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Is Symbolic Interactionism the Fifth Paradigm of Leadership?

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Abstract

The paper begins with a review of the literature in the field of leadership paradigms. Residual theories are outlined to demonstrate their common central notion of meaningfulness and related themes concerning culture, symbols and creative social interaction. These theories are identified as being within a school of Symbolic Interactionism which is developed as a fifth paradigm of leadership. The single most important characteristic of the theories that belong to this school is that they articulate the human nature of leadership as the making and management of meaning. Identifying this school enables greater exposure of relevant theories and benefits management education and practice. The study then validates Symbolic Interactionism as a management tool that is useful to a broad group of people including academics, practitioners, researchers and policy makers in the management field.

Keywords

Introduction

This paper aims to show by reference to the literature that numerous theories are not classified under one of the four commonly recognised paradigms of leadership, and that these share sufficient features to be categorised within a separate and significant paradigm. The research question is whether these theories may be regarded as forming a Symbolic Interactionist approach to leadership.

First, the leadership literature is reviewed to demonstrate the main acknowledged paradigms and their central concerns. Then several 'leftover' theories are examined in some detail to show the distinctive concepts of each and to demonstrate their shared idea that leadership is a phenomenon of meaning creation and management within group interactions. This evidences their notable contribution to our understanding of leadership from a Symbolic Interactionist viewpoint. Finally, it is argued that recognition of this paradigm is worthwhile because it emphasises the role of making and managing meaning in leader and follower interactions, and

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there is limited treatment of meaningfulness within the four recognised paradigms. The residual theories that focus upon meaningfulness would attract greater exposure if collected under one umbrella. It is argued that this paradigm offers distinct benefits for educators, practitioners and others concerned with the phenomenon of leadership.

Literature Review: Four Paradigms of Leadership

The literature on leadership is of enormous size, diversity and dynamism (Burns1978; Bennis & Nanus 1985; Bass 1990; Bryman 1992; Cooper 2000). Stogdill (1974) surveyed leadership theory and research and concluded there are almost as many definitions as writers on the subject, and many have since reiterated this view. However, despite various nomenclatures, including 'new' and 'emerging' theories (Boal 2000; Lowe 2000), there are four paradigms of leadership commonly cited in management books and research literature, although there is often mention of specific ideas that are not categorised into one of these, and sometimes as important exceptions to the main thrust of leadership thought.

Trait Theory. Trait Theory is usually traced in modern times to World War 1 Commissioned and Non-Commissioned Officer selection procedures using psychological tests. Earlier references can be found, and these were influential in their times (Galton 1870; Terman 1904; Smith & Peterson 1988). Theories of this sort share the common premise of a natural born leader as a central quality/characteristic of leadership. Although not now popular, Trait Theory is still evident in the leadership literature, sometimes as an underlying assumption, sometimes more explicitly as part of another perspective such as Stratified Systems Theory (Boal &Whitehead, 1992; Hooijberg &Quinn, 1992). Some eminent leadership researchers consider it remains worthy of continuing attention (House & Baetz, 1990), and possibly a question of degree to which leadership is genetic or developmental (Conger 1992). In much of the literature, though, the term 'trait' is so broadly applied as to elude meaning in itself. Bryman (1992) observes the

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danger that the term 'trait' becomes so stretched that it applies to any variable

on which leaders differ from non-leaders (p. 4).

More importantly, Trait Theory fundamentally denies meaningfulness in leadership events. Leadership as an unobservable gift from birth is not gained through training and development.

Leadership Style. In contrast to Trait Theory, a body of thinking arose in America between the late 1930s and the late 1940s that emphasised leaders' behaviours rather than genetics. This new line of thought presented leaders as people who display a behavioral set that is repetitive in patterning and reproducible more or less at will, and that has certain effects on 'followers'. Leaders' behaviours are susceptible to empirical identification, cataloguing, and measurement. Testable models of leadership can be constructed. Once key behavioural factors and relationships are identified, leadership is amenable to learning. Leaders are made not born, at least in the sense of being capable of adopting mechanised behavioural routines, or styles, although for some time those styles were thought to be fixed patterns.

The key questions for style theorists have been the dimensionality of leadership behaviours and their effects. The University of Iowa studies of the late 1930s and early 1940s suppose that only one dimension of behaviour defines leader style (Lewin & Lippitt 1938; Lewin, Lippitt & White 1939; Lippitt 1940). A leader adopts either an autocratic, democratic or laissez-faire style and cannot readily swap styles. Like the Iowa researchers, those at Michigan saw leader behaviours as unidimensional, so that a leader is either job-centred or employee-centred in style (Coch & French 1948; French 1950; Katz, Maccoby & Morse 1950; Katz, Maccoby, Gurin & Floor 1951; Mann & Dent 1954; Morse & Reimer 1956; French, Israel & As 1960). Bowers and Seashore's Four Factor Theory attempted to counter criticisms of a simple dichotomy in leader behaviours presumed to be the reason for variability in empirical support for earlier UM

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studies (Bowers & Seashore 1966; Smith & Peterson 1988). However, in the late 1940s a two dimensional approach to leadership emerged among researchers at Ohio State University (Stogdill 1948; Shartle 1950; Fleishman 1953; Fleishman, Harris & Burt 1955; Fleishman 1957; Halpin & Winer, 1957; Hemphill & Coons 1957; Fleishman 1960). They argued that leader behaviour could be reduced to two interrelated theoretical constructs, namely 'initiation of structure' and 'consideration'. A leader can behave in ways that produce various combinations of low or high ratings across these two independent dimensions: low/low, high/high, low/high, high/low. Sashkin and Fulmer (1988) argue that the notion of versatility advanced by Blake and Mouton (1964) offers an answer to unresolved questions of how leader behaviours relate to outcomes. The effective leader is said to be versatile, or skilled in being able to tailor behaviour to situational exigencies. Blake and Mouton (1982) suggest the two leader dimensions are integrally interrelated, or interdependent, rather than merely independent, so response to a considerate leader depends also on the degree of structuring behaviour shown by the leader, and vice versa. They argue these are separate dimensions, not unidimensional, but cannot just be added and subtracted. These are interactive factors and combine in a geometric manner according to a leader's choice (Lowin, Hrapchak & Kavanagh 1969).

Still, the style approach has not satisfactorily addressed whether leader/follower behaviours are automatic responses to environmental stimuli in a Skinnerian fashion, or intentional and meaningful conduct by leaders/followers, or something else. Some writers have taken a clearly Skinnerian view of leadership (Ashour & Johns 1983), with some effort to reinterpret other models (including within the style approach) in these terms (Mawhinney & Ford 1977; Scott Jr. 1977; Sims Jr. 1977). Generally, Behaviour Modification, or Operant Conditioning as it is alternatively known, postulates that a leader manipulates rewards and punishments (stimuli) to cause followers to behave in a desired manner. Yet this begs the question of whether leaders are somehow beyond the same kind of manipulation, or whether they

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too are merely sophisticated 'black boxes' responding to external stimuli beyond their control, and hence whether 'someone or something else' does all the determining of human behaviour.

Others have adopted a more Cognitive-Behavioural approach that still clouds the basic issue of whether humans are really rats or self-actualising (Podsakoff 1982; Larson Jr. 1984; Podsakoff & Schriesheim 1985). This Neo-Behaviourist view is unclear because notions of reward and punishment in human affairs can be interpreted differently than usually proposed by neo-behaviourists, viz. in terms of meaningfulness. Further, what is reward for one person is either neutral or seen as punishment for another. This view also implies generally that leadership can be replaced by the judicious use of rewards and punishments (Smith & Peterson 1988), much like the arguments about substitutes and neutralisers (Kerr 1976).

In the main, Style researchers do not state clearly that patterned and reproducible behaviours are under the control of their actors, although there are examples that strongly imply this (Blake & Mouton 1978; Blake & McCanse 1991) and others that emphasise ethical values (Likert 1961; 1967). What is even more ambiguous is the extent to which leader behaviour is considered meaningful and whether it has impacts on followers at a meaningful level. As Calder (1977) indicates, the Style approach generally neglects the leadership *process*, and especially a process that is interactional between leaders and followers. The Style approach fails to speak in terms of interactive meaning, assuming this is non-problematic, much less an issue of central concern.

Contingency/Situational leadership theories. From the late 1940s, in reaction to perceived problems of the Style approach, there has been a series of ongoing efforts to catalogue situational factors determining leader behaviour. These efforts identified four main types of contingency variables that have generally stood the test of time: leader personality/characteristics; task requirements of leader and subordinates; subordinates' attitudes, needs, and expectations; and organisational and physical environment (Filley, House & Kerr 1976).

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This school of thought contains another range of theories, including: the Continuum of Leader Decision Behaviours (Tannenbaum & Schmidt 1985, originally 1958); Fiedler's Least Preferred Co-worker approach, often named Contingency Theory, (Fiedler 1967; Fiedler Chemers & Mahar 1977; Fiedler & Garcia 1987; Fiedler 1993; Triandis 1993; Chemers & Ayman 1993; Fiedler 1997); Path-Goal Theory (Evans 1970; House 1971)); the Normative Leadership Model (Vroom & Yetton 1973) , alternatively named the Prescriptive Leadership Model (Filley et al. 1976); Situational Leadership Theory (Reddin 1970; Hersey & Blanchard 1982), sometimes called 'Lifecycle Theory' (Stoner, Collins & Yetton 1985); and Yukl's Multiple Linkages Model (Yukl 1971).

The central proposition of the theories in this approach is that leadership depends on all sorts of factors, including leader, follower and other variables external to their relationship. Many of these theories are reminiscent of the Style approach, and their contribution is to qualify leader behaviour and its effects by pointing to the role of moderating and intervening variables. For example, Fiedler's LPC model proposes the most appropriate leader style depends upon situational control, or the degree to which a leader can influence events. In turn, situational control is a function of three dimensions: leader-member relations, task structure, and position power (Fiedler 1967; Fiedler 1997). Path-Goal Theory builds upon Ohio State University research by delineating four leadership styles that incorporate the distinctions between consideration and initiating structure, including at the operational level (Schriesheim & Von Glinow 1977). Its central tenet is that an effective leader clarifies subordinates' goals and potential rewards available to them, showing the ways (paths) of achieving these, and ensuring consistency with work goals and organisational performance. The Situational Leadership Theory developed by Hersey and Blanchard (1982) has been noted as similar to Path-Goal Theory, but a leaner version, with only one environmental dimension of significance (Smith & Peterson 1988). Its core proposition is that effective leadership varies with the 'maturity' of followers. Yukl's (1981) ambitious Multiple Linkages Model cites so many intervening and situational moderator

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variables that the impact of leadership itself threatens to be lost. Yukl (1981) himself remarks

upon this difficulty of complex causal relationships, with associated research design, conceptual,

and measurement obstacles. Yet, partly because of all the factors covered in the Contingency

approach, meaningful interaction is not a central issue.

       Transformational/Transactional leadership theories. Popularised by Burns (1978), the

distinction between Transactional and Transformational leaders has been utilised variously to

enhance our understanding of leadership (Bass 1985; Dunphy & Stace 1990; Nadler & Tushman

1990; Bass & Avolio 1990; Bass 1998). The mid-1970s advent of this distinction has been

explicitly called a paradigm shift or new genre in leadership thought (Avolio & Bass 1988; House

& Shamir 1993), although Barker (1997) argues contrarily.

       Like House (1977) in his seminal work preceding Burns, many writers emphasise mainly

or only the transformational leader, (often called charismatic or visionary), and some have

developed substantial bodies of work accordingly (Bennis & Nanus 1985; Tichy & Devanna

1986; Conger & Kanungo 1987; Conger & Kanungo 1988a; Conger & Kanungo 1988b; Bennis

1989; Dunphy & Stace 1990; House & Baetz 1990; House & Shamir 1993; Conger & Kanungo

1994; Kouzes & Posner 1995; Bennis 1997).

       However, the main work has focussed on the Transactional/Transformational Leadership

bifurcation. This cleavage generally cuts across other broad approaches to leadership theory, and

it overlaps accounts discussed in the following section in significant though complicated ways. It

represents a current frontier of leadership thought and research, along with work relating to

gender issues, and concerns with post-heroic models (Sinclair 1998; Fulop & Linstead 1999).

       This distinction is generally put in the following terms. Transactional leaders are

concerned with the everyday routine of an established workplace, where the leadership task is to

ensure effectiveness and efficiency within the status quo, and in this context, with business

success. This is accomplished by a transaction with followers, with the leader providing some

form of quid pro quo in exchange for their cooperation. The leader usually motivates followers in

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a mundane, materialist fashion. By contrast, transformational leaders introduce a new paradigm of business practice, or elicit exceptional work unit performance. The transformational leader's main tasks are to challenge convention and help define a new vision of the future, to popularise new commitment, and to energise followers accordingly. This is seen as not a question of mere exchange, but rather a fusion of the interests of leader and followers in a two-way effective relationship initiated and sustained by the leader. The leader normally motivates followers via higher-order appeals and internalised rewards. It involves exceptional accomplishment by followers and hence leadership to suit.

Burns' (1978) conceptualisation is of transactional and transformative leadership forming a single continuum of behaviours. Burns' classic text has been the fountainhead of a great deal of subsequent leadership thought, including the extensive work of Bass, Avolio and their colleagues on the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) and the more recently named Full Range of Leadership (FRL) model. Indeed, despite various commendable contributions, it is fair to say the MLQ/FRL dominates the Transactional/Transformational literature.

In his reformulation of transformational leadership, Bass both extends Burn's concept and sees it as a separate dimension to that of transactional leadership (Bass 1985;1998; 1999; Bass & Avolio 1993). Any particular leader might embody both forms of leadership, as these comprise independent behaviours. A leader may employ both styles at different times or in differing amounts at the same time. Considerable recent research evidence – garnered by both its main proponents and more independent researchers – shows transformational leadership elicits extra effort and performance from followers, over and above that expected in an exchange relationship with a purely transactional leader (Bass 1985; Bass & Avolio 1990; House & Shamir 1993; Avolio 1994; Kouzes & Posner 1995; Densten & Sarros 1997; Bass 1998; Proctor-Thomson & Parry 2000). This 'augmentation' effect of transformational leadership is clearly of great interest.

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For present purposes this is related to a belief that leaders employing transformational skills manage meaning in a way that sets them apart from their fellows – followers, leaders employing only transactional skills, or managers. Transformational leaders supposedly have a superior ability to understand and to envisage reality, especially in times of uncertainty and change, to re-present that reality, and hence to persuade others as to future direction. This is largely why they are sometimes considered leaders rather than managers, or at least transformational leaders rather than *just* transactional leaders.

The Fifth Paradigm of Leadership

There is a series of views on leadership that cannot be classified readily into any of the above approaches, yet they have sufficient in common to be considered as a school of thought. They are strongly cognizant of influences from culture and society, and evermore from a global viewpoint (Smith & Peterson 1988; Martinko & Douglas 1999). The Constitutive perspective covers some but not all of them (Grint 1997). They are related but not identical to Cognitive approaches, especially insofar as the latter emphasise interactions between thinking individuals, and between individuals and their environment (Jaques 1986; Smith & Peterson 1988; Jaques & Clement 1991; Cowan Fiol & Walsh 1992; Jacobs & Lewis 1992). In terms of social science epistemology, they usually mix Hermeneutics and Interpretivism, and often Positivism (Blaikie 1993). They are generally concerned with social interaction, role development, stories, and attributions in the leader-follower equation. Leadership effectiveness is often either recast into quite different terms or cast aside for another way of explaining the nature and importance of leaders. Pondy (1978) identifies the key element of this approach as:

the effectiveness of a leader lies in his ability to make activity meaningful for those in his role set (p. 94).

Overview of fifth paradigm perspectives. Leadership writings within this school includes Leaders as Symbols (LS) (Klapp 1964); the Attribution to Follower (AF) approach (Green &

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Mitchell 1979; Feldman 1981; Martinko & Gardner 1982; Martinko & Gardner 1987; Lord &

Maher 1989); the Attribution to Leader (AL) approach (Calder 1977; Pfeffer 1977; Hollander

1993); Implicit Leadership Theory (ILT) research (Eden & Leviatan 1975; Weiss & Adler 1981;

Larson Jr. 1982); the Transactional/Social Exchange/Idiosyncrasy Credit Theory (T/SE/ICT)

approach (Hollander 1958; Hollander 1960; Hollander 1978; Hollander 1993); the Leader-

Member Exchange or Vertical Dyad Linkage (LMX/VDL) model (Danserau Jr. Cashman & Haga

1975; Graen & Cashman 1975; Graen 1976; Graen & Scandura 1987); the Strategic Influence

(SI) view, (Pelz 1952); the Social Identity Theory of leadership (SIT) (Hogg 2001; Hogg & Reid

2001); the Romance of Leadership (ROL) view, more broadly called Management of Meaning

(MM) by leaders (Smircich & Morgan 1982; Meindl, Ehrlich & Dukerich 1985; Bennis & Nanus

1985); and the Event Management Model (EVM) (Smith & Peterson 1988). It aligns with broad

historico-cultural and psycho-social approaches that are often intertwined with other strands of

theorising and specific issues like the gender debate in leadership (Court 1994; Kets de Vries

1997; Sinclair 1998). The view that leaders may be redundant due to substitutes or incapacitated

by neutralisers, although strictly an 'alternative to leadership' approach (Kerr 1976; Kerr &

Jermier 1978), fits partly into this category.

Leaders as Symbols. The notion of Leaders as Symbols (LS) is significant in this school,

including but not restricted to the narrow idea of the public figure of notoriety or fame. Klapp

(1964) was one of the first to study this latter kind of symbolic leader.

A symbolic leader is one who functions primarily through his meaning or image

(p.7).

Klapp cites many examples of symbolic leaders, including figures like Marilyn Monroe

and Mahatma Gandhi, who appear 'larger than life' and signify human themes or great ideas or

social movements. Such figures capture an essential aspect of this paradigm: the use and

importance of symbolism in leadership. Klapp's discussion, however, tends to orient around the

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narrow notion of the leader as a public symbol, someone capable of becoming "a timeless and placeless myth" (p. 64), someone who serves a vicarious function for transporting ordinary people from the mundane of everyday life into an 'unreal' play. This is analogy.

The importance of metaphor. The fifth paradigm fundamentally operates on metaphor, where the *social reality of leadership is itself a play*, and everyone is an actor playing some part in the drama of a leader's life. Weick (1977) puts a related view in his description of enactment processes in organisations. He sees the human world as invented by people in sense-making activities such as soliloquising, metaphor, and the 'real-isation' of ideas. It is a psychosocial creation, not some objective reality awaiting discovery.

Within the leadership literature there have been varying approximations to conceiving of leaders and developing theory in these or similar terms, such as Fleming's (2001) view of narrative leadership. It is possible to begin drawing together some of these ideas into a more coherent statement of a distinct approach to leadership. As this task of integration is attempted here, it is stressed that many of the reviewed writings are not claimed to be overtly concerned with symbols and meaning, but rather that these are compatible with a framework that emphasises human interaction and interpretations grounded in symbols, meaning and culture.

Attribution Theory. Several of these specific leadership viewpoints relate to the central Attribution Theory (AT) contention that people make sense of events in terms of definable causes. AT holds that people are prone to infer individual behaviour is due to personal motives or external causes according to various assumptions about the person and situation (Kelley 1973; Nisbett & Ross 1980; Martinko & Gardner 1987). It particularly stresses the role of cognitive processes of perception, intent and personal potency (as distinct from environmental causes) concerning human behaviour. Attributions are conceptualisations of cause in terms of what is meaningful. There are two major AT variants depending on the attributive target, either the follower or the leader.

Attribution to Follower model. The Attribution to Follower (AF) model proposes that employees' performances are explained in terms of either internal or external causes by the manager-as-leader (Green & Mitchell 1979; Feldman 1981; Ashkanasy & Gallois 1994), and, indeed, by followers themselves (Martinko & Gardner 1987). However, attributions by leaders tend to be the main focus of this variation.

The AF model posits leader behaviour as either inner-oriented toward the work unit or other-oriented away from the work unit. Inner-oriented leaders are prone to blame subordinates for failures – especially where leaders themselves are unschooled in subordinates' tasks (Mitchell & Kalb 1982) – and to congratulate themselves for success (Martinko & Gardner 1982). This suggests, among other things, that employee performance deficits may be explained as subordinates learning a sense of helplessness in interactions with the leader. Internal attributions of poor performance have been found to result in leaders taking programmed decisions of direct punishment, whereas external attributions encourage leaders to further situation diagnosis of the cause (Wood & Mitchell 1981). Such attributions are attempts to explain, via meaningful causation or ascriptions of meaningfulness, where followers are labelled as responsible or not for their performance according to the leader's orientation in leader/follower interactions.

Various factors potentially bias a leader's evaluations of subordinate performance and consequent reactions. These include the leader's prior behaviour (Kipnis, Schmidt, Price & Stitt 1981); subordinate peer popularity (Mitchell & Liden 1982); influence of good performers on a subordinate being evaluated (Liden & Mitchell 1983); previous consistency of good performance (Bizman & Fox 1984); overall subordinate performance (James & White 1983); on-the-spot decision-making (Ashkanasy & Gallois 1994); and whether poor performance is within or outside the subordinate's control (Green & Liden 1980) or due to lack of effort or ability (Bizman & Fox 1984). Altogether, these factors suggest leadership is interactively meaningful, not always rational, and a socially constructed reality.

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Attribution to Leader model. AT also provides insights into leadership from the viewpoint of leaders themselves being the attributive target (Calder 1977; Pfeffer 1977; Meindl et al. 1985; Meindl & Ehrlich 1987; Hollander 1993). In this Attribution to Leader (AL) model, the success or failure of a work unit is attributed to internal leader characteristics or lack thereof, rather than to complex organisational, industry, and societal forces. In this respect, Calder (1977) defines leadership as a set of personal qualities and the associated scientific problem is one of explaining how actors infer leadership from observing each other's behaviour since they

must work backward from behavior and can never know with certainty whether or not leadership qualities actually exist as a personal cause of behavior (p. 195).

That is, the problem is how to determine whether the cause of relevant effects concerns leadership qualities or something else. The role of meaningful interactions is even more apparent, usually from the follower side of the leadership equation, although a manager's peers, superiors, and significant others may also play a part.

Meaningful interaction is further suggested in Calder's specific model, represented in a complex flow diagram of four stages: observation; inferred behaviour using an implicit theory of leadership; information estimation based on choice alternatives analysis; and influence of biases due to personalism and goal incompatibility. Calder (1977) emphasises that

leadership has meaning only as defined by a particular group of actors (p. 199).

This explicates the need to interpret behaviour as meaningful, including by followers, in order to describe and define individualised leadership. AT requires the behaviour to meet a number of criteria: it must be significant, instigated and controlled by the actor, consistent over time, fitted to a consensus of relevant others' opinions, distinctive from that of followers, and socially desirable or in accord with group values (Martinko & Gardner 1987; House & Baetz 1990). Only then is it accepted as leader behaviour within the terms of some implicit theory.

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There are thus two AT faces of leadership. AT states leaders themselves make attributions to followers that generally determine whether performance is defined as under the latter's control or due to environmental causes beyond their control (Green & Mitchell 1979; Feldman 1981); and, hence, inter alia, whether the leader's style is likely to be task-oriented or socio-emotional. Also, actors are labelled leaders consequent to being perceived to behave in accord with expectations, norms, and goals that promote the group's interests, and that coincide with followers' personal ideas of leadership. Most importantly, followers attribute the label of leadership, rather than the leader simply assuming it or having it bestowed by a third party, and this is culturally variable. The two AT views comprise a framework for explaining leadership that emphasises the creation and interpretation of meaningfulness in social interactions.

Implicit Leadership Theory and culture. Associated research has supported the idea that people have an Implicit Leadership Theory (ILT) of what comprises the typical profile of an effective leader (Eden & Leviatan 1975; Weiss & Adler 1981); that the profile varies according to the particular kind of leader concerned (Foti, Fraser & Lord 1982); and that information about a leader or group performance influences perceptions of whether a specific leader actually fits the profile (Phillips & Lord 1981; Larson Jr. 1982) and whether non-leader causes are at work (Phillips & Lord 1981).

Hofstede's (1980) research has been combined with AT to show how attributions – or definitions of the situation – clash when expatriate leaders from highly individualist cultures interact with employees whose home culture is highly collectivist (Martinko & Douglas 1999). A significant international collaborative research project has found aspects of charismatic or transformational leadership are universally endorsed in implicit theories of leadership, whereas other aspects are culturally contingent (Den Hartog, House, Hanges, Ruiz-Quintanilla & Dorfman 1999). Leader profiling processes appear to vary in important and complicated ways among cultures. ILT therefore suggests leadership is rooted in complex cultural meanings.

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In sum, Attribution Theory and Implicit Leadership Theory help our understanding of the interactional processes of leadership. Together these kin theories suggest some of the mechanisms in social actors taking up leader/follower roles, creating organisational plots, engaging in story telling, and making sense of tales told. They provide fertile ways of explaining the making of meaning in leadership phenomena. The research evidence and theoretical argument accrued within these models show attribution is a complex, interactional process involving culture and socially constructed meanings.

Idiosyncrasy Credit Theory. Attribution Theory is compatible with Idiosyncrasy Credit Theory (ICT), also known as the Social Exchange/Transactional (SE/T) approach (Hollander 1958; Hollander 1961; Hollander 1974; Hollander 1978; Hollander 1993). The crux of Hollander's thought is that aspiring leaders must earn credibility with their constituents to acquire the leader mantle, and once acquired must similarly maintain it. Credit is earned in interactions with followers, where the latter come to view the leader's conduct as an innovative or unique contribution to the group that is conducive to individual member's interests. This requires the leader to display some competence of particular value to the group and to identify with the group and its expectations. Consequent to earning credit, the leader achieves status that allows later deviations (which may even be lauded) provided these produce continuing positive contributions to the group. Calder (1977) acknowledged strong parallels with AT.

Hollander's contribution is an argument for giving greater weight to the role of followers as actively engaged in determining effectiveness outcomes of leader-follower interactions. Effective leadership is seen as good followership, where followers give dependability, honesty, and competence in return for the leader giving esteem, recognition, direction, and vision. A leader emerges and remains recognised so long as he or she delivers some vital group outcome. Furthermore, a leader's legitimacy, influence and power, and behavioural style are at least partly determined by followers' expectations, perceptions, attributions, and judgements. A leader cannot

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reach beyond certain limits allowed by followers. Hollander thus emphasises followership in contradistinction to leadership, and consequently argues leadership is essentially interactive.

Leader-Member Exchange Model. These specific perspectives can be further related to the Vertical Dyad Linkage (VDL) or Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) model formulated by Graen and Cashman and their associates (Danserau Jr. et al. 1975; Graen & Cashman 1975; Graen 1976; Graen & Scandura 1987). LMX thought includes consideration of unique relationships between a leader and each follower, hence the dyad (Brower, Schoorman & Hwee 2000). This model also examines the role of group dynamics in determining the nature and effects of leadership. In this view, leaders exchange idiosyncrasy credits with other group members in building cohesion, developing norms, and pursuing organisational goals. However, not only do they interact with and attribute cause to followers, they distinguish among subordinates who perform well and those who perform poorly due to motivations and abilities; and this produces high-quality and low-quality exchange relationships within the work unit. That is, leaders distinguish an in-group and an out-group of followers within the work unit, with significant implications concerning performance expectations and appraisals, staff morale, systematic interactive biases, and self-fulfilling prophecies. This invidious distinction is based on various attributive biases, including the compatibility of leader authority and member affiliation values, or the degree to which a leader recognises members' independence or members accept a leader's authority (Ashkanasy & O'Connor 1997). There are consequent repercussions on actual performance, satisfaction, internal conflict, turnover and other commonly examined work unit outcomes. In sum, LMX extends Attribution Theory, especially Attribution to Followers thinking, to argue leaders interactively divide subordinates into a favoured in-group and a scrutinised out-group, with a variety of often unintended and unwelcome consequences.

Strategic Influence. The Strategic Influence (SI) view arose from Pelz' work in the late 1940s focusing upon effective leadership of first-line supervisors, though it can be applied to any management level (Pelz 1951; 1952). The basic proposition is that subordinates want a leader to

effectively represent their concerns and interests in various forums, in order to obtain a

favourable share of organisational resources, opportunities, and rewards, and hence to enable

their performance as a winning team. In this view, leaders need to influence significant others

outside the work unit, including peers, suppliers, contractors, and partners, not just superiors. Pelz

(1952) says leaders are not necessarily altruistic since they may use their influence against the

work unit or particular members.

Still, the basic SI proposition is compatible with an other-oriented attributive premise that

followers perform well given adequate support from outside the work unit. The SI view has been

supported by research showing managers with high LMX relationships with their superiors win

more resources for their subordinates (Graen, Cashman, Ginsburgh & Schiemann 1978). The

leader's strategic influence establishes a mutually reinforcing dynamic within the work unit:

employees thereby get the wherewithal, which ensures their willingness and commitment, with

consequent success as a work unit feeding back to reinforce the leader's strategic influence. A

review of studies by Smith and Peterson (1988) indicates strategic influence may vary in nature

and potency according to whether the broader culture is individualistic or collective. The SI view

is clearly consistent with Attribution Theory and Leader-Member Exchange thinking, it

emphasises leader/follower interactions, and it recognises the importance of culture.

Social Identity Theory. The Social Identity Theory (SIT) of leadership reflects much of

the foregoing stream of thought (Hogg 2001; Hogg & Reid 2001). According to this theory, a

person's social identity is to knowingly belong to certain groups, where membership has

emotional and value significance. All groups are cognitively represented by prototypes, which are

context specific, multidimensional sets of characteristics that define a group and distinguish it

from other groups. Via interrelated processes of depersonalisation, social categorisation, and self-

categorisation, the social world is structured as a competitive environment consisting of in-groups

and out-groups; and people match themselves and others to any relevant in-group or out-group

prototype(s). Rather than idiosyncratic preferences or personal relationships, it is social attraction

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(or perceived prototypicality) that forms the basis of people's feelings about one another. A leader is, or is likely to be, the member who appears most representative of the group's prototype(s) in a particular inter-group social comparative context – that is, the member who is most socially attractive (or most consensually liked).

However, there are both prototypical and non-prototypical leaders. In this view, a particular social identity becomes salient to perception, thought, and behaviour, as the relevant prototype accounts for structural differences and similarities in the social context; as it accords with the social meaning of that context; and as it satisfies self-interests. As people identify more strongly with a group, they are increasingly influenced by the group's basic characteristics regarding its leadership. In Hogg's (2001) words, this heightening of social identity means that

the basis for leadership perceptions, evaluations, and endorsement becomes increasingly influenced by prototypicality; prototypical members are more likely to emerge as leaders, and more prototypical leaders will be perceived to be more effective leaders (p. 191)

In SIT, attribution principles are prominent and the central concept of prototypicality is grounded in member/group social processes. This is another theory of meaningful interactions as the basis of leadership.

A dramaturgical précis. All of the models so far reviewed in this section are easily related to each other, and to a dramaturgical view of organisational life. Leadership at the interpersonal level is a role largely created, sustained, and filled at the beck of followers and significant others. Its mechanisms, however, are usually taken for granted, and concealed if not mystified in the language of everyday organisational life. A dramaturgical view is even more evident in other writings.

Romancing leadership. In the Romance of Leadership (ROL) view, people, including subordinates, attribute heroic qualities of causation to leaders (Meindl et al. 1985; Meindl &

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Ehrlich 1987). Leaders are symbols, and their purpose is not simply (if at all) to be effective. This view points to attributions in leadership events that involve a need to simplify and stereotype an abstract, multidimensional reality into easily understood and 'touchable' categories, to permit at least a semblance of human control over an uncertain world of seemingly blind forces. This results in a highly unrealistic, romantic leader image that fulfils functions unrelated to mere goal attainment. That image allows followers (and other stakeholders) a focal point for celebrating success – or a symbolic scapegoat for moving on from failure. Further, in symbolising heroic leadership, managers are able to manage meaning, and thus to control subordinates' views and activities.

Management of meaning. Management of Meaning (MM) thought is kindred to the ROL view. The central idea is enshrined in the title of an article on leadership by Smircich and Morgan (1982), who state:

After periods of interaction, unstructured leaderless groups typically evolve common modes of interpretation and shared understandings of experience ... Individuals in groups that evolve this way attribute leadership to those members who structure experience in meaningful ways. Certain individuals ... take a leadership role by virtue of the part they play in the definition of the situation (p. 258)

In this view, leaders are involved in the construction of social reality, in the determination of whose definition of the situation will prevail. Because emotions, perceptions, beliefs, values, technologies, job activities, and communications become mixed in the melting pot of everyday business life, because these are often highly qualitative and ephemeral, and because a 'viable basis for action' is therefore required, organisational members depend upon managers to lead by interpreting workplace events. Thus, Pfeffer (1981b) says that

it is the task of management to provide explanations, rationalizations, and legitimation for the activities undertaken in the organisation (p. 4).

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This function is especially important in today's world of endemic change, where employees turn to managers for assistance to understand the latest job redesign, organisational restructure, process re-engineering effort, strategic direction, or management philosophy. Fleming (2001) says leaders can and should be narrators who use stories for sensemaking and sensegiving to facilitate organisational adaptations. Notably, it is mainly the leader's definition of the situation that matters (Pondy 1978; Pfeffer 1981a; Smith & Peterson 1988).

Rather than interaction, as stressed by much of the thinking reviewed in this section, imposition of meaning is emphasised and often critiqued by ROL/MM theory. Nonetheless, all these theories share the central theme that leadership is all about making and managing meaning.

Event Management Model. The Event Management Model (EVM) of leadership advanced by Smith and Peterson (1988) is cast mainly in terms of events that are cognitively interpreted and roles that are considered separate from a sense of socio-personal identity. According to these authors, managers and other individuals impute meaning via a complicated cross-tabulation of five types of procedures against three types of structures. These writers often make statements like:

> *(M)ost of organisational life is socially constructed (p. 124).*

There are several points of agreement between the EVM and foregoing theories. These include, for instance, the importance of a leader's and follower's shared perceptions of the meaning of their interactions. Leaders are best seen as focal persons in a role set, not exclusive definers of reality. Leadership involves a leader and significant others, including followers, peers, superiors and wider network actors. From a leader's view, it thus involves downward, upward, and lateral influence efforts. Smith and Peterson (1988) see a central leader task as management of meaning regardless of whether transformational or transactional leadership is involved.

The social construction of leadership. Altogether, the foregoing suggest leader behaviours are essentially interpreted and reframed according to the needs of others, especially

followers, within a cultural context. Leadership is interactive and not always rational. The processes of interaction are cultural, symbolic, and problematic, and attributions occur in these terms. These are processes of social construction of leader roles within organisational life. Indeed, these processes create what it means to be a leader, to be effective as a leader, and to retain the leadership mantle. Attribution processes are meaning-making processes, and AT principles help us to understand how leadership is culturally created within the individual/group nexus. Leadership is an interactional form of story-telling. It is a process of scripting, casting, acting, and audience appreciation, within the cultural story of organisational life.

The central role of meaning in leadership. The most critical collective implication of these perspectives is the central importance of *meaning* to leadership. This is seen in the emphasis on leadership images and leaders as symbols. It involves a dramaturgical view of the social world, wherein leaders and followers are Shakespearian actors on the stage of life, capable of concertedly re-constructing the roles, scenes, and plot of the leadership play.

Meaning is seen in the emphasis upon interpretation of both subordinate behaviour and leader behaviour. Upon this fulcrum of interpreted behaviour, it is possible to determine value, to exchange idiosyncrasy credits, to attribute cause, to decide the focus of remedial activities, and/or to provide symbolic heroes or sacrificial lambs, among other things.

The meaningfulness of leader behaviour is especially noteworthy. It is not just any leader behaviour that is of interest to this school of thought, but rather leader behaviour that is meaningful. Actors symbolically constitute meaningful behaviour during the processes of their interaction as they weave stories of leadership in their daily lives. In this respect, this school entails a form of Contingency theorising that implies the impossibility of stating categorically before the fact just what is and what is not defined as meaningful in a given situation.

The interactive nature of meaningfulness, with its associated uncertainties, is unheralded in the previously cited broad approaches. In those, it is unproblematic, routinely taken for granted as a paradigm assumption, with transformational leaders the curators of special meanings in some

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views. Meaningfulness is even diametrically opposed and rejected in some specific models, like those of Skinnerian Behaviourism (Scott Jr. 1977).

Naming the paradigm. The foregoing theories and models may be classified collectively as Symbolic Interactionist ones, linked by a focus on the processes of social meaning involved in leader-follower interactions within culturally determined organisational settings, with the *management of meaning* being a critical task of leadership both in a changing world and in well defined routines. Unlike with the distinction between Transactional and Transformational leadership, in Symbolic Interactionism there is no implied restriction to 'grand meanings' and no related suggestion that leaders are exclusively able to control or interpret important meanings, and that that is what differentiates them critically from others. Rather, meaningfulness is viewed as created and managed by leaders and followers in symbolic interactions wherein the leader demonstrates particular but not paramount skills, and, indeed, must work quite hard to achieve and maintain the leader mantle, whether transformational or transactional in nature. Interactionist accounts consider human behaviour is psychosocially learned, more or less conscious, intentional, story-oriented, and meaningful; and sometimes rational and sometimes nonrational; rather than merely a genetic code or fixed personality function or conditioned reflex to external stimuli. Meaning and behaviour are married together, though often implicitly, in the ascription of roles or labels within a socio-cultural context. Organisational life and leadership resound with attribution, metaphor, symbol, description, interpretation, and other aspects of human narrative within the theatre of life. To date, although Symbolic Interactionism is a clearly formulated school of thought in sociology, and it is generally framed in the broader management literature under the head of the Management of Meaning (MM), it has not been defined unambiguously within the literature on individualised leadership. This paper proposes to help redress this omission.

Why is Recognising a Symbolic Interactionist Approach to Leadership Important?

One reason is the very fact that a fifth paradigm exists, unheralded and inadequately appreciated, presumably lacking due research resources and scholarly attention as a result, like the quiet and neglected school child. The transformational versus transactional approach is concerned with the cleavage between ordinary and extraordinary leaders, with a bias towards grand meanings, rather than with how both sorts of leaders manage reality by creating and interpreting leadership events. The style approach emphasises behavioural sets largely divorced from any meaningfulness that might infuse or define them. The contingency approach focuses upon various moderating and intervening variables that impinge upon a leader's abilities to lead, and, despite their importance, leader/follower factors are apt to be lost among the welter. However, only the Trait approach – with its relegation of human beings to genetic robots or 'stimulus response chains' – appears inimical to a Symbolic Interactionist framework. So three of the major 'paradigms' are amenable to some degree to a Symbolic Interactionist understanding of leadership, and that is a related reason for exposing its theoretical stream more to the light of research effort and scholarly critique. But a basic reason is that a fifth paradigm exists, and hence it stakes a claim to knowledge of leadership events that the others de-emphasise or cannot even envisage. Given the fifth paradigm covers a range of theoretical frameworks and takes a demonstrably different central concern to other approaches, it demands our attention.

The significance of a Symbolic Interactionist approach lies also in its explicit recognition of the essentially human character of leadership. Theories and models in this paradigm stress uniquely human abilities to create and interpret meaning in leadership events, to examine differential meanings of the same leadership event, and to analyse and comment upon leadership events through the veil of culturally impregnated language. No other approach to leadership takes meaningfulness as its predominant *raison d'être.* Yet meaningfulness is arguably among the chief distinctive features of being human, and even more so of the phenomenon of leadership. Thus, aside from neglect of a central concern of much leadership thought due to lack of equal status

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being accorded to this collection of theory and research, the central concern is itself evidently one of profound import.

Allied to these justifications for recognition, these perspectives have a number of other virtues. They remind us that leaders have normal human likes and dislikes, and that these influence their behaviour and responses to the task of leadership, as suggested by the 'letters' of Mumford, Danserau and Yammarino (2000). Leaders are not always rational, nor only concerned with organisational performance. Further, this category of theories generally stress follower motivation as the other side of the leadership coin. Follower motivation is neglected or de-emphasised in many mainstream leadership theories. Yet in today's world of globalisation, incessant change, enormous complexity, and ascendance of knowledge workers in an information society, leadership in any isolationist or elitist sense is no longer viable for prolonged organisational success. Followers and leaders together create the story of organisational life, the mechanisms of which are illuminated by theories in the symbol/meaning literature.

Some may consider this school is antithetical to reliable and predictable leader effects and therefore unworthy of attention. Yet, it is precisely the element of meaningfulness that allows people to become leaders, to be labelled leaders, and to be effective as leaders – to play out their role in the organisational story. It is their degree of skill in systematically managing meaning that matters, whether in environments of change and uncertainty or in ones of tradition and stability. It is therefore mistaken to believe these models ignore effectiveness issues to concentrate upon other concerns such as leader emergence, as some writers imply, sometimes paradoxically given their own foci (Smith & Peterson 1988). Rather, mechanistic causal relationships between objects are replaced by meaningful determinations of human events that are amenable to systematic study. If the Symbolic Interactionist paradigm is given due attention, it may be expected to improve our understanding of what it is that constitutes reliable and predictable leadership effects, and thus enhance our measures of leader reliability and predictability.

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It is therefore important to recognise the Symbolic Interactionist paradigm because it offers unique benefits to understanding and practicing leadership. These benefits derive from the role of meaningfulness in leader and follower interactions, its limited treatment in other paradigms, and, by contrast, its centrality in Symbolic Interactionist thought. Aside from this, many benefits can be gleaned from the preceding section, including an awareness of the role of cultural variation in leadership events, the need for leader vigilance in unifying rather than dividing teams, the essentially metaphorical and dramaturgical nature of leadership and its implications for learning leader/follower roles, the synergistic interactions of leader and followers for better or worse, and the importance of causally meaningful attributions.

Each paradigm has its champions, preferred methods and legitimate issues. At the least, the ideas of Symbolic Interactionism need greater recognition to allow their joint claim of contributing to our knowledge of leadership to be scrutinised more closely rather than examined inadequately through fragmentation of its effort. There are a set of overlapping issues, themes, principles and concepts that, despite their uniquely human character, are otherwise left underdeveloped, not being valued sufficiently under the major paradigms. Until there is greater exposure of the Symbolic Interactionist stream through granting it equal status as a paradigm we will not be in a position to judge whether it is 'flat earth' theory or the new frontier of leadership knowledge.

Conclusion

In Symbolic Interactionism, leadership is understood very differently than in other paradigms. It is not a *fait accompli* of birth, a genetic given. It does not consist in behavioural strings of stimuli and responses. It is not simply accepted in a mechanical, objective fashion of leader styles (much less personal qualities). It is not a matter of transformational or charismatic leaders having an exclusive grasp of the meaningfulness of human endeavours, though such

leaders may have critical understandings. It does not depend upon myriad situational factors, but rather upon the interactions of leader and followers particularly.

The evidence and argument presented above shows a fifth paradigm does exist, its central concern is with the uniquely human character of leadership in terms of meaningfulness, and that concern is both fundamental to leadership yet de-emphasised in the main paradigms that command attention and resources. The fifth paradigm deserves recognition because it exists, because it has intrinsic significance, and because its claim to contribution to our leadership knowledge and expertise cannot be addressed adequately until it gains equal status with other paradigms. Its benefits are of high value to academics, practitioners, and others interested in leadership. Such benefits include the fact that leaders suffer from human foibles as much as followers but with potentially greater consequences and, once understood and accepted, that fact can be addressed in aptly designed management education and development interventions.

It is unlikely that there will be consensus on the inclusion of all the reviewed theories within the fifth paradigm, and less so under the umbrella of Symbolic Interactionism. However, the argument put in this paper will stimulate debate about a fifth paradigm, where these and other 'isolate' theories properly belong, the value these add to our knowledge of leadership, their consequent worth as research directions, and whether there might be other paradigms.

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