Leadership: Where organization studies meet ethics

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Abstract

Leadership Studies is a new interdisciplinary field of Organization Studies that is growing at a steady rate all over the world. Leadership studies are seen as a branch of Management and Organization Sciences despite its philosophical roots that can be traced back to Plato's philosophical writings such as Laws, Politics, or The Republic. Starting from Burns' seminal book, Leadership (1978), and subsequent discussions with American business ethics pioneer Joanne Ciulla, a fundamental methodological question emerged: whether Leadership studies are a normative or a descriptive field of study.

Keywords

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Introduction

Leadership Studies is a new interdisciplinary field of Organization Studies that is growing at a steady rate all over the world. Leadership studies are seen as a branch of Management and Organization Sciences despite its philosophical roots that can be traced back to Plato's philosophical writings such as Laws, Politics, or The Republic. Starting from J.M. Burns' seminal book, Leadership (1978), and subsequent discussions with American business ethics pioneer Joanne Ciulla, a fundamental methodological question emerged: whether Leadership studies are a normative or a descriptive field of study.

This is a very important distinction as it splits Leadership studies in two, albeit not definite, fields: one belonging to Social Sciences where this dichotomy (normative and descriptive) is believed not to be a problem, as the dominant paradigm is German sociologist Max Weber's notion of wertfrei, that is social science should not include any reference to values. On the contrary, for normative theories of leadership, it is a puzzle. According to normative theorists (such as Joanne Ciulla), the descriptive theories are not actually fully descriptive; they, indeed, are backhanded as they retain their significance in an ambiguous balance between normative and descriptive ones.

Very similarly, leadership popular literature also masks a normative meaning under the vest of a descriptive narration. Leadership studies are therefore broke up into in two, often overlapping, fields: one which does not care about the distinction between normative and descriptive as it relies on social sciences methodology whose supporters believe to shield leadership studies from judgments of values; the other, on the contrary, is aware of this slippery and questions the validity of a social science methodology for leadership studies as the latter actually implies notions borrowed by the humanities: the normative/descriptive shift should be carefully analyzed in its magnitude.

The origins of leadership studies

While the birth of leadership is traceable to the early writings of Plato (notions than noticeably reinterpreted in Averroes' Commentary on Plato's Republic) and Aristotle (Nicomachean Ethics), it is only from the 19th Century that we had a renewed interest for studies in a leader's qualities or characteristics. The modern origins of leadership studies owe in a significant way to the contributions of those who implemented the so-called traits theory, and in particular to the Great Man Theory which is actually a product of the 19th century scholars.

Traits theory's earliest forms have provided an easy explanation for the complex collection of individual characteristics a leader should possess. While the original base of Trait theories can be traced back in several Greek classics such as Homer's The Odyssey and Iliad, the Great Man Theory was reintroduced in western culture with Carlyle (1969) and Emerson studies (1996). In more recent times (1940), new studies on Traits theory were set by several authors up in the United States (Bird, 1940; Stodgill, 1948; Mann, 1959). Finally, Traits theory was further analyzed during the 80s by showing that while no collection of traits could guarantee an individual's raise to leadership in any context, holding certain traits make it more likely that a person will be granted or assigned a leadership position (Marturano, 2014).

These characteristics have much in common with the qualities previously associated with the Great Men theories such as physical features, personality factors, education, and skills. On the other hand, exactly which of these characteristics a leader should possess is something that is considered to change continuously across time and seems related more to how a leader is perceived by his/her followers rather than to his or her real characteristics (Marturano, 2014).

Trait theories have started debates on some "philosophical-like questions" about leadership, such as whether leaders are made or born, which is related to leadership characteristics (Marturano, 2014; Kets de Vries & Engellau, 2014; Avolio, 2005; Jackson & Parry, 2008: 16; Riggio, 2009), and about the nature of charisma (Weber, 2015; Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Adair-Toteff, 2005; Marturano &

Arsenault, 2008), starting what eventually became highly disputed concerns on the very nature of Leadership.

From leadership as personality study to leadership as behavior and action

Leadership Studies can be sorted in three main groups, each related to a dominant disciplinary paradigm: Leadership as personality, leadership as behavior and action, and leadership as a symbol (Andersen, 2000); trait theories were the central paradigm of the first category. After the Second Word War, the booming of social sciences allowed Traits theory to be reinforced by using research tools such as data analysis (either qualitative or quantitative). This methodological wave become dominant not only in that particular leadership field but it was a result following a general trend that crossed the majority of social studies.

Leadership as behavior and action is linked to leadership style theories; they are focused on the behavior or behavioral patterns of leaders. These theories are still very popular and often go beyond a description of the behavioral pattern of leaders to offer explanations for the cause of leadership styles and their consequences in terms of effectiveness (McCall, 1976).

Starting in 1945, the Ohio State University Leadership Studies of Leadership Behaviors sought to identify the observable behaviors of leaders instead of identifying personality traits. Using data collected by interviews, observation, and questionnaires, the results showed that two factors accounted for most of the variance (Marturano, 2014). These two factors were named Consideration and Initiating Structure (Tracy, 1987). The first reflects the extent to which leaders exhibit concern for the welfare of the group members; that is oriented towards interpersonal relationships, mutual trust, and friendship. This leadership style is people-oriented.

The latter reflects the extent to which an individual is likely to define and structure her role and those of her subordinates toward goals attainment. This leadership style is task-oriented (Fleishman & Harris, 1962). These are the extremes between which the behavior of

managers ranges; indeed, managers are neither just task-oriented nor just people-oriented (Bass, 1990).

Several questionnaires and instruments for measuring leadership qualities, as many have pointed out, followed the original Ohio State University Leadership Studies of Leadership Behaviors research and led to two different and opposed views of the relationship between leadership and effectiveness (Marturano, 2014).

Creators of the famous Managerial Grid Blake and Mouton (1964) have claimed that team management is the only best leadership style. Fiedler (1967), on the opposite, argued that leadership behavior should be flexible as it needs to fit a given situation to ensure organizational effectiveness (Contingency Model).

Contingency theories were a fundamental tool for understanding leadership behaviors, while, at the same time, its methodological approach was scrutinized, including (1) its limited leadership conceptualization and insufficient empirical support for its models, (2) its failure to distinguish between the behavior of managers and leaders' behaviors, (3) over-simplification of the options available to leaders and the situations leaders might face (Bolman & Deal, 1991).

Such criticism resulted in new disciplinary research programs; notably the path-goal theory and the leader-member exchange theory. The path-goal theory, better known as "the path-goal theory of leader effectiveness" or "the path-goal model" claims that a leader's behavior is contingent on subordinates' satisfaction, motivation, and performance. It also argues that the leader engages in behaviors that complement the subordinate's abilities and compensate for deficiencies (House, 1971).

The origin of the Leader-Member Exchange, or LMX theory of leadership leader–member exchange, theory can be dated back to the Vertical dyad linkage theory (VDL) in 1975 (Dansereau et al., 1975). The Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory centers on the two-way relationship (the so-called "dyadic relationships") between supervisors and subordinates. The (LMX) theory basic idea holds that leaders form two groups of followers, namely an in-group and an out-group. Members of the former group are given greater responsibilities, more

rewards, and, basically, more attention. The leader allows them some latitude in their roles; in fact, in-group members work within the leader's inner circle of communication. Out-group members are not within the leader's inner circle: they receive less attention and fewer rewards, and are managed by formal rules and policies (Lunenburg, 2010).

LMX theory assumes that leaders develop an exchange with each of their subordinates, and that the quality of these leader-member exchange relationships influences subordinates' responsibility, access to resources, and performance. Moreover, LMX theory aims at promoting positive employment experiences by augmenting organizational effectiveness. Finally, LMX theory focuses at increasing organizational success through the creation of leaders and subordinates mutual positive relations (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Very importantly, the path-goal theory was very popular around 1970-90, but it has been overtaken by the LMX theory at the turn of this century as the most popular leadership theory. Path-goal theory research did not evolve further because of some implication in its design; it is not only leader-centered, but also sees a leader as a semi god; moreover, the Path-Goal Theory, in spite of its reformulation by House (1996), is a normative theory with strong authoritarian assumptions, but still it needs to be seen whether the modifications in the theory would work in environments where group members work in an independent, creative, intelligent, and knowledgeable way. In other words, there is a general disagreement whether or not the Path-Goal theory can be universally applied.

On the contrary, LMX theory is still being researched and improved and even giving birth to new and interesting leadership models. However, the highest limit of this theory is the fact that it does not help much in describing the specific leader behaviors that promote high quality relationships. LMX theory is indeed a descriptive (rather than normative) leadership theory centered on explaining the way in which people relate to and interact with each other rather than on prescribing how to form high quality LMX relationships (Gerstner & Day, 1997).

These theories operate a kind of Copernican revolution by putting followers at the center of leadership studies in place of leaders. Followership opens leadership to be a more complex and systematic activity that involves mutual influence between followers and leaders (Fiedler, 1993); in the end, leaders are a product of followership, or, in other words, leaders are selected by followers! Leader-followers multidirectional relation is an increasingly interesting field studied in order to understand the leadership phenomenon (Rost, 1991).

These leader-followers relations can be analyzed from different perspectives: not only from an influence point of view, as they interact in groups, and are thus involved in several fundamental group-level processes; at an impersonal level it, relates with influence and persuasion among individual group members; at the perceptual level, leader-followers relations involve followers' perceptions and expectations of leaders; finally, leader-followers relations are integral, as we have seen above, to many leadership theories and still have a special role in the transformational/ transforming theory in which leadership "provides a deeper level of connection with followers through the leader's ability to be a role model for the followers, inspire them through a vision, intellectually challenge them and demonstrate a genuine concern for the individual followers' well-being" (Hoyt, 2009).

Transformational, Transforming, and Transactional theories of leadership

James MacGregor Burns (1987), in his seminal book, Leadership raised a completely new research paradigm by bringing forward, according to American ethics scholar Joanne Ciulla (1995), a normative conception of Leadership, which can be labelled transforming leadership. Burn's new paradigm is indeed normative as it does not intend to simply describe how leaders in fact behave but, rather, prescribes how they ought to behave.

Burn's new research paradigm, focusing on the normative-descriptive aspects of leadership, was not a commonplace in Leadership Studies. Very interestingly, Burns unveiled a philosophical-methodological problem that had passed basically

unnoticed through Leadership Studies earlier in history. Past leadership scholars were actually ambiguous regarding the purpose of their studies; namely, whether they were putting forward a descriptive or a normative theory of leadership. This ambiguity led to a number of internal contradictions in much the same way as ambiguities between question of ethics and law in normative reasoning led to ethical and legal fallacies (Marturano, 2014).

The Scottish philosopher and pioneer social scientist David Hume famously warned about shifting from is statements to ought statements (later called the Is-Ought Fallacy). Hume's Is-Ought Fallacy, indeed, states that many scholars make normative claims (that is about what ought to be) on the basis of descriptive statements (i.e. about what actually is). Hume found that there seems to be a sharp difference between descriptive statements (about what it is) and normative statements (about what ought to be), and that it is not clear cut how someone can contingently infer from descriptive statements to normative ones (Hume, 1739).

Very similarly, almost every major contribution to leadership studies, "still move quickly from analyzing what leadership is to asserting a model of how it gets done, and thence to prescriptions for what leaders should do, and all too often these kinds of studies start at the end, with value laden notions of what ought to be the case" (Gosling & Marturano, 2008). According to Burns, transforming leadership "aims at moving beyond people's wants and wishes, thereby engaging their real needs and values" (Price, 2008).

Burns argues that transforming leadership allows people to transcend the claims of the multiplicity of everyday wants, needs, and expectations by raising both leaders and followers «to higher levels of motivation and morality» (Burns, 1987: 20). Burns contrasted transforming leadership to the more common, transactional varieties of leadership characterized in terms of the notion of exchange which could be economic, political, or psychological. According to Price, the morality associated with transactional leadership is thus an ethics of choice and individualism that characterizes the market and contemporary politics (Price, 2008).

Pioneering leadership scholar Bernard M. Bass (1985) further elaborated on Burn's dichotomy between transforming and transactional leadership. Bass claims that they are not on two opposite ends of a continuum, but are two definite separate paradigms. Bass concludes that the best leaders are indeed both transformational and transactional.

Transactional and leader-members exchange (LMX) theories are commonly seen as a further step to the dominant "leader-oriented" approaches which focus on the leader's actions and attitudes (Bass, 1985). Despite their behaviorist assumptions, such theories do not focus on the normative-ethical elements of leadership, but they have the advantage of shifting the meaning of leadership studies from a leader-centered to a holistic vision of leader-followers interaction. The main limit of this approach is to confine such interaction to that of "rational agents" ignoring complex, emotional factors, and social values (Tavanti, 2008).

From transforming leadership to ethical leadership

Leadership ethics, finally, emerged at the end of the 20th Century as a development of Burns' transforming/transactional theory. That is a distinct area of applied ethics and leadership studies while it is not, strictly speaking, an area of professional ethics- as Engineering Ethics or Information ethics. Leaders indeed face additional challenges as their work is not professionally regulated like the job of an engineer or a lawyer.

Leadership Ethics shares many ethical challenges with Corporate Social Responsibility and Business Ethics, but also with other branches of applied ethics and politics, for instance, ethical problems related to leadership behavior with shareholders and stakeholders as for the environmental impacts of such an organization in a particular territory. In general, ethical leadership studies are concerned with the relation between ethical behavior and effectiveness in leadership as it seems that leaders cannot always be at the same time ethical and effective (Ciulla, 2008b).

Joanne Ciulla (2008b) claims that ethical leadership is based - on the heels of Burns' works- on a leader-follower relation that is

consisted of an ongoing dialogue about values. Ciulla concludes that "the quality of all aspects of leadership rest on how well leaders promote the end values of liberty, justice, equality and happiness. These are lofty moral standards, but the relationship between what leaders are and what they should be is the main point of studying leadership".

Many authors claim that the ethical element is central to authentic leadership. Luthans and Avolio (2003), for example, claim that authentic leadership is defined with a set of characteristics such as confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, moral/ ethical, and future-oriented and gives priority to developing associates to be leaders. An authentic leader must be true to him/ herself and their exhibited behavior positively transforms or develops associates into leaders themselves (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). However, other studies have emphasized that a leader can be true to him in a corrupted organizational environment and, ironically, still are an authentic leader (Shamir & Eilam, 2005).

In ethical theory, this claim is not that paradoxical as it can be paralleled to the internalist-externalist debate that stems out from contemporary discussions over David Hume's motivational theory (Hume, 1739). How and under what conditions moral belief can itself be motivated is a matter of dispute. Some scholars, such as Thomas Nagel (1970), John McDowell (1979), and, recently, Russ Shafer-Landau (2003), hold that "moral belief is sufficient to motivate directly: Merely believing that it is right, say, to keep a promise will move the believer, at least to some degree, to act so as to keep the promise" (Rosati, 2016). This view is called ethical internalism.

Others, such as Michael Smith (1994) and Peter Railton (1986), hold the externalist standpoint that is "moral beliefs produce desires, which then motivate in conjunction with the moral beliefs that produced them. Believing that it is right to keep a promise produces a desire to do so, and these cognitive and conative states jointly move the believer, at least to some degree, to act so as to keep the promise" (Rosati, 2016). In other words, according to the externalists, "belief is

insufficient for motivation, which always requires, in addition to belief, the presence of a desire or conative state" (Rosati, 2016).

Moral motivation thus cannot arise from moral belief alone but must depend as well upon a pre-existing desire or other imperative-like or intrinsically motivating state. Authentic leadership moves from an internalist standpoint and it is incompatible with the externalist one. But, according to Hume and champions of the externalist position, ethical behavior may move too from personal or organizational desires (such as using bribery for maximizing profits) and still being authentic leadership (Rosati, 2016). This philosophical debate shows the difficulties to correctly characterize what authentic leadership is, as the very nature of ethical behavior is still conceptually slippery.

Conclusion

The need of a normative theory of leadership is twofold: on the one hand, normative theories help unfold methodological puzzles and failures within leadership studies such as the idiosyncrasies within the idea of a superhuman and undemocratic leader in the path-goal theory or the fallacious inferences that dominate leadership folk theories (i.e. if you want to be successful, you must behave in your work like Steve Jobs- or in that work situation you should behave as Steve Jobs did in a similar occasion), but also reinforcing the idea that leadership is strongly cultural-dependent and relies on followers' perception of a leader, values, needs, and beliefs.

Philosophy (that is the combination of ethics and critical thinking) is placed again at the heart of leadership. According to Hodginkson's seminal work on philosophy of leadership, logic- or critical thinking- is the executive's basic tool. It enters into his work through the weighting and assessing an argument, through the continuous monitoring for fallacy in presentations, projects, and plans. Logic/ critical thinking deals with matter of facts, structure, coherence, and consistency, causal chains and explanatory systems and sequences; ethics deal with all matters of value, from beliefs to morality, through the valuational, to all complexities of motivation.

Logic and ethics encompass all organizational behavior (Hodginkson, 1983: 4) which is becoming more and more complex and culture-related. While social science models are still being pervasively used encompassing also studies on cultural leadership (House et al., 2004), they are not able to grasp the complexities and the contingencies of a specific leadership role, neither are able to correctly explain the complex cultural environment in which leadership is embedded (Marturano et al., 2010).

As Von Hayek (1954) has argued, whole branches of social sciences, especially those developed as behavioral sciences and macroeconomics theories, rely not on concrete problems they tried to solve but only over the scholarly desire to strictly adhere with scientific methodology that, unfortunately, derives from a wrong interpretation of the methodologies used in natural sciences (Von Hayek, 1954). While the latter should explain the regularities of nature, the former should explain the unintended and unforeseen effects of human actions (Popper, 1957: 26). Logic and ethics have the role to fill this gap by passing the dichotomy between the normative and the descriptive for a more inter-subjective, organization-related, culture-aware way of thinking.

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