

This Special Issue is dedicated to Margaret Collinson

LEA SI on Leadership and Power
Editorial Introduction to the Special Issue

By

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This Special Issue examines the importance of power for understanding leadership dynamics. The articles comprising this collection suggest that power is fundamental to leadership theory and practice. They illustrate, for example, how power is enacted in the decisions, statements and claims that leaders make, in their practices and the many ways they influence followers, and through the organizational structures, resources, information and technologies they have at their disposal. The papers also indicate that leadership power dynamics are highly context-specific. A primary purpose of this SI is to showcase how, why and with what consequences power dynamics can reflect and reinforce leadership practices: in short, the articles illustrate how leadership and power are frequently inextricably-linked.¹

Historically, power dynamics have tended to be neglected in leadership research. In one of the most celebrated books in the discipline, Burns (1978) differentiated between ‘leaders’ (who successfully engage and satisfy followers’ motives) and ‘power holders’ (who

¹ This is not to imply that leadership issues can be reduced to questions of power, but rather to suggest that power is an important consideration that has frequently been ignored in leadership studies.

use followers for their own purposes and utilize ‘brute’ power to achieve their ends). Arguing that ‘power wielders’ should not be seen as leaders at all, Burns held that Hitler was therefore not a leader but a tyrant, ‘an absolute wielder of brutal power’ who crushed all opposition: ‘A leader and a tyrant are polar opposites’, he argued (1978: 3). If dictators and tyrants are not leaders, they no longer need to be the subject of leadership research.

Burns’ text has been highly influential. In the ensuing forty years this tendency to ‘purify’ leadership of questions related to power became normal practice in mainstream studies, especially in the more positivist and psychological approaches that predominate in the US. Power is simply treated as an uncontroversial property of leaders and most research has continued to convey the impression that leadership and leaders are inherently positive influences in organisations and societies. Studies continue to take for granted that (heroic) leaders are invariably a source of good, that leaders’ efforts unfailingly produce positive outcomes and that the interests of leaders and followers inevitably coalesce.

Such excessive positivity is illustrated by the large number of biographies and autobiographies about specific leaders that overemphasize their positive attributes whilst neglecting any negative qualities and behaviours (Meindl et al, 1985; Pfeffer, 2010). Another contemporary example of this excessive positivity is ‘authentic leadership’ theory, which depicts ‘authentic leaders’ as dynamic, self-aware visionaries who make transparent, highly ethical decisions. Authentic leaders’ positivity is viewed as infectious, creating ‘positive psychological capital,’ ‘positive moral perspective’, and a ‘positive climate’ throughout the organization (Collinson, 2012; Alvesson and Einola, 2019). As a result of this preoccupation with the positive influence of individual leaders and with identifying the ‘essential’ characteristics of ‘successful’ or ‘authentic’ leaders’ questions of power tend to disappear from view.

In contrast with the considerable research that addresses leadership issues without considering questions of power, much of the burgeoning literature on power in various social science disciplines has rarely considered (or at minimum has significantly underplayed) leadership issues. For example, within organization studies the influential perspectives of labour process theory and critical management studies (CMS) exemplify this neglect. Both approaches address key issues around the exercise of power, managerial control and asymmetrical structures in the workplace, but many of the writers in these traditions tend to ignore the study of leadership generally or the power of leaders specifically. For example, the influential Oxford Handbook of Critical Management Studies, edited by some of the key names in CMS (Alvesson et al., 2009) contains no chapter on leadership, and the term ‘leadership’ attracts just three mentions in the book’s index (all drawn from one specific chapter on gender and diversity (Ashcraft, 2009)). Hence, historically, studies of leadership and power have tended to remain largely separate from one another. This point is supported by one of the earliest studies explicitly linking leadership and power. Janda (1960) commented that studies of leadership and of power have been conducted ‘almost independently of each other....in the main those who write on leadership do not write on power and *vice versa*. Moreover, the number of cross-references between the two bodies of literature is amazingly small’ (1960: 353-4).

Having said that, in recent years a growing number of exceptions to this general rule have become increasingly evident. Adopting a variety of critical perspectives and methodologies, researchers have begun to address the inter-relationships between leadership and different forms of power and control (e.g. Lipmen-Blumen, 2005; Tourish and Vatcha, 2005, Tourish, 2013; Gordon, 2011; Sinclair, 2007, 2011; Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Bolden et al, 2011; Schedlitzki and Edwards, 2014; Sturm and Antonakis 2015; Ford and Harding, 2011; Firth and Carroll, 2017; Salovaara and Bathurst 2018; Lumby, 2018; Wilson, 2016;

Spector, 2016; Gagnon and Collinson, 2014, 2017; Collinson, 2011, 2012, 2019). These contributions acknowledge that, for good or ill, leaders exercise considerable power and influence in and around organizations and societies.² They recognize that leaders' impact can be constructive and empowering and/or destructive and oppressive (sometimes distinguishing between power 'with', 'to', and/or 'over'). These diverse critical studies demonstrate that leaders' power can take many forms, often mutually reinforcing and sometimes producing unintended and unanticipated effects. Equally, some of these studies acknowledge that followers' practices are frequently more proactive, knowledgeable and oppositional than is often appreciated (Banks, 2008; Collinson, 2006, 2019), and that gender, embodiment and other intersecting inequalities crucially shape leadership dynamics (e.g. Bowring, 2004, Sinclair, 2005; Lui, 2017).

A recent exemplar of a critical approach to leadership and power published in this journal by O'Connor et al (2019) examines the control strategies of HE leaders in three different countries. Referring to these strategies as 'stealth power', the authors explore four key control practices: rhetorical collegiality, agenda control, in-group loyalty and the invisibility of gendered power. Illustrating how these control strategies can operate covertly and panoptically, O'Connor et al show how leaders can exercise power and influence in subtle, indirect and disguised ways. This Special Issue seeks to contribute to these recent debates by bringing together seven articles that examine leadership dynamics through the lens of power.

² Acknowledging that there are many different ways of conceptualizing power in organizations and societies, this Special Issue Introduction is not the place to discuss the conceptual differences and similarities that characterise these various recent studies on leadership and power.

Structure and Content

All the articles in this collection were first presented in December 2018 at the 17th International Studying Leadership Conference (ISLC) held at Lancaster University. This meeting was designed to explore the diverse ways that power can be implicated in leadership theory and practice, and how leadership is also central to the understanding of power. The papers comprising this SI utilise a diversity of theoretical perspectives, drawing on sociology, philosophy, history, psychology and organizational studies, and utilising both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, to examine various power-related themes in a number of different countries.

The first four articles concentrate on leaders primarily as subjects, agents and enactors of power and control in societies and organizations. The first two address power dynamics in contemporary US politics. Spector examines the issue of ‘post-truth claims making’ that has emerged as a defining cultural and political phenomenon in contemporary times. He argues that reliance on post-truth claims helped fuel the rise of mid-20th century dictators and is now a tool of control for contemporary authoritarian political leaders posing as populists. Spector’s arguments are suggestive of the potential for future research to develop further analyses of ‘post-truth’ dynamics and related questions of ideology and propaganda in leadership relations.

Ciulla’s article compliments Spector’s arguments by concentrating more explicitly on leaders’ impact on followers, revealing, in particular, how leaders can exercise power by fuelling followers’ sense of resentment and by inverting dominant values. Informed by various philosophical debates, Ciulla explores the emotional dimensions of leaders’ manipulation of followers and this fuelling of resentment. By implication this article raises important questions about the motivations, perceptions and subjectivities of followers in relation to leaders that would re-pay further examination.

Asad & Sadler-Smith focus on hubris and narcissism in leadership dynamics: themes that also implicitly inform the previous two papers. While these terms are sometimes conflated within the literature, the authors clarify how hubristic and narcissistic leadership are both covetous of power, but in different ways. Since hubris and narcissism can produce damaging unintended outcomes for leaders themselves, and for followers, organizations, societies and even the planet, this is a particularly important area for future research.

Presenting empirical research in a UK professional service company, Empson shows how everyday practices in the organization are characterised by collective forms of leadership where authority relations are inherently ambiguous. However, when the firm faces an economic crisis, collective leadership and ambiguous authority were quickly replaced by a previously hidden elite that acts decisively to resolve the crisis. This study extends our understanding of leadership power dynamics by highlighting the possible persistence of a small elite even within ostensibly collective leadership processes.

The foregoing articles consider power and control strategies in leadership relations. The following three papers raise important additional questions about the subtlety and complexity of leadership power relations, demonstrating in the process that power is rarely all-determining and monolithic and can also have paradoxical, unanticipated and contradictory outcomes. A key point they highlight is that alongside power and control also typically comes responsibility, accountability and pressure.

Tomkins, Hartley and Bristow draw on detailed empirical research in a UK police force to document how leaders experience more responsibility than control; more blame than praise; and are predominantly subject to interpretations of failure based on personal fault rather than on situational or task complexity. It is possible that such intensified levels of responsibility and accountability may be particularly evident in the UK public sector: a theme that would benefit from further detailed research. Krauter's article builds on these ideas by

highlighting the pressures and stresses that can weigh down on leaders. Based on original research with 43 German private sector leaders, he argues that not only do a significant number of them suffer from stress and strain, but also that this can affect how they exercise power. In the final article Grint presents a ‘provocation’ that summarises these themes and also concludes the SI. He discusses some of the damaging effects of power on leaders themselves as well as on those around them. Whilst ostensibly highly seductive, power can become ‘a poisoned chalice’, he argues. This metaphor could be a particularly useful lens for future research on power and leadership.

Together, the articles in this SI demonstrate that the exercise of power is fundamental to understanding and enacting leadership. Illustrating various ways that asymmetrical power is typically embedded in leadership dynamics, the papers in this collection present detailed analyses of these multiple and simultaneous processes. While earlier critical studies have tended to concentrate on how leadership power can be exercised through overtly coercive and toxic practices, this collection suggests that control can also be enacted in more subtle, covert, informal and ambiguous ways. These articles also remind us that in the study of leadership, it is important to consider responsibility and accountability as well as power and control. In leadership dynamics, control and responsibility can be seen as two sides of the same coin.³ In sum, the articles in this collection provide further evidence that a greater recognition of the importance of power can in turn facilitate significant new insights into our understanding of leadership dynamics.

³ This point in turn highlights another disconnect or dichotomy in the leadership literature between the aforementioned critical studies of power, and research on ‘responsible leadership’ (e.g. Mark and Pless, 2006). While the former concentrates on power asymmetries and control practices (to the neglect of responsibility issues), the latter tends to focus more on the need to lead in socially, ethically and ecologically responsible ways (with little discussion of power issues). This Special Issue indicates the potential value of combining both approaches. An example of such an integrated approach is that by Blakely (2016).

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