The Lack of Power or the Power of Lack in Leadership as a Discursively Constructed Identity

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Abstract

The study uses a psychoanalytic framework to explore how leadership identities are constructed. It advances the idea that leadership identities are imaginary constructions that invariable fail reiterating a lack of being. Empirical material consisting of interviews with 15 leaders is used to explore the productive role this lack plays. The study suggests that leadership identities are always already subverted by unconscious desire and therefore less powerful than we might think with regard to imposing structures on others but also much more powerful than we might think as liberating struggles with leaders' imaginary selves.

Key Words: leadership, discourse, psychoanalysis, Lacan, lack

Introduction

The idea that leadership is associated with lack is not a new one. Prior research suggests that leadership lacks meaning and relevance (Barker, 1997; 2001; Dubrin, 2001; Fairhurst, 2007; House and Aditay, 1997; Wright, 1996; Yukl, 1989) and that as a phenomenon leadership, despite or because of its popularity, is much to do about nothing at all (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a;b). Moreover, while leadership has been found to be a desirable and popular identity constructed by individuals in organizations through narratives and discourse (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a;b; Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Collinson, 2005; Fairhurst, 2007; Ford, 2006; Ford and Lawler, 2007; Harding, Lee, Ford and Learmonth, 2011), leadership talk in practice is often banal, cliché ridden and devoid of substance (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a;b).

This leaves one to wonder how such a lacking phenomenon can ever be as popular or, indeed, as powerful as both proponents and critics claim it to be. While proponents consider it the panacea of our time, the cure for all that ails us in organizations and beyond (Autry, 2001; Goffee and Jones, 2005), critics advance the idea that leadership discourse is a powerful tool for imposing ideologies and existing power structures on employees (Bowles, 1997; Fletcher, 2004; Ford, 2006; Gemmill and Oakley, 1992; Kallifatides, 2001; Knights and Willmott, 1992; Learmonth, 2005).

The aim of this study is to add an entirely new perspective on this debate, one that explores the productive role of lack, how it both undercuts and enhances power and why lack may help us understand the continued mystery and romance of leadership (Meindl, Ehrlich and Dukerich, 1985), its sacred nature (Grint, 2010) and the fantasies it generates (Hirschhorn, 1999) that both imprison (Kets De Vries, 1998) and empower us

(Hirschhorn, 1999; Kets De Vries, 1999). By following an approach to the study of leadership recently called for by Alvesson and Spicer (2012) the present research examines more closely how leaders construct identities by drawing on existing leadership discourse (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a;b; Collinson, 2005; Fairhurst, 2007; Ford, 2006; Ford and Lawler, 2007; Harding, et al.; 2011).

Specifically, my aim is to do so from a psychoanalytic perspective and to understand both the conscious and unconscious dynamics of how leadership identities are constructed and how they invariably fail. Here I extend but also take a different stance from prior psychoanalytic theorizing on leadership, which has provided rich insight into the fantasies that leadership generates for leaders and followers, what role these fantasies play in organizations and how they provide productive as well as destructive relationships and subjective spaces (Gabriel, 1997, Hirschhorn, 1999; Kets De Vries, 1991a, 1998; 1999; Schwartz, 1990). In this study, I examine how fantasies are constructed but also, importantly, how they fail and reiterate fundamental lack.

By building on prior organizational research drawing on the work of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (Arnaud, 2002; 2003a; Arnaud and Vanheule, 2007; Bicknell and Liefooghe, 2010: Contu, Driver and Jones, 2010; Cremin, 2009; Driver, 2005; 2008; 2009a;b;c; 2010; Fotaki, 2009; Harding, 2007; Jones and Spicer, 2005; Roberts, 2005; Stavrakakis, 2008; Vanheule, Lievrouw and Verhaeghe, 2003) and examining leadership identity construction as an important struggle with who leaders are and what they desire, I take seriously the concerns of those I study (Alevsson and Spicer, 2012). I also explore breaking points and discontinuities and pursue emancipatory ends (Alevsson and Spicer, 2012) by focusing particularly on how such struggles are liberating

and empowering for the individuals who are constructing leadership identities and perhaps for those who participate in their social construction (Meindl, 1995).

As I will explain later, one of Lacan's unique contributions is to provide an understanding of the role of fundamental lack in human subjectivity (1977a;b; 1988a;b; 1991; 2001). This lack is not a lack in the ordinary sense of the word, as in one may lack resources or time, things a leader might complain about at length but might eventually obtain, i.e. a lack of having or avoir. Rather this lack is more fundamental. It is a permanent state of not having something that one never had and never will have, a feeling of lack that cannot be accurately attached to any specific thing (although we keep trying), something we might refer to as a lack of being, a manque a etre. Lacan helps us understand this lack and points out perhaps surprisingly that it plays a constructive and productive role in driving us to preserve our desire and in liberating us temporarily from the illusions that entrap the self.

From this perspective, I examine leadership not just as a fantasy that subjugates the self (Roberts, 2005) but, importantly, as a fantasy that also empowers the self as an emancipatory experience of fundamental lack. Here, I take up the idea that identity construction is not just a psychological process but is key to understanding political processes and power in organizations (Roberts, 2005). I underline that the imaginary constructions of ourselves are what subjugate us to power through our need to have them validated by others, which has been called the attraction of the mirror (Roberts, 2005). Leadership in this sense exerts power by holding those who construct leadership identities captive to the mirror. However, it also has the power to liberate as those constructions are always already undermined by and reiterate lack.

As I will explore further, it is this lack that might provide and even widen an emancipatory space for all who participate in the construction of leadership identities. To put it differently, the sacred, mystery, romance, and even the continued attraction of the fantasy of leadership (Grint, 2010; Hirschhorn, 1999; Meindl, et al., 1985) may rest not in what the fantasy is but what it is not. The importance and power of lack in leadership identities I explore here focus our attention on leaders' desires and the desires that they inspire but fail to fulfill for followers (Harding et al., 2011) and importantly for themselves.

In taking this perspective on leadership, I underline that it is very much a narcissistic process (Schwartz, 1990) and one that has political ramifications not by virtue of reducing the political to the psychological, something of which psychoanalysis is often accused (Hirschhorn, 1999). Rather, I attempt to show how the political is crucially informed by the psychoanalytical (Zizek and Daly, 2004) and how our understanding of the power of leadership discourse is perhaps radically altered by insight into how this discourse is used in the construction of leadership selves.

The emancipatory potential I hope to emphasize does not however come from overcoming lack, something Lacan believed to be impossible (1988a), nor from exploiting lack as that which renders leadership discourse weaker (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012), but rather from according lack its proper significance and from increasing awareness of it as a powerful struggle with the self and its desires. We are all inescapably bound to this struggle (Lacan, 1988a;b), so emancipation, as an act of unsettling any other-prescribed order, cannot arise from choosing to find the imaginary and the mirror we so desperately seek less attractive, as some have suggested (Roberts, 2005).

However, emancipation can and does arise, whenever we pay attention to all the holes that riddle the mirror, our self-constructions, the narratives of who we are and what we want. The holes as disruptions of our speech point to what is not there, a lack that refuses to go away. If we notice and amplify disruptions, as some have suggested (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012), we find through them not that leadership discourse exerts less power than we think (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012) but rather that it is the holes that render leadership identities not only desirable and impossible to achieve but enjoyable for all who participate in their construction.

The holes in the leadership mirror are enjoyable in the sense of Lacanian jouissance as an assertion of who leaders are not and of how leaders and by extension perhaps followers are not trapped in an imaginary order. By extension the holes may therefore provide a transitional space, both in the general Winnecottian sense as a source of human creativity and how this has been applied to leadership in particular as a space where growth of leaders and followers is possible (Kets De Vries, 1999). This space would not be a finite destination but a continual journey during which we are always already free to desire and so to be powerful and creative.

The paper proceeds as follows. An overview of Lacanian ideas is followed by the introduction of the empirical material. I then examine how individuals narratively construct leader identities and how fantasies of the self are erected by drawing on the discourse of leadership. I then investigate instances where such constructions fail and lack is reiterated. The study concludes by outlining the contributions of this perspective for leadership identities and power in organizations.

Lacanian Lack and the Construction of the Self

For Lacan lack plays a central role in understanding subjectivity (1977a;b; 1988a;b; 1991; 2001). So when Lacan writes that: "A lack is encountered by the subject in the Other" (Lacan, 1977b: 214), what he is referring to is that we express who we are and what we want in language but that this language is fundamentally alienating (Lacan, 1988b: 210). Specifically, the discourse we draw on to express what we desire is not of our own making (Lacan, 1977b: 206). Instead it is the conventions of language itself handed down through generations of others, a symbolic order, the order of an Other as Lacan calls it (1977b: 206). A sense that something is fundamentally missing in us and from our lives drives everything we do and say. Moreover, this sense of lack is not a personal shortcoming we can correct. Rather, even with psychoanalysis, the best we can do is to recognize lack as a structural condition and find a momentary release or "freedom from a narcissistic image" (Lacan, 1988a: 285).

To better understand why and how this is so, it is important to understand how Lacan conceptualizes subjectivity and what we might refer to as our conscious self or identity. This is a complex topic that has been discussed extensively in Lacan's own oeuvre (1977a;b; 1988a;b; 1991; 2001) and in a number of interpretations by clinicians (i.e. Benvenuto and Kennedy, 1986; Elliott and Frosh, 1995; Fink, 1995; 2000; 2004; Muller and Richardson, 1982; Nobus, 2002; Ragland, 1996; Vanheule, 2006; Verhaeghe, 2001). I will draw on these in my review here and attempt to make Lacan's thoughts as accessible as possible knowing that this is often a difficult task due to the complexity and intentional open-endedness (Fink, 2004: 65) of his writing (see also Arnaud, 2002;

2003a;b; Arnaud and Vanheule, 2007; Driver 2009 a;b; Fotaki, 2009 for further introductions).

To Lacan the only time in our existence when we may not be marked by lack is in the womb where we are whole and completely fulfilled (Verhaeghe, 2001: 24). We have no desire because nothing is missing. We have what we need without ever having to articulate what we want. When we are born, however, we have left, what Lacan called, the order of the real (Lacan, 1988b: 219), our unmitigated and undifferentiated connection to and experience of the world. We have entered instead, what Lacan called, the order of the symbolic. This is the "world of the symbol" (Lacan, 1988b: 210) through which we exist as social beings, the order of language, signifiers and linguistic conventions (Fink, 95: 5). And it is through language and in ordinary speech (Lacan, 1977b: 245) that we must articulate what we want in hopes of fulfilling our desires. This is a mediated and fundamentally alienating process (Lacan, 1988b: 210). We only learn from others and through the words of others what we desire and this does not seem to fulfill what we unconsciously desire. So when we articulate our desire, it always turns out in the end to elude us, to be a "desire for nothing" (Lacan, 1988b: 211). We try to overcome this lack by turning the self into a definable object that knows who it is and what it wants and can therefore obtain it.

However, the process of constructing ourselves in this objectifying way consciously through language leads us to be subjugated to and stuck in, what Lacan referred to, as the imaginary order (Lacan, 1988b: 177). In this order, we construct concrete selves with concrete desires and feel powerful when we articulate who we are and obtain what we say we want. The problem is that the imaginary order is a

misrepresentation and an illusion (Fink, 1995: 7). It is the illusion that through the symbolic order we can regain our lost connection to the perfect union with the mother (Muller and Richardson, 1982: 22) in the real and again feel whole and integrated. Yet all we obtain in the symbolic order is an encounter with an alienated self (Lacan, 1977b: 236) and others, or, what Lacan referred to as, the big Other also marked by lack.

Every time we feel sure that we have fulfilled a desire, we find out that there is something missing still. We want more. We want something else. We want what eludes symbolization, or what Lacan referred to as the objet a (1977b: 239), the surplus pleasure that is missing from our signifiers, the "piece of the real in the symbolic" (Ragland, 1996: 200), the thing we really desire that they are placeholders for (Benvenuto and Kennedy, 1986: 176). We cannot say what but we know something is not right. In fact, at some level, we have an overwhelming desire that is impossible to know. But it is there nonetheless (Lacan, 1988b: 210).

This is precisely the lack that Lacan thought was central to our existence (Lacan, 1977b: 215). The difference between Lacanian analysis (Lacan, 2001) and other therapeutic approaches, including Freud's, was that for Lacan this lack could not be filled. There would never come a day when we could learn to understand our fundamental desire or even who we are (Lacan, 1977b: 218). That is, there would never come a day when we could consciously identify a specific desire and take steps to fulfill it that would make us feel fulfilled. This is because what we lack has become submerged in our unconscious and who we are as subjects of the unconscious cannot be accessed through language. Therefore, trying to articulate consciously what our unconscious desires are only leads us to imaginary constructions which invariably fail as our

unconscious asserts itself and tells us that this is not "it" again, or as Lacan put it, we are confronted again that what we want or who we think we are turns out to be "a gift of shit" (Lacan, 1977b: 268).

The fascinating insight provided by Lacan is that our connection to the self as subject of the unconscious lies in our failures of speech and our failed imaginary constructions of what we want. It is in our recognition of lack. What Lacan suggests listening to in any conversation is to the ambiguities, tangents, misconstructions, omissions and other rhetoric creations (Benvenuto and Kennedy, 1986: 13) indicating that we are not who we say we are and do not want what we say we want. That is, the analyst tries to bring to the surface the moments when subjects alternately liberate and subject themselves to signifiers (Lacan, 1977b: 276).

In listening to such failures of speech we have the opportunity to come as close to the real as we can ever come, a feeling Lacan referred to as jouissance (1988a: 223), a libidinal feeling not to be confused with enjoyment (Fink, 2004: 157), but understood more as an experience similar to our initial wholeness (in vitro) made present by its absence (Arnaud, 2003b). So jouissance is a bittersweet pleasure at encountering lack and therefore of being momentarily liberated from our alienation (Lacan, 1977b: 216) in the imaginary order and experiencing the power of desire (Lacan, 1977b: 218). We have opportunities to experience jouissance every time we become aware of how our unconscious desire disrupts our conscious constructions (Lacan, 1988a: 284), when we are happy enough that what we thought would cure us failed again (Lacan, 1988b: 241). At moments when we amplify this we recognize that our desire is powerful and creative (Fink, 2004: 62) and will not be subdued as an object of the ego. Therefore, it is lack

through which we obtain "a sense of self" (Lacan, 1988b: 223) asserting ourselves as subjects of the unconscious, free of the imaginary, free of any order, to experience desire for desire itself (Lacan, 1977b: 243).

Empirical Material

Recognizing moments in our ordinary speech when lack surfaces, to Lacan, is not an activity confined to the analytic situation (Arnaud, 2002: 708). Rather it is a potentially emancipatory project for all human beings (Glynos and Stravakakis, 2002: 73). As such, the empirical material I examine for this study is purposefully not analytical in nature. That is, I am not examining transcripts of leaders undergoing analysis or even attempting to gain analytic insights. Instead, I am examining the ordinary speech in organizations where Lacanian analytic insights are appropriately applied (Arnaud, 2002) and doing so specifically in view of the everyday conversations through which leadership identity is commonly constructed (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a;b).

As I am looking at ordinary speech, through which Lacan thought we commonly construct the self (Lacan, 1977b: 245), I am also purposefully not looking at complete case histories, stories or literary performances, but rather at potentially fragmented, disjointed and incomplete identity narratives (Ford et al., 2007) and the signifiers, words and phrases as they slide around in the symbolic, the signifying chain (Lacan, 1977b: 206).

The narratives were collected during a class project for a graduate course I taught on leadership. Students were asked to interview one individual who constructs his or her identity through leadership discourse (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003b; Shamir, Dayan-Horesh, and Adler, 2005). The individuals interviewed were not students in my course

nor did I know or interview them personally. The purpose of the assignment was to examine the meanings attached to leadership based on first-hand accounts that could be discussed among students in the course and to conduct research on how leadership identities are constructed in ordinary conversations. This was also one of the reasons why I did not conduct the interviews as I did not wish to co-construct such identities as a mutual act of becomingness from a Lacanian perspective (Harding, 2009). Rather I wanted to observe how this was done in an ordinary situation, not with a view toward objectivity as of course I still co-construct the interviewees' identities now in how I perform the story in this paper (Boje et al., 1999), but rather with a view toward taking seriously the concerns of those I study while also having the ability to suspiciously engage with their narratives (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012).

Students were asked to share the study's purpose with their interviewees and to obtain permission from interviewees to participate in the research, be tape-recorded and referred to in later analyses guaranteeing their anonymity by removing any identifying information in published findings. Students were provided with basic instructions regarding qualitative research focusing on what narratives or stories are and how they convey subjective experience rather than facts (Gabriel, 2000). They were also asked to engage with the interviewees as a "fellow traveler" (Gabriel, 1998: 137) letting them talk as undisturbed as possible with occasional prompts to inquire about meaning. The students tape-recorded their interviews and provided transcripts.

15 students were in the course and all of their transcripts are included in this study. Each narrative contains an average of 260 lines for a total of 3904 lines of text. The narratives are referred to by number from 1 to 15 and line number from the

transcript. For instance (2/17-19) would refer to narrative 2, lines 17 to 19. The narrators were given pseudonyms. 13 narrators are male, 2 female. 2 of the narrators hold the position of corporate chairman and/or CEO, 2 narrators are business owners, 4 narrators hold senior or mid-level managerial positions in corporations. Other positions include general manager of a professional sports team, city mayor, head of a department and head coach at a school, president of a local government organization, director of a church and member of State parliament.

The narratives were interpreted based loosely on reflexive methodology (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) in an iterative process in which I tried to go from surface, conscious meanings toward deeper, less conscious ones beginning with a first reading of the interviews, then a closer reading for imaginary constructions, followed by an exploration of these constructions as encounters with lack. I first familiarized myself with the narratives by reading all interviews once and assigning line numbers to the text. To engage further with the data (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000), I also picked out pieces of information such as gender and industry and followed this with a hermeneutic reading (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) focusing on themes like what leadership means to the narrators. I then read the narratives several times (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) in view of how meaning may have collapsed and imaginary constructions were ruptured by contradictions, ambiguities, inconsistencies, expressions of seemingly opposing desires (Lacan, 1988b: 306), in short, fundamental lack.

As a contribution to reflexive leadership research (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a), the empirical material is meant to be seen here as one argument in a debate rather than valid proof of a particular finding (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000: 276). Moreover,

it should be noted that leadership identity as described through these interpretations is not a clearly defined object but may, at best, be seen as contestable co-constructions among a number of voices (Hardy, 2001) including the narrators, the students who interviewed them as well as my and others' subsequent interpretations that continue to perform the narratives over time (Boje et al., 1999).

Leadership Identity and Lack

Before I explore how leadership identities are imaginary constructions that inevitably fail as they reiterate fundamental lack, I examine how they are constructed in the first place. As individuals were asked to talk about themselves as leaders, it is not surprising that the narratives would reflect what seems to characterize much of the fantasy of leadership (Kets De Vries, 1991a, 1999) or, as some have suggested, a narcissistic process (Schwartz, 1990), or in Lacanian thought simply the function of ordinary speech as an effort to construct an imaginary self (Lacan, 1977b: 245). The narrators seemed to do just that by attempting to define who they are as leaders. They drew on what prior research has identified as a common discursive resource (Hardy, 2001) namely to construct a kind of leader biography or life story (Shamir et al., 2005: 15) to define who they are. For example, all 15 narrators provide some history or background showing their leadership development over time. They reference "my development as a leader" (15/46), "my development of becoming a leader" (11/15), "I began to form my own individual leadership style" (8/11), and "I became a leader" (12/29).

The narrators also constructed their imaginary, i.e. their consciously constructed, desire by referring to all they want to be as a leader in the context of how they define

leadership. Here again they draw on a common discursive resource (Hardy, 2001) as suggested by prior research, namely to build leadership identities from "fashionable versions" (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a: 366) and thereby to reproduce popular leadership themes, such as the development of shared purpose and vision (e.g. Kotter, 1990; Senge, 1990) or setting direction (Yukl, 1989). Ralph explains: "Leadership can be defined…[as] the buck stops here. It's the person who's, um, who's in charge, um, who has the final say" (10/ 167-169) and Mark explains: "I have to try and lead the business in the right direction now so that it will continue to grow and prosper" (9/8-9). Steve suggests: "Overall I would say leadership is…having a sense of vision for that organization" (5/14-15) and David states: "I think leadership…means to set the vision and to collaborate with people in the company to achieve that vision" (8/49-50).

In addition to defining an imaginary self as a leader who sets the direction or vision, the narrators also described themselves relative to lessons learned. Rick explains how he has struggled with knowing who he is:

> I have several times gotten involved or gotten confused with what I do and who I am. And those are two very distinguished things that you should not lose sight of who you are. What you do is not who you are. So, anyhow, that's with regret I say that but hopefully a lesson learned. I would add one other thing that may sound trivial but truly is important that you are happy doing what you are doing… if not you need to be where you would be happy because life is so short. (6: 90-93)

John describes that he has learned to be more realistic:

> I think one of the most important lessons that I have learned in being a leader is to try to set realistic goals for what you can accomplish and try your best to accomplish those goals…it's all about the journey. You will never reach your ultimate goal, and if you do, then maybe you should set some other goals, it's just a constant journey. You need to be realistic with yourself. For me, I need to have a smile on my face, a sense of humor, and not take myself too seriously along the way. (14: 223-242)

Finally, Ron describes that he has learned that being a leader is to be dissatisfied:

> I ran after being there 10 years…I was a leader…and they treated me that way. Well, I probably took that a little too much and the last I ran I did not really work that hard and that was one reason I got beat…I learned that I needed not to sit down and rest on your butt…I think since then I've done some leadership things and I always think, ok, I'm here because people expect me to produce and you know after a long time maybe I got tired. Rather than get beat out at something, you ought to step aside and let somebody who has the energy…to want to do it. I think as a leader…and everyone that I have ever known…has this little something different from a lot of other people and that is you're never completely satisfied. You always have this desire to move a little bit farther forward with what you're doing. (7: 324-339).

Ron alludes to some key things here. As he constructs himself as a leader who can "produce", he also points out that a leader has "something a little different" and that this something has to do with desire. While this fits well with the idea that leadership is reiterates lack because it is an objet a, something impossible to obtain, and therefore necessarily about the lack of fulfilling one's desire, it is important to keep in mind that what is referred to here is still a lack of having not the lack of being that Lacan suggests is key to understanding human subjectivity. While I take seriously Ron's concerns (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012) for what he has learned and believes in, it is important to point out that this, according to Lacan, has rendered Ron no less alienated and no less trapped in the imaginary order than any of the other narrators who construct imaginary selves by believing they have attained what they desire.

In order to become aware of instances of emancipation (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012) and a lack of being when the imaginary is unsettled by unconscious desire (Lacan, 1988a: 284), we need to delve deeper. Specifically, I need to move from a broad view of the narratives in which we get a sense of the overall imaginary self of this or that leader to a more detailed view in which we can see subtle discontinuities like brush strokes of a

painting noticed when we zoom in close. Before I examine instances of lack in the following narrative, I first present it as a broad, perhaps coherent, picture in which we can see a substantial part of the imaginary construction of this leader, Phil, who constructs an imaginary self around the lessons he has learned, his development and core values:

> I would count, um, development as a leader…obviously there's a lot of, uh, there's a lot of catch phrases and a lot of books that may say things about experience and things like that, and they do, they have a big help there. I would tell you for me, though, um, you know my…my walk as a Christian, um, would be, um, the defining moment in my development as a leader and as a person…The um leading people defining moment would have been, oh, probably three or four years ago and just had an experience, honestly, with a problem employee and, uh, really struggled with how to manage that. He was older that I am and was older than I was at the time, been in the corporation for twenty-something years at that point, and it's never fun to do that with anyone, and it's easy to vilify people for not, uh, doing their jobs, and actually, it was probably less about him doing his job than him having, um, attitudinal type of issues, and so, long story short, he's doing well today; he doesn't work for the company anymore…at times I felt really, um, inadequate and even feel like I failed him, not that probably ultimately he needed to do something else for the good of him and the corporation, but, um, I think it could have been handled better and so today, if I had to do it all over again, I would be a lot more direct; I would, um, communicate a lot better to him and to applying about what's going on and probably wouldn't rely on them [HR] as much, um, because I felt like I waited around, and I think that made things worse. Okay, so that's kind of a personnel one, and, um, by the way that was few and far between for us as problem people, I mean I had great staff, um, as many as twenty-five to thirty professional people working for me, so not meaning to cast a bad light on anyone…and I'm probably overlapping into some other questions here…but that's kind of something I've learned…Before we started talking about this, I, uh, I tried to think, and, uh, you know this is a lot of off the cuff here, so not a lot of prep time on that question…I mean, I obviously read books on leadership and then, as I referenced earlier, I would tell you I think a lot about, you know, Godly leadership and spiritual leadership, so you know, um, consideration of other people and servant leadership, um, are the first kinds of things I think of, and so not any dictatorial, um, sit behind a desk and bark out commands; I don't view that as leadership, and, um, you know, maybe this isn't part of this question, but notice a lot of differentiation between generations on what leadership means (pauses) because I work with some people who think that that is it, that it is to sit behind a desk, and, um, you know, have someone print your emails and hand them to you, and my generation, and obviously your generation, will be different, but, um being a part of at least semi-techno generation, to me leadership is about assimilating the information and making good, quick decisions, depending on people, relying on people that you are that

are good people to make good decisions and that means that you don't have to make everything in a vacuum yourself…Hopefully…I am a servant to others. Hopefully, I'm viewed as a leader not because I am trying to direct everybody in what to do or be, um, dictatorial myself, but, um, that I am a servant. I do care. I want to get the things done that are right. Uh, hopefully, I am good at prioritizing differences in urgent versus important, and, you'll find this when you venture into corporate world or wherever you work, a lot of people have, uh, their idea about what is important, but it may just be urgent…so segregating those and really prioritizing what's important is a difficult thing; it's kind of a learned thing, but, um, hopefully I add to that organizationally, and, uh, as well as attitude, I hope that I am a contributor of that…so obviously my values should surround uh, you know, Christian character, and, uh, sadly enough that's not always the case with everyone, and that's not trying to be negative there, but, you know, it's like anywhere else, there's people involved and there's, uh, opinion and agenda, but, uh, my values definitely surround, um, integrity and honesty and character, and, you know, do what you say and say what you mean, and, uh, be clear, and, uh, concise, and, uh, definitely not self-serving or, uh, (pauses), well, you know, those are broad terms, but, um, you know, definitely moral absolutes are something that's a part of me, and, so I believe, in, in, truth. (15, 42-163).

What emerges here (and I leave it to the imagination of the reader to see other imaginary pictures in Phil's mirror) seems to be a person who is deeply committed to being a servant leader (Greenleaf, 1977). Phil seems genuinely concerned with the welfare of his followers and struggles with living the values he identifies as being his truth such as practicing Godly leadership, integrity and selflessness.

However, when we take a closer look at the narrative we can also see breaking points and discontinuities that may surface unconscious lack. For example, we can notice Phil's repeated references to all the stuff that has been said about leadership, books on leadership and catch phrases. This seems to be an act of acknowledging on the one hand that he may be reproducing popular discourse but also to thereby enhance the authenticity of his own account as he is admitting he is realizing this but perhaps not doing it, and/or that his own thoughts nonetheless reflect his authentic experience and who he is rather than just a reproduction of what others have said. In the first two sentences of this excerpt

he refers to the books and catch phrases and then says that "I would tell you for me, though…", so distinguishing himself from this discourse. By insisting on the authenticity of his own account, he seems to try to suture a lack that surfaces because of course it is impossible to draw on any discourse and not be alienated by the symbolic (Lacan, 1977b: 239) or in other words not to experience the failure of the imaginary.

The next instance where lack may surface is after he has just described what he calls a "defining moment" around a problem employee that he struggled to manage. After he explains how he felt he had failed that employee by not communicating more or being more actively involved, he then seems to address the interviewer by labeling this as a "personnel issue" as if to acknowledge that this may not represent an instance of leadership or may not be relevant to leadership, and then explaining almost apologetically that problem people are the exception in his organization, that he does not mean to "cast a bad light on anyone" and then, seemingly addressing the interviewer again, acknowledging that he is "probably overlapping into some other questions here".

There are several discontinuities here. First, there is the failure to maintain a cohesive narrative around leadership and the concomitant effort to suture the lack of cohesion by turning to the interviewer and reaffirming that the narrator knows he may be off track but in "reality" is not and knows exactly what leadership is. The second discontinuity is that in the process of constructing a self that has learned from the case of the problem employee, he also seems anxious to construct a self that does not have problem employees and of a servant leader who is successfully helping followers.

I want to be very clear here that I am not concerned with whether or not Phil is a good servant leader. I am not interested in exploring the lack of having in this narrative

and whether Phil lacks competence or good employees. Rather what I am concerned with here is that we can notice how Phil constructs an imaginary self and then how this self shows fissures and breaks, which he tries to cover while moving to construct another part of that self. It is important not to confuse this process with impression management, which is addressed to others (listeners for example). The act of covering up lack I am concerned about here is addressed to the imaginary self. Importantly, therefore, the disruptions I am concerned with are not disruptions of the impressions of others, but rather Phil's imaginary self disrupted by Phil unconsciously reiterating that its desires are not expressed here, that all this misses the point, that Phil is pursuing a self and desires that are not "it" at all.

The unconscious therefore furnishes momentary relief from the imaginary order and therefore may provide Phil with an experience of liberation from the imaginary and jouissance. Jouissance again is not conscious enjoyment but an experience of being as close to the real as one can get, not authenticity but a release from the alienation of the imaginary (Fink, 2004: 157). Phil may also experience this moment as empowering (Lacan, 1977b: 243) as he misses "it" but also gets to experience the power of the very desire that will drive him into the next imaginary construction, which will fail, and then the next one, and so on.

Of course in the narratives there is no conscious sign of this dynamic. Phil does not stop speaking to shout "hurrah", nor does he articulate in any way that he experiences liberation or empowerment. As this is an unconscious process, all we see consciously and notice in the narratives are the breaks and discontinuities. But it is in them that lack

surfaces and they are worth paying attention to when trying to understand leadership identities. I will elaborate on this point further below.

Returning to Phil's narrative, the subsequent point in the narrative at which such a break occurs is when Phil addresses the interviewer again explaining how much he tried to think about his answers but that much of what he says may be "off the cuff". Here again the imaginary self-construction shows a fissure as to how coherent and well-thought-out it is. Phil suggests that he is aware of this discontinuity and turns to reiterating that he has read books on leadership, perhaps by way of legitimating the identity he constructs, before he turns again, this time to elaborate how he practices spiritual leadership. There is another fissure as he does not seem to describe what spiritual leadership is, but rather what it is not, namely being dictatorial or sitting behind a desk and barking out orders. This is followed by another fissure as Phil breaks off the description of not being dictatorial to explain that leadership is about assimilating information and depending on good people, which he concludes by expressing his hope that he is a servant leader, which seems to be another discontinuity, or rather an effort at covering up a lack in the narration around Phil constructing a coherent identity of being a servant or spiritual leader.

While Phil provided the disclaimer that his remarks may be off the cuff, this is not what is of interest here. I am not concerned about Phil's lack of having, such as a lack of narrative consistency. Rather I am suggesting that we should not get detracted by such lack of having and instead notice the fundamental lack of being that is underneath it all. What is reflected here is not that Phil fails somehow as a leader because he cannot convey what leadership is. Rather Phil's imaginary construction of himself as a leader

fails because it is not what he, as subject of the unconscious, really desires. The failed constructions therefore may be indicators of continued desire and a connection to something more powerful, creative and free that cannot be contained by any of the things Phil says he is or wants.

Following along Phil's narrative, we notice that the discontinuities seem to become more frequent. As if his conscious efforts to cover up fundamental lack are becoming staccato, Phil not only turns but perhaps lurches from one fragment of self-construction to another. He repeats that he hopes that he is a servant leader, that others view him as such, that he is not dictatorial, the he is good at accomplishing the right things and that he hopes he also contributes attitude. Here the frequent turns seem to end for a moment, as attitude is not further defined. Then he connects back to his "Christian character", points out that others "sadly" may not follow this, and then explains his values, concluding that these may be broad terms, turning again to the interviewer who is supposed to know this, and then concludes that these are his moral absolutes and the truth that are "part of me".

If we were to insert the word "lack" in the narrative at every one of these breaking points, we may notice a kind of a rhythm in the narrative, one that begins more slowly and then becomes faster as if some energy were building. Perhaps that is what is happening as Phil experiences the ruptures, experiences momentary release, moves to "fix" them by beginning another construction, experiences their failure and so on. By the time Phil concludes with a statement about moral absolutes and truth, we can sense how much energy is now going into "fixing" his imaginary self as it must now be fortified by reference to a discourse that seems incontestable. Yet in pointing to absolutes and truth,

Phil's identity becomes more contestable, as so far his construction has not coherently conveyed anything coming close to moral absolutes or truth.

In short, what we notice when we explore this narrative more closely is that a leadership identity is not only constructed, commonly and routinely, as an imaginary self, this imaginary self also commonly and routinely fails. It fails not when narrators describe who they are and what they want, even if such descriptions allude to struggles with who they are and what they want, such as when Rick says he's been unsure about who he is, John acknowledges the impossibility of reaching ultimate goals, or Ron states that being a leader by definition means to be dissatisfied and to desire ever more. These are still imaginary constructions designed to cover up fundamental lack.

What I hope to illustrate in Phil's narrative is that one has to pay careful attention not to what is being said in order to construct from it the imaginary self, but to what is not said and all that indicates unusual rhetorical creations that point to a fissure of the imaginary. In Phil's narrative, or in any other for that matter, different interpreters may come to different conclusions about where the fissures or disruptions surface. This is not important as, again, we are not diagnosing where lack is or what is lacking to then cure or correct it. Rather it is important to simply become more aware that all imaginary self-constructions have such disruptions in the first place and that it is here that we may begin to explore the lack of power and the power of lack in leadership identities.

Discussion

The purpose of this study has been to add an entirely new perspective on leadership, one that explores the productive role of lack in how leadership identities are constructed. To this end I have examined how leadership identities are narratively

24

constructed in conscious and imaginary ways, but also how they invariably fail as they are undermined by unconscious desire and the reiteration of lack of being. What remains to explore are the conclusions we can draw from this particularly regarding the continued attraction of the fantasy and power of leadership.

With regard to power, the least surprising conclusion of this study is of course that leadership identities have the power of the imaginary (Roberts, 2005). They exert power through the construction of the imaginary leader self by subjugating the leader and others who are to validate this self (Roberts, 2005). However, this power is always already undermined by being an imaginary construction that inevitably fails as it is undermined by the unconscious desire of the leader him/herself. As such this study provides further insight as to how leadership exerts power and is used to subjugate others (Knights and Willmott, 1992) but also why this is never a totalizing process, and why leadership is also weak in practice (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). As we have seen the power of the imaginary or the attraction of the mirror (Roberst, 2005) is always already undermined when we look a bit closer and notice its many fissures.

Yet, more importantly, the study also helps us understand that there is not just lack of power but also the power of lack. This power comes into view when examining leadership identities for their emancipatory potential (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). It is the power of unconscious desire and the many moments of liberation from the imaginary that leaders experience as they construct their identities. The power I am referring to is the creative struggle that defines human subjectivity, a struggle with never finding what we want and yet obtaining jouissance from preserving our desire to desire and to be free from alienation.

As leadership is an organizational practice that centers on the construction of identities, and the leadership discourse that is commonly drawn on in doing so not only includes everything (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012) but draws on clichés and banalities, leadership also foregrounds this creative struggle with lack more than perhaps any other organizational practice. In other words, we may all struggle with lack but leadership puts this struggle on public display and invites everyone to participate. As such, leadership identity construction not only offers many opportunities for those who narrate them to experience the power of their own desire, it may also offer ample opportunities for others to participate in this experience.

Perhaps it is this power of lack that helps explain the continued attraction of the fantasy of leadership (Hischhorn, 1999). Consciously this attraction is merely a romance (Meindl et al., 1985) with imaginary constructions of leaders' selves. But more importantly, unconsciously, it is their inevitable failure and the leaders' struggle with lack and his/her experiences of liberation and empowerment that we may be attracted to because they reflect our own. The mystery of leadership (Meindl et al., 1985) then may be that it is an unconscious attraction and the sacred nature of leadership (Grint, 2010) may be that it reflects something so fundamental to human subjectivity as the lack of being we all share.

Moreover, our own struggle with lack may not be merely reflected in how leadership identities are constructed, it may also be enhanced. As such the continued attraction of the fantasy of leadership may also lie in how we not just the leader's but also the follower's lack is reiterated when the fantasy fails. Recent research has advanced the idea that leadership's power also comes from the homoerotic desires that it inspires in

followers but never fulfills (Harding et al., 2011). From the perspective developed here, it may also be possible that the impossibility of fulfilling the leader's desire stimulates more desire on the follower's part and vice versa and how not just leaders and followers feature in each other's fantasies (Gabriel, 1997), but how they function in each other's failed fantasies.

Such a perspective would open up entirely new vistas on the emancipatory potential of leadership (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012) and the constructive relationship of leadership for widening subjective spaces in organizations (Gabriel, 1995). Psychoanalysis has long recognized the constructive role of the leadership fantasy in organizations as well as the destructive effects it has when individuals collude to maintain dysfunctional fantasies that preclude healthy transitional spaces in which leaders and followers can grow (Kets De Vries, 1999).

From the perspective developed here such a space is opened up precisely when lack surfaces. At such moments, it is also when the power of lack is not just a psychological but a political power as the the ethical subject (Roberts, 2005) can obtain its agency when they arise. This agency may remain entirely unconscious and the moment may go unnoticed as all those who construct leadership identities inevitably attempt to maintain the imaginary order. We saw this in the narratives as Phil moved to cover up any lack that surfaced, turned to those who were addressed by him, the interviewer for example, and I saw it in a few other narratives where the interviewer was asked to take a more active role in this process. One interviewer for example added her own understanding of what it means to be a caring leader when Karen described herself as such. Again the inclination to return to the imaginary is always present, and of course

according to Lacan inevitable as we can never rid ourselves of the imaginary order (1988: 177).

Nonetheless, Lacan also suggested that the imaginary order is always unsettled and that we do have the opportunity to prolong and intensify moments when this happens. He suggested that in analysis the analyst can amplify such moments by simply allowing a failure of the imaginary to bounce back and forth between analyst and analysand (1988b: 241). This is the agency I suggest the ethical subject possesses when leadership identities are narrated. Both narrators and those who co-construct the narration have such agency and this consists simply of allowing the failure of the imaginary to be noticed and to allow lack to be replayed between them for a few moments. Like an echo we could take moments when lack surfaces and simply allow them to be heard and to amplify them by echoing them back. We may do this by simply being silent and to just hesitate for a moment before we inevitably move to maintain or repair the imaginary.

As we learn more about how interviews, for example, can be experienced as acts of becomingness in which we are more attuned to how we seek to mutually create imaginary selves (Harding, 2007) we can begin to study the conversational practices through which leadership is constructed at every moment (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011) from this perspective. We could examine what echoes of lack we can already hear and how we might provide practitioners and researchers with the ability to not only notice but perhaps expand them. It has been suggested in the past that we heighten our awareness for arresting moments in narratives when opportunities for deeper reflection exist (Cunliffe, 2002). Similarly, we may heighten our awareness for moments of lack that surface every time leadership is narrated into being (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003b).

This study offers the exiting idea that leadership is always already transitional (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012) as it moves in and out of the imaginary. But perhaps it is therefore also a great organizational resource for performativity (Butler, 1993) as it furnishes us a rich discourse which to appropriate to find that as we co-construct leadership (Meindl, 1995), we are not who we say we are and do not want what we say we want. Consequently, one way of considering leadership to be the panacea of our time (Autry, 2001) is to appreciate that it offers abundant discursive resources to experience moments "of freedom" (Fotaki, 2009: 154) and the ever-present emancipatory potential (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012) of the power of lack.

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