LEADERSHIP THEORY

CULTIVATING CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

JOHN P. DUGAN

Leadership Theory

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Mary Agnes Broderick, Maria Teresa Jiménez Arnau, & Kathleen Elizabeth Dugan

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Preface

Leadership. Few words elicit simultaneously such a wide range of conflicting under-standings and feelings. It is a concept that both provokes and appeases. It is both desired and detested. Indeed, the concept of leadership is almost impossible to escape in our contemporary context. Across nearly every form of media the terms *leader* and *leadership* are bandied about, sometimes as a clarion call for what is most absent and needed in society and other times as a harbinger of the most compelling of social ills.

Despite being almost omnipresent in contemporary discourse, so little time is directed toward unpacking what is really meant by the terms leader and leadership. We default to the assumption of a shared understanding despite clear evidence that we may be operating from different conceptualizations altogether. In our relation-ships, our communities, our places of worship, our work environments—in nearly every aspect of our lives—the theme of leadership is at play. And yet . . . to what extent do we invest in examining our assumptions, comparing our perspectives, and converging around a shared meaning.

The purpose of this book is to foster dialogue about how we understand, experience, and enact leader roles and leadership processes through the exploration of leadership theory. A remarkable gap exists between the knowledge generated from the formal, academic study of leadership and its translation into everyday practice. This is at least in part attributable to the ways in which the formal, academic litera-ture on leadership reflects a "story most often told" or dominant narrative that is fre-quently disconnected from and/or incongruent with people's lived experiences. Thus,

the focus of this book is not just on exploring the architecture that informs our understandings of leadership but also on cultivating the perspectives necessary to engage with theory as a critical learner.

WHAT THIS BOOK OFFERS

The marketplace for leadership education, training, and development is growing at an exponential rate. This is evidenced in the increasing number of academic programs, community seminars, and corporate training opportunities, many of which draw on a flourishing body of scholarship on leadership theory. Leadership theory represents a particularly important area for intervention given the foundations it provides for both research and practice.

There is no shortage of books distilling the content of leadership theory. This book, however, is unique in a number of compelling ways. It offers an alternative approach to learning leadership theory that is *developmental in nature* and grounded in *critical perspectives*.

That the book is developmental means its goal is not to expose readers to the most expansive breadth of theories possible or encourage rote memorization and regurgitation. Acquisition of knowledge on a broad range of theories is important, but the process of learning *how* to learn about leadership theory offers greater additive value. Therefore, the organization and content of the book focuses on building readers' capacities to meaningfully interpret, evaluate, and apply theory—a process that can then be replicated as new theories emerge.

Part of the developmental approach taken in this book involves the infusion of perspectives derived from critical social theory. Critical social theories are concerned with understanding the flow of power in society, how this contributes to social stratification, and ways in which we can create more democratic and equitable social arrangements. The use of critical perspectives is a direct response to scholarly calls for greater attention to issues of justice in leadership theory.

The developmental approach and integration of critical perspectives work in tandem to position readers as critical learners of leadership theory. Readers are situated as valid knowers in their own right and, through the deconstruction and reconstruction of theory, begin to craft their own theories of leadership. The goal is to build agency to transform and apply theory in ways that advance leadership that can make a meaningful difference in the world.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS NOT

Sometimes it is easiest to understand the purpose and goals of a project through the articulation of what it is *not*. No book can serve the needs of all readers or cover all possible content. In fact, there lies a danger in trying to be everything to everyone. Too often this results in a watering down and oversimplification of content. As such, this book is guided by a number of delimitations that frame its design.

This Is Not an Exhaustive Examination of Leadership Theory

The goal of this book is to aid in building readers' capacities to engage with leadership theory as critical learners. To some degree, this means sacrificing breadth for depth in terms of coverage. Additionally, the book attempts to disrupt the "story most often told" in leadership theory. One of the ways in which this dominant narrative plays out is through the privileging of certain disciplines, content, and theories. Therefore, the metric for inclusion of theories in the book was the degree to which they shape or have the potential to shape formal and informal understandings of leadership across a wide array of disciplines. This means a number of well-known theories were omitted, including psychodynamic approaches, charismatic leadership, and Fiedler's contingency model, among others. This is *not* a statement of their relative value but a conscious decision made to create space for theories traditionally left out of leadership texts. Given the developmental and critical approach employed in the book, readers are encouraged to apply lessons learned to the examination of theories not included.

This Is Not a Book on Critical Social Theory

It merits explicit statement that this is *not* a book on critical social theory. This is a book on leadership theory. Concepts derived from critical social theories are employed as an interpretive lens to deepen the understanding of and ability to apply leadership theories. Therefore, I have attempted to synthesize large swaths of literature into three meta-themes. However, significant debate, distinction, and unique perspectives across the varying strands of critical scholarship are lost in this process. Perhaps the best and safest framing is that the critical perspectives presented in this book should serve as nothing more than a catalyst to seek out the rich and expansive body of literature representing critical social theory.

This Is Not an Exhaustive Set of Critiques

Electing for depth over breadth means that an exhaustive set of critiques are not provided for each theory. The approach I have taken is to offer general strengths and weaknesses for each individual theory. These critiques are varied to avoid redundancy as well as push readers to begin identifying strengths and weaknesses on their own. Additionally, Chapter 2 introduces a variety of tools of deconstruction and reconstruction to support the application of critical perspectives. Each chapter offers insights associated with just a single tool of deconstruction and reconstruction. This does not mean, however, that the others do not apply. My hope is that you will consider on your own how *all* of the tools of deconstruction and reconstruction relate to each theory as well as craft your own tools to supplement the ones I provided. Again, this approach reflects an attempt to stimulate your own agency and efficacy as a critical learner.

SUMMARY OF CONTENT

This book is organized into three sections. The first section sets the stage for learning leadership theory. Chapter 1 introduces the architecture of leadership—mapping the essential elements that comprise a theory and insights into how to delineate among theories. It provides the grounding on which the rest of the book is built. Chapter 2 introduces three meta-themes derived from critical social theory (i.e., stocks of knowledge, ideology/hegemony, and social location), along with a set of tools for deconstruction and reconstruction. The content of this chapter provides the interpretive lens for the rest of the book. Chapter 3 applies considerations from the architecture of leadership and critical perspectives to the "story most often told" in leadership theory. An alternative means for organizing theories is provided, and implicit leadership theory is introduced and used as an example to model the application of critical perspectives. Collectively, these three chapters are designed to begin developing readers' efficacy and capacity to engage with leadership theory as critical learners.

The core content of the book appears in the second section, which provides syntheses and analyses of more than 20 theories embedded within six theoretical

clusters. Chapters 4–10 employ a standardized format with three segments to ease the learning process:

1. *Standard overview*: Each individual theory is introduced through an overview of its core premises along with how it defines leadership. This is followed by a discussion of how the theory can be translated to practice as well as how empirical research evolves our understanding of its substance and utility. Strengths and weaknesses are also provided.
2. *Application of critical perspectives*: The cluster of theories appearing in a chapter are analyzed using the tools of deconstruction and reconstruction. Reconstructions are offered from multiple perspectives to build readers' comfort with the process and showcase varied ways to apply reconstructed theories to practice. For example, Chapter 5 reconstructs theories of production and effectiveness through the lens of supervision, while Chapter 6 reconstructs group-centered leadership theories through the infusion of content related to inclusion.
3. *Counter-narratives*: The final segment introduces a narrative that weaves together theory, critical perspectives, and translations to practice bringing to life the very human process of engaging in leadership. These stories challenge the "story most often told" and reflect critical life incidents from a brilliant group of leaders from varied disciplines and sectors (e.g., healthcare, education, government, business, nonprofit work, consulting).

The final chapter of the book outlines five key themes associated with the interpretation of leadership theory. These represent essential considerations for translating theory to practice. The chapter also introduces an integrated model for critical leadership development to provide a framework for readers' ongoing journey as critical learners.

A Note on Content

It is important to provide some context regarding how content in the book was generated. The product you see in front of you is the result of a significant amount of labor by an incredible team of students and colleagues. The syntheses of

leadership theories were assembled through a comprehensive examination of over 20 years of articles across five of the most influential academic journals in leadership studies. This was supplemented with content from original source materials, scholarly books, and additional articles from discipline-specific academic journals. The goal was to paint a clear picture of the origins of theories along with their evolution as a result of research. Additionally, our dedicated team engaged in a two-year, empirical study using critical narrative inquiry to create the counter-stories that conclude each chapter.

I hope the above information makes clear the comprehensiveness and rigor that went into creating the content of the book. We took seriously the importance of framing theory in ways that were accurate, highlighted innovations in research that extend our understandings, and approached the processes of deconstruction and reconstruction through an ethic of care. The use of narratives not only humanizes the theories but amplifies the voices of those whose stories are too often left untold in the leadership literature.

A Note on Using the Book

Care was taken to write this book in a developmentally sequenced manner. Readers will note that the complexity of theoretical content increases as the chapters progress. So, too, does the depth of the application of critical perspectives. Therefore, maximizing the intended purpose of the book would involve a sequential reading of chapters. Of utmost importance is that ample time and attention be directed to Chapter 2 and building a base understanding of critical perspectives as these undergird the approach to learning theory through the rest of the book.

The book is also designed with the knowledge that not every reader will want to explore all of the theories or theoretical clusters that are presented. The organization of content within chapters easily allows for bypassing individual theories while retaining the ability to engage with the deconstruction/reconstruction of a chapter. Ultimately, beyond the first three chapters a reader could pick and choose the individual theories or chapters with which to engage and still have a sense of the cohesive whole at the end of the book.

A Note on the Approach to Writing

As you explore the book you will likely note distinctive shifts from a more academic tone to a lighter, more personal, and sometimes humorous or even irreverent one as theory is interpreted, examined, and ultimately played with in service of its deconstruction/reconstruction and application to practice. I recognize that these shifts may be jarring for some who prefer a more straightforward academic text. For some, this may even appear to undermine credibility. However, I might argue that this alternative approach offers a beneficial disruption to the dominant and prototypical ways that leadership theory is traditionally written about in academia.

A FEW CAVEATS

Let me share a few general notes that may be helpful in framing the content you are about to explore. Consider these points of information that invite you to pause and ponder the reactions you may have to the book and its content.

Reactions to Critical Social Theory

There is no doubt that critical social theory evokes strong reactions. The next time you are with family or friends, just casually drop the fact that you are "doing some light reading on leadership, racial injustice, and domination," or "considering how Marx's thoughts on commodification draw into question management and leadership in society." Then wait for their reactions.

        Some people immediately lean in; their excitement and intrigue is palpable. Many people, though, start to squirm or may even scrunch their face in disapproval. Some might express outright hostility toward these ideas. Here is the reality . . . in the United States we are socialized to have an almost immediate response to Marx as antithetical to democratic principles. McLaren (1997) coined the term *Marxophobia* to capture how we are often acculturated to associate his work with the ideals of failed and dangerous totalitarian communism. McLaren reminds us, though, that "many if not most critical educators work outside the orthodox Marxian tradition and do not consider capitalism an irrevocable evil" (p. 172), while Brookfield (2005)

stated firmly that "critical theory and democracy are not at odds" (p. 363). Marx is not the only target of fear and mis-associations; scholarships on feminism and critical race theory have also been demonized as fringe and dangerous by some.

If you find yourself shutting down or skeptical of these ideas, I would encourage you to think about why and from where this comes. Could it be part of how you have been socialized culturally and educationally? Does it trigger an internal reaction because of its requirement to reconsider taken-for-granted assumptions about the world? Have you read critical social theories for yourself, or are your reactions built on assumptions about what they assert?

Interestingly, critical social theorists welcome skepticism, but this is often lost in interpretations. The critical perspectives covered in this book, along with the assertions leveraged in their use to deconstruct and reconstruct leadership theory, are all open to critique. What I present are not alternative "right" answers but tools for how to come to your own conclusions. Agger (2013) argued that "a book that purports to explain critical social theories itself needs to be explained, which is what will happen when teachers teach it and students study it" (p. 60). My hope is that this caveat is a relief for those who may worry that the use of critical social theory cannot itself be critiqued. In actuality, this is exactly what I want you to do.

My Positionality as Author

A central component of applying critical perspectives involves engaging continuously in critical self-reflection, which helps to identify and respond to one's positionality within broader social systems. There is no doubt that my positionality as a White, cisgender, gay man currently living as a member of the middle class shapes the lens through which this book is written. Any number of other social identities are also at play at varying levels of my consciousness, yet still influencing content and how it is presented. Therefore, I think it is important to at least have some sense of my background so you can consider how it shapes the content of the book and its presentation.

I didn't come to leadership as a true believer but from a place of skepticism and doubt. My socialization to the topic was negative at best and downright scary at worst. I perceived positional leaders as ambitious and typically self-serving, chasing popularity, profit, and power rather than attempting to make meaningful contributions. I witnessed abuses of power by authority figures that drew into question both their legitimacy and whether leaders and leadership even held the possibility of being

positive. At the same time, I watched as the work of people and groups making enormous differences in their communities was written off as social activism rather than leadership. Throughout my education, leadership programs were closed and only available to those who held positional roles. Leadership was the province of the elite of which I didn't consider myself a part.

I eventually did make my way into the leadership "tent," albeit initially out of a desire to see what it was really made of and with great hesitancy. This shift was the result of the generous patience of mentors and peers who challenged my presumption that leaders and leadership could *only* be what I had seen so far. They questioned why I didn't consider the forms of activism in which I was involved as leadership. Why was I giving so much of my power away and allowing others to define what leadership was and was not? These wonderful voices cultivated my efficacy as a knower, pushed me to construct and legitimize my own understanding of leadership, and perhaps most importantly confronted me about ways in which my dismissal of the topic was safer and more convenient than struggling with and attempting to contribute to how it was understood.

As I became more comfortable with the topic of leadership, I simultaneously became less comfortable with how my identities interacted with it. Leadership became a prism reflecting back to me an image of myself I did not want to recognize. I became acutely aware of privileged aspects of my identity and how they shaped my understandings, experiences, and enactment of leadership. The more leadership theory I read and leadership development I engaged in, the harder it became to hold onto the mantra I believed so deeply: that leadership was the province of the elite *of which I wasn't a part*. I saw myself, and particularly my whiteness and maleness, everywhere. It permeated what was taught, who taught it, and who was typically learning it. For a long while, I rejected this reality and became defensive about the very topic I had once so strongly dismissed. Working my way back from this has been a process—one aided in large part through critical perspectives, compassionate colleagues and friends, and brilliant students.

And the journey continues. I realize now that it will be a lifelong one, and that the uncertainty it brings with it is actually liberating. It feels like a release of pressure to know I will always have more questions than answers, more imperfect understandings than universal truths, more motivation to challenge my identities and their framing of how I make meaning in the world. If asked now, I would say I see so much possibility in the phenomenon of leadership. I see leadership in ways I did not see

before sometimes because it was obscured by the "story most often told" and my own positionality. Other times, I feel almost blinded by its potential.

THE AUDIENCE

This book is written for anyone interested in augmenting their understanding of leadership theory. Its goal is to encourage students, educators, and practitioners of leadership to adopt more critical perspectives. The content and organization of the book serves these goals, offering contextual reference points and narratives from a variety of disciplines and career levels.

- If you are a student in an undergraduate or graduate course in nursing, education, public policy, communications, business, or any other discipline for that matter, my hope is that you will find points of connection that deepen how you understand, experience, and enact leadership.
- If you identify as a leadership educator, my hope is that you will consider exposing those you teach to the content of the book. I also hope you will embrace the additive value of adopting critical perspectives as a primary pedagogy to facilitate leadership learning. Without these perspectives we run the risk of perpetuating the "story most often told" and dominant narratives that constrain our collective capacities to engage in leadership.
- If you are someone who cares about leadership and is focused on improving the various spheres of influence in which you operate—your company, your place of worship, your team—my hope is that you will see this book as an opportunity to invest in your own leadership development.

Acknowledgments

When this book was first conceived, I had no idea the extent to which it would shape my life in the years that followed. I admire greatly those for whom the process of book writing unfurls in an even marginally fluid manner. I am not one of those people. I have come to peace with this, though, and am deeply grateful for the learning opportunity crafting this book presented. It has been painstaking but rewarding. My hope is that it will contribute to a shift in thinking that centers critical perspectives as essential for teaching and learning leadership theory.

Words cannot quite capture the depth of gratitude I have for all those who provided support—championing, challenging, and reminding me there was a life and much more work to be done on the other side of this project. I'm incredibly appreciative of the patience, encouragement, and prodding from Alison Knowles at Jossey-Bass along with Erin Null, who initiated the project. I'm infinitely grateful to Susan Komives for her ongoing mentoring, ethic of care, and friendship as well as for providing the foundations in leadership knowledge from which so much of this work springs. A great deal of appreciation also goes to Marylu McEwen, who planted the seeds of social justice so many years ago fostering a burgeoning desire to explore identity, positionality, and how it shaped what I thought I knew.

The work contained in this book truly reflects the collective thinking and efforts of many. I am indebted to the "Book Club," my academic research team at Loyola University Chicago. They engaged in countless hours of discussion about the deconstruction, reconstruction, and application of leadership theories, contributing to the insights that appear here. They also played a vital role in the qualitative research project that resulted in the counter-narratives appearing at the end of each chapter.

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Perhaps the greatest joy in writing this book was the opportunity to share time with participants from our qualitative study whose lived experiences bring to life the themes of each chapter. Felice Gorordo, Art Johnston, Cindi Love, Charles Modlin, Mary Morten, Eboo Patel, and Georgianna Torres Reyes live leadership grounded in social justice, infusing the complex tapestry of their social identities into everything they do. They remind us that leadership is a dynamic, messy, beautiful, and ultimately courageous act of human connection. I am exceptionally grateful for their vulnerability in sharing their stories.

I am also grateful for the thoughtful advice, helpful critiques, and unique insights provided by so many gifted colleagues who helped shape the book. This includes feedback on early chapters from Marilyn Bugenhagen, Natasha Chapman, Paulette Dalpes, Travis Olson, Kerry Priest, Kristan Cilente Skendall, Craig Slack, and Dian Squire. I am especially appreciative of the time that students and colleagues donated to review the final version of the book, assist with creating reflection questions, and ensure that the end result reflected the values that informed the project from its inception. This included Carlos Ballinas, Naseeb Bhangal, Lesley-Ann Brown-Henderson, Tina Garcia, Shannon Howes, Michelle Kusel, Norma Lopez, Ariel Ropp, Brody Tate, Natasha Turman, and Corey Winchester. I would be remiss if I failed to mention all of the students in my leadership courses over the years at Loyola University Chicago whose complex thinking most certainly influenced the ideas presented here.

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Sometimes I think you believe and see in me more than I do in myself. I am grateful every day to have you as a friend. For Paul Davis, who 10 years ago pushed me to finish my dissertation and championed me in ways both large and small. Those efforts led directly to where I am today. To Sara Furr, for stating something obvious but in a way I could hear that propelled me toward completing this project. It might not have happened without you.

I am both grateful for and indebted to my cheer squad, who seemed to always know when to ask about progress on the book versus just buy me a drink, especially Colleen and Mike Beazley, Colleen Costello, John Garland, Kathie Henn, June Mabrides, Allan Onnen, Laura Osteen, Julie Owen, Kristan Cilente Skendall, Rich Sul, Beth Urbut, and Shannon Yust. I also need to extend a deep and personal thank-you to the captains of my cheer squad, Jason Pike and Heather Sullivan, who have taught me a great deal about what it means to "show up." There is not a day that goes by that I am not thankful that we "showtuned" into one another's lives. Your friendships mean the world to me.

Ultimately, everything I am I owe to my family, whose support through this process has been monumental. Through dips in efficacy and crises of credibility they were always present, sometimes pushing, sometimes pulling, but always demonstrating their care. I am eternally grateful for my sisters, Geri and Erinne Dugan, and parents Tim and Kay Dugan. To my aunt, Patricia Broderick, for always listening. I cannot fully capture my appreciation for all the good counsel provided over the years. To my extended family—Mary Tomeski and Kathy, Chuck, and C. J. Schnepp—as well as my "adopted" family in Valencia, Spain—Maria Teresa Jiménez Arnau, Maria Jesus Salvador Jiménez, José Enrique Salvador Jiménez, Santiago Salvador Jiménez, and Marta Torres Salvador—for their love and support. Finally, as I navigate this odd, odd life, I could not be more appreciative for the good company and unending support of my partner-in-crime and husband, David "Trey" Morgan. You make it all worthwhile.

About the Author

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Two active research projects support John's scholarly interests. The Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL) is a quantitative, international research program examining the influences of higher education in shaping leadership development (www.leadershipstudy.net). The MSL has collected data at more than 300 universities in the United States, Canada, Jamaica, Australia, and Mexico, with data representing over 500,000 respondents. The second project is a qualitative, longitudinal study employing both critical narrative and phenomenological methods to understand the influences of identity and power on leadership for social justice across a wide array of career sectors (e.g., medicine, education, nonprofit, business).

John is the author of 21 peer-reviewed journal articles, 12 book chapters, and 4 books. He is the recipient of several awards, including: *Research Article of the Year*, American Educational Research Association's Queer Studies Special Interest Group; *Distinguished Faculty Award for Excellence in Research*, School of Education, Loyola University Chicago; and *Emerging Scholar Award*, ACPA: College Student Educators International.

The Evolving Nature of Leadership

"We are the leaders we've been waiting for."
GRACE LEE BOGGS

You would be hard-pressed at this particular time in history to find someone who does not have an opinion about leadership. The media vacillates between showering praise on political leaders and deriding their incompetence. The business community is alternately framed as leaders in social innovation or criminals who abuse their leader roles. Contemporary social movements are lauded as examples of collective leadership while simultaneously chastised for lacking organization and a central leader. All the while social media provides an increasingly powerful vehicle for individuals to quickly voice and disseminate their opinions about leaders at all levels, from local to global, and across all sectors from industry to education. There is no shortage of opinion on the state of leadership, the success or failure of individual leaders, or the desperate need for more and better leadership—unless, of course, you talk to those who are often, for very good reason, exhausted with or feel alienated from leadership altogether.

Love it or hate it, the concepts of leaders and leadership are ubiquitous in contemporary society. This chapter begins with civil rights activist and feminist scholar Grace Lee Boggs's reframing of a Hopi quote that captures a central theme of these reactions to and feelings about leadership . . . they often reflect an outward gaze. They illustrate the longing we have for someone else to make the social structures we navigate (e.g., work, community, society) function better and our deep disappointment when this does not happen. Sometimes they even capture the ways in which we feel

marginalized from the concept of leadership as traditionally defined. But what would change if we turned our gaze inward? What if we came to realize our own potential, our collective power, and our shared place in creating the world in which we want to live? What if we positioned our family, our friends, our colleagues, and ourselves as the ones for whom we've been waiting? This book is built on these very assumptions and explores the role of leadership theory as providing the scaffolding to do just that.

WHY STUDY LEADERS AND LEADERSHIP?

Beyond the general fascination with the topic of leaders and leadership, what makes it worthy of study? Why create entire classes on the subject, generate volumes of scholarship, and direct so much attention? Our interest in leadership likely stems from the ways in which it evokes issues we care about deeply. Heifetz (1994) underscored this when he reminded us "the exercise and even the study of leadership stirs feelings because leadership engages our values" (p. 13). If I care about the new business I've started, I likely want to make it as successful as possible. If I'm concerned about the environment, perhaps I want to figure out ways to bring community members together to improve recycling efforts. If I acknowledge that my place of work is one in which I'll spend a great deal of time, maybe I want to contribute to a culture that is affirming and collegial. All of these examples force us to cross an implicit bridge that links the things we care about with leadership. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) extend this notion when they share that "exercising leadership is a way of giving meaning to your life by contributing to the lives of others. At its best, leadership is a labor of love" (p. 223).

More pragmatic rationales for the study of leadership exist as well. Bennis (2007) reminds us, "In the best of times, we tend to forget how urgent the study of leadership is. But leadership always matters" (p. 2). He goes on to share "the four most important threats facing the world today are: (a) a nuclear or biological catastrophe, whether deliberate or accidental; (b) a world-wide epidemic; (c) tribalism and its cruel offspring, assimilation; and finally, (d) the leadership of our human institutions" (p. 5). You could add to Bennis's list issues associated with rapid globalization, persistent domestic and international human rights violations, and growing resource scarcity to create a virtual perfect storm of leadership issues. There is no doubt that these challenges necessitate the study of leadership and how best to operationalize it. The truth, though, is that there are few times in history that are not characterized by

a conflation of social, political, and scientific issues that require leadership. Bennis reminds us that individuals and groups have the power to leverage leadership as a vehicle to address complex problems. The degree to which we are adequately prepared to do so is tied to the degree to which leadership is studied and learned.

WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

That there is no shortage of *opinions* about leadership contributes at least in part to the vast number of *definitions* that exist. One could question, however, the degree to which these definitions actually add something meaningful to the knowledge base. Do they functionally alter the ways in which we think about or engage in leadership? This book is going to take a bit of a different approach. No singular definition of leadership will be advanced. I most certainly will provide you with multiple definitions of leadership derived from a myriad of leadership theories. I will not, however, be offering you my own definition nor positing a grand, unifying theory of leadership. In a debate with a fellow leadership scholar, Day offered the term "pizzled," defining it as "simultaneously pissed off and puzzled" (Day & Drath, 2012, p. 227). I realize that for some readers this lack of a singular definition may result in feeling "pizzled" at this very moment. That's okay, as the learning of leadership *should* invoke alternating feelings of frustration and excitement if it is treated as the complex and deeply personal phenomenon that it is.

The choice *not* to provide a definition for leadership is a purposeful exercise in restraint to avoid adding yet another set of terms, another semantic differential to the pantheon of preexisting definitions. I will most certainly provide a means of bracketing the core components of leadership as well as encourage you to play with them, arranging and rearranging concepts in ways that are meaningful to your understanding of what leadership is and is not. I also want to be clear that this does not reflect indifference about definitional clarity. Definitional clarity is essential to understanding a particular theory and its underpinnings as well as how we engage in leadership practice. We are simply embarking on a different approach that suggests learning leadership theory is less about the acquisition of terminology and more about becoming a critical learner. It also repositions readers as having the agency to author their own definitions of leadership that arise as an eclectic mix of components from various theories and their own life experiences.

MAPPING THE DEFINITIONAL TERRAIN

Some of you may be ready to jump right into the leadership theory waters, but we aren't going to take a swim quite yet. My goal for you is to first begin developing the skills to be a critical learner. Simply being able to rattle off the names of important theories or theorists is not enough. It does not necessarily mean you know how to use theory any more effectively. I want you to be able to examine a theory to deconstruct its assumptions, its areas of strength as well as limitations, and then take from it the most useful components that resonate with your own beliefs to apply in the unique contexts you are navigating. This is what a critical learner does. However, to approach theory this way means we have to take a few steps back and first explore some content *about* theory before looking at it directly.

Exploring the inner mechanics of a theory is essential. This includes unpacking key assumptions about its nature, clarification of terminology, and differentiation of core considerations among theories. Taken together these three elements could be considered the building blocks of understanding leadership. In fact, let's use the process of building a home as a metaphor here with assumptions, terminology, and core considerations representing key elements of a building's (or theory's) architecture (see Figure 1.1).

FIGURE 1.1 The architecture of leadership theory

FRAMING

- BORN *vs.* MADE
- LEADER *vs.* LEADERSHIP
- LEADER *vs.* FOLLOWER
- LEADERSHIP *vs.* MANAGEMENT
- AUTHORITY *vs.* POWER
- MACRO *vs.* MICRO

FOUNDATIONS

- THEORY
- DEVELOPMENT

FOOTINGS

- PARADIGMATICALLY
  DERIVED
- SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED
- VALUES-BASED
- INTERDISCIPLINARY
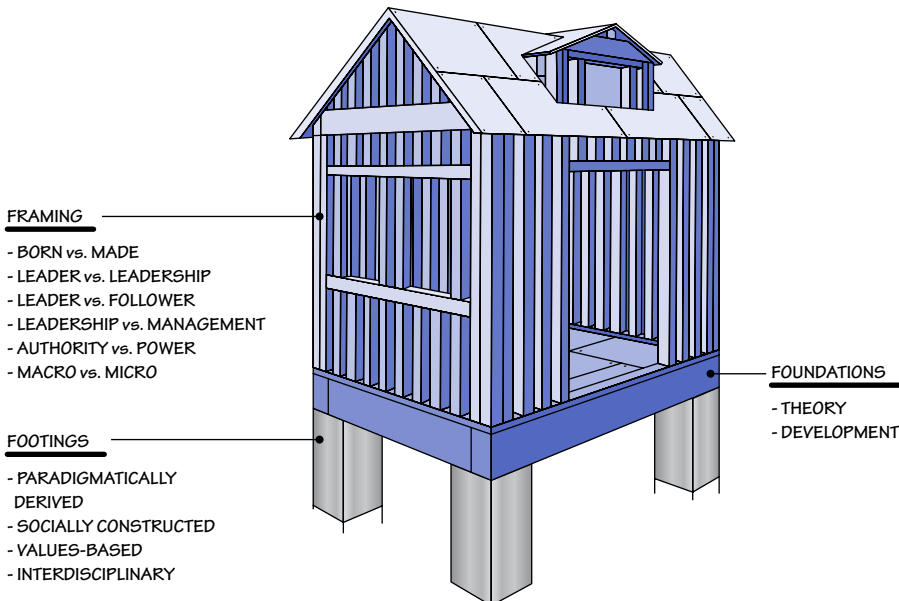
Your goal is to assess the structure of the theory looking at how its architecture informs, constrains, or elevates the utility of the content it presents.

So, what are the elements of the architecture of a home or a theory? *Assumptions* about the nature of leadership provide critical footings on which theory is built, undergirding and supporting ideas. When building a house, concrete footings are often taken for granted but bear the entire weight and structure of the home along with keeping it level. They serve as an essential grounding on which the foundation and the rest of the home are constructed.

Key assumptions provide the footings for *terminology*, or the major concepts associated with understanding the nature of leadership. The terminology employed in a theory is essential as it is akin to the foundation of a home drawing on the strength of the footings to offer further support in bearing the weight of the structure. Foundations are also designed to resist external threat such as moisture and cold by tailoring the design to fit its context. Similarly, terminology bolsters the parameters used to define leadership and adjust to the shifting contexts that influence it.

Finally, the differentiation of *core considerations* among theories could be likened to the framing of a house. Framing provides the skeleton of the building offering greater structure while demarcating unique spaces. In leadership theory, framing engages with a number of considerations that vary from theory to theory, shaping what it emphasizes in terms of content.

Assumptions About the Nature of Leadership
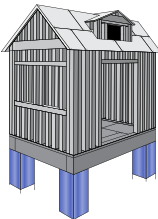
Let's start by exploring four core assumptions that provide critical footings for understanding leadership and its very nature. By *nature*, I mean the essence that informs how we come to understand any definition of leadership regardless of its unique properties. A clear definition of leadership will anchor a theory and serve as the springboard from which its assumptions are derived. Note that different theories may stress each of these assumptions to varying degrees.

Leadership Is Paradigmatically Derived

The primary footing on which leadership theory rests reflects its paradigmatic assumptions. You might be wondering what the heck it means for something to be paradigmatically derived. A paradigm reflects the basic lens through which a person views the world and consists of concepts, assumptions, values, and practices. Let's use an example to illustrate this. In the United States, if you were to reference football it would immediately call to mind a specific sport with clearly articulated rules. The paradigm through which we understand football is highly specific, so when the term is mentioned people immediately think of things like team affiliations and particular types of equipment. However, if you were to mention the same term in most of the rest of the world it would cue what we refer to in the United States as soccer, which has an entirely different set of rules and practices. Here is how a paradigm operates. If you were in the United States and told U.S. friends to meet you at the football field and to bring equipment, the dominant paradigm for football would likely kick in for them. They would show up at the U.S. football field, not the soccer field. They would likely bring a U.S. football, not a soccer ball.

In his now classic albeit often contested work, Kuhn (1962) defined a paradigm in the scientific sense as a set of beliefs and agreements commonly shared about how best to understand and address problems. Paradigms serve as the lens through which research is conducted and the theory derived from it is understood. Understanding the significant impact of a research paradigm is critical because it helps us identify taken-for-granted assumptions that may be embedded in a theory. It also contributes to a more accurate perspective on strengths and limitations. As such, paradigms set boundaries around what is and is not valued along with the most "appropriate" ways in which leadership should be studied.

Table 1.1 offers definitions of four key research paradigms (i.e., positivism, constructivism, critical theory, and post-modernism). Every theory is born out of a paradigm that carries with it particular assumptions that shape perceptions about the nature of leadership (Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2006). A critical learner must take these into account when considering how to interpret and use a theory.

Leadership Is Socially Constructed

With the exception of positivism, most research paradigms acknowledge that leadership is socially constructed. To suggest that something is socially constructed means that it does not naturally exist (i.e., it cannot be touched or explicitly seen) but is

TABLE 1.1 Research paradigms and their influences on leadership

Paradigm	Meaning	Presumptions About Leadership
Positivism	Believes in the existence of objective and absolute/universal truths that can be discovered through confirmation and prediction using systematic scientific observation, reasoning, and measurement and elimination/reduction of bias in research	• Universal truths exist about leadership. • The goal of leadership research and theory is to provide prescriptive answers.
Constructivism	Positions reality as subjective and constructed through the experiences and perspectives of the individual; reality is uncovered only through interaction and interpretation and the acknowledgment that bias is inherent in research	• How leadership is understood is dependent on individuals' life experiences and can differ significantly based on one's culture and context. • Leadership is relational and as such greater attention is paid to interactions between people in processes with one another.
Critical Theory	Suggests multiple, constructed realities characterized by the interplay of power relations with the goal of identification and transformation of socially unjust structures; research as a vehicle to call into question values and assumptions as well as cocreated between researchers and participants	• Understanding power is central to leadership, which can be abused as a tool to maintain social stratification. • Leadership often is defined by and reflects the values and beliefs of dominant groups.
Post-Modernism	Views the world as complex, chaotic, ambiguous, and fragmented, with reality as transitional and constructed by how the social world is represented and meaning produced; stresses the importance of questioning anything framed as truth because objectivity and universality are impossibilities	• The concept of leadership, along with its relative value, are challenged as a means to disrupt the status quo. • Leadership is understood as a phenomenon built on contradictory concepts that merit examination.

identified, named, and understood based on social interactions among people. It is cocreated in terms of meaning. Furthermore, because social constructions represent often taken-for-granted beliefs they function as powerful framers of reality for people and can be difficult to change. An excellent example of a social construction is money. In and of itself, money has no real value; in most cultural contexts it is simply printed paper or metal coins. However, individuals are socialized to symbolically

ascribe value to money. In the United States this is why we understand "the value of a dollar," can differentiate between types of currency and their relative value, and readily recognize that just because paper bills from a board game like Monopoly are also called money does not mean that they carry any inherent value.

The same assumptions of social construction apply to leadership. Leadership does not functionally exist. It represents an abstract set of concepts derived by people to explain and make meaning of observations from the world. The assumption that leadership is socially constructed is critical to understanding theory as it acknowledges the fluidity of the concept. It explains why each of us may have varying reactions to and interpretations of leadership. Furthermore, social constructions are bound by time, context, and culture. Applying this to the example of money, we understand that the relative value of $100 today is different than in, say, 1850. Similarly, you might find that what you can purchase with $100 differs based on location (e.g., in a city versus a rural area). Finally, although the concept of money is generally transferable across cultural contexts, how it is named, the form it takes, and its relative value can shift enormously from country to country. Again, when we apply these same assumptions to leadership we begin to recognize that what is deemed leadership is constantly evolving to keep pace with shifting norms in the sociopolitical systems in which we exist. How we understand leadership also becomes culturally contingent. That is, organizational, domestic, and global cultural differences will contribute to norms that in turn shape how leadership is understood, experienced, and enacted.

Leadership Is Inherently Values Based

If leadership is socially constructed, then *how* it is constructed represents the value norms that a particular group of people endorse at a given point in time whether good, bad, or somewhere along the continuum. However, this particular footing is one that is sometimes contested in fascinating ways. Some argue that leadership is value free or neutral and simply about effectiveness and/or goal achievement. Classic examples of these arguments typically focus on horrific leaders such as Adolf Hitler, Pol Pot, or Joseph Stalin, using their effectiveness in achieving goals as examples of how leadership can be absent of values. Others suggest a danger in this thinking, instead explicitly infusing concepts like ethics and justice into theory as a means to

segment out those who engage in leadership that harms others. This essentially redefines leadership as intrinsically good and positive.

What appears to be lost on both sides of the argument is the reality that leaders and leadership that cause harm hardly reflect the absence or neutrality of values. Quite the opposite is true. They bring to the forefront values that many simply find abhorrent, but they are values nonetheless. Failing to acknowledge this is a dangerous false dichotomy. Perhaps Kellerman (2004) said it best when she asserted that "because leadership makes a difference, sometimes even a big difference, those of us who desire to make the world a better place must . . . come to grips with leadership as two contradictory things: good and bad" (p. 14). But this assumption runs just a bit deeper. Because of social construction, leadership theory isn't just inherently values based. It also communicates which values are acknowledged and deemed important.

Leadership Is Interdisciplinary

A final footing that informs any understanding of leadership addresses its interdisciplinary nature. The field of leadership studies is often described as a young or emergent area that draws on writing from across multiple disciplines ranging from political science and communications to psychology and business. This leads to a body of literature that is at times both complementary and contradictory as different disciplines naturally emphasize unique dimensions. This multidisciplinary approach differs from an interdisciplinary one that explicitly puts disciplines in conversation with one another, expanding boundaries in the process. While multidisciplinary approaches are additive, interdisciplinary approaches are integrative and synergistic.

Consider the following as an example of leadership's interdisciplinary nature. It would be difficult to think about leadership without considering the ways in which groups manage strategic processes (business, management) in complex organizations (organizational/industrial psychology) nested in varying social and cultural contexts (sociology, social psychology, political science, history) that require learning new skills (education, human development, communication) that advance collective work for social change (philosophy, public policy). Unfortunately, though, learners are typically exposed solely to disciplinary or multidisciplinary perspectives requiring them to adopt interdisciplinary perspectives on their own. Evaluating theory effec-

tively, then, must involve questioning the degree to which interdisciplinary perspectives are present in content.

Collectively, these four assumptions regarding the nature of leadership provide the footings on which theories are built. They situate research paradigms, social construction, values, and interdisciplinarity as central features. Each of these footings anchors the notion that leadership is derived from social meaning. This reinforces the earlier point that there can exist no single, universal definition of leadership given the infinite number of influences that shape each person's understanding of the concept. Ultimately, *leadership is the sense that we make of it*.

Making Connections

- What limitations might a theory have based on the paradigm from which it is derived?
- What values do you hold related to leadership and what informs them?
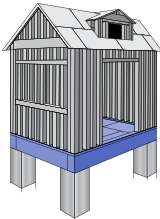
Clarification of Leadership Terminology

Building on footings is a foundation that requires the clarification of terminology. Here we will examine what constitutes theory in general and leadership theory in particular. We will also explore what leadership development entails and its component parts.

Leadership Theory

Lewin (1952) suggested, "There is nothing more practical than a good theory" (p. 161) and about this he is correct. Theory strings together often-abstract propositions and hypotheses in an attempt to make meaning or explain complex phenomena. Theory becomes a tool of daily life that allows us to make sense of the infinite amount of information we are required to process. Despite its importance to sensemaking, what constitutes theory can have different interpretations. It is perhaps easiest to divide theory into two varieties: formal and informal.

Formal theory represents what is traditionally seen as scientific or academic theory. It is derived over time through hypotheses that are empirically studied to