LEADERSHIP 2

contemporary critical perspectives

Edited by
Brigid Carroll, Jackie Ford
& Scott Taylor

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FOREWORD

Why are you reading this book? My guess is that it is prescribed reading as part of a course on leadership, right? But as a student myself, I know that there's course reading and there's course reading: there's the stuff you read in order to pass, and then there's the stuff you read because you're genuinely interested. Which is this book for you?

A few years ago it would have fallen into the first category for me, because – quite frankly – I found leadership to be a bit of a turn-off. I'd run into far too many power-hungry egotists who exploited positions of so-called leadership to force their opinions on others. Sure, not all leaders are like that, but on the whole leadership seemed tied up with images of being in the spotlight and taking charge. I can remember being in countless different seminars on *how to be a leader*, which all seemed to offer a sort of Swiss Army knife version of leveraging power via means such as manipulation, fear, charisma and so on. But far from being motivational, I found myself thinking 'Well if this is leadership then I want nothing to do with it.' It just felt so narcissistic, like it was anchored around a sort of worship of individual people (usually men) who trampled on the weak in order to lead their helpless followers to 'success'. Well, no thanks.

But if there's two kinds of reading, there's also (at least) two kinds of thinking about leadership. There's the so-called mainstream approach, which tends to focus on heroic individuals who dazzle and inspire their followers to achieve unquestionably good deeds – the sort of heroic leadership for which I have absolutely no appetite. But there's also this other kind of leadership thinking, the kind that characterizes the chapters in this book. This thinking has redeemed leadership for me and given it a depth and richness that I now find surprisingly engaging. So much so in fact, the more I've encountered this sort of thinking, the more gravitational pull it has on me. I now work at the New Zealand Leadership Institute (along with Brigid Carroll, one of the editors of this book), and in my work there I've been involved in helping put this book together. I'm also now pursuing my own postgraduate studies in – believe it or not – leadership. So what is it about this other kind of leadership that has brought about such a marked change?

I think there are two main reasons why the kind of leadership thinking in this book is exciting and different. The first is that again and again the authors will challenge the notion that leadership is something individual 'special' people possess. Forget about leadership positions. They're more or less irrelevant: they're just titles that, as some critics suggest, upsize people's egos more than their actual jobs. What they don't do though is make anyone a leader, nor do they necessarily afford anyone a set of followers. Instead, leadership is something quite a bit more mysterious, and certainly a lot less grandiose. A simple thoughtful question asked by the most junior member of a team might in that moment produce a spark of unexpected leadership. Or a moment in which someone confesses that they are confused, admitting that they were picturing the problem in a radically different way, may spur a shift in meaning for everyone else. Or perhaps everyone else *is* thinking something similar but struggling to put words to an inchoate jumble and then, like a lightning rod, someone manages to give voice to what needs to be said and thus stands, for that moment at least, as an ethereal leader. None of these are the possession of the leader; instead they emerge out of an interaction in unique and surprising ways.

Of course to call these actions leadership though they lack position or authority does open up the criticism of calling everything leadership. Certainly we would be loath to go that far. Similarly we are not suggesting that leadership is trivial, nor is it (usually) accidental. However, the murky ambiguity in

which this places leadership is precisely the right home for it, and it's part of what has reanimated my interest in it. I like that it's surprising and mysterious. But more than that, what it really does is bring leadership down from the lofty heights of corporate superstars like Jack Welch or Steve Jobs and turns it into something that could come from anyone, anywhere, anytime. This is important. As the following chapters will argue, it's not only inaccurate to reduce complex organizational success or failure to the actions of one person, it's also a disempowering excuse for apathy. But when leadership is wrestled into the realm of the mundane, so too follows responsibility, accountability and possibility. This is precisely the take on leadership about to unfold in this book, and the first reason leadership excites me.

The second reason is the way this other kind of leadership engages with the reality of power. Before I encountered the strands of thinking that characterize this book, the sum of my knowledge of power amounted to that old saying 'power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely'. That's a cute aphorism, but it tends to winnow away power until – once again – it resides only with a handful of people, who are usually those at the top. In other words, power is something only a few extraordinary people possess.

In the pages that follow, however, you will find a radical departure from this somewhat simple conception of power. Instead, power is going to be brought to life in ways that are surprising, and much closer to home. This is really exciting because instead of power being an abstract concept that applies only to the elite, it becomes visible all around us. It runs through things we use every day like words and languages; it is woven into the way we present and think about ourselves (like in our dress, hairstyles, accessories and so on); it filters the way we make sense of the people around us; and it permeates the previously innocuous and taken-for-granted, so things like bank accounts, technological devices, websites (Facebook? The news?), education (like the degree you're currently studying) and even books (including the one in your hands right now!). Every day lines of power flow through our lives and we bump, push, lean on, resist, enact and ignore them constantly.

Although this new picture of power is more complex, it's as rewarding as it is important. For a start it's much more interesting, since it intersects our everyday lives. But more than that, if we are to make any real headway at all with leadership we need to be able to see and engage with power. Any leadership issue you can think of – whether it's climate change, poverty, runaway inequality, corporate corruption, child labour or seemingly intractable lines of war and terrorism – is entrenched in networks of power. But perhaps the most provocative part of all this is that a thorough look at these networks of power will undoubtedly highlight the ways in which even you are implicated. Power is not some possession of distant others: it involves our everyday lives. This is the second reason this other kind of leadership has caught my attention.

That's me though – what does this all mean for you as a reader? Well given that you're about to embark on a journey through a different kind of leadership thinking, I'd like to invite you to make this a different kind of course reading too. Sure you can read through this with the appropriate kind of studying diligence and earn yourself a sweet A+ as your just reward – and so you should. But as the chapters in this book will argue, learning leadership goes well beyond the acquisition of head knowledge. Leadership involves so much more than simply knowing 'about' leadership. Broader knowledge about leadership does help inasmuch as it gives you a repository of lenses on leadership to think through and try out – but there's more to it than this. If you take seriously the ideas in this book, the space of leadership will expand beyond the plush offices of the C-suite and majestic corridors of political power. Instead the space for leadership actually becomes the space you are in right now, regardless of your age, status, experience, employment situation or whatever.

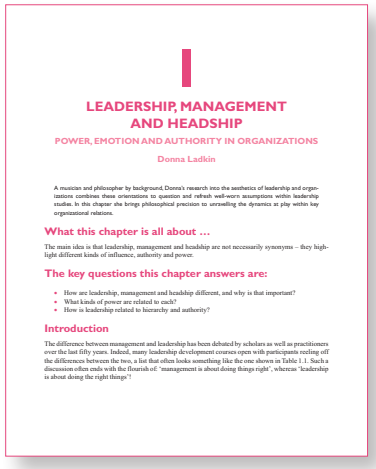
Taking this seriously then, I'd like to invite you simply to 'have a go'. There are opportunities all around you, across the full range of spheres you live in, like university, work, family, church, local community, national community, volunteer groups, protests, Facebook groups, clubs, sports teams, interest groups, hobbies – you name it. The thing about leadership is it takes practice and a willingness to experiment with your 'leadership identity'. Developing your leadership identity is one of the reasons why this book has 'stop and reflect' sections dotted throughout it. As a fellow student, I know that it's tempting to skip over these because they feel maybe a bit soft and fluffy (and they're not likely to have any bearing on whether or not you get that A+!). But because leadership is more than head knowledge, these reflection points are vital for helping you bring yourself into what you are reading. They also help build a practice of reflection that is the lifeblood of leadership. As I heard someone say recently, 'people don't learn from experience – they learn from reflection on experience'. So that's the first part: be reflective and have a go!

Lastly, I want to invite you to be prepared to see the world differently. The chapters in this book will – if you let them – challenge loads of everyday assumptions that we take for granted. Things like gender, diversity, language, power, knowledge, science, charisma, art, and of course what we mean by leadership. Some of the chapters have the potential to bump you right up against the boundaries you hold around the way things are. This is, I think, exactly what students of leadership need right now. The briefest glimpse at a newspaper is as far as you need to go for a sense of the size and scale of the problems we face today in an increasingly globalized world. It's enough to make anyone feel overwhelmed to the brink of apathy, especially if we believe that only a few gifted leaders at the top have the power to do anything. But the truth is these are problems that the self-styled heroic leaders of the world *cause* more often than they solve. What's more, no single individual, elected body or leadership position actually has the power to solve these issues.

What this calls for instead is a growing body of people who think differently. We need people who reject the stale old ideas of leadership and position and power, people who refuse to wait idly by for politicians to do something. We need people who are fluent in the complexity of power, who can call attention to and even disrupt its hidden lines that run through our world. We need people who are engaged in leading everywhere, irrespective of titles and position. This is the context that I invite you to hold in your mind as you read through this book, so that you, my fellow student, might join me in starting to lead differently.

Joshua Firth
Auckland, New Zealand

GUIDED TOUR OF THE BOOK



1

LEADERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND HEADSHIP

POWER, EMOTION AND AUTHORITY IN ORGANIZATIONS

Donna Ladkin

A musician and philosopher by background, Donna's research into the aesthetics of leadership and organizations combines these orientations to question and refresh well-worn assumptions within leadership studies. In this chapter she brings philosophical precision to unravelling the dynamics at play within key organizational relations.

What this chapter is all about …

The main idea is that leadership, management and headship are not necessarily synonyms – they highlight different kinds of influence, authority and power.

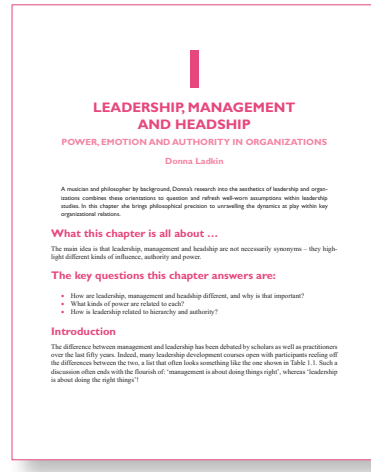
The key questions this chapter answers are:

- How are leadership, management and headship different, and why is that important?
- What kinds of power are related to each?
- How is leadership related to hierarchy and authority?

Introduction

The difference between management and leadership has been debated by scholars as well as practitioners over the last fifty years. Indeed, many leadership development courses open with participants reeling off the differences between the two, a list that often looks something like the one shown in Table 1.1. Such a discussion often ends with the flourish of: 'management is about doing things right', whereas 'leadership is about doing the right things'!

What this chapter is all about …
Brief summary of the chapter topic.



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The key questions this chapter answers are:
A list of key questions answered or raised in the chapter, to focus your learning as you work through the chapter.

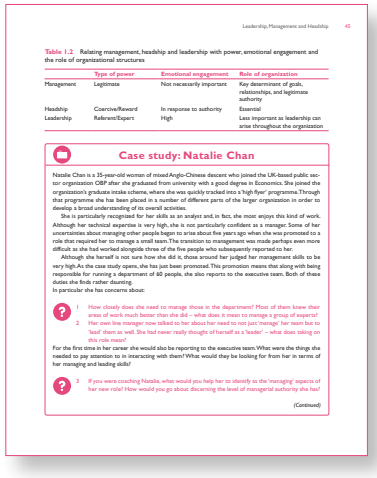

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Table 1.2 Relating management, headship and leadership with power, emotional engagement and the role of organizational structures

	Type of power	Emotional engagement	Role of organization
Management	Legitimate	Not necessarily important	Key determinant of goals, relationships, and legitimate authority
Headship	Coercive/Reward	In response to authority	Essential
Leadership	Referent/Expert	High	Less important as leadership can arise throughout the organization

Case study: Natalie Chan

Natalie Chan is a 35-year-old woman of mixed Anglo-Chinese descent who joined the UK-based public sector organization OBP after she graduated from university with a good degree in Economics. She joined the organization's graduate intake scheme, where she was quickly tracked into a 'high flyer' programme. Through that programme she has been placed in a number of different parts of the larger organization in order to develop a broad understanding of its overall activities.

She is particularly recognized for her skills as an analyst and, in fact, she most enjoys this kind of work. Although her technical expertise is very high, she is not particularly confident as a manager. Some of her uncertainties about managing other people began to arise about five years ago when she was promoted to a role that required her to manage a small team. The transition to management was made perhaps even more difficult as she had worked alongside three of the five people who subsequently reported to her.

Although she herself is not sure how she did it, those around her judged her management skills to be very high. As the case study opens, she has just been promoted. This promotion means that along with being responsible for running a department of 60 people, she also reports to the executive team. Both of these duties she finds rather daunting.

In particular she has concerns about:

1 How closely does she need to manage those in the department? Most of them knew their areas of work much better than she did – what does it mean to manage a group of experts?
2 Her own line manager now talked to her about her need to not just 'manage' her team but to 'lead' them as well. She had never really thought of herself as a 'leader' – what does taking on this role mean?

For the first time in her career she would also be reporting to the executive team. What were the things she needed to pay attention to in interacting with them? What would they be looking for from her in terms of her managing and leading skills?

3 If you were coaching Natalie, what would you help her to identify as the 'managing' aspects of her new role? How would you go about discerning the level of managerial authority she has?

(Continued)

Case studies
Leadership case studies have been included in each chapter to help you link theory with practice. Related questions will test your understanding of the issues covered.

Leadership, Management and Headship 47

- The nature of power associated with each activity (along with the attendant question of whether you have the requisite type of power to achieve your goal – and if not, how can you enhance or alter your power base?).
- The nature of the psychological contract inherent to each relationship. How can you foster the type of engagement central to each activity? How can you signal that you are moving from one mode to the other when you are in a role that requires both?

Managing, heading and leading organizations effectively require sensitivity to the particular context within which you are working, as well as to the expectations of those with whom you are working. Even those with high levels of managerial authority can be overthrown by disgruntled followers. Followers or subordinates can sabotage the most carefully laid strategy if they do not 'buy into' it. A 'great' leader can fail without the operational savvy to co-ordinate organizational operations. As long ago as 1977 Abraham Zaleznik pointed out the downside of too much managerial control, especially within changing competitive contexts. Each of these ways of operating is fine in its own right. The key is in knowing when and how (and whether you have the requisite type of power, quality of emotional engagement and location within your organization's structure) to step into one of these ways of relating.

Finally, this chapter has largely focused on 'managing', 'heading' and 'leading' as *activities*, but lurking behind this is the question of *who* is engaged in these activities. Can anyone enact management, headship or leadership? Are some people more suited to a particular type, as we have seen suggested in Zaleznik's work? These questions lead us to the concept of leadership traits, which is the topic of the next chapter.

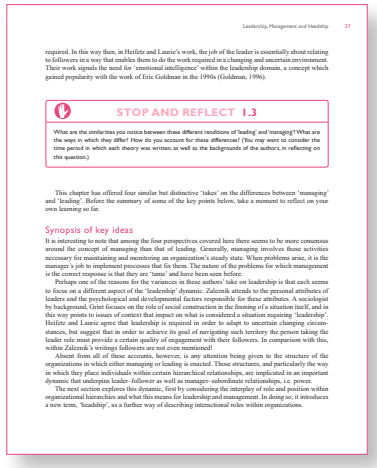
The key points in this chapter were …

- The main difference between management, leadership and headship concerns the organizational purpose each serves and the type of authority and power each relies on.
- Management is about processes that maintain a steady state. Management usually involves a position within an organization, and draws on legitimate power. The emotional content of managing can be rather limited.
- Leadership is more mysterious, but is about working with complex problems and change. Leadership requires endorsement that is given by followers, which involves a psychological contract. It doesn't necessarily mean position! Instead, it draws on referent power and the emotional engagement between leaders and their followers.
- Headship is not leadership! It is about the commanding authority that comes from an organizational place of power. It draws on positional power which can extend to coercion or rewards as its power basis. It can draw unconscious emotional responses from subordinates, who can respond to the 'role' rather than to the 'person' holding the role.

Further thinking

Grint, K. (2005) Problems, problems, problems: the social construction of 'leadership', *Human Relations*, 58(11): 1467–94.

The key points in this chapter were …
End-of-chapter summary of the main issues covered, ideal for revision.



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required. In this way then, in Heifetz and Laurie's work, the job of the leader is essentially about relating to followers in a way that enables them to do the work required in a changing and uncertain environment. Their work signals the need for 'emotional intelligence' within the leadership domain, a concept which gained popularity with the work of Eric Goldman in the 1990s (Goldman, 1996).

STOP AND REFLECT 1.3

What are the similarities you notice between these different renditions of 'leading' and 'managing'? What are the ways in which they differ? How do you account for these differences? (You may want to consider the time period in which each theory was written, as well as the backgrounds of the authors, in reflecting on this question.)

This chapter has offered four similar but distinctive 'takes' on the differences between 'managing' and 'leading'. Before the summary of some of the key points below, take a moment to reflect on your own learning so far.

Synopsis of key ideas

It is interesting to note that among the four perspectives covered here there seems to be more consensus around the concept of managing than that of leading. Generally, managing involves those activities necessary for maintaining and monitoring an organization's steady state. When problems arise, it is the manager's job to implement processes that fix them. The nature of the problems for which management is the correct response is that they are 'tame' and have been seen before.

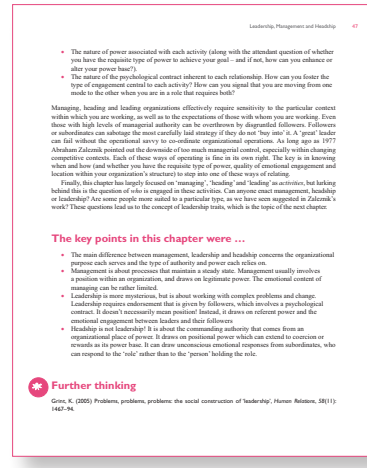
Perhaps one of the reasons for the variances in these authors' take on leadership is that each seems to focus on a different aspect of the 'leadership' dynamic. Zaleznik attends to the personal attributes of leaders and the psychological and developmental factors responsible for these attributes. A sociologist by background, Grint focuses on the role of social construction in the framing of a situation itself, and in this way points to issues of context that impact on what is considered a situation requiring 'leadership'. Heifetz and Laurie agree that leadership is required in order to adapt to uncertain changing circumstances, but suggest that in order to achieve its goal of navigating such territory the person taking the leader role must provide a certain quality of engagement with their followers. In comparison with this, within Zaleznik's writings followers are not even mentioned!

Absent from all of these accounts, however, is any attention being given to the structure of the organizations in which either managing or leading is enacted. Those structures, and particularly the way in which they place individuals within certain hierarchical relationships, are implicated in an important dynamic that underpins leader–follower as well as manager–subordinate relationships, i.e. power.

The next section explores this dynamic, first by considering the interplay of role and position within organizational hierarchies and what this means for leadership and management. In doing so, it introduces a new term, 'headship', as a further way of describing interactional roles within organizations.

Stop and reflect

These are very specific – when we put one of these boxes into the text, we want to indicate to you that there should be some active thinking going on. Of course, when you read you're already doing something active – understanding, relating to experience, making connections – so these boxes are designed to encourage you to take a moment to do that thinking without going any further in the text itself.



Leadership, Management and Headship 47

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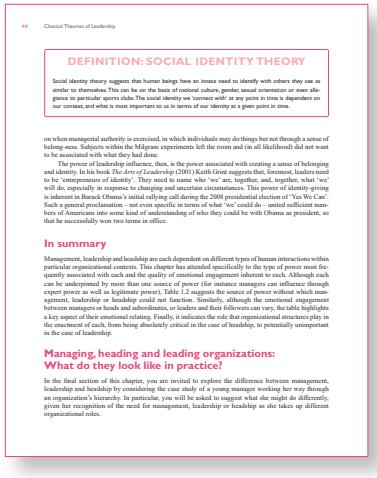
Further thinking

Grint, K. (2005) Problems, problems, problems: the social construction of 'leadership', *Human Relations*, 58(11): 1467–94.

Further thinking

These sections contain links to journal articles and other resources to encourage further exploration of interesting and important ideas in the book.



44 Classical Theories of Leadership

DEFINITION: SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

Social identity theory suggests that human beings have an innate need to identify with others they see as similar to themselves. This can be on the basis of national culture, gender, sexual orientation or even allegiance to particular sports clubs. The social identity we 'connect with' at any point in time is dependent on our context, and what is most important to us in terms of our identity at a given point in time.

on when managerial authority is exercised, in which individuals may do things but not through a sense of belong-ness. Subjects within the Milgram experiments left the room and (in all likelihood) did not want to be associated with what they had done.

The power of leadership influence, then, is the power associated with creating a sense of belonging and identity. In his book *The Arts of Leadership* (2001) Keith Grint suggests that, foremost, leaders need to be 'entrepreneurs of identity'. They need to name who 'we' are, together, and, together, what 'we' will do, especially in response to changing and uncertain circumstances. This power of identity-giving is inherent in Barack Obama's initial rallying call during the 2008 presidential election of 'Yes We Can'. Such a general proclamation – not even specific in terms of what 'we' could do – united sufficient numbers of Americans into some kind of understanding of who they could be with Obama as president, so that he successfully won two terms in office.

In summary

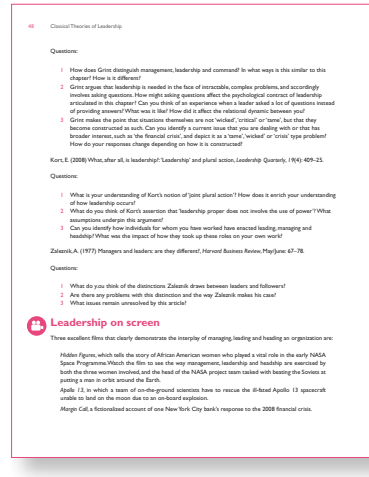
Management, leadership and headship are each dependent on different types of human interactions within particular organizational contexts. This chapter has attended specifically to the type of power most frequently associated with each and the quality of emotional engagement inherent to each. Although each can be underpinned by more than one source of power (for instance managers can influence through expert power as well as legitimate power), Table 1.2 suggests the source of power without which management, leadership or headship could not function. Similarly, although the emotional engagement between managers or heads and subordinates, or leaders and their followers can vary, the table highlights a key aspect of their emotional relating. Finally, it indicates the role that organizational structures play in the enactment of each, from being absolutely critical in the case of headship, to potentially unimportant in the case of leadership.

Managing, heading and leading organizations: What do they look like in practice?

In the final section of this chapter, you are invited to explore the difference between management, leadership and headship by considering the case study of a young manager working her way through an organization's hierarchy. In particular, you will be asked to suggest what she might do differently, given her recognition of the need for management, leadership or headship as she takes up different organizational roles.

Definitions

These are here to explain important academic jargon so that (a) you can understand your module leader better, and (b) communicate with them more effectively when you need to.



48 Classical Theories of Leadership

Questions:

1. How does Grint distinguish management, leadership and command? In what ways is this similar to this chapter? How is it different?
2. Grint argues that leadership is needed in the face of intractable, complex problems, and accordingly involves asking questions. How might asking questions affect the psychological contract of leadership articulated in this chapter? Can you think of an experience when a leader asked a lot of questions instead of providing answers? What was it like? How did it affect the relational dynamic between you?
3. Grint makes the point that situations themselves are not 'wicked', 'critical' or 'tame', but that they become constructed as such. Can you identify a current issue that you are dealing with or that has broader interest, such as 'the financial crisis', and depict it as a 'tame', 'wicked' or 'crisis' type problem? How do your responses change depending on how it is constructed?

Kort, E. (2008) What, after all, is leadership? 'Leadership' and plural action, *Leadership Quarterly*, 19(4): 409–25.

Questions:

1. What is your understanding of Kort's notion of 'joint plural action'? How does it enrich your understanding of how leadership occurs?
2. What do you think of Kort's assertion that 'leadership proper' does not involve the use of power'? What assumptions underpin this argument?
3. Can you identify how individuals for whom you have worked have enacted leading, managing and headship? What was the impact of how they took up these roles on your own work?

Zaleznik, A. (1977) Managers and leaders: are they different?, *Harvard Business Review*, May/June: 67–78.

Questions:

1. What do you think of the distinctions Zaleznik draws between leaders and followers?
2. Are there any problems with this distinction and the way Zaleznik makes his case?
3. What issues remain unresolved by this article?

Leadership on screen

Three excellent films that clearly demonstrate the interplay of managing, leading and heading an organization are:

Hidden Figures, which tells the story of African American women who played a vital role in the early NASA Space Programme. Watch the film to see the way management, leadership and headship are exercised by both the three women involved, and the head of the NASA project team tasked with beating the Soviets at putting a man in orbit around the Earth.

Apollo 13, in which a team of on-the-ground scientists have to rescue the ill-fated Apollo 13 spacecraft unable to land on the moon due to an on-board explosion.

Margin Call, a fictionalized account of one New York City bank's response to the 2008 financial crisis.

Leadership on screen

This is the part of the book we've had most fun with. Most of us use extracts from film, fiction and documentary, television and other visual materials in our teaching – leadership seems to be especially easy to find materials for because film-makers and television producers are as fascinated by leaders as everyone else. So, we've pulled together a few examples of things we find help us and the students we work with to think through leadership and leading.

ONLINE RESOURCES

There are Online Resources for this book, as there are for many textbooks. The authors and publisher have worked hard on its design and content, so do visit it – you'll find useful things and videos with everyone who has written the book. Our relatives think they're quite funny; you should also learn something from them.

The Editors

Visit **http://study.sagepub.com/carroll2e** for the following teaching and learning resources.

For students

Videos – the book's authors provide an overview of each chapter and discuss issues such as why the topic covered by their chapter is important, how you can apply the ideas discussed in practice, key theories and debates and tips for revision.

Free selected SAGE journal articles – important papers discussed in the book are available online to further develop your understanding and support your reading.

Weblinks – useful and original sources of information beyond the book can be accessed directly from the website by clicking on the links provided.

For lecturers

PowerPoint slides – packed with key concepts and questions, reflection points, and case studies for each chapter.

INTRODUCTION: THE POWERS OF LEADERS

Brigid Carroll, Jackie Ford and Scott Taylor

Welcome to this book. We are a group of academics who research and teach leadership, communicating what we know and don't know about it, making the subject as intriguing as possible, and perhaps even entertaining. We're going to start by exploring and defining key terms, then we'll introduce the people who have put this book together. But first we think you need to know why this book exists.

All academic books about leadership tell you in the first few pages that there are (literally) millions of texts by different authors out there in bookshops, on library shelves, in people's offices or houses, in most languages of the world. That means we always have to ask and answer the question of 'Why another one?'

This is a specific type of book. You know this already – it's a textbook. People write them for a range of reasons: maybe they think all existing textbooks in the field are bad, or maybe they think what the research field is *really* about isn't currently represented.

Why does *this* textbook exist, then? We're going to present you here with two closely linked rationales for writing the book, based on our understanding of the field of leadership studies after some time teaching and researching within it.

Why leadership? What leadership?

First, we think it's important to locate the ideas and practices associated with the term 'leadership' through theories that have developed over time, and then think about how the practices of leading can be understood through these theories. Leadership as an act, and the people described as leaders, are located in time and space – in other words, leading means different things at different moments and places. Times and places are always variable, changing and important – textbooks that claim to present you with eternal, unchanging truths about leadership are therefore not helpful. The world is so varied, different moments in time are so distinctive, organizations are so diverse, people are so unpredictable, that theories can only ever be convincing insofar as they are meaningful to people in places at specific times.

This does not mean all theories are equal, or that you take a relativist position. There are theories that are more convincing and persuasive. But we want you to read, think and make a choice that is well informed, critical and clear, so we're presenting as wide a range of options, in as much detail as we can, for you here.

How leading? Who leading?

A British politician, Tony Benn, died in early 2014. His politics were expressed in lots of different ways through a long and fascinating life; he had a particular habit of asking very difficult questions. For example, he encouraged everyone to ask these five questions of leaders:

What power do you have?

Where did you get it?

In whose interests do you exercise it?

To whom are you accountable?

How can we get rid of you?

Ask these questions of someone in your life you think of as powerful. We like these questions because they position the leader as a person-among-people. In other words, the leader has to provide an account of how power, and therefore leadership, has happened to them. The power of individual people to act (or not act), to speak (or to silence), is questioned by asking about processes and institutions in this way. We're going to ask you to think about power a lot during this book – the power of individual people who we see as leaders, the power of the idea of leadership and the ways that people acquire, or avoid, exercising power in the process of leadership.

These two starting points, time–space location and power, generate a particular way of learning about leadership or developing your own leadership practices. These ways of seeing leadership should affect how you think about your study of the ideas and practices associated with leadership, leading and leaders.

Leading, leadership and leadership studies

Leading

This is the action, the verb, the *doing* of something – leading, thinking about the actions, the activities, the people and the processes involved in *doing* leading. This doesn't mean we are only thinking about the people *defined as* leaders by job title. The *led* are at least as important as the leaders – as many people have said, it is impossible to lead or be a leader if there are no followers behind or around you. Leading is a process, or series of processes. This is a complex philosophical idea that is explored in more detail later in the book. However, for the moment, we can think of it as this – *leading is not a momentary activity, it happens over time, changing continuously depending on place, who is present when leading is happening and the negotiation of authority*. We are not likely to be able to identify an 'essence' of leadership in the form of a personality characteristic or trait, a mysterious charismatic gift, an apparent ability to transform people and organizations, or a function of the brain. We look at all of these theories of leadership, but with a healthy scepticism for their attempts to identify a 'key' to understanding leadership, identifying leaderly activity or developing leaders.

Leadership

Think of the last time you heard someone say, 'What we need here is some good leadership'. It might even have been you who said the words, expressing your desire for *someone* or *something* to lead you. Invoking the idea of leadership, looking for leadership, is easy. But then you run into the inevitable secondary questions – what, where, why, how, when, how much, do I want to do it ...

This is where we start with the idea of identifying leadership, as a series of questions. Where are you likely to find leadership? Can you see, touch, smell or taste it? Is it a thing you'll find lying

around like an object? Can you identify it when you see it in a book or film? What sort of clothes does it wear? Does it look like a man or a woman? Does it happen for a set period of time and then stop? How does it feel to be led? Is it dangerous? Can someone teach me to do it, or show me how to be a leader?

Or maybe, like the idea of *leading*, perhaps *leadership* is better understood as a process, involving people and therefore fundamentally social, subject to change over time according to where it's happening and why. Leadership is a term-in-use, a word that many of us fit into sentences every day. Within that usage, we make assumptions – that we understand the term leadership when we use it, that the people who are listening to us share that understanding, and that we will be able to identify leadership or make it happen.

We can see leadership in our own attempts to do it, in others' efforts to lead us, we can talk about it and we can read or write about it. Most of the time, however, most of us talk about 'it' in a relatively uninformed way – with authority, often, but without much clarity or reflection. Perhaps this is why you're studying leadership, to become better informed and to be able to think and speak about leadership with more clarity and meaning in life and at work. This involves challenging myths. As a starter, if anyone ever tries to tell you that leadership is any of the following, we want you to challenge them, using the vocabulary and ideas introduced in this book.

STOP AND REFLECT

When Scott first started lecturing, he spoke to a more senior colleague about some undergraduate students' essays. He was unsure whether some of the essays should pass or fail; they weren't very good, he knew that, because they didn't respond to the assessment criteria or engage with the ideas in the course he had taught, but he couldn't decide if they were bad enough to force the students into a resit exam, or just good enough to pass. His colleague suggested he think about whether his dad could have written them. In other words, she said, could someone who had never studied in the area have written the essay? If the answer was yes, then he should fail them, because the essays would be a set of assumptions, common sense and assertions. (Of course this doesn't mean that dads, or mums, are lacking intelligence, or unable to write good coursework about leadership. It just means that they haven't been through a formal educational or self-study process that enables them to write about the subject to satisfy an assessment that judges whether they should be trusted as people who know what academic theories can tell us about leadership.)

We could also think about the claims these students made in their essays as 'myths'. This isn't a judgement as to their truth or fiction; rather, it means that the claims should be read as symbolic stories that tell us something about the thing we're storytelling around, and something about ourselves as individuals or within our communities. Thinking about the what, why, where, when and how of leadership helps us to interrogate the many myths surrounding it as an idea and practice. Here are five of our favourite myths:

(Continued)

(Continued)

When we talk or think about leadership, we're focusing on elites – people at the top of the hierarchy, people who are extraordinary or superhuman, *individuals*. NO WE'RE NOT.

Leadership is rare. NO IT ISN'T.

Leadership is a good thing. NOT ALWAYS, IT ISN'T.

There is such a thing as a typical leader. NO THERE ISN'T.

Leadership exists and can be developed easily. IT MIGHT – BUT IT MIGHT NOT – AND IF IT CAN, WHY DOESN'T EVERYONE DO IT?

These might seem odd things to question at the start of a book or course module on leadership, but it can be fun to think in this way. List your assumptions and prejudices, and then see if you still believe them once you've read, thought, reflected, critiqued, engaged with evidence and arguments – ground your existing thoughts about leadership in academic research and ideas, in short. Then you'll be able to talk about leadership, using the grammar and vocabulary of leadership studies, and avoid sounding like someone who is just reproducing a set of unexamined prejudices, assumptions and common sense.

Leadership studies

You're probably reading this book as a full- or part-time member of a business school community, or as someone enrolled on an academic programme that involves thinking about management or organization theory. If you're a full-time business school-based student, you'll know about the variety of different subjects offered there – organization theory, marketing of various kinds (consumer, strategic, business-to-business), operations management, supply chain management, public or non-profit management, tourism and leisure management, finance, accounting, all sorts of economics ... it's not an endless list, but it can seem like it.

The curious thing is, many of the theories and concepts that inform analysis of these different aspects of management and organization are identical. Take one of the key concepts in leadership studies, personality traits. You can find this in textbooks about human resource management (in the recruitment and selection chapter), or organizational behaviour (in the chapter on self or identity), or marketing (in the chapter on consumer behaviour), or economics (although economists won't always tell you that they're making assumptions about human behaviour), and of course in this book.

So why have a separate department, specific academics, degree programmes or course modules, and textbooks on leadership studies, if you already know the theory? And how should we think about leadership studies? Is it an academic discipline in its own right, a field of study, or a convenient way for business schools to suggest they're up to date and relevant, speaking to the interests of the most powerful people (in some ways) in organizations?

As with anything connected to higher education and universities, there's a political aspect. Some academics want to lay claim to founding, developing or owning a particular field of study – and one of the

best ways to do that is to construct a new one. Leadership studies is currently in the middle of a boom – new peer-reviewed journals have been started, more and more books are being published, programmes of study are appearing around the world and there is an increasing number of academic conferences dedicated to leadership.

The peer-reviewed journals are the most important development. They publish the most prestigious form of academic writing. It involves people like us writing a relatively short, usually 7000-word, paper or article about a topic, such as transformational leadership, either based on new data or as a review of previously published research. We submit the paper to a journal, and work with the reviews/comments of three or more anonymous peer reviewers to improve it. Journals based on peer review are crucial to establishing the academic credibility of a research field. In principle, you can trust what you read in a peer-reviewed journal, because it's been read and approved by the wider research community – perhaps you could think of a journal paper as the direct opposite of a blog, where anyone writes whatever they want without any review. Peer-reviewed journal papers are very controlled pieces of writing; they can also be really hard work to read, because of the language used, the conventions of academic writing and the complexity of the ideas or analysis. But some of them are good to read, and most of them are rewarding to engage with if you're interested in the subject. We want to encourage you to read them, because we spend a lot of time and energy writing them, and they are the source that this book is based on – so read some of them for yourself and see if you agree with our interpretations of them.

But leadership studies isn't a specific academic discipline with its own theories, so how does it work? Within the broad boundaries of social science, we usually take a psychological or sociological perspective – then we become sociologists or psychologists of leadership. If you examine all of this research and educational activity closely, you won't find much that is distinctive to understanding *leadership*. We use methods of data collection that are common in other social or natural science disciplines; we analyze the data by adapting concepts from other disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, anthropology or sometimes the natural sciences.

So where does this leave us? And where does it leave you, as a keen student of leadership? After all, you've either bought this book or made the effort to go to a library to borrow it. As you'll see in all of the chapters to come, we think that leadership studies is defined by its focus on the idea of *leadership* and the practice of *leading*, and that those two things are quite specific. There may be a lot of debate as to what leadership is, or isn't, and disagreement about where and when we can say with confidence 'now *that's* leading' or 'she's *definitely* a leader', but we do have to agree to accept that leading and leadership are distinctive, interesting and worth thinking about in detail. That, for us, is leadership studies, and we believe it is important enough to put together a long book about it so that more interesting teaching and learning can happen.

The power of leaders and leadership studies

As you'll see as you read this book, the most important abstract term that we've used to organize this book is power. The idea and practice of power is a key way to understand leadership as a position, as an act and as an academic subject. It's most obviously present in leader–follower relationships when a leader is persuading or coercing someone to do something they don't want to do, but it is also in the air that surrounds all other relationships (e.g. leader–leader, follower–follower) and actions that we see as leading. Despite this, power is often neglected or ignored in research and education about leaders, leadership and leading.

If we see leadership as a process of influencing the behaviour of other people – in formal organizational hierarchies for sure, but also across communities and networks where more informal approaches tend to be displayed – power is recognizable as the public and private face of influence and authority. Most academics researching and teaching in the social sciences recognize that power is also one of the most complex *ideas* we have. It'll be helpful to you to be familiar with what we think are the three most significant ways in which power and leadership can be explored, and to start thinking about how these are entwined in studies of leadership in organizations. The three key terms here, which indicate ways of understanding power, are:

- traditional;
- radical;
- post-structural.

Because you're either an undergraduate or a postgraduate, you're certainly familiar with what the first two terms mean in an academic setting; the third may be new to you. Here's a brief introduction to what they each mean in relation to power.

The earliest studies of leadership, which we are thinking of here when we write about the *traditional* perspective on power, define what they're researching and writing about as the ability of an individual to control or to influence others – most often to get someone to do something that they may not otherwise have done. This doesn't necessarily mean coercion, but it certainly implies persuasion and breaking down some sort of resistance. Leadership here is defined as a possession, seen in a relationship that happens between leaders and followers. Over the last twenty years or so, this kind of leadership (and its associated perspective on power) has become more and more exalted, as academics, management consultants, journalists and power-full leaders themselves promote 'it' as the means to cure all organizational ills. On the other side of this 'leadership as panacea' coin, it can also be used to allocate blame for failures and disasters – so when something goes wrong we look to the leader to take responsibility and resign, even if what has happened was clearly outside their control. This is often referred to as finding the 'bad apple' in the barrel, ignoring the alternative possibilities that perhaps (a) the whole barrel of apples is rotten, or (b) there's a problem with the barrel as well as one or more of the apples.

Researchers who explore leadership and power in this traditional way usually turn to one of the most renowned academic studies of power in the social sciences, published in 1959 by two American psychologists, John French and Bertram Raven. In this short but incredibly influential piece of writing, they argue for five 'bases' of power: reward, coercive, referent, legitimate and expert. This model appears in most business school textbooks. Use of this model of power is always leader-centric, giving legitimacy to the idea that the individual leader and the leadership role are the most significant things in the process of leading. This in turn means that the needs, actions, thoughts and reactions of other characters in the relationship are mostly ignored, except as 'things to be managed'. It's also very important to say here that the traditional approach to power is a theory that implies generalizability – in other words, people who believe in the traditional approach think that their theories are correct or true in all social or cultural contexts. We'll come back to this in a moment when we think about post-structural perspectives on power.

The second perspective is *radical*, in that it seeks to explore power as a political and moral issue – in other words, not just as a neutral *thing* people/leaders possess as a way to get things done. British sociologist Steven Lukes introduced this term early in the 1970s (Lukes, 1974), and has since returned to

it (Lukes, 2005). His key contribution to understanding power is usually described by the phrase 'three faces of power', because he challenged theories that suggested power had only one or two 'dimensions' or faces. A radical perspective, then, suggests power has traditionally been thought of in three ways:

> as overtly exercised, clearly visible, with the aim of acknowledging and overcoming conflict.

This is, in some ways, the crudest form of traditional power. It is reliant on physical strength, intimidation or material threats such as dismissal, and is designed for one person to win everything and the other to lose everything. Alongside this we find the second dimension, where people think of power:

> as covertly exercised, less visible or deliberately excluded from discussion so that potential conflicts are overlooked or ignored.

In organizations and workplaces, this is a very interesting way to think about power; companies that are managed in very political ways, rather than on the basis of merit, are the places where this form of power is most present. Status and success are based on a willingness to do things in ways that are acceptable to those with status in the organization, often informally – it can be very frustrating because it's difficult to learn the rules, and some people are excluded for no obvious reason. This kind of power also produces winners and losers, but usually not quite so clearly.

Lukes' final 'face' or way of thinking about power is:

> as embedded within the structure, culture and processes of institutions.

This is the least visible manifestation of power, and therefore the most difficult to observe or even think about, in its exercise and effects – it's the kind of power we take for granted. Think for example about British society and culture, and the ways in which the British royal family exercise power. Members of that family have no formal position or power in, for example, political debates – and yet the current head of the family has to invite a politician to form a government following elections. If that invite doesn't happen, there is no government. (It always does, and there always is – but the point is that power is being exercised here.) Other members of the royal family occupy positions around the world that enable them to speak and influence countries, organizations and law-making. Finally, it is rare for a week to pass without a 'major news story' involving someone from the royal family or its extended branches in the British aristocracy – all contributing to your understanding of power and how it works in the UK.

Lukes' three faces of power encourage us to consider the ways in which leaders acquire, maintain and build their positions of leadership. So for example the first face of power, a hierarchical 'command and control' approach, operates when leaders focus on the observable behaviours of 'their' teams and try to correct any deviations from the approach they have planned. The second face of power is manifest in non-observable behaviours and the scope for manipulation and other subtle forms of control – such that contentious issues do not even become part of the formal agenda at a meeting, for example. The third face of power involves an even less visible but extremely active shaping of individuals' perceptions, thoughts and preferences such that they are persuaded into believing that they have no alternative reality in which to function. Alternatives are, almost literally, un-thinkable.

So from a traditional perspective of power as a *possession* that an individual can acquire, we come to think of power as a much more complex *process* with multiple faces that is partially hidden by or

within cultures or political systems, both of which are of course present in organizations large and small. Our third perspective, the *post-structural*, comes from a more philosophical set of theories usually associated with the French academic Michel Foucault. Foucault worked as a philosopher and historian; his influence on how we think about societies and organizations has influenced all social sciences and humanities. His theories are usually described as post-structural; his ideas are linked to Lukes' third face of institutionalized power, in which people (leaders) can sustain their dominance through *creating* and *shaping* the realities and norms for others (followers) which reduces their resistance to these realities, or even denies the possibility of resisting. This perspective emphasizes that people often monitor their own behaviour in a process of 'self-surveillance', as the rules and norms devised and imposed by others are accepted as how things are and must be.

These ways of seeing power recur throughout this book, sometimes obviously when a chapter is centrally concerned with power and its exercise, sometimes less obviously – but they are always there.We want to bring power more consciously into dialogue with leadership to open up a series of thought-paths that rarely feature in either other leadership textbooks or contemporary academic research in the area: we're thinking about things like fairness, equity, justice, resistance, conflict, emancipation, oppression, rationality, politics, globalization, the natural environment and knowledge. The complexity of power as an idea, as a way of thinking, has the capacity to challenge the 'comfort zone' that has been built around leadership through more neutral concepts such as influence, inspiration and values – these ideas are helpful in thinking about leadership, but they romanticize and simplify leadership-related knowledge and practice. Bringing power into the leadership conversation helps us 'get real' in terms of the interdependent, messy, paradoxical and partial ways that leading and following are practised in and around organizations. If we can understand how power (and, just as importantly, lack of power or powerlessness) operates in the landscape of leadership, we can start to develop insights that have the potential to shape how we develop and practise leadership. This in turn enables us, and you, to pay more attention to the relational and contextual dynamics that leading and following are embedded in and opens up new strategies for learning and for living or working with those who both lead and follow.

The power of authorship

These ideas also bring us to the question of who we are to write this book. We think this is important in two ways. First, you need to be able to see how and why we come to be in the position of authority that we are. This is partly an academic assessment, of us persuading you that we can be trusted as guides to the field of leadership studies. Second, however, it is also so that you can look a little more deeply into our motives – why we are writing this book and what that means for our representation of three aspects of the idea of what it is to lead. So, here we are.

Brigid Carroll completed her first degree in English Literature and History and then went straight into a Master's degree programme in English. During that she discovered literary theory and became caught up in the ways we can think about thinking. She completed a diploma in Secondary Education and went off to teach 13 to 17-year-olds, and loved it. There's something about trying to hook young people into learning that can create a real vitality and Brigid discovered that. Teaching at secondary level involves coaching sport, doing backstage work for school productions, leading outdoor education camps and becoming part of young lives. It's full on.

After a stint running an English department, Brigid went to New York to do an MBA. During that a professor passed her an article on literary analysis and organizations. Brigid didn't know you could

put the two together; in that moment a PhD was born. On return to New Zealand she embarked on that PhD, focusing on professional work, identity and narrative. Funnily enough leadership isn't in that thesis, although while writing it she started teaching leadership. That's an amazing experience as it connects in multiple ways to who people think they are, what impact they want to make and how they relate to others.

Shortly after completing her PhD the New Zealand Leadership Institute was established at the University of Auckland Business School. She is now an Associate Professor of Organization Studies in the Department of Management and International Business, and has contributed to a number of programmes, especially those that involve people working in professional and knowledge-based organizations. Her research now centres on leadership and its development, particularly with reference to practice, identity and discourse. She is part of this book because she believes you have to grapple with leadership, get your hands on it and work it hard, so that it loses its romantic veneer and gets to a real place.

Jackie Ford completed a first degree in Business Studies and French and embarked on her first career in personnel management in the early 1980s. That culminated with a board-level director position in human resources in a large British National Health Service organization. During this time, Jackie also graduated with a Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development qualification and completed a part-time Master's degree in Law and Employment Relations.

Following these studies, the lure of academe in the early 1990s was strong and when the opportunity emerged to direct the first Master's programme in leadership in the UK, at the University of Leeds Nuffield Institute for Health, she leapt at the prospect. Her second career started in 1993; her part-time PhD research explored questions of leadership, gender, power and identity for managers and organizational leaders.

Jackie's PhD examined new ways of researching, conceptualizing and practising leadership in organizations. These interests continue to inform her research as Professor of Leadership and Organization Studies at Durham University, notably through further development of critical, post-structural and psychosocial research methods and approaches that help to make sense of the experiences of working and organizational lives. She has written and lectured widely on this topic and thinks that this book will enable us collectively to say something new and more critical about the topic.

Scott Taylor did an undergraduate degree at the University of Glasgow in the Faculty of Arts in the 1980s. He left Scotland in 1990 to work in mainland Europe for seven years, then moved to England to study human resource management at the University of Bolton, going from that degree programme to the PhD programme at Manchester Metropolitan University, graduating in 2001. He currently works at the University of Birmingham as a Reader in Leadership and Organization Studies.

That apparently rational process was really a series of accidents and influences. However, it's resulted in doing a job he likes, for a couple of key reasons. First, he wants to understand why the workplaces he's been in for more than thirty years are so strange – odd rules, weird behaviours, apparently rational people doing irrational things. University business schools are the best place to do that. Second, he likes reading, thinking and talking about research evidence and ideas. Universities are the only workplaces he knows of where those things are encouraged.

Leadership studies also happened to him by accident more than design. After working at Open, Birmingham and Essex universities he was offered a job in a department of leadership studies. That brought him to an emerging approach to researching leadership called 'critical leadership studies', which he's now using to analyze charisma. He's involved in this book because he thinks it's an interesting project and that there is something different to be said about leadership.

We hope you enjoy the rest of the book, and learn with it.

PROLOGUE: AN UNCONVENTIONAL HISTORY OF LEADERSHIP STUDIES

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Suze worries about the prevalence of bad leadership, a problem she believes is actually exacerbated by the romantic, heroic leadership theories that are still so widely promoted. If we could think differently about what leadership is or could be, she believes, then our chances of fostering ethical, inclusive and effective leadership practices would be improved.

What this chapter is all about …

By examining *how* and *why* different ideas about leadership have emerged over time and examining the *effects* these ideas can generate, this chapter will help you to think more critically about the past and present of leadership studies, enabling you to think more creatively about what you want for the future of leadership.

The key questions this chapter answers are:

- How do social and political factors influence the development of leadership knowledge?
- What kinds of effects does leadership knowledge have, quite irrespective of whether it's true or not?
- What is meant by a 'critical-historical' lens?

Introduction

Familiarity with the history of a field of study is foundational knowledge that helps you to understand the different theories that have been put forward at different times and to gauge how more recent approaches compare with those from earlier times. For these reasons, it's commonplace to find a history chapter in textbooks that introduce students to a field of study. In the case of leadership studies, the following is a summary version of what you will typically find in such chapters.

BOX 1: A CONVENTIONAL HISTORY OF LEADERSHIP STUDIES

While there is a long history of thinking about leadership, scientific studies of leadership only started in the late nineteenth century. Theorizing that leadership was an intrinsic ability, early scholars sought to identify the traits of leaders. However, despite decades of such research contradictory findings came to characterize these efforts. Stogdill's famous 1948 review of trait studies identified the need to shift the focus so scholars turned their attention to leader behaviour, something they considered teachable and learnable.

Focusing on a workplace context, leader behaviour theories generally argued that attending to both organizing tasks and fostering good relationships was the key to effective leadership. Arguing this approach was too simplistic and inflexible, situational/contingency theories then proposed that a variety of leadership styles are needed, so as to respond to a range of situational factors. These ideas continue to be studied today.

However, following the inspiration offered by James MacGregor Burns, in the late 1970s a new paradigm emerged promoting transformational, charismatic and visionary (TCV) approaches to leadership. These focus around the core idea that effective leadership lies in advancing an inspiring vision that motivates followers to change their ways – a shift in thinking that has itself transformed the field. There is now an impressive body of studies informed by the TCV paradigm and it remains highly influential today.

Reflecting wider trends in the social sciences, in recent years leadership studies has also been further invigorated by the development of increasingly diverse streams of inquiry, meaning that today the field is a vibrant and multidisciplinary domain offering a rich set of insights into leadership.

A commitment to the discipline of scientific research in establishing the truth about leadership has been the motive force behind these developments, and leadership scholars today are committed to applying rigorous, objective and increasingly sophisticated methods of analysis to enable the development of leadership knowledge that is accurate and reliable.

As you can see, this approach to explaining the history of a field provides readers with some important basic facts and an appreciation of major developments in the field. However, it remains, unavoidably, a partial account. There is an implication in such conventional narratives, for example, that our understanding of leadership naturally and inevitably gets 'better' over time, as if driven by some unseen evolutionary force. As a result, today's leadership knowledge is portrayed as superior – more accurate, more 'truthful', a better way of thinking – than what existed in the past. This presumed 'progress' is said to be the result of scientific rigor, which is simply expected to bring us ever closer to a truthful, fulsome understanding of leadership.

This 'evolutionary' way of thinking about how and why ideas develop is a widely accepted, taken-for-granted perspective and certainly not unique to leadership studies. However, as we will explore in this chapter, by turning attention to the social and political influences shaping the development of knowledge, a different, richer and more ambiguous picture will start to emerge. The suggestion made here is that 'progress' in our understanding of leadership ought not to be assumed, is questionable and isn't inevitable.

To help develop this more complex understanding of the past – and present – of leadership studies, the chapter highlights social and political influences that, as you can see from the conventional narrative above, are often ignored when explaining developments in the field. Doing so helps us to situate the theories mentioned above in the context in which they first emerged, so that we can better grasp *why* scholars were inclined to think about leadership in a particular way at a given point in time. This allows us to see wider causes for the shifts from traits to behaviour to contingency/situational perspectives and onto the TCV view of leadership.

A further factor we will explore is the kinds of *effects* different ideas about leadership can have.We will look at what do ideas about leadership *do*? What *impacts* do leadership theories generate for our sense of self, how we relate to others and what we take to be good and true? This approach involves proceeding on the basis that what is presented as the truth about leadership – expert discourse – deserves scrutiny *irrespective of whether the ideas are factually correct or not.* In setting aside the question of whether a given theory is 'truly true', as it were, we can nonetheless consider the kinds of consequences to which belief in that theory can give rise. This then gives us a broader basis for evaluating its merits, beyond just matters of evidential support. This is important because leadership has ethical, social and political consequences, and so leadership theories shouldn't be evaluated merely on technical issues of evidence.

An important idea that underpins the approach taken in this chapter is to distinguish between *scientific discoveries*, on the one hand, and *social inventions*, on the other. The conventional narrative summarized above basically implies that it is processes of scientific discovery that have driven the developments seen in leadership studies. It relies on the problematic belief that the truth about leadership is somehow just sitting 'out there', patiently waiting to be found by researchers (Alvesson, 1996; Hunter, Bedell-Avers & Mumford, 2007). Yet this belief ignores how changes in society reveal that leadership itself changes and isn't, therefore, just sitting 'out there' in some stable, enduring form.

In contrast, then, this chapter will suggest that ideas about leadership can be usefully understood as socially constructed *inventions*. Treating these ideas as inventions is not to belittle their value or the effort or rigour that has gone into their development. It is also not to suggest they are random, ill-considered or merely fanciful. However, it is to say that they ought not be regarded as objective, enduring truths about the nature of reality. To help reveal their invented character, the chapter highlights how leadership ideas emerge as the result of shared efforts to make some kind of coherent sense out of social realities that are infinitely complex and unavoidably contestable, showing how these sense-making efforts are not free from social and political influences or impact.

The overarching analysis that the chapter offers both enriches and challenges normal understandings that leadership studies is a rigorous, modern, scientific endeavour, free from social and political influence or impact. To do this, the chapter gives examples of wider factors shaping the development of leadership knowledge and explores the kinds of effects that knowledge generates. The proposition being explored is that knowledge about leadership is fundamentally a *socially-constructed invention* and not something best understood as a scientific discovery. Far from meaning we should abandon the study of leadership, this perspective encourages scholars and practitioners alike to orient their efforts toward inventing new approaches to leadership, informed by values we hold dear, focused on the challenges we face, and paying heed to the personal, social and political influences and effects with which such inventions are entwined.

In what follows, I first want to discuss what is involved in using the 'critical-historical' lens that I draw on to guide this analysis. Understanding this will help shed further light on why I am taking the approach outlined above – and can also guide you in undertaking your own 'critical-historical' inquiries.

I then employ that lens to examine the rise and fall of trait-based theories during the first half of the twentieth century before turning to look at the still-influential TCV view of leadership. I briefly conclude by discussing some ideas from ancient Greek and medieval times about leadership which help to set the stage for thinking about the future of leadership.

A 'critical-historical' lens for studying truth claims

The 'critical-historical' lens I use here for studying ideas about leadership is informed by the thought of French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984). His studies ranged broadly over many topics – such as mental illness, crime and punishment, sexuality, the role of the state and how might we become ethical subjects – and his methods of inquiry developed over time (e.g. Foucault, 1970; 1977; 1978; 1980a, 1980b; 2008; 2011). However, drawing inspiration from his work suggests some important and provocative questions that can be used to challenge and enrich leadership studies – and any other body of knowledge or social practice.

Foucault was, broadly speaking, interested in *why* and *how* certain ideas and practices come to be widely accepted as having the status of truth and the *effects* those ideas and practices then have for us as individuals, groups and societies. He argued knowledge did not merely or inevitably enlighten and liberate us from ignorance or falsehood. Instead, he showed repeatedly how knowledge arises as a result of certain ideas, ways of being and practices coming to be seen as legitimate and desirable – a process that simultaneously relied on *other* ideas, ways of being and practices being rendered illegitimate, undesirable and perhaps even unthinkable.

One general implication of these arguments is that expert discourses that claim to speak the truth should be interrogated to understand why and how they developed, their underpinning values and assumptions and their effects. Doing so, for Foucault, was a necessary step toward us becoming ethical subjects, a practice which he saw as involving questioning the nature of truth, reality, our own being and what constitutes a good life. In light of all this, his work guides us toward asking three questions throughout this chapter. The first two of these are:

1. What was *deemed problematic*, at any given point in time, which enabled certain ideas about leadership to be seen as appealing and truthful?
2. What *strategies* were used to promote these claims to speak the truth?

The first question directs our attention to the back story, i.e. the wider social and political context shaping how something becomes constituted as a 'problem' needing expert attention. This *process of problematization* both justifies and guides the development of knowledge and practices intended to deal with the issue of interest or concern. It creates the basic framework for thinking, if you like, within which some things come to be seen as important and desirable while others are simultaneously rendered undesirable or irrelevant.

Our second question directs the focus toward the *strategies* through which ideas about leadership are developed and promulgated. Examining these factors highlights that processes of scientific discovery, presumed somehow immune from wider influences, are not the sole, nor perhaps even the primary, driving force of developments in leadership knowledge. Instead, we start to gain an appreciation of the wider social and political influences that are motivating and directing the focus of leadership research.

Let's stop and reflect on these ideas before we get to our third question.

STOP AND REFLECT

Processes of problematization

Processes of problematization occur all the time, often beginning in public discussions and then eventually becoming issues that experts study and advise on and about which governments and organizations develop policies, laws or rules. Some recent examples could be 'the binge drinking culture amongst youth' or the idea that 'millenials are self-absorbed'.

If these *problematizing* statements come to be accepted as truthful, many implications then follow. However, where all this typically starts is with a few people arguing 'x is a problem', prior to which point 'x' may not have even had a name, much less have been seen as deserving the attention of experts and other authority figures. As the problematizing process gathers credibility and influence, what it presents as true/false or right/wrong becomes widely diffused, and over time simply comes to seem 'common sense', 'natural' or self-evidently true.

Try to identify a social issue that you have seen being caught up in a process of problematization. What strategies are used to gain acceptance that it is a 'problem'? How do individuals, organizations and governments then respond once traction that it is a 'problem' is achieved? Do these shifts in thought and practice reflect the ideals of objective, scientific discovery, or might it make more sense to think of them as a social and political process in which the interests and strategies of different stakeholders are highly influential?

Answering these first two questions will throw up a lot of new ideas to add to our narrative about developments in leadership studies, allowing a richer story to emerge. However, they only take us so far because they focus on why and how ideas emerge. Another key concern of Foucault's was to scrutinize what ideas *do* to our sense of self, our relations with others and how society functions when they are accepted as constituting 'the truth'. Hence our third key question is:

3 What *effects* do ideas about leadership have for those deemed 'leaders' and 'followers'?

This question enables us to explore what it is that leadership theories seek or encourage from us – for example,what manner of person do they ask us to become, what behaviours do they expect of us and how do they propose we engage with others? These questions arise because Foucault argues knowledge unleashes *processes of subjectivation,* by which he means the ways through which we form a sense of our self by drawing on wider ideas about what it means to be human (or, more specifically here, a leader or a follower). This folding in of such ideas to our very sense of self – of who we are as an individual subject – guides what we think and do and what we see as desirable and valid. However, this process is simultaneously a disciplining, norm-setting force, rendering some ways of thinking, acting and being desirable and legitimate and others not so. The subjectivating process affects not only ourselves as individuals but also governs how people interact and how society more generally functions. However, because this is a disciplining approach that we exert largely upon ourselves, it is likely we may not recognize what is going on.

Drawing on these insights, Foucault proposes we must understand the individual subject as fundamentally a social product, one who has internalized much of what has been presented to them as the truth and who is therefore highly disciplined by that truth. Consequently, if we wish to facilitate greater freedom it becomes vital to examine the subjectivating effects of what is seen as the truth – which, remember, is itself a product of the social and political influences involved in processes of problematization and the strategies used to promote claims to speak the truth. To become an ethical subject, Foucault asked that we question truth and seek to move our very self beyond its limitations. Let's now stop and reflect on these ideas.

STOP AND REFLECT

Processes of subjectivation

Think about your university lecturers and jot down what common behaviours and attitudes you see them adopting. For example, are they typically quite picky about getting details correct, especially in written assignments? Do they often encourage you to consider both the strengths and weaknesses of an idea? What other habits, attitudes and ways of acting do your lecturers commonly adopt when going about their work? Take a few minutes to jot down your observations.

It's highly likely that you will notice quite a lot of similarity in your lecturers' behaviours, even though each is nonetheless a unique individual. Foucault's explanation for this is that through drawing on knowledge about what 'being an academic' involves, your lecturers have been shaped by processes of subjectivation to adopt certain disciplined ways of thinking and acting that enable them to form a sense of self as 'academic'. This, in turn, shapes how academics interact with others. None of this eliminates individuality, but it does highlight that knowledge unleashes powerful shaping effects on who we are and how we think and act.

Drawing on these insights, can you now think of ways in which your own sense of self has been influenced by wider ideas about what it means to be a student, an adult, a citizen of your country and so forth? What benefits, but also what limits, do these influences create for you?

Having now explained the basics of the 'critical-historical' lens, in what follows I draw on these three questions inspired by Foucault's work to demonstrate how they allow us to both challenge and enrich conventional ways of understanding the past and present of leadership studies: a different history is about to be told. Due to space limitations, I will focus on how and why the idea of leadership as the domain of gifted individuals has repeatedly re-emerged at different points in time, highlighting the *problematizations* and *strategies* used as well the *effects* such ideas can generate via *processes of subjectivation*.

The rise and fall of trait theory

As we saw in our conventional history earlier (Box 1), trait theory involves conceiving of leadership as some kind of intrinsic ability and has led scholars to seek to uncover and define the distinctive characteristics that made someone a leader, but with contradictory results. Another chapter in this textbook will explore trait theory in more detail because of its importance; however, for now this basic understanding of it is enough for us to be going on with.

The rise of trait theory was influenced by various, related, processes of problematization, meaning that in the late nineteenth century the idea that leadership was a trait, i.e. a natural ability that some had and others didn't, was readily accepted. At this time, biology was already widely seen as a profound, perhaps even determinative, influence on human behaviour (Bannister, 1979). Phrenology – the pseudoscientific study of the shape of people's faces and heads – was influential, with proponents claiming insight into human character and the causes of criminal behaviour and mental illness (Benjamin, 2007). It was widely argued that women were the 'weaker' sex, not merely in terms of physical strength but also in intellectual, spiritual, aesthetic and moral terms. Darwin's ideas about evolution via natural selection were widely promoted as offering insights for human society and its governance. Social Darwinian thought thus held considerable sway, treating social ills as the result of a mismatch between someone's natural ability and their social position (Bannister, 1979; Gillham, 2001). The eugenics movement took these ideas a further step, arguing for government intervention as to whom should be permitted to have children (Gillham, 2001; Godin, 2007).

In the midst of such influences, it readily came to seem self-evident that scholars should strive to identify the attributes of those 'naturally best suited to lead': doing so, it was believed, would minimize the risk of social harm that could arise if those lacking the required traits were put into leadership roles. This was the core *problematization* which leadership scholars of this time sought to address. In so doing, however, such efforts simultaneously offered political conservatives the support of science to argue that the social inequality then being challenged by progressive thinkers was both natural and unavoidable. The elitist flavour of these *processes of problematization* implied that the working class, women and people of colour needed to be kept in their subordinated positions. The overall aim of these problematizing efforts was a social order in which hierarchy and inequality were valued and enforced, based on the belief this was what nature had ordained. Trait studies thereby helped to undermine those arguing for greater equality in society, or those suggesting that 'nurture' and not just 'nature' shaped human behaviour.

A highly influential leadership researcher at this time, Sir Francis Galton, argued the overall aim of studying the traits of 'exceptional men' (and yes, he did mean men only) was to figure out how we might 'produce a highly-gifted race of men by judicious marriage during several consecutive generations' (Galton, 1892: 45). He and a number of other leadership researchers at this time were also active in the eugenics movement (Gillham, 2001; Godin, 2007). Their interest lay in translating research findings about leader traits into government policy, hence all the usual *strategies* employed to gain influence were used – public meetings, publications, research, lobbying people in power and so forth. Galton's influence remained strong even through into the 1930s, when a study by Taussig and Joslyn (1932) , drawing directly on Galton's work, concluded that 'natural inferiority' was the most likely reason for labourer's sons being underrepresented amongst American business leaders, and further, that environmental factors could not be the cause of this.

The problematization informing these efforts was, it should be acknowledged, typically founded in honest intentions. These scholars quite sincerely believed that some were naturally 'born to lead' and that Social Darwinian- and/or eugenics-based policies could result in greater social wellbeing. Knowing what we now do about the Holocaust, of course, these ideas likely send shivers down your spine. However, while eugenics is now widely discredited the key features of trait theory – that leaders are *fundamentally* superior to followers – has a long history and remains influential today.

The notion that some are naturally best suited to lead creates important *subjectivating effects* on both 'leaders' and 'followers', inciting each to see their position as inevitable and unchangeable. Someone

identified as 'possessing leadership traits', for example, readily comes to conceive of themselves as a gifted and superior being. Seeing themself in this manner then means that issuing instructions to others, taking charge of discussions and claiming the right to make decisions on behalf of a group also seems natural and self-evident. Any questioning of such actions by those lacking the leadership 'x factor', moreover, is likely seen as meddlesome interference by those who have failed to accept their role as follower, i.e. an inferior individual who needs to be told what to do. All of this, of course, has social and political consequences.

As is readily apparent, the subjectivating effects of trait theory incline leaders toward what we would today most likely see as arrogance, a troubling sense of entitlement and an autocratic style which lacks a concern for others' development. Followers, meanwhile, are rendered passive and stripped of initiative or a desire for development when subjectivated by trait theory, which tells them they lack the 'x factor' that it takes to lead. However, given the wider frame of thinking – what Foucault would call their regime of truth – in which trait theorists were themselves embedded, their understanding would be that having leaders and followers act in such a manner was both natural and highly desirable in sustaining social order.

Responding to a particular problematization, i.e. that of ensuring a 'natural order of inequality' was upheld, leadership knowledge in the first part of the twentieth century thus generated processes of subjectivation that helped serve to uphold that very inequality. All of this would have seemed entirely natural, logical and reasonable for those enmeshed in this way of thinking. Foucault's point, of course, is that we too are enmeshed in particular ways of thinking that are the result of contemporary processes of problematization and subjectivation shaping what we see, think, do and value, and it is only when we begin to question what we take to be the truth that we start to free ourselves. However, to return to our re-writing of the history of leadership studies, trait theory fell suddenly out of favour around the end of World War II and that is the next part of the story to be explored.

Stogdill's 1948 review of trait studies is widely credited for this rapid turning away from trait studies and moving toward a focus on leader behaviour (Bass, 2008; Hollander, 1979). Even today authors often quote from Stogdill's conclusions that 'an adequate analysis of leadership involves a study not only of leaders but also of situations' (1948: 65) to explain this shift. However, Stogdill actually also concluded that some traits had shown strong associations with leadership, so why was the trait approach basically abandoned at this time?

Archival research has shown that Stogdill's boss, Shartle, had decided to focus the now famous Ohio State leadership studies project on leader behaviour *several years prior* to Stogdill's review (Wilson, 2016). To be explicit: there appears to have been no scientific evidence that Shartle drew on to inform this dramatic change in basic assumptions about the nature of leadership. He later simply stated 'my own interest was primarily leader behaviour. I felt that if we could get a handle on it, the program would be worthwhile' (1979: 132). Other sources provide further proof that by 1945, fully three years prior to Stogdill's famous review of trait studies, the Ohio project had already developed a model of leader behaviour (Bowers & Seashore, 1966: 240). All of this, of course, is something of a blow to those suggesting that evidence is the key to developments in leadership knowledge!

Applying our 'critical-historical' lens, this dramatic change in thinking and research focus can be explained by turning our attention to the social and political influences shaping the development of knowledge. By the early 1940s, if not earlier, it would have been readily apparent that Hitler's claims of raced-based superiority were disconcertingly similar to conceiving of leadership as something grounded in the natural superiority of a select few. Such biologically-focused ways of thinking about leadership thus became prone to being *problematized* as akin to key features of Nazi ideology, in other words.

It would therefore have made a lot of sense, politically, for leadership researchers to move their efforts away from the corrupting stain of such perspectives – and a turn to leader behaviour provided a viable *strategy* for so doing.

A shift in focus to leader behaviour in the workplace also aligned with contemporaneous government and business problematizations of worker productivity, morale and absenteeism, as well as with broader concerns about the dangers of authoritarianism (Adorno et al., 1950; Hodgson, 2005; Trethewey & Goodall Jnr, 2007). Informed by these influences, both the Ohio State and Michigan State leadership studies generated models of leader behaviour in workplace settings that emphasized a focus on both relationships and tasks as the preferred approach to leading – something now presumed teachable and learnable (e.g. Fleishman, 1953; Katz et al., 1950). In an era where democratic rule was widely seen as having been crucial to the Allies' capacity to defeat Nazi Germany, and where equality of opportunity was getting greater attention than before (Hodgson, 2005; Trethewey & Goodall Jnr, 2007), this more inclusive account of leadership fitted well. It was, in other words, a truth suited to its time.

However, despite the massive research effort that went into studying leader behaviour for close to two decades, Korman's 1966 review found that there was virtually no predictive validity to the core concepts developed by the Ohio State studies, prompting the move to a focus on situational/contingency perspectives. While Korman's evidence informed this development, shifting the focus to situational/contingency perspectives aligned with the popularity of open-systems thinking more generally at this time, as well as to social trends that were demanding more flexibility and responsiveness by leaders (Ackerman, 1975; Cornuelle, 1975; Roos, 1972). Situational/contingency models therefore brought into focus an idea that still holds considerable sway today, namely that there isn't one best way to lead and that contextual factors should inform the approach taken.

As you can see, by asking our critical-historical questions we come to a very different understanding of the history of leadership studies than that offered by conventional narratives, and it's now apparent that scientific discovery alone isn't the basis for why ideas about leadership initially focused on traits before shifting to leader behaviour and then moving on to situational/contingency factors. We can see that not only were social and political factors important influences on the development of these ideas, but also that these ideas also carry within them social and political effects. By understanding the social and political processes through which these ideas were invented, we have a wider set of factors by which we can evaluate their merits.

While situational/contingency ideas remain the focus of ongoing research, the next major development in leadership studies was the emergence of the transformational, charismatic, visionary (TCV) school of thought, and so that is where we will next turn our attention. First, though, let's stop and explore some implications that flow from the above, using current debates in your own city or country as a case study. Please review the case study on the next page before proceeding with the discussion below of the TCV approach to leadership.

Leadership as transformation, charisma and vision

In 1978 James MacGregor Burns, a political scientist, published his very influential book simply titled *Leadership.* In that, he distinguished between what he called transactional leadership, which he conceived of as an exchange relationship between leaders and followers – akin to a 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours' arrangement – and transforming leadership. The former was conceived as having limited merit and impact. Transformative leadership, however, was said to involve leaders engaging

Case study: Questioning the local truth about leadership

The preceding 'critical-historical' analysis is suggesting to you that a wide set of social and political influences are at play at any given point in time. It's not, in other words, simply a matter of evidence that influences researchers and the wider public when it comes to how they conceive of leadership. The foregoing also suggests that what is *being problematized* will have flow-on effects to how leadership is then conceived. This implies that what we come to think of as the truth about leadership may be something of a self-fulfilling prophecy – because that 'truth' is *designed to respond to what is being problematized*. All of this has the potential to limit critical and creative thought about leadership.

Using these insights, what connections can you identify between what is being *deemed problematic* in your city or country at the moment and what is subsequently being put forward as the 'appropriate' leadership response?

In your analysis, can you identity any risks of a self-fulfilling dynamic … and can you find a way to think beyond or outside the limitations of current understandings? The table below might help you work through this analysis.

What is being deemed problematic?	What notion of 'leadership' is being called on to address these problems?	What other possibilities are dismissed, as a result of these favoured notions of leadership?

followers in the pursuit of a morally righteous vision to secure change, a life-altering process which held the promise of followers themselves becoming leaders. A resurgence of interest in charismatic leadership also emerged at around the same time.

By the mid-1980s, Bernard Bass had taken inspiration from Burns's ideas to formulate what remains a highly influential theory of leadership through to the present day (Bass, 1985; 1999; Bass & Riggio, 2006). Key ideas of this theory include the propositions that effective leaders:

- are role models, setting standards for how followers should think and act;
- offer inspiration by way of a goal or vision which motivates followers to take action;
- stimulate followers' thinking through offering new ideas; and,
- treat followers as individuals, encouraging their development.

The intended outcome is that followers are fundamentally transformed through the leader's influence, committing themselves to the pursuit of the vision put forward by the leader and performing at levels not previously considered possible.

Because Bass had in mind an organizational setting for his theory, he did not dismiss the transactional approach as had Burns, but instead connected it with long-established managerial practices. These

include leaving people to get on with the job until a problem arises (which he termed 'laissez faire leadership' and saw as of limited value) and applying rewards or sanctions depending on performance. Over time, these transactional practices have often come to be seen as 'management' while the practices listed above are given the kudos of being 'leadership', but Bass's theory formally includes both transformative and transactional elements and also highlights issues of vision and charisma. Multiple other theories that emerged around this time promote similar ideas.

Using our critical-historical lens, let's now explore the problematizations that explain the emergence of the TCV approach, the strategies used to promote its influence and the subjectivating effects to which it may give rise.

The 1970s were increasingly problematized as a time of crisis for the US. Its failure in the Vietnam war, the increasing competitive threats posed by Japanese manufacturing, the Watergate scandal and the OPEC oil crisis all helped to create a sense that America had somehow lost its way (Ackerman, 1975; Hodgson, 2005; Magaziner & Reich, 1982). In this context, reconceptualizing leadership as a vital force for change held great appeal. Outspoken, influential leaders such as Martin Luther King, Gloria Steinem and Malcolm X were then widely seen as charismatic visionaries promoting transformational change, garnering enthusiastic engagement such that followers themselves were changed by the experience. In response, efforts to tightly define and replicate such approaches and bring them into a business context were developed by researchers as their response to this *problematization* of the status quo and the subsequent increased desire for change-focused leadership.

These ideas were then spread via the usual *strategies* of conferences, publications, training programmes, research centres and university courses, all of which cumulatively built a body of evidence and support for thinking of leadership in terms of transformation, charisma and vision. Several decades on, these ideas continue to hold widespread appeal not merely because of the evidence – which is increasingly challenged[1] – but also because contemporary society continues to problematize the achievement of change as *the* key issue which leaders are expected to address. While some of this interest in enabling change is driven by both progressive and conservative political forces, the demand of capitalism to continuously secure new sources of profit provides a systemic driver for harnessing 'leadership' as a vehicle for driving change – unless, of course, leadership were to be reconceptualized as something that ought to challenge the harmful effects of unbridled capitalism!

The *subjectivating* effects of conceiving of leadership in TCV terms are at first glance widely appealing, because contemporary society so highly values charisma, vision and the ability to achieve change. However, there are also troubling effects that can be unleashed by these ideas. To see oneself as such a leader, for example, is to bestow upon oneself the sparkling allure of a charismatic presence, the gift of far-seeing vision and the ability, metaphorically speaking, to turn water into wine. It is to see oneself as deserving of great status, wealth and influence. All of this greatly risks encouraging hubris, narcissism and risky decision making by leaders (Tourish, 2013; Wilson, 2013). These ideas also imply seeing followers as beings who need to be worked upon, in order to become more and more like the leader, their role model for all that is good and desirable. There is,

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[1]See, for example: Van Knippenberg, D. and Sitkin, S.B. (2013) A critical assessment of charismatic-transformational leadership research: back to the drawing board?, *Academy of Management Annals*, *7*(1): 1–60; and Tourish, D. (2013) *The Dark Side of Transformational Leadership: A Critical Perspective*. New York: Routledge.

in other words, a desire for cloning oneself that can be unleashed when leaders are subjectivated according to TCV notions and this, in turn, demands the elimination of their followers' individuality and freedom (Wilson, 2013; 2016). As is readily apparent, these subjectivating effects are deeply troubling and suggest considerably more caution is needed when considering such popular approaches to leadership.

Our critical history approach has, yet again, generated a more complex account of developments in leadership thought than we find in conventional histories. Now we can see that the popular and influential TCV approach emerged in response to concerns about enabling change – and that its continued popularity serves capitalism well through promoting constant change. We can also see how its subjectivating effects help us make some sense of the ego trips that so many business leaders seem to be on! Perhaps most importantly of all, though, these insights can help us in thinking more creatively about the future of leadership. Before doing that, however, I want to finish up this chapter by very briefly exploring a recurring feature of the longer history of leadership studies which conventional histories also overlook, as there's an important lesson to take from that before we think about the future of leadership.

Conclusion: Lessons from the past

While conventional histories usually start in the late nineteenth century, the reality is that leadership has been studied for centuries. Looking a long way back, we find that Plato argued in the fifth century BCE that 'when god fashioned you, he added gold in the composition of those of you who are qualified to be Rulers' (Plato, *The Republic*, 415a). Notably, however, in much the same way that Plato conceived of leaders as gifted, superior beings so too did trait theory – and so too do transformational, charismatic and visionary approaches: there is nothing of the mundane, ordinary or plain about these attributes, instead they imply exceptional ability is the hallmark of leaders. Once this way of thinking is in place it becomes 'logical' to see followers as lesser beings, thereby setting the stage to argue, as did Plato's compatriot Xenophon, that it is 'the business of the ruler to give orders and of the ruled to obey' (Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, 3.9.11).

Similar ideas are to be found in the medieval era. Erasmus, for example, argued in the sixteenth century that the leader – by which he meant the king – was 'more like a divinity than a mortal' and that 'the happiness of the whole people' depended on them (Erasmus, 2010[1516]: 26–7). This way of thinking, of course, would clearly have helped sustain monarchical rule as God-given and desirable, and would therefore also have undermined any efforts to give more of the people a say in how they were led.

While not continuous throughout history, then, there is a recurring pattern that when leadership is conceived as a distinctive capacity of 'exceptional' individuals, one key effect of such ideas is to undermine democratic and egalitarian values and practices. Arguably, seemingly modern ideas of leadership as transformational, charismatic and visionary are recycling old ideas that can have just such effects. Given all this, the idea that leadership studies is making progress in bringing us ever closer to the truth about leadership really does need to be questioned! What we need to do is to start imagining a different future for leadership, one that learns from the past.

STOP AND REFLECT

Imagining the future of leadership

Our 'critical-historical' lens has shown us that social and political *problematizations* are important influences on how leadership is understood, not just the efforts of researchers attempting to undertake scientific studies. It has shown us these ideas have social, political and *subjectivating effects*. It has also shown us that there's a recurring pattern in leadership studies whereby notions of leaders as being fundamentally superior to followers facilitate anti-egalitarian and anti-democratic views.

Bearing all this in mind, what kinds of problems do you think leadership today and in the future should be designed to respond to? What social and political values should inform our understanding of leadership? What subjectivating effects should we be encouraging in our ideas about leadership and what should be avoided? If you were to start with a blank sheet of paper, how might you now invent the future of leadership given that you have a critical appreciation of its past and its present?

The key points in this chapter were …

- Social and political factors, and not just scientific evidence, play an important role in shaping the development of leadership knowledge via processes of problematization and through enacting strategies that promote particular ways of thinking and acting.
- Leadership ideas have subjectivating effects that can be powerful and problematic yet are often overlooked – and when these ideas rest on notions of leaders as superior beings, they may undermine egalitarian and democratic values and practices.
- Applying a 'critical-historical' lens calls into doubt the idea that leadership studies will naturally evolve to bring us ever closer to the truth about leadership. Instead, leadership knowledge is a socially constructed invention to which we can all contribute.

Further thinking

Somewhat surprisingly, there's not a lot of work examining the history of leadership studies, despite the fact that it's much more interesting than is implied by the conventional histories offered in introductory textbooks. You may find these of interest:

Spector, B. (2016) *Discourse on Leadership: A Critical Appraisal*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Spector, B. and Wilson, S. (2018) We made this bed … now look who's lying in it, *Organization*, 25(6): 784-93. doi:10.1177/1350508418757333

Trethewey, A. and Goodall Jnr, H.L. (2007) Leadership reconsidered as historical subject: sketches from the Cold War to post-9/11, *Leadership*, *3*(4): 457–77.

Wilson, S. (2016) *Thinking Differently About Leadership: A Critical History of Leadership Studies*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.

Leadership on screen

Freedom Writers (2007) is a great movie through which you can explore some of the key ideas discussed in this chapter. The first time you watch it note how the lead character is portrayed as the central force for change due to their special qualities and visionary, transformational leadership.

Now watch it again, and this time notice how much the central character has to learn from their 'followers' before they can exert any influence that is not just based on formal authority. Notice how so much of the 'transformational vision' actually emerges from ideas raised by 'followers'. Notice the many acts of 'leadership' that are carried out by 'followers', quite independent of anything the leader does. By the end of this second viewing, your understanding of leadership, leading and following may itself be transformed!

2

TRAIT THEORIES OF LEADERS AND LEADERSHIP

FROM ANCIENT GREECE TO TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY NEUROSCIENCE

Scott Taylor

Scott's been teaching theories of leadership since he started lecturing in 2002, and has always enjoyed the lecture on trait theories.

What this chapter is all about …

The main idea is that trait theories of leadership are one of the oldest ways of thinking about leadership, and continue to permeate leadership theories today. The theory is that certain personal characteristics make some people leaders (such as intelligence, height or gender). But we need to question this …

The key questions this chapter answers are:

- How did trait theories come about?
- In what ways are trait theories presented today?
- What evidence are trait theories based on?
- What are the main critiques of trait theory?

Introduction: The rise, fall, and rise of trait theories

In most leadership studies textbooks, the chapter on trait theory comes near the beginning. This book is no different – trait theories, or the 'trait approach', are placed in this way because they are usually described as the first systematic research that presents an understanding of how leadership happens and where leaders come from.

This means that trait theories are an important historical artefact – they provide an insight into how people thought about leadership right at the start of leadership studies, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After introducing trait theories most textbooks then note that by the mid-twentieth century the approach had been 'challenged' or 'discredited'.

However unlike natural science theories that are disproven or discredited (think about the theory that all other planets orbited the Earth, or that we could reliably predict behaviour from the shape of someone's head), social science theories can be more resilient. Trait theories are still with us in research, and they're also remarkably influential in leadership development practice, as they provide an easily understood framework for consultants, trainers and some business school management education programmes.

In this chapter, we work through the research that trait theories are based on. It's important to do this because they are still with us in another very significant way, in the form of neuroscientific approaches to leadership, and we can't understand those unless we understand the roots they have in the earliest trait theory. Neuroscientific approaches are ways of researching leadership and developing leaders that have come to prominence in the last ten years. Although this may seem like a long time period, it is very unusual for an approach to become as established as the neuroscientific perspective has, as quickly as this, so we need to ask why that is.

That's the shape of the chapter. We start with what is often represented as the first academic theory of leaders, leadership and leadership development, and then we move through the period when trait theories were being dismissed. We finish by exploring the brave new world of trait theory as expressed in neuroscientific approaches to understanding leadership. It's a long but interesting story, which has significant implications for anyone who wants to understand why leadership sometimes looks like an activity that only a very small, very specific group of people are invited into.

Speaking of 'Great Men'

Novelists, playwrights and film-makers often structure their stories around the question of whether people are born to, develop or stumble into 'greatness'. The rise and fall of corporate dynasties, the triumph or failure of individual company leaders, provide fascinating human and organizational narratives that take us to the question of whether people are somehow 'suited' for leadership. Biographies and autobiographies always have to deal with the issue of whether a leader was 'born to it', or perhaps better 'bred to it', by dint of possessing a set of personality characteristics that differentiate 'them' from 'us'. These stories are really demonstrations of the 'Great Man' approach to understanding leadership.

STOP AND REFLECT 2.1

Studying leadership always involves engaging with 'Great Man' theories. This theory is always presented as the nineteenth-century precursor to the 'proper' psychological trait theories developed in the early twentieth century. However, we rarely read in detail how this way of defining and theorizing leadership actually works in practice. It goes something like this …

First, choose someone who has been generally recognized as an important leader. Preferably someone who is/was globally acknowledged as a leader, who occupied a position of significant power (political, military, organizational, financial, or cultural – people like Hitler or John F. Kennedy in politics, Napoleon or Wellington in a military context, Steve Jobs in a corporate context – the kind of person it's difficult to deny had a significant effect on societies, large organizations or historical events).

Second, look closely at their life history, behaviours (especially at moments identified as turning points) and relationships with other people, especially enemies. You should be able to gain a sense of behavioural patterns, relationship patterns and significant life event influences on how the leader developed as a person.

These are your data. Now you're in a position to decide what you think makes the person different to non-leaders, all of the non-Hitlers or not-Steve Jobs people. The combination of life history (especially events and relationships in childhood or adolescence), behaviour patterns and how the designated leader dealt with people in everyday life will enable you to say what the specific leaderly personality was. You identify characteristics of the person such as energy, height, aggression, persistence, tact or intelligence.

- How does this help you to understand leadership?
- What does this way of understanding leadership neglect, silence or deny?

There are many criticisms of 'Great Man'-based theories of leadership. We'll come to those in a moment, once we've looked in detail at what trait theory is. Before we do, we'd like to try to rescue what we can from the idea of leader biography that 'Great Man' theory works from, because it's not all bad.

The value of biography

Three colleagues in the Department of Sociology of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem observed that the majority of leadership theories still look to personality or character traits and behaviours to explain what leadership is (Shamir et al., 2005). They also noted that, even though trait theories have their roots in 'Great Man' theories, very few academic studies of leading take leader auto/biographies seriously. This may be a result of being unsure about the status of the books; most are written by the leaders themselves or 'ghosted' by carefully chosen collaborators. These books must be read with scepticism, for both content and tone. There are few leaders who either write or commission a critical biography of themselves, or write reflexive critiques of their own practice.

However, the books do have significance and value. They provide insights into life, work and leadership practice that cannot be found anywhere else. Most academic researchers find it difficult, or impossible, to gain the kind of access to leaders that biographers are given. Steve Jobs, for example, provided official biographer Walter Isaacson with a very high level of access to colleagues, family and friends (Isaacson, 2011). Jobs told Isaacson that he wanted no control over the published text, claiming he wouldn't even read it. (As it turned out he didn't, because the book was published after his death in 2011.)

So the stories are important, even if we have to be sceptical about their truth status or accuracy. Shamir and his colleagues make a series of very practical suggestions about leader biographies and how we can use them to understand better the act of leading and the person. They argue that auto/biographies perform two functions. First, obviously, they tell us something about how leadership is practised and understood in a particular place at a moment in time. Second, they contribute towards the social

construction of leadership as important. In other words, when we read leader auto/biographies we not only look into the leader to understand their leadership practice, we also contribute towards the continuous construction of what counts as leadership.

For example: when we read Steve Jobs's biography, we know we are reading the biography of a significant leader – the book cover tells us this, our colleagues and fellow students tell us, and we know it from the news media and online sources. As we read the book, however, we also reinforce Jobs's status – as we come to know more about his workplace practice and personality, we talk about it, write about it, perhaps practise it in emulation of the person presented as the great leader. The life story thus becomes part of what we think of as leadership and part of what we do when we try to lead or follow. The more powerful the story, the stronger the effect.

As Shamir and his colleagues tell us, it is usual for researchers to read leader biographies only to try to identify the traits and skills that life events and experiences contribute to the development of. Many leader biographies emphasize parental divorce, the early death of a parent, an unhappy or disrupted education, poverty or the desire to please an important figure. This, then, is the essence of 'Great Man' theory's contributions to understanding leadership – the identification of personality traits or social skills that important leaders embody or practise. Biographies can be and do much, much more than that, but early scholars of leadership used them in a very narrow way, i.e. as real, true life stories, mostly of men, that could help us to explain what leadership was and how it developed.

From 'Great Men' to scientific trait theories

These early leadership scholars would probably not have described themselves as social scientists creating knowledge or theories. They were trying to achieve:

- insight into how people become leaders who act in the public good;
- insight into how to stop people becoming damaging leaders;
- book sales.

The general approach, based on the idea that people are born with a set of genetically-inherited characteristics that might be further developed through certain life circumstances or experiences, gives us the basis for the approach to leadership studies that we came to call 'trait theory'. The term 'trait' carries a very specific meaning, which is a little more complicated than the standard dictionary definition. The *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of trait (as 'a distinguishing quality or characteristic, typically one belonging to a person; a genetically determined characteristic') is the foundation that academic researchers build on, in three ways:

1. Some people have them, some don't (observation of traits is used to distinguish people from each other).
2. They are a personal possession (they can't be given to you or taken away from you).
3. They are in place at birth (they're genetically determined).

For researchers who want to be able to identify what makes individuals in leadership positions leaderly, all of this can be seen as good news. They can read biographies or conduct interviews, observe

behaviours and events to identify what made leaders different from non-leaders. Twentieth-century researchers developed this further – they defined physical factors, skills and attributes that they thought leaders have (or should have), and then designed tests to establish whether people do in fact have the traits they should have.

This is, on the face of it, a simple story. Researchers read 'Great Man' theories of leadership and leadership development; through their reading of the stories they identify persistently present physical factors, skills or attributes; then researchers trained in data collection methods reduce the lists found in 'Great Man' theories to what they think are common essentials, and develop ways to measure and test for these.

Although research methods are often seen as somewhat boring, and just the tedious detail of how data are collected, they are in fact central to understanding theories in all academic fields. If we don't understand how the data that theories are built on were generated, then we can't assess the credibility of the theory. It is therefore worth spending a few moments looking in depth at the research methods that the evidence for trait theories is founded on.

STOP AND REFLECT 2.2

Researchers creating trait theories of leadership start from the belief that they can't identify what leadership is in itself. Instead, the research they do tries to identify ways by which we can identify things that leadership is related to. So, if most people occupying positions of leadership, such as chief executive or army officer, are taller than average, then we have identified something that being or becoming a leader is related to (above average height).

Researchers can extend this idea in two ways. They could read existing academic theories and make up a list of physical characteristics, personality characteristics or skills that other researchers have identified, then test them on a new group of people. Or they could observe people in leadership positions (or read auto/biographies) and develop a list of traits in that way, then test them on a group of people.

Trait researchers most often design a long questionnaire that they think establishes whether an individual possesses specific traits. Sometimes this can be quite straightforward, e.g. someone is either above average height or not. However, most traits are difficult to test for in this way because they are not physically visible – personality characteristics such as initiative or integrity, for example, can be exceptionally difficult to design reliable questions for.

But trait researchers are ingenious and persistent. So they read, think, work and test questionnaires until they achieve enough reliability and validity to satisfy their academic peers. There are always flaws in research methods – none provide perfect knowledge and all can be critiqued on some basis. The process that trait theorists go through has some very specific and significant flaws, though.

- What's good about the research methods often used in trait-based research?
- What's bad about the methods?

To reiterate: trait theories are based in the academic field of psychology, researchers are interested in physical attributes, personality or social characteristics (usually inherited), and sometimes acquired skills. All of these things are collected under the term 'trait'. One of the best reviews of leadership

research, written by US-based academic Arthur Jago in the early 1980s, summarized the development of trait theory to that point resembling something like Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Traits thought to signify leadership in the early 1980s

Form of trait	Physical	Personality	Social	Skill
Examples	Energy Height Weight Hair Clothes	Aggression Dominance Enthusiasm Originality Sense of humour	Sensitivity Prestige Tact	Intelligence Judgement Knowledge

As always with trait theories, this looks convincing: most of us can think of a leader who embodies one or more of these physical characteristics, or behaves in ways consistent with the personality characteristics. However, as Jago also points out, there are some very serious problems with trait theories; some are acknowledged by the researchers, some are not:

1. The statistical relationships that researchers find between traits and achievement of leadership are often weak. In other words, although there may be a correlation between intelligence and propensity to lead, it is usually not a strong relationship that enables reliable prediction.
2. Traits are not universally or consistently needed to become or be a leader; they vary from research study to research study, as the researchers collect data in different settings. In other words, whether a leader needs to be tall, for example, depends on the organizational context, the market conditions the company operates within, the people they are trying to lead, the cultural conditions that the leader lives within, or one of an infinite number of other issues.
3. Finally, when trait researchers collect their data, they often test both leaders and followers.This sounds like a good idea, but the leaders are the people who are in formal positions of leadership, and the followers are not. This raises the question of how the leader came to be in that position – there is always a selection process of some kind, and in large organizations that process will usually involve a series of psychological tests. In other words, the person in the position of leadership may be there as a result of enthusiasm as measured in a selection test designed to identify leaders. Similarly, after a period of time in a leadership position, a person might become more self-confident (another key trait used to identify leaders), meaning that the trait is not inherent to being a leader, but an outcome of occupying the position.

The problem with trait theories: It's all in the detail

Jago's review and critique of trait theories builds on one of the most important academic interventions in the development of leadership studies, which came around forty years previously. In the mid-1940s, Ralph Stogdill joined a group of researchers known as the 'Ohio State Leadership Studies' group.

Previously, Stogdill had studied psychology; he was therefore very much an academic insider when he began to think about psychology-based trait theories, with a detailed knowledge of research methods. He had also worked in the US military, in recruitment, selection and classification.

The contribution Stogdill made to leadership studies is immense, and it began with his first piece of published work in the field in 1948. It is sometimes difficult to know what academic research will endure or be influential when first published, but it appears Ralph Stogdill's journal paper 'Personal factors associated with leadership: A survey of the literature' was recognized from the start as important. Although it is now more than sixty years old, it is still worth returning to the original paper, both as an example of the academic work of that period, and as an exemplary critique of a dominant approach.

Here is a summary of his arguments about trait theories of leadership:

- First, he notes that research methods vary widely. Some researchers use observation, some read biographies, some use ratings. In addition, researchers studied a wide range of social and age groupings.
- Second, he notes (as Jago did many years later) that there are weak relationships between many of the traits studied and leadership.
- Third, he notes the need for researchers to be very clear about their findings (which they often were not). For example, in relation to intelligence, when researchers did find that leaders tend to be 'more intelligent' than their followers, it was clear that the gap between the two groups should only be slight for leaders to work well with followers. Researchers did not always make this clear.

Stogdill's immense labour in reading more than a hundred published studies of leadership and traits is summarized in a series of bullet points towards the end of his 37-page journal paper. This paper is usually represented as a serious challenge to trait theory, a turning point in leadership studies – and this is an accurate representation, to some extent. It can also be read, however, as supporting some aspects of trait theory. As Stogdill writes, he finds a significant number of traits are important presences for people in positions of leadership, across a range of research studies.

However, the key contribution for which Stogdill's work is renowned lies in his observation that, even if traits are important in understanding leader behaviour and leadership effectiveness, context is what determines whether the trait emerges as significant. In other words, the presence or absence of traits in practice depends on the social, cultural or organizational surroundings that the people being researched work in.

The significance of this observation, based on an immense amount of reading and a long training in the research methods used by the researchers whose work he was reading, enabled Stogdill to make this strong statement:

> A person does not become a leader by virtue of the possession of some combination of traits, but the pattern of personal characteristics of the leader must bear some relevant relationship to the characteristics, activities, and goals of the followers. (1948: 64)

It is difficult to overstate the importance of this when we consider the development of leadership studies as an academic field. In one sentence, Stogdill sets out a major intrinsic failing of existing trait theories and a significant absence in all trait theories to that point, i.e. that of the follower.

STOP AND REFLECT 2.3

Ralph Stogdill was the first and most vocal critic of trait theories. His argument was made stronger by his detailed understanding of the research methods used by trait researchers, and their approach to theory building. Stogdill was trained in psychology and practised clinical psychology before moving into full-time academic work. He combined this disciplinary background with a long and deep commitment to understanding the practice of leadership and leading, working at Ohio State University for many years. It is intriguing that an obituary written by a colleague notes how Stogdill 'exemplified effective leadership' by being 'quiet and unobtrusive' (Hakel, 1980), suggesting that theory and practice came together for this particular scholar.

- Why do you think Stogdill's colleague wrote that his leadership was exemplary because it was quiet? Have you worked with a quiet leader? If you have, what was it like? If you haven't, would you like to?

This might seem to indicate that trait theories, and personality theories in general, are unhelpful when we're trying to understand leadership, leading and the development of people in positions of power. This is, of course, not the case. Trait theories were the first attempt to bring the study of leadership into the social sciences, building on the 'gentleman amateur' approach that early 'Great Man' explorations of leadership involved. We cannot simply dismiss more than a hundred years of careful, thoughtful, empirical research because the approach has flaws. For this reason, it is worth looking in more detail at recent studies of leadership and leading in which the researchers take a trait approach, both explicitly and implicitly. The next two sections encourage you to read and think about two very important recent studies of leadership: the first is a classic, sophisticated exploration of trait theory, focusing on a very obvious trait, sex; the second is a more controversial way of thinking about leadership and leadership development, focused on the brain and the potential of neurological research to identify and develop leaders.

Contemporary trait theory: Why are there so few women CEOs?

As fourth-wave feminism has gathered momentum in recent years, the lack of women in obvious positions of leadership has become a pressing concern for journalists, researchers, politicians, and above all for women. If you imagine that women have achieved equality in reaching or occupying positions of leadership, you should read about the career of Julia Gillard, first ever woman prime minister of Australia from 2010 to 2013. Gillard was subject to quite extraordinary abuse from political colleagues and news media, often focusing on the fact that she is a woman. Gillard and many of her female colleagues decided to confront what they experienced as sexism and misogyny, most famously when Gillard spoke with great anger, passion and eloquence in the Australian parliament (we will discuss this speech again in Chapter 7, 'Difference and Leadership', and you can also find a link to it at the end of this chapter).

In a British corporate context, at the moment of writing, there are seven women CEOs of the hundred largest companies here. This strangely low number has been static for several years, although it is an advance on 2013 when the resignation of Angela Ahrendts from Burberry reduced the number of women

CEOs from three to two. To put this into context – there are more than twice as many men named 'John' in this group of a hundred leaders than there are women.

This is, to say the least, puzzling, for men and women. Are there so few good women leaders? Is it so difficult for women specifically to reach the peak of a large organization? Why are there so many men called John in these positions? Is this a peculiarly British thing? Asking undergraduate students at the University of Birmingham why they think the FTSE 100 companies are like this, I find a great range of thoughtful responses: women are expected to take time off to give birth to and act as primary carers for children, thereby interrupting their careers; there is a social stigma attached to being a woman executive; women want this kind of career less than men, perhaps because of education or family background; or simply that sexism and patriarchy remain accepted practice.

There are still traces of sex, or sexist, determinism in many discussions of leadership. The idea of determinism is often used in academic debates about psychological approaches to research, and to critique research that takes biological sex as a characteristic to be researched. Determinism is not complicated to understand – essentially its academic usage is somewhat negative. If we call a piece of research 'determinist' it means that the researchers are assuming that something a person has or is, usually a biological feature (such as sex, height or ethnicity), affects behaviour in ways that the person struggles to control. Every time, for everyone, no matter what the situation or the person. You can see the problems with this quite easily. Determinism suggests that we are all prisoners of our physical, genetic or cultural inheritance. It suggests we are unable to exercise agency in our working lives, as we are mostly dependent on our biology or inherited character traits.

Many researchers are not satisfied with existing explanations of 'gender disparity in the C-suite', and one group working in Queensland are especially unsatisfied with what they read as deterministic explanations of women's exclusion. Despite the global profile that a small number of women chief executives and operating officers achieve (e.g. most recently, Sheryl Sandberg at Facebook) the overall picture remains incredibly depressing in terms of equality of representation. Autobiographies such as Sandberg's, or biographies written by journalists for prominent women leaders, can be useful and helpful, especially as inspiration or to share 'war stories'. However, they explain very little in a more general sense. For that, we have to turn to more detailed, careful, peer-reviewed research – such as that conducted by Fitzsimmons and his colleagues at Queensland (Fizsimmons et al., 2014).

If you read Fitzsimmons and colleagues' paper, and you should, you'll find they do something very interesting. They present an argument that is based on qualitative data – in other words, data which do not involve statistical analysis and enable discussion of the research questions in a different way. The researchers want to achieve theory development, based on their arguments and the meaning of the data they've collected and analyzed, rather than making an argument based on the size of their dataset, the reliability of the statistical tests they've done, or the generalizability of their analysis. It's very different from most trait theory-based studies of leadership.

The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with a carefully constructed matched sample of women and men, which then enabled them to put together life narratives that can be compared. This in turn allows the identification of differences in how women and men accrue experience, achieve entry into the kind of educational institution, or develop the kind of identity and meet the kind of mentors, that will in the future enable entry into the very small, mostly male, club of chief executives and chief officers in large corporate organizations.

The conclusions are, in some ways, unremarkable: the researchers tell us that life outside the workplace is extremely significant in both enabling and constraining the achievement of positions of power

such as chief executive. This isn't surprising – if a person's education has been disrupted, if a person has caring responsibilities for others, if a person doesn't have good contacts in an industry that values social networks, then it seems obvious that success should be elusive. What makes this research fascinating, however, is the way it weaves extremely sophisticated qualitative data collection and analysis, complex theories of society and leadership, and policy implications, with a surprisingly narrow perspective on how we think of the sex we each embody.

We can think of being a man or being a woman as a trait, i.e. a physical characteristic that we can do little or nothing about. Clothes, hair, shoes and material artefacts such as glasses can all be more or less sex-specific: men with long hair, women wearing trousers, may upset what some think of as normal, but doesn't usually fundamentally affect how we see the person in front of us, whether we think of them as 'woman' or 'man'.

However, this way of thinking about sex in leadership research takes little or no account of social, organizational or cultural context in shaping expectations of leaders/leadership. Organizational researchers have been telling us for some time that the sex we inhabit is better understood as *gender*. This term describes something quite different, in the idea that who or what we are in relation to being woman or man is socially constructed – in other words, what and who we are in relation to sexual orientations and gender identities is not fixed or determined by our bodies, genitals or chromosomes. Instead, gender can be understood as something we perform, an achievement we make happen every day – sometimes not only through relatively straightforward things such as clothes, hair, which toilet door we go through, but also through more complex things such as how we behave, how we speak, what we say, and the roles we choose to occupy in social situations. Each of these choices in miniature will have a cumulative effect on us as people, on the people we work with, lead or follow, and on the social context we work within.

If we try to understand sex in this way, as socially constructed gender rather than biological trait, we re-orient the issue from being one that we can research through trait research to a set of complex interlocking issues that start from a very different position. This 'anti-determinist' way of thinking, and being, challenges another '-ism' that is a foundation of trait theory – essentialism. Essentialism suggests that there are irreducible differences between women and men. That's it. Stated like this, it seems very straightforward and not at all complicated – and perhaps also very, very obviously true and correct. However, if we introduce the possibility that sex is a biological category and gender is a set of socially constructed distinctions, then we can see instantly that there are two potential threads of analysis and controversy here. In relation to the research described here, on the experiences of women and men leaders in Australia, we are clearly reading a study of 'leadership and sex', i.e. a trait-based account of how women and men do leadership differently. If we introduce the idea of gender, meaning the patterns we live with as 'male' or 'female', the behaviours we are taught to expect of biological women and biological men, then we could conduct an entirely different piece of research, with very different conclusions.

To make this clearer through an example from the research conducted by Fitzsimmons and his colleagues: towards the end of their analysis the researchers suggest ways to overcome the disparity in the number of women and men in leadership positions. They suggest that leadership development should be offered to women to provide understanding of the experiences men have that make them leaders, and for more opportunities to be offered to women to network more effectively and thereby be invited into the men's clubs that control entry to senior leadership positions. The biological traits possessed by each group would stay the same, but women might learn to behave more like men, performing a masculinity that would open doors hitherto closed because of the lack of a Y chromosome.

What you make of this will depend on how you feel, or what you think, about a range of complicated things. If you think that characteristics such as sex, ethnicity, sexuality or nationality are fixed and determine who we are, how we behave, then you will tend towards an essentialist, perhaps determinist, perspective on debates such as this one. You might find yourself saying something like, 'I think that women are made differently to men and therefore don't reach positions of leadership for that reason'. On the other side you'll find people who take an anti-essentialist perspective, articulating the belief that our identities are constructed or performed in social contexts. If you're in this group you might say, for example, that women are under-represented in 'the C-suite' because men, and the masculinities associated with men, are largely in control of entry to 'their' leadership groups, and they prefer to maintain a homogeneous group that they can rely on to be wholly committed to work and better predict the behaviours of. It's a complex and controversial debate, based on complicated and controversial workplace practices, that provides a fascinating contemporary window into trait theories of leadership and their problems.

From observation of traits to brain scans: The introduction of neuroscience to leadership studies

Another very significant recent development in trait theories of leadership is the 'union' of leadership theory with another field, cognitive neuroscience, as part of a movement called the 'new biology of leadership'. A series of research studies published in prestigious peer-reviewed journals, the Neuro-Leadership Institute (www.neuroleadership.org) and management consultancy activity in the area all suggest this is a growing community of academics and practitioners. The best place to start in understanding this new field of research and organizational interventions is with the introduction to a special themed issue of an important journal, *The Leadership Quarterly*. There, three UK-based academics outline the field and what its research means (Lee et al., 2012).

First, Lee and his colleagues tell us that they have no wish to be associated with the term 'neuro-leadership'. They prefer to think of what they do as part of a much wider new biological approach to understanding issues related to leading. They propose we should think of neuro-approaches to understanding leadership as just one specific way of doing research into explaining how and why leadership happens, or doesn't happen, based on human biology. It is easy to see the links to early trait theory where this chapter started, even if the research methods are quite different. This is extremely significant, and again worth exploring in detail.

Brain-work and leadership: Collecting data

The idea of biology and neuroscience as a way of exploring leadership conjures up some intriguing images – scientists in white coats, perhaps, experiments that require things to be attached to your head, maybe even brain scans using enormous expensive machines in hospitals, all as ways of developing new theories of leadership. These images are, to some extent, accurate. Researchers in this area are often based in departments of life science or biology in universities, working collaboratively with scholars based in business schools. The data are collected through experiments that are more commonly conducted for medical research or in experimental psychology research – some of the data collection monitors and measures neural activity inside the brain through magnetic resonance imaging, e.g. when people are

asked questions about leadership experiences (Boyatzis et al., 2012); other research explores the individual's genetic map looking for variance to explain achievement of leadership positions (Chaturvedi et al., 2012); others test how people react to images of faces when asked to analyse a situation that suggests a particular approach to leadership (Spisak et al., 2012).

It is intriguing to talk to students about this rapidly expanding field of research and the methods used. Some react with interest and enthusiasm; some show a great deal of discomfort. The difference appears to be rooted in whether we believe that this kind of data can contribute to the development of meaningful leadership theory, or explain the development of leaders. The research is certainly presented in a convincing way in journal articles by the researchers. They make claims such as '[k]nowing the neurological responses behind both a leader's behaviour and his or her followers' responses may allow for improved pedagogy and training, thus helping leaders to form more effective relationships' (Boyatzis et al., 2012: 270); or: '… 40% of the variance [in 'leadership emergence' – in other words, explaining who becomes a leader and who doesn't] being attributable to genetics' (Chaturvedi et al., 2012: 228). This is extremely seductive, especially if you have to write an essay or sit an exam on the question of what makes a leader.

It is more difficult to articulate exactly what creates the discomfort some people feel when confronted with this research. Perhaps there is something socially uncomfortable about the idea that we can explain, or predict, which people will become leaders through something as mechanical as genetic testing. This could, of course, happen at a very early age, or perhaps even pre-birth. If sex selection of babies happens, then perhaps prospective parents might be tempted to choose whether to have a child or not based on genetic prediction of leadership capability. Maybe we want to think we have more control over ourselves and our working environments than this research suggests? Or could we be worried that we would find out we are in the 'not-leader' category and therefore destined always to be led?

Fortunately, two academics based at Cardiff Business School and the University of Liverpool Management School have thought about this new version of trait theory from a critical ethical standpoint, and written a series of journal articles to explain why they think we should all be uncomfortable with this biological turn in leadership studies (Lindebaum, 2013; Lindebaum & Zundel, 2013).

Creating a pathology, not a biology, of leadership

Dirk Lindebaum and Mike Zundel share discomfort about the wider research field of organizational neuroscience, which also informs other areas of management and organization studies such as marketing or employee relations. They are specifically concerned about neuroscience-based leadership research however, because of its particular ethical implications. The first worry they have is that such research *dehumanizes* people, especially if it results in attempts at neurological modification. In other words, Lindebaum and Zundel are unhappy about the prospect of workplace-training interventions that are based on reshaping how we think or respond to complex working situations. This possibility is based on the theory that how we think, the neural pathways that we develop, can be changed in specific ways, to enable us to be better leaders or followers. While some people may be happy to experience this degree of personal change for the sake of work, others may not – and if neuro-interventions are seen as a reliable means of developing leaders then people will come under pressure to submit to these.

The second ethical concern relates to selection processes. Large organizations invest huge amounts of time and money in complex selection processes, especially for graduate schemes, to identify those most likely to work most effectively or fit in best. Most contemporary selection processes involve psychological or social psychological tests, such as the almost-universal psychometric testing and generic

personality testing. Biology, however, offers an attractive new way of selecting people for jobs based on brain scans for patterns relating to, for example, leadership capability, or even genetic testing for propensity towards desirable (or, of course, undesirable) behaviours. The difficulties with this approach to selection are clear even to researchers committed to biology of leadership – they will include and exclude on the basis of *likelihood* and propensities. In addition, the research on which such selection processes are based would be open to challenge, as psychometric research is.

Third, Lindebaum and Zundel suggest we (researchers, leaders and management consultants) should reflect on what this research means for how we think about organizational life. Work and the workplace are, whether we like it or not, an activity and place where actions have ethical bases and consequences. Ethics, however, are not something that are amenable to natural scientific research methods and ways of thinking. Instead, thinking and behaving ethically are social, cultural and human processes – simultaneously inside the brain and hence partly biological in the sense that all human action or thought might be classed as such, but stubbornly resistant to reduction to a neurological image or genetic code.

Reducing leadership

The term 'reduction' brings us to the final challenge to this way of thinking about leadership and leaders. It is raised and worked through by Lindebaum and Zundel at length when they assess the claims and methods of both organizational neuroscience and specific studies of leadership from that perspective. It is a complex argument, but well worth engaging with because it has broader implications for how we think about leadership studies as a research field.

In short, Lindebaum and Zundel suggest that biological, especially neuroscientific, approaches to complex social phenomena such as leadership are being reduced, or simplified in an explanatory way, by being broken down into parts which are then brought back together to look for causal links.

In relation to leadership, this might work as follows: we want to understand why some leaders appear to be more popular or successful than others. First, we break down what we mean by 'leader' and 'leadership'. We do this by looking at previous studies and picking out the behaviours that researchers generally agree enable us to identify a leader. Second, we think about what popularity or success mean, through some kind of measurement – this is relatively straightforward for success in a shareholder-owned corporation where most agree profit, return on investment or company size are significant indicators. For popularity, perhaps we'd use an established leadership research tool such as the Leader–Member Exchange questionnaire.

Once we've done that, we collect our data. Then we try to establish links, or correlations, between specific variables. We perform statistical tests, probability tests or significance tests, to make claims about causality – in other words, to suggest that one thing causes another.

These processes are well established in natural science research, and often used in parts of the social sciences. Journals such as *The Leadership Quarterly* often publish research of this kind. However, other journals, such as *Leadership*, tend to publish work which is either critical of or ignores reductionist positivist research. This critique or rejection can take many forms: some researchers believe that reductionist research is meaningless because it applies a natural science model to social processes and dynamics that involve irrational or arational people; others argue that all research is conducted by people and therefore both politicized and personalized; yet others argue that biological, neuroscientific or trait-based theories should be understood as only one way among many to understand leadership. Above all, critiques of this way of thinking about leadership emphasize that leaders and followers are people – thinking, feeling,

emotional, unpredictable, irreducible people –rather than simply mechanical systems of interlocking and interrelating neurons and cells.

Trait theories of leadership: A never-ending quest

This chapter has a number of aims, easily summarized: trait theories have been with us a long time in leadership studies and must not only be taken seriously, but also approached critically.

This chapter has described the approach's historical roots in qualitative philosophical and literary analysis of leaders' practices and personalities. Since then, as the final section above emphasizes, trait theories have taken a series of increasingly quantitative natural scientific turns, culminating in a new biology of leadership. However, there is also a critical community analyzing this development, asking whether it is appropriate, what it means, and what its effects on the research and practice communities might be (especially if it is unchallenged).

The chapter should also leave you with a clear sense of the value of trait theories. Attempting to define traits is, and probably always will be, one of the foundations of leadership studies. Critical analyses of it, based on either 'internal' critiques (such as low reliability and validity), or 'external' critiques that question the possibility of achieving a behavioural understanding of and leadership through cognitive research and individual level data, challenge but do not destroy it.

Trait theories generally, and biological studies in particular, are reductionist, neglecting human dynamics such as culture, social context and process. However, trait theories will continue to have a high degree of relevance and be very seductive as social and cultural phenomena as much as for empirical or theoretical insight. It is important to recognize their rhetorical power to persuade and their suggestion that they can help make sense of irritatingly complex questions such as 'Where do leaders come from?' Perhaps most importantly, it is crucial to remember that trait theories are as prone to changes in fashion as any other perspective, despite their representation as eternal truth. This means that the people that trait theories exclude as 'non-leaders' one day, may become exactly the same people that another trait theory tells us are ideal leaders another day.

Case study: The secret of becoming a leader – (Dame) Stella Rimington

The book this case study is based on, *Open Secret: The Autobiography of the Former Director-General of MI5* (2001), is remarkable in many ways. First, it is a detailed account of working at a high level in the British intelligence services – in other words, how it was to be a spy for the British state. Books such as this did not exist at all before the mid-1990s, despite the long history of spying. Second, it is written by a woman, unusual in itself for such a masculine profession. Third, as the sub-title tells you, this particular woman became the Director-General of the organization she worked for – the first, of two so far, in a little over a hundred years, and the first ever to write a book about that work. Finally, it is dedicated to her daughters, suggesting that it is a book about being a woman as much as a book about intelligence gathering, spying or leadership.

Rimington's story is remarkable because it is tells us about a woman achieving a position of authority and leadership by breaking through a series of barriers and taboos that, once broken, can never be completely reconstructed. She was born in the UK in 1935, when women were still usually required to leave British government service on marriage. The proportion of women working was relatively low compared with 2018; women were mostly confined to specific types of work, and usually expected to become a full-time home-maker, mother or wife before the age of 30. These cultural expectations and organizational norms would change, but only slowly, and are still with us.

Aged 57, Rimington became, as she says in the introduction, a 'sort of female James Bond' – or perhaps a better description would be a 'sort of real-life "M"', as she would have been James Bond's boss, telling him what to do. (The makers of the James Bond films had Rimington in mind when they made 'M' a woman for the first time in 1995.) In becoming the positional leader Rimington quietly challenged a string of trait- and biology-based assumptions, norms, conventions, prejudices and practices that dissuaded many women from thinking of themselves as potential or actual leaders. Her story goes something like this …

- **Joining**

> It soon became clear to me [on joining in 1969] that a strict sex discrimination policy was in place in MI5 and women were treated quite differently to men. They had only recently abandoned the dauntingly entitled post of The Lady Superintendent, whose job it was to supervise the welfare of all the female staff and to ensure that the proprieties were observed. No doubt this position dated from the days when only girls from 'good families' were employed, and their mothers and fathers were promised that they would be properly looked after. (2001: 90)

Rimington's story emphasizes that hers is a very quirky organization, employing some very idiosyncratic people to do unique jobs. However, it is also a mundane organizational story of sex discrimination. Women were employed as 'assistant officers', never full officers, and only a separate very short career ladder was available. MI5 was different from other British Civil Service departments, where women were then able to rise to positions of leadership, but its practices reflected a very common attitude in 1960s England – that there were men's jobs and women's jobs. This way of thinking about people clearly has its roots in the trait approach, as women are defined as 'different' simply because of biology and, by extension, personality and behaviour.

The MI5 organizational culture was particularly masculine. However, as in many organizations during the mid-twentieth century, there was slow change happening, in part because MI5 needed clever hard-working people, and labour markets were such that women had to be considered as well as men. Higher education in the UK was also changing rapidly; many more women were attending university and graduating. Second-wave feminism appears in the background, with women arguing for equality across social contexts, including workplaces. As Rimington says:

> This [sexist] attitude to women seems incredible now, looked at from the standpoint of the 21st century. So much has changed in women's employment expectations since those days. But I don't think it ever occurred to my male colleagues that they were discriminating against us and in those days it was not

(Continued)

(Continued)

> really questioned inside the Service [MI5]. And to be fair to them, even I, coming in from the outside, did not question it at first. (2001: 103)

This is a fascinating reflection, because it makes clear two aspects of assessing people through traits. First, it suggests that judging a group of people by traits we expect them to have simply because they belong to a category such as 'woman' can become so normalized in an organization that it is invisible – in other words, trait theory becomes an unquestioned aspect of the culture. Second, it implies that even the members of the trait group don't see the assumptions being made about them, or are not able to question them.

- **Questioning**

Rimington did come to question the idea that, as a woman, she should not expect to aspire to certain jobs or organizational positions. The culture was maintained in part by the recruitment process, which was founded on the 'tap on the shoulder' (p. 120) method – friends of friends, people (men) that organizational members could be confident were 'one of us'. Rimington began to protest about this relatively quickly. She had been working for MI5 for only a few years when she noticed younger, less competent or less hard-working men being promoted to more senior posts. Initially, she took the bureaucratic approach: she asked the personnel officer in her annual appraisal interview what she would have to do to be promoted. The scene must have been amusing in some ways:

> The poor man was completely taken aback. I felt rather like Oliver Twist when he asked for more … I do not think it had ever occurred to him that a woman might want to become an officer … After all, no doubt the women he knew stayed at home and did the flowers, so why was this woman, who had already broken all known conventions by returning to work with a baby, now demand to be treated as if she were a man? He muttered about all the things one could not do as a woman, which made one less than wholly useful. (2001: 121)

This description provides a series of insights into how trait theories can be mobilized to define 'outsiders' as lacking, only suited for specific work, positioned to stay where they 'belong'. Rimington's protest quickly extended and she won the support of some men in the organization to achieve promotion, a significant pay rise and more interesting work. Her success was not followed by, as she puts it, an 'opening of the floodgates' (p. 124) such that all women were considered as equal colleagues. Change happened for a more mundane reason – the introduction of legislation by the British government in 1975 making sex discrimination illegal. The organizational culture and its unique legal status meant that it would have been a very brave woman, or group of women, that challenged discrimination in the courts, but it turned out that wasn't necessary. A letter signed by a group of women outlining their unhappiness at how they were managed provoked change in the organizational rules; however, as Rimington notes, the cultural 'taboos' on what women were considered able to do took a lot longer to disappear, if they ever have.

- **The traits needed for intelligence work**

Rimington puzzles at length throughout her book as to why she was so successful in her profession. She discusses education, culture and many different traits such as self-confidence or persistence. However, she dismisses the argument that specific traits are needed for the work she did, putting her success down to determination, energy and an ability to 'get things done'. These qualities, or practices, were present throughout Rimington's working life so that in 1992, she was appointed Director-General – interestingly, the selection process was classic:

> One day, shortly before Christmas, I was asked to stay behind and he [the retiring Director-General] said 'Congratulations. You are to be the next Director-General.' By then, it did not come as a great surprise to me, but thinking about it now, it is, to say the least, rather strange that no-one had thought to ask me if I wanted the job. Whatever process had brought us to the point of my being told that I'd got it, this certainly was not open competition … What would have happened if at that late stage I had said I did not want it, I don't know. But I did not say that, though it soon became clear that what I was being offered was something of a poisoned chalice. (2001: 241)

There is an irony in the fact that Rimington was promoted partly on the basis of being the 'right kind of person', an insider, after spending so many years fighting against exactly that attitude. However, more importantly, her appointment also marked the moment when MI5 would change forever – she discovered she was to be the first leader to be named publicly. That decision, made by politicians and civil servants, would frame her time as the organization's leader – the one wholly good thing about it, as Rimington notes, is that it resulted in the wonderful book she wrote after she retired.
(Rimington, S. (2001) *Open Secret: The Autobiography of the Former Director-General of MI5*. London: Hutchinson.)

1. Why do you think Stella Rimington was so persistent in her working life? In other words, why did she not do as so many women of her generation did, and leave?
2. What do you think was necessary to becoming the Director-General of MI5 in the time that she worked there? Are any of the things you identify traits?
3. If you were in her position, how would you develop yourself as a leader?

The key points in this chapter were …

There should be three themes that you have in your head as you leave this chapter for the next one, on contingency theories of leadership. First, the staying power of trait theories – this should suggest to you that trait theories are academically important, culturally significant and likely to stay with us for as long as we research and practise leadership. Second, related to this, theories of leadership do not get 'disproved' or dismissed – there are fashions, but theories are rarely entirely discredited or shown to be completely wrong. Third, similar to the previous chapter and the next one, this chapter should also help you to think of leadership studies as a research field in which there is a range of perspectives, competing for your attention and trust.

- Trait theories are one of the earliest ways of thinking about and researching leadership. They grew out of 'Great Man' theories.

- They continue to be important today, especially through gender and neuroscience perspectives on leadership.
- Trait theories have been extensively critiqued. In particular, early theories had a lack of real world research support. Critique usually focuses on the tendency to reduce leadership down to minimal traits (like sex or neurons) in a way that ignores the importance of context.

Further thinking

If you want to understand trait theories, then you will need to read at least one of the extended reviews of them as an approach – there are three important ones, in order of publication:

Stogdill, R. (1948) Personal factors associated with leadership: a survey of the literature, *Journal of Psychology*, *25*(1): 35–71.

Jago, A. (1982) Leadership: perspectives in theory and research, *Management Science*, *28*(3): 315–36.

Judge, T., Piccolo, R. and Kosalka, T. (2009) The bright and dark side of traits: a review and theoretical extension of the leader trait paradigm, *The Leadership Quarterly*, *20*: 855–75.

If you're interested in neuro- or biological approaches, it's best to start with the internet, here:

www.neuroleadership.org

but you must then move on to the peer-reviewed academic research – you'll find references at the end of this book.

Julia Gillard's speech can be found at:

Sydney Morning Herald, 10 October 2012, www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/transcript-of-julia-gillards-speech-20121010-27c36.html (accessed 30 January 2014).

As you read, reflect on trait theories in light of the critiques described in this chapter. Consider the following questions:

1. Do you think trait theory is worthwhile as an approach to researching and teaching leadership?
2. If you were offered a neurological test to find out if you think like a leader by a research team in a university, would you accept the offer and do it? Why/why not?
3. Imagine that you were forced to take a neurological or genetic test by your employer, and you have been called into a meeting with your supervisor. They explain to you that you have tested negative for leadership traits. How would you feel about this? Would you believe it? How might this affect your future employment? How might it affect the way you think about yourself?

Leadership on screen

Trait theories are not easily represented on screen because we can't see many of them in the same way as we can see, for example, charisma. However, many films, documentaries and television series suggest implicitly or explicitly that traits are the key to understanding people leading:

- *Blade Runner* (1982) – this is quite old, but it's a classic, and there is a sequel, *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), that explores many of the same issues. The plot centres on whether robots ('replicants') can behave in ways that humans do. It's a fascinating exploration of what it is to be human, how we assess humanity and how we judge others through their personality and behaviour. (If you like the film, you might also enjoy the short story it is based on, 'Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?', by Philip K. Dick.)
- Recent documentaries about the US corporate world refer frequently to how leaders emerge, are selected and create followers through the use of trait norms, especially *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005), and *The Corporation* (2003). Both of these are also worth watching for their insights into leadership and leaders more generally.
- A lighter (in some ways) representation of trait theories in action is *Trading Places* (1983) – it's another old movie, but it's still meaningful for thinking through the implications of what researchers call 'heritability', genetics and the 'dark side' of trait theories.

As you watch any of these films, or if you see trait theories of leadership represented anywhere else on screen, ask yourself these questions:

- Why are researchers in leadership studies so keen on trait theories when so many fictional films and documentaries suggest they are damaging, unhelpful to individuals and organizations, and discriminatory?
- If you were identified as a potential leader because of traits that you have inherited or developed, how would you feel about it?