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To cite this article: Johan Alvehus (2021): Docility, Obedience and Discipline: Towards Dirtier Leadership Studies?, Journal of Change Management, DOI: [10.1080/14697017.2021.1861696](https://doi.org/10.1080/14697017.2021.1861696)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14697017.2021.1861696>



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Published online: 14 Jan 2021.



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Docility, Obedience and Discipline: Towards Dirtier Leadership Studies?

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ABSTRACT

Leadership is a popular term, among scholars and in general. It is romanticized and seems to cover everything and nothing. Its analytical value has therefore been questioned, and so has the very existence of leadership as a phenomenon. Here, based on the social psychology of GH Mead, I argue that leadership is a fundamental human phenomenon emanating from docility. By exploring this through the lens of three classic texts – Milgram's *Obedience to Authority*, Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, and Taylor's *The Principles of Scientific Management* – I argue that processes that accomplish leadership are often not understood as leadership, but as something else, for example manipulation or management. More generally, I argue that leadership disappears as we identify the details of its manifestations, and from this I argue that leadership is a concept that denies its own ontological foundation. My conclusions suggest that leadership scholars and practitioners increasingly should draw attention to the choices involved in leadership processes and to practices commonly seen as not being about leadership – leadership studies will benefit from making the immaculate concept of leadership dirtier.

MAD statement

I set out to *Make a Difference* (MAD) by arguing that leadership is a fundamental feature of human existence and that it is an outcome of humans' innate predisposition towards docility. I argue that the key to understanding leadership is to see it as a social process that denies its own existence, and that it is in this the mystery and romance of leadership originates. Leadership scholars and practitioners should increasingly draw attention to the choices involved in leadership processes and to those 'dirty' practices commonly seen as not being about leadership.

KEYWORDS

Discipline; docility; empty signifier; interaction; leadership; obedience

Introduction

It is hard to imagine any term in organization studies that has the same appeal as *leadership* does – in terms of academic interest, but also in terms of consultancy, courses and everyday talk. Its use, and possibly overuse, has made leadership a very tricky concept. We seem to live with an ongoing romance with leadership and heroic leaders (Bligh &

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Schyns, 2007; Collinson et al., 2018; Meindl et al., 1985). Yet, as Burns famously argued already in 1978, leadership 'is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth' (p. 2).

Leadership is often disassociated from its more tangible cousin management, to the extent that whatever leadership is, it is at least not management (Carroll & Levy, 2008; Terry, 1995; Zaleznik, 1977). Nowhere is this more apparent than in calls for 'authentic' and 'transformative' leadership (e.g. Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010) – there is an ongoing struggle for leadership to remain an immaculate and positive concept (Alvesson & Einola, 2019), free from traces of management and manipulation. Some observers have drawn the conclusion that the language of leadership itself is the problem, and that our ongoing romance with leadership makes us prone to explain organizational processes that we do not understand in terms of leadership (Meindl et al., 1985). Blom and Alvesson (2015, p. 488) have noted that leadership is characterized by 'hegemonic ambiguity,' flourishing with 'esoteric and stretched meanings' causing 'confusions and mystifications.' Others have even argued that leadership is an empty signifier that 'has no ontological foundation of its own, it is always epistemological; a second order construct through which judgements about persons, processes and outcomes can be arrived at *post hoc*' (Kelly, 2014, p. 910). The term leadership has become somewhat of a Velcro: throw anything positive at 'leadership' and it will stick.

But just because the term leadership itself has attained this immaculate and Velcro-ish character doesn't mean that leadership is not relevant or has no ontological foundation. Researchers wanting to problematize leadership have mainly questioned and criticized either purportedly everyday talk about leadership, or other academics' use of the term. More rarely, although exceptions of course exist, have these researchers cared to engage in studying leadership *in situ* and asking if there actually might be any foundation underlying the romanticized talk about leadership.¹ Rost's (1993, p. 4) claim that very little effort has been put into trying to 'understanding the essential nature of what leadership is' still seems valid.

In this essay, I will pick up Rost's call for trying to understand the essential nature of leadership. First, I explore the idea that there actually might be an ontological foundation for a phenomenon that we can understand in terms of leadership: I argue that leadership is an outcome of humans' innate tendency towards *docility* – the predisposition to submit to the Other – and therefore a fundamental condition of human existence. Second, I will explore the idea that the term leadership in itself in fact denies this ontological foundation: as soon as we start identifying and labelling the foundation in more detail it ceases to be leadership, and becomes something else. I therefore argue that the romance of leadership, and its ambiguous and hegemonic character, is the very essence of the term leadership.

The article takes the form of an essay. My aim is not primarily to make a final statement about what leadership is; rather I aim to open up a conversation, to show that the question is relevant and possible to engage with. The article takes a somewhat uncommon route. I will allow my text to meander through three excursions and as the text unfolds it will bring in new parts to the overall argument. The first excursion is to early American pragmatism in the form of George Herbert Mead (see the following section). The second, to Stanley Milgram's series of experiments in social psychology from the 1960s (see third and fourth sections). The third concerns the notion of discipline through the eyes of

Michel Foucault and Frederick Winslow Taylor (see fifth section). Only in the final section do I bring these thoughts together and return to explicitly discussing leadership.

Mead and the Notion of Docility

George Herbert Mead, in the posthumously published volume *Mind, Self, & Society* (Mead, 1934), presents a thought that still, a hundred years later, can be perceived as challenging: that consciousness and self arise not from within a person or a brain, but from interaction between Ego and Alter, between Self and Other. It is a fundamentally social accomplishment; interaction precedes self and consciousness (Asplund, 1967). Mead grounds his analysis in the notion of a ‘gesture.’ Social acts are conversations of gestures, for example vocal signs but also body positioning, facial expression, and such:

When, in any given social act or situation, one individual indicates by a gesture to another individual what this other individual is to do, the first individual is conscious of the meaning of his own gesture [...] in so far as he takes the attitude of the second individual toward that gesture ... (Mead, 1934, p. 47)

When meaningfully interacting with Alter, Ego anticipates Alter’s response. This happens by taking Alter’s attitude to Ego’s own act: What response does this call out in Alter? This should not be understood as a turn-taking sequence, nor as a rational calculation. The process is dialectical; Alter is already inherent in the social act.

Mead has largely been picked up as a forerunner of symbolic interactionism and correctly, he discussed how meaning and significant symbols arise in interaction. On a trivial level, Mead’s position is not very challenging: that meaningful interaction involves anticipating and responding to Alter and that our sense of self is affected by the way we are perceived by others would be embraced by most observers (Asplund, 1967). But Mead’s core idea is more radical. Human consciousness, Mead argued, develops in the relation of *both* Ego *and* Alter, simultaneously; in a fundamental sense, no human is an island. Cognition and thinking are acts located not in brains, but in conversations of gestures. The psychology of Mead is a truly *social* psychology: we exist betwixt and between.²

The Other need not be a specific individual. There is a ‘generalized other,’ an ‘organized community or social group’ that subjects orient themselves towards, and there is a ‘common social activity or set of social undertakings in which, as members of an organized society or social group, they are all engaged’ (Mead, 1934, pp. 154–155). Therefore, any social act is interaction, even if it is a conversation of gestures between Ego and the generalized Other. Social norms and institutions are inherent in interaction, not merely outcomes of interaction.

Mead’s view is dialectic. For the analytical purpose at hand, however, I will break up this dialectic and focus on one of its elements, what I will refer to as *docility*. In order to act meaningfully we need to see ourselves from the position of the Other, and in order to do this we need to *become* the Other. I use the term docility to represent this predisposition to submit to the Other.³ Docility is not something we can choose – it is inherent in sociality and therefore in human existence. What I want to highlight with focusing on docility is a readiness to take the role of the Other – not the act of actually submitting to the Other. It is a predisposition, not a complete act; it is but one element in the dialectic.

For example, meaningful resistance depends on taking the role of the Other. And docility does not necessarily imply empathy or sympathy. Even aggression towards the Other is based on docility to the Other – in order to cause anger, pain or anxiety we need to understand anger, pain or anxiety from the role of the Other. All meaningful behaviour is social, regardless of its morality. And at the heart of even the vilest and most vicious act is an element of docility when we take the role of the Other.

Mead's discussion is, however, undertaken against a backdrop of harmonious social systems: (The words 'power' or 'influence' do not even appear in the index of *Mind, Self, & Society*). He never seems to ask: What generalized Other do we interact with? What if there are conflicting Others? The term docility does not imply passiveness. Quite on the contrary, in situations of conflict – and arguably, most social situations contain an element of conflict or tension – we need to bring the *active choice* of Other into the theoretical discussion.

Milgram and the Notion of Obedience

Stanley Milgram's series of experiments, reported in the book *Obedience to Authority* (2005, originally published in 1974), are among the most renowned and notorious in the history of social psychology. With the Holocaust as a backdrop, Milgram and his research team set out to understand how ordinary people commit acts that go against their own morality, and morality in general. They asked: Why, and in which circumstances, are orders obeyed?

The experiment set-up is ingenious. The subject, recruited by advertising, arrives at the research facility and is randomly assigned a role of Teacher or Learner in an experiment on 'the effect of punishment on learning' (Milgram, 2005 p.18). The essence of the experiment is that a Learner, strapped to a chair and therefore unable to leave at free will, is supposed to memorize a series of word pairs. When the Learner fails to remember the pairs correctly, the Teacher administers an electric shock of increasing severity. There are 30 levels on the shock generator, ranging from 'Slight shock' (15 V) to 'Danger: Severe shock' (375 V) and beyond that to a maximum of 450 V, labelled 'XXX'. When the shocks are delivered, the Learner at 75 V starts grunting and at 150 V screams that he wants out. He protests with increasing intensity, but after 330 V (an 'Extreme intensity shock') falls silent, no longer responding to the learning task.

The Teacher is, by the experiment design, supposed to continue to the highest level. But how far will people actually go?

The situation is of course rigged. The Learner is a confederate in the experiment (a 'mild-mannered and likable' 47-year old male accountant; p. 16) and the outcome of the drawing of lots is predetermined.

The experiment was varied in a range of ways. In the original set-up, the victim was out of sight and communicated only by responding to the questions by pressing switches that lit up lamps in an answer box, and after some time, by grunting and screaming. The closeness to the victim was varied, for example by having the Teacher touch the Learner; the context was varied by moving the experiment from the elegant 'Interaction laboratory' at Yale to an off-campus, more rugged, site; the Learner was in some variations said to suffer from a heart condition; the male Learner was replaced by a female; and so

on. The whole process of experimental design was extremely creative in aiming to adjust for all conceivable variables.

Depending on the set-up, the number of subjects that went on to administer the presumably lethal electric shock of 450 volts varied. In the baseline experiment, 65% of subjects did. Different variations only somewhat decreased this number, and it turned out the key significant variable was the closeness of the victim. The closer the victim, and the more feedback (vision, audio, touch), the fewer subjects completed the task. Milgram concluded, 'we are born with a potential for obedience' (p. 125).

A key question in the experiments, and for Milgram's conclusion, is what 'obedience' means. This may seem as a play with words, but it is key to understand the experiment in more detail. Obedience is defined by Milgram as explicit 'prescription for action ... taking the form of an order or command' (p. 114). This is how some of the research subjects motivate their actions: 'I was just doing what I was told' (p. 8). This also means that there is a 'point of rupture' where the Teacher switches from obedience to disobedience.

Three things should be noted here. One: Obedience and disobedience are two different explanations for the behaviour pattern observed. Obedience is explained, by Milgram, as a set of conditions that in different degrees produce an 'agentic state', where the subject subsumes their will to that of the authority. Subjects no longer choose, they just follow. Disobedience means switching back to self-agency. It is as if 'will' is postponed in the agentic state whereas it (re)appears when subjects disobey.

Two: Obedience is almost exclusively discussed as existing in relation to formal authority. We could ask, why is the Teacher understood as obedient to the Experimenter when they continue with the experiment, but disobedient when they follow the demands of the suffering Learner and break the experiment? Why is not to obey when someone screams 'Get me out of here!' in agony, and you comply with this? In fact, one Teacher in the experiment explicitly acknowledged this: 'If he [the Learner] doesn't want to continue, I'm taking orders from him' (p. 48). Milgram subsequently acknowledges that this is a shift in who's orders are obeyed but does not develop on this.

Three: The experiment is very carefully set up to *not* be about distinct and explicit orders. This means that the experiment is in fact not characterized by obedience in the way which Milgram defines it. The subjects get an explanation of the procedure, and then the experiment proceeds. They are explicitly told that they are free to abort at any point. The encouragements to continue are described by Milgram as 'prods', not orders: 'Please continue', 'The experiment requires that you continue', and the strongest: 'You have no other choice, you *must* go on' (p. 21). As noted by Burger et al. (2011, p. 464), it is 'only when we get to the last of the four prods that the participant hears what probably sounds like an order to most people'. Thus, only very late in the process, and in many cases not at all, do the subjects get direct orders and therefore display obedience as defined by Milgram. And interestingly it is the fourth, most order-like prod that is *least* likely to lead to obedience – it presents an opportunity to disobey rather than obey (Gibson, 2013, p. 301).

Ultimately, the Milgram studies 'may have little to do with obedience as conventionally understood' (Gibson, 2013, p. 304) and certainly not if building on Milgram's own definition of obedience. Milgram argues that it is the authoritative situation that is key to understand what it is that is going on – that is what produces obedience. It seems strange to me, however, to say that people obey a situation. The term docility seems better suited to understand this. Subjects initially accept the social situation and its

institutional context and once that is done, orders are in most cases not relevant for the situation to continue.

From Obedience to Docility

Following Mead, all social acts are oriented to an Other. For the subject appearing at Milgram's laboratory the question is: Which Other? Most subjects clearly choose the Experimenter. We must be careful, however, not to overstate the notion of choice. As the experiments bear witness to, the choice is largely a passive one. Milgram and others have interpreted this as an effect of the situation per se: subjects are placed in an authoritative situation and remain in an agentic state until they choose to break off the experiment. What I want to draw attention to, however, is that this break-off depends on interpersonal relationships, and more specifically, the moment when another Other becomes significant.

In order to enact the situation and understand what this social situation (i.e. the experiment) means, the Teacher must take the role of the Other. But to the Teacher, there are two different Others to relate to: the Learner and the Experimenter. So, the question becomes, which Other? Clearly, to many Teachers the Experimenter is the relevant Other. This is also supported by Milgram's own observations: 'Most subjects seemed quite concerned about the appearance they were making before the experimenter' and Milgram argues that they have a 'powerful orientation to the experimenter' (Milgram, 2005, p. 59). The 'choice' of Other is vividly illustrated by the subject 'Bruno Batta', a local resident of Italian descent with 'rough-hewn face that conveys a conspicuous lack of alertness' (p. 45):

What is extraordinary is his apparent total indifference to the learner; he hardly takes cognizance of him as a human being. Meanwhile, he relates to the experimenter in a submissive and courteous fashion. (Milgram, 2005, p. 46)

They varied the experiment by changing the distance between Teacher and Experimenter (experiment no. 7), and obedience 'dropped sharply when the experimenter was physically removed from the laboratory' (p. 59). Several Teachers started cheating, administering lower shocks than they should. The Other of the Learner suddenly became significant. Similarly – and this is the clearest and most explored relational variable – bringing the Teacher closer to the Learner increased the Teachers' tendency to see the Learner as a relevant Other.

This is further illustrated in two other variations of the experiment (nos. 17 and 18). When a group situation was introduced, outcomes changed drastically. Instead of a sole Teacher, there were three Teachers, two of which were confederates of the experimenters. The two confederates aborted the experiment at different shock levels and refused to participate further. Now the number of naïve subjects who followed through dropped to 10 percent. Milgram theorize this as group conformity; but again, we can add to this by introducing the notion of docility. The group situation introduced new Others that the subject could relate to. As put by one research subject, 'I did not wish to seem callous and cruel in the eyes of the other two men' (p. 120).

Two other outcomes of the experiment, seldom reported but nonetheless disconcerting, are worthy of notice. The first was when the naïve subject Teacher was put in a

supportive group role (reading the word pairs), and a confederate administered the shocks. In this variant, over 90 % of the subjects continued the experiment. They no longer had a direct involvement in the interaction pattern of Teacher and Learner, and the docility was wholly to the Experimenter. The second I want to highlight is the pilot study. In this variant, the Learner gave no response to the shocks when they were administered. Under this condition, all Teachers went all the way to the XXX-marked switches. The reactions from the Learner (protest, screams) were only introduced after the pilot study in order to create disobedience. Did the Teachers suspect that no shocks were delivered? Perhaps; we do not know. But apparently the only significant Other was the Experimenter. The Learner disappeared entirely from view.

Other changes, such as introducing a Learner with a heart condition, or changing the perceived persona of the Experimenter, did not significantly affect the outcome. Neither did changing the physical location. Even when moving the experiment location to a nearby industrial town, 'the level of obedience [...] was not significantly lower than that obtained at Yale' (p. 69). This does not stop Milgram from the conclusion that the authoritative context is key, even when removing a clear indicator of scientific authority does not significantly affect outcomes.

What is it that is going on in these experiments? I would, based on my reading of Mead, suggest: The Teacher directs their interaction focus to the Other of the Experimenter. Much of the experiment progresses without further instruction and encouragement. The Teacher never has to obey. Orders that demand obedience (as defined by Milgram) only appear late in the process, and then seem to mainly lead to *disobedience*. Before this, the Teacher is merely docile: they shape their activity to how they imagine the Experimenter wants them to act and according to the script given when the experiment is introduced. As long as they do this, there is no need for orders, and therefore nothing to obey. The tipping point is when the Teachers start relating to the Learners – they shift their interaction focus to another Other. Suddenly, they are docile in relation to that Other. Thus what we see is not an act of disobedience, but a shift in docility – the taking of the role of the Other – from the Experimenter to the Learner.

I propose that we can use these experiments as a window into a fundamental process: The process of relating to an Other, to take the attitude of that Other and follow along. What we observe is not a passive agentic state of following a script – it is an active act of relating. It sometimes comes through as strategic and conscious; usually at the breaking point but also in *post facto* rationalizations. In their own account, the subjects refer to various motives for their actions: Duty, the authority of God, their own experiences, the interest of science. But before this comes the choice of Other and docility towards that Other. What the experiments highlight is perhaps not obedience, but *when shifts from one Other to another Other occur*. The question is who to relate to, and this question by necessity arises before explicit authority, or the giving of orders, has been exercised.

Foucault, Taylor and the Notion of Discipline

The opening of Foucault's (1995) *Discipline and punish* (originally published 1975) is agonizing. In a few pages we are taken from a blood-soaked and anxiety-inducing description of the torture and execution of a regicide, to a clinical and sterile description of the daily routines in a youth prison. This opening illustrates the discontinuity that captures

Foucault's interest: The transition from bodily punishment to the prison system that occurs within less than 100 years in France, and the way in which this is related to changes in how humans are made subjects. The form of power that emerges in this period is disciplinary power, a power without a face and without a hand. It first emerges in the military, in prisons, in hospitals, in factories and in schools; eventually it becomes a dominant form of power in modernity.

Disciplinary power is productive. It divides, defines, and transforms deviance, shaping its materials – humans – into predictable and controllable subjects. Its primary metaphor is Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, a prison where the prisoners are constantly under the impression of surveillance. Panopticon embodies the impersonal and economic character of disciplinary power: it is designed to not involve any relationships and interactions between prisoners and guards, yet it is omni-present.

The particular methods used may vary within different institutional spheres, but the key principles remain the same. They produce a certain kind of subject, *a docile body*, a body whose malleability and flexibility makes it appropriate for inserting into a productive machinery. The power is capillary in that it seeps into the miniscule details of existence.

... in thinking of the mechanisms of power, I am thinking rather of its capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives. (Foucault, 1975, p. 39)

Docility was of course not, Foucault notes, discovered in the eighteenth century. The body and its malleability has been in focus throughout the ages, as also evident in some of Foucault's later works (Foucault, 1985, 1986). What emerges at this particular point, he argues, is a series of methods designed to exercise 'meticulous control of the operations of the body' imposing a 'docility-utility' (Foucault, 1995, p. 137). Seemingly, the main invention of this new power regime is the individualized yet standardized person; all individuality that exists is that which is defined within the disciplinary matrix. The point is to economize body and soul, to squeeze out the most utility possible from it. Reading Foucault's analysis is suffocating.

Foucault's analyses of disciplinary power are, however, despite their focus on subjectivity, devoid of actual people. They are based on texts that set out to describe or prescribe disciplinary practices. Perhaps discipline, docility, and subjectivity would appear different if we took graffiti in prison toilets, gossip in the barracks, or pupils playing games on their school computers during lessons, into consideration (cf. Semple, 1992)? Foucault is a historian of ideas, not of humans. In many ways the intricacies of disciplinary power are better described by Taylor (1911) in his account from implementing the principles of scientific management at Bethlehem Steel.

When laying out *The Principles of Scientific Management* – I will assume that the reader is familiar with the idea of scientific management and its origins – Taylor (1911) describes in detail how they selected a man, nicknamed Schmidt, and aimed at getting him to 'handle 47 tons of pig iron per day and making him glad to do it' (p. 44). They deliberately seek out this man as he had a reputation for putting a high value on monetary compensation: 'A penny looks about the size of a cart-wheel to him,' as a fellow worker described it (p. 44). They take up a discussion with Schmidt, drawing his attention to the higher

wage he will receive, and they instruct him in detail on what to do. All is done with a great deal of arrogance. Taylor notes:

This seems to be rather tough talk. And indeed it would be if applied to an educated mechanic, or even an intelligent laborer. With a man of the mentally sluggish type of Schmidt it is appropriate and not unkind, since it is effective in fixing his attention on the high wages which he wants and away from what, if it were called to his attention, he probably would consider impossibly hard work. (Taylor, 1911, p. 46)

Scientific management is disciplinary power put to practice. And in practice, discipline is not just a set of principles or technologies – it is a question of relationships. When carrying out the abstract principles, the Other is already there. Schmidt is an active agent with whom Taylor engages in meaningful (in Mead’s sense) interaction. Now of course, drawing in the dialectic of taking the role of the Other can be seen as a bit of theoretical overkill here. Isn’t this just a question of convincing or manipulating Schmidt? Indeed it is. Yet, it shows an element in discipline that is overlooked in many discussions of disciplinary and capillary power: its effectuation is an intricate relationship and in that relationship, the Other is already present. In his overt manipulation of Schmidt, Taylor takes the role of the Other.

Developing systems of inspection, division, ranking, time-tables, correlation of the body and the gesture, and so on – the activities that mold the Other’s docile body – have at their heart docility to a generalized Other. In drawing up a blueprint for a Panopticon this comes through as strategic, technical, rational. But in practice it is immediate, spontaneous, and inherent – bound up in meaningful interaction to a specific Other. Moreover, discipline demands that the Other in each instance responds appropriately. The carefully designed systems of inspections and corrections to the Other need to be internalized. For this to happen, the prisoner Other must take the role of the inspector Other; failing to do so will risk the disciplinary attempts to at least partly fail (And so they have, as evident from the resistance taking place in prisons, schools, and barracks).

From an interactionist view of Mead’s kind, we cannot completely cut out the individual from the social process, nor can we eliminate agency. Even the seemingly impersonal, neutral, generalized and all-encompassing capillary power is accomplished in interaction. From a Foucauldian point of view docility is an *outcome*. From a Meadian point of view it is a *prerequisite*.

On Docility and Leadership

Mead brings insights into the nature of subjectivity and social interaction. At the heart of his theory is the taking of the role of the Other. This role-taking is necessary, spontaneous and inherent in any interaction. I have argued that a key element here is an innate human tendency towards *docility*.

As the Milgram experiments show, we have a tendency to ‘follow along,’ that is, we actively maintain the harmony and logic of the social situation as we understand it to be. But for this to occur we need to choose the ‘right’ Other – in the Milgram experiments, many subjects chose the Experimenter. The espoused reasons for this varied, but the key take-away for the purpose at hand is that *docility involves an active choice of Other*, and

that this choice will have profound impact on the way in which a situation unfolds. It is not primarily a question of obedience or disobedience, but a question of docility towards whom.

In Foucault's notion of discipline, the subject is an outcome of the operation of power; there appears to be little agency involved. The prisoner or the pupil do not choose the Other. However, if we start thinking about disciplinary power in concrete interaction, the image changes somewhat. Now discipline appears as a form of interaction, as subtle yet overt attempts at shaping the activity of the Other. Power is exercised in social interaction – the Other plays a much more significant part than Foucault's analysis implies. There is no necessity to assume that a prisoner or a pupil or Schmidt will respond 'properly' to the techniques employed by a guard or a teacher or Taylor. The process is fallible to the extent that other Others are chosen.

But, where does this leave us in terms of leadership? The argument put forth here makes it possible to see leadership in a slightly different light. In order to do this, we must first ask: What is leadership? In this I follow Rost (1993), who argued that most understandings of leadership encompasses four elements: it is (i) a relationship based on influence that (ii) involves leaders and followers that (iii) intend real changes and (iv) develop mutual purposes.

Let me apply this to the examples above. Can we see the Milgram experiments as 'leadership'? We find a relationship between experimenters and research subjects (ii) based on influence (i). Both experimenters and subjects agree that the experiments involve a mutual purpose of developing science (iv), a higher goal involving changes in the scientific understanding, as indicated in prods and in interviews with subjects (iii). The fact that the situation is rigged does not change this – most research subjects likely experience the situation as real and it is therefore real in its consequences, to paraphrase the Thomas theorem (Thomas & Thomas, 1928). Thus, the Milgram experiments can actually be said to be about leadership.

But what then about Taylor and the discipline in scientific management? Is not scientific management the very antithesis of leadership? Yet, it involves all the elements Rost identifies. Taylor tries to influence Schmidt (i, ii). Rost's (1993) notion of influence concerns non-coercive influence, 'based on persuasive behaviors' (p. 107) – remember how Taylor carefully selects a subject presumed to be easily persuaded to focus on monetary rewards. The mutual goal of scientific management involves changes towards higher productivity (iii) benefitting the employer and employee alike, as it enables higher salaries *and* higher profits (iv). So, this too can be said to be about leadership.

From the view I take her, there is an ontological foundation, docility, that enables the phenomenon of leadership to occur. Leadership – and related concepts such as followership (Grint, 2010; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) – refers to conditions that, according to Mead, are at the heart of human existence: consciousness, self, and social order.⁴ But I would wager that few would intuitively see the two examples – obedience and discipline – as examples of leadership. But *why* do we not see these two examples as examples of leadership?

Arguably, a lot can be understood as leadership. Rost's definition potentially encompasses a wide range of social situations and processes – just like the Velcro character of the term leadership I described initially. But once we start to observe that elements such as skillful manipulation or formal structures play a part in the situation, the label leadership seems to cease being relevant. Leadership is commonly understood in contrast to

management, the latter being a question of things such as formal positions, resource allocation, and certain 'managerial' practices; the manipulative 'dark' side of leadership is seldom highlighted, other than in a few critical academic texts. It is almost as if as soon we identify the underlying processes as management, manipulation, obedience to authority, or whatnot – we also disassociate them from leadership. And thus, the term leadership remains untainted from a reality less immaculate.

Rather, then, than being an empty signifier that can be attached to almost anything, it seems that leadership is a term very well suited for being attached to nothing. If there is any nature to the term leadership, I suggest that it is that *leadership is a concept that denies its own ontological foundation*. As soon as we start being specific about the underlying ontological foundation, once we engage in describing the messiness and complexity of everyday social life, the label leadership will no longer seem very appropriate.

Concluding Remarks

From the perspective outlined here, docility is at the heart of human existence. We are predisposed to relating to the Other, from which consciousness, self, and society emerges. Interpersonal influence is therefore an innate feature of human interaction and this also provides the ontological foundation for the accomplishment of something we can call leadership. Leadership (and the mirror term followership) involves the active choice of an Other to subject to. However, when looking closer at such processes, we can often identify and characterize attempts at circumscribing the choice of Other and then label them management, discipline, manipulation, and so on. The very moment we start understanding something in more detail, its 'leadery' character disappears – and it is no longer about 'leadership.' The mystery, fascination, and romance of leadership is that we will always look for it but never find it, for as soon as we find it, it disappears.

Is it time to stop talking about leadership? Perhaps it is a category best forgotten, by researchers and practitioners alike; why keep up the rat race? My suggestion is the opposite. If we understand leadership to be a phenomenon that is produced by our very nature, the pursuit to understand it should be continued. We need to highlight how leadership involves choices of Others and how such choices are circumscribed and influenced by various practices. We must open up for the idea that the accomplishment of leadership will involve all those 'dirty' things that the term leadership seemingly denies: management, manipulation, and so on. We need to start staining the immaculate concept of leadership with exactly such dirty elements in order to understand it.

Notes

1. There are of course exceptions, not least within the current trend of studying leadership-as-practice or as a collective and/or distributed phenomenon (Alvehus, 2019; Carroll, 2016; Crevani, 2018; Sergi, 2016; Simpson et al., 2018) and in conversation analysis-oriented approaches (Clifton, 2006, 2014; Larsson & Lundholm, 2013; Vine et al., 2008). Still, empirical research on this is scarce, and many authors remain vague about the nature of the phenomenon they study.
2. For the purpose at hand, I have deliberately left out Mead's discussion of the relationship between the 'I' (self) and the 'me' (mind). This is a consequence of my choice to focus on what I call docility in Mead's dialectical process. Bringing the 'I/me' question into this brings back the 'full' dialectic, but that discussion is beyond what I can cover in this paper.

3. 'Docility' is sometimes used as a derogatory term. That is not my intention. In the Merriam-Webster dictionary, docile means 'easily taught' or 'easily led or managed', and it 'implies a predisposition to submit readily to control or guidance'. It is in the latter sense I use the term, with an emphasis that this is a predisposition – not an inevitable outcome. Moreover, synonyms such as 'amenable' or 'obedient' suggests that there is a will of another that one is amenable or obedient towards; this is not implied by the way I use docility here. Docility does not presuppose the will of the Other, it is merely the inherent predisposition needed to take the role of the Other. See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/docile>
4. Of course, I do not suggest that we can reduce leadership, or any other complex social phenomenon, to docility. That something is necessary does not mean that it is sufficient.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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