'Only Connect!': Exploring the Critical Dialectical Turn in Leadership Studies

By

David L Collinson,

Lancaster University Management School

d.collinson@lancaster.ac.uk

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Abstract

This article considers the value of critical dialectical perspectives for leadership research. Surfacing under-explored issues about power, paradox and contradiction, critical dialectical approaches challenge the tendency to dichotomize that frequently characterizes leadership studies. They argue that leadership power dynamics typically take multiple, simultaneous forms, interconnecting in ways that are often mutually reinforcing but sometimes in tension. Revealing the importance, for example, of gender, embodiment and other intersecting diversities and inequalities, these perspectives also highlight how power can be productive as well as oppressive, covert as well as overt. Careful to avoid treating leaders' control and influence as all-determining and monolithic, they also recognise that different forms of power and control may produce unintended and unanticipated effects such as follower resistance. Critical approaches hold that followers' practices are frequently more proactive, knowledgeable and oppositional than is often appreciated. By addressing the dialectics of power, conformity and resistance as a set of dynamic, shifting and inter-connected processes, the article concludes that critical dialectical perspectives have the potential to open-up new ways of understanding and researching leadership and followership.

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Introduction

In his classic Edwardian novel 'Howards End', E. M. Forster (1910, 2012) examines the lives of three English families at the turn of the 20th century. The story describes the inter-connections between an extremely rich, a middle class, and an impoverished family who otherwise inhabit quite separate social spheres. Howards End demonstrates how economic inequalities and social prejudices can undermine communication and community. It also emphasizes the positive potential of connected relationships in helping to transcend economic and cultural divisions. In his Epigraph to Howard's End, Forster advises the reader to: 'Only Connect!'

Lipman-Blumen (2000) argues that in the twenty first century making connections will increasingly become a primary quality of effective leadership. Facilitated by advanced digital technologies placing a premium on the connections between concepts, people and environments, this new 'connective era', she argues, is characterized by two contradictory social forces. On the one hand, global interdependencies are accelerating at a furious pace, while on the other, local assertions of diversity and of distinctive identities are increasingly evident. This rapidly changing context requires new kinds of 'connective leadership', Lipman-Blumen suggests, that can reconcile a world increasingly connected by technologies but fragmented by diversities.

[I] This article is dedicated to the memory of my wife Margaret.

Both Forster and Lipman-Blumen highlight the value of enhanced connectivity. This article explores the potential benefits of greater connections in leadership theorizing. It begins by arguing that leadership research is generally successful in identifying conceptual distinctions, but is often less effective in exploring connections, relationships and tensions. An over-reliance on dichotomization tends to privilege one side of an apparent polarity, whilst overstating the (perceived) negative features of the downplayed binary (Collinson, 2014). In place of this dichotomizing impulse in leadership studies, the article considers the value of critical, dialectical forms of analysis that can more effectively attend to the inter-connected, relational and dynamic nature of leader-follower dynamics. While under-explored in leadership studies, dialectical thinking has a long history in philosophy and early social science. It addresses not only the mutually reinforcing character of social relations, but also the deep-seated tensions and contradictions in relations based on opposing but interdependent forces that typically produce conflict and change. In addition, dialectical approaches also address questions of power, asymmetry and control.

The article elaborates this argument by considering recent work in critical leadership studies (CLS). Informed by a diverse, and sometimes competing set of theories and perspectives (from labour process theory, critical management studies and feminism to post-structuralism, radical psychology and psychoanalysis), these studies share a concern to highlight the interrelated significance of situated power relations, identity constructions, and their (sometimes paradoxical) conditions, processes and outcomes (e.g. Collinson, 2011: Tourish, 2013; Spector, 2014, Wilson, 2016). Critical perspectives suggest that it is through these interwoven and asymmetrical processes that leadership dynamics are typically enacted, frequently rationalized, sometimes resisted, and occasionally transformed. They view questions of situated power, asymmetry and paradox as fundamental to the construct of leadership even when these are distributed or more democratically established.

The Field of Leadership Studies: The Persistence of Dichotomies

It is possible to view the leadership field as comprising at least three main paradigms: mainstream/heroic, post-heroic, and critical studies. Representing the overwhelming majority of studies, mainstream/heroic approaches focus primarily on leaders' qualities and practices (Carlyle, 1841; Allison, Goethals and Kramer, 2017), incorporating a broad range of theories from trait, style, contingency, path–goal, charisma, transformational, to emotional intelligence, social identity, and authentic leadership (e.g. Northhouse, 2018; Yukl, 2019). Mainstream perspectives concentrate primarily on individual leaders, paying less attention to the socially and discursively constructed contexts and relations of leadership dynamics, or to their structural and cultural conditions and consequences. The majority of mainstream leadership studies are also North American in origin and much of this research articulates the positivist and functionalist values that predominate in the US (Hartog and Dickson, 2004).

The mainstream literature is replete with distinctions often treated as 'either/or', mutually exclusive dichotomies, such as: transformational/transactional; leadership/management; born/made leaders; task/people; theory X/theory Y; individual/collective; one best way/contingent; organic/mechanistic, autocratic/participative, rational/emotional, and saviours/scapegoats (Collinson, 2014). As Harter (2006: 90) observes, in the study of leadership 'dualisms pop up everywhere'.[1] This 'bi-polar shopping list approach' (Grint, 1997: 3) is particularly prevalent in mainstream studies where leaders' personas and practices tend to be privileged and psychological perspectives predominate (Jackson and Parry, 2018). Dichotomies can also surface as '2x2' quadrants or as multi-level analyses (e.g. society, organization, group and individual) (e.g. Yammarino and Dionne, 2019).[2]

One of the most intractable dichotomies in leadership studies is that between leaders and followers (Burns, 2008). Much of the mainstream literature privileges and elevates leaders and neglects the active role of followers (Linstead, Fulop, & Lilley, 2009). It typically assumes that 'leaders' are in charge and make decisions and 'followers' simply carry out orders from 'above'. With leaders and followers frequently treated as dichotomous, disconnected categories, relations between them are often ignored or taken for granted. Even when leader-led relations are addressed, they tend to be understood as largely static, stable and predictable: their dynamic, shifting character is underplayed (e.g. Hersey and Blanchard, 1996). Mainstream approaches also tend to ignore the underlying asymmetrical nature of leader-led dynamics.

This neglect reflects the tendency in many studies to adopt an excessively positive orientation that treats power and control as unproblematic or unremarkable forms of organizational authority (Collinson, 2012). The conceptual separation of power and leadership reflected in these approaches has resulted in an overly narrow focus on leaders' 'transformational influence' and capacity to inspire. Power is simply treated as an uncontroversial property of leaders and most research conveys the impression that leadership and leaders are inherently positive influences in organisations and societies. Studies typically 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 invariably coalesce.

Such excessive positivity is illustrated by the currently popular '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 'positive climate' throughout the organization (Collinson, 2012; Alvesson and Einola, 2019). In thus

concentrating on identifying the 'essential' characteristics of 'successful' leaders', and their (potentially) positive 'influence', power itself either disappears from view or else is theorized as a commodity that authentic leaders will automatically use wisely.

Questioning the leader-centric lens of mainstream approaches, post-heroic perspectives focus on relational and collective dynamics, examining processes such as distributed, shared, collective and collaborative leadership (e.g. Gronn, 2002; Pearce & Conger, 2003; Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012; Harris, 2013). Shifting the analytical lens from the individual to the collective, post-heroic perspectives examine the socially constructed nature of leadership, and in the process highlight the importance of (empowered) followers. Yet, post-heroic approaches sometimes invert the dominant dichotomy by privileging collective dynamics whilst downplaying individual agency (Collinson, 2018). For example, contemporary interest in 'leadership as practice' (LAP) explicitly rejects any concern with the traits and behaviours of individual leaders (e.g. Raelin, 2016a and b), preferring instead to view leadership 'as an agency emanating from an emerging collection of practices' (Raelin et al, 2018: 2).

Similarly, Meindl (1995) recommends that researchers should ignore leaders altogether and concentrate on followers' views of leaders and of themselves as followers. Although this approach valuably highlights the importance of followership, it replaces the privileging of leaders with the prioritization and romanticism of followers. Equally, Chaleff (2009, 2015) recommends that 'courageous' followers need to voice constructive criticism and engage in 'intelligent disobedience'; particularly when they believe that leaders are not acting in the best interests of the organization. His recommendations tend to underestimate the power of leaders, their possible reluctance to value or listen to dissenting voices, and the

potential costs of resistance, for example in relation to whistleblowing (Miceli and Near, 2002; Stein, 2020).

Reversing the dichotomy, and privileging followers' agency can also neglect the asymmetrical nature of leadership relationships and leaders' capacity to exercise power and control (Collinson, 2011). To be sure, organizations need to be understood as collective endeavours. But in practice, this sense of collective interdependency is often in tension with the numerous ways in which organizational power is enacted: how owners seek to control, how leaders seek to lead and how managers seek to manage. Critical, dialectical perspectives argue that both (collective) practices and (individual) traits/behaviours are important aspects of leadership power relations.

Before moving onto a consideration of critical leadership studies, I would like to point out that problematizing dichotomization does not mean rejecting the value of distinctions per se. Indeed, distinctions can help to create meaning, clarity and transparency, and thus avoid confusion and manipulation. As Simmel (1994: 5) observed, in our efforts to make sense, learn, organize, and construct identity, human beings typically 'separate the connected' and 'connect the separate'. Language typically relies on subject–object separations (for example, 'leader' and 'follower') and differentiation is also fundamental to organization: the principle of separating processes into their constituent parts informs the division of labour. The issue here is not so much the creation of distinctions, but rather the failure to connect and to re-connect. When distinctions are treated as dichotomies, they can reduce complex relationships to 'either/or' polarities that downplay or neglect important interrelations, tensions, asymmetries, and contradictions. A central argument of this article is that acknowledging the dialectical nature of leader-led dynamics is one potentially helpful way that we can begin to re-focus leadership studies on 'connecting the separate' (Simmel, 1994).

Critical Perspectives on Leadership

'Critical leadership studies' (CLS) is a fairly loose umbrella term referring to a diverse, heterogenous and emergent set of perspectives that share a concern to critique the situated power relations and identity constructions through which leadership and followership dynamics are typically enacted (e.g. Ford 2010; Ford and Harding, 2011; Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Collinson, 2005; 2011, 2014; Spector, 2019). CLS writers question the view that the extreme power imbalances which often characterize hierarchies in contemporary organizations are both desirable and immutable features of organizations (Tourish, 2013, 2014). Critical perspectives also encourage a concern with dysfunctional, toxic and destructive leadership and its paradoxical and sometimes unintended effects (Tourish and Vatcha, 2005; Lipman-Blumen 2005; Schyns and Hansbroughn, 2010; Rayment and Smith, 2011).

Adopting a variety of approaches and methodologies, CLS researchers often draw on the more established field of critical management studies (CMS), which seeks to open up new ways of thinking about management by questioning traditional orthodoxies (Adler, Forbes and Willmott, 2007). Both CLS and CMS are informed by a plurality of perspectives ranging from labour process theory and critical realism, to feminism, post-structuralism, deconstructionism, literary criticism, postcolonial theory, cultural studies, environmentalism, history and psychoanalysis. Although issues of power are a central concern within critical perspectives generally, what constitutes power,[3] where 'it' could be located and how 'it' might be enacted remain contested questions. For example, labour process and critical management theorists tend to concentrate on management and ownership whilst avoiding or undervaluing the study of leadership generally or the power, influence and authority of leaders specifically (e.g. Alvesson and Willmott, 2003; Alvesson, Bridgman and Willmott

2009). Many critical writers tend to ignore or underplay leadership both as a field of study and as an organizational process (Collinson and Tourish, 2015).

In most cases, this neglect has generally remained at the level of an unspoken omission (e.g. Fleming and Spicer, 2014), however, recently Learmonth and Morrell (2017; 2019) have more explicitly dismissed the concern with leadership both in theory and practice. They instead ascribe analytical primacy to the structural economic conflict of interest between 'bosses' (management) and 'workers' within capitalist organizations. This approach is problematic because power and identity are also generated by other structural and intersectional sources such as gender, race and ethnicity and because 'management' is typically a differentiated and heterogeneous function (Knights and Willmott, 1986), often characterized by paradoxical tensions and conflicts (Jackall, 1988; Watson, 2000). Moreover, leadership has historical (Lipmen-Blumen 2000), organizational (Mintzberg, 2008) and cultural significance and resonance, which means that it therefore merits theoretical and analytical attention in its own right (see also Collinson, 2017).

In sum, while critical management and labour process scholars tend to concentrate on management, the emergent field of CLS suggests that leadership is also a central feature of organizational power dynamics. The CLS focus on leadership could complement CMS by facilitating an additional understanding of how power and control are typically enacted and often centralized in contemporary organizations. Although CLS emphasize that leaders as well as managers and owners often exert significant power and influence over organizational practices, not all these critical writers draw on dialectical thinking, and it is to the theme of dialectics that we now turn.

The Dialectics of Power

In social theory dialectical approaches highlight the importance of connections by exploring the complex webs, structures and practices of everyday relations that constitute 'a

dynamic knot of contradictions, a ceaseless interplay between contrary or opposing tendencies' (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996: 3). These perspectives examine the processes by which paradoxes and tensions interact to produce adjustments in and between interdependent forces that may otherwise be seen as mutually exclusive opposites (Putnam, Fairhust and Banghart, 2016). Dialectical analyses therefore address the mutually-reinforcing character of social relations as well as the deep-seated tensions in relations based on opposing but interdependent forces that typically produce conflict and change. By re-interpreting presumed opposites and apparently fixed dichotomies as intrinsically interrelated concepts, they reveal how changes in one directly impact on the other (Putnam et al., 2011).

In both classical philosophy (e.g. Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Descartes) and early social science (e.g. Hegel, Marx, Engels, Sartre, Weber, Simon) dialectical thinking was a significant and central feature. With the rise of management science in the 20th century, however, many of these earlier insights, for example about tensions and contradictions, were lost as new perspectives focused increasingly on creating analytical order and tidiness (Storey and Salaman, 2009). In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in dialectical analyses in relation to society (Giddens, 1984; Latour, 1993), organization (Putnam et al. 2011; Putnam et al., 2016; Mumby, 2011) and communication (e.g. Tracy, 2004; Barge et al, 2008). This (re-)turn to dialectical thinking has in part been prompted by a growing interest in post-structuralist analysis and in the social theories of writers like Giddens and Foucault whose respective insights about the dialectics of power are particularly relevant for rethinking leader-led relations.

Giddens (1979, 1984, 1993) seeks to overcome the 'dualism' (or dichotomy) that, he argues, is a central problem in social theory where analyses of social structure typically remain disconnected from those focusing on human agency. This can result in explanations built on one of two polarities: voluntarism (an excessive focus on individual agency

sometimes evident for example in psychology) or determinism (an excessive focus on the determining and constraining influence of social structures sometimes evident for example in structuralism and Marxism). Giddens' structuration theory emphasizes the deep-seated inter-connections and dialectical relations between structure and agency.

Central to this theory is a dialectical understanding of power relations which holds that structure and action are embedded in and reproduce one another as their medium and outcome. Structures shape and inform human agency but typically in dialectical, mutually-reinforcing ways. They both constrain and facilitate agency and practices. Giddens' 'dialectic of control' holds that no matter how asymmetrical, power relations are always two-way, contingent, and to some degree interdependent. Emphasizing an intrinsic relation between agency and power within all social relations, Giddens asserts that human beings are knowledgeable social agents who, acting within historically specific (sometimes unacknowledged) conditions and (sometimes unintended) consequences, always retain a capacity to 'make a difference.'

An important implication of Giddens' dialectic of control for leadership studies is that leader–led relations will typically be characterized by both interdependencies and power asymmetries. Since asymmetrical power relations are always two-way, leaders will to some extent remain dependent on the led, while the latter retain a degree of autonomy and discretion. Accordingly, a dialectical approach recognises that, while leaders' power is important and extensive, it may also be limited and constrained.

Foucault (1977, 1979) contributes to the understanding of power by highlighting its inter-connections with knowledge, subjectivity and resistance. Addressing the ways in which 'power/knowledge' regimes are inscribed on human subjectivities, Foucault explored the 'disciplinary power' of surveillance that produces detailed information about individuals, rendering them visible, calculable and self-disciplining. He suggested that, by shaping

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identity formation, this disciplinary power can be enabling and creative, as well as constraining and repressive. Hence, rather than viewing power as inherently oppressive (as Marxist analysis tends to suggest), Foucault held that it can also be productive and empowering. Equally, he argued that power should not be understood as a sovereign possession or a fixed juridical mechanism, but as a fluid and dispersed productive force that is an ever-present property of social relations. For him, power is exercised, rather than acquired as a possession.[4]

Importantly, Foucault also highlighted the dialectical relationship between power and resistance. He argued that power creates the conditions for its own resistance and that dissent typically draws on the very power it opposes. Even in the most totalitarian of regimes, tensions and contradictions persist that provide opportunities for resistance, especially in the form of localized acts of defiance (McCabe et al, 2019). As Foucault (1979: 95) argued, 'where there is power, there is resistance.'[5] An implication of Foucault's ideas for leadership studies is that leaders (and managers) can exercise power by measuring and evaluating followers' performance, especially when the latter internalize and reproduce this discipline through self-surveillance (Townley, 1993; Collinson, 2003). Equally, Foucault's focus on dissent and its intimate connection to the exercise of power are important for understanding how power/resistance dialectics are typically enacted in leader-led relations.

In utilising the ideas sketched above, a number of researchers have sought to re-frame leadership studies in dialectical terms. Fairhurst (2001) advocates dialectical forms of inquiry that go beyond seemingly oppositional binaries to explore their 'dynamic tension' and 'interplay'. More recently, she has explored the dialectical tensions in the narrative discourses of Donald Trump and Pope Francis (Deye and Fairhurst, 2019). Gronn (2011) argues that leadership is fundamentally 'a hybrid configuration' comprising both leaders and followers, both individual and collective dimensions in varying mixtures. Lipman-Blumen (2000: 331)

views the societal forces of differentiation and integration (see Introduction) as in 'dialectical tension'. Equally, she argues that human development itself can be understood as 'a dialectical process between self and other'. For Lipman-Blumen, the overarching task of leadership is to connect these two dialectics. The next section considers some of the key features of a specifically dialectical approach to critical leadership studies.

Dialectical Approaches to Critical Leadership Studies

Critical dialectical perspectives explicitly problematize asymmetrical power relations in leadership dynamics. Careful to avoid treating leader's control and influence as all-determining and monolithic, these perspectives also recognise that different forms of power can be in tension with one another, and may also produce unanticipated and unacknowledged effects: power can be paradoxical and contradictory, with unintended outcomes. They aim to show that power is not so much a 'dependent variable' or a commodity to be used or abused at will, but rather a deeply embedded and inescapable feature of leadership dynamics and of organizational structures, cultures and relations: power is structural, relational and practice-based (Gordon, 2011; Lumby, 2018). From a dialectical perspective, leaders' power and control can take multiple economic, discursive, and embodied forms. Power can be conferred by hierarchical position, as well as enacted more informally through processes, relationships, networks, and personal agency. While leadership and power are often associated with those in positions of formal authority, critical dialectical studies emphasize that leadership can also emerge informally in more subordinated and dispersed relationships, as well as in oppositional organizational forms such as trade unions (Knowles, 2007) and revolutionary movements (Rejai, 1979). The following sub-sections now explore the multi-facetted nature of leadership power dialectics in more detail.

Power as gendered, intersectional and embodied

Critical feminist research illustrates how leadership power continues to be deeply gendered (Rhode, 2017; Carli and Eagly, 2011). Historically, power has been associated with men and masculinity, and leadership is often conceptualized as a stereotypically masculine endeavour (Goethals and Hoyt, 2017). Challenging taken-for-granted views that white, middle-aged men are inevitably the people in charge who create visions and make decisions, feminist studies demonstrate that gender is an important source of power and influence frequently embedded in organizational structures, cultures and practices (Ford, 2006; Gardiner, 2018). They show how romanticized notions of the heroic, 'tough', 'strong' and 'charismatic' leader are often saturated with images and assumptions of men and masculinity (Bowring, 2004, Kerr and Robinson, 2018). Studies demonstrate that, despite relatively longstanding anti-discrimination legislation in western societies, women continue to comprise a small fraction of those occupying senior leadership, management and boardroom positions (Johnson and Lacerenza, 2019). The comparatively few women who do achieve hierarchical progress can experience considerable hostility in male-dominated managerial cultures (Sinclair, 2007), often having to cope with: heightened and intense scrutiny (of their bodies, clothes and physical appearance), feeling 'misidentified' in the workplace (Meister, Sinclair and Jehn, 2017) and sexual harassment (Beggan, 2019).

Feminist writers emphasize that gender relations also often intersect with other important sources of power, identity and inequality such as race, ethnicity, class, and age (Calas et al., 2010; Mumby, 2011). Relatedly, critical studies on men reveal how the category 'man' takes many different forms and how 'hegemonic' and 'subordinate' masculinities (Connell, 1987) typically inform the gendered power relations of leadership, management and followership (Collinson and Hearn, 2014). They show how 'hegemonic masculinity' shapes leadership decisions, values, styles, language, cultures, relations, identities and practices (Hearn & Collinson, 2018) in ways that subordinate women and other men and

masculinities. These studies recognize that masculinity is neither universal nor monolithic but can take multiple forms related to intersecting inequalities and may also vary across transnational organizations and societies (Hearn, Vasquez del Aguila and Hughson, 2018). They also highlight how male leaders are often treated as if they were 'masters of the universe' with the ability to predict and control the future (Knights and McCabe, 2015).

For many men, work continues to be a primary site for identity construction and of 'masculinity contests' (Berdahl et al, 2018). Seeking to prove that they are powerful and tough 'real men', men often compete for and exercise (masculine) power and identity through strategies of dominance and superiority over women and other subordinated men (Collinson and Hearn, 2014). Feeling constantly under pressure to prove their manhood, men are more likely to engage in aggressive and risky behaviour, displays of sexuality, sexual harassment, and by devaluing women and those men who do not fit hegemonic criteria (Hearn & Collinson, 2018). Such pressures can be exacerbated by performance systems that pit employees against one another, and workplace cultures that, for example expect long hours working and 24/7 availability (Collinson and Collinson, 2004). 'Masculinity contest cultures' tend to value typically male norms prioritizing aggression and dominance and avoiding weakness and vulnerability. Berdahl et al (2018) contend that such masculine cultures are typically characterized by four primary expectations: to 'show no weakness', to demonstrate 'strength and stamina'; to 'put work first' and to engage in 'a dog-eat-dog' hyper-competition. The outcomes for employees of this kind of high pressure, toxic leadership culture are likely to be reduced morale, increased burnout and higher turnover (Glick et al, 2018).

These gendered workplace contests are also very much about white masculinity: hegemonic masculinity is typically defined by not only male, but also white supremacy (Berdahl et al, 2018). Accordingly, similar arguments can be made in relation to other

intersecting sources of power and identity such as race, ethnicity, class, age, religion, disability and sexual orientation: important themes for more critical work on leadership (Liu and Baker, 2016). Ashcraft & Mumby (2004) illustrate how certain gendered, ethnic and class-based voices are routinely privileged in the workplace, whilst others are marginalized.

Relatedly, critical dialectical studies highlight the embodied nature of leadership power (Liu, 2017). They demonstrate, for example, that, in education, the police and orchestras, women and men leaders utilize their bodies as modes of power, influence, and communication (Sinclair, 2005, 2013; Ropo & Sauer, 2008), and how corporeality, emotions and aesthetics may shape leaders' practices (Hansen & Bathurst, 2011; Melina, Burgess, Falkman, & Marturano, 2013). Feminist studies argue that notions of transformational leadership typically assume a male body (Sinclair, 2007) and reveal how followers' practices are also embodied (Makela, 2009).

This focus on the dialectics of embodiment reminds us that leadership and followership are also about flesh, blood, bones, organs and bodies, as well as being situated in specific times and places – they are both embodied and embedded. It provides a welcome counter to studies that privilege leaders' minds as if they were entirely separate from their bodies. By focussing on embodiment, writers reframe the Cartesian mind/body dualism in dialectical terms. For Descartes, logic and the scientific method required the separation of 'the rational mind' from the 'emotional body'. Leadership research has traditionally focused on leaders' minds to the neglect of their bodies, particularly in relation to decision-making, strategy and (changing) 'minds' (e.g. Gardner, 1996, 2006). By treating leadership as an inherently cerebral process research has privileged rationality and neglected emotion (see also Pullen and Vachhani, 2013).

Critical studies of masculinities indicate that men are often disconnected from their own bodies, especially in relation to illness (Connell, 2005). Reluctant to confront possible

physical fragilities, we men may try – frequently unsuccessfully – to distance ourselves from our own bodies (Collinson & Hearn, 2018). One significant limitation on leaders' power is the frailty and impermanence of the human body itself. Studies have revealed the extent to which many American presidents (Post & Robbins, 1993) and British prime ministers (Owen, 2011) have experienced mental and/or physical illness whilst in office, as well as the lengths to which those around the leader may go to conceal such illness from the public.

This sense of disconnection and of disembodiment (both as leaders and as men) may be compounded by virtual technologies (Hearn, 2012). The use of new digital technologies can intensify (men) leaders' (psychological and cultural) distance, potentially reinforcing their tendency to view employees as mere numbers on a spreadsheet. Equally, social media (e.g. Twitter) enables political leaders to enhance their power and influence by speaking directly to supporters whilst simultaneously distancing themselves from journalists (and other critics) who are therefore less able to hold them to account.

Power as productive <u>and</u> oppressive, overt <u>and</u> covert

Critical dialectical studies also suggest that power can be enacted in overt, subtle, disguised, and sometimes invisible ways within leadership dynamics. Leaders' power can be both enabling and disciplinary: It can be positive, productive, and empowering, as well as toxic, corrupt, and destructive (Schyns et al, 2019). Leaders typically play a key role in defining strategies and visions, shaping structures, cultures and change programmes, monitoring work and performance, providing rewards, applying sanctions, and in hiring and firing. They can also exercise power by 'managing meaning' and defining situations in ways that suit their purposes (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Critical perspectives address the dangers of concentrating organizational control in the hands of a few. As Finkelstein (2003: 43) noted, 'being (chief executive officer) of a sizeable corporation is probably the closest thing in today's world to being king of your own country.' They also disclose how leaders can use

ideologies that seek to redefine sectional as universal interests, through discourses that construct excessively positive definitions of reality, and by 'distancing' themselves from particular local practices (Collinson, 2005).

Leaders can exercise power through their communication and messages. For example, Spector (2020) 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. Exploring leaders' manipulation of followers, Ciulla (2020) reveals how leaders can exercise power by fuelling followers' sense of resentment and by inverting dominant values.

Leaders' power can also be more disguised and concealed. O'Connor et al (2019) examine the strategies of those in senior positions in HE institutions in Ireland, Italy and Turkey which, they argue, were specifically designed to obscure the centralisation of power. Referring to this as 'stealth power', they identify four control practices that seek to obscure leaders' power: rhetorical collegiality, agenda control, in-group loyalty and the invisibility of gendered power. Their findings illustrate how leaders' power can operate covertly and panoptically. Similarly, Lumby (2018) explores subtle forms of leader power such as 'shaping discussion and decisions', 'acquiring the support of others', 'weakening opposition', 'denying power' and 'creating a favourable impression'.

Power dynamics can also shape localized micro-interactions, for example, being displayed in forms of eye contact, how individuals stand or sit, the gestures they make, the words they choose as well as in the physical arrangements and features of rooms and the locations in which meetings take place (Dick and Collings, 2014). Equally, the external architecture of buildings can also convey important messages about power and status (Dale

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and Latham, 2015). Internally, those in senior positions are typically located on the top floors of buildings, well away from subordinates and frontline operations.

Critical studies also examine the impact of power on leaders themselves. They reveal how the effects of power might have paradoxical, counter-productive and damaging outcomes for leaders and organizations. Senior positions typically confer greater autonomy, status and privilege, but they may also nurture leaders' hubris, narcissism and arrogance (Sadler-Smith, 2019; Tourish, 2020). This, in turn, can inform a failure to consult – even a disregard for others' views – and a desire to hold onto power even when support for a leader has faded. Power can be intoxicating (Owen 2012; Owen and Davidson, 2010) in ways that encourage leaders to be more impulsive, less risk-aware, and less empathetic (Asad & Sadler-Smith, 2020) - unable or unwilling to appreciate other people's point of view (Useem, 2017).

Power can also be corrupting (Kipnis, 1972). Particularly in contexts where leaders enjoy high degrees of autonomy and low accountability, their power can become excessive and they may start to believe they are shielded from any potential costs of deception. Research indicates that such conditions are conducive to unethical behaviour and corruption (Bendahan et al, 2015; Giurge et al, 2019), corporate 'psychopathology' (Boddy, 2011, Babiak and Hare, 2007) dictatorship (Schubert, 2006) and authoritarianism (Harms et al, 2018). Conversely, in other contexts like the contemporary UK public sector, leaders' accountability and responsibility may have intensified. Tomkins, Hartley and Bristow (2020) 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. This can lead to high levels of stress, anxiety and loneliness for individuals in leadership positions (Krauter, 2020; Sillard and Wright, 2020). These findings remind us that in the

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study of leadership dialectics, power and responsibility often comprise two sides of the same coin.

Although they emphasize the importance of power, dialectical approaches also recognise that leadership relations are rarely so asymmetrical that they are invariably one-way. Giddens' dialectic of control reminds us that although power is important for understanding social dynamics, it should not be overstated or seen as all-determining. These arguments have important implications for understanding followership, as the following two sections elaborate.

Power, consent, conformity and compliance

As discussed above, mainstream studies tend to portray followers as 'an empty vessel waiting to be led, or even transformed, by the leader' (Goffee & Jones, 2001: 148). In recent years, however, there has been growing interest in exploring the more active role followers play in leadership processes (for example, Shamir et al, 2007; Riggio et al, 2008; Kellerman, 2008). Post-heroic perspectives have argued that 'exemplary' and 'star' followers are a precondition for high-performing organizations – particularly in the contemporary context of flatter hierarchies and greater team-working (for example, Kelley, 2004).

While mainstream approaches often assume that followership is freely chosen, critical perspectives contend that such arguments are overly voluntaristic because they fail to locate followers in their structural, cultural, and economic context – the asymmetrical conditions and consequences of action. Precisely because of the ways in which power and control are typically enacted in contemporary organizations, many subordinates might, for example, have to accept and enact a strategic path decided by leaders (and with which they may disagree).

Dialectical approaches recognize followers as skilled, proactive and knowledgeable agents who have at their disposal a repertoire of possible agencies, ranging from deference, unquestioning loyalty, commitment, conformity and compliance, to indifference, cynicism,

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disguised dissent and overt resistance. They also acknowledge that followership can embody many different meanings, including, for example, political supporters, disciples, fans, customers, fanatics, and even social media 'followers'. Within this broad range of possibilities, an employee can be seen as a specific kind of organised follower who sells their labour to an employer. In that sense, employment can be treated as a particular kind of commodified followership: one that is more contingent and constrained, sometimes insecure and potentially disposable, and much less 'freely chosen'.

Studies of conformity, compliance, and consent (e.g. Arendt, 1958; Shamir, 2004) illustrate the disciplinary character of leadership power. Although conformity tends to be viewed positively in mainstream studies, frequently treated as an expression of commitment and loyalty, more critical writers highlight its potentially detrimental consequences. Much of the research on conformity and its damaging effects emerged in the post-world war two period, as writers tried to make sense of the Nazi extermination of six million Jews and the explanation of many of those involved that they were 'just obeying orders'. Milgram's (1963) experiments highlighted people's willingness to obey authority, apparently regardless of its consequences. Fromm (1977) addressed human beings' 'fear of freedom' in which individuals prefer to avoid responsibility for making decisions themselves by sheltering in the perceived security of being told what to do.

Others have outlined deeper explanations for the human proclivity to conform to others' will and the recurrent desire to be led by charismatic leaders. Drawing on Becker (1973), Lipman-Blumen (2000) points to human beings' fear of death (both our own and our loved ones) which, she argues, informs a relentless search for meaning. This existential insecurity, derived from the awareness of our own finitude, compels us to seek out and elevate leaders who we believe can provide meaning and protect us, in part through the illusion of their omniscience and control.

Various researchers observe that followers often attribute exceptional qualities to charismatic leaders through processes such as transference (Maccoby, 2007), fantasy (Gabriel, 1997), and idealization (Shamir, 1999). In a later study Lipman-Blumen (2005) examines followers' fascination with toxic leaders, despite – possibly even because of – the latter's dysfunctional characteristics (insatiable ambition, enormous ego, arrogance, etc). Given the asymmetrical nature of organizational power in leader-led relations, it is unsurprising that followers may conform (or comply), but, from a leadership point of view, we need to know more about how, why, and with what consequences men and women followers conform, comply, or remain committed to their leaders and organizations.

Bratton, Grint, and Nelson (2004) counterpose the negative organizational effects of 'destructive consent' with the potentially positive consequences of 'constructive dissent'. Similarly, critical dialectical approaches highlight followers' potential and capacity to express dissent and enact resistance. In doing so, they recognise that leadership relations are rarely so asymmetrical that they are all-determining or all-powerful, as the following section elaborates.

Power, knowledge, resistance and dissent

Issues of follower dissent have only recently been addressed in leadership studies (e.g. Banks, 2008) and in the mainstream leadership literature resistance has tended to be viewed as an 'irrational' process that leaders and managers should try to eliminate (Gagnon and Collinson, 2017). Nonetheless, there is a considerable literature in organization studies indicating, firstly, that employees often draw on their technical knowledge, strategic agencies and cultural resources to express disaffection in organizations (e.g. Mumby et al, 2017) and, secondly, that resistance can be a rational agentic response to leaders' exercise of power. Despite the efforts of scientific management to deskill workers (Braverman, 1974),

employees on the frontline continue to retain technical and cultural knowledge that they can deploy in expressing dissent. Studies show how resistance can take numerous forms (Courpasson & Vallas, 2016) whether explicit (for example, strikes) and/or more disguised (for example, output restriction). In exceptional cases, subordinates may even (seek to) depose leaders.

My own research in organizations over the past 40 years has consistently found that followers are potentially more oppositional than is often recognized in the leadership literature. It also suggests that resistance is more likely to emerge when subordinates believe that leaders are exercising control in unfair, dictatorial and/or coercive ways. Equally, employees are more likely to resist when they feel that their views have not been considered, when they perceive leaders and managers to be 'out of touch', and when they detect discrepancies between leaders' statements and their practices. If followers perceive such inconsistencies, they can become increasingly cynical about leaders (see also Fleming, 2005).

Research in a UK truck manufacturer discovered that a corporate culture campaign introduced by the new American senior management team to establish trust with the workforce had precisely the opposite effect (Collinson, 1992, 2000). Manual workers dismissed senior management's definition of the company as a team and resisted by 'distancing' themselves, restricting output and effort, and by treating work purely as a means of economic compensation. They created a counter-culture celebrating a working-class masculinity that valued male breadwinner identities, elevated 'practical', manual work as confirmation of working-class manhood, and communicated through aggressive and profane forms of masculine humour, ridicule and sarcasm. The company's leaders remained unaware of how their strategies produced counter-productive effects on the shop floor.

Where followers are particularly concerned to avoid sanctions, they may resist in more disguised ways. Although employees might be highly critical of leaders' practices, they may publicly censor their views and camouflage their actions through covert resistance that covers its own tracks (Scott, 1985). Anticipating the possibility of disciplinary sanctions, they might shape their actions accordingly. Subtle and routine subversions, such as absenteeism, 'foot dragging', and 'disengagement' can be difficult to detect. Employees may even undermine leaders' change initiatives simply by doing or saying nothing. While, silence should not be confused with consent, such inertia can result in leaders making all sorts of mistakes (Grint, 2005). Disguised dissent is particularly likely in the current era of intensified surveillance. Under the gaze of authority, individuals are increasingly aware of themselves as visible objects, and, as a consequence, they can become increasingly skilled choreographers of self using impression management techniques (Goffman, 1959).

Research on North Sea oil installations found that despite company executives' commitment to safety, many offshore workers were either not reporting accidents and 'near misses', or else they sought to downplay the seriousness of particular incidents (Collinson, 1999). While corporate leaders in London and Aberdeen talked proudly about the organization's 'learning culture', offshore workers complained about a 'blame culture' on the platforms. Believing that disclosure of accident-related information would have a detrimental impact on their annual appraisals, pay, and employment security, offshore workers felt compelled to conceal or downplay information about accidents, injuries and near misses. Precisely because such practices constituted a firing offence, workers also disguised their underreporting.

These findings illustrate that disguised dissent incorporates self-protective practices that sometimes blur the boundaries between resistance and consent. Relatedly, Kondo (1990: 224) criticizes the tendency artificially to separate conformity or resistance into 'crisply distinct

categories.' She contends that there is no such thing as an entirely 'authentic' or 'pristine space of resistance', or of a 'true resister'. Observing that people 'consent, cope, and resist at different levels of consciousness at a single point in time', Kondo (1990) questions the meaning of the term resistance and warns about the dangers of romanticizing oppositional practices – that is, of imputing an invariably subversive or emancipatory motive or outcome to resistance.

To summarise, critical dialectical studies regard follower resistance as an important feature of leadership processes. Far from always being passive and unquestioning, subordinates can express opposition in multiple forms, using knowledge and information in ways that simultaneously enact, but also conceal, their resistance. Disguised dissent incorporates self-protective practices that sometimes blur the boundaries between resistance and consent. Emphasizing the mutually-reinforcing nature of leaders' power and followers' resistance, critical dialectical studies also show how leaders' control can have unintended and contradictory consequences that leaders do not always understand or anticipate. This is not to suggest that followers will invariably engage in dissent, or that opposition is necessarily effective; control may produce compliance and even conformity, while resistance can also have unintended and contradictory consequences (see e.g. Ashcraft 2005). These arguments in turn raise important questions for future critical research about what constitutes resistance – about who resists, how, why, and with what consequences.

Conclusions: Making Connections/ Exploring Dialectics

This article has explored the value of building deeper connections in leadership theorizing, highlighting in particular the neglected importance of power in leadership dynamics. In doing so, it has considered the emergent field of critical dialectical leadership studies which addresses the relational, asymmetrical and paradoxical character of leadership dynamics. These perspectives surface important questions about organizational power

relations, conflicts, tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions that are typically under-explored or marginalized within mainstream leadership studies. The paper has argued that power is fundamental to leadership theory and practice: 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. Power can reinforce leaders' sense of disconnection from followers and from the natural world.

Dialectical perspectives challenge the dichotomized understandings of leaders, followers and of leader-led relations that persist in much of the conventional literature and are sometimes reproduced (in other forms) in post heroic and more critical studies. They question 'either/or' polarities that downplay or neglect leadership interrelations, tensions, asymmetries, and contradictions. Critical dialectical perspectives acknowledge that leaders' power(s) can take multiple forms, and have contradictory and unintended outcomes, which leaders either do not always understand, or of which they may be unaware. They show how leader–led relations contain the potential for conflict and dissent. Leaders cannot simply assume followers' obedience or loyalty. Critical dialectical studies view control and resistance as inextricably-linked, mutually reinforcing processes that are also inherently ambiguous and potentially contradictory.

While the paper argues that leadership and power are frequently closely connected, this is not to imply that leadership issues can be reduced to questions of power. Rather, it is to argue that power is an important consideration, frequently ignored in leadership studies. Accordingly, the article has highlighted the value of connecting leadership studies (where questions of power have been largely neglected), with social theory, CMS and labour process analysis (where power has been examined, but leadership issues have rarely been considered). Furthermore, the paper has also suggested that both in theory and in practice,

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power typically takes a plurality of simultaneous and intersecting forms, and thus is likely to require multiple interwoven theoretical frameworks. To this end, the paper discussed the leadership dialectics of: gender, embodiment and intersectionality; the productive, oppressive, overt and covert nature of power; consent, conformity and compliance, and knowledge, resistance and dissent. These dialectics are themselves likely to be mutually-reinforcing and/or in tension with one another. The potential implications for leadership studies of dialectical analysis are suggestive of new lines of research that can further connect previously separated theories and themes.

Directions for future research

Future research could focus on the various meanings and theories of power captured in dialectical approaches and how these are enacted in leadership processes. For instance, the resurgence of authoritarian and autocratic political leadership on a global scale raises important questions about the exercise of power in organizations (e.g. Harms et al, 2018), illustrative of recent distinctions between 'power over', 'power to' and 'power with' (e.g. Salovaara and Bathurst, 2018). Relatedly, more critical, dialectical research could address many of the under-explored connections between leadership and the health and well-being of the planet and its eco-system. Leadership decision making is centrally implicated in climate change and sustainability issues and would benefit from further research (e.g. Satterwhite, McIntyre Miller, and Sheridan, 2015) utilising theory which recognizes the complexity and inter-connections of such processes. Hence, these critical perspectives suggest that leadership research should pay more attention to the damaging and dysfunctional aspects of leadership. For example, untrammelled leader power was arguably a key factor in the banking crisis (Tourish and Hargie, 2012; Kerr and Robinson, 2011).

Likewise, while this article has emphasized the potential value of making deeper connections (in a more conceptual sense), feminist research suggests that men leaders frequently benefit from personal relationships (with other men) in leadership positions (e.g. Kanter, 1993), but these gendered networks are often primarily informal, operating beyond scrutiny and accountability in the 'private' sphere. Such informal relationships may have an empowering effect for the men involved (as the old saying goes, 'it's who you know, not what you know'), but these connections can also become incestuous and exclusionary, especially in relation to women and non-hegemonic men (the opposite effect to that anticipated by E.M. Forster). Because of their lack of transparency, these relationships could even facilitate corruption. Dialectical approaches offer the means to theorize such processes, providing the opportunity to substantially extend our understanding of how positive and negative effects of leadership are co-produced and mutually implicated.

It is also important to recognize that leadership power dynamics are invariably situated in time and space. While there is considerable research on leadership and context (e.g. Osborne, Hunt, Jauch, 2002; Porter and McLaughlin, 2006; Liden and Antonakis, 2009), few of these studies address questions of power (and resistance). The multiple identities, values and cultures of leaders and followers in various regions, societies and continents are likely to significantly shape leadership practices (Chin, Trimble and Garcia, 2018). Hence, future research could address the dialectical connections between culture, contexts and power.

Further connections between power and identity in leadership dynamics could also be addressed. For example, while 'leader' and 'follower' are deeply embedded dichotomies especially in Western societies, there is a growing recognition that such traditional identities no longer adequately characterize contemporary leadership dynamics, which are increasingly seen as blurred, fluid, and contradictory. For example, distributed leadership encourages those in more junior positions to act as 'informal leaders', and in many organizations, leaders

are subject to intensified pressures of accountability positioning them in subordinate roles (i.e. as de facto followers). Future research could examine the implications of these shifting and paradoxical power relations and identities.

Finally, we also need to consider the multiple and intersecting nature of power/identity dialectics. Critical feminist studies demonstrate that differences and inequalities can take multiple, intersecting forms. Yet, when exploring one dialectic, it is possible to reproduce others. For example, we can address leader/follower dialectics, but neglect how these dynamics are also shaped by inequalities such as gender, ethnicity, race and class. Whilst focussing on the barriers to advancement for mainly white, middle-class women, researchers have sometimes neglected how women of colour predominate in lower-paid, insecure and dead-end jobs (Holvino, 2010). Similarly, studies may critically examine the control/resistance dialectic, but in ways that neglect emotions and thus reproduce a rational/emotional binary. Critical studies therefore need to develop sophisticated understandings of how these various dialectics connect and intersect.

In sum, by connecting power/identity dialectics, critical approaches have the potential to develop new insights into the conditions, processes and consequences of leadership dynamics. At a time when autocratic, authoritarian and dictatorial leadership are increasingly prominent on a global scale, it would seem particularly important for critical dialectical approaches to contribute to debates about the future direction of leadership both in theory and practice. Returning to Forster, his exhortation to 'Only connect!' principally referred to intimate relations in Edwardian Britain. Yet, as Lipman-Blumen's emphasis on the need for greater connectivity in 21st century leadership indicates, Forster's dictum has a much wider relevance and resonance for contemporary societies. This is especially the case in western cultures where we increasingly live in fragmented, privatized life-worlds facilitated by digital technologies that intensify our disconnection from communities (except those online). The

intention of this article was to demonstrate that a much greater focus on exploring

connections can also significantly enhance our understanding and appreciation of the

dialectics of leadership, both in theory and practice. Only Connect!

Footnotes

[1] The use of dichotomies can also proliferate. For example, studies of transformational/transactional leadership typically build on leader/manager binaries with the transformational pole being associated with leadership and the transactional polarity with management. When differences between leadership and management become dichotomized, leading and managing are often viewed as mutually exclusive activities (Rost, 1991) with leaders and managers seen as entirely different 'types' of people (Zaleznik, 1975). Any connections or overlaps between them are lost as transformational leaders are treated as visionary, inspiring change agents, whereas transactional managers are downgraded as more narrowly concerned with mundane operational matters such as rules, costs, routinization and risk-aversion.

[2] Multi-level analysis is influential in various sub-fields of leadership studies (Yammarino, Dionne, Chun, and Dansereau, 2005). While identifying different analytical levels can be a useful heuristic device, multi-level studies typically focus on identifying distinctions to the neglect of exploring how these 'levels' are simultaneously implicated and interwoven in particular practices (Collinson, 2014).

[3] Power can be conceptualized in multiple structural and interpersonal ways (Collinson and Tourish, 2015). A recent review of the literature (Sturm and Antonakis, 2015: 139) defines interpersonal power in terms of 'having the discretion and the means to asymmetrically enforce one's will over others.'

[4] Foucault's relational conception of power highlights some of the limitations of Marx's critique of private ownership and class inequalities. However, Foucault's argument that power is exercised rather than possessed seems to underplay certain significant sources of (structural, hierarchical) power and leadership in contemporary societies where, for example, legally-enshrined ownership (for example, of land, property or organisations) confers considerable power, prestige and leadership status on particular individuals and groups. Rather than perpetuate a binary (or false dichotomy) between these 'proprietorial' and 'relational' views of power, as some writers advocate (e.g. Knights, 2019), I would argue that both are significant when exploring power and leadership: both property/juridical and relational/process theories are important in examining the intersecting nature of power and leadership. More broadly, I would agree with Bidet's (2016) focus on the important potential synergies between Marx's critique of property in capitalist societies and Foucault's analysis of power/knowledge relations. Exploring these latent synergies would better illustrate how power is both exercised *and* possessed, producing effects that are simultaneously repressive *and* enabling, negative *and* positive, typically reproduced through interconnecting dialectics.

[5] Despite their interest in power, neither Giddens nor Foucault explicitly focussed on leadership (or management) dynamics. This reflects a broader pattern in the literature on dialectics and on power which has rarely considered leadership (and/or management) issues. Weber is an exception to this general rule. Studies of leadership and those of power have therefore tended to remain largely disconnected from one another. This point was commented upon by one of the earliest studies explicitly linking leadership and power. Janda (1960) observed 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).

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