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David Collinson

Lancaster University Management School, UK

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Abstract

This article critically examines excessive positivity in leadership dynamics. It argues that the tendency for leader positivity to become excessive is a recurrent but under-researched medium through which power and identity can be enacted in leadership dynamics. Drawing on the metaphor of ‘Prozac’, it suggests that leaders’ excessive positivity is often characterized by a reluctance to consider alternative voices, which can leave organizations and societies ill-prepared to deal with unexpected events. Prozac leadership encourages leaders to believe their own narratives that everything is going well and discourages followers from raising problems or admitting mistakes. The article also argues that followers (broadly defined) are often quick to identify leaders’ excessive positivity and are likely to respond through various forms of resistance. It concludes by considering the extent to which excessive positivity also characterizes leadership studies, and raises additional questions for further critical analyses of Prozac leadership.

Keywords

excessive positivity, Prozac leadership, critical leadership studies, power, identity, resistance

Introduction

‘Over the ten years that I have had the privilege of addressing you as Chancellor, I have been able year by year to record how the City of London has risen by your efforts, ingenuity and creativity to become a new world leader. Now today over 40 per cent of the world’s foreign equities are traded here . . . So I congratulate you . . . on these remarkable achievements, an era that history will record as the beginning of a new golden age for the City of London.’

Gordon Brown, Chancellor of the Exchequer, 20 June 2007

The above extract from the Chancellor’s 2007 Mansion House annual address to the City of London exemplifies how, in attempting to acknowledge and inspire others, leaders can deploy highly positive statements. Yet shortly after this speech, the Chancellor’s vision of

Corresponding author:

David Collinson, Department of Management Learning and Leadership, Lancaster University Management School, Lancaster, LA1 4YX, UK

Email: d.collinson@lancaster.ac.uk

a 'new golden age' collapsed under the weight of global financial meltdown. In previous Mansion House speeches, Brown consistently celebrated the government's 'light touch' regulation, which he claimed had helped to 'abolish boom and bust'. In 2006, for example, he proudly boasted that, despite considerable media pressure after the Worldcom accounting scandal, he had steadfastly refused to listen to more cautionary voices recommending a 'regulatory crackdown' on the financial sector. Yet, it has subsequently become clear that the unregulated nature of financial services was a major factor contributing to the 'sub-prime' mortgage crisis that has severely damaged Western economies and fundamentally undermined the Chancellor's optimistic predictions of a 'new golden age'.

In the early 2000s such excessive positivity also characterized global housing and stock market booms. It was widely assumed that these economic conditions were now permanent features and that they could be controlled by interest rates alone. This was compounded by the recklessly optimistic view that it was economically viable to expand credit to people who could not afford to repay, to aggregate their debts into mortgage 'bonds' and then sell this debt to other financial organizations. Discouraging critical analysis in favour of high risk-taking, excessively positive thinking (EPT) appears to lie at the heart of the deep recession sweeping across many Western economies.

This article argues that in their attempts to communicate and inspire others, leaders typically not only 'frame' (Bolman and Deal, 2008) and 'manage' meanings (Smircich and Morgan, 1982), but frequently do so in highly, and sometimes excessively, positive ways. The ability to persuade has been widely noted as a key leadership skill, often enacted through rhetoric, narrative and discourse (Carroll and Flood, 2010). This has informed recent interest in the social and discursive construction of leadership especially through sense-making, story-telling, symbolism and metaphor (Fairhurst, 2007, 2011). Equally, many researchers assert that leadership is fundamentally about influencing others and that positivity is one of the most effective communication techniques (Cameron, 2008).

Being positive is widely seen as an attractive personal attribute, enabling leaders to exude an air of confidence and authority. When looking to the future and constructing a vision, leaders often paint highly optimistic scenarios designed to inspire and reassure followers. Similarly, the plethora of practitioner-oriented 'Heathrow texts' on 'how to be an effective leader' encourage leaders to express a 'passionate' commitment to their role and organization. Peters and Austin (1985: 266) emphasize the importance of leaders' 'infectious optimism' and their ability as 'cheerleaders' to inspire commitment, confidence and enthusiasm through positive 'intensity'. In recent years, consultants and researchers have identified the significance of humour, especially for leaders seeking to soften more directive messages whilst emphasizing positive and 'personal' relationships with subordinates (Collinson, 2002). Relatedly, employees are frequently encouraged to be upbeat and positive: if they bring with them a positive commitment to work, there is less need for costly supervision (Collinson, 2010).

To be sure, in certain contexts leaders' positivity may inspire followers, drive change and improve performance, especially when subordinates 'believe in' leaders and trust in the veracity and consistency of their words and actions. However, problems can occur, particularly if this positivity is seen to be discrepant with everyday experience. For example, if leaders repeatedly promise that 'things can only get better'¹ but over time this does not happen, followers can become increasingly sceptical and cynical. Informed by recent critiques of positive thinking, this article draws on the idea of Prozac leadership to develop a critical analysis of the tendency for leader positivity to become excessive. The term *Prozac*

leadership is used here to denote the way that leaders, followers and excessive positivity have become increasingly intertwined in contemporary organizational and societal practices.

In a literal sense, Prozac is one of a number of contemporary drugs used to moderate depression (Bentall, 2009; Greenberg, 2010) and induce 'artificial happiness' (Dworkin, 2006). Several researchers have critically examined the impact of Prozac as an addictive drug, particularly on US society (e.g. Elliott and Chambers, 2004; Herzberg, 2009). Whilst the US constitutes two-thirds of the global market for anti-depressants and these are the most commonly prescribed drugs in that country, in recent years their use is also increasing significantly in other countries such as the UK. Anti-depressants have also been directly connected to leadership. Various studies reveal that a number of political leaders in the US (Post and Robbins, 1993; Shenk, 2005) and UK (Owen, 2009) have experienced depression and other mental problems requiring medication.

In the more metaphorical sense primarily explored here², the term *Prozac* is used to denote and symbolize a widespread social addiction to excessive positivity. This chemical metaphor seeks to highlight leaders' use of positivity as a recurrent way of enacting power, influence and identity. It is suggestive of how positivity can resemble an addictive drug in ways that frequently mitigate against critical reflection. The following article deploys the term Prozac leadership to analyse critically this cultural preoccupation with the pursuit of positivity and to question the underlying taken-for-granted belief in the efficacy of positive thinking for addressing leadership challenges and inspiring followers. In this sense, the argument is informed by the emergent perspective of *critical leadership studies* (CLS).

Critical leadership studies explore how power and identity can be enacted in overt, subtle and sometimes invisible ways within leadership dynamics (Collinson, 2011). Constituting a comparatively new perspective on leadership, critical studies share a concern to critique the power relations and identity constructions through which leadership dynamics are frequently reproduced, rationalized, resisted and occasionally transformed (e.g. Banks, 2008; Nye, 2008). Informed by an eclectic set of perspectives (e.g. Ospina and Su 2009; Sinclair, 2007, 2011), CLS challenges hegemonic views in the mainstream literature which take for granted that leaders are the people in charge who make decisions whilst followers are those who merely carry out orders from 'above'. CLS often draws on the more established field of critical management studies (CMS), which seeks to open up new ways of thinking about management (Mingers, 2000).³

The approach developed here is informed by Foucault's (1977, 1979) ideas on the disciplinary effects of discourses and the power/knowledge dialectics that underpin them.⁴ Although prominent in critical management studies, Foucault's work has been less influential in the study of leadership. The following argument builds on Foucault's emphasis on the positive nature of power. In contrast with other perspectives that tend to view power as an inherently negative mechanism of repression, Foucault suggests that power can also be enabling and productive, especially in shaping subjectivities and constructing identities (Collinson, 2003). Developing a critical analysis of EPT in leadership dynamics, this article explores how excessive positivity may characterize leader-follower dialectics in ways that can erode preparedness and damage effectiveness. It considers a number of examples that illustrate how leaders' positivity can reproduce material and symbolic tensions and organizational contradictions fuelling various forms of follower dissent. It also considers the extent to which excessive positivity characterizes leadership studies.

'Ac-cent-tchu-ate the positive'?⁵

In many Western societies, positive thinking is now widely taken for granted as an ideal 'way of being'. Although by no means exclusive to the US, 'positivity' is a particularly distinctive feature of American culture, where upbeat self-promotion is widespread and often viewed as a desirable 'survival strategy' in a highly competitive and individualistic market society. Positive thinking, talking and acting shapes all the major areas of US life and personal identity, from work, career, politics, medicine and religion to family, consumerism and leisure. Being positive sends a message about the individual's apparent strength, power and self-confidence. Widely taken for granted as the key to career success, prosperity and a healthy life, it is also often associated with the pursuit of happiness: a doctrine that is enshrined in the US Declaration of Independence and central to the 'American dream'. This 'can do', 'yes we can' culture differentiates the US from more reserved and introspective societies. Now a multi-billion dollar industry, the 'positive thinking industry' in the US is typified by the proliferation of self-help books that advise people on how to live their lives.

First published in 1937, Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* was the first major self-help text to highlight the value of positive thinking. It is now one of the bestselling books of all time. Emphasizing that people should compliment and appreciate others, Carnegie (1994: 41) argued that 'the big secret' in 'getting anybody to do anything' was 'making the other person want to do it'. Part 4 of Carnegie's book concentrates on leadership and the relatively simple prescription that praise and appreciation are the most effective ways of persuading others to do what you want them to do. Carnegie quotes the industrialist Charles Schwab, who believed that the best way to 'arouse enthusiasm' was 'by appreciation and encouragement'. Schwab stated that in dealing with subordinates, 'I am hearty in my approbation and lavish in my praise.' Citing Dewey, Freud and James, Carnegie suggests that the desire 'to feel important' and 'appreciated' is a deep and insatiable 'human urge'. He contends that leaders who value subordinates are likely to be effective precisely because followers are perpetually searching for identity validation.

Carnegie's prescriptions have significantly influenced political and business leaders' persuasion techniques and their attempts to shape followers' motivations and actions. Managing positive impressions has become a key priority for many leaders (e.g. Sharma and Grant, 2011). Carnegie's ideas have subsequently been elaborated by various popular US writers, most notably Norman Peale, who highlighted 'the power of positive thinking' (1952). A protestant preacher in Manhattan, Peale sought to help individuals overcome their doubts and sense of inferiority through 'mind training' in 'how to think positively'. His 'positive philosophy of life' involved practising repeated self-hypnosis and 'positive affirmations' combined with 'prayer power', faith and reading the scriptures. Peale argued that by learning a number of 'dynamic laws' designed to eliminate all negativity, individuals would increasingly believe in themselves and enjoy 'authentic confidence'. They would recognize that positivity has self-fulfilling effects. Like Carnegie, Peale's book became a bestseller.

The contemporary impact of writers like Carnegie and Peale can be discerned in the way that positive thinking continues to pervade America's popular culture, for example on TV talk shows and in 'pop psychology' bestsellers.⁶ Positive thinking informs the messages of therapists, life coaches and counsellors, and is even viewed as helpful in treating illness and disease (e.g. Cousins, 1990). Its popularity has also influenced the emergence of 'positive psychology' (Seligman, 1998, 2002) and 'positive organizational behaviour' (Bernstein, 2003; Luthans, 2003; Luthans and Yousef, 2007; Wright, 2003). These academic disciplines claim

to present more 'scientific' understandings of how 'positive psychological capital' such as optimism, efficacy, resilience and hope facilitates health, confidence, goal achievement and organizational effectiveness (Cameron et al., 2003; Caza and Cameron, 2008).

Informed by 'appreciative enquiry' (e.g. Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005), positive scholarship is increasingly influential in the study of leadership. Cameron (2008) outlines various 'positive strategies' that produce 'positive leadership'. Avolio and Luthans (2006) specify the positive dynamics that define 'a high impact leader'. Hannah et al. (2009) suggest that leaders who create a positive and multifaceted self-construct will be able to influence followers most effectively. Similarly, Avey et al. (in press) argue that leaders' optimism, hope and resilience can positively influence followers' performance. Peterson and Luthans (2003) contend that hopeful leaders have a positive impact on workplace performance outcomes such as profit levels, employee satisfaction and retention rates.

However, a number of writers have recently critiqued the positive thinking movement. They highlight the problematic personal, organizational and societal effects that can emerge from 'excessive optimism' (Ehrenreich, 2009), 'positive asymmetry' (Cerulo, 2006), 'irrational exuberance' (Shiller, 2005, 2008) and 'gambling against the odds' (Lewis, 2010). Thaler and Sunstein (2009: 36) contend that 'unrealistic optimism' can lead to excessive risk-taking through the overestimation of personal invulnerability and immunity from harm. Critiquing the preoccupation with happiness, Wilson (2008) highlights the value of melancholia, which, he suggests, facilitates creativity by stimulating an active questioning of the status quo. Similarly, Scruton (2010) proposes the value of pessimism. He critiques the 'false hope' of 'unscrupulous optimists' and revolutionary idealists who throughout human history have wrought havoc by disdaining constraints and trying to impose their utopian visions of the world.

Critiquing 'the tyranny of positive thinking'

In a particularly important contribution, Ehrenreich (2009) questions the 'excessive optimism' and 'bright-siding' that, she contends, now characterizes large swathes of US society. For Ehrenreich, 'bright-siding' is 'the relentless promotion of positive thinking in US society'. Acknowledging that Americans are a cheerful and optimistic people, she argues that positive thinking has become an almost mandatory cultural attitude eroding Americans' ability or willingness to consider disturbing news. Ehrenreich suggests that rather than being related to shifts in the business cycle, positive thinking has always been a primary feature of US society, developing in opposition to European Protestant Calvinism with its strong emphasis on deferred gratification and rather grim view of pleasure as sinful. She therefore asserts that the roots of positive thinking are deeply-embedded in the origins of US society, developing in opposition to the punitive religions of 'old Europe'.

Whilst positive thinking is now ubiquitous in the US, it is in the business community, Ehrenreich observes, where 'bright-siding' has been most enthusiastically embraced. Yet, it is also here where the refusal even to consider negative outcomes like mortgage defaults contributed directly to the current economic malaise. Characterized by constant efforts to deny unpleasant possibilities and 'negative' thoughts, positive thinking is a dangerous obsession, she argues, that sustains a 'mass delusion' and 'deliberate self-deception'. It can also fuel national hubris and a 'we know best' approach, which in turn has led to a growing concern in the US about 'why people hate America' (Sarder and Davies, 2002).

Critiquing ‘the tyranny of positive thinking’, Ehrenreich (2009: 74) highlights its false promises, disciplinary pressures and victim-blaming dimensions. For example, positive thinking supposes that if your business fails, or your job is eliminated, it must be your fault. If an optimistic outlook is the key to economic success, then there is no excuse for failure. As a breast cancer patient, Ehrenreich personally experienced the pressure to think positively in order to beat the illness. Cheerfulness is required, ‘dissent is a kind of treason’ (Ehrenreich, 2009: 31). She criticizes this emphasis on the imagined practical effects of positive thinking (where preferred outcomes are assumed to occur simply by wishing for them), and the underlying toxic message that if you do not think positively, you will not be successful and it will be your fault. Somewhat paradoxically, positive thinking advocates can offer a very negative judgment: you only have yourselves to blame.

Ehrenreich is particularly critical of the ‘positive psychology’ movement, questioning its restricted focus on mind-sets like optimism and happiness and its underlying assumption that circumstances have little impact on how people think. Equally, Hackman (2009: 310) criticizes the ‘relentless focus on the individual’ in positive organizational behaviour. In the UK, Fineman (2006) develops a similarly stringent critique of ‘the hidden tyranny’ of positive organizational scholarship. He argues that ‘positiveness’ typically becomes another disciplinary pressure, imposing happiness as ‘an obligatory organizational practice’ (Fineman, 2006: 280) whilst ‘pathologizing’ those who do not fit in. Despite claims to enhance creativity and happiness, HR initiatives such as ‘structured fun at work’ events often constitute ‘seductive’ attempts to increase managerial and cultural control. Such initiatives, he contends, obscure rather than dissolve structural inequalities in power and the dehumanized nature of work. While Fineman focuses primarily on the (HR) management of workplace happiness, his arguments can also be applied to the critical analysis of leadership.

Other writers have similarly critiqued the managerial emphasis on positivity, revealing how happiness and fun can be co-opted as motivation techniques in organizations such as McDonalds (Ritzer, 2000), Disney (Van Maanen, 1991), Mary Kay Cosmetics (Biggart, 1989) and Delta Airlines (Hochschild, 1983). By celebrating success, sharing leisure activities and managing positive emotions through ‘corporate fun’, managers seek to build a strong sense of teamwork. These ideas can be traced back to the human relations movement with its central argument that happier employees will be more productive. Equally, it is often suggested that by expressing very high expectations of followers, leaders can produce positive effects on performance (sometimes termed the ‘Pygmalion effect’). Research has also found that managerial positivity has been used to influence and persuade customers. Exploring the US insurance industry where managers ‘orchestrated optimism’ through routinized sales procedures, Leidner (1993: 112) describes how sales training required participants to memorize scripted presentations. This included internalizing the company’s ‘Positive Mental Attitude’, which encouraged trainees to talk ‘in a positive, enthusiastic tone of voice’ and to deliver a pre-defined standard joke.

Ehrenreich more explicitly links her critique to leadership. She describes how business, religious and political leaders frequently use positive messages to inspire followers and to achieve their objectives. Evangelical preachers in mega US churches espouse the ‘good news’ that you only have to want something to receive it. They promise wealth and health in this life, rather than the life hereafter. Whilst pastors increasingly embrace commercial values, business leaders have become more evangelical, Ehrenreich argues.⁷ She describes how leading up to the financial meltdown, many corporate executives privileged positive thinking over detailed analysis. For example, Joe Gregory, the former president of Lehman Brothers,

prided himself on making decisions based on 'instinct' rather than detailed risk analysis. Ehrenreich (2009: 144) asks, 'why bother worrying about dizzying levels of debt and exposure to potential defaults – when all good things come to those who are optimistic enough to expect them?' For Ehrenreich, this is 'how positive thinking destroyed the economy' (see also Ward, 2010).

In the UK the Royal Bank of Scotland's (RBS) acquisition of the Dutch Bank ABN Amro exemplifies a recent important leadership decision informed by excessive positivity, too little risk analysis, inadequate due diligence and a disregard of warnings. This purchase at a vastly inflated figure (£49b) was in 2007 the biggest banking takeover in history. Occurring just as the global liquidity crisis began to bite, the deal fundamentally weakened the RBS balance sheet, not only because of the size of the acquisition, but also because of ABN's significant exposure to the US subprime mortgage crisis. Consequently, RBS had to be bailed out by the UK government and in early 2012 the Bank was still owned by the state. This case illustrates the wider tendency, highlighted by Lovallo and Kahneman (2003), for executives to make decisions based on 'delusional optimism'. The authors argue that, when planning and forecasting major initiatives, executives routinely exaggerate the benefits and discount the costs of specific scenarios. As a result of this over-optimism, initiatives are unlikely to come in on budget, on time or to deliver expected returns. Lovallo and Kahneman conclude that organizations which reward optimism and discourage pessimism are likely to undermine the capacity to think critically.

Lewis (2010) examines the relentless optimism of Wall Street and its disastrous consequences. For example, he describes the 'woo' culture of high fives, motivational speakers and loud cheers at Countrywide Mortgage, where lending practices exemplified the reckless expansion of credit. After one Countrywide manager in 2004 questioned the assumptions of ever-rising house prices, he was told, 'You worry too much.' By insisting that subordinates' upward communication is exclusively positive, Prozac leaders and the uncritical cultures they encourage can silence committed and concerned followers. In such contexts, subordinates learn that it may be advisable to comply with typical Prozac mantras such as 'I only want to hear positive news' and 'Bring me answers, not problems'. In these circumstances, followers are likely to engage in positive impression management practices communicating the 'good news' that Prozac leaders favour/require.

With regard to political leadership, Ehrenreich highlights George W Bush, who defined the role of president as one of 'cheerleader'⁸, encouraging optimism, inspiring confidence, dispelling doubts and pumping up the spirit of national self-congratulation. Ehrenreich (2009: 10) quotes Condaleeza Rice, who explained that she did not express various concerns because 'the President almost demanded optimism. He didn't like pessimism, hand-wringing or doubt.' Ehrenreich contends that the President's preoccupation with positivity reduced the administration's ability effectively to deal with major disasters, such as the 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre in New York, the 2005 Katrina floods in New Orleans and the 2007 financial meltdown. Despite advance warnings in each case, the Bush administration did not anticipate such possibilities and their responses were widely seen as too slow and inadequate. Hence the President's Prozac leadership appeared to be a significant barrier to open communication, which in turn eroded his administration's effectiveness.

Cerulo (2006) argues that 'optimistic bias' can hinder people's ability to envisage 'worst case scenarios', undermining preparedness and inviting disaster. American optimism, she asserts, tends to override warnings about potential disasters. Cerulo describes how FBI leaders in Washington repeatedly disregarded warnings of possible terrorist attacks by air,

including the significant alert in the 'Phoenix memo' from FBI agents prior to 11 September 2001. Deep-seated leader-centrism combined with the complacency of over-optimism were fundamental barriers to communication within the FBI, where the flow of information was predominantly top-down. Cerulo's analysis demonstrates that 'positive asymmetry' can damage preparedness to deal with problems. By suffocating alternative perspectives, leaders make it more likely that organizations are less equipped to consider future risk or potential threats and dangers. In short, 'brightsiding' can leave organizations 'blindsided'.

The charismatic leadership dynamic underpins many of the foregoing examples. A rereading of Weber's (1947) classic analysis suggests that EPT can often characterize this foundational relationship in leadership studies. Weber argued that charismatic leaders typically believe in their divinely ordained mission, viewing themselves in overly positive ways as 'the chosen ones' with a 'destiny' and 'higher purpose' differentiating them from others. EPT can therefore fuel leaders' inflated sense of superiority and excessively positive self-belief and self-conviction. Their grandiose self-image can be compounded by followers who attribute exceptional qualities to leaders through, for example, transference (Maccoby, 2007) or fantasy (Gabriel, 1997). Such excessive positivity in the dialectical dynamics between charismatics and their adoring followers can strengthen leaders' belief in their own power and invulnerability in ways that perpetuate their hubristic and narcissistic practices. The posthumous idealization of founding members of organizations and societies further reveals how followers' excessively positive attributions and romanticism may become even stronger after the charismatic leader dies.

The foregoing critiques illustrate the extent to which EPT can inform leaders' discourses, facilitating their exercise of power and construction of identity. They also highlight the negative impact that EPT can have on effectiveness, resulting in over-optimistic predictions about possible future scenarios that fail to anticipate deficiencies with projected plans (see also Shipman and Mumford, 2011). Prozac leaders tend to believe their own highly positive narratives in ways that can leave them ill prepared to deal with problematic events. EPT can also discourage followers from expressing critical comments or suggesting alternative courses of action. The silencing effects of Prozac leadership are all the more likely when followers look to leaders for psychological and material security (Lipman-Blumen, 2000). The foregoing arguments indicate that leadership can silence the anxiety and resistance of followers (Grint, 2010). Subordinates might indeed internalize dominant positive discourses. Alternatively, if they believe that 'difficult' messages will not be well received by leaders, they may censor their views as a way of protecting career, reputation, salary and/or job security.

However, although it is important to recognize that (Prozac) leadership can have silencing effects (Calas and Smircich, 1991) and followers may find it difficult to express more challenging views, employees' internalization of positive discourses should not be overstated. Follower silence may be a consequence of fear (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009) or an act of resigned compliance⁹ and thus more oppositional than it initially appears. Exploring the limits of positive thinking, the next section suggests that followers do not always accept or internalize leaders' upbeat messages and that Prozac leadership is likely to generate a much wider range of responses.

Resisting Prozac leadership

For some time, critical studies of management have emphasized that, despite (and sometimes because of) disciplinary pressures, employees do find ways to express dissent (e.g. Fleming

and Spicer, 2007; Mumby, 2005). Yet, it is only relatively recently that the importance of followers' resistance has been recognized in leadership studies (Banks, 2008; Collinson, 2005, 2006). While subordinates may not have the power or seniority to enact significant change, they may resist, for example, through strikes, working to rule, output restriction, working the system, sabotage and whistleblowing. As Bakhtin (1941) outlined with regard to the carnival, the counter-cultures often created by those in subordinate positions can symbolically invert and reject dominant values and hierarchies (Willis, 1977). In extremis, followers might even (seek to) depose leaders (Mole, 2004). Fleming's (2005) research in an Australian call centre found that an excessively positive corporate culture made workers feel like they were being treated as children, which provoked various oppositional practices.

Some leadership researchers encourage followers to challenge leaders when they believe that dissent can benefit the organization (Chaleff, 2009). Others argue that upward critical communication (Tourish and Robson, 2006) is dangerous and the ramifications of risking dissent can be severe (Collinson, 2006). Studies of whistleblowing, for example, reveal that those who speak 'truth to power' run significant risks (Alford, 2001). Particularly in the context of Prozac leadership, those who offer more critical perspectives risk being labelled as 'negative troublemakers' or 'whingers'. Courage can be redefined as betrayal, and explicit dissent may have damaging effects on an individual's reputation and career, and might even result in dismissal.

In the UK the head of group regulatory risk at Halifax Bank of Scotland (HBOS) was fired in 2004 because he repeatedly warned senior directors that the bank was lending too much, too fast. Paul Moore warned that HBOS was overly focused on an aggressive sales culture that was out of balance with controls and that HBOS was significantly underestimating the risks of lending too much to borrowers who would have difficulty repaying. Three years later his warnings were corroborated as HBOS went to the brink of collapse as a result of financing its lending growth by raising funds on wholesale markets. When financial reserves dried up in 2007, HBOS had to be bailed out by the UK government and then sold to Lloyds Bank.¹⁰

Where employees are concerned to avoid such draconian sanctions, they may seek to express dissent in more disguised ways. They might decide to camouflage their actions through a kind of resistance that 'covers its own tracks' (Scott, 1985). Anticipating the sanctions that overt dissent could provoke, subordinates may engage in self-protective subversions such as absenteeism, foot dragging and disengagement, which are more difficult for leaders to detect (Collinson, 2006). They may also operate in the ambiguous space of 'tempered radicals' who are simultaneously committed to their organization but also to a cause that is in tension with the dominant culture (Meyerson, 2001).

When other avenues of persuasion seem to be exhausted, dissent may be expressed through resignation. For example, in 2003 the UK International Development Secretary Clare Short resigned from the cabinet during the Iraq War in protest at the allies' failure to produce a post-war reconstruction plan for the country. At the Iraq War enquiry in 2010, Short highlighted the highly masculine culture of the male-dominated Blair cabinet, which, she argued, forced through decisions and was hostile to alternative voices. In his recently published memoirs, Tony Blair (2010) conceded that he did not anticipate 'the nightmare' that unfolded in Iraq in the aftermath of war. This acknowledgement seems to vindicate Short's earlier criticisms and exemplifies how Prozac leadership frequently fails to anticipate difficult possibilities.¹¹ The case also illustrates the particular problems that women may face within male-dominated work groups, especially where excessive optimism prevails.

A recurrent theme which has frequently emerged in my own research in UK organizations is that subordinates often detect inconsistencies within and between leaders' positive messages and their practices. Research on two North Sea oil installations found that, despite senior management's upbeat claims about the company's safety performance, many offshore workers did not disclose accidents and near misses (Collinson, 1999). Senior managers in London and Aberdeen were very confident that the accident reporting system operated effectively and that all incidents were reported. They described their commitment to safety as 'unremitting', 'all-embracing' and 'our number one concern.' Proudly describing the company's learning culture, a senior manager stated, 'We've taught them that they won't get penalized because of an accident. All we want to do is learn from any incident so it doesn't happen again.'

Yet, on the platforms workers complained that those who reported safety-related information were penalized with poor assessments (which impacted on pay and employment security). Believing that managers would prefer not to hear about any difficulties related to safety, workers deliberately communicated overly positive messages back up the hierarchy. Responding to a report outlining these findings, corporate executives at the London Head Office expressed disbelief that employees were not disclosing accidents. Assuming that concealment could not occur since this contradicted the learning culture, senior managers' responses illustrated their excessive optimism and distance from offshore practices. This research highlighted the discrepancy between leaders' optimistic belief in open communication and learning, and workers' lived experiences of a platform 'blame culture'.¹²

Research in a UK truck manufacturer owned by a US multinational explored the organizational effects of a highly upbeat corporate culture campaign introduced by the new US executive team (Collinson, 2000, 2011). Concerned to improve trust and communication, the new managers introduced a monthly house magazine. 'Call me Barney' was the US managing director's front page message in its first edition. Emphasizing that 'My door is always open', the MD stated, 'I will be on the assembly line at 7.30 every morning, so please come and talk to me.' Printed on glossy paper, the magazine was filled with positive progress reports, photographs of well-dressed, smiling figures, jokes, and features on employees' leisure activities. The newspaper came to symbolize the new US owners' public commitment to positive and enhanced communication.

However, manual workers greeted the new management's upbeat messages with a great deal of scepticism. They complained that senior management's actions were inconsistent with their positive-sounding words. In their experience, managers did not want to hear suggestions on how to improve organizational practices. Many commented that despite his stated commitment, the managing director had never been seen on the shopfloor at any time of day, let alone 7.30 in the morning. Perceiving the US managers as insincere and manipulative, workers constructed a counter-culture that emphasized their own 'honesty', masculinity and 'practical common sense'. Rather than enhancing trust and communication, the gap between leaders' Prozac messages and the workers' lived experience had the opposite outcome. Yet, leaders remained largely unaware of how their positive messages produced contrary effects on the shopfloor.¹³

Central to the shopfloor's counter-culture was the use of satirical humour as a primary form of dissent. The experience of musician Dave Carroll as a passenger with United Airlines exemplifies how humour can be used effectively to challenge excessively positive corporate public statements. In 2008, Carroll watched in horror from his window seat as baggage

workers at Chicago airport mishandled his \$3,500 Taylor acoustic guitar as it was being loaded into the hold. After nine months of unsuccessful attempts to convince the airline of its responsibility for the damage to his guitar, Carroll wrote and recorded a song, 'United Breaks Guitars'. Posted on YouTube with accompanying spoof video, the song became a massive hit, the largest in Carroll's career. Within 12 months the video had received approximately 9 million hits, and sales of his other recordings also increased considerably. Carroll appeared on nearly every major news outlet and chat show in the US and Canada, in what had become a public relations disaster for United Airlines.

On his website Carroll highlights the discrepancy between the airline's highly positive commitment to quality customer service and its actual response to a customer's problem. During the nine months of repeatedly contacting United Airlines, Carroll experienced 'complete indifference' from United employees, who simply directed him to other departments. As he states, 'The system is designed to frustrate affected customers into giving up their claims.' Despite the company's highly upbeat messages about customer service, employees were unwilling to take Carroll's problems seriously. Belatedly, and only after the damage to United's public image, the managing director of 'customer solutions' telephoned Carroll to apologize. Still espousing a positive message, he asked permission for the YouTube video to be used in internal training and assured Carroll that the organization intended 'to learn from this incident'.

The foregoing examples illustrate how leaders' and managers' positive messages can be at odds with employees' and customers' experiences. They also reveal that when their excessively positive statements are questioned, leaders may be reluctant to hear alternative views, despite their positive claims to the contrary. Remaining physically and/or psychologically detached, they did not question their own excessively positive assumptions. Carroll's experience suggests that the whistleblowing voices of customers (who are external to the organization) may be more effective than those of employees (who are inevitably constrained by employment contracts). It also demonstrates the potential impact of technologies like YouTube in facilitating viral critiques of excessively positive corporate messages. Furthermore, Carroll's case illustrates the potential influence of the media in shaping organizational reputation. Indeed the power and ubiquity of the media and the persistent search for positive marketing coverage are important factors potentially intensifying leaders' preoccupation with (and anxiety about) maintaining positive corporate reputation and external image (Price, 2010).

In addition to customers' dissent, resistance to Prozac leadership may be expressed by shareholders. Rogers et al. (2011) argue that executives' use of overly optimistic disclosures (especially about corporate earnings) increases the risk of the firm being sued by shareholders. Exploring detailed litigation data in 165 lawsuits (2003–2008), they found that the disclosures of sued companies were consistently more optimistic than those of non-sued firms in similar circumstances. In 91% of cases, plaintiffs targeted optimistic language when bringing actions against a firm. Typically, investors alleged that their expectations about a company's value were improperly raised by upbeat corporate messages. The researchers conclude that executives' optimistic language increases litigation risk. To summarize, the foregoing examples illustrate how leaders' search for 'sunny' news and positive reputation can become an intensely contested terrain. Leaders' highly selective focus on constructing an overly positive image and/or on intentionally concealing 'bad news' has the potential to produce significant resistance from employees, customers and shareholders.¹⁴

Excessive positivity in leadership studies

Excessively positive thinking is also evident in leadership research. Studies frequently begin from the assumption that leaders are a source of good and that their efforts invariably produce positive outcomes. Mainstream leadership studies (MLS) are typically framed by a concern to make causal links between leaders' positive contribution and organizational performance and to describe and improve leadership effectiveness. Concentrating on the 'essential' characteristics of 'successful' leaders', many studies seek to identify universal, predictive and scientific laws based on 'objective' measures of observable phenomena using positivist methodologies and quantitative technologies (e.g. psychometric tests, questionnaire surveys and laboratory experiments, often with students). Whilst critiques of heroic, leader-centric models (Gronn, 2002) and of the objectivist assumptions underpinning positivist methodologies are now well established (Lakomski, 2005), another meaning of 'positive-ism' also lies at the heart of mainstream studies.

Over 25 years ago, Meindl et al. (1985) criticized leadership theory and practice for its belief in the excessive potency of leaders. Arguing that romanticized perspectives frequently exaggerate what leaders are able to achieve, Meindl et al. asserted that leaders' contribution to a collective enterprise is inevitably more constrained. A rereading of Meindl et al. suggests that underlying the romanticism evident in many studies is an excessively positive view of leaders as the primary agents of organizational success. Whether focusing on their traits and styles, situations and contingencies, distance and proximity or their emotional intelligence and spirituality, MLS is frequently underpinned by highly positive preconceptions about leaders.

Transformational leadership (TL) is one of the most influential concepts in leadership studies. Central to Burns's (1978) theory was a passionate and well-meaning belief in the transformative power of positive thinking and the pursuit of happiness. Yukl (1999) outlined an important critique of the limitations of TL, but what has been less widely explored is Burns's crucial distinction between 'leaders' and 'power-wielders'. He defined leaders as those who successfully mobilize followers to achieve a collective purpose by engaging their motives. 'Power-wielders', by contrast, were those who use followers for their own purposes and utilize 'brute' power to achieve their ends. He therefore separated and elevated ('positive') leadership over ('negative') power wielding. Arguing that brutal dictators should not be considered to be leaders at all, Burns seems to reproduce the 'bright-sided' discourses critiqued by Ehrenreich and others. Indeed Burns titled a subsequent book *Transforming Leadership: A New Pursuit of Happiness* (2003), reflecting his moral and positive view that leadership can satisfy human wants and alleviate global poverty and the unhappiness that results from disadvantage.

Such optimistic thinking about leadership can indeed be empowering, but when taken to excess it may encourage a reluctance to address more difficult situations and possibilities (in leadership theory as well as practice). Many subsequent studies have developed Burns's ideas about leaders' potential to enhance collective well-being, defuse conflict and satisfy followers' needs (e.g. neo-charismatic leadership models (Bass, 1985)). They have argued that the ability to influence followers will be enhanced by leaders who positively 'engage' and 'validate' followers' identities (e.g. Lord and Brown, 2004). By assuming that leaders invariably produce beneficial outcomes, these theories have tended to purify (Latour, 1993) the concept of leadership to such an extent that it has typically been viewed primarily in terms of its inherently positive 'influence', whilst questions of power, paradox and

contradiction have disappeared from view. There has been a general tendency in MLS to idealize TL, and a reluctance to address issues of power or the contested nature of leadership.

In recent years, this 'positive-ist' emphasis in MLS seems to have become even more pronounced, exemplified by the considerable interest in emotional intelligence, spirituality and neo-charismatic models. In particular, 'authentic leadership' theory (AL) is now established as a primary mainstream research theme (e.g. Avolio and Reichard, 2008; Avolio et al., 2004; Gardner et al., 2005a and 2005b; Gardner et al., 2011; Luthans and Avolio, 2003). Informed by the aforementioned positive scholarship movement, researchers typically depict authentic leaders as dynamic, confident and optimistic visionaries whose authenticity is expressed in their deep self-awareness, transparent decision-making, the veracity, consistency and morality of their words and deeds, and in their concern to engage and develop followers. Authentic leaders' positivity and enthusiasm is viewed as infectious, likely to spread throughout the organization, renewing the optimism of others, particularly through 'positive psychological capital', 'positive moral perspective' and 'positive organizational climate'.

AL can therefore be seen as an updated and idealized version of Burns's TL. Whilst acknowledging this link, some of its leading proponents differentiate AL from TL primarily in terms of its emphasis on leaders' deep knowledge of themselves (Avolio and Gardner, 2005: 324). They argue that authentic leaders display higher levels of self-awareness and much greater reflexive knowledge about their 'true, authentic self'. Fairhurst (2007: 103) questions this assumption that authentic leaders know themselves whilst other leaders do not, and challenges the idea that authentic leaders possess higher levels of self-awareness. She argues that notions of 'genuine' and 'inauthentic' are open to various interpretations. Discussing Linda Wachner (CEO of Warnaco), who uses highly coercive and humiliating strategies in relation to male managers, Fairhurst demonstrates that inauthentic leaders do not necessarily display less self-insight.

By contrast with the Wachner example, AL researchers present few empirical examples of such 'superheroes' and studies tend to remain detached from concrete organizational practices. Reporting on a recent experiment, Norman et al. (2010) seek to provide evidence that 'leaders' positivity' (defined as hope, resilience, optimism and efficacy) and transparency are valuable elements in cultivating followers' trust and in practising authentic leadership within downsizing scenarios. Despite acknowledging that their empirical data are limited by a reliance on hypothetical scenarios using fictitious followers and leaders,¹⁵ the authors argue strongly that followers who perceive their leaders to be positive and transparent are more likely to trust them and believe they are effective. In so doing they fail to consider the possible tensions that can occur between positivity and transparency in leader-follower relations. As argued earlier, focusing on the former can damage the latter in ways that erode followers' trust in leaders. Suffice it to say here, that the current preoccupation with constructing hypothetical and idealized models in contemporary AL theory illustrates the extent to which excessive positivity continues to predominate in leadership studies.¹⁶

It is perhaps no coincidence that such one-sidedly positive approaches tend to be particularly evident in US leadership studies. As an intellectual discipline, leadership studies has always been heavily influenced by US scholarship and, as discussed earlier, the US is the birthplace of positive thinking. The reluctance to address more 'difficult' issues provides one explanation for why, despite their prevalence in leadership practices, critical analyses of EPT in leadership dynamics have been so rare. Indeed highly positive conceptualizations of both

TL and AL seem to mirror (rather than to examine critically) Prozac leaders' disinclination to consider alternative possibilities, as illustrated in earlier discussions about the financial meltdown, the attack on New York, the Hurricane Katrina floods and the Iraq War, as well as on the oil rigs, in the truck factory and at United Airlines. In their reluctance to address more 'difficult' issues regarding, for example, power, identity, conflict, paradox and contradiction, some mainstream studies appear to both presuppose and reproduce excessively positive views of leaders. In this sense, they mirror the EPT that in practice can render Prozac leaders ill prepared to deal with unexpected events.

Conclusion

Positivity is now so embedded, ubiquitous and taken for granted in popular Western cultures that it is rarely questioned in theory or practice. Being positive can indeed be empowering and in many cases is preferable to its bi-polar opposite of sadness or depression. Positive narratives in leadership can be transformational, facilitating innovation and enhancing teamwork. Such outcomes are particularly likely when employees are engaged in strategic dialogues and when they have confidence and trust in leaders. Often possessing detailed knowledge of local practices, followers have the potential to make important contributions to strategic deliberations. However, positive narratives and discourses may also simultaneously conceal and obscure underlying power asymmetries and top-down control strategies.

This article has suggested that excessive positivity is an important medium through which power, influence and identity can be enacted in leadership dynamics. When taken to excess, positivity in the guise of Prozac leadership is characterized by several inter-related features. First, it often reinforces leaders' reluctance to address difficult problems, and a tendency for them to dismiss disturbing news and future difficult possibilities, leaving little or no space for more questioning perspectives. In this sense, Prozac narratives encourage leaders to believe their own excessively positive messages,¹⁷ whilst simultaneously confirming their identities as leaders. This in turn can render leaders surprised and ill prepared when problematic events occur. Second, rather than facilitating open communication, positive discourses can have disciplinary effects. Prozac leaders make it clear to those around them that they prefer only positive upward communication. This can suffocate open debate and have silencing effects on followers, discouraging them from raising problems or acknowledging mistakes. Third, when leaders' positive narratives are disconnected from the economic and/or social realities of everyday life, it can fuel followers' scepticism and suspicion, damaging trust, communication and learning cultures. Finally, whilst leaders need to consider the possible consequences of their decisions and actions, EPT reinforces the likelihood that they will not do so and increases the possibility that lessons will not be learnt and mistakes will be repeated. Accordingly, Prozac leadership, whether in corporate, political or other settings, can damage performance by eroding trust, communication, learning and preparedness.

Regardless of whether Prozac leadership is fuelled by wishful thinking, naivety, hubris or more deliberately manipulative motives (or a combination of these), the foregoing empirical examples demonstrate that subordinates can perceive Prozac leaders to be contradictory, remote and unwilling to consult, and may dismiss their excessive optimism as insincere and manipulative. In such contexts, Prozac leadership can either silence followers or provoke more overt resistance. It may reinforce the possibility that alternative perspectives are silenced, dissenting voices are marginalized and upward messages are disguised. Frustrated by leaders' reluctance to listen, followers may engage in oppositional practices

such as withholding information (e.g. the offshore case), restricting output (e.g. the truck factory case), publicly highlighting inconsistencies (e.g. the United Airlines case) and/or suing firms (e.g. the shareholders case).

In sum, this article has sought to contribute to critical studies of leadership by naming and examining Prozac leadership as a potentially important contemporary dynamic. It has examined the under-researched significance of EPT in reproducing and obscuring how power asymmetries and identities can be enacted in practice. The paper has also addressed the disciplinary and potentially contradictory organizational effects of Prozac leadership. Acknowledging that 'positive' and 'negative' definitions of power are always socially constructed, situated in time and space, and contested attributions that can be interpreted in numerous ways, this article has suggested that the tensions and contradictions inherent in Prozac leadership can become significant barriers to effective leadership, management and organization. Finally, it also examined how excessively positive assumptions frequently inform not only leadership practices, but also mainstream leadership theories. As an intellectual discipline, leadership research has always been heavily influenced by US scholarship. It is therefore unsurprising that (excessively) positive narratives have come to pervade leadership theory as well as practice. What is perhaps more noteworthy is that critiques of this inter-relationship have been so few and far between.

In recent years there have emerged within leadership studies two clearly discernible responses to the numerous revelations of executive corruption and unethical practices in Western societies. A small number of researchers have sought to specify the meaning of 'toxic' (Padilla et al., 2007), 'bad' (Kellerman, 2004) and 'destructive' (Schyns and Hansbroughn, 2010) leadership, while many more studies have focused on highly positive models of authentic leadership. These research themes have remained largely discrete and separate from one another. Questioning such bi-polar tendencies, this article suggests that leaders' excessive positivity, their claims to authenticity and possible toxic practices may not be so distinct or easily separable, and indeed might actually be inextricably linked within specific leadership dynamics. It is hoped that this article may encourage further critical studies of Prozac leadership and its ambiguous, shifting and contradictory conditions, processes and consequences. Research could for example explore the possible interrelations between excessive positivity and excessive executive pay.

Notes

1. In 1987 Tony Blair's 'New Labour' Government was elected in the UK on a wave of hope and collective elation. Labour's campaign song 'Things can only get better' was a popular tune by D:Ream which epitomized the desire for change gripping the nation at that time. This optimism gradually gave way to disappointment, and a sense that 'things could indeed get worse'. A similar euphoria characterized the US election of Barak Obama in 2008. As the first black president, Obama was viewed by many as a transcendent political leader who could overcome the deep divisions of race, class, and party. Euphoria and hope were ubiquitous. Here again, after followers' initial euphoria and optimism, disillusionment subsequently set in. Stewart and Knaus (2011) describe how promises of a better future have also repeatedly reoccurred in the context of the war in Afghanistan. They document how since 2004 different generals and politicians have predicted and promised that the forthcoming new year's military campaign will be 'decisive' and each year this turned out not to be the case.

2. Metaphor is frequently used in everyday communication (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), as well as in social (Hyman, 1962; Goffman, 1959) and organizational theory (Cornelissen et al., 2010; Morgan, 1997). Recently, metaphor has also been applied in leadership studies (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011), where leaders have been viewed through the metaphors of 'saints', 'gardeners', 'bullies', and 'commanders'. Sveningsson and Blom (2011) view 'leaders as buddies' which has some links with the focus here. However, in their research organization an egalitarian ethic is predominant, not only because of the highly skilled and autonomous nature of the employees studied, but also because the study was conducted in Sweden where equality and informality are particularly valued: contexts which encourage 'buddyfication'.
3. Questioning traditional orthodoxies, CMS exponents draw on a plurality of theoretical perspectives, from structuralism and labour process theory, to feminism, deconstructionism, postcolonial theory and environmentalism. Whereas CLS recognizes that, for good or ill, leadership dynamics exercise significant power and influence over contemporary organizational and societal processes, CMS tends to ignore the study of leadership, focusing more narrowly on management (see Collinson, 2011).
4. Discourse analysis has sometimes carried with it the 'occupational hazard' of overstating the determining power of discourse and underplaying material dimensions. Discourses are rarely separable from economic, political and cultural dimensions, which are typically in dialectical relationship with one another (see also Mumby, 2008). Equally, whilst discourse is a form of practice, it is also important to recognize that discourses and practices can be in tension. This is often the case in relation to Prozac leadership.
5. This subtitle refers to the 1944 US song by Johnny Mercer 'Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive', the full chorus of which is: 'Accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative, and latch on to the affirmative, don't mess with Mister In-Between.' Sung in the style of a sermon, it encapsulates the enormous US cultural investment in positivity. The song has been covered by famous artists such as Bing Crosby, Ella Fitzgerald, Perry Como, Aretha Franklin and Sam Cooke, and has also appeared in many TV shows, films and commercials.
6. Illustrating its perceived continued relevance, Carnegie's book has recently been updated to take into account the digital age of social networking sites, email and the internet (Cole, 2011).
7. The statement by the CEO of Goldman Sachs that he is a banker 'doing God's work' is a vivid and literal illustration of leaders' evangelical tendencies.
8. Bush Jnr was a cheerleader in prep school, and as Ehrenreich (2009) observed, cheerleading could be considered the 'athletically inclined ancestor' of contemporary positive thinking.
9. There is now a considerable literature on silence in organizations (e.g. Blackman and Sadler-Smith, 2009; Morrison and Milliken, 2003). Studies reveal how the silencing of those in subordinate positions can occur through acts of power (Brown and Coupland, 2005) that limit conflict (Perlow and Repenning, 2009) and exercise control by reproducing inequalities such as gender (Simpson and Lewis, 2005) and race (Bell et al., 2003).
10. Moore was replaced by a sales manager with no experience of risk management or regulation. This was a personal appointment by the CEO against the wishes of the other directors. Moore was subsequently awarded substantial damages for unfair dismissal. In 2009, Moore presented his evidence to a Treasury select committee where he explained that he had also raised these matters with the Financial Services Authority, but to no avail.
11. In the UK Tony Blair's penchant for smiling was a distinctive feature of his generally upbeat, positive persona, which was impersonated and lampooned by satirists on national TV and ridiculed by his political enemies. Suffice it to say here that during his premiership Blair's beaming smile seemed to symbolize his highly optimistic leadership approach.
12. In 2010, the Deepwater Horizon explosion killed 11 workers and injured 16 others, generating a massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, as well as producing catastrophic effects for the BP organization. The findings of the US Presidential Commission on the disaster highlighted

- leaders' distance from the drilling operation, their ineffective monitoring of platform safety practices and over-reliance on the sub-contracting and outsourcing of platform functions. These could all be said to reflect an over-optimistic approach at executive level toward platform safety. Relatedly, leaders' excessively positive decision-making may have been a contributory factor in a number of other major organizational disasters such as the Challenger space shuttle explosion (see also Reed, this issue).
13. Similar patterns of shopfloor cynicism about corporate communications were examined by Llewellyn and Harrison (2006).
 14. During the Iraq War US military spokespeople criticized journalists for being 'too negative' in their coverage. Yet, US soldiers blogged that official casualty figures were significantly underestimated.
 15. The authors acknowledge that participants in the experiment were asked to make judgments about hypothetical downsizing scenarios and fictitious leaders or followers. They only had the limited information provided by the researchers, trust was based on first impressions, there were no real consequences of leaders' actions, and face-to-face interaction was absent, as the experiment was conducted on-line (Norman et al., 2010: 360). In short, the project fundamentally altered the typically asymmetrical power relations of organization.
 16. For other critiques of 'authentic leadership' see Shaw (2010) and Ford and Harding (2011). For broader critiques of authenticity in organizations see Lindholm (2008) and Fleming (2009).
 17. In so far as leaders themselves may be most influenced by their own excessively positive narratives, this argument has some similarities with 'the dominant ideology thesis' outlined by Abercrombie et al. (1980).

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David Collinson is Professor of Leadership and Organization at Lancaster University Management School. David is the founding co-editor of the *Leadership* journal and founding co-organizer of The International Conference on Studying Leadership. He has published extensively on critical approaches to leadership, organization and management. Recent publications include: *The Sage Handbook of Leadership Studies* (with Alan Bryman, Keith Grint, Brad Jackson, Mary Uhl-Bien), *Dialectics of Leadership*; *Re-thinking Followership*; *Critical Leadership Studies*; *Satire, Humour and Leadership*; and *Blended Leadership: Employee Perspectives on Effective Leadership in the UK Further Education Sector*.