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Back to Life: Leadership from a Process Perspective

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Back to Life: Leadership from a Process Perspective

Abstract

Process thinking has given us signals regarding how to make critical judgements about, or else how to grasp actively and immanently, an organisational world on the move. The perspective of a world that is constantly changing draws our attention to the sensate feeling of time and to the creative use of the immediate past, which is no more and the immediate future, which is not yet, in our experience of the here and now. The current discussion uses the concept of process to contribute a more critical understanding of the actual occasion of leadership behaviour, anticipating this will offer both a route out of the popular obsession with *individual* leader-work and interactive studies of leadership as a predicate dependent on particular leaders and followers in *interpersonal* contexts, and toward the creative potential of leadership *as process itself*

Keywords: event, leadership behaviour, lived experience, process studies, relations

Back to Life: Leadership from a Process Perspective

> Fundamentally, everything stands still – the thawing wind, however, preaches to the *contrary*!
>
> (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*)

Introduction

Traditional studies tend to hypostatise leadership as *individual* leader-work, for example as the prescribed collection of psychological attributes belonging to a well-defined person (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Burns, 1978; Fiedler, 1967; Hersey & Blanchard, 1977; Stogdill, 1950). Meanwhile, interactive studies extend traditional questions about the intentions of individual leaders to a consideration of discrete schemes of relations, in which leadership is seen as a predicate dependent on particular leaders and followers in *interpersonal* contexts (Brower, Schoorman & Tan, H.H. et al., 2000; Dansereau, 1995; Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Graen & Scandura, 1987; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Keller & Dansereau, 1995; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997). Nowadays, rather than focusing on 'leadership' as an essentially static attribute, the active and transformational nature of 'leading' is very much in vogue. Alongside this dynamic description there has also been a growing interest in the contribution and relevance of a particular ontological and epistemological orientation known as *process thought* (see, for example, Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Hernes, 2007; Ropo, Eriksson & Hunt, 1997; Rehn, Strannegard & Tryggestad, 2007; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Process thinking rests on the general theory of relatedness and continuity in social affairs. On this perspective, life and society cannot be split into distinct and identifiable parts, but must

be conceived rather as an undivided, active process that is always shifting. What obtains in the here and the now is derived from the past; it is inescapably embedded in the historicity of past events, and in turn shapes future events – just as people living in Europe were affected by particles released from Chernobyl, so too do recent economic decisions and financial practices in the USA in particular affect the global community.

Process thought is also a distinctive sector of philosophical tradition. Drawing on the pre-Socratic cosmology of Heraclitus, whose basic principle was that everything flows, a processual approach deals with questions of emergence (becoming) before distinct entities or identifiable substances (being). For process thinkers, the actualities of our perceptual experience are not 'things' but 'events' (Whitehead, 1978); reality is change (process) itself. This kind of metaphysics is logically opposed to that of Parmenides, probably the most significant of the pre-Socratics, who saw existence as eternal, it can neither come into being or be destructed. What exists is now, all at once, timeless, uniform and unchanging. Thus, movement is impossible because it requires something coming-to-be and since everything must either completely be or not at all there is no-where that coming into being can begin (Osborne, 2004). In recent times, the concept of process has become identified most closely with the British mathematical physicist turned philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, and the French intuitionist philosopher, Henri Bergson. Two among other intellectual associates are the American psychologist and pragmatist, William James, and the twentieth century proto-postmodern philosopher of difference, Gilles Deleuze.

The current discussion is structured as follows. In the next section, the philosophical project of these 'processual thinkers' is reviewed in more detail. In sections three and four, process thinking is employed as a critical perspective to interrogate both *individual* leader-work and interactive studies of leadership in *interpersonal* contexts. Section five turns toward the creative potential of seeing leadership behaviour as an event – precisely *as process itself* –

before finally considering the implications of this approach for explicating imaginatively abiding problems in leadership studies.

Process Thinkers

The clearest expression of Whitehead's process philosophy can be found in his assertion that the 'passage' (Whitehead, 1920: 54) or 'advance' (Whitehead, 1978: 314) of nature is a fundamental condition of experience in itself. In this continuous advance, or universal becoming, which is essentially a movement of creativity and novelty, each occasion of actual experience is the outcome of its predecessors. Actual occasions or 'eternal objects' each have a definite duration, arise, reach satisfaction and perish. Nonetheless, they do not simply disappear without trace but always leave behind consequences that have the potential for entering into other passing moments of experience. So, at each step perception of the immediate present – the 'here now' – is weighed down by an immediate past – a 'there then' – even a fraction of a second ago and, by turn, anticipates future events in which it can be taken up.

Following Whitehead, our knowledge about the world does not obtain in a set of abstract and simply located entities – for example, managers, and leaders, or followers and even organisations – which are taken *to be* in themselves, in a perfectly identifiable and recognisable sense. This simple location, though handy, definite and manageable, is an error of mistaking abstract concepts for substantial processes – what Whitehead (1967: 51; see also Wood, 2005) calls 'the fallacy of misplaced concreteness'. This abstraction from the immediate flow of experience tends to fix distinct and identifiable parts as timeless instants, without movement. But the immediacy of each actual occasion is relational and 'arises as the bringing together into one real context of diverse perceptions, diverse feelings, diverse

purposes, and other diverse activities' (Whitehead, 1927: 9). We might say that our immediate perception and subsequent meaning conceptualisation are blended into one – more 'now' than 'here'. The concreteness of experience therefore is constituted as an actual occasion in which being gives way to the reality of process. The first two lines of a popular Christian hymn, 'Abide with me; Fast falls the eventide' (Whitehead, 1978: 209) characterise this nexus. Here, the perceptual permanence of 'abide' and 'me' in the first line is matched by the perpetual passage of 'fast' and 'falls' in the second line, to create a new immanent synthesis (passage *and* permanence; perishing *and* everlastingness).

Like Whitehead, Bergson's contribution to process thought is metaphysical. Like Whitehead, he suggests life and nature are not distinct things or substances, but rather sensations, feelings and ideas seized from original process. Both scholars assert that evolution is continuous. Living *is* changing, it is inventing. Nature's essence, its *élan vital*, is the creative advance into novelty. Unlike Whitehead, however, Bergson (1912: 44) argues the corresponding process of isolating, immobilising, or securing actual occasions from the limitless flow of 'virtual' possibilities is an 'imitation', which, although useful for capturing life, is itself 'a counterfeit of real movement'.

In doing so, Bergson enumerates two opposing tendencies for apprehending the concrete world. The first is the logic (epistemology) of the *intellect*, which denotes the world as an already determined series of solids. It forces on us a static conception of the real, which, if taken too far, cannot embrace the continuity of flow itself (ontology). The second is the method of *intuition*, whereby we plunge into the very life of something and identify ourselves with it by a kind of sympathetic indwelling. Here reality is expressed as 'fluid concepts', quite different from the static abstractions of traditional logic. On its own the intellect's 'spatial' abstraction of things is too deterministic. However, the flow of the actual world without a corresponding logic is too indiscernible, too 'inaudible'. Life is realised by infusing the

intellect with intuition and not simply by reducing one to the other. It is a kind of intermediate position, an interval or existence placed halfway between both (Bergson, 1991).

Bergson is primarily a philosopher of time, which he considers eludes our intellectual spatialisation of things: 'In short, the qualities of matter are so many stable views that we take of its instability' (Bergson, 1983: 302). In other words, we conceive immobility to be as real as movement and then mistake one for the other – the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, once again. Nonetheless, time is always going on, it never completes: it is the condition of real experience and not merely thought. This is not to deny that time cannot be thought. Clearly it can. Bergson's point is simply that our conception of time as a series of positions, one then the other, and so on is a matter of abstractive thinking and *not* a property of concrete experience (living time). Simply located positions are surface effects we employ to give substance to our concrete world, but under whose 'givenness' the fluxing nature of reality is neglected. For us to grasp this principle, Bergson (1983: 237) argues, we must reverse our mental habits to see that mobility is the only actual reality. We must loosen ourselves from the intellectual force underlying the 'already made' and step more directly into the perpetual flow of the 'being made'.

The condition of experience in the making is founded clearly upon a consideration of 'the concretes of … experience' (James, 1975: 109). Thus, concrete experience is the cornerstone of processual ideas and beliefs about the world. What is most important, therefore, is a consideration of how beliefs function and how ideas are used *in situations*. This is the contention of William James' process thought. For James, deciding the truth of beliefs, or the usefulness of ideas, is derived from experience in itself and not through abstract conceptual analysis. He advocates *relating* beliefs and ideas back to a consideration of their particular consequences for life. By relating ideas and beliefs to the various elements of lived experience, James draws attention to the fact that the world is incompletely organised and, as

such, largely a matter of our own creation. We carve out and carve up 'the sensible flux' (James 1975: 122) of the knowable universe in order to fashion usable representations:

> …in the sky "constellations", on earth "beach", "sea", "cliff", "bushes", "grass". Out of time we cut "days" and "nights", "summers" and "winters". We say *what* each part of the sensible continuum is, and all these abstract *whats* are concepts (James, 1979: 50, original emphasis)

The main lines of development in James's thought are therefore *practical* and *empirical*. Meaning and truth are *processes* made and validated by their workableness relative to a present situation:

> The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process, the process namely of its verifying itself, its veri-*fication*. Its validity is the process of its valid-*ation*. (James, 1975: 115, original emphasis)

Clearly, James's empiricism goes beyond the naïve realist connection between our perceptions and distinct phenomena of nature, which can be united only through abstractions and concepts imposed from *without*. In James's radical empiricism it is not the distinctive impressions of objects immediately given or abstract reflections on a world already made which are primary. Rather, reality has to be verified by a criterion of practical usefulness. In this case, because phenomena of nature and matters of fact are created in the relations between people and the world, they are liable to modification *inside* concrete experience.

The creation of innovation, novelty, and the new in relation to actualities (actual occasions) is also precisely what is at stake in Deleuze's metaphysics. Deleuze (1994) thinks

of the movement of becoming in terms of an internal or immanent force (apropos Bergson's élan vital) that creates actual spaces and times, sensations and intensities. He describes 'points, places and functions, positions and differential thresholds' (Deleuze 1994: 207), as an 'internal qualitative relation' (Deleuze 1994: 46) or a 'virtual multiplicity' (Deleuze 1994: 212) that 'expels as well as creates, destroys as well as produces' (Deleuze 1994: 11). For Deleuze, the salient feature of this immanent force is that it is entirely self-sufficient. It does not have to go outside itself in order to move, change, or enter into relations. In fact, precisely as a process, its intensity does not survive without changing in nature. It is a different form of existence that affirms multifarious *differences* and becomings within it. Its Being differs from itself immediately, internally. In other words, its difference 'in-itself' (Deleuze 1994) is the process of reality actually 'processing'.

Of course, the dominant Western intellectual system of thought, which presupposes physical elements as distinct and identifiable, does not easily permit such an imperceptible force that is purely intensive and that cannot be measured or captured. This is the challenge for the revolutionary and political dimension of Deleuze's work. Alone and with Felix Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983; 1987), Deleuze analyses the ways in which contemporary societies and organisations often canalise social life within finite limits and simultaneously characterise as a remedial pathology behaviour that deviates dangerously, or refuses to coalesce smoothly, with any single, coherent set of identities. Deleuze and Guattari locate the repressed neuroticism of modern individuals within contemporary capitalism, for example, in the schizophrenic's characteristic refusal to dissociate multiple, distinct identities or personalities. What is important for Deleuze is movement away from (all) invariance. He is no longer addressing the human condition from a fixed point of view, as something identifiable and recognised. Human experience now suggests a view of complexity and indeterminacy. It implies a 'machinic assemblage' (Ansell-Pearson 1999: 140), rather like the

heterogeneous fusion of machine and organism in cyborgs (Haraway 1985; Wood 1998). The important thing is that *Being* is the open system par excellence. It is not fixed but in motion, never resting, but constantly trembling (Linstead & Thanem 2007).

To summarise, according to process thinkers such as Whitehead and Bergson, our perceptual experience is a whole that cannot be separated into distinct zones – people/world or mental/physical – without involving the interplay *between* physical feelings and mental valuations. Following the lines of James, we might say abstract concepts like truth, meaning or identity are only more or less useful, more or less workable, or more or less sensible. They are varying and temporary and liable to modification in the course of future experience. Following Deleuze, experience is divisible but not divided. What 'defines' truth, meaning or identity is not their fixed structure but their permanent renewal, what they can do, what they can become.

The Liminality of Process Thinking in the Social Sciences

Certainly, theorising 'acts of organising' is not new in organisation and management studies (see, for example, Blau, 1955; Lindblom, 1959; March, 1988; Mintzberg & Waters, 1985; Mohr, 1982; Pettigrew, 1973; 1985; Weick, 1979; 1995). Karl Weick, in particular, has been writing about acts of organising as the means by which participants make sense of their social interactions, for over thirty years. Similarly, the hugely influential work of Robert Cooper (for further reading, see Chia, 1998a; 1998b; Spoelstra, 2005), concerning the philosophical and sociological exploration of dis/organisation, has articulated a processual style of thinking since at least the mid-1970s (see, for example, Cooper, 1976). More recently, organisational theorists (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002) who accept a process worldview have begun to advocate a need for better appreciations of process metaphysics.

The latest developments in the field have been presented at conferences and showcased in special issues/sections of international peer-reviewed journals (viz: Dibben & Cobb 2003; Linstead 2002; Linstead & Mullarkey 2003; Mullarkey & Linstead 2004; Rehn et al., 2007; Ropo et al., 1997). These publications consist of contributions from scholars who believe that, despite raising methodological issues in relation to criteria of validity in social science research (Ferlie & McNulty, 1997), the move to process knowledge is helpful in dealing with the important issue of time in research findings (Tuttle, 1997), as well as being more philosophically and theoretically able to grasp the dynamic and transformational nature of leadership discourses, (Koivunen, 2007), organisational development (Calori, 2002) and group behaviour (Watson, 2003), new product innovation (O'Shea, 2002), organisational knowledge (Styhre, 2003; Wood, 2002), the social organisation and business cultures (Hatzenberger, 2003; Power, 2003) and negotiated consent (Larson & Wikström, 2007), among others.

Of course, there remain many dilemmas, challenges and debates, surrounding the implications of process thought for understanding social action. One 'hot topic' relates to the different views scholars hold about whether organisation phenomena consists of things or processes, or whether these are complimentary ways of viewing entity and flux. For process thinkers, processes of change, movement and transformation characterise actual 'things'. The world is made up of occasions of emerging experience and concretising abstractions. It is important to note that for Whitehead (1978: 347), understanding a concept of finite identity at the same time as it seems to perish and pass 'is not the mere problem of fluency and permanence. There is the double problem: actuality with permanence, requiring fluency as its completion; and actuality with fluency, requiring permanence as its completion'. For example, our lived experience is not just a process of becoming. Indeed, 'actual entities … the final real things of which the world is made up' (Whitehead, 1978: 18), although fleeting in

nature, are not perpetually perishing (this is the despair of nihilism). Whitehead's (1978: 347) actual entities also have an 'objective immortality'. Even as the actual entity passes certain beliefs and conceptions are maintained and worked into the fabric of new passing moments of experience.

Here, the analogy can be drawn between Whitehead's double problem of fluency and permanence and Freud's concern 'to satisfy the double requirement … for indefinite preservation and an unlimited capacity for reception' (Derrida, 1978: 222). Freud's method is to consider the perceptual apparatus of the 'Mystic Writing Pad' (Derrida, 1978). The Mystic Pad consists of a slab of dark coloured wax over which is laid a translucent covering-sheet, which can be detached from the upper surface of the wax slab. A stylus is used to inscribe the upper surface of the translucent sheet. It presses the sheet into the wax slab underneath making the inscribed marks visible. The marks 'vanish' however when the contact between the covering-sheet and the wax slab is broken and do not return when the two surfaces come together again. The Mystic Pad can be used again and again in this way as the covering-sheet forms no permanent traces and has the potential to receive unlimited fresh inscriptions. But it is easy to discover the permanent trace of the inscriptions by examining the impressions left on the surface of the wax slab itself. The wax slab represents the everlastingness of the unconscious and the appearance and disappearance of what is written is the becoming and perishing of perceptual experience. We might say it 'is the fluent world become 'everlasting'' (Whitehead, 1978: 347).

Clearly, if we accept this proposition, research that pays attention to social action in general, and the field of management and organization in particular, needs to do more than emphasise prevailing substantive and unchanging conceptual 'categories'. Alternatively, if the process approach is to understand the dynamics of a social action such as leadership, for instance, then classical views associated with an individual person, or the profile of various

'high flyers', are soon shown to be incomplete and insufficient. Leaders might be important, but it is by no means obvious that their influence *alone* has significant consequences for organisational activities, performance and outcomes. From a process worldview, we could say that leadership is essentially a moment of real experience and not of conceptually well-defined individuals and their agential relations. Put differently, if there is one designation that accurately characterises leadership from a process point of view, it is that it emerges in a 'dense intermeshing of relationships' (Cooper, 2005: 1691), in which thinking and perceiving are one.

A second topical issue of concern is the extent to which process 'is regarded as just one more position in the trench warfare of methodology' (Rehn, et al., 2007: 229). On the one hand, there are process researchers purporting to explain organisation and management phenomena by making expedient use of longitudinal case studies (see, for example, Langley, 1999; Ropo et al., 1997; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). On the other hand, there are process theorists who accept the metaphysical centrality of a process-relational worldview (Chia 1999; Tsoukas & Chia 2002; Wood 2005), but are as yet unable/unwilling to fix 'gangways' to practice, or are only now beginning to fabricate methodological 'railings' that respond to perceived demand (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Van de Ven & Poole, 2005; Wood & Ferlie, 2003).

This situation, in which theorists increasingly pursue specialist interests, thereby losing contact with each other and with the whole, is perhaps indicative of an intellectual field (like many others) in which there is 'no longer a shared discourse, a shared set of terms … a shared language we all, however idiosyncratically, speak' (Ortner, 1984: 126). Perhaps because of the substantial interest in processual approaches to management and organization, the field shows the classic symptoms of liminality – a confusion of categories and expressions that relates to a field in the making, or a transitional or initial stage of development during

which the concept lacks precision, is prescribed by extant analytical frameworks and remains within disciplinary jurisdictions. A variety of theories and methods – process philosophy, process thinking, process analysis, and process research – have all been developed under the label of 'process studies'. These various theoretical schools and approaches have promoted a critical and reflective awareness of the relentless flux through which reality is experienced currently in post-industrial societies. But that is where the shared discourse, the shared set of terms and a shared language ends.

Currently, 'process studies' consists of disjunctive investigations with individuals pursuing their specialised interests in isolation, or else small groups talking mainly amongst themselves and failing to stir argument and debate in wider management and leadership studies. In so doing, researchers in the field risk losing contact with each other and so reducing the visibility and impact of process thought as a whole. To date, process studies have consisted of two quite different categories of theoretical affiliation. The first driving assumption is that 'social reality is not a steady state', that 'human conduct is perpetually in a process of becoming' and that one of the greatest inductive challenges for the process analyst is to 'find the underlying mechanisms in an immediate or more distant context and thereby 'catch this reality in flight' (Pettigrew, 1997: 338-339). Furthermore a processual analysis involves 'breaking down data', constituting components categorising and sub-categorising, cracking open, labelling and reconstructing, decoupling, classifying and recombining (Dawson, 1997: 403). In other words it consists of *representing* social reality.

Nonetheless, several internal inconsistencies seem to arise from these assumptions. First, social reality is not a steady state, *but* we can explicitly and directly 'fix' it. Second, human conduct is perpetually in a process of becoming, *but* reality is an outcome of the structures and mechanisms driving sensible processes. Third, social reality occurs rather than merely exists, *but* the clear and distinct 'qualities' of the mechanisms and structures of reality

dominate over their ‘relatedness’. Fourth, understanding the sequence and flow of events over time is crucialand here the value of process is as epistemology or a ‘logic’ that can be put to work in explaining the doings and comportments of things – for example, managers and organisations.The implications of this epistemology are thatprocess research is a contemporary ‘return’ to natural realism in the critical interpretation of organisational life and the transformation of the firmIts analytical framework looks more like a ‘substance approach’, in which process risks being reduced to a dependent state or condition of something else and not an act in itself. Furthermore, the tendency to understand outcomes as having sharp boundaries is mistakenly to link process research with the principle of something to be completed (i.e. the start and end of a process), rather than properly to focus on the act or process itself. This kind of process research appears to be more concerned with providing ‘useful insights into the practice of conducting longitudinal case studies on organisational change’ (Dawson, 1997: 390) (i.e. of finding a technical solution) than with recognising the fundamentally processual nature of the real, in which primacy is given to the movement and process of *becoming* rather than to substantive and unchanging notions of *being.* From this it appears that an effective ‘blind spot’ of extant process research is precisely the study of complex activity and process, which ‘our methods are not geared up to detect or know’ (Suchman, 2005). The conventional process paradigm maintains a methodological fetishism for *things* and *objects* that can be identified. As Suchman (2005) reflects: ‘To appear on an agenda, or in an annual report … there must be *some thing* that can be named’. By contrast, process metaphysics starts from quite different theoretical affiliations. The guiding idea is that process *is* the concrete reality of things. As a result, process has priority over substance and substance is subordinate to process. Things are always subordinate to processes because processes inwardly engender, determine and characterise (concretise) the elements of experience. Life and society are conceived as a process of creative advance in

which past events are contracted in the present, and in turn are taken up by future events. Consequently, things are simply constellations of processes *vis-à-vis* the 'normal' view that process and change are simply a matter of how things appear (Dawson, 1997; Langley, 1999; Ropo et al., 1997; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). The key difference from the normal paradigm of process research is that although the social world can be broken down, compartmentalised, categorised, labelled and classified, this is a matter of abstractive thinking and *not* a property of the actual world itself. We may say therefore thatprocess metaphysics is post- (or perhaps even pre-) Kantian. It is in this sense a radical approach, always immanent to the world. Rather than adopting a phenomenological position that appears exterior to experience, and which must rely on a set of mechanisms and structures as proxies in order to shine a light on reality, the world is already for-itself. It is already illuminated from within and already makes sense to itself.

Nonetheless, precisely because applied process studies is a field in the making, we should try to balance the claims of those conducting processual research on management and organizations (Ropo et al., 1997) and those interested in exploring the complexities of process philosophy and theory in management and organization studies. Thus, we should be careful not to make the mistake of rejecting one or the other since both provide valuable comment. Any attempt to distinguish between them might result simply in our re-asserting the conventional bi-polar position of process/permanence or stability/change (Rehn et al., 2007). If we see the 'creative disagreement' between these different ways of thinking process 'as a strength rather than a problem' (Rehn et al., 2007: 230), then will they will be like ships quietly passing in the night. This is better perhaps than being mired in conceptual confusion and forced contradiction.

Following these reflections on the liminality of process studies in the social sciences, the discussion now turns to the role of these different ways of thinking process in the

development of leadership studies. I want to suggest that each perspective finds an equivalent correlate in a different phase or stage of leadership studies, as: (1) processes *of* individual leaders, (2) processes *of* interpersonal leadership, and (3) leadership *as* process.

Processes *of* Individual Leaders

When thinking about leadership, senior executives and individual managers (as post holders) typically are promoted as the source or cause. The logic behind this idea is that he or she can impose his or her vision, preferences and influence on a social system to bring about substantive change. This simple and attractive idea is used to refer to the personal qualities, skills and expertise of a few talented people, whose conduct may be perceived as 'leaderful' by their embodiment of some transcendental or archetypal processes (communication, problem-solving, people management, decision making, etc.). Whilst situational factors (such as the nature of the task, group, culture, etc.) may be considered, they do not seem to be viewed as barriers to the leaders' abilities to lead under different circumstances. This notion of individual leader-work, however, does little to challenge traditional conceptions of leadership and, despite it being one of the most researched topics of the past 50 years, the popular view remains relatively unchanged: the 'heroic' leader (there is a marked gender bias in the language of leadership) possessing a variety of powers, attributes and 'competencies' that enable him (sic) to bring about transformative effects within his (sic) domain of influence.

Traditional leadership theories (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Burns, 1978; Fiedler, 1967; Hersey & Blanchard, 1977; Stogdill, 1950), including charismatic and transformational leadership perspectives (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1997; Conger, 1989; Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Goffee & Jones, 2000), focus on personal attributes to the neglect of wider

contextual forces that also impact on organisational performance and outcomes. Besides being predictable, this collection of attributes only provides the invocation for cognitively, behaviourally, spiritually and emotionally aware leadership to anticipate and aspire to, in the realisation of present or, more often, new leadership behaviour within predominantly capitalist organisations (Fry, 2003; Goleman, 1996; Greenleaf & Spears, 1998; Hooper & Potter, 2000). By doing so, they continue to promote the leadership process as individual leader-work and thus exaggerate the leader's role in terms of his or her personal abilities and the contribution they generally make to organisational performance and outcomes.

Whilst personal qualities of the leader are undoubtedly important they are unlikely to be sufficient in themselves for the emergence and exercise of leadership. It is perhaps more likely that these aspirational characteristics, attitudes and behaviours result from the over-simplification of a vast pool of environmental data into a few key people. Mintzberg has made this point several times and repeats it once more when he questions Fortune magazine's assertion that 'within four years, Lou Gerstner added more than $40 billion to IBM's shareholder value. *All by himself?*' (Mintzberg, 2004: 22, original emphasis).

It is for this reason we often hear that leadership is about being followed, or that leadership is not just a quality in the leader but, more importantly, it is a quality that resonates among the led. This is a significant step because it draws attention to leadership as a process of reality construction (Smirchich & Morgan, 1983; Shotter & Cunliffe, 2003). Fairhurst's (2005; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996) discursive social constructivist approach draws on communication studies to explore leadership's changing role in organisations. Leadership, she argues, needs to be understood discursively, rather than simply as a cognitively focused individual skill. She further describes leadership as a process of sense making, whereby, on the one hand, leaders use language as a tool to frame or reframe social contexts so as to overcome possible resistance to change, to secure commitment and encourage buy-in from

employees for management initiatives, whilst, on the other hand, the meaning and value attached to a leader's individual skills or personal attributes is also dependent on followers' selection and framing of them.

Processes *of* Interpersonal Leadership

Some influential perspectives have anticipated research drawing our attention to leadership as a kind of interactive encounter (Brower et al., 2000; Dansereau, 1995; Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Graen & Scandura, 1987; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Keller & Dansereau, 1995; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997). Contrary to the traditional cognitive focus on individual skill, leadership now appears to be a relational phenomenon, one that is socially constructed by managers *and* subordinates in actual work interactions (Lührmann & Eberl, 2007).

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory is perhaps the best known of the social construction approaches for identifying types of interpersonal relationships in which individuals operate (Brower et al., 2000; Engle & Lord, 1997; Graen, Orris & Johnson, 1973; Graen & Scandura, 1987; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997). Theoretically, what distinguishes the LMX theory is its claim not to focus on leaders and followers as independent terms. Rather, the point of interest is the influence and social exchange relationship between leaders and followers (Danerseau, 1995; van Breukelen, Schyns, & Le Blanc, 2006). Empirically, the traditional assumption that leaders adopt a consistent leadership style towards all members of their work unit, team or organisation, is contested. The key premise of the LMX approach is that effective leadership relationships develop between specific 'dyadic' partners in particular organisational settings (Dansereau, 1995; Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Leadership is differentiated in a social

exchange process that develops along dimensions to which both superiors and subordinates can contribute and that both parties value (Dienesch & Liden, 1986). Thus, leadership is a reciprocal achievement, whereby superiors exert influence over subordinates and subordinates exert influence over superiors.

Graen's and his collaborators' LMX model (Graen et al., 1973; Graen & Scandura, 1987; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) 'pursues the question of how differentiated dyadic relationships develop and combine to form systems of interdependent dyadic relationships or network assemblies' (van Breukelen et al, 2006: 298). The higher the quality of the network of relationships – where quality is analogous with normative conceptions of mutual trust, respect and loyalty, etc. – the better organisational performance and outcomes will be. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to presume what is achieved is fundamentally a more relational representation. Such interactive studies actually retain a commitment to the primacy of methodological individualism and run the risk simply of encouraging easy (dualistic) associations between independent terms, rather than acknowledge the primacy of relations (Chia & Holt, 2006)

Dansereau and colleagues (Dansereau, 1995; Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Keller & Dansereau, 1995) use the concept of a vertical dyadic linkage (VDL) to develop an alternative, individualised leadership approach. According to Dansereau & Liden (1986), a leader has a vested interest in the role performance of a subordinate and will exert pressure in the form of an individualised role expectation episode. 'Here, the focus is on the way formally assigned superiors succeed in securing satisfying performance from a particular subordinate, thus becoming a 'leader' in the eyes of his (sic) subordinate' (van Breukelen et al., 2006: 299).

In different ways both LMX and VDL models cast important doubt on the traditional hypostatisation of leadership as a collection of personal attributes. Nonetheless, despite the

bifurcation in approaches, interpersonal exchange models continue to focus on leadership as a leader-follower dualism. That is to say, although most models involve participants who are interdependent, interpersonal exchanges may simply re-affirm the default condition of leadership as (aggregated) individual acts.

A key premise of social exchange approaches is that leaders form different types of exchange relationships with their subordinates. Accordingly, the leader is viewed not in terms of his or her personal attributes per se, but rather in terms of the relative contribution he or she makes in a situation (Dansereau, 1995). To this extent, it would appear social exchange *relationships* between leaders and followers are the primary focus. Nonetheless, despite this attention, we argue social exchange models erroneously continue the fetishism for individuals as the source of leadership. It is quite telling, for example, that such models focus on relations to others but do so invariably from the standpoint of individual leaders and followers already made (Uhl-Bien, 2006). In this way, social exchange models seem to commit a tautology, or else a logical fallacy, which holds well only because leadership is read into the content of the process which actually conditions it. This objection leads us to investigate several other important theoretical and empirical concerns.

First, social exchange models understand the criterion of leadership as a result of the structure of intermediary relations between already given leaders and followers. Proponents suggest these terms are more like 'relational pointers' than proper, self-contained substantives (see van Breukelen et al., 2006 for a review) – this way of thinking does at least understand leadership as an activity, not a substance, and definitely not as merely a collection of attributes. Nonetheless, conceptually, social exchange thinkers presuppose ready-made leaders and followers who see themselves as separate individuals; discrete, bounded things that would be there whether we recognised them or not. The focus has now broadened to include 'more parties' than just the leader, but this does not progress beyond being a mere

extension of the individual leader-work perspective. At present, 'the processes described are still primarily considered to occur in the "minds" of the individuals involved in the collectivity rather than in the social dynamic' proper (Uhl-Bien, 2006: 659; cf. Hogg, Martin, Epitropaki, Svensson, & Weedon, 2005; van Kippenberg, van Kippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2005).

Second, empirically, social exchange models focus on the dyadic level as the appropriate unit of analysis for leadership activity. Nonetheless, as we have seen above, the dyadic structure expresses intermediary relations as a sort of go-between that connects people, whose distinctness is already privileged. From the Greek *dýo* meaning 'two', the dyad consists of two parts. In social psychology, the conceptualisation of the dyad begins with the analysis of a two-person relationship. In chemistry a dyad is a bivalent formation, and in biology a dyad is characterised by a pair of chromosomes resulting from cellular division. The key point is there are always two. Likewise, the most important aspect of social exchange perspectives is to describe the two-way influence and social exchange relationship between leaders and followers (Brower et al., 2000; Danerseau, 1995; Uhl-Bien, 2006). The propensity is to assume the existence of an intermediary variable (the interaction or exchange) between a leader-follower dualism that is measured according to any one of a number of scales containing anything from 2-, 4-, 5-, 7-, 10-, 12 and even 14-items (for a fuller review see Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Keller & Dansereau, 1995).

Third, 'most studies supporting the conclusions about positive relationships between LMX quality and organisational outcomes' are 'static field studies' and 'correlation studies' using 'questionnaires' and 'self-reported … assessment instruments' (van Breukelen et al., 2006: 304). In other words, LMX studies tend to be *quantitative* in design. Their emphasis is on measurement and predictability in respect of leadership phenomena and the search for causal laws and relationships between discrete 'variables'. Consequently, a familiar one-

sidedness is quickly re-established in leader/follower relations, as these acknowledged or recognised distinctions become fixed. In the ordinary interpretation of social exchange models, for example, it is the leader who claims authority for the relationship. How he or she responds to a situation or develops high-quality linkages with followers is still seen as their normal role. Moreover, in the charismatic/transformational leadership relationship, the basic unit of analysis remains the individual. The conceit, therefore, is for the actions and intentions of individual leaders to be specified as separate and importantly causal activities. Nonetheless, simply targeting intermediary relationships or linkages between discrete and bounded leaders and followers along lines of communication that leaves their basic nature unaffected (Ingold, 2000), fails to take account of a more complex and interdependent relationship, one that involves the complete ingression of these terms. Here again, the dyadic structure relates or links ready-made terms, but it does not account for their distinctiveness in the first place.

Fourth, it seems clear from the above that social exchange models are not geared up to detect or know complex processes. This is why, in order to be visible and reportable, ongoing relations must be thought of in terms of 'subject' and 'object' dualisms (Suchman, 2005; cf. Simondon, 1992). Nonetheless, what we term 'leader' or 'follower' is merely a token, expression or label for a more fundamental type of relatedness at work behind the scenes. For example, Uhl-Bien (2006) identifies relational leadership through which social order is 'constructed' and 'produced', but the emergent social order is seen in terms of ends to attain, that is states of rest, rather than the interiority of the actual event, in which these positions are incarnated. It is a simple 'fixing' of process – 'reality caught in flight' (Pettigrew, 1997: 337), so to speak. Nonetheless, as Bergson (1983) reminds us, there is always more in a transition than a series of states or positions. Thus, privileging outcomes is merely to link the essence of reality with a string of successive states, rather than properly to focus on its nature as a continuity of becoming.

So, whilst we might not be able to think without focusing on the intermediary relations between 'subject' and 'object', we ought to be more critical of the selective pressures eliciting such dualisms. For example, the resources used in arguments about objects and their variables might not be a necessary aspect of leadership. Furthermore, leadership might be something that cannot be related simply to accounts of quantity at all; it might be something that escapes measure. In which case, we might have to take a step back and look at the things these dualisms fail to relate, but which may in fact turn out to be a more valuable expression of leadership behaviour.

Leadership *as* Process

Returning to the theory of framing found in communication and information systems (Fairhurst, 2005; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996), the frame serves as a surface of information, where jurisdiction over what is informed and communicated is not so much an essential truth as a kind of meaning made, brought into being and actually dependent upon whomever frames it *from a position outside it*. In Fairhurst's terms the frame might differentiate 'constructive' employee buy-in from 'negative' resistance. Framing therefore gives rise to delineation or a boundary between a focal-field that is legible and see-able and an out-of-field that is illegible and must remain invisible or latent (Cooper, 2005). Nonetheless, by delineating or arranging a boundary with separate sides, so that a term residing on one side cannot act upon a term on the other side without crossing the gap or the interval between them, *we* draw a distinction. *We* create a gap or an interval that *we* must subsequently bridge in some way. One consequence of this distinction is that an identifiable image, say of an individual leader, is cut out from the other images in the world. But it would be wrong to privilege such a distinct and identifiable image alone as the cause of leadership. Instead, we should be more concerned to

explore the latent relationship – 'that missing presence' (Cooper, 2005: 1692) – *between* identifiable distinctions rather than the identifiable distinctions themselves. In other words, it is the 'shared space we can never reach' (Cooper, 2006: 71), but which actually describes the specific terms we can identify that should be our focus.

Rubin's *Double Profile* (Ehrenzweig, 1967: 23) is exemplary of a shared space that suspends limitation. The image makes us aware of more than one thing at the same time. In its contours we tend to see the profile of one or the other of two faces, each partially cancelling the other out because of the incompatibility of their appearance. If we glance at the image more diffusely, however, we are simultaneously able to see the profile of both faces as they try to kiss one another. Likewise, in *The Truth in Painting* (1987), Derrida considers the relationship between the painting and the frame. The frame, he asserts, separates the painting from its original context, but it also links the one to the other. Blurring the boundary between painting (inside) and frame (outside) tends to dilate our focus and makes room for the possibility that the frame cannot be thought as the simple limit of the painting but rather suggests its *de-limitation*. Similarly, Lyotard (1977) draws on the work of the filmmaker Michael Snow to illustrate how seemingly distinct frames can be collapsed through a process of 'unframing' (see also, Deleuze's [1992: 17] reference to 'deframing'). In Snow's *The Central Region*, a single camera is rotated in a continuous sequence through all the points along both a longitudinal and latitudinal sphere. The camera scans in all planes and determines characters and objects along both the vertical and horizontal axis. By including in a continuous shot the range of images of all regions, including footage of the apparatus upon which the camera is mounted, Snow attempts to supplant the 'naturalness' of framing with an awareness that it too is a constructed category.

Thus, the important point is to move away from the seeming naturalness of the framings, with all their exclusivity and singularity, within which leadership is usually made to

fit, or which leaders can use as a simple unitary tool to 'limit' or author their social contexts. In particular, we start to widen our appreciation of leadership as a genuinely relational experience of unlimited content, rather than reduce it immediately to an essential 'thing' that can be simply located in/between particular people. Indeed, our perceptions might be only fleeting glimpses of seemingly mundane encounters that have a certain 'internal resonance requiring permanent communication' (Simondon, 1992: 305), but which, nonetheless, always exceed our attempts to fix and objectify them (Cooper, 2005).

The point of seeking to widen our appreciation of leadership's lived experience is to bring into view and render rationally discussable precisely those mostly unnoticed, 'out-of-field' details of ordinary, everyday interactions, which are no longer a closed set, but which we are continually using in dealing with others and the otherness around us (Shotter, 2005). If we want to examine leadership's constitutive milieu in all its variety, we might start to emphasise joint activity to more fully grasp how ordinary actions contribute to creative outcomes (Shotter, 2005). Doing so, can bring added depth to our understanding of the leadership phenomenon and gives us, potentially, a more complex way of understanding both the possibilities of leadership as well as its limitations (Grint, 2005). Having considered the persistence of simply located individuals and relationships in leadership studies we proceed now to outline a non-localisable relational ontology, one that is glimpsed in qualitative moments or 'events'.

The concept of the event does not take a substantive and unchanging view of categories of being such as 'identity', 'self' and 'persons', or even 'organisations', 'society' and 'culture'. The event is precisely an effort by philosophers such as Deleuze and Whitehead, among others, to move beyond the alleged unchanging categories of *being* in the development of a model or 'logic' for thinking about the contingent and the anomalous nature of real experience. Thus, rather than presupposing the validity of 'closed' categorical thinking

and the epistemological conditions of being, these moments or events are said to be 'open' because they preside over the movement and processual conditions of *becoming*.

Clearly, an emphasis on the movement and processual distribution of becoming implies a world *in the making*. Like the throwing of a dice, the world arises in the imaginative ideas the unexpected turns or creative impulses, life might take. On this view, the lived experience of leadership is always an open or a 'dynamic' category involving a combination of two essentially insoluble processes: recollections of the 'there then' are contracted to suit the conditions of real experience in the 'here now'. Correspondingly, the here and now is drawn from a definite event in our history that is no longer, but which nonetheless stands out in our mind (Bergson, 1991), and oriented toward a future that is not yet. These two sides or aspects are a latent field of relationships (Cooper, 2005); always recreating themselves repeatedly out of each other. When they blend together perfectly a wonderful sense of meaning and value emerges. On such fleeting occasions the two are not merely intersected they are 'fused into one' (Whitehead, 1978: 18). Borrowing from Whitehead, this indivisible unity or composite is the condition of real experience of leadership.

On this reading, leadership is a kind of event, one that 'makes something – something rather than nothing – emerge' (Deleuze, 1993: 76). Nonetheless, the lived experience of leadership does not lend itself to any substantive and unchanging category. Like the intensified sites of over-crossing where the beams of several lasers intersect (Linstead and Thanem, 2007), events create the conditions of possibility for perceptions to exist. Thus, the categorical properties of events like leadership are only thanks to 'the intensities that give rise to it – that make it matter – and to the intensities that are transforming it – that make it matter now and in the future' (Williams, 2003: 174).

Bergson (1991: 81) considers critically how events 'arrest', 'isolate', 'halt', or else give 'exact measure' to the 'zone of indetermination' surrounding perception, thus creating

'new dispositions toward action'. Meanwhile, for Deleuze (1994), the event, or 'l'événement', expresses the 'groundless ontological ground' of life without identity, bodies without organs, the virtual or actual reality of singularity and novelty that expels as well as creates, destroys as well as produces. Events 'are forever moving, gaining and losing parts carried away in movement; things are endlessly being altered' (Deleuze, 1993: 79) in 'a world the very ground of which is difference' (Deleuze, 1994: 241). Or, as Whitehead (1978: 78) would say, events are 'a "concresence" of elements'; they are fundamental building blocks, 'the final real thing[s] of which the world is made up' Whitehead (1978: 18).

We commonly recognise events as either 'effects' or 'situations' that simply occur, such as an organised social occasion, or as something that simply reveals familiar definitions or objects in the world (Williams, 2003). Nonetheless, an event does not mean that 'a man has been run over' or 'a storm is coming', or 'a friend is arriving' (Deleuze, 1993: 76). In Deleuzian langauge '[t]he event is … always missed if it is thought of in terms of essential characteristics' (Williams, 2003: 154). Instead, the event is about effect, it becomes effect, running through and re-arranging the relations between familiar histories and the situations at hand along the way (Deleuze, 1994).

Thus, an event such as the real experience of leadership often exceeds our apprehension and occurs as an effect of, and in, sensations and feelings. In a way the sensation or affect of a leadership event cannot be thought without relation to a change in the relation between familiar standpoints or objects within systems. Each actual occasion of leadership is made up of aggregates of smaller or past events and is in turn part of a larger event or events to come. It 'arises as the bringing together into one real context of diverse perceptions, diverse feelings, diverse purposes, and other diverse activities' (Whitehead, 1927: 9). In the example of leadership, it expresses change, an opening of the future and the possibility of something new (Linstead and Thanem, 2007; Williams, 2003). Thus – by my

reading at any rate – spoke Zarathustra (Nietzsche, 1969: 219): 'O my brothers, is everything not *now in flux*? Have not all railings and gangways fallen into the water and come to nothing? Who can still *cling to* "good" and "evil"'?

Conclusions

The process analysis of leadership proposed in this discussion enables different answers to questions often raised about leadership by psychology and sociology: namely questions of identity and relationships. With regard to the question of identity, the analysis of leadership in terms of process suggests that no set of trait theories based on personal behaviours or qualities is sufficient for constructing leadership. Likewise, with regard to the question of relationships, contemporary theories exploring aspects of the dyadically dualistic contexts in which leaders and followers are often situated continue to utilise these distinct terms after the fact, without first demonstrating their original (actually ongoing) distinctness. As such they also fall short of describing the more thoroughgoing experience of mutuality at work beneath the surface.

Process thinking focuses on the constitutive interval that both separates and brings together these familiar terms, in the belief that a new concept and practice of leadership emerges from this double movement. For example, a processual answer to the question of how leaders lead change might suggest that in fact leaders *do not* lead change, at least not in the sense of shining a light on some future reality from without. To paraphrase Bergson (1991), leadership is not concerned merely with leadership *of* something: rather leadership *is* something. It is indistinguishable from the process of creative advance in which past is contracted in the present, and in turn is taken up by the future.

It is precisely on this temporal assumption that a concept of leadership as event or actual occasion, in which being gives way to the reality of process, has been developed.

Leadership from a process perspective is predicated of events, differences and becomings, as the relation 'in between' a series of simply located things and persons, rather than of the things and persons themselves. In short, a theory of leadership *actually* 'processing' brings us back to life. It turns us toward leadership's creative potential and not to the static particulars of individuals or groups arguably functioning as *abstract* qualities or dyadic dualisms.

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