Reflections:
Insomnia? Try counting leadership theories

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Abstract

40 years ago, it was argued that despite years of research we still did not understand leadership. A similar argument was presented in this journal just last year. This article presents some reflections based on both my experience of researching leadership and of working with leaders. In doing this the myriad of theories of leadership are explored and key trends identified. Perhaps the most significant of these is the recognition of leadership as a dynamic relational process. This enables us to move from a leader centric focus in research to one that recognises the active participation of followers in the leadership process. In addition, the limitations of research to date, and its lack of relevance to practice is discussed, followed by proposed actions that could be taken to help develop a clearer understanding of the nature of leadership and improve relevance for practitioners. The article concludes with a view that we do know a lot about leaders and their impact on a wide range of outcomes. However, we still know relatively little about leadership.

Key Words: Leadership, Leaders, Research Methods, Leadership Theories, Research Relevance.

Introduction

Back in 2003, I set out to review our understanding of leadership, and developments in our thinking (Higgs, 2003). The article pointed out that 'leadership' has been studied more extensively than almost any other aspect of human behaviour in an organisational context. However, I also argued that the plethora of studies and theories have fallen short of providing a clear and consistent view of what constitutes leadership. Indeed, the extensive literature and lack of a clear understanding of leadership, resonates with an earlier quote from Kets De Vries (1993:27): "*The more leaders I encounter the more difficult I find it to identify a common pattern of effective leadership behaviours*".

In reflecting on our understanding of leadership, and reviewing recent literature, there is an amazing array of competing theories. It does appear that our research is attempting to find the "Holy Grail", or a universal theory of leadership. However, the complexity of organisations and group dynamics requires us to move away from thinking that there is something new to be discovered. Rather we should reflect on what we know and use this to attempt to make sense of the leadership phenomena in today's context. Indeed, a comment by Weick (1985: 56) seems to encapsulate this challenge:

> "*Social and organizational sciences, as opposed to physics or biology, do not discover anything new, but let us comprehend what we have known all along in a much better way, opening up new, unforeseen, possibilities of reshaping, re-engineering and restructuring our original social environment.*"

Burns *(1978:2)* stated *that "leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth"*. This point was recently highlighted and endorsed by Burnes et al (2018) and By et al (2018). They suggested that we have learned little about leadership in spite of an ever-growing volume of academic research. In a similar vein, Dinh et al (2014) pointed out that we have amassed an extensive body of research and theory that has consolidated and emphasised the importance of leadership in organisational science. However, they also point out that we know much more about the outcomes of leadership than the processes that effect the emergence of these. This critique is particularly significant in the light of the considerable growth in academic interest in the area of leadership. This is illustrated by the leading journal, The Leadership Quarterly, having devoted a special issue in 2014 to a review of 25 years of leadership articles published in that journal. What was notable about these articles were three things; i) the sheer volume of research; ii) the dominance of quantitative research studies; and iii) the dearth of linkages between academic research findings and implications for practitioners.

In terms of the extent of the attempts to understand leadership, Meuser et al (2016) identified 49 different leadership theories. Yet, despite this substantial number of theories, we still appear to have failed to establish a clear, shared, understanding of the nature of effective leadership. While some argue that our failure is due to diverse definitions (Zhu et al, 2019; Dinh et al, 2014) others suggest that it is an over reliance on quantitative research methods that fail to reveal substantial insights into the way in which leaders engage followers in achieving important outcomes (Zhu et al, 2019; Dinh et al, 2014; Parry et al, 2014; Avolio et al, 2009; Avolio, 2007).

As long ago as 1991, Rost asserted that research has been focused on leaders, rather than leadership and how leaders manage dyadic relationships with followers. This argument has been taken up and developed in this journal, leading, in 2021, to the inclusion of the sub-title "Reframing leadership and organizational practice" (Clegg et al, 2021). Overall, it could be argued that Burn's (1978) assertion remains relevant today. Indeed, whilst we know a lot about *leaders*, we still know relatively little about *leadership*.

Against the above background, it is worth reflecting on just where we appear to have arrived at with leadership research. In doing this the limitations of our approach to understanding leadership may be illuminated by considering the key themes that have emerged over the last few decades. The justification for such an approach is captured by Hunt and Dodge (2006; p.453):

'To know where we are going with leadership research, we must know where we are and where we have been - we must look backward and forward at the same time.'

In exploring the extant research, it is important to comment on a number of significant, inter-related, critiques, which are i) insufficient consideration of leadership as a dynamic group process; ii) lack of consideration of purpose; iii) the failure to consider context adequately; iv) insufficient consideration of process and behaviours; v) methodological limitations; and, very importantly, vi) a disconnect between academic research and practice. In essence, these critiques relate to i) what we study; ii) how we study it; and iii) how we make our research more accessible.

Where are we and where have we been?

There are a large number of review articles providing a good guide to academic thinking and trends - *where we are and where we have been* (e.g. Page, 2019; Zhu et al, 2019; Dinh et al, 2014; Avolio 2007). Indeed, the 25th anniversary edition of The Leadership Quarterly (2014) provided an excellent basis for reviewing the state of leadership research. What was clear from this particular edition of the journal was that we have no shortage of theories aimed at explaining the phenomenon of leadership. As has been pointed out there are some 49 leadership theories (Zhu et al, 2019; Meuser et al, 2016). However, it can be argued that this plethora of theories fails to provide a clear and shared understanding of leadership. No attempt will be made to summarise these 49 theories here though! Rather, it is important to highlight the trends emerging and underpinning critiques identified above. These are:

i)   *A move from a leader-centric to a relational leadership lens*

Some argue that we have seen a shift in research from a focus on leaders to a focus on relationships with followers (Dinh et al, 2014). However, some 70 per cent of studies continue to adopt a leader focus (Zhu et al, 2019). In terms of understanding leadership (rather than leaders) research remains dominated by what Rost (1991) terms peripheral and content elements (i.e. elements external to the dynamic of the leader-follower relationships). Therefore, whilst a shift to a more relational focus is claimed, literature remains dominated by leader focussed theories and models (Burnes et al, 2018; By, 2021).

ii)   *The concept of distributed leadership*

There is an increasing level of interest in the concept of distributed leadership (Zhu et al, 2019; Dinh et al, 2014). This is evident in the emergence of shared leadership theories (Sweeney et al, 2019). In part this is explored in the context of looking at the leadership of groups and teams and the respective roles of their members (Sweeney

et al, 2019). The exploration of leadership in the context of groups and teams could be useful in developing a better understanding of its relational nature. However, the design of studies examining leadership in a more distributed context continue to position the leader as the proactive actor, and the followers as the object of leadership. In considering leadership as a relational process, it is important to recognise that leaders and followers are both active participants. They interact in a dynamic way (Haslam et al, 2017; 2010; Rost, 1991).

Thus it appears that the literature, whilst claiming a more distributed and relational focus, continues to be telling us more about leaders than leadership (By, 2021; Burnes et al, 2018; Kempster et al, 2011).

iii)   *Increasing concentration on participation and engagement*
Associated with a trend towards more relational theories of leadership there is a recognition of the importance of follower involvement and participation in decisions affecting their work (Ling et al, 2018; Burnes et al, 2018; Ford et al, 2021; Higgs & Roland 2011). This is particularly notable in research examining the role of leadership in effective change implementation (Burnes et al, 2018; Ford et al, 2021; Ling et al, 2018; Dumas & Beinke, 2018, Higgs & Dulewicz, 2016). This trend is associated with an increasing interest in and importance of the relationship between leadership and the engagement or commitment of followers (Dumas & Beinke, 2018; Ling et al, 2018; Raelin, 2011;2017). However, the focus of research in this area is largely on how the leader employs involvement as a means of achieving goals set by the organisation or leader. In reflecting on this, the point made by Rost (1991), that all too often the leader is positioned as the sole source of achievement in relationships with followers, remains relevant. Within this stream of literature there

appears to have been little movement away from this framing of the leader-follower relationship.

iv)   Emerging interest in purpose

In reflecting on the significance of engagement and commitment there is an emerging discussion on the role of purpose (By, 2021; Kempster & Jackson, 2021; Kempster et al, 2011). The nature of purpose has rarely been discussed within the leadership literature (By, 2021; By et al, 2018; Ling et al, 2018; Kempster et al, 2011). Indeed, within the broader management literature there is little research into the role of purpose within organisations. Whilst there was some interest in this topic following the work of Collins and Porras (2002) this tended to be largely within the practitioner realm. Rather than purpose, discussions in the academic literature tend to coalesce around examining the role of objectives and goals (Burnes et al, 2018; Kempster et al, 2011) resulting in a continuation of seeing leadership residing in an individual – namely the leader. Drath et al. (2008) offer an overriding approach - summarised in their direction, alignment, and commitment (DAC) model - that can be further developed and applied if we are to progress our understanding of leadership as a dynamic group level relationship (By, 2021; Haslam et al, 2017; Rost, 1991). As such, By (2021) proposed the consideration of purpose as emerging from a group process, a view aligning with arguments raised in the social identity leadership literature (Haslam et al, 2017; Van Kippenberg et al, 2004). Within this frame, purpose can be seen as providing a salient group identity that contributes to the achievement of organisational outcomes (Haslam et al, 2017). Indeed, some see the need to consider purpose as being pivotal is the development and understanding of leadership, as opposed to leaders (By, 2021; Burnes et al, 2018). Its absence from

the literature is a significant limitation on our ability to understand and further develop leadership theory and practice.

v) Significance of values and ethics

Zhu et al (2019) in reviewing highly cited articles, in what they classified as the top 10 journals, pointed out that in the period 2010 to 2017 there was an emergence of research that introduced the idea of values and related ethical issues being significant for leadership research. A notable development in this stream of research has been the emergence of authentic leadership (Avolio, 2007; Avolio et al, 2009). This places the leader with a strong moral compass at the heart of leadership. Associated with this development has been the emergence of the concept of responsible leadership (Doh & Quigley, 2014; Maak, 2007: Pless & Maak, 2006). Responsible leadership theory brings together issues relating to ethics, corporate social responsibility, and the engagement of wider stakeholder groups (Maak, 2007; Pless & Maak, 2006). However, to date responsible leadership does tend to remain somewhat under researched (Doh & Quigley, 2014). Indeed, in the reviews of both Dinh et al (2014) and Zhu et al (2019) none of the articles discussed employed responsible leadership theory fully.

v)   Growth in exploration of dark leadership

Zhu et al (2019) identified an increasing number of leadership articles addressing questions relating to abusive supervision published in the period between 2010 to 2017. Going beyond this review there is a growing interest in what may be referred to as "dark leadership" (Dinh et al, 2014; Schynn & Schilling, 2013). It does appear that this interest has been sparked by practitioner writing on the topic (Higgs 2013; 2009). The concept of "dark leadership" encompasses a range of constructs

including exploitative, destructive, toxic, narcissistic, and psychopathic leadership (Dinh et al, 2014). It is suggested that the interest in this area has been prompted by increasing evidence of corruption, and corporate failure (Simonet et al, 2018; Solas, 2016; Naseer et al, 2016). It is evident that the ability of leaders to engage in 'bad' behavior arises from their positional power (Fatfouts, 2019). Indeed, this point is well argued by Kets de Vries and Miller (1997: 22) who comment that '*Leadership is the exercise of power, and the quality of leadership – good, ineffective or destructive – depends on an individual's ability to exercise power*'.

Whilst this area of research is both interesting and relevant, it tends to reinforce a focus on leaders rather than leadership. Studies tend to explore the antecedents of "dark leadership" in terms of personality, and the consequences at an individual level (Bulkan & Higgs, 2019; Ouimet, 2018; Solas, 2016). The dynamics of relationships with followers tends to remain largely unexplored.

In Summary

The above review resonates with the critique presented by Crevani and Endrissat (2016: 23) asserting that the dominant leadership paradigm is one that is "*Excessively individualist and psychologically informed accounts of leadership that concentrate on individual traits, transactions or transformations as performative practice miss the point. Leadership is a collective accomplishment that emerges in relations and interactions among complex actor networks, that are in turn reproduced and transformed through such relations and interactions*" Indeed, it does appear that not enough has changed since Rost's (1991: 91) critique of leadership research that it is ""…*great men and women with certain preferred traits influencing followers to do what leaders wish in order to achieve group/organizational effectiveness*".

Overall, the assertions of By (2021) and Burnes et al (2018) – we know a lot about leaders, but relatively little about leadership – appear fully justified. Although the themes outlined above offer some encouraging moves away from considering purely 'peripheral' elements (Rost,1991), a more fundamental shift is required if we are to develop our understanding of leadership rather than leaders. To illuminate the concept of leadership more clearly, there is a   need to explore it in the context of it being a dynamic relational social process (Haslam et al, 2017; Van de Kippenberg et al, 2004; Rost, 1991).

Perhaps a starting point for developing a better understanding of leadership (rather than leaders) is to reflect on the definition offered by Rost (1991;102): *"Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purpose"*.

Limitations of research to date

The limited consideration of leadership as a dynamic group process is a major limitation on our ability to understand leadership. However, based on reflecting on research to date, there are several other limitations that restrict our understanding of leadership and, in particular, our ability to have an impact on practice. The key ones identified are: i) the failure to consider context adequately; ii) lack of consideration of purpose; iii) insufficient consideration of process and behaviours; iv) methodological limitations; and, very importantly, v) a disconnect between academic research and practice. These (frequently inter-connected) issues will now be considered.

i)   Lack of context

As Dinh et al (2014) pointed out, leaders are embedded within organisational systems which are continually evolving and subject to volatility change and

uncertainty resulting from a dynamic external environment. This suggests that to develop an understanding of leadership we need to position it within the context in which it operates. Avolio (2007) asserted that in order to develop and build leadership understanding, context plays a critical role, and that more integrative research is needed to develop our understanding. However, in the literature it is evident that context remains under researched (Dinh et al, 2014). Zhu et al, (2019) in their analysis of leadership theories that attempt to capture various aspects of the context within which leadership unfolds, found that only 15 per cent of the 752 articles reviewed addressed context. They comment that this dearth of studies is of concern, given that the need to consider context in leadership research has been increasing over the past two decades.

However, as Occ (2018) pointed out, context has neither been placed within, nor given central significance, in studies. Furthermore, Porter and McLaughlin (2006), in their review of 16 years of leadership research published in 21 leading journals, identified that context is not central to leadership studies. If it was considered it was only as an afterthought. They pointed to a consistent picture that few, if any, contextual variables are included in leadership studies. If included they were narrowly defined, and only after the dependent variable had been selected. They further point out that the limited considerations of context largely occur in quantitative studies, and this lack of central consideration of context is arguably a factor that limits generalizability of leadership studies (Occ, 2018; Jones, 2006). Consequently, there is widespread reductionism in this research due to the complexity of taking all contextual factors into account. Attempts to address the complexity of context tend to be through the use of advanced statistical techniques. Porter and McLaughlin (2006) argue that this tends to amplify the limitations. Osborn

et al. (2002: 799) proposed a contextual theory of leadership based on a discussion of extant literature arguing *"… that leadership itself is embedded in its context. One cannot separate the leader(s) from the context any more than one can separate a flavour from food"*.

In reflecting on context, it does appear that there are two ways of considering it in terms of its impact on leadership studies. First, there is the impact of context on the way in which leaders behave and the actions they take. Second, there is the way in which leader behaviours and actions can impact the context. Furthermore, it is evident that these two aspects of context have a recursive relationship. To bring context into research in leadership we need to consider how those with leadership responsibilities interact and behave with a wider group of actors and stakeholders. This consideration reinforces the issue with our current approach to leadership studies - that of the actors involved (see above).

ii)   Lack of consideration of purpose

The role of leadership is suggested to be crucial in communicating a vision for change, engaging followers with this vision and creating a shared sense of purpose (Ling, Guo & Chen, 2018; Higgs & Rowland, 2005; 2011). Somewhat surprisingly then, as highlighted above, there is a dearth of academic literature that explores the role of purpose in relation to leadership (By, 2021; Kempster et al, 2011). In contrast, popular management literature can be seen to suggest that 'purpose' is some kind of magical concept that makes an organisation tick. However, the specific nature and role of purpose remain somewhat unclear (By, 2021: Ling et al, 2018; Kempster, 2011). Further research is required to understand how it operates as a mechanism

that enhances the likely effect in achieving positive organisational and/or societal outcomes.

A potential explanation of the role of purpose in relation to leadership can be found within the social identity literature (Haslam, 2017; Haslam et al, 2017; 2010). Social identity leadership theory encompasses the exploration of leadership processes that focus on followers' collective identities on the group to which they belong (Haslam et al, 2017; 2010; Van Kippenberg et al, 2004). Furthermore, it is argued that insights from social identity processes may enable leaders to create or reinforce their followers' sense of self-identity. In doing this the collective identity can energise organisational members to devote effort to organisational outcomes (Haslam et al, 2010; 2017; Thomas et al, 2013; Ling et al, 2018). Indeed, it has been argued that the increasing salience of purpose can enhance group cohesion and commitment (Ling et al, 2018; Haslam et al, 2017; Thomas et al, 2013).

Thus, the behaviours of leaders can help in defining what the group stands for. In doing so it is important for leaders to spend a great deal of time communicating (both directly and indirectly) group norms (Howieson et al, 2019: Ling et al, 2018). In some respects, the concept of collective identity is perhaps closer to the concept of purpose than vision, as articulated in the leadership literature (Haslam et al, 2010; 2017; Thomas et al, 2013; Ling et al, 2018).

From the foregoing it could be argued that, as with a collective identity, a collective sense of purpose requires a higher degree of consistency of the perceptions of purpose among organizational members. Social identity leadership theory emphasises the importance of internalisation of norms through common values, interests, and goals (Haslam, 2001). In terms of purpose, this could be seen as people's sense of *connectedness* with that purpose.

iii)   Lack of attention to process and behaviours

In the literature it appears that, while we know quite a lot about the outcome of leadership, we know relatively little about the *processes* and *behaviours* that lead to these outcomes. As pointed out by Dinh et at. (2014) there tends to be little evidence that demonstrates how leaders make organisations effective. Rather, the majority of studies examine how leaders are perceived, or focus on leaders and their qualities, not how they change processes and exhibit behaviours in relation to individuals, groups or the organisation at large. These processes include followers, as well as more enduring structures (e.g., goal orientation climate, ethical culture), that are influenced by leaders. Indeed, Dinh et al (2014;55) argue that developing a clearer linkage between processes and outcomes "...*can advance theory and will also provide a firmer basis for leadership interventions"*.

As argued above, research remains dominated by a focus on leaders, with an emerging understanding that leadership needs to be understood in terms of a more complex nexus of relationships that can involve more collaborative behaviours (Dinh et al, 2014; Hogg et al, 2012). Whilst there is some move towards a more relational view of leadership, the dominant approaches are either dyadic relationships (Zhu et al, 2019; Dinh et al, 2014) or aggregation of individual dimensions to a group level (as in the shared leadership research - Sweeney et al, 2019).

At the same time, the dominance of quantitative approaches results in a focus on common measurable aspects of leaders rather than the details of how they behave in a diverse range of contexts and relationships. Certainly, it seems that there is a need for a more behavioural approach to understanding leadership in order to explore the dynamics of leadership as a process. Whilst the emergence of the

leadership as practice (LAP) stream of literature is asserted to be designed to address this limitation (Raelin, 2011; 2017), to date, this literature appears to be more concerned with methodological considerations than empirical studies.

iv)   Research methods

Whilst much of the research on leadership demonstrates a clear and significant role played by overall constructs and their component elements in relation to a range of outcomes, there remains limited evidence that explains the mechanisms that underpin these relationships or offers theoretical foundations (Haslam et al., 2010; 2017; Hogg, 2010; Thomas et al., 2013). Linked to this is the observation that the majority of leadership studies are based on quantitative methods of research (Zhu et al, 2019; Dinh et al, 2014; Parry et al, 2014). Perhaps the dominance of such quantitative methods underpins the difficulties in elucidating the processes through which leadership is connected to a range of outcomes.

As Bartunek and Seo (2002) point out, quantitative methods operate at the level of abstract constructs. They suggest that greater use of qualitative methods would enable the processes that underpin the constructs to be uncovered, leading to a richer understanding. Put more simply, Conger (1998:108) argued that quantitative research alone cannot produce a good understanding of leadership given the "... *extreme and enduring complexity of the leadership phenomenon itself*". He pointed out that leadership involves multiple levels of a phenomena, possesses a dynamic character, and has a symbolic component - elements better addressed using qualitative methods. Building on this, Parry et al (2014) assert that quantitative

methods are insufficient to develop our understanding of the nature of leadership, understood as a social influence process.

Given the above issues, it is at first surprising that quantitative methods remain so dominant. However, as Parry et al (2014) point out, leadership research tends to be positioned within the realm of psychometric approaches to methodology. This apparent obsession with ever increasing sophistication of statistical methods has been referred to as 'physics envy'. In terms of developing our understanding of leadership, Porter and McLaughlin (2006) point out that the widespread reductionism associated with sophisticated quantitative methodology limits our ability to understand the complexities associated with leadership. Although the need to compliment quantitative studies with understanding developed through qualitative research has been highlighted for over two decades, it appears that little has changed in terms of the balance between quantitative and qualitative methods within journal articles (Zhu et al, 2019; Dinh et al, 2014).

Whilst this seems difficult to understand, perhaps some light may be shown on this from the study of Zhu et al (2019). In their review of 28 years of published research on leadership (1990-2017), they identified 200 landmark articles that had the highest level of co- citation frequency. In reading their work it was clear that these landmark articles tended to set the agenda for both the focus and methodology of articles to follow in the field. In concluding their article, they made the following observation: "in this study, we do not emphasize the social ties among the co-authors' and co-cited authors. Future studies could examine the social network of authors regarding their common affiliations, academic supervisor-student relationship, and shared working experiences. The evolution of such social relationship networks is

also important to help us to understand the intellectual development of the leadership literature. (Zhu et al. 2019: 248).

This observation could imply that the agenda and methods of research in academic journals are dominated by the interests of a relatively small number of scholars. Perhaps this could explain the continued dominance of both statistical methods and established theoretical frameworks in studies of leadership.

The majority of leadership articles adopt a cross sectional approach to research (Dinh et al, 2014; Zhu et al ,2019). However, the nature and effects of leadership tend to emerge and vary over time (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). To develop our understanding of leadership, therefore, we need to include longitudinal studies. There is a growing recognition that leadership is an interactive social process (Day et al., 2014; Silva, 2016) and a need to take account of its dynamic nature is required. Hence, in order to improve our understanding, we need to look at how leadership and different behaviours play out over time. A good example of this need can be found in relation to research into bad leadership. Whilst it is recognised that the impact on followers of bad leadership is influenced by the length of time that they have been working with the leader (Higgs 2009; Chatterjee and Hambrick, 2007) there has been little research that explores the effects of tenure on bad leadership and follower outcomes (Schyns & Schilling 2013).

v)   Value to practice

In reflecting on developments in our understanding of leadership the significance of a conference keynote by Neil Anderson (Anderson et al, 2001) comes to mind. The presentation challenged our ability to communicate our research in a way that was

accessible to practitioners. To illustrate his arguments, he presented a framework for classifying research (Figure 1).

INSERT FIGURE 1 AROUND HERE

Certainly, in relation to business-related issues such as leadership, it can be argued that the ideal research framework should be one in which there is a combination of methodological rigour and practical relevance. Anderson et al (2001) describe such a paradigm as being 'pragmatic science'. However, in the leadership arena we appear to have moved away from this paradigm - in two different directions (Antonakis; 2017): The first direction – labelled 'practitioner science' by Anderson et al. (2001) - focuses on practical relevance at the cost of methodological rigour. This is illustrated by the proliferation of biographies of 'successful' CEOs. The second direction taken – labelled 'pedantic science' (Anderson et al, 2001) – is a greater focus on methodological and theoretical rigour at the cost of practical relevance.

Thus, research into leadership has polarised, with academics and practitioners each denying and, effectively, ignoring contributions from the other. Indeed, in some cases contributions from practitioners are not only ignored but denigrated. For example, in a relatively recent paper King and Badham (2018) refer to practitioner writing on the topic of mindful leadership as being "*McMindfulness*" (suggesting it is the academic equivalent of McDonalds). In my view this is not a helpful way of bridging the gap between research and practice.

Over the last two decades there has been considerable debate at academic conferences about the need to place more emphasis on the practical implications of academic research in published articles. Prompted by this, I recently reviewed 25

journal articles on leadership covering the period of 2013 to 2020 (not a particularly systematic review admittedly). Based on a simple word count, these articles contained 145,866 words of which 1603 related to implications for practice. Therefore, just around 1% of the total word count was focused on practical implications. Indeed, some nine of the 25 articles had absolutely no discussion of practical implications. Amongst the remaining work, discussion of implications for practice ranged from a low of 0.4% of word count to a high of 4.4%. It is therefore unsurprising that research conducted in academia is seen to have little practical relevance to practice. Indeed, if anything, our research is moving ever deeper into the 'pedantic paradigm'. In reviewing the titles of many academic articles on leadership it is evident that they have little meaning for practitioners. It would be invidious to pick out specific titles to illustrate this point. However, readers will readily be able to think of plenty of illustrations from their own experience.

This trend to greater 'pedantic' research is concerning when there are increasing calls for academic research to have an impact in the wider world. This has been reflected, for example, in the quinquennial research excellence framework (REF; UK) which now requires UK universities to provide impact case studies. However, in the course of two REF cycles, business schools tended to struggle to find good quality impact case studies. In my limited experience with three business schools, none of the impact cases submitted have related to leadership research. It does appear, therefore, that as a discipline, leadership studies are failing to gain traction or contribute significantly to practice.

In engaging with leaders in organisations asking them whether or not they have read certain research articles usually elicits the answer "No", (or "I have tried but they are incredibly difficult to read and understand"). Indeed, this is a view often

encountered amongst doctoral students starting out on their studies. There is little doubt that academic work is not, by and large, easy to read. With this in mind I conducted a short exercise, applying the Fog readability index (Gunning, 1969) to a small sample of 10 academic articles on leadership. The Fog Index analyses readability based on a combination of sentence length and language complexity. This combination produces an index number which reflects reading difficulty related to the age and experience of readers. An index greater than 12 suggests that the work is too hard to read for most people. Gunning (1969) points out that broadsheet newspapers such as the Times and Financial Times have a Fog Index of below 11, with more popular tabloid newspapers having a far lower index. In my (unscientific) sample the computed Fog index of the articles reviewed ranged from a low of 19.56 to a high of 27.6. Thus, perhaps the reactions of practitioners mentioned above, and indeed reactions of doctoral students, are understandable.

It does appear that if we want to make a difference to organisations, we need to address the lack of attention to the practical implications of our research. In addition, we need to devote more effort to communicating the findings and implications of our research to those working in organisations.

Conclusions

Reflecting on research into leadership the assertion by Burns (1978) that leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth appears to remain relevant. It is evident that we have accumulated a vast amount of research. As a result of an ever-growing focus on 'pedantic' science we have produced a very confusing mass of theoretical perspectives and methodological complexities. In

addition, we seem to have failed to produce communicable findings that make a real difference to organisations.

We do understand a lot about leaders and their impact on a range of outcomes. However, as argued above, we do not really understand *leadership*. In reviewing what we have uncovered it seems that there are three areas in which a change in future research could increase our understanding of leadership and the relevance of our research to the practitioner community. These relate to i) What we study; ii) How we study it; and iii) How we make our research accessible.

What we study

Based on the above reflections, there are two areas in which future research could usefully focus. First, the context in which leadership is enacted needs to be studied in greater depth. In particular, understanding how context impacts on the behaviours of leaders, and equally understanding the extent to which leadership can influence the impact of external context on groups and the organisation.

Second, the emerging recognition of leadership as a dynamic interactive social process warrants a greater focus in future studies. The growing interest in fields such as the application of social identity theory to leadership studies seems to be a promising area of future research. Linked closely to this is the emerging interest in the role of purpose and its relationship to leadership as a process. Within the social identity theory of leadership reference the concept of salience of collective identity can be seen to be related to a group's purpose (Haslam, 2017, Hogg et al, 2008). Developing our understanding of the role of leadership in framing a group's purpose could play a significant role in increasing our understanding of the nature of

leadership. Indeed, reviewing the literature, social identity theory and leadership prompts a possible definition of *leadership* as being *a process through which the capabilities of a group are enabled to be focused on achieving a shared collective purpose*.

How we study

In terms of research methods, there remains a need for more qualitative research in order to develop a deeper understanding of what is leadership. Indeed, there is nothing new in this suggestion (e.g. Avolio 2007; Avolio et al, 2009; Parry et al, 2014). Whilst we have seen an increase in the amount of qualitative research in the field it does remain dominated by quantitative studies. This is particularly the case in the higher ranked journals.

The great majority of leadership studies tend to be of a cross sectional nature. However, the impact of leadership occurs over time, as illustrated for example by findings in the field of 'dark leadership' (e.g. Schyns & Schilling, 2013). Furthermore, as we see the growth in interest in leadership as a dynamic relational process our understanding will be enhanced by increasing the use of longitudinal research designs.

Employing methods such as social network analysis (Scott & Carrington, 2011) will enable us to explore leadership as a dynamic relational process. Indeed, its application to team research in a longitudinal setting has been found to produce valuable insights (Pollack & Matous, 2019).

Perhaps the most significant change to the way in which we study leadership relates to revisiting the mode 1 versus mode 2 research debate (Gibbons et al,1994). There is little doubt that the vast majority of leadership research is conducted within

mode 1. That is to say the focus of the research is driven through problems of knowledge being set and solved in a context governed by academic interests of a specific community (Gibbons et al, 1994). On the other hand, mode 2 knowledge production is started from practical problems or issues, rather than from theoretical or discipline- based problems. Given the volume of practitioner-based publications on leadership, combined with practical experience of leadership, it is evident that there are significant challenges faced by organisations that require greater understanding.

The mode 1 and 2 debate is highlighted further by Anderson et al's. (2001) discussion of the need to balance academic rigour and practical relevance. They maintained that unless academics combine methodological rigour and practical relevance then the academic-practitioner-polarisation in management research will harden. Indeed, the reflections above suggest that this has already happened. Relevance alone is not enough to develop real insights into complex organizational phenomena (Huff, 2000; Huff and Jenkins, 2002; Balogun *et al.*, 2003). However, more practitioner involvement in the research process is required, whilst simultaneously maintaining rigour. Indeed, Balogun *et al.* (2003) argued that the complexity of many areas of study (which certainly includes leadership and organisational change) gives rise to a need to study practitioners in the context of their work, and the need to move away from the researcher as the interpreter of data to a model which encourages greater self-reflection from respondents. Huff (2000) proposed an approach to address these issues that may be summarised as 'collaborative research', which is different from action research. As Huff and Jenkins (2002) pointed out, collaborative research entails interactive discussion with groups of informed participants. They advocated the use of participant generating

queries to shape the direction of the inquiry. Based on experience of working with collaborative inquiry, Higgs and Rowland, (2005) point out that this can be a difficult route to follow. It requires balancing the practitioner desire for fast and relatively simple solutions with the maintenance of academic rigour. However, the results can be very satisfying in terms of observing the practical application of insights developed from the research and the ability to make a difference.

Overall, it would be of enormous benefit to developing a deeper understanding of leadership for our research to move from being '*on organisations*' to '*with organisations*' based on working with real problems and challenges.

Making Research Accessible

In his introduction to the 25th anniversary issue of The Leadership Quarterly Francis Yamarino (2014: 2) stated:

"*Hopefully, as readers of LQ, you will agree that the final product is both useful and outstanding, and also contributes very well to LQ and to the future of leadership theory building, theory testing, and professional practice - which no doubt will be reviewed in the 50th anniversary issue of LQ in 2039!*"

From the discussion above, it is evident that the amount of space dedicated to the discussion of practice implications of research does not match with Yammarino's claim. There is little, if any, real discussion of these implications in that edition of the journal. Perhaps Yamarino's hopes for the 50th anniversary issue to relate to contributions to academic practice.

A possible starting point in increasing the accessibility of research could be exhorting journals to encourage authors to discuss the implications for practice of their work in more detail. However, this suggestion is not new. Responses to

previous calls for such a change appear to have had little impact. Given the primacy of publication in terms of academic careers it is unlikely that this position will change. Changing the way in which we do research, as discussed above, and adopting a mode 2 approach could contribute significantly to increasing its accessibility. However, it has been argued that the move towards mode 2 research, and greater engagement with organisations, is unlikely to succeed (Nicolai et al, 2011). Indeed, in a study involving both academics and practitioners in evaluating research, they pointed out that

> *"In an empirical case study of one of the oldest management journals in the world, the authors show that the demands of academic and practitioner reviewers are hardly compatible, and, to some extent, inversely correlated. In contrast to other studies, here the authors show that the reason for the tension between academics and practitioners with regard to this issue does not lie in differences in the evaluation criteria of each group. Rather, the different worldviews of academics and practitioners lead to different interpretations of these criteria and a striking incongruence between the two groups' ideas of practical relevance". (*Nicolai et al, 2011:*53)*

The observation that academics and practitioners have distinctly different ideas in terms of practical relevance is well reflected in the content of the implications for practice sections of many journals. Perhaps, therefore Anderson's hope for academic research balancing rigour and relevance is unlikely to be realised in the near future. This is particularly the case if we are to rely on academic journals as the main source of academic contribution to practice.

Perhaps to increase the accessibility of research a more systemic change may be required. Within academia all too often career progress is linked to publication in highly ranked journals. In assessing an academic's performance giving credit to business reports, monographs, and engagement with organisations may lead to the production of more accessible research outputs. Additionally, encouraging journals to establish sections devoted to application of research findings could contribute to accessibility.

This reflection began with an argument, from my first academic paper on leadership (Higgs, 2003), that the plethora of studies have failed to provide a clear and consistent view of what constitutes effective leadership. Having reflected on the field since then this view has not been changed. As stated above, we do know a lot about leaders, but little about leadership. Furthermore, even within the extant literature there remain many contradictory viewpoints, inconsistencies, and gaps in our knowledge. A predominantly reductionist approach to studying leadership produces a degree off apparent simplicity in findings as a result of complex analyses. Practitioners are seeking simple solutions to the complex problems of leadership. This paradox of simplicity is encapsulated in the following quote from Judge Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr (1997:1001)

> "*The only simplicity for which I would give a straw is that which is on the other side of the complex — not that which never has divined it*."

I'm aware that I've painted a somewhat gloomy picture of our research in the field of leadership. However, I do feel that some of the changes in both focus and methods of research, outlined above, provide a more optimistic possibility for future

developments in the field. Perhaps I could conclude with a more optimistic quote

from Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.

> "*The great thing in this world is not so much where we are, but in what*
>
> *direction we are moving.*" (Holmes, 1997:995).

Note: I calculated the Fog Index of this paper to be 11.54– still work to do!!

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Figure 1. Research approaches (adapted from Anderson *et al.,* 2000)

	Lo Relevance	High Relevance
High Rigour	Pedantic Science	Pragmatic Science
Low Rigour	Puerile Science	Practitioner Science