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Less Followership, Less Leadership?
An Inquiry Into the Basic But Seemingly Forgotten Downsides of Leadership

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In the original tradition of the "Unplugged" section, "carte blanche" grants a wild card to world-class scholars to share their own perspective on novel ways to conceive of management today. They may offer new avenues and draw up an agenda for a specific research question. Authors have to be invited to submit to the "carte blanche" series by one of the editors.

Abstract. Leadership is generally viewed as important and beneficial for individuals as well as organizations. The term, however, also implies followership and the targets for leadership may be less enthusiastic about adopting a follower position. From a follower's point of view, there might be downsides associated with a leadership/followership relationship, including negative effects on identity and reduced autonomy. These often neglected downsides may lead to a dampening of the enthusiasm for leadership in practice and form a counterforce to the prevalence of leadership. This aversion towards followership may therefore mean 'less' leadership, for instance less salient 'leader/follower' qualities in relations and interactions than is generally assumed in leadership/followership studies.

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Who wants leadership? The question might be odd, given contemporary society's cry for more salient and sustainable leadership, especially when combined with the steady flow of literature on the subject. The dominant assumption among practitioners and leadership scholars seems to be that leadership is both desirable and necessary. There are of course critical voices (e.g. Alvesson & Spicer, 2011, 2014; Collinson, 2005; Gemmill & Oakley, 1992; Knights & Willmott, 1992; Western, 2008; Tourish, 2014; Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007), which often emphasize power and ideology, but the assumption that leaders lead

those who need and benefit from being led still dominates the majority of the leadership literature as well as the broad, societal discourse on the subject (Pye, 2005).

A common assumption guiding most leadership studies is 'that the employees sampled innately need or desire leadership' (Hunter et al., 2007, p. 436). As with all assumptions, this one needs to be critically examined (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013). Leadership sounds good, but arguably it calls for something that is less enthusiastically embraced: followership. From a formalistic point of view it may appear to be straightforward to sort people into leaders and followers (and this is routinely done in the leadership research and publication industry), but leadership and followership cannot be reduced to formal positions. Leadership needs to be considered not just as a process in which leaders issue instructions to followers, but as a relational phenomenon in which followership is a key element, calling for people to see themselves as followers (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). Arguably, leadership relations without followers do not make sense, and the absence of the latter undermines or even precludes leadership. But do people want to be followers, and to accept the role and the identity that this entails? Of course, there are definitely situations and relations when accepting a follower position might be perceived as beneficial, where the perceived upsides exceed the downsides and to actively avoid or resist a follower position might also come at a price.

Working with counter-assumptions is often a powerful way of questioning established truths and bodies of knowledge (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Arguably, it is through challenging dominant assumptions that it is possible to develop new theories (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013). Therefore, in contrast to many mainstream texts on leadership, one can depart from the assumption that competent employees often do not feel that they need or desire followership; instead, they seek to avoid and minimize leadership/followership relations. The implications for understanding leadership are far-reaching. Of course, the argument needs unpacking and nuancing. In this paper we will, from a constructionist perspective (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Shamir, 2007), assess the dynamic and dependent relationship between leaders and followers (Carsten et al., 2010; Uhl-Bien et al., 2013). In doing so, we delineate our argument from what we refer to as 'follower-less' ideas on leadership (for example distributed/shared/self leadership with seemingly only leaders and no followers) and assume that the relationship between leaders and followers is asymmetric in terms of status, power and influence, where the former category (i.e. leaders) is privileged (Harter et al., 2006; Rost, 2008). While recognizing that there are potential upsides associated with accepting a follower position (e.g. inclusion, support, direction, meaning, reduction of uncertainty and anxiety) we investigate two major problems or downsides (experienced negative elements) for those taking follower positions, which are related to *identity* and *autonomy.* These downsides are of course not the only problematic elements that can be experienced by followers, but they are two fundamental disadvantages for this group. It is also important to emphasize that these downsides are different from the argument that only "bad" leadership leads to "bad" outcomes. Even reasonably competent leadership may entail problems and sacrifices for people not eager to define themselves as followers.

The message emerging from many influential leadership studies is that leadership is a good thing and employees generally benefit from and desire it. However, a broad overview of the empirical evidence does not unambiguously support the view that people in general are enthusiastic about taking followership positions. Leadership is difficult to define and study and assumptions and ideologies permeate all research (Alvesson & Karreman, 2015; Kelly, 2014). For a long time leadership research struggled to elicit any conclusive answers (Yukl, 1989). Transformational leadership research (TFL) appeared to give the field a

boost and hoped to capture the secret of effective leadership; however, much of this research is highly problematic, since many researchers seem to measure the existence and causal force of TFL through its effects, which is tautological (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013; Yukl, 1999). Some research would also argue that leadership is fairly marginal, at least in some organizational contexts and for some people. For example, in their seminal article on substitutes for leadership, Kerr and Jermier (1978) describe how organizations can work without leadership, given certain conditions.

In some areas, the benefits of leadership as the (or at least a major) way of organizing work cannot be seen as a given. Research on knowledge-intensive firms and professionals indicate that subordinates seem to manage rather well without much leadership (e.g. Alvesson 2004; Lowendahl, 1997; Rennstam, 2007; von Nordenflycht, 2010), although some researchers also claim that leadership (very broadly defined) is important for knowledge and innovation (Mumford et al., 2002). Many claim that professional labor is autonomous labor and aspirations about professionalism are expanding (Fournier, 1999). One could also argue that in contemporary society, with an educated workforce who has access to a wealth of sources for support and inspiration, the need for leadership is reduced. Given the flourishing of narcissism and grandiose self-images in the Western world (Alvesson, 2013; Foley, 2010; Twenge et al., 2008; Twenge & Foster, 2010), were most people want to associate themselves with something high-status and identity-boosting, followership may not seem to be an attractive position. This may lead people to try to avoid followership positions. Despite the ubiquitous demand for and celebration of leadership in society, many people in organizations may be less enthusiastic about taking a follower position and would prefer to minimize the risk of becoming targets for leadership. The dominant assumption that leadership is 'good' and is broadly seen as favorable (including for followers) can therefore be questioned.

We need to consider a possible paradox: it combines the dominant view of leadership as a positive, important and broadly celebrated kind of social practice, and at the same time it must acknowledge the limited enthusiasm that parts of the workforce might feel for leaders in their daily work life, since the follower positions occupied by most may be experienced as unappealing. This may also be the case for managerial work/formal leadership positions (i.e. managerial duties also constrain autonomy and identity), but the problems of being a manager or leader are outside the scope of this paper. Our point here is neither to make a strong statement against the significance and consequences of leadership (see for example Alvesson & Spicer, 2014 and Collinson, 2011 for overviews of 'Critical Leadership Studies'), but rather to point out the uncertainties surrounding such claims, thereby underscoring the need to be open-minded and consider various assumptions. Rather than accepting and reproducing the assumption that leadership is broadly perceived as good and welcome (by the intended followers), we can, as previously mentioned, consider a counter-assumption: there is often a disinterest in leadership relationships as many people do not want to take follower positions: they do not expect their manager (or senior colleague) to define the right values, beliefs and meanings for them, and this figure is not key for providing support and development.

In this paper, our aim – based on the counter-assumption described above – is to elaborate on two important but often neglected downsides associated with leadership (primarily experienced by followers), and to discuss when 'less leadership' (i.e. less direction and/or support discursively framed in terms of leader-follower relations) makes sense. We do not go as far as some other critical leadership scholars, for example Gemmill and Oakley 1992, who claim that leadership is an example of 'false consciousness' whereby the 'central aim is to repress uncomfortable needs, emotions, and wishes' (p. 114) resulting in 'massive learned helplessness' (p. 115) and 'childlike dependency' (p. 121).

Instead we outline two important and seemingly forgotten downsides that should be recognized and measured against the potential upsides of a leader/follower-relationship, where the 'net effect' is an empirical question. The paper thus contributes to the skeptical or moderately critical literature that questions the dominant position of 'leadership' in organizational research and practice as well as the growing literature on followers and followership (e.g. Bligh, 2011; Carsten et al., 2010; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Uhl-Bien et al., 2013).

The paper proceeds as follows: first, we discuss the close relationship between leadership and followership as presented in the literature. Then we elaborate on the differences between leadership and management, and argue for a more distinctive use of the concept of leadership. We continue by arguing that followership includes voluntary submission and asymmetry in relation to a leader. We then outline what we see as two important downsides of leadership, which often seem to be ignored or underestimated. This is followed by a discussion on what the downsides of followership might mean for leadership. A concluding section summarizes and ends the paper.

LEADERSHIP IMPLIES FOLLOWERSHIP

After noting that 'despite almost three thousand years of ponderings and over a century of "academic" research into leadership, we appear to be no nearer a consensus as to its basic meaning', Grint (2010, p.1) suggests that perhaps simply just 'having followers' (p.2) might be an adequate definition of leadership. The importance of followers is also included in most definitions of leadership. According to Antonakis et al. (2004: 5):

> "Most leadership scholars would agree, in principle, that leadership can be defined as the nature of the influencing process – and its resultant outcomes – that occurs between a leader and followers and how this influencing process is explained by the leaders' dispositional characteristics and behaviours, follower perceptions and attributions of the leader, and the context in which the influencing process occurs"

However, even a minimalistic definition involving followership (such as Grint's above) is refuted by researchers emphasizing self, shared; collective, and distributed leadership (e.g. Gronn, 2002; Lovelace et al. 2007; Manz & Sims, 1980; Manz, 1986; Pearce & Conger, 2003). We see much 'follower-free' or follower-marginalizing ideas on leadership as outside the otherwise broad scope and relevance of this paper.

Some literature tries to upgrade followership. Relational approaches to leadership often emphasize dialogue, mutual influence and participation. They often downplay or even avoid mentioning the involvement of followers (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). Hosking (2011) for example, writes that 'leadership is a relational practice, ongoing in and supportive of dialogues, emergent processes, relational responsiveness, multiplicity, and appreciation' (p. 462). Also, literature focused on followers and followership emphasizes the 'positive' aspects of followership, almost to the point of stripping the category of the conventional meanings of followership, instead constructing an image of followers as active, skilled, participatory and enjoying harmonious relations with leaders (e.g. Bligh, 2011; Collinson 2005; Crossman & Crossman, 2011). Some studies point out varieties of followers, of whom some are passive and others happy just to follow (Carsten et al., 2010).

Some literature emphasizes a leadership without leaders. Crevani et al. (2010:78) 'redefine leadership in terms of processes and practices organized by

people in interaction, and study that interaction without becoming preoccupied with what formal leaders do and think'. This approach often tends to emphasize positive interactions in general (Raelin, 2013) and it becomes difficult to see what is distinctive about 'leadership'. Arguably, we can be interested in collaborative work – which is often more important than 'leadership'/asymmetrical leader-follower interactions – without overusing and confusing the label of leadership. In this paper we refrain from seeing leadership as a form of problem-solving, participating, or direction-shaping joint activity. We follow dominant understandings of the subject matter and view followership and a sense of asymmetrical relations as intrinsic to the notion of leadership. (This does not imply that the relationship is entirely static or that all initiative and influence flows from the leader, but that the relationship in the short- and medium term, and most interactions, are unequal.)

Despite ambitions, not least in the literature on followers, to empty followership of anything other than positive meanings and upgrade followers to what comes close to 'non-followers', the very idea of leadership calls for followership. This means a group of people taking a comparatively inferior position in relation to the leader, who is the primary source of activity, knowledge, sense-giving, and who provides a sense of reality. Carsten et al. (2010, p. 545) view followership as people relating to 'those with higher status', which is also part of the definition of leadership (see also DeRue & Ashford, 2010). This does not of course preclude the existence of activity and influence among followers, but in relation to the leader these qualities are not dominant. A follower is not an equal participant in this relationship (Rost, 2008). This relationship does not preclude mutual influence and moments of initiative and activity from all members of a group, nor the reversal of the dominant and submissive roles, but deviations from leadership are relatively rare, brief or issue-specific. As Harter et al. (2006) write, 'it goes to the meaning of the word "leadership" for there to be some kind of inequality' (p. 290). This inequality is key to our discussion in this paper. We do not address the fact that at times the influence is shared, or discuss the (peculiar) idea that everybody is a leader and/or does leadership when involved in organized (positive) actions. Most influencing and group work can be understood without talking about leadership (Alvesson et al., 2016).

CUTTING LEADERSHIP DOWN IN SIZE – LEADERSHIP SHOULD NOT BE EQUATED WITH MANAGEMENT

Before proceeding we need to further clarify what we mean by leadership, without denying the ambiguity of the term and the various viewpoints in the leadership field(s).

The distinction between management and leadership (Kotter, 1985; Zaleznik, 1977) is difficult but crucial. Leadership-followership is hardly the same as employees subordinating to the manager as part of an employment contract, or following something (e.g. an ideology or a fashion) in general. People may 'follow' not because of being positively influenced by the authority person (given a leader status), but simply because they are obliged to comply with the manager in order to retain the job or avoid direct sanctions (which is not regarded as 'followership' in this paper).

One area of leadership studies focuses on the distinction between managers and leaders (Zaleznik, 1977; Hunt, 2004; Nicholls, 1987; Palmer & Hardy, 2000). The distinction is regularly set up to contrast trivial, boring management with sexy, important leadership (Bolden et al., 2011). Zaleznik (1977) views the influence of leaders as 'altering moods, evoking images and expectations, and establishing specific desires and objectives [...] The net result

of this influence is to change the way people think about what is desirable, possible and necessary' (p. 71). Leaders are then heavily involved in what Pfeffer (1981), refers to as 'symbolic management'. Leadership is a sense-making activity that entails symbolic actions and processes that generate meaning (Bryman, 1996; Ladkin, 2010; Smircich & Morgan, 1982). The emphasis of leadership is thus not on the formal, 'objective', and behavioral, but on thinking, valuing, emotions and identities:

> Management can get things done through others by the traditional activities of planning, organizing, monitoring and controlling - without worrying too much what goes on inside people's heads. Leadership, by contrast, is vitally concerned with what people are thinking and feeling and how they are to be linked to the environment to the entity and to the job/task. (Nicholls, 1987: 21)

This does not imply that managers and leaders need to be separate people or fixed, distinct types – most people in senior positions do both and many non-managers perform leadership acts based on personality or experience. Some of these acts may influence behavior, sentiments or meanings – but it may be wise to distinguish between phenomena and avoid the very broad use of concepts. In terms of subordinates/followership, most people in formal organizations are subordinates – paid to comply with instructions from managers within the constraints of formal hierarchy, bureaucracy, the employment contract, and so forth. In a leadership relationship, the formal aspects are downplayed or sometimes even irrelevant. Here it is mainly about the 'positive' influence on values, meanings, moods, orientations – qualities that cannot be topics for command. (A manager can order people to smile and be polite to customers, but he or she cannot instruct people to endorse the meaning of 'customer-orientation'.) The roles of leader and follower are about relational processes in which people claim and grant identities (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Without correspondence in view of self and other, leadership/followership will not work. There need to be 'symmetrical meanings' about the asymmetry/inequality of the relationship and the adjacent identities (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Still, a formal managerial position is an important factor in asymmetrical relations and in most cases managers-subordinates will to some degree overlap leader-follower relations (Carsten et al., 2010).

It seems increasingly common to conflate management and leadership, partly because the latter term is more grandiose and appealing (Alvesson, 2013). Also, studies claiming to investigate the social constructions of leadership tend to study managers/supervisors (Bresnen, 1995), while followership studies focus on formal subordinates (Carsten et al., 2010) without much consideration as to whether those studied construct themselves and their work in terms of leadership and followership or not. Mumford et al. (2009) claim that the issue of managers versus leaders is something for studies to explore and in the meantime, it is best, or at least good enough, to approach leadership 'broadly' (p. 123). There are two fundamental problems here. One is that those involved may not see each other as leaders and followers – people in formally subordinate positions may not define their formal superior as a 'leader' (unless in a general sense) and might not see themselves as 'followers'. Also, irrespective of the views of those involved, a careful investigation of a relationship might lead the researcher to the conclusion that the leadership/followership relationship is not accurately represented. It may be that a more nuanced view is necessary, and that the a priori categorizations of 'leaders' and 'followers' may be misleading.

So the theme in this paper is leadership/followership, not managers/subordinates (or management/subordination as part of an employment contract), although in an organizational context leadership/followership will often overlap

manager/subordinate positions. This distinction is vague and difficult but it is worth trying to maintain it in order to understand the social constructions and identity issues around followership in its different forms.

VOLUNTARY SUBMISSION - A KEY QUALITY OF A LEADER/FOLLOWER RELATIONSHIP

Our task in this paper is not to suggest a new or very distinct view of leadership, but in order to justify the overarching idea of 'less leadership', we need to define the term and reduce it's range somewhat. A key element in most leadership theories is having followers (Grint, 2010; Uhl-Bien et al., 2013), but not just formal subordinates complying with instructions, rules, and so forth. Leadership means engaging in systematic influence on people's thinking, feelings, values and meanings (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). This implies that some people will voluntarily comply with and accept a follower identity in relation to a leader seen as central for offering direction, meaning and support (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Seers & Chopin, 2012). This is still rather a broad statement, but it makes leadership different from management. There is also the possibility of collaboration between peers (sometimes – and confusingly – referred to as 'shared leadership'). Leadership is not follower-free, and followership seldom means blind obedience. Leaders/followers can be linked to or different from formal positions; they can be more or less salient or camouflaged and change over time, but they are still characterized by a clear sense of asymmetry, specifically a difference in status, identity and power (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). The leader's values, advice, directions, and meanings tend to carry much more weight compared with those of other followers or peers. In fully egalitarian relations, there is therefore little point talking about leadership (Harter et al., 2006). As a consequence, followership can be understood as a partly *voluntary reduction of influence* or what Shamir (2007) refers to as disproportionate social influence, in favor of being influenced by (associated with an acceptance of inferiority in relationship to) a superior (leader). This is clearly different from a pure manager-subordinate relationship, where there is not necessarily a sense of inferiority, but people may comply as an outcome of formal employment contracts, hierarchy and the vertical division of labor. Subordinates often accept the manager's formal obligations and rights, but they do not need to become devoted followers and or to be significantly affected in terms of 'altering moods, evoking images and expectations, and in establishing specific desires and objectives', to repeat Zaleznik's (1977: 71) definition of leadership.

If we disregard the leadership acts of a few great heroes and consider the more typical situation of people in managerial positions trying to lead, in the majority of situations the followers may experience a downside. As subordinates' granting and acceptance of the leader's influence is a key element in leadership (DeRue & Ashford, 2010), the experience of potential downsides is crucial for the very existence and outcomes of a leadership relationship. Does one accept the downsides and become responsive to another person having a key influence on one's constructions of meanings, values, beliefs and self-understanding (the distinct elements in leadership)? Accepting a low status identity as a 'follower' (Rost, 2008) and refraining from active influence is not self-evidently appealing in contemporary (Western) culture, except for those who are inexperienced, lack resources, face extraordinary situations or are cultivated in strongly hierarchical systems or totalitarian institutions. Followership then needs to be considered not just in terms of more or less passive or active followers (e.g. Bligh, 2011; Carsten et al., 2010; Crossman & Crossman, 2011), but also in terms

of the possible frustrations or sacrifices associated with a socially and psychologically unfavorable position (Rost, 2008).

TWO BASIC DOWNSIDES OF LEADERSHIP FROM A FOLLOWER PERSPECTIVE

We will here point out two basic but important downsides associated with leadership/followership from the potential followers' point of view: the sacrifices in terms of identity and autonomy. An obvious drawback of followership concerns identity. Not all people are content to locate themselves in a position of status inferiority. Likewise, the appeal of having discretion and autonomy at work is another key factor that may make workers reluctant to formally position themselves as followers.

SACRIFICE IN TERMS OF NEGATIVE IDENTITY

A major downside is associated with the more or less voluntary acceptance of a follower identity. A follower identity should not be viewed as the inevitable consequence of occupying a formal subordinate position. It is the result of an iterative and generative claiming and granting process with uncertain outcomes (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). A follower identity exists in an asymmetrical relationship characterized by the difference in terms of social status: 'Leaders hold a position of privilege in the dualism [Leader-Follower] because they are considered to be superior to their followers' (Gordon, 2011, p. 196). In addition, '[P]ower relations between leaders and followers are likely to be interdependent as well as asymmetrical… and often contested' (Collinson, 2011, p. 185). The hierarchical subordination of 'followers' makes this position less appealing for identity and self-esteem compared to being a leader. You seldom hear people presenting themselves as 'followers'. This is because of the generalized expectations associated with the two positions/roles (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Rost, 2008). To be a follower is to be inferior to a leader – not in all respects or at all times, but it does not make sense if a 'follower' person feels equal to or superior to his/her 'leader'. In that case a different conceptualization of the relationship seems more appropriate (e.g. manager/professional, CEO/sales manager, coach/athlete, agent/artist, and so forth). Formal hierarchy may lead to compliance, and senior positions and leadership tend to overlap, but as said before, the idea of leadership captures something different from formal positions and interactions. You may accept and comply with the manager's formal mandate, but when it comes to management of meaning (values, ideas, beliefs, understandings) subordinates can more or less choose if they take a follower position or not (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Seers & Chopin, 2012).

A strong sense of inferiority might be unavoidable and acceptable for young people in relation to much more experienced, well educated or otherwise competent colleagues, especially if the inferiority is perceived as temporal, as part of being a newcomer. Race, gender and class might also contribute to 'acceptance' of an inferior or follower position. It might also be acceptable, even attractive, to construct yourself as a follower to high-status people and/or people with exceptional talents. Indeed, to be a disciple of Christ or the Dalai Lama, a secretary of Nelson Mandela and so forth, might perhaps serve as a productive resource for positive identity work, but these extreme examples are removed from the often mundane reality of modern working life we are treating in this paper.

As the examples above indicate, there might actually be situations where a follower position is actively sought after. However, in many cases a follower

position is not sought after. Often in manager-subordinate relations (or those between various peers), the perceived superiority/inferiority asymmetry is not so strong that a leader-/follower relation is self-evidently established. Emphasizing that someone is a follower marks them as having a low social status (Rost, 2008). To be regarded and to regard oneself as someone who is 'following' rather than 'leading' (or working fairly autonomously, alongside other professionals/ peers/people), will typically involve a feeling of inferiority and hence potentially result in a negative self-conception. Hence, in order to grant someone else a leader identity and accept a follower identity for yourself, an element of submission and inferiority needs to be in place (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). When accepting such an identity, the original sense of inferiority might even be reinforced and cemented, making an 'exit' out of the relationship harder to achieve. Having a follower identity may also be seen as an outcome of identity regulation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) or 'disciplinary power' mechanisms associated with identity formation (Foucault, 1980). This may well be resisted by people targeted as 'followers'.

The unwanted nature of the follower position is illustrated by how middle managers asked to describe their work almost exclusively point at their superiority in managing subordinates, and deny their position as subordinates who are themselves also managed (Laurent, 1978). The sacrifices in terms of a positive identity associated with a follower position thus make many people unwilling to claim and accept such a position (DeRue & Ashford, 2010), which in turn may complicate and undermine leadership as the necessary followership part may not be in place.

SACRIFICE IN TERMS OF REDUCED AUTONOMY

Apart from the problem of negative identity, there is the issue of reduced autonomy. Autonomy is, like leadership, generally thought of as something good (Hackman et al., 1975), particularly in Western cultures. There are also recognitions of the dangers and anxieties associated with extreme freedom (e.g. Fromm, 1941), but few organizations come close to offering an anxiety-provoking high level of freedom. Apart from very young, inexperienced or dependent people, perhaps with a 'low self-concept' and who are eager to attribute charismatic qualities to their leaders (Howell & Shamir, 2005), most qualified individuals probably want discretion and leeway to do the job as they see fit (Alvesson, 2004; Deetz, 1997). Foley (2010: 173) even claims that 'autonomy is the one thing that makes professional life more fulfilling' . At least some people do not want much interference or too many constraints on what they are doing. Many also want to avoid being at the lower end of an unequal relationship. This does not preclude the existence of management structures, hierarchy, bureaucracy, guidelines and practices (Adler, 1999) or reduce the need for leadership interventions, see e.g. Kerr & Jermier (1978). Of course, there are specific and extraordinary situations, such as a crisis calling for immediate collective action, where leadership or other forms of managerial intervention may be seen as necessary (Grint, 2010), but these situations are the exception in many organizations.

We find a possible contradiction or dilemma between leadership and autonomy ideals. While one cannot argue that leadership always includes significant constraints, or that most people would prefer a work situation entirely characterized by discretion and free of limiting structures, the very idea of leaders leading followers and followers following leaders arguably involves a reduction of autonomy. Even supportive, low-control forms of leadership may involve limiting junior colleagues' autonomy. Delegating means that the manager is in control and decides how much discretion is appropriate. The manager also decides on the 'proper' type of leadership, including the need to be transformational, authentic,

serving, facilitative, supportive, and so forth; but these decisions can still be seen as 'too much of a good thing' (Blom, 2012).

Leadership typically means counteracting free, diverse thinking, valuing and acting, as a consequence of the creation of shared meanings and collective action (Smircich & Morgan 1982). Followership entails being willing to accept the leader's definitions of what exists, what is good and what one should strive for. The professional may claim the right to discretion and autonomy (within occupationally defined limits), while the follower is more dependent on the leader to receive ideas guiding a specific constrained discretion and autonomy (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). The outcome of some forms of leadership may involve a degree of pre-directed or pre-structured autonomy so that discretion is used in what the leader would consider to be the 'right way'. This is the idea behind the enthusiasm for corporate culture, and more recently, organizational identity, which assumes that through identifying with and internalizing the right values, orientations and mindset, people would voluntarily do the 'right thing' without the need for leaders or managers to assume direct control (Dutton et al., 1994; Peters & Waterman, 1982, for critical discussions see Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Tourish & Pinnington, 2002; Willmott, 1993). Even so, leaders need to grant followers significant input about assumptions, values and meanings – and refrain from frequently expressing ideas that go against those expressed by the leader. Two core tenets of followership are the strong inclination to be persuaded and the ability to only rarely insist on equal or stronger voice than the leader.

Many leadership researchers emphasize forms of leadership that are supposed to be experienced as facilitative rather than restrictive (e.g. Mumford et al., 2002), but leadership is hardly just about being supportive or facilitative. The majority of all organizations include a multitude of tasks that are not very stimulating or joyful and the job of managers is to manage people in doing tasks they may find stressful or boring. Therefore, when managers and other authorities are exercising leadership, it is not only about helping people to do things they really like to do, but also to make them do what they do not like to do, especially when these tasks are necessary for organizational performance. There is an element of reduced room for maneuver involved, and leadership is to a significant degree about constraining action space, cognitions, values, emotions, identity constructions, and so forth. This may be accomplished in a positive, persuasive manner rather than an overtly repressive one, including appeals to values, norms, obligations, pride, shame and guilt, but nevertheless means that a person's freedom to do whatever s/he wants is significantly restricted. Leadership – as addressed here – is primarily about organizational (or the leader's) goals, not about maximizing followers' freedom and happiness. Even though management partly deals with goal accomplishment and leadership involves an element of voluntary compliance, leadership leads to an additional reduction of autonomy, as the domains of thinking, feeling, self-view and other forms of independence are restricted by the outlook of the leader. (Even with forms of leadership such as the influencing of modes and meanings, most settings probably still involve significant subordination to management, including allocation of work tasks, requests to comply with corporate bureaucracy, implementing corporate strategies and fulfilling specific objectives and evaluating work performances. Few organizations can simply replace management with leadership – except perhaps in rhetoric; see Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003.)

Although there is not a simple zero-sum relationship between leadership and autonomy, there is a tension and a conflict between the two. This tension should be taken seriously, not glossed over by theories promising superior forms of leadership which create solely positive outcomes. When people claim that only positive things co-exist, the idea of a conflict or contradiction-free organizational reality can typically be seen as ideological and repressing the awareness of conflicts (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Sometimes this goes so far as to argue that

Hitler was not a leader, because he was a dictator, or that he was an 'inauthentic leader' – as he was not guided by good motives (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Jackson & Parry, 2008). Rather than assuming that two 'good' traits easily co-exist – e.g. leadership and autonomy – one should accept that often the good and the less good often go hand in hand. Organizational life is not free from tensions. An interest in autonomy can conflict with occupying a follower position.

BRIEF SUMMARY

If we take the downsides in terms of identity and autonomy involved in all leader-follower relations into consideration, it is less evident that what is presented as 'positive' forms of (managerial or informal) leadership will be positively perceived by those supposed to be followers. Even if the literature presents these forms of leadership in persuasive ways where the sacrifices are marginal, people supposed to be followers might be ambivalent or unwilling to accept this view. For these reasons, people in organizations might often prefer minimizing the exposure to leadership, avoiding/reducing manager-led meetings where leadership is exercised, limiting exposure to interventions which reduce autonomy and trying to downplay or bypass interactions or discourses emphasizing their status and identity as followers.

Again, it is important to note that these so called 'downsides' are experienced as negative by the potential followers, and are not automatically 'measurable' or 'objective' downsides or costs for the organization, even if dissatisfied subordinates can affect the bottom line negatively. It is also important to emphasize that the downsides outlined above can be recognized before accepting a follower identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) as well as experienced after the acceptance of such an identity. People may hesitate in taking an underdog position, both before assuming one and during interactions where the expectation is that they accept a follower role. 'Followers' unwilling or hesitant to comply with leadership efforts will of course undermine the effectiveness of these efforts. Even a manager doing 'correct' leadership – working in line with any of the endless recipes for good leadership – may fail if people are unwilling to take a follower position. Negotiations, mutual adjustments or co-constructions of leadership may not work if potential followers are not interested in a leader-follower relation. This may, from a conventional leadership theory position, be seen as a failure, but it is not a given that the 'net result' for the organization is negative, as followership is not always the best response and strategies such as peer support and teamwork may be as effective as more conventional leadership in many situations (Kerr & Jermier, 1978).

DISCUSSION: LESS LEADERSHIP AS AN EFFECT OF LESS FOLLOWERSHIP?

Unless framed in such a way that leadership is by definition a good thing, it seems reasonable to point at the downsides of leader-follower relations. Many people in organizations – top management, middle managers, Human Resources, as well as subordinates yearning for 'better' leaders and leadership – often seem to neglect or ignore the sacrifices or downsides described above. There is of course the possibility that sometimes the downsides are well recognized, evaluated and accounted for when granting someone a leader position/accepting a follower identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). But when reading most of the influential texts on leadership, these downsides tend to be ignored. This oversight is an outcome of focusing primarily on leadership, not on leader-

and followership. And when followership is in focus, usually the positive aspects are emphasized.

Not only good leadership acts, but also willing followership, are needed in order for leadership to succeed. In assessing leadership (and implicitly also followership) as a practice, it is important to consider its potential downsides. The identity and autonomy sacrifices contingent upon followership may cause people to stay out of or weaken leadership relationships, but managers may have better things to do than spend time trying to transform subordinates through getting them to buy into the manager's vision, values and ideals and manage how they should think and feel (Blom & Alvesson, 2014; Holmberg & Tyrstrup, 2010). The two downsides explored in this paper are of course not the only potential problems from a follower perspective. Yet they are important downsides to recognize and they offer an explanation as to why it sometimes seems so hard to conduct leadership as suggested in large parts of the leadership literature. Living up to the templates of transformational or authentic leadership may put a heavy burden on the average manager (Sinclair, 2011). This burden is extra heavy as subordinates, as discussed above, may not be cooperative or responsive (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). Influencing people beyond their behavior to the point where one has a significant impact on their values is difficult and time-consuming. Limited interest from the intended follower can be interpreted not necessarily as 'bad' or 'wrong' leadership, but simply that people can function without leadership.

The dominant leadership discourses praise and promise a partially 'leadership-impregnated' working life. Managers think that they need to exercise leadership and that a solution to most organizational problems is more/better/different leadership. But as it calls for followership, leadership is not a straightforward solution. Given the potential sacrifices, they may feel inclined to minimize or marginalize followership and thus leadership, expressing a feeling of 'less leadership logic', for example minimizing a clear follower identity in interaction. The effects of grandiose leadership discourses – promising managers (or informal leaders) effective and happy subordinates if they show good leadership – may thus be reduced or even sabotaged in specific manager/subordinate relationships and interactions by people eager to steer away from followership.

Our point is not to discourage leadership efforts; nor do we suggest that people always work best if they can do what they want, or that hierarchy, management or leadership should be minimized. Followership positions are sometimes accepted, perceived as effective, rewarding and valuable, for example in crises or when strongly uneven capacities characterize the potential leaders and potential followers. Sometimes managers may improve organizations and assist subordinates in doing a better job through persuading them to take followership positions (and identities), even in cases where there is initial resistance. Shared meanings are important in organizations and sometimes not accomplished through organizational cultures or horizontal negotiations. But the contemporary strong emphasis on leadership in academia, society and working life has a potentially colonizing impact that needs to be questioned. Critical literature emphasizing the danger of leadership is valuable (e.g. Gemmill & Oakley, 1992; Knights & Willmott, 1992), but often tends to reproduce an assumption that leadership is a central and powerful characteristic of organizations. In this paper, we would like to also raise the possibility that leadership in general may not have to be very significant in organizations given the downsides associated with followership. When people see themselves more as 'non-followers' (e.g. professionals, peers, co-workers) than followers, there will be 'less leadership'.

In parallel with the ascendance of 'heroic' views of leadership such as transformational leadership, we see a trend towards upgrading followers and downplaying strongly asymmetrical and rigid leader-follower divisions (Bligh, 2011). Collinson (2005) for example suggests that we should 're-think followers as knowledgeable agents … as proactive, self-aware and knowing subjects' (p. 1422) and look at the dialectics including resistance in the leader-follower relationship. This is a good point, but it tends to discursively lock people into leader/follower identities, and given the often neglected/hidden downsides it might be easier to enter than exit such an identity position (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). It also tends to make the follower label empty and potentially meaningless. An excessive upgrading of 'followers' to active, influential participants or even co-leaders goes against the idea of leadership/followership. Saving leadership and also followership from the potential unpleasantness of the latter reduces leadership. As a 'follower' one tends to be less of 'a proactive, self-aware and knowing subject' than if one sees oneself as a professional or, more generally, as a self-going organizational member, i.e. a 'non-follower'. And in addition to Collinson's (2005) critical discussion in terms of dialectics of 'control and resistance', we would like to highlight the subordinates' option of just ignoring leadership attempts. Since leadership includes a strong element of voluntary compliance, 'followers' can to a high degree choose their response to leadership attempts. This means that people can 'exit' or minimize leadership relations within their workplace by avoiding the adoption of follower positions.

We then emphasize the distinction between subordinates and followers. Followers are interested in and willing to be influenced by the leader, affecting values, beliefs, meanings, cognitions and other elements going beyond a manager/subordinate relation and its structural/formal framing (e.g. Nichols, 1987; Zaleznik, 1977). But followers' discretion is far from endless: advice and suggestions from someone in a leadership position are expected to be taken seriously. Subordinates may therefore avoid involvement in leadership relations and interactions, by for example not going to the manager for advice or not appearing too enthusiastic when participating in leadership-centered meetings. In the case of informal leadership ambitions rather than those based on a formal superior position, people may avoid placing the aspiring leader and oneself in an asymmetrical relationship by not approaching this colleague too frequently or respectfully. If different people are approached, one can avoid establishing a specific person as an authority and informal leader, relying more on networks of peers than informal leadership (Blom & Alvesson, 2014).

In many cases managers may find it very difficult to conduct leadership, as followership is as unattractive as leadership is attractive when closely scrutinized. The appeal of leadership-superiority comes at the expense of followership-inferiority and this creates internal tensions within the leadership-followership constellation which can lead to leadership ambitions and followership non-ambitions. The precondition of leadership – that 'there is clarity in the leader-follower relationship and individual's identities as leader and follower' (DeRue & Ashford, 2010, p. 628) – may frequently simply not be in place. This condition can be partly explained by the two basic but seemingly forgotten downsides of leadership-followership outlined in this article.

CONCLUSION

Leadership researchers regularly divide the organizational world into leaders and followers. This division is seldom questioned. Occasionally it is mentioned that the roles shift between different individuals – influencing and being influenced – but this is something different from the idea that there are

individuals that have a systematic and significant influence over followers in an unequal relationship. Typically a person in a managerial position is targeted for study, either directly or through subordinates asked to produce answers in a questionnaire or an interview about the leadership of their manager. That the term 'follower' is a meaningful and precise categorization cannot, however, be taken for granted. Rather than 'follower' being a natural and self-evident category, it should be seen as a possible position and identity, not always appealing or free from tensions and unease. Skillful leadership may mitigate experiences of inferiority, but a person feeling superior or even equal to another may not take a follower position and rather than examine how individuals socially construct their identities as followers, one may ask if (and when) individuals in Western societies really do construct their identities in this way. This is not a strict empirical question and we do not give any firm answer. It is a question that we raise for reasons of reflexivity and it needs to be considered in any study of leadership/followership. The phenomenology of subjects is central here: how do people define themselves in the context of (possible) leadership? Followership may be viewed as less attractive and therefore systematically or consciously avoided.

Key qualities of leadership – as defined by most leadership studies – include asymmetrical relationships and followership. Followership is a position and identity often negatively experienced compared to leadership. Few business schools eager to attract students would consider offering courses in followership instead of leadership and the market for how to become a better follower is probably limited. The downsides associated with the former tend to drive an avoidance or reluctance of followership and thus promote leadership. Leadership is a challenge and is perhaps less frequently practiced in relationships than preached by managers, leadership educators and the leadership publication industry (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). Leadership is discursive; followership and its practices/avoidances are less explicit in talk and text. Leadership talk may be in broad circulation but may not be practiced that much due to the disinclination to follow. Without followership, there is no leadership.

A demand from some employees for less followership may also mean less leadership, both in the sense of leadership being a key quality of a relationship and of the conducting of acts meaningfully described as leadership practices. We should be more open to the possibility that less leader-/followership may be common and sometimes – at least from the potential followers' point of view – a good idea. The downsides of exposure to leadership need to be taken into account: being 'transformed' through getting one's worldview defined or altered by the leader reduces autonomy and affects self-identity. Questions like 'Do you see yourself as a follower?' are seldom asked.

In some cases the downsides of leadership are limited in relationship to the benefits. Followership is sometimes wanted or at least accepted. But in cases of strong emphasis on leadership the sacrifices in terms of autonomy and inferiority become salient. Leadership/followership does not come for free – except for the ideologist defining leadership as linked to, or defined by, only good outcomes.

A powerful and increasingly popular discourse emphasizes the 'grandiose' nature of leadership (Alvesson, 2013; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2015). This invites many people to associate themselves with the idea of leadership. But this may also mean that followership becomes increasingly negatively loaded. The more we want to become leaders, the less we want to be followers. The reinforcement of ambitions and fantasies of aspiring leaders may lead to a shortage of aspiring followers. The ideological 'success' of leadership is a source of its defeat in many contexts: there is more 'leadership' (talk, fantasies, identity) than 'followership'. Leadership talk and fantasies then become decoupled from practice or relations.

Less leadership/less followership needs to be placed on the agenda when we think about leadership and the organization of work, as well as alternatives to leadership/followership as a mode of organizing a workplace. One way to do this

is to link leader- and followership more clearly, and highlight the asymmetry and the potential downsides. It is time to ask whether members of an organization really see themselves as followers and subscribe to followership at all. Against the dominant assumption in leadership studies that employees desire or need leadership (Hunter et al., 2007), one can – based on the key downsides outlined in this paper – raise the counter-assumption that many employees may not desire or think they benefit from leadership. Neither assumption has been seriously investigated; both are worth taking seriously in research.

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