LEADERSHIP AND IDENTITY PROCESSES: CREATING DIALOGUE BETWEEN SOCIO-COGNITIVE AND PSYCHOANALYTIC PERSPECTIVES

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SUMMARY
This paper attempts to contextualize recent changes in the leadership literature using psychoanalytic concepts. It is argued that while psychoanalysis and contemporary socio-cognitive psychology are complementary, they have developed along historically different lines that have impeded mutual dialogue. Socio-cognitive approaches have increasingly emphasized the role of follower processes, first in their emphasis on leadership schemas, then on the more contemporary focus on follower identity processes. Similarly, psychoanalytic views of leadership have traditionally focused on follower processes, in particular, processes of narcissistic identification and oedipal struggles between leaders and followers. The two traditions thus share a common feature in their stressing of the importance of identity formation and maintenance in the leadership process, but diverge in their very different views about what characterizes social identity. The paper attempts to create a dialogue between these two literatures by examining charismatic, leadership schema, and identity theories of leadership from within a psychoanalytic framework. It is argued that this framework furthers leadership thinking in three principal ways. First, it makes central notions of authority in the construction of personal identities, a feature which has historically been key to understanding psychoanalytical views of the self, but has been marginalized in socio-cognitive views, which tend to view the self through the lens of cognitive schema, rather than as vehicles for coping with power relations. Second, the combined framework highlights the processes by which individuals construct normative ideals, showing the power of leadership processes to be primarily based on the ability for leaders to take on a moral aura, rather than in objective perceptions of similarity on the part of followers. Finally, the framework explains notions of charisma that are difficult to reconcile with contemporary socio-cognitive theories of identity. While early Weberian treatments of charisma treated the concept as both separate from and implicated in processes of bureaucratic structure formation, the concept became diluted in socio-cognitive approaches to be akin to a kind of personal bond or liking relationship. Psychoanalysis, however, restores to the charisma notion the complex relationship between structure and authority which was present in the original Weberian conception. Throughout the paper, it is argued that psychoanalysis should not replace the recent socio-cognitive perspective, but that the very trajectory of the latter is bringing it into line with many classical concepts in psychoanalysis, and that initiating a dialogue between the two at this juncture may speed up developments already in the works in the socio-cognitive area.
LEADERSHIP AND IDENTITY PROCESSES: CREATING DIALOGUE BETWEEN SOCIAL COGNITION AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

Recent leadership literature has taken a social-cognitive turn (e.g. Lord & Brown, 2004; 2001; Hogg, 2005; 2001; Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003). While a continuing tradition focuses on leader traits and behaviors (e.g. Zaccaro, 2007; Judge, Bono, Ilies & Gerhardt, 2002), a growing literature examines leader prototypes and self-schema (c.f. Hogg, 2005). These social-cognitive approaches have challenged earlier, big-man visions of leadership, replacing them with follower-based schema theories (e.g. Lord & Maher, 1991; Hogg, 2001). This transition can be understood as an attempt to replace top-down, romanticized theories of leadership with cognitive views and to replace moralized leadership notions with empirical issues of fit. It has also opened the study of leadership to approaches examining in detail the complex psychological processes that lead people to recognize leaders and to follow those who come to embody leadership attributes.

In a largely independent, yet historically parallel movement, psychoanalysis has moved into the field of leadership. Psychoanalysts have explored leadership and projection (e.g. Kets de Vries, 1989), corporate corruption (e.g. Stein, 2007), group dynamics (e.g. Long, 1991), subordinate status (e.g. Oglesky, 1995), neurosis (Kets De Vries and Miller, 1985) and transference (e.g. Diamond & Allcorn, 2003), among other themes. While this literature has, at times, mentioned possible convergences between psychoanalytic ideas and the growing move toward identity-based approaches in leadership (e.g. Goethals, 2005), very little work has been done to explain, enrich, or develop such convergences.

I propose that psychoanalysis can fill several gaps in the leadership literature that are ripe for development. First, because of the unique blurring of the distinction in psychoanalysis between identity and authority, it can mediate current debates between leader-focused and follower identity literatures. I argue that bridging this gap pushes ideas of charismatic leadership closer to their Weberian (1947) origins, origins which have been lost in contemporary discussions of charisma (Beyer, 1999). Second, psychoanalysis can allow a largely quantitative and descriptive social cognition literature on leadership to gain a hold on the normative pressures that leaders represent and exert on followers. This integrations aligns with current concerns with the normative and ethical bases of leadership (e.g. Messick & Bazerman, 1996). Third, because of its conceptually distinct treatment of human subjectivity, psychoanalysis can augment weaknesses in the current follower-identity literature, which tend to neglect non-cognitive aspects of identity, such as ideological and emotional aspects, recently emerging as crucial topics (e.g. Bono & Ilies, 2008; Erez, Misangyi, Vilmos, Johnson, LePine, & Halverson, 2008; Mumford, Espejo, Hunter, Bedell-Avers, Eubanks and Connelly, 2007).

At its base, the current paper uses psychoanalysis to recuperate authority and self-alienation themes in the formation and development of personal identity. When authority is viewed as a constitutive element in the formation of individuals, I argue, the charismatic power of authority figures can be better understood, without sacrificing the emphasis on followership and social cognition that have emerged within leadership thought.

The current paper will unfold as follows: First, I will summarize the progression from leader-based to follower-based views in the mainstream leadership literature, focusing on how issues of identity have recently come to the forefront (e.g. Hogg, 2005; 2001). Next, I will turn to a psychoanalytic conception of identity as a progressive narcissistic development (Freud, 1914), resulting in a dynamic and multifaceted vision of identity. Third, I will unpack the history of leadership theories from a psychoanalytic view, attempting to show how apparent historical debates can be reconciled, while approaching new terrain that has been neglected in prior debates. In to show the value of such disciplinary cross-talk, I will argue
that a renewed emphasis on psychoanalysis opens up possibilities for scholars to a.) Clarify the relationship between personal influence and formal organizational structures, a key problematic in Weber’s original charisma notion, and an important component of contemporary agency-structure debates within organization studies, b.) Reconcile descriptive and normative emphases in leadership, and c.) Explore the relationship between leadership and ideal selves, linking cognition with emotional and ideological perspectives.

LEADERSHIP THEORY: FROM CHARISMA TO PROTOTYPE

As mentioned above, follower-based leadership approaches have tended to compete with earlier top-down, romanticized (e.g. Meindl, 1993) theories of leadership, replacing charismatic leadership notions with empirical issues of leader-follower fit. Below, I briefly outline this progression, to illustrate this movement within the literature.

The search for a point of departure in conceptualizing leadership has led to a tension between a focus on the person of the leader (e.g. Zaccaro, 2007; Judge, et al, 2002) on leader-follower relationships (e.g. Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), or on follower aspects (e.g. Lord & Brown, 2004; 2001). The difficulty in getting a hold of the leadership concept (e.g. Bennis, 2007; Meindl, Erlich & Dukerich, 1985; Pfeffer, 1977), and the subsequent debates between various loci of leadership, may reflect an underlying theoretical problem that is difficult to address in the language of contemporary social psychology. Put briefly: how is it that individuals come to embody a model of authority for others, and how is it that others successfully internalize such models? On what psychological foundations can we theorize a bridge between authority and subjectivity?

Early theories of leadership focused heavily on individual leaders (Zaccaro, 2007), building on Weber’s (1947) notion of charisma. Developing around the charisma notion was a great man view of social forces (Andreas, 2007), with a clear focus on the inspirational leader, a figure who works in the interstices of formal structures to reframe interpretations of the world through inspirational appeals. While Weber’s original formulation places the charismatic leader as a force within the larger context of the creation and overturning of bureaucratic structures (e.g. Andreas, 2007), psychology-based leadership theories moved this focus more squarely on the leader him/herself, forming a literature of neo-charismatic approaches (Fiol, Harris & House, 1999). These approaches include transformational leadership (e.g. Bass, 1985), personality approaches (e.g. Judge et al, 2002; House, Spangler & Woyce, 1991), and behavioral approaches (e.g. House, Woyce & Fodor, 1988).

The individualist bent of approaches emphasizing the traits and behaviors of leaders (see Zaccaro 2007), drew criticism early on (esp. Stogdill, 1948). In the 1970’s, some scholars began to question the importance of individual leaders for group and organizational functioning (e.g. Pfeffer, 1977, Salancik & Pfeffer, 1984;1977) Increasingly, the focus shifted from the ineffable romantic quality of charisma (Meindl, 1993; 1985), to relational and follower aspects, a view which took leadership as a relational quality (e.g. Tyler & Lind, 1992; Graen, 2007). This shift in focus began with exchange-based theories such as LMX (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), in which leadership was considered as emergent from the interactions between leaders and followers. As the focus began to shift more toward followers, however, the mental states of followers vis a vis their leaders began to take prominence (Lord & Maher, 1991; Lord, Foti & DeVader, 1984).

Follower-based approaches used the notion of cognitive prototypes (Rosch, 1978) to think about how organizational members organize and classify views of leaders. Schema-based theories took two main forms, the earlier leadership categorization theory (LCT; Lord, 1977, 1985; Lord, Foti & Phillips, 1982; Lord et al, 1984), followed by the social identity theory of Leadership (SIT-L; Hogg, 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2000). LCT held that people hold ideal mental types of leaders, and evaluate their current leaders by comparing them with these mental types (Lord et al, 1984). SIT-L, however, built on this tradition by insisting that leader
schemas were not independent of, but rather intimately connected to, self-identities, or follower’s schematized views of themselves (Hogg, 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2000).

It is important to note that SIT-L, and subsequent studies that followed this line of research, focused on a particular brand of social identity theory called self-categorization theory (e.g. Turner, 1985), which differed from prior identity approaches by its focus on epistemic versus self-esteem based identity motives. Whereas Tajfel & Turner’s (e.g. 1979) original formulation of social identity theory based the formation of identity on a drive toward group-based self esteem, self-categorization theory was framed around uncertainty avoidance (Hogg & Terry 2000), a self-verification motive that involved individuals’ attempts to build a coherent self view.

I argue that social identity approaches are the culmination of the theoretical movement from leader-focused to follower-based approaches, for several reasons. First, unlike charismatic, trait, or behavioral theories, social identity approaches locate leadership in the individual and collective mental states of followers. Second, unlike leadership schema theory, social identity approaches move the object of schematization from the leader proper to the self, thus making SIT-L even more follower-based than LCT. Third, by shifting within social identity theory from enhancement to verification-based views of the self, this approach removes the emphasis on striving, replacing it with cognitive matching. In other words, while the self-enhancement perspective sees the self as motivated by a normative ideal, self-categorization theory tends to occlude this motivation, focusing more on self-coherence (Hogg & Terry, 2000). It is precisely this coherence view of the self that psychoanalysis will problematize, as I describe below.

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND THE LEADERSHIP ROLE

Since Freud’s Totem & Taboo (1912-13) and Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego (Freud, 1921), the study of hierarchy, authority and leadership of groups has had an important role in psychoanalytic thought. On the other hand, with some important exceptions (e.g Kets de Vries, 1989; Stein, 2007; Goethals, 2005), psychoanalysis has played a somewhat minor role in leadership studies, although psychology more generally has been central to the development of the leadership field. That psychological perspectives in leadership theory have been so important has meant that topics such as identity, authority, leader perceptions, and leader member relations have been widely studied. That psychoanalysis independently deals with many of the same topics has meant that these topics have developed largely without some of the important insights that psychoanalysis could offer.

The movement in the academic leadership literature from romanticized images of charismatic mobilization to cognitive fit models echoes relevant psychoanalytic notions of ego formation in relation to power figures. In the following discussion I recast competing theories in terms of varying pictures of ego development in relation to powerful others.

Very briefly, the basis of mental structures according to Freud is a libidinous drive that provides the motive force for later developing mental structures (Freud, 1923). This drive takes the form of a search for pleasure, or in its later Lacanian formulation, a chaotic and irreverent bursting forth of existential fulfillment called jouissance (Lacan, 1992). However, this urge inevitably meets resistance from a reality which does not give way to immediate resolution (Freud, 1914). The vicissitudes of the libido in the struggle with this reality principle give rise to notions objects and the self, and constitute one’s relation to the world through processes of narcissistic self-development (for an organizational exploration, see Schwartz, 1990). Importantly, the cognitive structures so constituted, even if they do not appear as desires, are formed in relation to desire, and reflect transformations of desire.

In On Narcissism (Freud, 1914), Freud presents the predicament of the developing psyche as the attempt to recuperate a lost sense of omnipotent unity with the world, a utopian image referred to as the ideal ego. However, this irrecuperable totality proves impossible to
achieve, and the ego develops in an attempt to replace this lost primary narcissistic object in a secondary narcissism, establishing substitute identities that the subject finds readily available in social roles and self-identities. Subsequently, the subject appropriates an identity and is motivated to strive towards attaining this identity, referred to as the ego-ideal, a type of mental model of the self (Carr & Lapp, 2005). The difference between the ideal ego and the ego-ideal can be summarized in the following way: The former is an attempt to regain an indefinable narcissistic omnipotence, often by irrationally idealizing eminent others (Lagache, 1961), whereas the latter arises when the narcissistic impulse leads the subject to adopt self-identities that seem to promise the achievement of this omnipotence (Mijolla-Mellor, 2005). The ego-ideal has thus been described as a hope, a project Chasseguet-Smirgel (1985, p.29) that the individual undertakes in a spirit of is a autonomous aspiration Blos (1985, p38).

Ironically, this spirit of autonomy and self-assertion finds satisfaction only in pre-existing social models, and involves injunctions and demands for obedience to identity norms. As a consequence, the normative element involved in the motivated project of the self can also involve a self-loathing, punishing function, the super-ego (Freud, 1933). Both the ego-ideal and the super-ego describe mental structures associated with aspirations and esteem with regards to an image of personal betterment. However, the two structures represent different standpoints with regards to this striving. The ego-ideal is a self-image, representing an embodiment of the values and traits that an individual holds in high regard. The individual develops a consciousness of his/her ego through a nostalgic yearning for an archaic satisfaction (Freud, 1914), and constructs an idealized image of the self whose actualization would secure such a state of satisfaction. Essentially, then, the ego-ideal represents the image of virtue for an individual, the model of the well-lived life. The super-ego, by contrast, is an internalized image of an authority figure (for example, the parental figure) from which the person receives normative pressure and which is the seat of morality. The super ego arises out of the Oedipal complex, an identity transforming event in which the forming subject is pitted against a paternal authority figure (e.g. Schwartz, 2002). The Oedipal context is resolved when the subject identifies with this authority figure, and comes to internalize the paternal demands as moral values (Freud, 1933). The super-ego, unlike the ego, is not a rational adaptive capacity but rather a normative, desiring force. In fact, while the super-ego appears, moralistically, as repressive and antagonistic to a person’s drives, it is in fact an expression of those very drives, of the internalized image of the demands of the authority figure. The individual, in a sense, swallows whole the image of authority, whose demands turn the libido back upon the individual, providing a constant moral imperative. Thus while the ego-ideal and the super-ego both objectify the subject through a normative gaze, the gaze of the ego-ideal is essentially aspirational, whereas the super-ego is self-punishing.

What is key to note for the purposes of this paper is that ideal ego, ego-ideal and super-ego are all aspects of the individual’s self-constitution, and describe different aspects of this constitution, throwing into doubt theories that stress a unified notion of identity. More specifically, these constituents describe different moments in the attempt by subjects to negotiate their relation to an unyielding world. The ideal ego reflects the subject’s yearning for unity with a beloved primary object, for Freud, the maternal object (e.g. Freud, 1905). The ego-ideal reflects the aspirational identities that the subject self-consciously adopts in the hope of reaching this ideal. The super-ego reflects the subjectivized authority relations with which the subject identifies, and by which the subject punishes him/herself for the aloofness and failure that accompany this impossible task. On the basis of this distinction, we led to two complementary principles, first, that an examination of self-identity should take into account the dynamic strivings of the self towards an external object, and second, that a description of authority relations should take into account how these relations depend on the subjective introjection of authority figures into the structure of the self.
With these two foundational principles, we can return to the debates within recent leadership literature between leader-based and follower-based perspectives. Each approach, it is argued, capitalizes on some aspects of the leader-follower relation, but because both lack a theoretical language to create a bridge between leadership and followers, they do not tell the whole story. In the following section, I propose how a psychoanalytic language can help to think through these approaches.

INTERPRETING LEADERSHIP THINKING THROUGH PSYCHOANALYSIS
Charisma, Neo-charisma, and the Vicissitudes of the Ego
As described above, charismatic and neo-charismatic theories of leadership focus on unique traits, qualities, or behaviors of leaders that set them apart from non-leaders. Such leaders are described as exemplary individuals, who create extraordinary effects through their personal capacities (House & Beatz, 1979, p. 399). In the neo-charismatic approaches, these capacities are often treated as tools that a leader can deploy; Bass (1999), for instance states that every ranges from charismatic to laissez-faire styles (p545).

Beyer (1999) critiqued the neo-charisma approaches, claiming that, in order to apply the charisma concept to everyday business contexts, scholars had tamed the magnetism inherent in the original conception. In the attempt to recuperate this quasi-mystical aspect of visionary leaders, some scholars have referred to the idealization component inherent in charisma, for instance, in Bass and Avolio’s (e.g. 1993) notion of idealized influence. However, the nature of subjective idealization is largely absent from these literatures.

By contrast, the process of idealization and its relation to authority figures is central to the identity forming process described by psycholanalysis. Using the notions of ideal ego, ego-ideal, and super-ego, the charisma phenomenon may be interpreted as the re-emergence of libidinal jouissance, projected onto the form of the omnipotent authority figure. The follower, rather than simply perceiving the leader as imbued with special powers (e.g. House & Beatz, 1979), derives vicarious empowerment from identification with the leader. The function of the charismatic leader, in this vision, is not to inspire followers through a show of personal excellence, but rather to embody jouissance, orienting the ego-struggles of followers.

Following psychoanalytic theory, this struggle can take different forms, depending on the nature of the narcissistic identification of the follower with the leader, a variable which to my knowledge has not been studied in the organizational literature. In a primary narcissistic relation (Freud, 1914), the charismatic leader appears as a vision of perfection to be followed, an all-encompassing good imbued with a gift of grace, a view clearly in line with the early theological vision of Weber with regards to charisma (Weber, 1947). In a secondary narcissistic relation (Freud, 1914), the follower constructs a sense of identification with the leader, using the figure of the leader as an aspirational target, in line with the ego-ideal. The aspiration-identificatory relation can be seen somewhat in the earlier versions of social identity theory, which focused on positive self-strivings (e.g. Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Finally, in an Oedipal relation (e.g. Freud, 1933), the leader takes on a super-egoic function, wherein the follower’s identification with the leader results in the internalization of authority relations and the subsequent guilt associated with being an unworthy subject, for having inadequately embodied the symbolic demands of authority. This relation has received much less treatment in the literature; however, some authors have touched upon it using Lacanian notions of symbolic indebtedness (e.g. Arnaud, 2002).

From the above, it seems that purely leader-focused theories leave out an important part of the charisma story, particularly when they neglect psychodynamic processes that go on between leaders and followers. This individualistic bias has been pointed out by several scholars (e.g. Beyer, 1999, Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), with exchange theories noting the importance of relationships, but focusing on relationships in terms of leader follower outcomes of quality exchange (e.g. Graen, Hui, & Taylor, 2006) rather than on the complex
psychological identifications and struggles with authority from within the minds of followers. On the other hand, some critiques of trait-based leadership have focused on how leaders provide heuristic means of explaining complex and uncertain environments (Beyer, 1999, Pfeffer, 1981), thus giving rise to individual charismatic leader perceptions as a type of fundamental attribution error (e.g. Pfeffer, 1981). These critiques, similarly to psychoanalysis, view leader perceptions as a function of follower psychological needs. However, by focusing on sensemaking and epistemic coherence, they miss the essential psychoanalytic insight that followers project charisma perceptions onto leaders in an attempt to establish identity models essential to their social and personal development.

By contrast, follower based theories such as LCT (Lord et al, 1984; Lord & Maher, 1991) and SIT-L (Hogg, 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2000) focus specifically on role identities, and thus have a closer affinity to a psychoanalytic perspective. Still, the cognitive bent of both of these theories results in the loss of a key insight of charismatic and neo-charismatic perspectives, namely, the inspirational and quasi-mystic hold over followers that leaders can exert. In moving from charismatic qualities to follower cognitions, the gift of grace disappeared as a vestige of a romanticized view of the charismatic leader (e.g. Beyer, 1999). A psychoanalytic view of leadership returns this gift, treating it as a gift from followers.

Social-Cognitive Approaches and the Internalization of Leadership

Leadership Schemas as Subjectivized Charisma. Critiques of the personalist bases of leadership research in the 1970’s and 1980’s (e.g. Salancik & Pfeffer, Pfeffer, 1977) gave rise to a growth in follower-based views that focused on leadership perceptions by organizational members (e.g. Lord & Maher, 1991; Meindl et al, 1985). Using social-cognitive research on categorization, LCT (Lord, 1977,1985; Lord et al., 1984 ; Lord, et al, 1982; Nye & Forsyth, 1991) attempted to examine leadership as a knowledge structure in the minds of followers, and focused on the alignment of implicit leadership categories with leader qualities (for a meta-analytic review, see Lord, DeVader & Alliger, 1986).

This shift to perceptions of leader performance was important in the light of various developments related to the leadership area, for example, the finding that inspirational leaders often impact subjective perceptions more than they impact objective performance (Lowe, Kroeck, and Sivasubramaniam 1996), the finding that performance often affects leadership evaluations more than highly evaluated leaders affect performance (e.g. Agle, Nagarajan, Sonnenfeld & Srinivasan, 2006), and the use of cognitive biases such the fundamental attribution error to explain leadership perceptions (e.g. Pfeffer, 1981). For the purposes of the current paper, the main importance of LCT was that it viewed charisma as an image that followers projected upon leaders. Thus, the inspirational leader was reframed as a cognitive structure and could be studied in terms of perceptual, memory and attribution processes, treating leadership as a psychological phenomenon (e.g. Lord & Maher, 1991).

According to LCT, attributions of leadership involve a relatively simple categorization (leader/non-leader or leader/follower) of the stimulus person into preexisting hierarchically oriented categories (Foti, Fraser & Lord, 1982, p 326). While viewing leadership as a primarily cognitive phenomenon did open up the black box of the individual in order to study psychological processes, it also privileged cold processes of cognitive processing over hot processes of emotion, motivation and moral intuition, processes that we now know affect social judgment making (e.g. Haidt, 2001). Recent work in the charisma area, for example, has demonstrated the importance of affect transfer (Bono & Ilies, 2008; Erez et al, 2008) to the functioning of charisma, a point which was strongly emphasized in the original work by Weber (1947). Given this strong link between charisma and emotional contagion, it is highly unlikely that leadership attributions would be made purely on the basis of a prototype matching process, a point which Erez et al. (2005) emphasize.
As the tide in this literature moves toward a more emotion-laded view of leadership, psychoanalytic views become more useful as ways to think about the emotional bases of leader-perceptions. While Erez et al. (2008), for example, establish an empirical correlation between leader and follower affect, since they neglect a psychodynamic view of emotions, they are left to explain their hypotheses though a process of cognitive mimicry, drawing on other works that have established the presence of such a mimicry (e.g. Barsade, 2002; Bartel & Saavedra, 2000). But if, as described above, we can conceive of leadership schema as attempts by the subject to establish an identity though the internalization of authority roles, then affect transfer becomes better understood as the vicarious jouissance that the follower experiences via the introjected authoritative Other. From a psychoanalytic perspective, emotional mimicry makes sense because the very emotional life of the individual is in a sense borrowed, and the individual inhabits a matrix of symbolic authority which provides the necessary coordinates for any emotional display.

Even more relevant, however, is that the attribution of the term leader to an individual is normatively loaded, and a psychological theory of leadership categorization should give some account of how an individual comes to inhabit this normatively privileged position. The ego dynamics resulting from the narcissistic progression (Freud, 1914) give grounding to such a normative account because all the ego-constitutive steps that give rise to self-knowledge are, at base, attempts to return to one’s origins. These origins are imagined as a mythical beginning and ending point, and cognition itself is simply the working out of a labyrinth whose goal is to reach this imaginary point.

Seen in this light, all cognition contains a normative element, because thought inherently attempts to reach an idealized origin, constructing schematic structures to represent this ideal while by this very construction blocking its goal. These structures may be thin, as in the almost thoughtless submission to the ideal ego, the almost supernatural figure of the superstar or world-changing leader. They may be rigidly stereotypical, as in the super-egoic internalization of a leader-type which is rigidly applied according to consistent criteria. Or they may be reflective, contemplative and ambitious, as in an individual’s earnest attempt to create a self-project by emulating a mentor, who comes to stand for the ego-ideal. In each case, the decision to be made is thoroughly normative, for it responds to the fundamental question How should a person be? Leadership theory simply must at some point deal with this hard question, and psychoanalysis provides tools for thinking through these issues.

Social identity and the Unified Self. The transition from leader-focused to follower-focused views was continued and developed in the SIT-L perspective, which modified LCT in two important ways. First, LCT still focused on leader qualities, only moving these to the cognitive attributions of followers and issues of schema-fit. However, SIT-L emphasized leader fit within follower self-schemas, rather than fit with leadership schemas, creating a stronger focus on the link between self-identity and leadership. Second, while LCT treated cognitive prototypes as individual (Fielding & Hogg, 1997), SIT-L focused on the social bases of identity formation, effectively conceiving of identity in terms of social or depersonalized categories (Hogg 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Fielding & Hogg, 1997). While SIT-L converges with psychoanalysis in emphasizing the importance of identity in leadership cognitions, it frames identity in a way that is very different from psychoanalysis, leading the two theories to fundamentally different places. This difference rests mainly in the motivational structure of identity, emphasized in psychoanalysis but not in the self-categorization approach of SIT-L and on two theoretical divergences resulting from this.

First, SIT-L holds that leaders emerge in a process of follower identification. Because the unity of self-identities is not questioned, identity becomes equivalent to similarity, such that leaders emerge who are similar to the prototypical self-identities of followers (Hogg, 2001, 2005). These identities are more or less coherent social groupings, and no attempt is
made to get under the process of identification with social groups to understand a.) How particular social prototypes become appropriated and internalized or b.) Why this should happen in the first place, other than the general motive of uncertainty reduction (Hogg 2001).

By contrast, the problem of the establishment of an identity out of the myriad pieces of the social world is the defining problem of psychoanalysis (Schroeder & Carlson, 2007). In most psychoanalytic views, the self is inherently split, that is, because the ego-ideal a symptom of the fractured nature of the self, and an attempt to patch together a unified self, it is not possible to equate identification with sameness in psychoanalysis. This is clearest in the Lacanian (1977) idea of the mirror stage, in which the individual forms an identity by outwardly projecting an image of him/herself, always in a distorted and alienated fashion.

This difference is important for thinking about identification with leaders because, while both perspectives stress identification, the differing views of the nature of identity lead to quite different conclusions. In psychoanalysis, identification brings with it alienation, the fact of seeing oneself (or one’s self-ideal) as outside of oneself, and thus combines identity with lack. It is precisely this lack with creates the desire associated with emulating an authority figure, a desire difficult to explain if the self remains whole during identification.

An important corollary follows from this point. In SIT-L, complete identification with a leader should lead to an infinitely positive relation between follower and leader, while differentiation should lead to an antagonistic relationship. For example, Hogg & Terry (2000) distinguish between self categorization based leadership and leadership based on structural differentiation, a distinction which they use to contrast virtuous and abusive leadership. In psychoanalysis, however, this distinction breaks down, given the fact that complete identification would destroy the leader-follower bond, since the difference giving rise to the ideal relation would be erased. To fully identify with the Other, in other words, would risk the danger of our getting too close to the object and thus losing the lack itself (Zizek, 1991 p. 10). It is this subtle interplay between identification and alienation that establishes the charismatic myth, framing the leader as an improved version of the self, or more precisely, what the self would look like were it to become fully realized.

Second, and relatedly, the SIT-L view of identity as holistic and unified reflects its origins in the cognitive psychology tradition. Indeed, Tajfel’s (e.g. 1969) early work was in the Gestalt tradition, which focused on the cognitive treatment of figures and wholes. This cognitive bent may explain the underplaying of the normative bases of social cognition in this tradition. For example, an important basis of the SIT-L perspective is the idea that liking and complying with leaders is a function of their prototypicality in terms of self-schemas (Hogg, 2001, 2005). The position is essentially the following: Leadership is a function of liking, which is in turn a function of both salience and similarity (Hogg, 2001). Leaders that fit schematized self-prototypes are more likely to benefit from cognitive heuristics because they appear perceptually distinctive (e.g. figural against a background) or cognitively salient (Hogg, 2005, p. 60). In addition, because people tend to exhibit greater liking for people similar to them, self-prototypical leaders will be more liked, and this will lead to leader-follower alignment in the organization. The motivational drive for these effects is the reduction of cognitive uncertainty (Hogg, 2001).

It should be evident from the above discussion that while identification in psychoanalysis is a guilt-ridden and traumatic process, in SIT-L is largely descriptive and sanitized of inner struggles. In psychoanalysis, the ego does not only recognize itself in the identified object, but strives toward self-realization through it. Thus, what is at stake is not simply the reduction of uncertainty, a primarily cognitive process, but rather the narcissistic struggle by the follower to achieve an ideal, a thoroughly normative picture of the self that is absent from the prototype discussion. While SIT-L does not deny this libidinal push toward an ideal (what in social identity theory has been referred to as the self-esteem hypothesis,
present in Tajfel and Turner’s 1979 work), it does tend to push questions of self-worth to the side, and thus misses the moral dimension involved in the formation of subjectivity.

This point follows naturally from the previous one, namely, that of similarity versus difference in leader-follower relations. SIT-L, following much of current thought in social cognition (e.g. Fiske & Taylor, 1991), views the subject in self-categorical terms, such that individuals have a self-schema, and are motivated to see that self in a positive light. Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, holds a dynamic view of the subject, in which an inarticulable and noumenal subject struggles to express itself by constructing narcissistic identities which never quite fit. By not getting behind the traumatic origins of self-identities, SIT-L loses the important insight that self-schemas always hide the subject in and through the very act of embodying the subject.

Whence the Super-ego: The Great Disappearing Act

One consequence of this sanitization of the self-leader relations, similarly to the taming of charisma cited by Beyer (1999), is the disappearance of the equivalent of the super-ego in mainstream leadership research. Occluded is the self-alienation and objectification that identification with a powerful Other entails. This self-objectification, present in the ideal ego (as nostalgic longing) and the ego-ideal (as imaginary self-image), it is most acutely felt in the super-ego function, which involves actively submitting oneself to unrelenting judgment.

The disappearance of a super-ego function in leadership theory seems odd, since this area deals inherently with issues of power relations, and the super-ego relies on internalized power relations (Freud, 1933). Indeed, several organizational scholars have viewed the symbolic norms of an organization as essentially related to Oedipal processes involved with the super-ego (e.g. Arnaud, 2002; Long; 1991; Styhre, 2008). The absence of the super-ego is apparent in both leader-centered views and in follower-centered views. For example, the neo-charismatic construct of transformational leadership (e.g. Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985) emphasizes follower empowerment and moral uplift. For abusive, punishing, or immoral leadership, Bass retains the label pseudotransformational leadership (Bass, 1999, 1993). LCT, in its social-cognitive turn, likewise disregards normative notions such as the super-ego; while it is accepted that people have leader schemas, these schemas are treated as any other cognitive category (e.g. Greenwald & Banaji, 1989). Indeed, it is hard to imagine a leadership prototype that does not include any normative judgment about a person or a comparison between that person and the self. In SCT-L, this comparison appears, and is a salient feature of the theory, but again without any judgmental component. Again, it is difficult to imagine following a leader because that leader embodies one’s cognitive ideal prototype of oneself, without judging the leader and oneself normatively in terms of that prototype. And if one’s leader is more self-prototypical that oneself, then it is likely that the subject will feel awe (ideal ego), ambition (ego-ideal) or self-loathing (super-ego) as a result. Limiting his/her reaction to liking based on similarity seems psychologically thin by comparison.

On the other hand, psychoanalytically informed views, which place issues of punishment as foundational to identity development, have historically explored the sadistic and tyrannical side of leadership (e.g. Goethals, 2005; Kets de Vries, 2006; Stein, 2007). For example, Stein (2007) describes how unresolved Oedipal issues may have lain at the heart of the Enron scandal, and Kets de Vries (2006; 2004) has recently explored the psychological bases of despotic leadership. With regards to leadership perceptions, Goethals (2005) reminds us that according to Freud, authority figures are not only seen as charismatic, but also as dangerous and threatening, leading to ambivalent feelings by followers that are difficult to explain with prototype-based theories. This focus on the moral ambivalence of leadership facilitates psychoanalytic approaches in important contemporary issues such as corporate corruption (e.g. Stein, 2007), worker precariousness (e.g. Deranty, 2008), and crisis management (e.g. Stein, 2004). Recuperating the notion of the super-ego provides inroads
into explaining how the dark side of leadership may be built into the very concept of leadership, rather than as a marginal aberration.

DISCUSSION

To this point, I have attempted to demonstrate how many contemporary issues in leadership theory can be clarified through maintaining a dialogue with psychoanalysis. The above criticisms do not imply that such approaches should be replaced by or are inferior to a psychoanalytic understanding; on the contrary, it was my objective to show how these approaches have moved along a trajectory that has progressively demonstrated the importance of self-processes in leadership, and has does so largely independently of psychoanalysis. However, the very cognitive turn that has produced interesting results in this literature has also occluded issues of irrationality, mystique, and blind authority that make leadership an interesting field of study (Beyer, 1999). By maintain a dialogue with psychoanalysis, I argue that mainstream leadership theory can offer its wealth of empirical results to psychoanalysis, while profiting from the interpretive system that has developed in psychoanalysis over the last century. In this section, I summarize some of the benefits of this dialogue

First, psychoanalytic views, because of their dual focus on desire and jouissance, on the one hand, and on authority and Law on the other hand, work importantly at the interface of agency and structure, and can thus inform the agency-structure debate that is central in organization studies, an area in which some work already begun apply psychoanalysis (Cederstrom, 2006). Psychoanalysis contributes here by viewing laws through the lens of the super-ego (Freud, 1933) or the symbolic function (Lacan, 2002), seeing the cold formality of bureaucratic structures as fundamentally conditioned by the hot dynamics of personal agency.

We may note that the relationship between hot charisma and cold formal structure was a key feature in Weberian charisma. According to Weber (1947), charisma explained social influence in precisely those areas in which bureaucratic norms did not govern. Indeed, contemporary institutional theories have often viewed formal structures as concretized versions of agentic action, (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000), structures in which action-forming power is locked within background rules, and thus appears impersonal. For example, Meyer & Jepperson (2000) describe institutional norms as the reconstruction of god as basic principles (p 105). On the other hand, when such rules and structures are not present, it may be that the force of agency-structuring power is personalized in the figure of those who stand in positions of command.

The Weberian, institutional vision of charisma, as distinct from more recent trait theories (c.f. Beyer, 1999), can be easily reconciled to a psychoanalytic perspective. Referring to Oedipal terms, before the establishment of the impersonal Law, there is the authoritarian, decadent paternal enjoyment (Freud, 1965), and paternal authority later becomes depersonalized into general rules for conduct and internalized into the individual’s moral conscience. As Lacan (2002, p. 309) states [T]he true function of the Father . . . is fundamentally to unite (and not to oppose) a desire to the Law,’” that is, to recast the agentic pulse of the subject in the symbolic mettle of society. This internalization of paternal demands tames the violence of authority, and gives the subject a sense of control. Institutional perspectives such as those of Meyer and Jepperson have thus echoed psychoanalytic notions of the formation of formal structure. Because this idea, foundational to psychoanalysis, has been articulated over almost century, psychoanalysis can offer a language with which to express ideas that are currently being worked out in organizational theory.

Second, as discussed above, a psychoanalytic perspective reinstates leadership as a morally relevant phenomenon, that is, one that deals with ideals and normative exigencies rather than simply categorization and reduction of uncertainty. One of the most interesting aspects of leadership is that it is neither purely descriptive nor purely moralistic, but resides in the interstices of the two. Leadership is not purely descriptive because being a leader is not
equivalent to holding power or exerting influence, but involves an ideal vision for followers. It is not purely moralistic because there is a difference between simply being morally admirable and being a leader, since leaders also exert empirical effects on the social systems they inhabit.

Understanding how the fact of influence meshes with the normative power of an ideal is something difficult in an empirical tradition which emphasizes the fact-value distinction, a difficulty which has become increasingly salient in philosophy (e.g. Putnam, 2002). This difficulty becomes reflected in an empirical tradition that struggles to explain not only why people are categorized as leaders, but why such a categorization makes us feel obliged to follow them. As explained above, psychoanalysis does not suffer from this problem, because it does not view our categories as prior to our strivings, but rather as an outcome and a product of our strivings. This inversion, which de-centers the self, resolves the problem of why a self would follow an other, because in an important sense the self is already a product of following.

Highlighting the normative aspect of leader perception opens several theoretical possibilities. First, it unmasks attempts to rationalize leadership processes by viewing followership as compliance, and emphasizes the internalization and identification aspects of persuasion (e.g. O’Reilly & Chatman, 1986). At the same time, in the notion of the split-self it gives a theoretical base for internalization and identification. Individuals internalize and identify with powerful other in a self-alienated attempt to find themselves. This attempt is tragic because their selves are not in the other with which they identify but are a function of the search itself. It is ideological because in their search, the clues they find have been laid out for them in a network of social roles that scaffold their attempts at self-discovery. Without the notion of a split-self, neither the tragic nor the ideological aspects of this dynamic are visible, because the choice of identifying with a leader appears as if made by an already constituted self, and not an existential choice about who to become.

Second, and relatedly, psychoanalysis provides a critique as to the ideological nature of current leadership theory itself, as an attempt to sanitize authority process by seeing leader identification as essentially epistemically driven, rather than the politically salient self-enhancement motivation described by earlier identity theorists (e.g. Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As many (e.g. Butler, 2000; Althusser, 1971; Zizek, 2004) have argued, the symbolic image of authority constitutes ideology itself, and any attempt to create an identity must rely on the symbolic ideological nexus within which the individual is embedded. From this perspective, identification with leaders is thoroughly epistemic, reducing subjective uncertainty, but it is also ideologically engaged. By glossing over the self-enhancement motive of identification, much leadership theory implicitly occludes this ideological dimension of identification.

Following this point raises some difficult questions about the place of leadership in society. If identification involves a hierarchical projection of authoritative others by a fundamentally lacking self, whereby these others gain a charismatic aura by virtue of their imagined superiority, how does identification with leaders combine with an ethic of liberal democracy that posits formal equality among persons? Is, for example, a psychoanalytic view of leadership consistent with liberal ideas about human dignity and worth? Can we re-insert notions of the ego-ideal or super-ego into our view of persons and still hold on to the intrinsic self-sanctity of the liberal subject? Seen in this light, the dialogue between self-unity views in social psychology and psychoanalytic views over the self may reflect struggles over how to cleave together a the sanctity of the self with an ethic of leadership. The former view has brought leaders down to earth by making them prototypes of everyday social groups. Can psychoanalysis reinsert notions of authority, guilt, and self-separateness without radically undermining a liberal ethos? If not, where are we left? The richness and importance of such a dialogue offers many possibilities for the future of leadership studies.
Third, the vantage point of psychoanalysis helps unify leader and follower-centered approaches. From a psychoanalytic perspective, both leaders and followers are co-constituted in the interpersonal dynamic, such that leader and follower centered views are not mutually exclusive. In this respect, psychoanalysis follows other relational views such as leader-member exchange (LMX) theory; however, the relational aspect in psychoanalysis goes deeper to explore how the very personae of the exchange are constituted in and through their relating to one another. In this framework, leader and follower collude in enacting a relational script, whereby each takes on a complementary role in a psychological game writ large. The leader stands in for the archaic paternal authority, gaining a seemingly unexplainable power from this position, and the followers can gain a sense of stability and vicarious enjoyment from this authority.

Notwithstanding the above points, there are clear lacunas within a psychoanalytic approach to leadership that call for future research. Given the importance of linking the authority structure of leadership with identity processes of individuals, a key question is that of how symbolic authority structures at work become internalized in individual identity structures, and why certain elements of a person’s surroundings undergo this internalization while others do not. To cite Zizek (2009): the central mystery of the big Other: the point at which the big Other, the anonymous symbolic order, gets subjectivized; in other words, it remains to be seen how exactly the leader gets into the head of the subject. Research in this area would examine, for example, how certain leadership processes can promote relatively unconscious ideal egoic follower support, versus the more self-conscious ego-ideal identification, versus the hypercritical super-egoic leadership internalization, and how such differences affect the workplace.

In addition, recent psychoanalytic work has conceived of identification with authority as equivalent to the internalization of a symbolic social nexus of meanings (e.g. Arnaud, 2002), and has stressed focusing on group (e.g. Goethals, 2005), organization, and system (e.g. Fotaki, 2006) levels of analysis. This multi-level focus creates a need to unpack the relation between this symbolic macro-structure and the figure of the individual leader. If the authority structure used to harness individual identity is essentially a social matrix, then under what circumstances does this power become condensed into a single individual, and how does the institutional authority of social symbols differ from the personal authority of a powerful leader? This question, as discussed above, brings us around to the question of charisma versus bureaucracy that Weber put at the center of his theory, but has been overlooked in the charisma literature.

Both of these research agendas imply not a clean break with the mainstream leadership literature, but an extension of themes already present under the surface. In the former case, psychoanalysis would enrich existing notions of identity, while in the latter case, psychoanalysis would be a tool to bring current leadership theories back to their origins. In the past decades, psychoanalysis has been applied to areas as diverse as political science, legal theory, literary criticism, and women’s studies. In the organizational literature, it has been present, but has remained a peripheral voice. The current moment, I have argued, is ripe for an integration of psychoanalytic ideas into the mainstream of leadership studies.

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environmental uncertainty, and top management team perceptions of CEO charisma. 


