seek to develop a critique that draws on the identity constructions through which leadership (and followership) are brought into being.

There is thus increasing interest in followers and followership (see, for a discussion, Riggio, Chaleff and Lipman-Blumen, 2008; and Shamir et al's [2007] tribute to Meindl). A review of the research that has been influenced by Meindl's ideas by Bligh, Kohles and Pillai (2011) concludes that these studies challenge some of the basic assumptions of leadership theory. That is, firstly, charisma is attributed *post hoc* to leaders after success has been achieved; and secondly, merely being given the title of leader persuades followers to perceive that person differently. That is, 'followers' psychological readiness to comprehend events in terms of leadership may play an important role' in determining

how leaders are regarded   (Bligh, Kohles and Pillai, 2011, p. 1067) and indeed they

suggest it is now established that followers play 'an active role in the leadership process'

(1068).

Such a conclusion accounts for the development of a theory of the social construction of

followership. This is defined by Shondrik and Lord (2010:9), as:

'the emergence of a leadership relationship that occurs when (1) a potential leader

perceives or infers a group of individuals to be his or her followers or (2) when

individuals in a group begin to view themselves as members of a larger group led

by a leader. Rather than being confined to the role of a passive participant under

the control of a leader, followers are able to actively construct and shape the

leader's perceptions and their self-perceptions through interactions with the leader

and each other'.

Meindl's influence is clear here. His 1995 paper's title was 'The romance of leadership as

a follower-centric theory: A social constructionist approach'. Carsten et al's (2010) study

is perhaps exemplary of the research stimulated by Meindl's introduction of a social

constructionist perspective on followership. Carsten et al explored individual

'followership schemas' or 'generalised knowledge structures that develop over time

through socialization and interaction with stimuli relative to leadership and followership'

(p. 546). They identified three categories of followers: passive, active and proactive.

Passive followers emphasised deference and obedience, active followers emphasise

partnership, while proactive followers emphasise constructive challenge and voice. Only passive followers appeared to feel comfortable working with authoritarian leaders.

However, the critical perspective that often informs social constructionist accounts (Gergen, 1985; 1991; 1998; 1999: Shotter, 1991; Shotter and Gergen, 1989) is largely absent from the social construction of followership, which ignores power, an issue we will return to below. Such an absence of critical writing is also noted in another area of followership studies: that of implicit leadership and followership theories (see Bligh, Kohles and Pillai, 2011, for a discussion). *Implicit followership theory* is defined as 'individuals' personal assumptions about the traits and behaviors that characterize followers' (Sy, 2010:74). These are 'lay' or 'naïve' theories, but are believed to influence relationships in practice, because leaders are understood to compare followers to an ideal(ised) follower that exists in their minds, and treat the follower accordingly, regardless of how that person actually behaves. *Implicit leadership theory* explores leaders' and followers' unspoken assumptions about leadership. Studies into these unspoken, unarticulated theories of what sort of person a leader or follower *is* are not very complimentary to followers. De Vries and van Gelder (2005), for example, point out that leaders are generally valorised but followers are demonised. Such demonization of followers can be illustrated from the change management literature in which some theorists write about resistance to change in terms that characterise followers as having a lack of psychological resilience, preference for low levels of stimulation and novelty, short-term thinking, cognitive rigidity and reluctance to give up old habits (Oreg, 2003). Such a stance implies that those who do not like change are suffering from personal shortcomings, rather than their perhaps having the wisdom and knowledge to anticipate

some problems that changes might cause. It further infers that all wisdom and receptivity to change resides in the leader whose qualities, by implication, include resilience, flexibility, innovative thinking, and high levels of stimulation. These implicit theories are understood to influence interactions in organizations, often negatively (Sy, 2010), although others see them as constituting 'a dynamic leadership process' in which leadership is understood as 'an ongoing, dynamic, two-way exchange between leaders and followers that is structured by both parties' implicit theories' (Shondrik, Dinh and Lord, 2010:1). However, there is little or no reflexivity in this work, so the researchers do not explore their own implicit theories, and there has been no attempt to explore the implicit *academic* followership theory that informs research and theorising in this field. The task of this paper is to identify the implicit followership theory that informs academic debate.

In sum, research into followership is developing fast, but the field lacks a critical account. This absence renders researchers unaware of the performative effect of their studies. This goes beyond the semantic issue that bedevils followership studies identified by Bligh (2011:432), who suggests that the word 'follower' has connotations of subordination and passivity, and ignores possibilities for understanding people identified as followers as active, self-motivated, influential and involved. Bligh argues that alternative words (participants, contributors, members, associates, collaborators) are perhaps needed. We go further. A performative understanding of language (Butler, 1990, 1993) whereby discourses are understood as constituting that of which they speak, suggests that by asking study participants to think or talk about themselves as followers (or leaders),

researchers are actively positioning participants within an identity category or subject position that limits what they can do or say: they have to constitute themselves as followers in order to conform with the requirements of the research study. This leads to the question of whether research into followers/ship actually constitutes that which it is exploring. Does 'the follower' exist as a self-identity until someone is asked to account for themselves as a follower? That is, do studies of followers (and leaders, it follows) constitute that very actuality they are studying?

These questions are pertinent to Collinson's (2006) poststructuralist questioning of 'the notions of voluntary and freely chosen followership that inform much thinking on follower identity and followership more generally' (p.182). He suggests that current theories of followers and followership ignore the conflicts, ambiguities and tensions that may be involved in being called a follower, and are unaware of the multiple ways in which it is possible to enact followership and constitute the identity of follower. Although Collinson (2006) initially pursues the seemingly common practice of identifying three follower identities, he rejects that practice by suggesting that individuals move through all three perspectives of: conformist (conforming to a blueprint of the 'ideal' follower), resistant (refusing to conform to managerial and leadership demands, or undermining them), and dramaturgical (using impression management to give the appearance of being a good follower through various tactics). 'Followers' can be all of these, sometimes in the same instant. Contrast this with the one-dimensional follower in Kelley's (1992) concept of exemplary followers, that is, followers who are active, independent and critical thinkers. These followers, he argued, tend to have strong values and to be the *courageous*

conscience of the organization. Collinson (2006) would suggest that that would be but one aspect of their on-going performative accomplishment of the workplace self.

We add this possibility of leadership research constituting that which it is exploring to Bligh's (2011: 432) list of the major gaps in understanding about leadership/followership: there is difficulty in defining leadership and followers/followership; little is known about contextual and cultural influences on leadership and followership; researchers have been unable to see leadership as anything but romantic, with followers therefore the subordinated and inferior party; and the discipline has barely begun to explore the ethical implications of leader-follower processes.

The critical leadership literature, in which we locate this paper, has as yet contributed little assessment of the turn to followership. Exceptions include challenges to the asymmetrical power relationships and identity constructions through which leadership dynamics are reproduced (Collinson, 2011; Ford, Harding and Learmonth, 2008; Harding, 2015), but also a warning of the dangers of replacing leader-centrism with follower-centrism or keeping the dualism in place but giving primacy to followers (Bligh, 2011: 429; Collinson, 2006; 2011; Ford, Harding and Learmonth, 2008; Uhl-Bien and Pillai, 2007). But Meindl (1995: 340) was mindful of the need to 'remediate leadership studies by disentangling, decoupling, or separating leadership from its origins: objectifying it - cleaning it up, so to speak - so that researchers can better work with it as a scientific construct, independent of its lay meanings'. We share his belief in the need to interrogate the origins of leadership theory, or rather the assumptions that have informed thinking about leadership since the early days of trait theory (Ford, 2005), even as we reject his desire to make followership more scientific. Our argument is that the now-emerging field

of follower/ship studies is informed by its unexamined and uncritical heritage, and so it threatens to repeat the mistakes of the first century of leadership theory.

Our aim in this paper is to identify the unarticulated but highly influential *implicit academic theory of follower/ship* that informs dominant paradigms of leadership. We thus introduce a critical approach to follower/ship studies. We analyze seminal papers in each of the three major categories of leadership theory identified by Crossman and Crossman's (2011) review of the leadership and followership literature. From leader-centric theories we explore Bass and Steidlmeier's seminal account of Ethics, Character and Authentic Transformational Leadership Behavior (1999); from the multiple leadership category we analyse Gronn's (2002) paper on distributed leadership; and from leader-centred theories that (apparently) rely on follower perspectives we explore Greenleaf's (1970/1991) essay on servant leadership.

Methodology

Our methodology is influenced by Calas and Smircich's (1991) seminal reading of major management texts, in that we also adhere to traditional academic practice of close reading of texts to identify the verity of their arguments and their unarticulated assumptions. We drew on Brown's (2004) method of analyzing documents. This involves a close reading of each text to identify and code interesting features, informed by a specifically deconstructionist perspective that explores how meaning is constituted and undermined.

The 'interesting feature' we specifically sought was the understanding of the scene of encounter (Butler, 1997) between leader and follower: how is each party, leader and

follower, described, how is the stage set for the encounter, and what is understood to go

on in this encounter? Following Butler (2000) we asked:

1.   what acts of recognition are taking place?

2.   what are the norms and ethical frameworks in which these acts of recognition

     take place?

3.   what identities can emerge through these acts of recognition?

This gave insights into the authors' conceptions of leaders and followers – the imaginary

subjects around which their theories are built.

The close reading of the texts suggested that each had a major *fracture point*, or what

Critchley (2012:22) referring to Althusser calls 'décalages, displacements or dislocations'.

These are contradictions in meaning, or arguments whose sense is questionable. We then

analysed the ways in which each fracture point undermines the theory of leadership being

propounded.

We turn now to the first of the three seminal texts.

 1. **Authentic Transformational Leadership**

Bass and Steidlmeier's (1999) seminal account of Ethics, Character and Authentic

Transformational Leadership Behavior (1999), builds on Bass's earlier and highly

influential theory of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985) and sets the scene for the

emergence of authentic leadership theory (for critiques see Ford and Harding, 2011;

Ladkin and Spiller, 2013). Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) set the stage for the encounter as

follows. They are advocating authentic transformational leadership as an ethical

organizational identity. Authentic transformational leaders (ATL) have moral characters,

values embedded in their vision that are ethically legitimate, and they lead followers in

moral processes and actions. The ATL uses influence processes, while followers use

empowerment processes to engage in 'dynamic self-transformation' (183). Followers

wish to emulate their leaders because of charisma or idealised influence, the inspirational

motivation and intellectual stimulation provided by the ATL, and individualized

consideration that they provide (184). They suggest that (186):

'it is a matter of modern Western moral concern that ideals not be imposed, that

behavior not be coerced, and that the search for truth not be stifled. Ethical norms and

behavioral ideals should not be imposed but freely embraced. Motivation should not

be reduced to coercion but grow out of authentic inner commitment. Questioning and

creativity should be encouraged. Followers should not be mere means to self-

satisfying ends for the leader but should be treated as ends in themselves. We label as

inauthentic or 'pseudo' that kind of transformational leadership that tramples upon

those concerns'.

Both leaders and led are transformed by the relationship (186), although the distinction

between authentic and pseudo-transformational leadership rests on the presence or

absence of moral foundations (186). The following table 1 summarises the distinctions

between authentic and pseudo- transformational leadership:

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

In this theory, the follower must not only agree that the ATL is a highly moral person, but must learn to model themselves on the ATL. The presumption of ATL theory is that the follower will do so. If this is the case, then we suggest that the follower will eventually realise s/he is as good as the leader. If so, then s/he is no longer a follower, but a co-leader. When this happens the leader will have no followers and therefore, without anyone to lead, cannot be a leader. Implicit in this theory therefore is the establishment of a dynamic in which each follower becomes a leader who eventually ceases to be a leader because of his/her success in nurturing their followers (the first fracture point). The successful ATL therefore ensures their own undoing.

However, the acknowledged difficulties of distinguishing between authentic and pseudo-authentic leadership cannot be ignored, and this indeed is a second, and perhaps more fundamental, fracture point within this theory. Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) point out the difficulties of distinguishing between the two, because the pseudo-ATL wears a mask that, to the outward world, gives the impression of true authenticity. The leader is thus on the horns of a dilemma: how can s/he be sure that the ex-follower is authentically transformational and not pseudo-ATL? If the ATL promotes the follower to leader, and the successor is truly ATL then the organization will survive. But if the ATL is mistaken and promotes someone who is clever enough to disguise their lack of authenticity, then the organization will be put in jeopardy. The ATL cannot therefore risk handing over their place to a follower unless they can be absolutely sure of the follower's authenticity. Proof is always going to be extremely difficult to provide, so the follower will have to strive harder and harder and harder to prove their goodness. The demand to be authentically transformational is thus an ethical norm, but no-one can quite know who is

truly authentically transformational and who is pseudo. Where is then the dividing line between being 'truly' authentic and striving to be truly authentic?

Further, Nietzsche, Sartre, Freud and other major philosophers all see bad conscience as foundational within the human psyche (Butler, 2000). This is what makes authentic transformational leadership, as outlined by Bass and Steidlmeier, impossible. The ATL has no weaknesses. But to be authentic requires that one examines one's self and identifies one's weaknesses and failings, and all the things that cause the terrible internal, mocking and admonitory voice. If one knows that one is always struggling to be good, or decent, or efficient, or whatever, then one must acknowledge that to pretend to the moral high ground is to be a pseudo-ATL. The pseudo-ATL is therefore an inevitable aspect of the truly authentic transformational leader. One cannot ask one's followers to emulate one, because they would have to emulate one's weaknesses as well as one's strengths. To be authentic requires that one refuses to be a role model for one's followers, and refuses to ask them for recognition of the self as ATL. The distinction between ATL and pseudo-ATL thus disappears: through striving to attain the norm the self must compromise aspects of the self, hiding its weaknesses. Bass and Steidlmeier's theory sets up the pseudo-ATL and the ATL as opposites, so that if one is not authentically transformational then one must be pseudo-ATL. There is no half-way house, no position from which one can examine one's self in one's full glory as a complex, riven human being, with weaknesses as well as strengths. Table 2 below explores this further:

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

To become an authentic transformational leader therefore requires that one acknowledges that it is impossible to be an authentic transformational leader. The identity is destroyed by its own foundations. What there is instead is a struggling human subject trying to exist in complex, demanding work environments (Harding, 2015). D.W.Winnicott (1953) reduced the pressure on women to be perfect mothers: just be a 'good enough' mother. The implication of this reading for training and developing people as leaders is: be a 'good enough' leader. To aspire to be perfect, authentic, charismatic, always successful, always inspirational, is to aspire for the unattainable.

The 'follower' in this theory is therefore: an empty vessel waiting to be filled with the ATL's qualities; a threat to the ATL as s/he comes to take over the ATL's role, someone who can be duped by a pseudo-ATL, and someone who may themselves become a pseudo-ATL. This follower is both vitally necessary to ATL, but also a danger to it. To avoid becoming a danger, we suggest, the follower in this theory must remain an empty vessel, an object waiting to be vitalized by the electrical spark of the leader's authenticity, but never actually brought to life, because if it were enlivened it would undermine the very theory that is supposed to inspire it. But that empty vessel can also undermine the theory at its roots, as because to admit of 'the follower' as a complex subject who might respond in a variety of ways to the leader's initiatives would be to negate the theory *ab initio*.

2. Gronn's distributed leadership (2002)

We turn now to a theory of leadership that removes followers altogether from its purview. Published in *The Leadership Quarterly* (2002)*,* this seminal paper in theories of

distributed leadership offers a perspective developed as a critique of dominant models of the 'solo or stand-alone leader' (423). Distributed leadership is aligned, Gronn suggests, with what he describes as current modes of working, where the division of labour is ever-changing, and there is task differentiation and reintegration such that 'new workplace imperatives are generating qualitatively different forms of interdependence between organizational personnel [that] have stimulated the adoption of distributed modes of work coordination' (425). In distributed leadership, as defined in Gronn's paper, the tasks carried out by leaders may be distributed within a group which, collectively, carries out the traditional leadership tasks.

Gronn's first task is to critique the 'two sacrosanct binaries or dualisms' that have defined leadership theory: leader-followers and leadership-followership which, he argues, prescribe rather than describe a division of labour (428). He is sympathetic to Miller's (1998) argument of the need to 'dispense with the category of followership' (427), with organization becoming 'a process of negotiation between leaders' (Miller, 1998, in Gronn, 2002:427).

Gronn (2002:428) defines leadership as 'a status ascribed to one individual, an aggregate of separate individuals, sets of small numbers of individuals acting in concert or larger plural-member organizational units' in which organization members voluntarily attribute influence to one or other of the focal units. The attribution of influence may be through direct or vicarious experience (the latter referring to reputation), and its scope is 'the workplace-related activities defined by the employment contracts which operate in particular contexts' (428). Potentially all organization members may have influence and thus be leaders, because influence must be distinguished from authority (which managers

have). Duration of the attributed influence may be short or long term. Distributive leadership *is* 'concerted action', that is, collaborative modes of working that arise spontaneously, intuitive understanding developed through close working relationships, and structural and institutionalised arrangements which aim to 'regularise' distributed action. There is conjoint agency (431) where actions are synchronised through a psychological bond between the parties (431) that develops within the framework of authority relations of the employment contract. Interdependent working relationships 'cement the trust conducive to a nonthreatening emotional climate and peer support' (433), but they are threatened by 'the rhetoric of leader-followership' (434). Finally, Gronn discusses training; this should equip individuals 'to cope with flexible space' and would require developing the ability to take a strategic view of 'what needs doing and the ability to develop complementary relationships' (442) and would, it seems, take the focus away from individual job-holding. Leadership is later referred to as 'the contextualised outcome of interactive … processes' where there is a 'fluidity of … spontaneous collaboration and intuitive working relations … along with the continuity of workplace relations implied by the idea of institutionalised practices' (444).

Although it might be suggested that our interpretation of distributed leadership is overly literal, our analysis leads us to conclude that in Gronn's approach, leadership is an *outcome* of interactive processes, rather than an input into organizational processes. There are no followers: people emerge who take the lead in some aspects of a process (because they have a strategic view of what needs to be done and how to do it), while others emerge who take the lead in other aspects of the same process (implying that when they are not in leadership roles they are not-leaders, because they cannot be followers).

That aspect of our data analysis that seeks to find out how the scene of encounter between leader and follower is imagined therefore did not work at this point – there are only leaders in this theory, although the implications of the paper's arguments is that there will be times when people are not-leaders. However, there are fracture points in this model:

1. The issue of whether or not a follower-less leader can actually be a leader, because by definition someone cannot lead without having someone who follows. Leader is a term that infers a relationship, much like *mother* or *daughter* in contrast to words like *woman* or *girl,* which can stand independently (Rioch, 1971). So, in the same way that there is an implicit assumption of a *parent* when the word *son* is used, so too does the word *leader* only make sense with the word *follower* implied within it;

2. A presumption of harmonious organizational working, where issues of power and the frailties of being human are absent. Even if not emerging within positive psychology, the approach is remarkably optimistic. It ignores the possibility of anything but consensus, and presumes that each member of the organization shares the same 'vision' of what should be done, how it should be done, and with what ends in mind. That is, staff are one-dimensional and have one emotion: happiness;

3. This leads to the understanding that if emotionally positive aspects of work are defined as 'leadership', then everything that is not emotionally positive is 'not leadership', limiting leadership's focus in ways unintended by the theory;

4. Thus is this theory an attempt at colonisation, in that all everyday (harmonious) working relationships are re-labelled 'leadership? If so, how should we

understand the numerous, and well-attested situations, when there is disagreement,

quarrelling, politics, striving for one's own advancement at the expense of others,

etc?

Further, the performativity of language (Butler, 1990; 1993) means that attempts to

ignore, if not eradicate, followers must inevitably fail so long as the term 'leader'

circulates. The performativity of the term, the way it serves to constitute subject positions

and identities, rests on the existence of the very necessary binary other of leadership, that

is, the follower. To abolish the term 'follower' requires abolishing the term 'leader'. To

attempt to claim otherwise is a terminological sleight of hand. Thus in a team where the

tasks of leadership are distributed, the tasks of followership must also, it follows, be

distributed. Everyone thus becomes both a leader and a follower.

Gronn's thesis implies that the scene of encounter (in which followers have been written

out, even though they must be there if leadership is to be discussed) is harmonious and

lacking dissensus, with no political activities, no power play, and an absence of bad

temper or tiredness, with everyone tuned in to achieving the task in hand. The angelic

people who should staff organizations must therefore suppress all aspects of the self that

do not contribute to such an utopia. That is, they must become super-human and have no

weaknesses. Whereas authentic transformational leadership presumes that the follower

can be guided by the leader towards achieving normative ideal behaviours, participants

involved in distributive leadership somehow know, without discussion or education, how

to be ideal leaders and not-leaders as we seek to explore in table 3 below.

<div align="center">INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE</div>

But, as we argued above, organizations are staffed by fallible human beings. They are places rife with politics, ill-temper, controls, resistance against those controls, and so on. Anyone attempting to maintain the absurdly high ideals outlined for leaders (and not-leaders) in this theory are therefore doomed to failure. To step up to become a leader could, in distributive leadership, threaten the volunteer with inevitable failure.

Thus Gronn's theory requires that there be Utopian organisations where all power, conflict and the sheer complexities of being human has been eliminated. It is only in such impossibly idealistic organizations that distributive leadership might perhaps function.

Indeed, distributive leadership theory starts from the perspective of a teamwork where participants take responsibility for those aspects of the job for which they are best suited. While these tasks are undertaken through teamwork, or the pleasure in working on a project with committed colleagues, or whatever other reason, there is the prospective of success, job satisfaction and desire perhaps to carry on with the next project, absorbing the lessons from the current project, and thus continuing to improve. However, to take this teamwork and re-label it 'leadership', and furthermore a leadership without followers, could to destroy that very thing that was found so attractive and desirable in the first place.

What then is the implicit academic theory of the follower that informs distributive leadership theory? We suggest this model is underpinned by a quite sophisticated theory, albeit unarticulated. Note that Gronn advocated interdependent working relationships that would cement trust and thus succour a nonthreatening emotional climate and peer support (433), and he saw 'the rhetoric of leader-followership' (434) as destructive of such

relationships. This implies that to be identified as a follower is to become someone who

is negative, disinclined to teamwork, and destructive of 'emotional climate' more

generally. He thus seems to have insights into how identities in which some people are

positioned as superior to inferior others have a damaging effect on those understood to be

inferior.

However, rather than eradicating the cause of this destructive labelling, that is, the leader,

he attempts to eradicate the follower. He thus retains the 'sacrosanct' binaries he wished

to expunge.

3. Greenleaf's theory of Servant Leadership

Greenleaf's iconic book, *Servant Leadership* (1977), is a collection of essays and

speeches rather than a book-length exposition of servant leadership, and indeed, apart

from the first chapter, there is often little direct reference in its various chapters to servant

leadership. The book starts with the author introducing himself to the reader as a

practising manager who is antipathetic to academia – he seeks actions rather than thought.

The theory of servant leadership that he offers is inspired by a story by Herman Hesse

and there is something of the spiritual and mystical throughout the theory that Greenleaf

develops. He draws on a curious mixture of sources (Albert Camus, the *I Ching*, etc.),

plus anecdotes relating to anonymous people who supposedly demonstrate great

leadership, and observations about past leaders.

Greenleaf was despairing about the state of the United States at the time he wrote the

book, and he looks forward to a desirable (albeit vague) future that can be achieved

through servant leadership. His view of the United States in the mid-1970s was of a

country that was in dire straits – there was a crisis of leadership (11); communities had

broken down (37) and been replaced by mal-functioning institutions; there was a

'disposition to venture into immoral and senseless wars, destruction of the environment,

poverty, alienation, discrimination, over-population (46-7) all because of individual

human failures 'one person at a time'. Servant-leaders could lead the way out of this

dystopian present. Unlike the authors discussed above, Greenleaf acknowledges that the

'human condition' is one of imperfection (12), but he still seems to cling to the idea of

there being some people who are above such imperfections – these are the servant-leaders.

However, there is a lack of definition of what Greenleaf means by leader, follower and

servant and, it follows, of servant-leadership. There is a lot of description of the ideal

leader that seems to encapsulate elements of what the absolute ideal, the servant-leader,

would be like. We can tease this out by identifying in his arguments what he says about

poor and ideal leaders and followers, because there is within Greenleaf's discussion an

implicit model of the poor and the ideal leader, and the poor and ideal follower, and the

ideal-ideal in both leader and follower. Table 4 below develops this further.

<div align="center">INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE</div>

What is striking is the degree to which Greenleaf's servant leader is beyond human

achievement and therefore impossible for mere mortals to attain. This weakness is

acknowledged by recent more critical writings, including those of Collinson and Tourish

(forthcoming) who report in footnote 8 to their paper that the characteristics identified for

servant leaders seemed to be growing exponentially: 'For example, Spears (1995)

suggested that servant leadership had ten major characteristics. But a more recent review

indicates that this has grown to forty-four (van Dierendonck, 2011). These include courage, vision, the ability to exercise transforming influence (while empowering others), and humility. This clearly poses implementation challenges. Attending to forty four characteristics in one's daily leadership practice would require levels of sagacity rarely found outside Mount Olympus'. There is something of an impossibility to servant leadership. Servant-leaders are paragons of virtue. They are 'functionally superior because they are closer to the ground – they hear things, see things, know things, and their intuitive insight is exceptional' (42). They aim to make sure that 'other people's highest priority needs are being served' (13), with the aim of supporting those other people to themselves become servants.

But his understanding of 'servant' differs from the colloquial: Greenleaf uses the term to refer to someone 'who wants to serve, to serve *first*' (p. 13). The common-sense understanding of the word, as someone who works in a menial position keeping the home of someone else clean, tidy and well-functioning, does not seem to be applicable to Greenleaf's theory. He contrasts the person who wishes to serve *first* with the person who wishes to be leader *first* 'perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions' (p. 13), thus elevating as the distinction between 'good' and 'poor' leaders the motivation to take on leadership roles.   In this his theory is somewhat akin to Bass and Steidlmeier's (1999) contrast between authentic and pseudo-authentic transformational leaders. However, it is Greenleaf's choice of the term 'servant' and his redefinition of it as someone who serves by taking the lead for the common good, that we suggest is the fracture point in this model.

There is little about followers in his text, beyond a presumption Greenleaf shares with many writers on leadership: good leaders encourage growth and development in their followers. However, sprinkled throughout his essays are references to those who, he thinks, need to be led by servant-leaders, and it is these references that give insights. He refers to 'the legions of deprived and unsophisticated people ', to 'the "typical" person – immature, stumbling, inept, lazy' (p. 21); 'half-people' (p. 21). It is leaders' superior abilities that mark them out as leaders – they have better judgement than others (p. 23); their intuition is superior; they are better listeners, and have superior foresight.

Greenleaf thus imagines two classes of people: the vast majority of 'unsophisticated people' from which servants (those who serve an individual or a family and occupy more or less menial roles) are drawn, and the superior, exalted few from which those who serve (what is argued to be) the common good are drawn. He develops such notions further in his later work, to add to his earlier prophesy in relation to the effect of his model on 'the least privileged in society' (1977, p.7), adding an addendum that 'no-one will knowingly be hurt by the action, directly or indirectly' (Greenleaf, (1998, p.43). In other words, Greenleaf's account implicitly introduces into leadership theory presumptions about class. The thesis underlying his account appears to be of a lumpen proletariat that can be saved from their fate not by a revolution but by servant leaders who will nurture the development of those few who have the capacity to develop and who in turn may succeed themselves to become servant leaders.

Discussion and conclusion

 In both Bass and Steidlmeir's (1999) paper on authentic transformational leadership and Greenleaf's theory of servant leadership the follower is, on the one hand, imagined as an empty vessel awaiting filling by the leader's inspiration. But on the other hand there may be elements of fear underpinning this desire. Throughout the history of the US-authored management textbook there has been a sub-text of fear of the masses, and what they would or could do if they rose up (Harding, 2003). That is, the 'reds under the bed' myth that led to McCarthyism informed the collective unconscious (Jameson, 1991), of the United States' governing classes, leading to conscious and unconscious attempts at control. We suggest the possibility that leadership theory's long trajectory articulates a wish-fulfilment in which the masses become followers who are so seduced by their leaders the thought of rising up against them would never occur.

We have shown how Bass and Steidlmeir have built into their theory the seeds of its own downfall, in that authentic and pseudo-authentic transformational leaders are indistinguishable. The staff members motivated to become leaders may have within their ranks those pretending to authenticity in order to mask their own purposes. Again, fear stalks the gaps and interstices in this model. In Greenleaf's theory of servant leadership there is, we have suggested, an almost overt reworking of ideas of class conflict – the lumpen proletariat are capable of being assuaged and pacified by a rare few people with special and unusual qualities – an aristocracy with refined sensibilities and superior powers. We suggest that the implicit academic theory of followers that informs writing on leadership is one that echoes the fears of the powerful through the millennia: that the mob is always straining at the ramparts, ready to destroy civilisation.

Gronn's theory of distributed leadership at first sight appears somewhat different. Whereas Bass & Steidlmeir's and Greenleaf's basic presumption of humanity is Hobbesian, in that people are assumed to be born bad and need controlling and educating, Gronn's appears to be more akin to Rousseau's understanding that people are born good but circumstances can turn them bad. Gronn actually identifies leadership theory as one of the factors that can turn people bad, but his courage fails him and he does not follow the implications of his arguments, which is that leadership should be eradicated. He therefore does away with the masses, at the stroke of a pen. They disappear, in a unitarist dream of harmonious organizations where everyone works towards a shared outcome.

We therefore suggest that what unites these three perspectives on leadership is a sense of elitism (leaders are destined to govern) and power use (and potential abuse) of those with less power. In all three approaches, power is the elephant that lurks in between the lines, peers out from the fissures and languishes in the gaps in logic. But it is unacknowledged. In authentic transformational leadership, there appears to be a veneer of 'helping' followers to achieve beyond their wildest dreams but the reality is the continuing aggrandizement of the heroic leader. The leader is transcendental and omnipotent, both elitist and anti-democratic. History is replete with illustrations of ways in which charismatic, transformational and power-hungry individuals use coercive pressure to lead people to evil ends (Tourish, 2013). In distributive accounts, there is a pretence that the workforce is made up of equals, all working towards the same harmonious ends. As Alan Fox (1966) pointed out long ago, such a unitarist perspective disguises structural and hierarchical power. In servant leadership accounts, the pretence of putting the follower at

centre-stage, to be *served* by the leader, belies the theory's attempt to use the power of the elite to control those who are regarded as an inferior and unsophisticated hoi polloi.

So disinterring the theory of follower/ship that silently informs major theories of leadership suggests leadership theory is the pursuit of control of a potentially dangerous mass through the use of power.

This leads to the question of the form this power takes. Since Lukes' (2005) seminal work on power we have become accustomed to thinking about power as not only an external weight that presses on people, but as a way of controlling even their very thoughts and desires. Foucault's concept of power as not only oppressive but productive, in that it brings things into being, placed power in circulating discourses and in the very materiality of the body's synapses. As Butler (1997) pointed out, power presses on us and limits us at the same time as making the 'me' possible.

But the power that informs leadership theory is a peculiar form of power. Firstly, it has performative force: an industry of leadership development has sprung up around the world, with management consultancies, training agencies, universities and colleges all contributing to turning managers into leaders. Numerous people seem to prefer to call themselves leaders rather than managers (O'Reilly and Reed, 2011).

But there is no evidence at all that all these leaders have any influence over their putative followers. Indeed, there may be some evidence to the contrary, as noted above, that is, someone becomes a leader only because staff accord her/him with the title of leader.

Therefore the power that circulates in leadership theory is a power over those who become called leaders. It confers on them that identity, and requires that they conform to

29

the norms and practices that govern that subject position. But leadership theory is so divorced from practice, that is, from material encounters between people in workplaces, that it cannot advise leaders on how to govern followers. All it does is provide empty promises about the leader's ability to fill up the follower with their own charisma, or authenticity, or goodness, or abilities.

So perhaps the absence of studies of followers/ship has been a blessing in disguise. A supposed elite of thinkers has devised models, theories, training courses, consultancies, conferences and so on. The leadership industry is vast and global. But its powers are limited to persuading managers to call themselves leaders, while those who should be their followers are unexplored, unknown and untheorised. They get on with their working lives while their managers busy themselves with the impossible task of becoming the authentic, charismatic, servant who does not serve, and leader who does not lead.

So even as we are critical of leadership theory's lack of understanding of the complexities of the human subject, we cannot argue that it needs to replace its simplistic presumptions of followers – it is best to leave well alone. Rather, it is the leadership industry's continuing effects on managers that need our attention.

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Table 1: Bass and Steidlmeier's Authentic and pseudo-transformational leadership

	Authentic Transformational Leadership – Ideals for their followers.	Pseudo-Transformational Leadership – Idols of their followers
Charisma or idealised influence	Envisioning, confident, sets high standards for emulation. Values: universal brotherhood. Promote ethical policies, procedures and processes. Must 'eventuate in the internalization in all the organization's members of shared moral standards' (188)	Seek power and position, and indulge in fantasies of power and success. Values: grandiose, fictitious we-they relationships that divide. Inconsistent and unreliable. False to organisation's purpose. Outer shell of authenticity but it is a mask.
Inspirational motivation	Focus on the best in people, and harmony, charity and good works. Empowerment to transform the person. Inwardly and outwardly concerned about the good of everyone.	Focuses on the worst in people, on demonic plots, conspiracies, unreal dangers, excuses, and insecurities. Talk about empowerment but only to seek control. May give impression of concern for the good, may be idealized by their followers, but inwardly concerned only about the good for themselves.
Intellectual stimulation	Openness, with a transcendent and spiritual dimension, allows followers to question assumptions and generate more creative solutions. Altruism is a fundamental question. Use persuasion to convince others on the merits of issues. Bring about change in followers' values by the merit and relevancy of their ideas.	Uses a logic of false assumptions to 'slay the dragons of uncertainty, take credit for other's ideas, scapegoat them for failure. Use anecdotes rather than hard evidence. Charlatans who feed on the ignorance of their followers. Manipulate the values of followers. Only does the right thing when it coincides with their self-interest. Intolerant of other views, substituting emotional argumentation for rational discourse.
Individualized consideration	Underscores necessity of altruism. Treats each follower as an individual, coaches and mentors. Concerned about developing their followers into leaders. Promote attainable shared goals. Helps followers to develop their leadership skills. Channel their need for power into the service of others.	Concerned with maintaining the dependence of their followers. Exploit followers' feelings to maintain deference. Expect blind obedience. Encourage fantasy and magic. Foments favouritism and competition among followers. Seeks a parent-child relationship. Uses power for self-aggrandisement. Privately derisive of those they are 'supposed to be serving as leaders' (189). Public image (that of saviours) contradicts their private selves

Table 2: Bass and Steidlmeier's Authentic and pseudo-transformational leadership: Stated and implicit followership theory

	Authentic Transformational Leadership – Ideals for their followers.	Pseudo-Transformational Leadership – Idols of their followers
Followers' position - stated	'inner dynamics of a freely embraced change of heart in the realm of core values and motivation, open-ended intellectual stimulation and commitment to treating people as ends not mere means' (192). They will learn the values of justice, equality and human rights. Will develop an inner ethical core in which self-interest is secondary. Follower-leader distinction should wither away (200), as 'true consensus in aligning individual and organizational interests' (207).	Followers are fantasists who engage in the leaders' fantasies.
Followers' position - implicit	Empty vessels waiting to be filled with goodness by the leader/teacher, much as happens in cults. However, less valued than shareholders, senior management and continuity of the organization (204), but the successful ATL develops them so that they become ATLs themselves.	Followers are gullible vessels easily taken in by appearances, who do not realise they are being used and exploited.

Table 3 Gronn's theory of distributed leadership and implicit theories

Distributive leadership	Implicit followership theories
Gronn advocated interdependent working relationships that would cement trust and thus succour a nonthreatening emotional climate and peer support (433), and he saw 'the rhetoric of leader-followership' (434) as destructive of such relationships.	Gronn appears to recognise the performative effect of the term 'follower'. That is, to be placed in the subject position of 'follower' requires that one become negative, disinclined to teamwork, and destructive of 'emotional climate' more generally. This is a highly critical approach with which we agree.
Distributed Leadership as a process of negotiation between leaders (427)	If the term 'follower' is so destructive, then it must be replaced with a more positive term. Gronn does not follow through on his critical stance, or recognise the imbrication of the term 'leader' with 'the follower'. The implicit theory here appears to be that the only way to remove the destructiveness of the term 'follower' is to eliminate it from speech - DL 'dispenses with the category of followership' (427). The term 'leader' now expands to encompass all identities in the organization, or rather all harmonious identities. The implicit theory here perhaps is that of the bee-hive, where all are workers servicing the needs of the Queen Bee qua organization. That is, all are drones.
Distributed Leadership as 'concerted action' (429) of collaborative modes of working, intuitive understandings and supportive structural and organizational arrangements	Gronn returns to seemingly out-dated and out-moded models of unitarist organizations. There is no room for dissent and no understanding of power. Everyone must comply with the dominant order. The implication of Gronn's theory is that everyone *will* comply. Leadership becomes a matter of mind-control in which no deviation from organizational requirements is permissible.
Training should equip individuals to 'cope with flexible space' and this would require developing the ability to take a strategic view of 'what needs doing and the ability to develop complementary relationships' (442)	This reveals most profoundly Gronn's implicit understanding of the people who form the staff of organizations – that is, they are not able to work collaboratively, to take charge of their own work, etc., unless they receive training that will inculcate these abilities. The lumpen proletariat underpins Gronn's theory – people, he presumes, are essentially lazy, lack foresight, a capacity for team-work, innovation, knowledge sharing, etc. This suggests his concerns about the term 'follower' revolve around its failure to tackle the

recalcitrance he sees in the average staff member.

Table 4: Greenleaf's implicit leadership and followership theories

The poor leader	The ideal leader	The ideal follower	The poor follower	The servant leader	The servant as follower
They are unable to envision what needs to happen, 'too many who presume to lead do not see more clearly and in defence of this inadequacy, they all the more strongly argue that the system must be preserved' (15)	The ideal leader is 'better than most at pointing the direction' (15). 'The very essence of leadership, going out to show the way, derives from more than usual openness to inspiration' (15) The ideal leader gives followers clear direction 'more clearly where it is best to go' (15)	The ideal follower follows the leader. Followers are helpless and incapable of knowing the direction in which to go. Leaders are persuasive and trustworthy who provide a goal for followers, 'an overarching purpose, the big dream, the visionary concept…that excites the imagination and challenges people to work for something they do not yet know how to do' (16)		'Servants, by definition, are fully human. Servant-leaders are functionally superior because they are closer to the ground – they hear things, see things, know things, and their intuitive insights is exceptional' (42).	The ideal followers grow and become servant leaders themselves: 'The follower chooses to follow the servant leader, so that 'those served grow as persons… [and] while being served become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants.' (7)
		They have no agency and no need to think for themselves.		They have 'unlimited liability for others .	
	'A leader initiates, provides the ideas and the structure, and takes the risk of failure along with the chance of success' (15)	Again, the ideal follower falls in behind the leader and does whatever is asked of her/him.		p. 7 the great leader is seen as servant first. By that he means that this leader is 'deep down inside' a servant (7) and leadership is bestowed upon such a person. Leadership can thus be taken away, but the 'servant nature' is the 'real man' and cannot be taken away (8)	If the leader is one who would serve, then the follower becomes servant to the leader, helping him/her achieve his/her vision of serving. Language, it seems, is turned upside down, as in George Orwell's 1984 where language becomes newspeak – words can come to mean whatever the speaker says they mean.
The (poor) leader first may need to	Has a power drive that falls within the range of	Resists the self-promotion of the poor leader, so	Obeys the demands	Leadership 'begins with the natural feeling that	The ideal follower should be able to distinguish between

assuage an unusual power drive or acquisition of material possessions (13)	the normal – although this is not specified.	refuses to be a follower.	of the poor leader.	one wants to serve, to serve *first*' (13). This is sharply different from one who is *leader* first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions' (13). However, how the two are to be distinguished is unclear.	the leader who wishes to serve and the leader who wishes power and self-aggrandisement. The follower requires a certain sagacity, but the follower in this theory cannot possess such wisdom and insight, else s/he would be a servant leader.
	Ideal leaders seem to be paternalistic and domineering. Leaders know better than followers what they need to achieve: 'by clearly stating and restating the goal the leader gives certainty and purpose to others who may have difficulty in achieving it for themselves' (15)	Is child-like in his/her lack of certainty and purpose, requiring an external agent to provide what s/he lacks.	Would claim to know better than leaders what is needed.	Would appear to wear the mask of a servant, but this disguises an arrogance and certainty about his/her abilities, putting them beyond challenge. The servant leader has something of the tyrant about him/her.	Obeys orders.