Dichotomies, dialectics and dilemmas: New directions for critical leadership studies?

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Abstract
This article builds on Fairhurst and Connaughton’s proposals for future research agendas in leadership studies by critically examining three key themes in the leadership literature: dichotomies, dialectics, and dilemmas. The first section argues that mainstream leadership research frequently relies on conceptual dichotomies which are often multiple, inter-related, and proliferating. Critiques of dichotomization are suggestive of more dialectical forms of analysis and these are discussed in the second section. Dialectical studies can surface important questions about organizational power relations, paradoxes and contradictions that are typically under-explored within mainstream leadership studies. The third section proposes an additional, future research theme for critical perspectives, namely whether and if so why, how, and with what consequences leaders may engage in discourses of denial regarding the dilemmas and tensions of organizational life. The article concludes by arguing that re-framing leadership dichotomies as multiple, intersecting dialectics can open up fresh lines of enquiry and generate important insights about the complex and situated relations of power and identity that comprise leadership and followership dynamics.

Keywords
Dichotomies, dialectics, dilemmas, power, identity, paradox, tension, contradiction, denial

Introduction
Arguing for a “communication-centred view of leadership,” Fairhurst and Connaughton (F&C) present an impressive review of a diverse series of paradigms and perspectives. In practice, the dynamics of leadership and communication are often inextricably linked so F&C’s concern with inter-disciplinary integration is most welcome. From a critical perspective, equally helpful is their fourth value commitment which states that “leadership communication is inherently power-based, a site of contestation about the nature of...
leadership” (p. 5). This foregrounding of power processes and the politics of meaning is to be welcomed particularly within leadership studies where such issues are routinely sidelined by the dominant mainstream perspectives of functionalism, positivism, and psychologism. Drawing on critical perspectives, the following article seeks to build on F&C’s proposals for future research agendas in leadership studies.

In relation to “power-based” research, F&C focus on Critical Management Studies (CMS). One associated paradigm not explicitly considered in their review is that of Critical Leadership Studies (CLS): a growing area of interest, particularly in European leadership research which views power as central to leadership dynamics (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Collinson, 2011). CLS build on CMS to highlight the numerous inter-related ways in which power, identity, and context are embedded in leadership dynamics. Although heterogeneous and diverse, critical perspectives share a focus on the situated power relations and identity dynamics through which leadership discursive practices are socially constructed, frequently rationalized, sometimes resisted, and occasionally transformed (e.g. Banks, 2008; Ford, 2006; Nye, 2008; Tourish, 2014).

Whilst CMS and CLS both examine situated power relations and their reproduction in particular structures, identities, and practices, there are important differences between them that should also be acknowledged. First and foremost, CLS explicitly recognize that, for good and/or ill, leaders and leadership dynamics exert significant power and influence over contemporary organizational processes. They acknowledge, for example, that it is leaders who typically exercise considerable control over: scarce resources; decision making; structures, rules and regulations; formal communications; strategies and visions; corporate cultures; performance management; rewards and sanctions; and hiring and firing. Yet, many CMS writers tend to ignore or underplay leadership as a field of study. Despite their espoused concern to examine the exercise of power and control, they tend to focus exclusively on management and organization, viewing leadership as more suited to practitioners, to functionalist perspectives, and to the psychological study of individual leaders.

By contrast, CLS emphasize that leadership and management are often interwoven forms of organizational power and identity that are not as easily separable as is sometimes assumed. CLS also recognize that despite typically being associated with those in positions of formal authority, leaders can emerge informally in more subordinated and dispersed positions and locations, as well as in oppositional organizations such as trade unions (Knowles, 2007) and revolutionary movements (Rejai, 1979). Whilst emphasizing the importance of power dynamics, there is also a growing recognition in CLS that leadership relations are typically not so asymmetrical and top-down that they are invariably one-way and all-determining. Three related points follow. First, CLS highlight the significance of followers’ agency, knowledgeability, and potential for resistance, whether explicit (e.g. strikes) and/or disguised (e.g. output restriction). Second, they emphasize that leadership dynamics can have unintended and contradictory consequences which leaders do not always understand, anticipate, and/or of which they are unaware. Third, CLS examine how leadership/followership dynamics are frequently reproduced through identity security-seeking strategies (Collinson, 2003, 2006) that can have paradoxical outcomes (e.g. intensifying the insecurity that identity strategies were designed to overcome). To summarize this overall point: the critical focus on leadership differentiates CLS from CMS.

Building on F&C’s proposals for future research agendas, this article discusses three key themes in the leadership literature: dichotomies, dialectics, and dilemmas. The article also proposes an additional future research theme for CLS, namely whether and if so why, how
and with what consequences, leaders may engage in discourses of denial regarding the power effects, dilemmas and tensions of organizational life. The first section critically examines the nature, extent and impact of dichotomization in leadership studies. It argues that leadership research tends to rely on conceptual dichotomies that are often multiple, inter-related, and proliferating. Critiques of dichotomization are suggestive of more dialectical forms of analysis and these are discussed in the second section. As F&C acknowledge, dialectical studies can surface important questions about organizational power relations, conflicts, tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions that are typically under-explored or marginalized within mainstream leadership studies. The third section highlights the (neglected) extent to which practicing leaders may seek to deny or underplay dilemmas and tensions. Indeed, dichotomization may itself be viewed as an attempt to eschew from analysis ambiguity, paradox, and tension, as the first section now discusses.

Dichotomizing leadership

F&C valuably acknowledge the tendency in the leadership literature to dichotomize power and influence, as well as power and resistance. Nevertheless, this dichotomizing tendency is so extensive and embedded in leadership studies that it is worthy of further consideration. Take for example, one of, if not the most celebrated and cited books in the history of the discipline. In his seminal text “Leadership,” Burns (1978: 19) argued that transformational and transactional leadership comprised “two fundamentally different forms” of leadership. Approximately 30 years later, Burns (2007) acknowledged that his original concepts were “over-dichotomized” and that he could not now explain why he had neglected “the mixture” between them, as he explained:

I think my book is overly dichotomized....I tried to present the conceptual frameworks of transforming leadership and transactional leadership as a contrast as though there is no connection between them. I now think this is wrong. There is a stronger connection between transforming and transactional leadership than I led readers to believe. I think we have a spectrum. A few leaders operate wholly on the transactional side and a few leaders operate wholly on the transforming side, but most work on both sides of that spectrum and combine transforming and transactional leadership. I do not know why I did not see the mixture there. (Burns, 2007: viii)

Burns’ important statement demonstrates that even highly influential ideas about leadership are prone to over-dichotomization. Transformational and transactional leadership have dominated the field and it is these concepts that those outside the discipline frequently associate with leadership research. As one of the founding fathers of leadership studies, Burns’ frank disclosure is particularly significant.

Hollander (2009) agrees with Burns that transformational and transactional leadership should be seen as more overlapping than previously supposed. Arguing that transformational leadership remains an exchange relationship, he asserts that Burns’ distinction is predicated on a narrow concern with tangible rewards. When intangibles are also considered, it becomes evident that these concepts are more inter-connected than originally assumed. More specifically, Hollander suggests that transformational leaders provide followers with personal attention, support, fairness, and intellectual stimulation, and followers reciprocate with loyalty, esteem, and trust, allowing leaders greater latitude (or “idiosyncracy credit”). Observing that most effective leaders incorporate both transformational and transactional
elements, Hollander also criticizes the asymmetry embedded in this dichotomy, questioning the recurrent tendency to elevate transformational as the “good mode” of leadership whilst transactional is often portrayed as inferior. Hollander’s criticisms exemplify how dichotomization can privilege one side of an apparent polarity above the other, exaggerating its perceived positive aspects, whilst overstating the apparently negative features of the downplayed polarity. His arguments illustrate how dichotomization tends not only to over-emphasize difference, but also to perpetuate unwarranted asymmetries within distinctions.2

The dichotomization of transformational and transactional leadership is just one example of this tendency in leadership studies. The literature is replete with numerous distinctions that are often re-defined as dichotomies. As Harter (2006: 90) observes, in the study of leadership “dualisms pop up everywhere.” In addition to the transformational/transactional binary, the following examples are illustrative rather than exhaustive of this pervasive tendency for influential leadership perspectives to build on dichotomous thinking: leadership/management; leaders/followers; leaders/contexts; born/made leaders; task/people orientation; theory X/theory Y; one best way/contingent; organic/mechanistic, autocratic/participative, forceful/enabling; saviors/scapegoats; charismatic/quiet; and essentialist/constructionist. This “bi-polar shopping list approach” (Grint, 1997: 3) is particularly prevalent in mainstream leadership studies (e.g. trait, style, contingency, path-goal, charisma, emotional intelligence, etc.) where leaders’ personas and practices have tended to be privileged and psychological perspectives and positivist methodologies predominate.3

This deep-seated tendency in leadership studies to rely on dichotomous thinking is perhaps unsurprising. Both in theory and practice, leadership dynamics are complex and elusive. Persistent ambiguities make leadership difficult to research as well as challenging to enact (Pfeffer, 1977). As Burns (1978: 2) memorably stated, leadership is “one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth.” Those who study leadership are confronted by numerous dilemmas, causal possibilities, and tensions (Zaleznik, 1963). They work with shifting uncertainties and multi-faceted relationships (Rickards and Clark, 2006). Also shaping these “baffling causal factors” (Burns, 2005: 11) are fast moving and unpredictable local, regional, national, and international contexts, connected ever more closely by new technologies continually re-shaping communication, competition and collaboration (Lipman-Blumen, 2000). Faced with this ambiguity and complexity, it is perhaps unsurprising that researchers have tried to simplify leadership dynamics and their causation. Dichotomization is one simplification strategy frequently used in leadership theory and research.

Yet, by eschewing complexity, it is argued here that dichotomization can have significant negative effects on leadership studies.4 Dichotomization constrains analysis by over-simplifying the complex, inter-connected, and shifting relationships that characterize leadership dynamics. It emphasizes differences by making excessive separations between distinctions and treating these as immutable polarities. Dichotomization also involves simultaneous and asymmetrical processes of privileging, marginalizing, and excluding. Furthermore, it tends to narrow down the range of concepts, issues, and variables as well as limiting and fixing their causal direction. As a result, important issues, particularly around power, ambiguity, tension, paradox, and contradiction tend to disappear from view.

In addition to being a widespread and taken for granted feature of mainstream leadership studies, dichotomization also appears quite intractable. Its tenacious nature is reinforced by a tendency for one binary to build on another. For example, studies of transformational leadership often rely on and reproduce dichotomies between leaders/managers and
leaders/followers. In relation to the former dichotomy, the transformational pole is frequently conflated with leadership whilst the transactional polarity is associated with management. Accordingly, leading and managing are viewed as mutually exclusive (Bennis, 1989; Rost, 1993) while leaders and managers are defined as different types of people (Zaleznik, 1975). Transformational leaders are often privileged as visionary, strategic change agents, whereas transactional managers are downgraded as more narrowly concerned with rules, costs, stability, routinization, and control (Bennis and Nanus, 1985). In relation to the leader/follower dichotomy, transformational studies have been criticized for privileging heroic leaders (Linstead et al., 2009; Yukl, 1999) and neglecting the active role of followers (Hollander, 2009). This dichotomy is particularly intractable, as Burns (1978) noted: “leader-follower bifurcation is one of the most serious failures in the study of leadership” (3). Thirty years later, Burns (2008) acknowledged that in the ensuing period, making the linkage between leadership and followership has “proved exceptionally difficult” (xii).

Even more critical analyses that question the reliance on leader/manager and leader/follower dichotomies may still reproduce a dualistic approach by simply inverting the original asymmetry. For example, Lease (2006) criticized the “good leader/bad manager dichotomy” (2006) for “glamorizing” leadership (exciting and innovative) and “denigrating” management (dull and risk-averse). Asserting that leadership is better seen as one aspect of the broader construct of management, he redefines leadership as “just good management repackaged.” This inversion of the asymmetry tends to privilege the productive, rational, and transparent benefits of management and bureaucracy (Du Gay, 2000), whilst viewing leadership as unpredictable, inconsistent, and overly subjective.

As discussed earlier, some CMS writers have examined management control practices and largely ignored the significance of leadership (e.g. Alvesson and Willmott, 1992, 2003; Alvesson et al 2009). There is a tendency in CMS to assume that the impact of leadership is overstated and that leadership encourages an unnecessary preoccupation with individual psychologies, distracting attention from the broader study of structural and systemic organizational processes. In their empirical research, Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) questioned the very existence of leadership as an observable phenomenon. They identified a number of organizational practices that were, in their view, managerial, but none which could be viewed as “leadership.” Hence, whilst transformational studies tend to privilege leadership and neglect management, the reverse dichotomy is evident in some critical studies.5

Similar binary inversions are discernible in criticisms of the leader/follower dichotomy. For example, building on his influential critique of the tendency to “romanticize” individual leaders as either heroes or villains,6 Meindl (1995: 329) proposed a “follower-centric” approach to leadership studies. He recommended that researchers should ignore leaders and concentrate on followers’ views of leaders and of themselves as followers. Whilst this approach valuably highlighted the importance of followership for understanding leadership dynamics, Meindl’s recommendation tended to reverse the prevailing dichotomy, replacing the analytical privileging of leaders with the prioritization of followers.

Informed by Meindl’s work, “post-heroic” perspectives focus on the shared and collaborative nature of leadership (Pearce and Conger, 2003; Spillane, 2006), and on the importance of followers for “successful” organizations (e.g. Kellerman, 2008; Riggio et al, 2008; Shamir et al., 2007). Chaleff (2009) recommends that “courageous” followers need to voice constructive criticism particularly where they believe that leaders are not acting in the best interests of the organization (see also O’Toole, 2008). From a critical perspective, such recommendations tend to underestimate the costs and overestimate the possibilities of
explicit dissent in organizations (Collinson, 2011). By focusing on followers and underestimating the hierarchical nature of power asymmetries, post-heroic perspectives may replace the privileging of leaders with the romanticism of heroic followers.7

In sum, this section has argued that dichotomization is pervasive, deep-rooted, and often taken for granted in leadership studies. An over-emphasis on defining difference is evident in transformational studies and leadership research more generally, with one binary often leading to the use of others. Even critiques may not escape the dichotomizing impulse, sometimes reproducing it through inversion. Dichotomization also tends to over-simplify complex leadership dynamics, and to eschew from analysis important dilemmas, tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions. In relation to leadership research, how we construct distinctions is particularly important, because it shapes the way we define problems, ask questions, conduct research, create theories, and propose alternatives.

From dichotomies to dialectics

As F&C acknowledge, recent discursive, dialectical studies have started to critique the dichotomizing impulse in the leadership literature. Dialectical and paradoxical thinking has a long history in philosophy (e.g. Plato, Descartes) and early social science (e.g. Marx, Weber, Simon, Gouldner, Burke). Yet, as Storey and Salaman (2009) argue, with the rise of management science in the twentieth century, many earlier insights about dilemmas, ambiguities, paradoxes, tensions, and contradictions were lost as new perspectives focused increasingly on creating analytical order and tidiness. However, a growing interest in dialectical analysis can now be discerned in theories of society (Giddens, 1984; Bhaskar, 1993; Latour, 1993)8, organization (Bartunek, 2006; Norton, 2009; Putnam, 2003), communication (e.g. Barge et al., 2008; Tracy, 2004; Trethewey, 1999), and leadership (Collinson, 2005a, 2011; Fairhurst, 2001). Dialectical approaches highlight the importance of deep-seated tensions and contradictions in relations based on opposing but interdependent forces that produce conflict and change, “a dynamic knot of contradictions, a ceaseless interplay between contrary or opposing tendencies” (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996: 3).

This “dialectical turn” is also evident in recent studies of differences which emphasize how multiple diversities and inequalities can be mutually reinforcing. Exploring the intersecting nature of difference(s) in relation to gender and diversity, Putnam et al. (2011: 36) argue that dialectical perspectives re-frame presumed opposites and fixed binary poles as intrinsically interrelated concepts “such that adjustments in one directly impact on the other.” Writers emphasize that gender relations often intersect with other important differences/inequalities such as race, ethnicity, class, and age (Calas et al., 2010; Mumby, 2011). Relatedly, critical studies on men explore how the category “man” takes many different forms and how “hegemonic” and “subordinate” masculinities typically shape the gendered power relations of leadership, management, and followership (Collinson and Hearn, 2014). Studies show how dominant masculinities are often reproduced through men’s construction of excessive differences created particularly between men/women and paid “work”/domestic life (Collinson and Hearn, 1994).

Reinforcing this growing interest, a small number of leadership writers have begun to deconstruct dichotomies by arguing that such either/or binaries are better understood as dialectically inter-related. Rather than treat distinctions as dichotomies, these critical writers highlight the tensions and/or mutually reinforcing inter-relationships that underpin these apparent polarities. Typically, these writers also explore the importance of asymmetries in leadership dynamics and their wider economic, social, political, cultural, and technological
contexts. The two primary themes on which critical leadership writers have concentrated so far are leader/follower and mind/body dialectics.

A number of researchers have re-framed the persistent leader/follower dichotomy in dialectical terms (e.g. Gordon, 2002, 2011; Gronn, 2002; Prince, 2005; Ray et al., 2004). In an earlier paper, Fairhurst (2001) argued that seemingly opposing dichotomies between individual leaders and collective processes are better examined in terms of their “dynamic tension” and “interplay.” Emphasizing that followers are much more proactive, knowledgeable and potentially oppositional than is often recognized, Collinson (2005a) examines leader–follower relations in terms of their dialectical dynamics, focusing in particular on processes of control/resistance, consent/dissent, and men/women (see also Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007). Gronn (2009, 2011) observes that the leadership literature is characterized by a recurrent pendulum effect that swings between heroic, individual perspectives followed by renewed interest in more distributed, collective leadership. He proposes a revised unit of analysis which recognizes that underpinning leadership is a fundamental “hybrid configuration.” This invariably comprises both leaders and followers, both individual and collective dimensions in varying hybrid mixtures.

A growing number of leadership writers also re-frame the Cartesian mind/body dualism in dialectical terms. For Descartes, logic and the scientific method required the separation of “the rational mind” from the “emotional body.” In a similar way, leadership studies has traditionally focused on leaders’ minds to the neglect of their bodies, treating leadership as an inherently cerebral and disembodied process, concerned with decision-making, strategy, vision and (changing) “minds” (e.g. Gardner, 1996, 2006). Effective leaders are typically assumed to inspire and motivate followers primarily through cognitive processes of mental persuasion. While followers’ bodies are often centrally implicated in the outcome of such processes, leaders and their practices are assumed to be almost entirely disembodied.

By contrast, recent critical studies demonstrate, how, for example in education, the police and orchestras women and men leaders can utilize their bodies as modes of power, influence, and communication (Ropo and Sauer, 2008; Sinclair, 2005, 2007, 2013), and how corporality, emotions, and aesthetics may shape leaders’ practices (Hansen and Bathurst, 2011; Hansen et al., 2007; Melina et al., 2013). Research in political science on leaders’ illnesses and the public concealment of mental and physical problems of US presidents (Post and Robbins, 1993) and UK prime ministers (Owen, 2009, 2012) also contributes to this growing awareness of the inherent dialectical interplay between minds and bodies in leadership dynamics, as well as revealing some of the covert strategies sometimes deployed to project and protect a public image of the leader as invariably healthy.

Feminist studies examine how embodied practices often take gendered forms in leadership dynamics (Bowring, 2004). They suggest that notions of transformational leadership typically assume a male body (Sinclair, 2007) and that followers’ practices are also embodied (Makela, 2009). Similarly, critical studies of men and masculinity/ies indicate that men can be psychologically detached from their own bodies, especially in relation to illness (Connell, 2005). Reluctant to confront our possible physical fragilities, we may try, often unsuccessfully, to distance ourselves from our own bodies (Hearn, 2012). This focus on the dialectics of embodiment provides a welcome counter to studies that privilege leaders’ minds as if they were entirely separate from their bodies (see also the recent special issue in this journal on “The Materiality of Leadership” (Pullen and Vachhani, 2013)).

These emergent critiques of dichotomization suggest that dialectical interplay and tension within power asymmetries may be important new directions for critical leadership studies.
However, to date less attention has focused on the multiple, inter-related, and simultaneous nature of leadership dialectics and the tensions and interplay between them. Typically, researchers have concentrated on largely discrete dialectics, such as leader/follower or mind/body. Yet, in focusing on one specific dialectic, writers might neglect important inter-connections and tensions with others. For example, it is possible to address leader/follower dialectics, but neglect how these dynamics are invariably shaped by gendered and racialized bodies. Conversely, some studies examine leaders’ embodiment but in so doing leave unquestioned their power, status, and control over followers. Suffice it to say here that the multiplicity, interconnections, and tensions between leadership dialectics as they emerge in particular practices would repay further theoretical and empirical consideration. The next section discusses one possible related direction for future research in CLS.

**Surfacing dilemmas and tensions**

As F&C observe, there is growing interest in the tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions of leadership dynamics and organizational life. Traditionally, leadership effectiveness has been associated with the persuasive skills of transformational leaders who, through their decisive decision making, eliminate dilemmas and ambiguities. Yet, recent research suggests that in contemporary, fast moving contexts, effectiveness is often far removed from the idealized, heroic model of the single-minded charismatic. Various studies suggest that leadership effectiveness is more closely associated with versatile, agile and ambidextrous practices that require a capacity to deal with uncertainty, unpredictability, paradox, simultaneity, and ambiguity in more subtle ways (Goleman, 2000; Wilkinson, 2006; Yukl and Lepsinger, 2005; see also Barge, 2014.

In the UK, Storey and Salaman (2009) argue that dilemmas, tensions and conflicts are important and inescapable features of organizational decision making for leaders who are often under intense pressure to deal with competing and potentially inconsistent demands. Exploring six “key” dilemmas (strategy, structure, control, innovation, knowledge, and change), they suggest that, rather than view these as a nuisance or aberration to be eliminated through decisive action, leaders should re-interpret them as paradoxical, creative opportunities to be welcomed and exploited. The authors encourage leaders to re-frame apparent polarities in new, creative, and paradoxical ways. They recommend that leaders be more reflexive about their own frames of reference, and that they learn how to exploit creatively the tensions between seemingly conflicting priorities. Advocating organizational systems and practices that “thrive on paradox,” Storey and Salaman (2009: 22) hold that the management of dilemma and paradox is “the essence of leadership.” Similarly, Simpson and French (2006) draw on Bion’s work to highlight the value of “negative capability” for effective leadership practice. They argue that this capability embodies patience and the ability to tolerate uncertainty, frustration, and anxiety in ways that enhance leaders’ ability to think in the present moment.

In the US Collins’ (2001) extensive empirical research found that the “level 5” leaders of “good to great” companies consistently displayed a paradoxical blend of seemingly irreconcilable and paradoxical qualities: they were modest but wilful, humble yet fearless, both resolute and stoic. Rather than being “celebrity” charismatics, they were found to be quiet, reserved, unpretentious, and self-effacing. Level 5 leaders channeled their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building the organization. 11 Cameron et al. (2006) argue that effective leaders tend to be “simultaneously paradoxical” (64), integrating factors usually seen as competing, contradictory, and even incompatible. These authors
encourage leaders to deal with tensions by re-thinking apparent opposites in terms of their positive commonality, replacing “either/or” with “both/and” thinking. Similarly, Kaplan and Kaiser (2003, 2006, 2013) argue that effective leaders are those who can move flexibly between the apparently opposing modes of being both “forceful” and “enabling” and both “strategic” and “operational.” Hence, a small number of studies have begun to reveal the significant dilemmas and paradoxes that may lurk behind the public persona of transformational leaders. They also, in turn, start to raise questions about whether, how, and with what consequences leaders and managers respond to dilemmas, tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions. Whilst these questions clearly require further research, there is emerging evidence to suggest that leaders may respond to dilemmas and uncertainties by using dichotomous thinking. Kaplan and Kaiser (2003, 2006, 2013) discovered that many leaders tended to be “lop-sided.” In relation to being “forceful” and “enabling,” and “strategic” and “operational,” most leaders in their large-scale study were effective with regard to one of these (apparently opposing) qualities or the other, but rarely both. Consequently, many were either too task-focused (and not sufficiently people oriented), or too big picture-oriented (with little concern for implementation). Kaplan and Kaiser’s research reveals how a leader’s strength can become a weakness when it is overplayed. Most importantly, these leaders also preferred to be lop-sided, typically favoring their current skills and downgrading the alternatives. Underpinning their adherence to dichotomous thinking appeared to be a number of identity insecurities. Excessively forceful leaders worried that they might become (or be viewed as) weak. Those who were overly enabling were anxious that they could become (or be seen as) abrasive or power-mongering.

In a similar way, Storey and Salaman (2009) contend that practicing leaders and managers frequently look for “tidy solutions.” Far from tempering “conviction with doubt” or seeking to “exploit the simultaneity of opposites” (228), leaders often respond to dilemmas by adhering to ingrained polarities. They prefer polarized ways of understanding organizational dilemmas and tend to “flip flop” from one side of these constructed binaries to the other. Storey and Salaman (2009) suggest that this tendency to polarize available options often results from the need to negotiate and gain colleagues’ acceptance and commitment to proposals. Leaders do this by overstressing both the positives of the favored option and the negatives associated with the rejected proposal. Storey and Salaman (2009) conclude that escaping the limits of dichotomization constitutes a major challenge for practicing leaders. Suffice it to say here that these studies suggest that leaders may be so averse to ambiguity and uncertainty that they prefer to produce polarized (and thus over-simplified) solutions to complex problems: an important insight that requires further analysis.

My own research in organizations over the past 30 years has found a recurrent and related pattern. This is for organizational leaders to be either unaware of organizational tensions and paradoxes or, if they are informed of them, to try to deny or downplay their nature, extent, and consequences. This is especially the case with regard to leaders’ relations with followers/employees. Leaders’ hierarchical position “at the top” of organizations can result in them being distant and detached from “the front line” where many of the organization’s tensions are often most acutely experienced (Collinson, 2005b). Equally, followers may face considerable difficulties and barriers in seeking to voice their “critical upward communication” to those in senior positions (Tourish and Robson, 2006). Consequently, leaders can be largely unaware of fundamental tensions and contradictions embedded within routine organizational practices.12

In an earlier article in this journal, I argued that leaders can invest in excessively positive discourses that subsequently produce counter-productive and sometimes cataclysmic results.
(Collinson, 2012). For example, the failure to address the risks and contradictions of reckless loans (e.g. sub-prime mortgages) despite various warnings (Lewis, 2010) illustrates business and political leaders’ tendencies to engage in denial through excessively optimistic perspectives. Equally, the article argued that leaders’ “prozac” discourses can generate resistance from subordinates, customers, and shareholders who “see through” the inconsistencies in overly-optimistic statements. For example, shopfloor workers in an engineering factory ridiculed the new US senior managers’ statement that “we are all a team together.” Rejecting the corporate leaders’ statement that the company’s success was based on a shared team effort, manual workers argued that this emphasis on collaboration was contradicted by the way managers treated their labor as a disposable commodity. Viewing the US managers as insincere and manipulative, they constructed a counter-culture which privileged their own working class “honesty,” masculinity, and “practical common sense” that in turn informed their strategies of output restriction. The US leaders remained largely unaware of how their positive messages of teamworking produced contrary effects on the shopfloor, strengthening workers’ counter-cultural resistance built on an entrenched and polarized perspective of “us and them.”

Moreover, even when corporate leaders are informed of organizational tensions and inconsistencies, they may be reluctant to acknowledge them or recognize their severity. Research in the North Sea oil industry found a number of practices on offshore platforms that endangered safety (Collinson, 1999). When this was pointed out to corporate leaders, they tried to deny the significance of these research findings. The case study firm had an impeccable safety record and was regarded throughout the industry as a model of excellence. It was owned by a US multinational which also had a strong reputation for its commitment to workplace safety. Corporate leaders at head office expressed pride in the company’s excellent safety performance built on rigorous reporting procedures, the linking of safety to performance assessment, and the emphasis on a “learning culture” which encouraged employees to disclose all accidents and stressed that they would not be punished for so doing.

Managers working offshore were equally confident that the accident-reporting system operated effectively. Platform induction programs, monitoring procedures, and formal communications stressed that safety was everyone’s responsibility and that all safety-related information must be reported. Yet, the research found that in practice many workers either did not report accidents and “near misses” or else they sought to downplay the severity of particular incidents. Workers believed that disclosure of accident-related information would have a detrimental impact on their annual appraisal, pay, and employment security. They were sceptical about leaders’ espoused commitment to the learning culture, highlighting what they termed “a blame culture” on the platforms that was in tension with the company policy of open communication.

At the completion of the research, a report outlining these findings was presented to corporate executives at the London Head Office. Expressing shock that employees were not disclosing accidents, executives insisted that such practices could not occur since they contradicted the learning culture and constituted a firing offence. One executive added that he had “worked for the company for over twenty five years and did not recognize it from this report.” Yet, this particular executive had never actually visited an offshore platform. Corporate leaders’ responded to the report by trying to deny its central finding of inconsistencies and contradictions in the safety culture. This case illustrates the extent to which, when confronted by tensions and inconsistencies in workplace practices, corporate leaders may engage in discourses of denial.
Building on F&C, this section has argued that future leadership research could examine in much more detail the dilemmas, tensions, and possible contradictions of organizational life. More specifically, the article has suggested that future critical research should explore important questions of whether, how, why, and with what consequences corporate leaders may respond in particular ways to organizational tensions and contradictions. Being distant and detached from frontline processes, leaders might be genuinely unaware of the challenging dilemmas and tensions confronting subordinates. Alternatively, even when corporate leaders are informed of these issues, they may be reluctant to acknowledge or deal with them. These examples highlight important possible tensions between leaders’ discourses and polices on the one hand and their local level implementation on the other.

Discussion

In this final section, I want to raise one point of clarification. This is to acknowledge the importance of distinctions in everyday life. The foregoing critique of dichotomization does not seek to question the value and significance of distinctions per se. Human beings distinguish and contrast in order to make sense, learn, organize, and improve. We differentiate for example between day and night, theory and practice, production and consumption, and public and private. Identifying such differences helps us to make sense of ourselves, our relationships, and the world around us. It also enables us to exercise control, construct identity, and make causal links between distinctions. As symbolic interactionism emphasizes, human self-consciousness emerges as we start to separate ourselves psychologically from our parents. Similarly, if the old adage is accepted that “high fences make good neighbours,” maintaining distinctions and boundaries may also enhance relationships with others. Differentiation is also fundamental to organization: the principle of separating processes into their constituent parts is central to the division of labor and bureaucratic organization. Distinctions can help us to create meaning, clarity, and transparency and thus to avoid confusion, manipulation, and mystification. As Simmel (1994: 5) observed, human beings typically “separate the connected” and “connect the separate” adding “things must first be separated from one another in order to be together.”

Moreover, the introduction to this article emphasized the importance of distinctions, offering a cautionary note about F&C’s ambitious attempt to “cross” theoretical paradigms and perspectives (e.g. post-positivist, social constructionist, critical, and postmodern). In relation to CMS and CLS, it was argued that attempts to integrate paradigms should not gloss over important distinctions and differences. The search for overlaps and commonalities can run the risk of neglecting important differences and tensions between paradigms that may be deep-seated, competing, and even incommensurable, as in the case of functionalist and critical approaches (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). F&C’s attempt to integrate opposing paradigms might also reflect another important distinction: that between North America and Europe/Australasia. In the USA especially, positivist approaches remain dominant and their critique is much more difficult to voice than in certain other parts of the world (Martin and Collinson, 2002). Accordingly, US leadership researchers with critical sympathies may decide to work “within” or “alongside” the mainstream functionalist and positivist perspectives rather than try to engage in thoroughgoing critique. Focusing more broadly on management and organization studies generally, and the critical analysis of power dynamics in particular, Hardy (2013) has recently commented on the “fine lines” that critical researchers have to tread when seeking to publish in elite US journals such as AMR, AMJ, and ASQ.
She argues that these US journals are “inexcusably behind the times” when it comes to addressing conceptualizations of power (454).

The issue at stake in relation to (leadership) dichotomies is not so much the creation of distinctions per se, but rather the tendency both to overstate them by neglecting underlying inter-relationships and to create unwarranted asymmetries between them. In our search for control, identity, and security, we human beings sometimes pursue clarity, structure, and organization to such an extent that ambiguity and dilemma are eschewed in preference for the apparent certainties of bi-polar alternatives and the perceived comfort of compartmentalized thinking. The construction of difference and division is also an important means by which power and control can be exercised in organizations and societies. This article has suggested that when distinctions are exaggerated and viewed as dichotomies, they can oversimplify complex leadership relationships and reduce them to either/or polarities that downplay or neglect inter-relations, tensions, asymmetries, and contradictions. If taken too literally and treated as discrete either/or extremes, they can be reified as seemingly solid and absolute oppositions.

In sum, distinctions are important, but so are the connections and relations between them. ‘Creativity theorists’ suggest that it is precisely the synthesizing of previously disconnected matrices that is the source of human innovation and imagination. Koestler (1964) argued that creativity and invention results from the process of ‘bisociation’ in which previously unrelated and apparently incompatible matrices of thought are drawn together to construct a new synthesis or matrix of meaning. Fauconnier and Turner (2002) build on Koestler’s ideas in their theory of ‘conceptual blending’ which contends that all human thinking and imagination (e.g. language, art, religion, science and other feats of ingenuity) are the result of the blending of metaphors. Suffice it to say here, that there may be great value for critical leadership studies in exploring such dialectical blends, connections and tensions in leadership dynamics. As EM Forster’s (2012) epigraph in Howard’s End advises: ‘Only connect’.

**Conclusion**

This article has built on F&C’s proposals regarding future leadership research agendas and presented a set of interrelated arguments addressing three primary themes. First, it explored the nature, extent, and limits of dichotomization. Highlighting the intractability of dichotomization in leadership studies, it argued that this dominant approach has tended to eschew, neglect, or downplay important dilemmas, ambiguities, and paradoxes. Second, the article emphasized the value of re-framing leadership binaries as multiple, intersecting dialectics. The critical focus on leadership dialectics recognizes the importance of leadership dilemmas: of mutually reinforcing inter-connections and overlaps, unintended consequences, multiple, competing logics and deep-seated tensions, as they often emerge in leadership dynamics and organizational practices.

Rather than seek to avoid or eliminate these dilemmas, dialectical perspectives acknowledge them as central, inescapable features of leadership both in theory and practice. Arguing that dialectical thinking can open up fresh lines of enquiry in leadership research, the paper also suggested that significant challenges remain, especially in relation to how leadership dialectics can take multiple and intersecting forms: highlighting, in a sense, the value of exploring dialectics dialectically. This approach proposes the re-framing of leadership dynamics in ways that can explore their shifting, multiple, paradoxical, embodied, and situated dynamics. It focuses on the simultaneous interplay between leaders, managers,
followers, and contexts as well as on their ambiguous and potentially contradictory conditions, processes, and consequences. As a way of thinking about distinctions, re-framing dichotomies as dialectics highlights the nuances, interrelations, and tensions often underlying apparent binaries. Rather than try to produce a definitive list of such dialectics, which will likely vary according to contextual specificities, it is argued here that dialectical analysis is better understood as a way of thinking and understanding leadership dynamics.

Third and relatedly, the article examined the tendency for practicing leaders to underplay or deny these dilemmas, paradoxes, tensions, and contradictions often in preference for the apparent “certainties” of dichotomous or polarized thinking. Especially where leaders are concerned to protect their power and to project a transformational identity, they may be concerned that acknowledging ambiguities, doubts, and dilemmas might damage their status and reputation as decisive leaders. Equally, it is not just leaders themselves who may engage in such denial processes. Senior management teams, PR specialists, middle managers, subordinates, followers, customers, shareholders, other stakeholders, and media commentators can all subscribe to romanticized notions of decisive leaders. Accordingly, there may be considerable pressure on leaders to “live up to” archetypal images of the assertive and self-confident leader who overcomes ambiguities and dilemmas through decisive action.

Accordingly, more research is needed on how leaders (and leadership studies) may become trapped (Argyris, 2010) within dichotomized perspectives and practices. As Storey and Salaman (2009) observe, escaping the limits of dichotomization constitutes a major challenge for practicing leaders. Relatedly, one obvious form of polarization in which leaders can become entrapped is excessive competition. A growing number of studies document how competition and conflict between those in senior positions within and between competing organizations can have damaging organizational and personal effects (e.g. Gordon and Nicholson, 2008; Martin, 2013). A study of the auto-destructive behavior of the leaders of the major Scottish banks in the period 2005–2008 illustrates how competition for positions of power between senior male banking leaders distracted them from dealing with the global economic crisis and significantly contributed to the destruction of the banks themselves as independent institutions (Kerr and Robinson, 2011). These contradictory dynamics of excessive competition between (male) leaders indicate the need for more research on horizontal as well as vertical leadership dynamics. Such research on the complex horizontal relationships of those in leadership positions may also begin to address the paradoxical processes and consequences of excessive collusion that can occur between ostensibly competing leaders.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that overcoming dichotomization is by no means exclusive to leadership studies and is indeed a challenge for many areas of scholarly endeavor. For example, in social theory dualism is a “central problem” (Giddens, 1979) particularly in relation to the binaries between individual and society, structure and action, and subject and object. Equally, much of the management and organization literature tends to use conceptual dichotomies such as centralized/decentralized; differentiation/integration; organic/mechanistic; formal/informal; autonomy/interdependence; tight/loose; change/stability; and control/resistance (Dale, 2001; Knights, 1997; Mumby and Stohl, 1991). Dichotomies primarily emerge here as “either/or,” mutually exclusive alternatives, but can also surface as “2 × 2” quadrants (Lowry and Hood, 2004), or as differentiated levels of analysis (e.g. society, organizational, group, and individual). Such conceptual distinctions can be useful heuristic organizing devices, simplifying complexity, eliminating ambiguity, and enhancing clarity. They might also enable researchers to apply a sense of order to the study of management or organization. However, researchers can also over-emphasize...
differences and distinctions, exaggerating their mutual exclusivity and neglecting important inter-relations, ambiguities, and tensions. They may concentrate on differentiation to such an extent that they neglect how different “levels” of analysis are often simultaneously implicated and mutually interrelated in particular practices. To paraphrase Simmel (1994), researchers can focus disproportionately on “separating the connected” to the neglect of “connecting the separate.”

The influential European social theorist Zygmund Bauman has commented on the proliferating tendencies of dichotomization in both scholarly enquiry and administrative practice. Bauman (1991: 14) observed that “The central frame of both modern intellect and modern practices is opposition – more precisely, dichotomy. Intellectual visions that turn out tree-like images of progressive bifurcation reflect and inform the administrative practice of splitting and separation.” Bauman contends that this modernist preoccupation with separation is driven by human beings’ discomfort with ambivalence and ambiguity, underlying which is a fear of chaos and anarchy. He also argues that the search to eliminate ambiguity through neat, simple binary classifications is unachievable. As a “side-effect” of the dichotomizing urge, ambiguity will always re-appear, he contends, which subsequently calls for additional classification that then produces further ambiguity and so on. Accordingly, it is concluded here that further critical research could valuably examine both the limits of dichotomization and the potential of dialectical perspectives to surface important dilemmas, ambiguities, and tensions in the theory and practice of leadership, management and organization.

Notes
1. Here I am using the following terms largely interchangeably: dichotomy, dualism, binary, and polarity.
2. Burns’ (2007) acknowledgement appears to define dichotomization as a more straightforward matter of overstating difference. Yet this seems to underestimate how dichotomization also simultaneously relies on (unwarranted) asymmetries between concepts.
3. Critical researchers challenge the positivist assumptions of mainstream leadership studies for reproducing a fact/value dichotomy that privileges an “essentialist” search for “objective” knowledge. They argue that this approach neglects the socially constructed nature of leadership and the “theory-laden” character of observation (Lakomski, 2005: 61).
4. It is acknowledged here that complexity theory does challenge simplistic causal models and the implied linearity of leadership relationships (e.g. Uhl-Bien et al., 2007, Uhl-Bien and Marion, 2008). However, from a CLS perspective, complexity theory tends to underestimate the significance of situated organizational power relations.
5. Some writers have argued that a pendulum effect is discernible in the comparative, but temporary primacy ascribed to leaders or managers, which shifts within different economic and political conditions. Whilst in the second half of the twentieth century management tended to be prioritized in policy initiatives, a resurgence of interest in leadership occurred in the early 2000s. Grint (2011) argues that in the twentieth century, normative leadership (e.g. Human Relations) and scientific management (e.g. Taylorism) models tended to shift in their popularity according to prevailing economic and political conditions.
6. Predating Meindl, Pfeffer (1977) argued that the impact of individual leaders on organizational outcomes was significantly overstated.
7. There are also signs here that the conceptual pendulum may be swinging back to leaders, with trait theory undergoing something of a resurgence (e.g. Zaccaro, 2007). Current interest in more ethical, honest, authentic, and responsible leadership (e.g. Judge et al. 2009) further suggests that predictions of the permanent demise of trait theory could be rather premature. This observation also
indicates that leadership studies (like shifts in policy and practice) can become locked within alternating dichotomies, as ‘new ideas’ swing like a conceptual pendulum between opposing bipolarities. Having exhausted the possibilities of one dichotomy, researchers shift to its apparent opposite (Gronn, 2011).

8. Critiquing “the fiction” of dualism, Latour (1993) argues that since the seventeenth century, the modern world has been based on clear, purified distinctions between nature and human, subject and object, science and society. He contends that this ‘great divide’ was never real, the human divorce from nature did not occur. Claims of purification hide the persistence of unofficial hybrids consisting of interactions, seamless webs, dialectical networks, and linkages, as well as technological “quasi-objects” that blur the line between the natural and the human. For Latour, hybrids are everywhere (see also Gronn, 2009). Informed by Latour, Frenkel and Shenhav (2006) examine “binarism” as a form of power and domination reproduced through the imperialism of Western management models. They critically examine the colonizers’ tendency to draw on binary distinctions to inform and justify their power over indigenous populations.

9. Feminist writers also explore how gender divisions at “work” and at home are often reproduced through inter-related distinctions such as rational/emotional and competitive/collaborative. In this sense, feminist perspectives suggest that dichotomization may be a gendered process: an exercise of gendered power, reflecting dominant masculinities that seek to separate and control, whilst denying important inter-relationships. From this perspective, dichotomization may itself be understood as reflecting a masculine concern with exercising control through separation.

10. In contemporary societies and organizations, this sense of mind/body separation or disembodiment (as leaders and as men) may be compounded by new digital and virtual technologies. The use of ICT can intensify (men) leaders’ distance, potentially compounding their tendency to view employees and customers as numbers on a spreadsheet.

11. Collins argues that these findings defy the commonly accepted view of effective leaders as charisma’s whose determination is typically bolstered by their larger-than-life egos. He was surprised that the research findings pointed to the importance of leaders precisely because he had instructed his research team to downplay the latter’s role either in terms of attributing credit or blame. It is also important to recognize the potential “halo effect” at work in this study. Rosenzweig (2007) argues that much of the data used to produce Collins’ findings were shaped by knowledge of eventual performance. It may be that “humble leadership” led to success, but it may also be that successful companies tend to be described as having excellent leadership. Rather than necessarily discovering what led some companies to become “great,” this project according to Rosenzweig, may have caught “the glow of the halo effect.”

12. The TV series “Undercover Boss” (Lambert and Holzman, 2011) demonstrates that it is often only when leaders experience frontline operations for themselves that they start to understand fully how their organizations routinely operate, and where major change is most needed. Of course, leaders’ very agreement to take part in this TV program suggests in itself that they are likely to be comparatively more open to upward feedback, more receptive to new ideas, and more willing to embrace the need for change.

13. The research was based on qualitative interviews with 98 offshore employees and onshore managers and leaders on two platforms. Interviewees included “roustabouts,” “roughnecks,” “riggers,” drillers, platers, electricians, engineers, painters, tool pushers, crane operators, module cleaners, scaffolders, supervisors, medical officers, safety advisers, safety representatives, and offshore installation managers. In addition, interviews were conducted with 10 safety and production managers in Aberdeen and three corporate leaders at the London head office, including the CEO. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. The number of personnel on the two platforms during the research was 216 and 263, respectively. All but four of those interviewed were men, reflecting the male domination of both platforms. There were three and five women on the two platforms, respectively. The interview schedule covered five main themes of personal biography, the social relations of work, home-work balance, gender, and safety. In-depth interviews usually lasted
between 1.5 and 2 h. Discussions often continued in more informal settings, over meals, playing pool, and drinking coffee. The daily supervisors’ meetings were observed, and documents and accident records were collected. The research explored the experience of offshore work, from commuting in the helicopter to the platform organization of work, leisure, eating, and sleeping.

14. Clearly, safety is a vital issue for leadership in all organizations, and especially so on offshore oil platforms. In the ensuing period since this project was completed, serious safety lapses have continued to characterize the oil and gas industry. In 2005, the Texas City BP refinery explosion killed 15 people and injured 180. In 2010, the Deepwater Horizon explosion killed 11 workers and injured 17 others, generating a massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and an environmental disaster now considered to be the largest in US history.

15. See for example, Robert Frost’s poem ‘Mending Wall’.

16. For example, a special issue on leadership and context includes two separate introductions exploring context from the perspective of leadership psychology (Liden and Antonakis, 2009) and discourse analysis (Fairhurst, 2009). The editors argue that their dual perspectives do “different kinds of research” and constitute “a different journey with a common destination.” It is equally possible that these dichotomous expeditions will arrive at divergent locations, particularly as the authors in this issue do not address possible overlaps or tensions as they travel along their respective paths.

17. It should also be recognized that it is not only leaders but also followers who may become trapped in dichotomous and polarized thinking (Collinson 2005a). As a result, followers can reinforce their vulnerability to leaders’ power and decision making, particularly if they elevate leaders as heroes and messiahs, or, if in negating them, they seek to ‘distance’ themselves from the organization (as the earlier case from the engineering factory illustrated).

References


**Author biography**

David Collinson is Chair of Leadership & Organisation and Head of the Department of Management Learning & Leadership at Lancaster University Management School. He is the founding Co-editor of the ‘Leadership’ journal and founding co-organiser of The International Conference on Studying Leadership. David’s publications focus on critical approaches to leadership, organization and management. His articles have appeared in many leading journals such as *Organization Studies; Human Relations; Journal of Management Studies; Leadership Quarterly; Organization; Gender, Work and Organization; Leadership*, and *Work, Employment & Society*. David has published 13 books including *The Sage Handbook of Leadership* (2011) and *Major Works in Leadership Studies Volumes I–IV* (2011).