Taking Leadership Fashions Seriously as a Vehicle for Leadership Learning

Guthey, Eric; Ferry, Nicole Capriel; Remke, Robyn

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Abstract

Many scholars have criticized popularized and commercialized leadership ideas as mere fashions that dumb down leadership discourse, research, and learning. By contrast, we take leadership fashions seriously as an important vehicle for individual and collective leadership learning. We extend the neo-institutional theory of management fashions to define leadership fashions as a process that constantly reconfigures the rational norms and expectations attached to leadership, and that elevates certain approaches as the best way to fulfill those norms and expectations. Combining Weber's broad understanding of rationality with our own concept of affective rationality, we account for the many different instrumental, practical, moral, and sometimes deeply personal and emotional norms and expectations that drive the leadership fashion setting process. This approach contributes a theoretical foundation for understanding the sociological significance of leadership fashions, for exploring the leadership industries that produce and promote them, and for researching further the ways that leadership fashions and the leadership industries influence leadership research, learning, and practice.

Introduction

A number of scholars have characterized popularized and commercialized leadership ideas as mere fashions. They have decried leadership fashions for dumbing down leadership research, language, and learning, for promoting corporate control, excessive positivity, and stupidity, and for spreading downright leadership bullshit (eg. Alvesson and Einola, 2019; Alvesson and Spicer, 2014; Collinson, 2012; Kellerman, 2012; Learmonth and Morrell, 2019; Pfeffer, 2015; Wood and Petriglieri, 2004). But if leadership fashions exert as much influence over how people think, talk, and learn about leadership as critics say, then leadership scholars need to theorize and research them in earnest rather than simply deride or dismiss them. In this theoretical essay, therefore, we take leadership fashions seriously as a significant vehicle for individual and collective learning about leadership, and we develop a theoretical foundation for exploring them further.

Toward this end, we reevaluate and extend Abrahamson's (1991, 1996, 1999) foundational work on management fashions, which is in large part a theory of management learning. Abrahamson argued that management fashions function to provide technical prescriptions to help managers learn about ever shifting norms and expectations regarding how they should behave in a rational manner. While this argument helped launch an important body of critical research on management fashions, it rests on assumptions about the technical and instrumental nature of rationality and learning that are too limited to make sense of the different kinds of learning that occur in connection with leadership fashions. Some fashionable leadership ideas do provide technical prescriptions for how to respond to norms and expectations regarding performance and progress. But others provide moral prescriptions and inspirational exhortations for how leaders should embody certain substantive values and principles (Ciulla, 2004; Kempster et al., 2011). Still others deliver deeply personal and therapeutic prescriptions for how leaders should experience and express emotions, or shape the emotional and spiritual experiences of their followers (Fry, 2003). Leadership fashions often promise not merely to

provide efficient means to organizational ends, but also to help determine what kinds of ends should be considered important in the first place (Heifetz, 1994; Selznick, 2006). While there is considerable overlap, this heavy dose of moral, emotional, therapeutic, and socially foundational norms and expectations serves to distinguish the kinds of rationality applied to leadership fashions from those applied to management fashions.

To account for these distinctions, we invoke Weber's (1964) categorization of the range of norms of rationality that function to justify social behavior, including theoretical or scientific rationality, practical or intuitive rationality, formal or instrumental rationality, and substantive or value rationality. Because so many people—including many scholars—consider it perfectly rational to attach deeply personal and emotional expectations to leadership, we propose the relevance of a new category we call *affective rationality*. With this expanded understanding of rationality as a backdrop, we define leadership fashions not just as a set of popularized, commercialized, or trivialized ideas, but rather *as a process that continually redefines the rational norms and expectations attached to leadership, and that elevates certain approaches to leadership as the best way to fulfill those norms and expectations.*

By means of this argument we make several contributions to the critical study of leadership. First, we expand the limited assumptions about rationality behind neo-institutional management fashion theory to describe the wide and sometimes conflicting range of rational norms and expectations attached to leadership. This allows us to explain how some leadership fashions—far from merely advancing corporate imperatives as some critics charge—deliver their own critique of the corporate and bureaucratic rationality that pervades so much of popularized management and leadership speak. Second, we contribute the concept of affective rationality, which makes it possible to account for the many intensely emotional, spiritual, and quasi-therapeutic norms and expectations often attached to leadership without dismissing them as irrational. This concept provides a novel

explanation for the much pilloried persistence of what many consider trivial and excessively positive approaches to leadership that tug at the emotions via inspirational exhortations and self-help bromides (Alvesson and Einola, 2019; Collinson, 2012). The centrality of affective rationality in leadership discourse also helps explain why leadership learning and development often foreground aesthetic (Carroll and Smolović Jones, 2018), emotional (James and Arroba, 2005), liminal (Hawkins and Edwards, 2015), or deeply self-reflexive (Cunliffe, 2009) dynamics and experiences.

Third, we build on this expanded conception of rationality to contribute the first theoretically grounded definition and understanding of leadership fashions, establishing their sociological significance and providing a foundation for exploring their influence on leadership learning. Our approach can also inform and sharpen critical readings of popularized leadership discourses by taking into account the dynamics of their production, promotion, and consumption. Finally, we take seriously, rather than simply dismiss, the role of the leadership industries in promoting leadership fashions. In this manner we contribute a foundation for critical research into not just the discursive and social construction of leadership, but also the commercialized production of leadership and leadership learning, and into the central role that leadership scholars themselves play in these industrialized and commercialized processes (Butler et al., 2015).

In the next section we contrast the widespread critical dismissal of leadership fashions with the body of research that has established the importance of understanding management fashions and their influence on management learning. Then we extend key elements of Abrahamson's theory of management fashions to develop a theoretical approach to leadership fashions. We conclude by discussing the broader implications of our argument, and by outlining an agenda for future critical research on the connections between leadership fashions, the leadership industries, and leadership research, learning, and practice.

Theoretical and conceptual foundations

Critical perspectives on leadership fashions and the leadership industries

A number of critical leadership scholars have invoked the notion of management fashions to criticize popularized and commercialized leadership fashions along with the leadership industries that produce them (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011, 2012; Blom, 2016; Tourish, 2008). Some distinguish what they consider legitimate research and practice from fleeting fads, while others characterize the whole notion of leadership as an oversimplification of complex processes, an ideological ruse, or a misguided fantasy of excessive positivity (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2016; Collinson, 2012; Grint et al., 2016; Martin and Learmonth, 2012). Several extend this critique beyond mass-market leadership fashions to encompass much of academic leadership research. For example, Alvesson and Einola (2019: 383) single out authentic leadership theory for its "shaky philosophical and theoretical foundations, tautological reasoning, weak empirical studies, nonsensical measurement tools, unsupported knowledge claims and a generally simplistic and out of date view of corporate life." They characterize the "endless smorgasbord" of inspirational leadership theory—including transformational, servant, ethical, and spiritual leadership—as similarly fashionable and flawed. In this same vein, Learmonth and Morrell (2019: xii) declare themselves "against leadership" because they question the possibility that the language of leadership or the leadership industries can do anything other than legitimize corporate power.

Several scholars not working in the critical leadership studies paradigm have been just as quick to dismiss leadership fashions and the leadership industries as "leadership BS." In his book by that very title, Pfeffer (2015: vii) charges that conventional wisdom and published research on leadership is "based more on hope than reality, on wishes rather than data, on beliefs instead of science." Wood and Petriglieri (2004) compare the leadership industry to the fashion industry in order to critique the way that dubious experts, unqualified authors, and unidentified ghost writers exploit

the anxieties of those looking for over-simplified solutions to problems of increasing complexity in the modern world. In a book-length critique of the leadership industries, Kellerman (2012) warns that rampant popularization and commercialization might actually help bring about the end of leadership itself. It is important to note that none of these mainstream or critical arguments provide a clear definition or conceptualization of leadership fashions or the leadership industries before dismissing or declaring themselves otherwise against them. We argue that closer attention to the substance of previous research on management fashions can provide a more solid theoretical foundation for evaluating and critiquing the popularization and commercialization of leadership.

Management fashions research

In management fashions research, the term "fashion" has functioned less as a pejorative term or cause for alarm, and more as a sociological construct for describing a set of important collective, discursive, and industrial processes whose influence extend far beyond shifting tastes in clothing or other aesthetic spheres. Management fashions research draws inspiration from a sociological interest in fashion that dates back to the early days of the discipline, and that reflects two of its central preoccupations: the relationship between individual behavior and collective norms, and the nature of the mechanisms that bring about collective learning and social change over time (Sapir, 1931; Simmel, 1904). To emphasize the sociological importance of understanding fashions, for example, Blumer (1969) distinguished them sharply from fads. He understood fads as spontaneous and non-cumulative outbursts of crowd behavior or bandwagon effects that did not lead to learning. By contrast, he described the fashion system as a collective process of innovation, selection, and learning that could respond to changes in taste and sensitivity and influence cultural trends.

Abrahamson (1991, 1996) drew on this history of sociological research to introduce the first theoretical framework for understanding management fashions like TQM, knowledge management, or business process reengineering. His work has inspired an extensive stream of critical research that

has explored the dynamics of the production, dissemination, and consumption of managerial knowledge and discourse (Czarniawska, 2011; Engwall and Kipping, 2004; Jackson, 2001; Kieser, 1997; Sturdy, 2004). Scholars working in this vein have sought to understand how management fashions function as conduits for innovation, diffusion, and learning (Jackson and Guthey, 2007; Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2016; Scarbrough and Swan, 2001; van Veen et al., 2011). Others have provided important critiques of how management fashions function also as instruments of managerial control, ideological hegemony, identity regulation, and/or workplace resistance (Clark and Salaman, 1998; Guthey, 2005; Knights, 2003; Parush, 2008).

Abrahamson characterized management fashions as symbolic goods generated by the interplay of supply and demand in a marketplace populated by producers, distributors, consumers, intermediaries, institutions and managers themselves. He invoked the production of culture perspective to emphasize the "createdness" of management fashions as cultural and symbolic products—that is, the fact that they are "made somewhere by someone" (Peterson, 1979: 152; see also Hirsch, 1972; Peterson and Anand, 2004). But this was not a top-down theory that assumed the power of management fashion setters to impose their ideas on passive manager-consumers. Abrahamson invoked the production of culture perspective precisely to conceptualize the mutual influence of providers and end-users in the process of co-producing management fashions (Abrahamson, 1996a). An entire special issue of *Management Learning* has explored these user-driven processes of appropriation and co-production in depth (Heusinkveld et al., 2011; van Veen et al., 2011). Far from malleable subjects or ideological dupes, this research makes clear, employees, managers, and other consumers play an active role in shaping the learning processes that result from the diffusion of management fashions.

Abrahamson (1996) also drew on neo-institutional theory to describe management fashions as short-lived versions of the taken-for-granted institutional myths that legitimize bureaucratic and

organizational structures and practices (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). He defined a management fashion as a "relatively transitory collective belief, disseminated by management fashion setters, that a management technique leads rational management progress" (Abrahamson, 1996: 257). He unpacked this latter notion of "rational management progress" by pointing out that prevailing norms of rationality generate expectations that managers will adopt efficient means to improve performance, while norms of progress generate expectations that managers will adopt ever new and improved means to achieve organizational ends over time. In line with other institutional scholars, he referred to *norms* as overarching, generative rules considered obligatory and binding by an institution or social collective, and *expectations* as more specific beliefs or anticipations that certain behaviors or actions will take place in accordance with these norms (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Gibbs, 1965; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Morris et al., 2015). Management fashion setters compete to provide prescriptions for responding to these norms and expectations, promoting the belief that this or that management technique will provide new and improved ways for boosting performance.

For the purposes of our argument, it is important to specify further how Abrahamson and his co-authors understood the notion of rationality. Drawing on Barley and Kunda's (1992) analysis of successive waves of rational versus normative managerial rhetoric, Abrahamson and Eisenman (2008: 726) use the term "rational" to describe how "work processes can be formalized and rationalized to optimize labor productivity, as can the reward systems that guarantee recalcitrant employees' adherence to these formal processes." They use the term "normative" to refer to the notion that "employees can be rendered more productive by shaping their thoughts and capitalizing on their emotions" (Abrahamson and Eisenman, 2008: 726). Although they mention emotions in this context, they frame emotions as an instrumental tool for increasing performance, not as any sort of significant human or social factor that deserves consideration apart from organizational performance.

This overemphasis on a narrow, technical, and instrumental conceptualization of rationality inflects Abrahamson's discussion of the central links between management fashions and management learning. In this context he distinguished sharply between "real learning," shaped by techno-economic forces and technically useful management fashions, and "superstitious learning," shaped by socio-psychological vulnerabilities and by technically inferior or even dysfunctional concepts and techniques (Abrahamson, 1996: 274). He maintained that superstitious learning experiences may appear subjectively compelling, but that they fail to connect actions to desired outcomes (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999; Levitt and March, 1988). This strictly instrumentalist approach to learning does not recognize the socio-psychological, let alone emotional or affective dynamics of collective learning processes, and thus limits the usefulness of the neo-institutional theory of management fashions for understanding leadership fashions.

We argue that such an instrumentalist lens certainly cannot encompass or explain the many different and sometimes competing expectations that drive the production of new leadership fashions, or that characterize the kinds of learning that takes place in their wake. Servant leadership and spiritual leadership, for example, come wrapped in deeply emotional and therapeutic expectations, while responsible leadership or social justice leadership foreground foundational social expectations about values, morals, or justice (Fry, 2003; Hunter, 1998; Kempster and Carroll, 2016; Maak and Pless, 2006). In the next section, therefore, we therefore introduce a broader conceptualization of the range of rational norms and expectations that stakeholders attach to the concept of leadership.

From management fashions to leadership fashions

There is not room in this article to catalogue the many different expectations attached to leadership. They are legion. Nonetheless, we begin this section with a brief overview of the broad, thematic clusters of such expectations. Even this overview makes clear that any theoretical conceptualization of leadership fashions requires that we revisit the assumptions about rationality behind neo-institutional management

fashion theory—because they are too narrow—and that we develop an expanded understanding of the many different norms of rationality that generate expectations attached to leadership. Just because an instrumental understanding of rationality cannot account for many or most of the popularized expectations attached to leadership, we do not conclude, as others have, that are therefore irrational (Wood and Petriglieri, 2004) or trivial (Alvesson and Einola, 2019).

Instead, we proceed to expand the range of potential norms of rationality that generate expectations attached to leadership by drawing on Weber's (1964) categorization of practical, theoretical, formal, and substantive rationality. Townley (2002, 2008) has established the importance of such an expansive understanding of rationality for organizational research. A number of scholars have argued that institutional theory needs to look beyond norms of instrumental rationality and to reintroduce meaning, culture, values, and emotions to institutional theory (Suddaby et al., 2010; Voronov and Vince, 2012). After establishing the relevance of Weber's expanded conceptualization of rationality for understanding leadership fashions, we further expand the range of rational norms that generate expectations attached to leadership by proposing the relevance of *affective rationality*. With this broad understanding of rationality as a backdrop, we then proceed to present our definition of leadership fashions, and to outline the implication of our argument for future critical research on leadership.

The many expectations attached to leadership

Instrumental or technical expectations about improving personal and organizational performance play a prominent role in popular or academic discussions of leadership. Business schools take it as their mission "to develop leaders who should ultimately be judged on their ability to improve organizational performance" (Podolny et al., 2010: 166). Leaders who fail to improve performance, or at least to appear to do so, often risk losing their jobs (Yukl, 2008; Zenger and Folkman, 2009). The vast amount of literature that explores links between leadership and organizational outcomes speaks to the centrality of instrumentalist expectations in both academic and popularized definitions

of leadership (Bowers and Seashore, 1966; Hoffman et al., 2011). But many of these same sources expect leadership not merely to provide efficient new means to important ends, like management, but to also help determine what kinds of ends count as important in the first place. This is precisely why so many leadership scholars have emphasized the centrality of meaning and purpose to the notion of leadership (Kempster et al., 2011; Podolny et al., 2010). Others expect leadership to shape the very norms and expectations that inform such determinations on the basis of foundational visions and judgments about the meaning and purpose of both organizational endeavors and social life more broadly (Foldy et al., 2008; Kempster et al., 2011; Seyranian and Bligh, 2008). Bennis and Nanus (2012: 20) popularized the notion that "Managers are people who do things right and leaders are people who do the right thing" in order to contrast efficiency with effectiveness. Such commonplace distinctions between management and leadership speak to the widespread nature of substantive expectations that leadership will elevate issues of purpose to mitigate some of the excesses of management in its relentless pursuit of increased performance.

Bennis and Nanus's adage thus highlights that moral and ethical expectations and aspirations pertain to leadership to a much greater degree than to management. Ciulla (2004: xv) has argued that "ethics lie at the heart of all human relationships and hence at the heart of the relationship between leaders and followers." Several scholars emphasize that meaning and purpose are central characteristics of leadership (Kempster et al., 2011; Podolny et al., 2010). Bass and Steidlmeier (1999: 181) insisted that leaders who lack a strong moral compass are "pseudo transformational," and that authentic transformational leadership "must rest on a moral foundation of legitimate values." In the hands of popularized leadership writers, these moral expectations begin to sound more like inspirational exhortations. This does not mean that we should dismiss them, but rather recognize the sociological fact that a good number of people—including many scholars—*expect* leadership to be

inspirational, either of their own volition or because the leadership industries nudge and encourage them to expect as much.

The fine line between academic research and inspiration becomes even more blurred when it comes to expectations that leadership should fulfill a variety of emotional and even spiritual needs. Some call for leaders to "lead from within" by embodying certain personal qualities and even spiritual ideals (Rubin et al., 2005: 845; Yukl, 1999). Dasborough and Ashkanasy (2002: 616) argued that "leadership is intrinsically an emotional process, where leaders display emotion, and attempt to evoke emotion in their members." Transformational leadership exemplifies the expectation that leaders reshape their own and their followers' own personality and emotions to support the organizational purpose (Ashkanasy and Tse, 2000). Avolio and Gardner (2005) argued that authentic leadership development should employ the inner dynamics of self-awareness, self-regulation, and positive modeling. Others have pointed out that such leadership development practices encourage followers to work on the deepest aspects of their identities (Ferry, 2018; Nicholson and Carroll, 2013; Petriglieri, 2011). As we discuss further below, spiritual leadership theory represents the apotheosis of the expectation that leaders will mobilize intrinsic and deeply personal dynamics such as faith, hope and love in a manner that will increase not only motivation and commitment, but also joy, peace, and serenity (Fry, 2003).

Expanding the concept of rationality

By summarizing in broad strokes the widespread expectations that leadership will increase performance, effectiveness, purpose, moral character, ethical awareness, emotional well-being, and spiritual fulfillment, we have barely scratched the surface. As interest in leadership continues to grow, these expectations continue to multiply. To reiterate the point we made earlier, Abrahamson's primarily instrumentalist conceptualization of rationality would suffice to account for all of the expectations attached to leadership only if we were to assume that the ultimate point of leadership

were merely to close performance gaps and to boost productivity. But for many, the very point of connecting leadership with concepts like purpose or moral consideration is to raise questions about the proper ends of collective organizing activities and about the moral consequences of performance imperatives (Podolny et al., 2010). It is therefore necessary to adopt a broader conceptualization of the norms of rationality that generate expectations attached to leadership.

In this section, therefore, we develop a conceptualization of rationality adequate to account for the broad range of norms and expectations attached to leadership. In sociological terms, rationality is not simply a form of instrumental reasoning or bureaucratic formalization. Rationality functions as a discourse for establishing the validity of social action without resorting to the coercion provided by appeals to a higher authority or to the use of physical force (Alexander, 1985; Habermas, 1984). When challenged, claims to rationality are subject to argumentation and appeal to consensual norms. Norms of rationality are therefore shared affirmations or collectively accepted rules that social actors should establish the validity of their behavior by appealing to a culturally or institutionally recognized discourse, such as political expediency, business efficiency, legal argumentation, or moral reasoning (Meyer and Rowan, 1977).

Weber (1964) categorized the wide range of such culturally recognized discourses by distinguishing between practical, theoretical, formal, and substantive rationality. *Practical rationality* validates the pragmatic working out of the most expedient course of action for dealing with the problems presented by day-to-day realities (Kalberg, 1980; Townley, 2002). *Theoretical* or *scientific rationality* validates behavior deducted from increasingly sophisticated abstract constructs for understanding the world (Kalberg, 1980; Townley, 2002). *Formal* or *instrumental rationality* refers to the calculation and adoption of the most efficient means to specified ends, and more broadly to the insistence that all social and organizational action should be measured and judged according to such an impersonal and bureaucratic calculus (Brubaker, 1984:). *Substantive* or *value rationality* judges

and validates social action according to its congruence with a system of values or foundational beliefs and principles about purpose and meaning, regardless of how efficient they are at achieving a specified end (Weber, 1964).

Brubaker (1984) has argued that the distinction between these latter two forms of rational discourse is crucial for understanding Weber's foundational contributions to sociology. Likewise, Townley (2002) has pointed out that the distinction between formal and substantive rationality is crucial for understanding institutional and organizational change. But the neo-institutional theory of management fashions does not address this central distinction. As mentioned earlier, Abrahamson's (1996a) account of how managers determine which goals are important focuses exclusively on the closing of performance gaps, a formally rational concern that sidesteps issues of purpose or principle. Both rational and normative managerial rhetoric as described by Barley and Kunda (1992) and by Abrahamson and Eisenman (2008) fall into the category of formal, not substantive rationality, because they are concerned with productivity and with the technical efficiency of the means adopted to induce it. When the neo-institutional theory of management fashions invokes the concept of rationality, it is tacitly referring to formal or instrumental rationality without specifying as much, essentially construing all rationality as formal rationality.

Weber's broad conceptualization of rationality can help account for the wide range of expectations that fuel demand for leadership fashions. Norms of formal rationality do indeed generate expectations that leadership will adopt calculable and efficient means to deliver results and improve performance in the context of bureaucratic organizations. At the same time, norms of practical rationality generate expectations that leadership involves the taking of pragmatic action to solve day-to-day problems. Norms of theoretical rationality generate expectations that leadership should conform to behavior deduced from theoretical reasoning and validated academic research. Norms of substantive rationality generate expectations that leadership will deliver collective purpose, meaning,

moral order, and a sense of alignment between social actions and deeply held values or beliefs. Meanwhile, norms of progress generate expectations of a supply of ever improved versions of all of these forms of leadership. These expectations fuel continuous demand and keep leadership fashions setters in business.

Affective rationality

In this section we propose the concept of *affective rationality* as an appropriate further extension of Weber's conceptualization of what counts as rational. We do so because even Weber's expansive conceptualization of rationality cannot account for the many emotional, therapeutic, and spiritual expectations often attached to leadership, or for the deeply personal dynamics that many scholars have highlighted as central to leadership learning and development (Fineman, 1997; James and Arroba, 2005; Petriglieri et al., 2011). Parry and Kempster (2014) argued that the relationship between love and leadership is significant to leader-follower relationships, and that many follower accounts of charismatic leadership take the form of a love story that foregrounds compassion, attraction, and desire. A number of scholars have explored the broader themes of romance and romanticism inherent not only in the ways that followers attach themselves to leaders and leadership, but also in the leadership narratives that animate social movements, workplace resistance, and broad-scale change (Collinson et al., 2018; Guthey, 2016; Kempster and Carroll, 2016; Meindl, 1995; Meindl et al., 1985). From a variety of different perspectives scholars have explored leadership learning and development as a matter of deep personal reflection and self-reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2009; Kempster and Stewart, 2010; Petriglieri et al., 2011); as a psychodynamic identity workspace (Petriglieri, 2011; Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010; Sinclair, 2007, 2011); as a potentially unsettling process of identity undoing (Iszatt-White et al., 2017; Nicholson, 2011; Nicholson and Carroll, 2013); as a form of self-directed control akin to what Foucault called governmentality and pastoral care (Carroll and Firth, 2020; Ferry, 2018; Ferry and Guthey, 2020); as a liminal space or state of

existential between-ness (Hawkins and Edwards, 2015); and as a intrinsically aesthetic experience that is at one and the same time affective, visceral, sensory, embodied, and relational (Carroll and Smolović Jones, 2018).

From the perspective of Abrahamson's neo-institutional management fashion theory, as we pointed out earlier, all of these important dynamics would constitute "superstitious" as opposed to "real learning." In order not to dismiss these dynamics as trivial or irrational, we introduce the concept of affective rationality. We define affective rationality as a discourse for validating social action based on the conviction that emotions make their own kind of sense and constitute their own form of legitimacy apart from any appeal to formally rational utility or to substantively rational beliefs and values. The notion of affective rationality describes how individuals and groups accord independent value and legitimacy to emotions and affect, and to deeply personal processes of identity construction or transformation (Mumby and Putnam, 1992; Petriglieri et al., 2011; Sturdy, 2004). Norms of affective rationality consist of collective affirmations that social actors ought to justify their behavior by appealing to the intrinsic value of emotions, affect, and the inner dynamics of identity construction and the self.

For Weber, validating social action via appeals to emotion would have represented the polar opposite of validating social action via appeals to reason. He described charismatic leadership as a form of affective authority that has no place within a formally rationalized bureaucracy (Conger and Kanungo, 1987). Weber did not argue that formal rationalization would stamp out charismatic leadership altogether. Rather, they would coexist as competing forms of legitimacy, and modern tendencies towards bureaucratization would continually provoke efforts to "re-enchant" the world with manifestations of affect (Weber, 1964: 358ff.). But Weber died four years before Elton Mayo conducted the Hawthorne experiments. He could not have predicted that the human relations movement would insert the new discipline of psychology, and its concern with the inner life of

emotions, into the heart of workplace relations inside the large, bureaucratic corporation (Gillespie, 1993; Illouz, 2008). Nor should Weber be expected to have anticipated what Illouz has described as the rise of a new, therapeutic cultural ethos predicated on this new science of the self.

According to Illouz (2008: 15) psychology's rise to prominence provided "a new lexicon to conceptualize and discuss emotions and self in the realm of ordinary life." By the 1960s, she argues, American culture had become preoccupied with emotions and with the deployment of various scientific and therapeutic techniques for uncovering and managing them. As a result, those elements of affect Weber had considered irrational became effectively rationalized and deployed to improve everyday life as well as productivity inside large, bureaucratic organizations. Such scripts and techniques would prove vital to the management of the kinds of emotional labor required by the burgeoning service industries (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Hochschild, 2012). Under what Illouz calls "emotional capitalism," the inner self becomes an essential aspect of economic and organizational behavior and emotional life begins to follow the logic of economic exchange. The popularization of a variety of quasi-therapeutic services and self-help products (such as personal, business, and executive coaching) both results from and further intensifies this cultural transformation (McGee, 2005). Illouz (2007) and Hochschild (2012) have argued convincingly that the spread of this "therapeutic ethos" has turned emotions and affect into culturally and commercially available resources or scripts for validating social action on their own merits.

The availability of affective rationality as a discourse for validating behavior can help explain why many leadership fashion setters and consumers consider it perfectly natural and indeed rational to attach such deeply personal, emotional, therapeutic, and spiritual expectations to leadership. Leadership gurus, and many leadership scholars, respond to and reinforce these expectations when they depict leadership and leadership development as an inner, therapeutic journey of personal discovery, emotional awareness, or spiritual fulfillment (Bolman and Deal, 2001; Fry, 2003;

Petriglieri, 2011; Petriglieri et al., 2011). Many leadership fashion setters mobilize norms and expectations of affective rationality to critique what they see as overly formal, hierarchical, or bureaucratic approaches to leadership. Thus, when Wood and Petriglieri (2004: 217) insist that "leadership is not a rational endeavor; it is a deeply emotional and psychological one," they actually exemplify how leadership fashion setters can disavow one form of (formal) rationality to elevate another (affective) rationality in its place. The process of mixing or counter posing different sets of rational norms and expectations in this manner is central to our definition of leadership fashions.

Defining leadership fashions

On the basis of the expanded conceptualization of rationality that we outline above, we define leadership fashions as *a process that continually redefines the rational norms and expectations attached to leadership, and that elevates certain approaches to leadership as the best way to fulfill those norms and expectations.* In contrast to Abrahamson (1996)—who defines management fashions as collective beliefs—our definition places a greater emphasis on the diversity and even divergence of beliefs that can play a role in the fashion process, and allows for the possibility that neither leadership fashion setters nor consumers need to actually *believe* in a popularized leadership idea or practice in order to promote or to exploit it. Employees in an organization that endorses transformational leadership, for example, may feel pressure to affirm or to promote that concept even if they believe personally that it is meaningless or manipulative (Gagnon, 2008; Nicholson and Carroll, 2013). As McCabe and Russell (2017) have demonstrated with respect to management fashions, even inanimate objects such as posters or costumes deployed to translate fashionable ideas into managerial sanctioned actions can exert their own form of resistance to managerial intentions. Likewise, participants in the leadership fashion system can elevate a concept or technique for a variety of other reasons: to curry favor with their superiors, to advance their political interests or their career, to adhere to certain cultural or behavioral norms, to signal that they are at the forefront of (formally,

substantively, or affectively) rational leadership progress, or to contribute to the continual reconfiguration of the rational norms and expectations that shape demand for new leadership concepts and techniques (Giroux, 2006).

We propose that the wide and sometimes contentious range of rational norms attached to leadership fashions combine in ever shifting combinations to generate noticeably different kinds of expectations than those attached to management fashions. Of course, there is considerable overlap and cross-fertilization. Norms of substantive or even affective rationality can generate expectations attached to some management fashions, such as, for example, corporate social responsibility, or management spirituality. Hybrids such as "total quality leadership" or "lean leadership" may indeed seem like boiled-over versions of pre-existing management fashions. And some leadership fashions, legitimized and promoted by appeals to instrumentalist norms of formal rationality and performance imperatives, can appear positively bureaucratic and managerialist, as illustrated below in our discussion of spiritual leadership. Nonetheless, no one really expects management fashions to inspire effusive outpourings of emotions or quasi-religious professions of faith of the sort that are commonplace in the kinds of leadership development programs and leadership events orchestrated by evangelical and charismatic megachurches, for example (Tkaczynski and Arli, 2018). Nor do management concepts and discourses provide the foundation for intensely therapeutic self-help and personal growth programs in the way that leadership fashions very often do (Collinson, 2012; Ferry, 2018). Our point is not that management is in some essential or fundamental way different from leadership, but rather that a different range of rational norms and expectations become attached to leadership in the leadership fashion setting process. Oftentimes the substantive and affective expectations attached to particular leadership fashions are deployed precisely to resist or to critique formally rational, overly bureaucratic, or instrumentalist imperatives that many attach to management.

An example: spiritual leadership

In this section we explain how spiritual leadership provides an example of a leadership fashion that functions to critique rigid norms of formal and bureaucratic rationality in a manner that points a different set of rational norms and ideals. It also exemplifies in vivid fashion how different norms of rationality combine and sometimes clash to generate conflicting expectations even in the context of a single leadership fashion. Bolman and Deal (2001) employ the concept of spiritual leadership to launch a substantively and affectively rational critique of the imperative to increase efficiency, productivity, or sales. For these authors, the point of spiritual leadership is not to close performance gaps or to maximize organizational outcomes, but rather to turn "today's sterile bureaucracies" into "tomorrow's communities of meaning," to help "our society to rediscover it's ethical and spiritual center," and "to enrich your life and leave a better legacy for those who come after you" (Bolman and Deal, 2001: 12). Guthey (2016) has argued that Bolman and Deal's variant of spiritual leadership draws on cultural tropes with historical roots in romanticism and antimodernism in a manner that exemplifies how popularized leadership discourses can function to question rather than reinforce dominant corporate narratives.

In contrast to Bolman and Deal, Fry (2003: 693) maintains that the purpose of spiritual leadership is "to foster higher levels of organizational commitment and productivity." The Spiritual Leadership Survey distributed commercially by Fry's International Spiritual Leadership Institute (2011: para. 1) subjects the notion of spirituality to a quantitative, formally rational calculus, and concludes that "results to date support a significant positive influence of organizational spiritual leadership on employee and unit performance, life satisfaction, organizational commitment and productivity, and sales growth" (see also Case and Gosling, 2010). Thus Fry's variant of spiritual leadership claims to deliver on the very corporate imperatives for greater productivity and sales that Bolman and Deal seek to critique. The divergence in the way these different authors define spiritual

leadership makes clear that the norms of rationality attached to leadership do not always mutually reinforce each other. They can conflict with each other, even within the context of a single leadership fashion, in ways that create considerable dissonance, and that ultimately contribute to the perception that leadership is an ambiguous or empty concept (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Pfeffer, 1977).

From a broader perspective, spiritual leadership also exemplifies how leadership fashions can build on and echo each other in ways that form relatively coherent leadership fashion families or trends. Abrahamson and Eisenman (2008; Blumer, 1969) defined management fashion trends as major shifts in the content and tenor of management discourse that result from the accumulation of management fashions in particular directions over time. Drawing on this definition, we define leadership fashion trends as notable, protracted drifts in the dominant configuration of norms and expectations attached to leadership across successive waves of leadership fashions. Taken together with other, adjacent leadership fashions over a period of several decades, for example, spiritual leadership makes sense as part of a moral and spiritual crescendo of substantively and affectively rational discourse wrapped around the trajectory from transactional, to transformational, to authentic, to servant, to spiritual leadership fashions. This would appear to indicate a consistent, long-term drift toward ever more substantively and affectively rational leadership rhetoric over formally rational rhetoric—a trend which, as we have noted, several critical leadership scholars seek to criticize or to dismiss as trivial or ideological (Alvesson and Einola, 2019; Case and Gosling, 2010; Tourish and Pinnington, 2002). The development of a substantively and affectively rational leadership fashion trend needs to be tested and substantiated or revised by means of a longitudinal study of the rhetoric attached to leadership fashions, and by an investigation of the conditions of their production, promotion and consumption. Such a study can help to specify and characterize the gradual development over the last several decades of a noticeably different, quasi-therapeutic vocabulary or cultural discourse connected to leadership and leadership learning.

The leadership industries

Another reason why leadership fashions can appear contradictory or ambiguous, and why their numbers keep growing nonetheless, is that there are so many would-be leadership fashion setters competing in the race to produce, to promote, and to profit from them, financially or otherwise. Abrahamson (1996: 256) includes in his description of the management fashion setting community all those "organizations and individuals who dedicate themselves to producing and disseminating management knowledge." Among those who produce and disseminate leadership knowledge, we can include leadership trainers and consultants, coaches, popular authors and gurus, publishers, business journalists, scholars, leadership journals, academic and professional leadership associations, leadership institutes, and of course business schools.

These various actors represent different sectors of the leadership industries, which we define in the plural as *all those individuals and organizations who generate revenue or professional advantage by responding to and further promoting demand for leadership products, goods, services, and ideas.* We emphasize the role of the leaderhip industries to emphasize that leadership fashion is not just a process of social or discursive construction, but also industrial production. Many different members of the leadership industries function as leadership fashion setters—they sense incipient demand for new leadership fashions; they promote the idea that new concepts "capture the essence of leadership" and therefore stand at the forefront of formally, substantively, or affectively rational progress; and they seek to influence the norms and expectations that shape the reception of their leadership innovations (Abrahamson, 1996). These leadership fashion setters, arbiters, and critics—including leadership scholars—all have an incentive to distinguish themselves from the pack by elevating their own configuration of preferred norms and expectations over against others. For example, in the process of criticizing authentic leadership theory as representative of the bankruptcy of leadership fashions more generally, Alvesson and Einola (2019: 383) charge that:

the positive leadership recipes . . . are far from being anchored in solid theoretical foundations based on a thorough understanding of leader-follower/manager-subordinate relations and of what it takes to get tasks done in various contexts of modern work life.

In this manner these authors elevate their own preferred configuration of norms—specifically norms of theoretical, practical, and formal rationality—to dismiss the idea that leadership theories should conform to or advance norms of substantive or affective rationality.

By following Abrahamson in adopting a production of culture perspective, our approach to leadership fashions lays the groundwork for a more thorough investigation of the cultural, competitive, and institutional dynamics of the leadership industries, and the influence of these dynamics on leadership research, learning, development and practice. Such an investigation can help leadership scholars think more self-reflexively about the central role that they themselves play in the leadership fashion process and the leadership industries (Alvesson, 2020). In our discussion section we outline an agenda for pursuing such research.

Discussion and conclusion

In an essay on the history and significance of the concept of leadership, Podolny et al. (2010) draw on Weber's distinction between formal and substantive rationality to argue that the study of leadership went awry when scholars began to assume that its primary function was to boost productivity and performance. They point out that early leadership researchers did not seek to predict organizational or economic outcomes, but were interested in leadership "because of its capacity to infuse purpose and meaning into the lives of individuals" (Podolny et al., 2010: 167). These authors lament the fact that more and more leadership theory is produced inside business schools, where researchers encounter a variety of incentives and pressures to conduct quantitatively verifiable studies that isolate economic performance as a dependent variable in a formally rational manner, and to mold leadership learning around similarly corporate or instrumentalist assumptions. Podolny et al. argue

that early leadership studies correctly prioritized norms of substantive rationality over norms of formal rationality, and they call for a return to such substantively rational priorities.

The argument we have developed in this article shares this concern with the multiple forms of rationality that create expectations attached to leadership, and with the shaping influence of the cultural and institutional contexts within which the production of leadership knowledge takes place. But we do not advocate a return to substantive over formal rationality as the only appropriate lens through which to view leadership. Instead we take a further step back to point out that an even wider range of rational norms—including, as we have proposed, norms of affective rationality—combine together in ever shifting combinations to generate expectations attached to leadership. On this basis we call for research on how both producers and consumers respond to and generate such expectations in ways that contribute to the co-production of mainstream and fashionable approaches to leadership.

Contributions

By means of our argument we make several contributions to leadership studies. First, we expand the limited understanding of rationality at the heart of management fashion theory by invoking Weber's expansive categorization of rationality and by demonstrating its relevance to the understanding of leadership fashions. This contribution is significant because it helps explain the differences between the range of expectations attached to leadership as opposed to management, and because it helps to situate and to counteract the widespread critical tendency to dismiss leadership fashions because they do not conform to a limited range of norms and expectations of formal or theoretical rationality. Second, we introduce the concept of affective rationality, further expanding the concept of rationality itself in the context of research on management and leadership fashions. This contribution is significant because it helps account for the many intensely emotional, spiritual, and quasi-therapeutic norms and expectations that many different sources attach to leadership, and to

situate the affective, aesthetic, and often intensely personal dynamics of leadership learning and development.

Third, we build on this expanded conceptualization of rationality to contribute the first clearly articulated, theoretically grounded definition of leadership fashions. This contribution is significant because it provides a foundation for understanding the nature and function of leadership fashions, how they get produced, promoted, consumed, and appropriated towards a variety of different interests and ends, and how they influence the dynamics of leadership learning and development. Our fourth contribution builds on Abrahamson's original emphasis on the industrialized production of management fashions to lay the conceptual foundation for a production perspective on the popularization of leadership via the leadership industries. This contribution is significant because it provides a theoretical foundation for researching the commercial and industrial influences on the social construction of leadership itself, for exploring the commercialized dynamics of leadership learning and development, and for self-reflexively examining the role that leadership scholars themselves play in such processes.

Leadership fashions—like leadership learning—are cultural products. Drawn from the production of culture literature (Hirsch, 2000; Jones and Thornton, 2005; Lawrence and Phillips, 2002), the term "cultural product" refers to an expressive asset consumed via acts of interpretation rather than simply via practical use. Consumers value cultural products at least as much for their symbolic meaning and emotional associations as for their utility. Of course, consumers attach some degree of meaning and emotion to all products, and cultural products can serve practical, technically useful, and even mundane purposes. But meaning and emotion are integral features of cultural products in ways that they are not for more utilitarian goods like fiberglass insulation or fuel additives, to the point where interpretation and consumption function as essential stages in their very production.

This means that the significance of cultural products is contentious and constantly in a state of emerging and changing.

Like other cultural products, leadership fashions are co-created by an industrialized process of manufacture and delivery in concert with a symbolic process of interpretation and reproduction. We have argued that the commercial and industrial dynamics connected to leadership fashions do not render the kinds of learning they promote somehow automatically illegitimate, superstitious, or ideologically suspect. But they do call for new kinds of research that can comprehend the workings of leadership fashions and the leadership industries in depth. We outline an agenda for future resarch in the following section.

Future research

For the reasons stated above, a thorough understanding of leadership fashions will require both the kinds of narrative and discursive perspectives that critical leadership studies have primarily employed thus far—perspectives that can speak to the symbolic, emotional, ideological, and identity work that leadership fashions perform—and a set of new research methods and approaches that can open up the study of the leadership industries and the production of leadership. This area of study raises important questions that scholars have yet to ask about how financial considerations, organizational pressures, professional norms, firm strategies, market dynamics, and consumer demand contribute to the shape and content of leadership ideas, products and services. These commercial and industrial dynamics clearly influence the ways that people think and learn about leadership.

To understand this influence, future studies will need to explore how the various tiers and sectors of the leadership industries get constructed and interact with each other. They need to evaluate the mechanisms that actors in the leadership industries deploy to professionalize themselves and to police their boundaries. They need to analyze how various interests function and compete within

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those boundaries, and to account for cultural and regulatory differences that produce variation in the practices of the leadership industries across regional, national, and sectoral boundaries. And they need to explore the crucial role played by client organizations and consumer/end-users in the co-production of leadership discourses, products and services in these many contexts.

These many and varied activities result in the proliferation of popularized leadership concepts, discourses, and fashions, which in turn, we argue, exert considerable shaping influence over leadership learning, development, and practice. To understand the nature and extent of that shaping influence, critical leadership studies need to supplement the analysis of individual leadership fashions, texts, and discourses by taking a production perspective on the leadership industries and the production of leadership. Research conducted from a production perspective will also serve to highlight in a self-reflexive manner the important role that leadership and organization scholars and educators themselves (or more correctly, ourselves) play in the supply chain of leadership fashions (Butler et al., 2015; Guthey et al., 2009).

The point of a production of leadership framework, however, is neither simply to dismiss the many fashions, trends, concepts, or practices that result from this process, nor to decry the leadership academics and educators who participate therein. The point is rather to map out the many intersecting forces, interests, norms, and expectations at play within the leadership fashion setting process, and to understand the connections between the kinds of leadership products these intersecting forces end up generating, as well as the kinds of leadership learning—and actual leadership—that they help generate.

In this manner, the argument we have delivered here can encourage critical leadership scholars to reconsider their understanding of what counts as critique, and where it takes place. As we have emphasized by introducing the notion of affective rationality, the value ascribed to leadership fashions can hinge just as much on their symbolic and emotional resonance as on their technical

usefulness. This is the basis on which we have argued that blanket critical dismissals of leadership fashions as trivial are overhasty. In fact, we have suggested, leadership fashions can in some instances perform just as critical a function as the critics themselves, and for a much greater number of people. That is, to the extent that even the most hyped, commercialized, and even treacly leadership fashion draws attention to norms of substantive or affective rationality, it can convey a latent or inchoate desire for a counterpoint to the kind of formally rational economic calculus that prioritizes the organizational efficiency of means over the value of ends.

Instead of just reinforcing the language of corporate power, then, some leadership fashions can deliver their own critique—however compromised by organizational imperatives, ideological undercurrents, promotional hype, or mass appeal—of the impersonal market forces and instrumental forms of corporate and bureaucratic control that appear to dominate the modern landscape and to encroach on the possibility of exerting individual or collective human agency (Guthey, 2016). From this perspective, leadership fashions can function as popularized forums for dialogue, debate, and collective learning about the nature and purpose of organizational and social endeavors, and about how to balance formally rational concerns about bureaucratic efficiency and effectiveness with substantively rational concerns about the importance of community, values, justice, or ethics, and with affectively rational concerns about emotional vitality, interpersonal connections, or spiritual well-being. Thus, taking leadership fashions seriously as a vehicle for leadership learning—and even critique—can allow for precisely the kind of critical engagement with public audiences and their concerns that Bridgman (2007) has advocated in the context of management learning.

One of the key insights provided by critical leadership studies is that leadership itself has become a taken-for-granted aspect of the way that many people look at the world, to the point where the very activities and interests that have placed leadership on its pedestal have become hidden in plain sight. But as we have argued, leadership scholars have not sufficiently analyzed these activities,

nor have they sufficiently explored the "createdness" of their own object of study, which includes not just the social or discursive construction of leadership, but also the industrialized production of leadership and the consequences thereof for leadership learning and practice. A production framework on leadership fashions supplements critical and discursive research with an investigation of the social, institutional, industrial, and commercial conditions under which discourses, theories, beliefs and myths about leadership get produced and promoted. Future such research can contribute to a better understanding of the reciprocal influence between those conditions of production on the one hand, and the range of norms and expectations that govern leadership research, learning, discourse, and practice on the other.

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