



*Routledge Studies in Leadership Research*

# **REVITALISING LEADERSHIP**

**PUTTING THEORY AND PRACTICE INTO CONTEXT**

Suze Wilson, Stephen Cummings, Brad Jackson  
and Sarah Proctor-Thomson



# Revitalising Leadership

*Revitalising Leadership* connects leadership theory and practice with context. It argues that the universal prescriptions favoured by most leadership scholars ignore the reality that context always matters in leadership practice—and so it should matter in leadership theorising, too. Addressing this gap, the book offers a novel framework that enables the development of context-sensitive leadership theory and practice. This framework directs theoretical and practical attention to the key challenges for leadership in different organizational contexts. It involves developing a specific purpose for leadership in a given context, as well as formulating the values, norms and domains of action which should guide leadership efforts in that context. Determining these various matters then informs the role, responsibilities, rights, behaviours and attributes especially relevant to leaders and followers for that context and the focus, purpose and boundaries of the leader-follower relationship. Deploying this framework, six in-depth illustrative theorisations are provided, showing how leadership practice might best take shape in the contexts of supervisory management; HR management; innovation and entrepreneurship; strategy; governance; and leadership studies itself.

*Revitalising Leadership* will appeal to diverse audiences, due to its theoretical novelty, its diversity of illustrative examples, its practice-focussed orientation and its clear, engaging style. These include leadership scholars concerned with the lack of attention being paid to context in leadership theorising; organizational scholars wanting to learn how leadership thinking can be brought to bear on the different management functions the book explores; practitioners seeking leadership ideas that are tailored to the context they lead and follow in; and those involved in MBA or leadership development programmes who are looking to combine the personal reflection sought by such programmes with a thoughtful analysis of the context in which their leadership practice takes place.

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# Revitalising Leadership

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# 1 Why Revitalise Leadership?

## Introduction

[T]he leadership field over the past decade has made tremendous progress in uncovering some of the enduring mysteries associated with leadership. . . . The period that leadership theory and research will enter over the next decade is indeed one of the most exciting in the history of this planet.

(Avolio, Walumbwa & Weber, 2009, p. 442)

Researchers seem content to ask smaller and smaller questions about fewer and fewer issues of genuine significance, producing statements of the blindingly obvious, the completely irrelevant or the palpably absurd.

(Tourish, 2015, p. 137)

Our proposition is that the time has come to revitalise leadership, to radically rethink what should constitute its purpose, focus and the role it plays in our organizations. Far too often, those holding formal leadership positions, those who make the strategy, policy and resource allocation decisions, are leading in ways which frustrate or disappoint, or are pursuing objectives unlikely to provide a sustainably better life for those they claim to lead. Self-interest, not service to others, along with a focus on short-term results without regard to their longer-term consequences, takes precedence far too frequently.

We see these problems as being deeply systemic in nature, shaped in part by particular ways of thinking about and practicing leadership in organizations which have come to the fore in recent decades, and not simply the result of a few ‘bad apples’ in leadership roles. Convention now has it that organizational leadership takes for granted the primacy of a managerialist lens on organizational life and the capitalist imperative for endless growth (Alvesson, 1996; Parker, 2002). Often, only an *individual* leader’s personal ‘style’ and the *short-term* results achieved on their watch are given detailed attention, thereby reinforcing ways of thinking and behaving which are ‘functional’ but also fundamentally ‘stupid’, given the *collective* effort needed for *long-term* organizational (and planetary) sustainability

## 2 *Why Revitalise Leadership?*

(Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). Indeed, much of the focus of organizational leadership practice these days appears fundamentally directed toward enhancing profitability and preserving managerial status for the immediate future, whilst offering sufficient psycho-social support and developmental challenge to worker-followers to sustain their active involvement in this state of affairs. However, a questioning of the larger purposes and longer-term ends which organizational leaders pursue is increasingly necessary, given the problems posed to the capitalist 'logic' of never-ending growth and accumulation by climate change and the reality that ever-improving material wealth does not guarantee greater human happiness (Diener, Harter & Arora, 2010; Koch, 2015).

Simultaneously, though, in communities (and some organizations) all over the world, we are witnessing the growing incidence and impact of leadership which is not reliant on formal authority, rank and status, which speaks to shared concerns and often seeks to bring people together to advance otherwise forgotten or marginalised issues and interests (Kellerman, 2012). This kind of leadership effort is often focussed on achieving goals which reflect deeply held, value-based concerns. It is often grounded in a concern for larger purposes, such as securing justice, peace, democracy, freedom and empowerment of those whose interests are otherwise neglected, or the protection of the natural environment, and aims to mobilise and promote change for the betterment of all on a sustained basis (Eslen-Ziya & Erhart, 2015; Raelin, 2011, 2016). These developments, too, we understand as a systemic response to a changing world, one where many have grasped that 'the centre cannot hold' and that local initiative is both needed and can bring about real change. At the level of practice, then, we see both the best and worst of what leadership can offer all around us.

Meanwhile, if we look to the scholarly and popular literature on organizational leadership, it seems as if we are drowning in a sea of leadership theories, be they formal or more anecdotal in nature. While substantively new and different ways of thinking about leadership have emerged in recent years (e.g., Grint, 2000, 2005a, 2005b; Ladkin, 2010; Raelin, 2003, 2016; Sinclair, 2007, 2015), the mainstream of scholarly effort largely comprises competing recipes prescribing how manager-leaders should craft their selves in bold and heroic terms in order to advance their careers (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2016; Wilson, 2016). This excessive and often exclusive focus on the personal characteristics or style of the leader both reflects and feeds a recognised leader-centric bias in our thinking (Meindl, Ehrlich & Dukerich, 1985). Simultaneously, it encourages a grandiose, narcissistic mindset amongst leaders (Alvesson & Gabriel, 2016; Tourish, 2013), crowds out a proper appreciation of the crucial influence of followers (Kelley, 1992) and pays scant heed to the varying contexts in which leadership work takes place (Osborn, Hunt & Jauch, 2002). Yet if 'leadership' is constituted as nothing more than a project of rendering the self more perfect so as to enable career advancement, shaping the self in ways that align to whatever approach or

style constitutes the latest leadership fad, then something so self-absorbed in its focus likely offers little in terms of advancing collective well-being.

To respond to these various concerns, our argument is that we must revitalise leadership. We believe we must develop new and different ways of thinking about the purpose, focus and role of leadership in organizations, in order to help inform changes in leadership practice. We want to explore here how leadership can be crafted in a *variety* of ways that directly address the key challenges which arise in different contexts. This implies a re-appraisal of the expectations we have of leaders and followers, including the powers, rights and responsibilities we give to them. It means thinking, too, about the limits of leadership, resisting the temptation to romanticise its powers and potential or to treat it as the magic bullet that can solve every problem.

With this book, our goal is to demonstrate why we must and how we can revitalise leadership theory and practice. Our focus is on offering a new way of theorising leadership, theorising that can genuinely inform practice though paying attention to the particular matters which are of salience to leadership in different settings. Rather than another generic recipe intended to shape the self of the leader, what we set out here is a flexible suite of ingredients that addresses multiple dimensions of leadership, such as its purpose, underpinning values and norms, role and responsibilities, and demonstrating how these matters can be configured variably to meet the needs of particular organizational contexts. We formulate approaches to leadership shaped by the diverse range of challenges and needs which arise in the context of different organizational roles and functions. Our approach derives from what we call *leadership-practice-in-context*, the idea that leadership is only of value if it is shaped by, and responds to, the needs of a particular context.

For over a century, leadership scholars have, by and large, directed their efforts at producing theories which they claim to have universal applicability. They have assumed leadership is something ‘natural’, something that has an enduring ‘essence’—even though they also keep changing their minds about what that ‘essence’ might be (Kelly, 2013; Wilson, 2016). The predominant focus has been on the psychology of the leader—their behaviours, personality, cognitive habits, influencing and communicative style and such like. And, the concern has routinely been that of leader effectiveness considered narrowly in terms of its impact on worker productivity, morale and organizational commitment (Sinclair, 2007; Wilson, 2016).

All these matters have been examined extensively, but much less attention has gone to addressing the contextual dimensions which are salient to and shape leadership practice. The larger purpose and substantive results that leadership in a given context might be called on to achieve, beyond an effect on followers’ perceptions and feelings, has largely been ignored (Kempster, Jackson & Conroy, 2011; Porter & McLaughlin, 2006). Here, we reject the universalist, essentialist, a-contextual paradigm which has dominated leadership studies over the last century and instead offer a theoretical framework and exemplar

#### 4 Why Revitalise Leadership?

theorisations which are grounded in a new approach—a *contextualised theorising* of leadership, where ‘leadership’ is understood as something that can be *constructed or invented* in an endless variety of ways (see also Wilson, 2016). We seek to build on and extend leadership research which has taken contextual issues seriously, resulting in formulations that have a direct and deep connection with specific settings (e.g., Faris & Parry, 2011; Hannah, Uhl-Bien, Avolio & Cavarretta, 2009; Quick & Wright, 2011).

When we speak of *contextualised theorising*, we mean theorising which hones in on, and is tailored to, particular contexts and issues. We are taking leadership theory local, you might say, enabling us to pay attention to the challenges of *leadership-practice-in-context* in different organizational settings, using this to craft a leadership approach designed for the particular demands of various roles and functions within organizations. For us, the context is the stage, the setting in which leadership occurs, so we therefore take it as the starting point for our thinking about what approach to leadership is likely to be of value. The salient aspects for leadership of a given context are, of course, contestable, as is what is constituted as leadership (Grint, 2000), so recognising the futility of prescriptive precision our theorising is deliberately heuristic in tenor.

When we say we understand leadership as something *constructed or invented*, we connect to the philosophical stance of nominalism and to post-modernist, post-structuralist perspectives more generally, in two key ways. Firstly, we understand social reality as itself being (constantly) constructed or invented, rather than the inevitable consequence of natural causes. For us, social reality has an historically specific yet fluid form and is open to competing interpretations (Blaikie, 2000, 2007; Dickens, 2013; Potter, 2013). Arising from this, ‘leadership’ is likewise something that is (constantly) constructed rather than derived from nature and is historically specific, fluid and open to competing interpretations.

Secondly, we treat what is commonly said and believed to be true—discursive regimes—as influential forces shaping how social reality gets constructed, irrespective of whether a given discourse is empirically correct or not (Foucault, 1977, 1978). This means ideas about leadership matter regardless of their veracity, for discursive regimes shape what is accepted as constituting leadership. As a consequence of these understandings, it becomes possible to conceive of ‘leadership’ as something that has already been constructed and invented in many different ways, ways that can be found in the various discursive regimes which speak of leadership—and to which we now add our efforts.

In our approach, rather than simply maintain the conventional focus on the self of the leader, we seek to be more expansive in the factors our theorising addresses. Consequently, we consider the kinds of *challenges* thrown up by different organizational contexts, to which leadership may be constructed to offer some response. Specifically, we examine leadership in the context of operational-level supervision, the HRM function, innovation and

entrepreneurship, strategy, governance, and leadership studies itself, arguing each of these settings offers specific challenges and possibilities for how leadership can be conceived and practiced. We explore the *purpose* of leadership in these different contexts and the *values and norms* that we argue, normatively, ought to inform it, as well as the *domains* of action within that context where it might usefully contribute. We identify personal *attributes and behaviours* that, given the preceding points of analysis, we see as especially salient to those engaging in leadership work in each of these different contexts, whilst recognising that someone's identity as 'leader' or 'follower' is fluid and contestable. We also look at the *roles, rights and responsibilities* of both leaders and followers in these different contexts and the nature of the *relationship* to be forged between them.

We are concerned, then, about the substantive results to which leadership efforts may contribute and how those results are to be achieved. In this approach a concern with psychological issues of individual behaviour has a role to play, but does not dominate the scene. Instead, we bring in sociological, political, ethical and philosophical concerns about what leadership does for and to us. However, what emerges as salient is not presumed universal in nature but, rather, varies in the different contexts of leadership practice that we will explore.

Our approach is informed, also, by our commitment to the constructive value of critical thinking—thinking which questions what is normally taken-for-granted. This critical orientation is not about being hostile to leaders or leadership, but it does mean we question the faith which many now seem to have that leadership is the answer to every problem (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2016; Wilson, 2016). Consistent with the broader tradition of critical social science, it also means we are attentive to issues of power in its many and various forms, as well as issues of justice, equality, freedom and democratic participation (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Alvesson, Bridgman & Willmott, 2009). These are issues which any serious effort to examine leadership cannot avoid, in our view, as to hold a leadership role is to be in a position of power relative to others, while participating in leadership work which advances a particular outcome carries with it the ethical duty to consider what means may legitimately be used and whose or what interests are served through that (Ciulla, 1995; Price, 2003). Unfortunately, in our opinion, much of the scholarly and popular leadership literature has adopted a much narrower, functionalist orientation, in which the primary concern is essentially about how 'leadership' results in greater productivity (Alvesson, 1996; Sinclair, 2007). We are not opposed to productive workplaces: clearly, un-productive workplaces are an exercise in frustration and wastefulness. However, we join with others who argue that thinking seriously about leadership demands sustained attention to its social, political and ethical dimensions (e.g., Ciulla, 2004; Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003; Ladkin, 2010; Sinclair, 2007), and so we unapologetically bring these matters into our approach.

## 6 *Why Revitalise Leadership?*

Having thus far offered you a very brief precis of what this book is about, then, in the balance of this chapter, we explore aspects of the leadership literature which have informed the focus and approach taken. We begin by offering a broad historical review which highlights how the wider context has, in fact, always played a key part in shaping leadership thought and practice, and how contextual issues have traditionally been treated in leadership knowledge. This, we hope, will sow seeds of doubt on the common belief that modern leadership knowledge develops via the production and accumulation of objective evidence and the elimination of error, by highlighting wider contextual forces that inform where, how and on what issues leadership scholars focus their efforts (Trethewey & Goodall, 2007; Wilson, 2016). We then examine major trends in the leadership studies field as of today, offering a critique of the dominant ‘leadership science’ approach before honing in on the emerging new paradigm in leadership studies which informs our approach. To demonstrate the potential of heuristic theorising, we explore some key texts from this paradigm which adopt this approach, before turning to examine how an engagement with contextual issues has been addressed in some recent studies. We conclude this chapter by explaining how the book is organized and identifying who may find it relevant.

### **Issues of Context in Leadership Knowledge**

The Western study of leadership has a long history in which what is claimed to be the truth about leadership has undergone continuous revision, at each stage reflecting particular values, norms and concerns which were influential at that point in time (for an extended analysis of this history, see Wilson, 2016). In ancient and medieval times, leadership knowledge was produced via the holistic combining of what we would today conceptualise as philosophy, ethics, religion, political science, sociology and psychology (e.g., Erasmus, 2010; Lipsius, 2004; Plato, 1995, 2007; Xenophon, 1997, 2006). Moreover, leadership scholars in these times produced knowledge that did not abstract the leader from their context: the concern was not simply the desired personal attributes of leaders and issues of leadership technique but, also, the provision of advice and insights that directly addressed the substantive issues leaders faced and the particular goals they ought to pursue. Heads of state were the main point of interest at this time, with some limited attention also going to military leadership, while connections were sometimes drawn to those with expertise or authority to lead in other settings, such as ships’ captains, doctors, farmers, priests and heads of household estates.

### **Classical Greek Knowledge**

Aristotle, Plato and Xenophon provide advice for heads of state in relation to a wide variety of substantive issues involved in governing a city state, as well as addressing the personal qualities of leaders and how they ought to conduct themselves to best effect (Aristotle, 2009; Plato, 1995, 2007;

Xenophon, 1997, 2006). For these scholars, leadership is understood to be a rare and exclusively male quality which is a gift of the gods; hence leaders are imbued with the spark of the divine. The philosopher-king-warrior is constituted as the ideal, one who knows, loves and pursues the truth, governs decisively without pandering to popular opinion and possesses a soldier's strength, discipline and tolerance for hardship (Plato, 1995, 2007; Xenophon, 2006). Followers, however, are said to be lacking in such qualities to varying degrees and, therefore, are expected to act in accordance with the leader's directives, without scope for debate: deference to a superior being is, thus, the proposition being advanced.

The leader's role here, as the one who knows best, was to determine all matters which could affect the well-being of the people and the state. This, in turn, required extensive knowledge by leaders of such diverse matters as statecraft, agriculture, town planning, warfare, religious practices to keep the gods happy and child-rearing, these all being matters on which leadership scholars could be expected to formulate advice. To fulfil this demanding set of duties, leaders were expected to live an ascetic existence in which personal pleasure was effectively prohibited: the demand was that every waking hour should be directed toward protecting and advancing the interests of the people and the state. While leadership here entailed complete and absolute power over others, this was simultaneously paired with the expectation that a leader's exclusive focus be on serving the interests of those he led. Consequently, leaders were positioned as both master and servant, and perhaps even slave, to those they led (Wilson, 2013, 2016).

The wider context shaping the formation of these ways of thinking about leadership and its practice was the continuous political and military upheavals which plagued the ancient Greek world, along with its epistemological, ontological and cultural assumptions and religious beliefs (Grant, 1991; Morris & Powell, 2006; Wilson, 2013, 2016). Emerging from these influences, 'leadership' is positioned as offering truth, morality and the answer to every problem for a world racked by conflict and uncertainty. The nature of leadership as constructed here is an approach that comprehensively reflects the values, norms and issues that were seen as salient to this particular context. These truths about leadership were inventions, designed to address concerns which their inventors held dear. This, we argue, remains fundamentally the case even unto today.

Politically, the legitimacy of the Athenian democracy was undermined by claims that leaders are divinely gifted beings incapable of wrong doing, for its ideal of equality (amongst wealthy men of the aristocracy, at least) is thereby reconstituted as something contrary to the natural, divine, truth and morality which is leadership (Wilson, 2013, 2016). The death of Socrates, mentor to Plato and Xenophon, in response to sedition charges laid by the Athenian democracy offers a personal motivation for such a move, one that is supplemented by a general concern by these scholars to advance the interests of the aristocratic class (Grant, 1991; Morris & Powell, 2006; Wilson, 2013, 2016). From the ancient Greeks, then, we learn that it is possible to

produce an account of leadership which is deeply informed by one's socio-cultural, intellectual and political context and which provides substantive and personal guidance for leaders on how to navigate in this context. This knowledge, of course, is not free of political value, intent or effect, nor will it have universal applicability. Instead, its relevance and credibility derives from the connections it makes to values and issues of high salience to the context to which it seeks to respond.

## Medieval Knowledge

In the medieval era, scholars such as Calvin (2010), Erasmus (2010), Lipsius (2004), Luther (2010) and Machiavelli (2005) likewise directed their attention to the substantive issues faced by leaders who were heads of state, as well as to analysis of the desirable personal qualities of such leaders and issues of leadership technique. Monarchy was then the most common form of governance in Europe, and the truth about leadership could be found in a genre of books known as 'mirrors for princes' (Gilbert, 1938; Morrow, 2005; Skinner, 2002). An estimated 1,000 such texts were written between 800 and 1700 AD, and they were widely read amongst the elite classes (Gilbert, 1938; Lambertini, 2011). The general purpose of these texts was to issue guidance to princes on how best to lead, knowledge which, in turn, also helped to inform those with whom princes regularly engaged as to their needs and what might be expected of them. The particular texts our analysis focusses on originate from the 16th century, when the Renaissance and the Reformation gave rise to significant social, political, religious and intellectual change (Craigie, 1950; Gilbert, 1938; Skinner, 2002).

At this time leadership was again tied to the masculine and the divine, as kings and princes were understood to be an instrument of God's will, indeed their special standing in God's eyes was central to the legitimacy of their status and role. (e.g., Erasmus, 2010; James VI, 1950; Lipsius, 2004). As with the ancient Greek approach, leadership knowledge here addressed the whole of the leader's life from cradle to grave and included both their official, public efforts and their personal conduct. The scrutiny of the leader implied by this holistic view extended to include God himself, with the warning being issued that "the judgement after death is not the same for all: none are treated more sternly . . . than those who were powerful. No other achievement will better enable you to win God's favour than if you show yourself to be a beneficial prince to your people" (Erasmus, 2010, pp. 18–19). In contemporary terms, a kind of multi-rater feedback process is thus envisaged, in which God and the people judge the leader for how well he has served their interests.

Defining the 'virtues' of leaders was a key focus at this time, with scholars offering various prescriptions. Table 1.1 below summarises three such models, offered by Calvin (2010), Erasmus (2010) and Lipsius (2004). What is notable is how these virtues speak to an underlying concern to

Table 1.1 16th-century European leadership virtues

<i>Calvin's model</i>	<i>Erasmus's model</i>	<i>Lipsius's model</i>
Integrity	Wisdom	Virtue
Prudence	A sense of justice	• Modesty
Clemency	Personal restraint	• Majesty
Moderation	Foresight	• Ensure justice
Innocence	Concern for the public well-being	• Prefer clemency
		Prudence (force + virtue)
		• Military prudence
		• Civil prudence

Source: Calvin, 2010; Erasmus, 2010; Lipsius, 2004

ensure leaders exercised their extensive powers in a considered, just manner. One key purpose of leadership knowledge here, then, is to seek to constrain what leaders can legitimately do.

Beyond the focus on the self of the leader, though, substantive issues of statecraft, warfare, religious doctrine and public policy were also key concerns for leadership knowledge and practice (e.g., Erasmus, 2010; James VI, 1950; Lipsius, 2004). Issues of *realpolitik*, concerned with the maintenance of the leader's position through the exercise of techniques such as inciting fear, being deceitful and acting with cunning were also addressed (Lipsius, 2004; Machiavelli, 2015). To develop this broad and diverse capability, considerable focus is given over to the leader's education from their birth onwards. This education is not only to ensure the leader is equipped to perform his duties, but also to prevent him being wrongly swayed by poor advice or polluted by bad influences, such as are said to be posed by the great majority of people. Distance from followers is considered important in order to maintain the leader's majesty, focus and purity (Erasmus, 2010; James VI, 1950).

Medieval leadership scholars needed to tread carefully, given the powers of their key audience routinely extended to issues of life and death decided according to their personal judgement (Allen, 1951; Cameron, 2001; Skinner, 2002). Yet the growing tensions between Church and state arising from the Reformation, and within and between states, often due to competing dynastic ambitions, were such as to make this a dangerous time for leaders (Cameron, 2001; Gunn, 2001; Jardine, 2010). In this context, scholars went to considerable effort to connect their ideas about leadership to the moral, ethical and religious code of their day. They commonly sought to promote an approach which constituted a considered, stabilising response to the varying substantive issues and threats that leaders were facing, although boldness was also sanctioned in regard to some issues (Erasmus, 2010; Lipsius, 2004; Machiavelli, 2015). Politically, an acceptance of the monarchical system of governance was assumed, thereby helping to sustain its legitimacy. As part of this, accepting or promoting a divine foundation

for kingly leadership and advocating the importance for leaders to work in the interests of the people, aided in justifying the limitations that were placed on the political rights of the population.

From our review thus far what we see, then, is that the nature of leadership knowledge in both the ancient and medieval world entailed a detailed consideration of the context in which leaders were situated as a central concern for scholars seeking to explain the nature of leadership and offer advice to leadership practitioners. Questions of both the means and the ends of leadership were considered. Both leaders and their particular context were analysed. Normative considerations were not separated out when addressing these matters. This holistic basis for theorising leadership reflected the epistemological norms of these times, in which the modern separation of fact and value simply made no sense.

### **The Emergence of ‘Leadership Science’**

It is not until Carlyle’s influential work, first published in 1840, that we see the beginning of the turning away by leadership scholars from the substantive issues which arise in the context of actual practice and a narrowing in on leader psychology (Carlyle, 1993; Wilson, 2016). This development, of course, coincides with the general splintering of disciplines one from another as modern social science first emerges, bringing with it the adoption of a ‘natural science’ epistemology, in which leadership is understood as something which can be accounted for in objective ways, free from researcher bias (Gordon, 1981; Spoelstra, Butler & Delaney, 2016; Winch, 1967). In leadership studies, this development finds its first full expression in Galton’s Social Darwinian and statistical approach to the identification of the traits of exceptional men (yes, men), an orientation and methodology which heavily influenced the subsequent five decades of focus on leader traits (Galton, 1892, 1970; Smith & Krueger, 1932; Stogdill, 1948; Wilson, 2016).

Subsequent major developments in the field, such as emergence of behavioural theories, contingency/situational theories and ‘new leadership’ approaches, which emphasise notions of vision, charisma, transformation and, more recently, authenticity, have also developed primarily via a ‘natural sciences’ epistemology (Alvesson, 1996; Jackson & Parry, 2011; Wilson, 2016). Hence, the conventional narrative has it that modern leadership studies progresses via the careful and objective accumulation of evidence which enables the elimination of ignorance and error and brings us ever close to the truth about leadership (e.g., Avolio et al., 2009; Huczynski & Buchanan, 2006). The concern with precision and measurement, which is a key feature of this epistemological paradigm, is a major reason why grappling with complex, dynamic contexts has proved problematic for contemporary leadership scholars. However, wider contextual influences, not simply the accumulation of evidence, have continued to be crucial influences shaping major developments in the field.

The shift from trait to behavioural theory around the end of WWII, for example, is commonly credited to Stogdill's (1948) review of the trait literature (Bass, 2008; Huczynski & Buchanan, 2006). Yet a careful reading of Stogdill's review shows he is not as damning of trait theory as is now commonly assumed, for he identifies a number of traits which he reports multiple studies had shown as having a strong association with leadership. In fact, the project leader of the team where Stogdill then worked, Shartle, reports that a shift in focus onto leader behaviour was one he identified as important by war's end, some three years prior to the publication of Stogdill's review (see Shartle, 1979; also Bowers & Seashore, 1966, confirm this same timing). This decision, we suggest, constitutes an astute and pragmatic reading by Shartle of the post-war political context, in which claims of natural superiority à la trait theory likely sounded suspiciously close to Nazi ideology. Moving the focus onto leader behaviour thus provided a politically acceptable way forward for leadership scholars at this time, rather than this development emerging simply in response to clear evidence of the problems with trait theory (Wilson, 2016).

The later shift from trait to contingency/situational approaches was partly informed by evidence (see, in particular, Korman's damning 1966 review of the Ohio State leader behaviour model). However, the intellectually fashionable status of contingency thinking at that time was also an important influence (Reed, 2006; Wilson, 2016; Wren, 2005). Notably, a number of contingency/situational theories continued the focus on tasks and relationships, which were the core elements of behavioural theories, despite Korman's findings, again indicating issues other than evidence were shaping the research agenda (e.g. Fiedler, 1967; Hersey & Blanchard, 1974; House, 1971). Meanwhile, the assumptions made about followers in contingency/situational theories, whereby they are now seen as potentially difficult to manage, reflects a response to the growing challenge to authority which emerged as part of the counter-culture at that same time (Ackerman, 1975; Cornuelle, 1975; Roos, 1972; Wilson, 2016). Wider contextual influences, then, rather than simply the accumulation of evidence, are again influential here in how leadership is understood and what we expect from it.

In a similar vein, the emphasis of 'new leadership' approaches, which focus on 'vision', 'transformation', 'charisma' and 'authenticity', also reflects challenges and concerns that go well beyond matters of evidence (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; House, 1977; Luthans & Avolio, 2003). These ideas first emerged at a time when America was facing a series of political, military and business challenges which threw into doubt its ability to sustain its world dominating position (Ackerman, 1975; Hodgson, 2005; Magaziner & Reich, 1982). Dramatic changes were thought to be needed and 'new leadership' approaches are strongly oriented toward the achievement of change. They also often drew on by-then widely accepted cultural assumptions about human potential for growth and change, promising to foster this amongst followers (Burns, 1978; Gitlin,

1993; Hall, 2005). This focus on change and personal development likely helps to sustain the continued popularity of these approaches through to the present day, aligning as they do with the requirements of capitalism and the focus of contemporary culture on self-development (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2016; Wilson, 2016).

In the era of ‘leadership science’, then, the focus of theorising continues to be shaped by issues of wider social salience, even at the same time as such issues are not overtly acknowledged or addressed in such theorisations. Indeed, we now have the paradoxical situation whereby theories that claim a basis in science and to offer universally applicable prescriptions, are, in their basic orientation, derived from non-scientific and historically specific contextual influences. This occurs at the same time as such theories routinely ignore contextual considerations in their prescriptions for leadership practice, due to their epistemological and methodological commitments. A key problem is the lack of attention to basic assumptions (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2016; Spoelstra et al., 2016; Wilson, 2016). The desire for precise ‘scientific’ findings has led to a situation whereby “sterile preoccupations dominate the literature” and “the identification of ever more mediating processes and moderating factors takes precedence over interrogating fundamental assumptions” (Tourish, 2015, citing Van Knippenberg and Sitkin, p. 137). The end result is a field of studies where its mainstream of effort now suffers from “unrelenting triviality” (Tourish, 2015, p. 138).

### **Leadership Studies Today and the Problem With ‘Leadership Science’**

Focussing now on the current state of play, three key trends are evident in the field of organizational leadership studies today and thus warrant discussion. The first key trend is the sustained, incremental development of a range of now well-established theories, theoretical perspectives or approaches to the study of leadership. This Kuhnian ‘normal science’ is continuously expanding and refining established theories, mostly by seeking out further dependent, mediating and moderating variables via empirical methods and hypothetico-deductive logics of inquiry (Alvesson, 1996; Hunter, Bedell-Avers & Mumford, 2007). Within this, neo-charismatic (i.e. ‘new leadership’) theories were identified in an influential review of *The Leadership Quarterly* as the single largest category used in studies published in that key journal for the period 2000–2009 (Gardner, Lowe, Moss, Mahoney & Coglisier, 2010). Other long-established approaches also attracted continued attention, such as trait, behavioural, cognitive and multi-level perspectives (Gardner et al., 2010).

The second key trend is the rapid proliferation of new avenues of research and theorisation which, simultaneously, remain committed to the epistemological and methodological expectations of ‘leadership science’. This development has seen attention shifting to studying leadership in conjunction

with some other related phenomenon, such as emotions, strategy, change, creativity and innovation, or to studying leadership in particular settings, such as in teams or in political and public service roles (Gardner et al., 2010). Ethical, servant, spiritual and authentic leadership theories have also garnered growing attention by ‘leadership science’ (Gardner et al., 2010).

Despite these two trends, however, the assumptions and limitations of ‘leadership science’ which inform both of them have come under increasing challenge. The scientific approach is fundamentally concerned to identify ‘fact not opinion’ (Atwater, Mumford, Schriesheim & Yammarino, 2014, p. 1174), thus relying on the problematic understanding that phenomena deemed ‘facts’ are somehow beyond legitimately variable interpretations and not subject to the arbitrary influence of social construction as to their very existence (Hacking, 1999; Foucault, 1970; Spoelstra et al., 2016). It typically regards the appropriate domain and focus of social science to be concerned with what is empirically ‘true’, while philosophy, politics and religion are left to deal with the murky issue of determining what is (morally) ‘good’ or acceptable (Gordon, 1981; Saul, 1983; Winch, 1967). At the same time, of course, what is on offer from ‘leadership science’ is not actually value free but, rather, has typically served organizational interests in the post-WWII era by way of its concern to improve worker performance (Sinclair, 2007; Trethewey & Goodall, 2007; Wilson, 2016). This effort to serve the interests of capitalism and managerialism is partisan, even ideological, in orientation, yet these matters are readily camouflaged behind a wall of statistics (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2016; Wilson, 2016).

The focus of ‘leadership science’ goes to identifying correlations between precisely defined and de-contextualised features of social reality, which are rendered into constructs and variables for quantitative analysis. Parsimony in theorising is *de rigour*, from which precise propositions and hypotheses emerge for testing, validation and, eventually, conversion into a psychometric or some other instrument intended to offer standardised application in manager assessment and development (Alvesson, 1996; Spoelstra et al., 2016; Wilson, 2016). This approach, which is broadly consistent with the mainstream approach of the wider field of management and organization studies, thus suffers from the “ongoing fetishization of positivist methodologies and functionalist perspectives”, a state of affairs which has become “institutionalized by a deference to supposedly leading US journals” (Tourish, citing Wilkinson and Durden, 2015, p 138).

In ‘leadership science’, considerable effort goes to claiming impartiality and objectivity as regards data and its analysis (Atwater et al., 2014). Yet, the credibility of the epistemological underpinnings of all this effort have long been in contention. Gordon (1981), for example, identifies that while the natural sciences provide the reference point by which the social sciences are conventionally judged, “there is no agreement concerning the epistemic foundations of the natural sciences” (p. 635). The ready confidence that ‘leadership science’ constitutes a viable, credible approach to a phenomenon