

The absent follower: identity construction within organizationally assigned leader-follower relations

Abstract

This article seeks to add to our understanding of processes of identity construction within organizationally assigned leader-follower relations through an exploration of the role of the absent, feminised follower. We situate our work within critical and psychoanalytic contributions to leader/ship and follower/ship and use Lacan's writings on identification and lack to illuminate the imaginary, failing nature of identity construction. This aims to challenge the social realist foundations of writing on leader-follower constellations in organizational life. We examine our philosophical discussion through a reflective reading of a workplace example and question the possibility of a subject's identity construction as a follower. If a subject is unable to identify him/herself as follower, he/she cannot validate others as leaders, rendering the leader-follower relationship not only fragile but phantasmic. We highlight implications of our exploration of the absence of follower/ship and endless, unfulfilled desire for leader/ship for future research and practice.

Keywords:

Leader-follower relations, identity construction, identification, lack, unconscious dynamics

Introduction

The recent turn within the field of leadership studies towards constructionist (e.g. Grint, 2005; Fairhurst and Grant, 2010), relational (e.g. Crevani, 2015a, b; Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Hosking, 1988; Hosking, 2011; Hosking and Morley, 1988, 1991; Uhl-Bien, 2006) and discursive approaches (e.g. Clifton, 2006; Collinson, 2008; Fairhurst, 2009; Fairhurst and Cooren, 2004; Larsson and Lundholm, 2010; Sheep, 2006) has moved the focus of leadership research onto emergent processes of influencing and meaning making where the role of the individual leader and follower are openly explored and contested, rather than assumed (Crevani, 2015a). Previously dominant, one-dimensional perspectives on leader and follower identities have been problematized with a view to their tendency to ‘ignore context, complexities, multiple and shifting identities and (...) power dynamics’ (Harding, 2015: 153). Whilst critical accounts of leader identity construction and identity work (e.g. Clifton, 2014; Ford, 2006, 2010; Ford et al., 2008; Gemmill and Oakley, 1992; Nicholson and Carroll, 2013; Pullen and Rhodes, 2008; Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006) have helped to explore the role of gender, power, discourse and resistance, there remains a need for research into leader-follower relations within organizational life that explores these not as a permanent state but as infrequent, temporal and situation-specific (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Crevani, 2015b; Winkler, 2011). This research needs to build on critically focussed contributions (e.g. Collinson, 2006, 2008; Gordon, 2002; Ford and Harding, 2015) that challenge the hegemonic assumptions within mainstream leadership discourse born out of romantic fantasies of the omnipotent leader (Meindl et al., 1985). These assumptions legitimise power asymmetries between leader and follower and normalise a dominant masculine image of the heroic leader (Ford, 2006) that renders the follower both, subservient and feminised (Ford, 2010).

Whilst a stream of follower-centric research has emerged that aims to explore and strengthen our knowledge of the follower (e.g. Bligh, 2011; Carsten et al., 2010; Howell and Mendez, 2008; Kelley 1988, 1992; Riggio et al., 2008; Shamir et al., 2007), these attempts suffer from a lack of criticality (Collinson, 2006; Stech, 2008; Uhl-Bien and Pillai, 2007) and continue to presume the social reality of followers as material beings in a ‘symbiotic relationship’ with leaders (Ford and Harding, 2015: 3); this is despite followers’ being seemingly absent from organizational practice (Harding, 2015). Ford and Harding (2015: 3) argue that this taken-for-granted assumption of the existence of the subordinated follower, working towards the same goal as the leader, is deeply embedded throughout the literature and that leadership theory ‘is underpinned by the desire for power and control over the dangerous masses’ (p. 1). O’Reilly and Reed (2010) and Learmonth and Morrell (2016) equally raise concerns about the popularity of the language of leadership both within academic writing (critical and mainstream contributions) and organisational practice and the continued routine labelling of hierarchical groups as leaders and followers. Learmonth and Morrell (2016: 9) stress that the categories of leader and follower serve the purpose of confirming their very existence and the assumption that ‘interests of leaders and followers automatically coalesce’. This stresses the need for critical contributions to challenge the continued, routine use of ‘leader’ and ‘follower’ in connection with research into organisational life. Exploring this performative nature of leader/ship and follower/ship research, Ford and Harding (2015) ask the important question of whether ‘the follower exists as a self-identity until someone is asked to account for themselves as a follower’.

Inspired by ‘Lacanian motifs and principles’, Kelly (2014: 919) calls for a radical rethinking of leadership that adopts a negative ontology of leadership and as such overcomes the field’s obsession with the study of real, ‘special individuals’ who have power over other

not-so-special individuals and explores instead the absent presence of leadership. Seeing leadership as an ‘empty signifier’, Kelly (2014) argues, shows that no fixed meaning can exist of leadership. Instead it ‘serves to create the conditions of possibility for many competing and complementary definitions, meanings and interpretations’ (906). We argue that this focus on what is absent opens up possibilities for a more critical exploration of those labelled ‘followers’ and their relationship with leaders in an organizational context.

In this article, we therefore contribute to critical accounts of leader/ship and follower/ship by focussing on the importance of the relative absence of the follower and his/her feminised position in organizational discourse and practice through our exploration of identity constructions in organizationally assigned leader-follower relations. More specifically, we take a linguistic view on identity construction (Driver, 2015) and the categories and organizational labels of leader and follower to explore whether a subject can discursively produce him/herself as follower. We turn to Lacan’s work on identification and lack, recognising its usefulness for a critical examination of leadership (Contu et al., 2010) as exemplified through existing explorations of leader identity construction (Driver, 2013), the role of his theory of discourses (Costas and Taheri, 2012; Fotaki and Harding, 2012) and reflections on process (Harding, 2007) and desire (Harding et al., 2011). Driver (2013), for example, has brought our attention to the power of the imaginary order within which the subject continuously creates seemingly concrete imaginary leader self-constructions that he/she needs to have validated by others. She has demonstrated that ‘leadership identity is not only constructed, commonly and routinely, as an imaginary self, this imaginary self also commonly and routinely fails’ (417). Yet, this Lacanian application to leader/ship has so far failed to explore the follower as the validating Other beyond noting that follower’s lack is equally reiterated when dominant leadership fantasies fail (Driver, 2013).

To advance our understanding of identity construction in organizationally assigned leader-follower relations, we explore the role of the follower as the absent, validating Other within leader identity constructions. We pay particular attention to the feminisation of the absent follower image in a hegemonic leadership discourse that is focussed on the masculine, heroic leader image. This enables us to critically explore the social realist foundations of leader/ship and follower/ship theory, i.e. the assumption that leaders and followers exist as material beings beyond the labels discursively produced in organizational practice. To do so, we will build on Driver's work (notably 2013, 2015) and draw on Lacanian contributions on control (Roberts, 2005), entrepreneurship (Jones and Spicer, 2005), hegemonic discourse (Mueller, 2012) and negative ontology (Kelly, 2014) to explore the absent image of the feminised follower within the subject's desire for leader/ship. Furthermore, this focus on the absent, feminised follower as the validating Other within leader identity constructions allows us to explore a case example from the workplace. Following this empirical discussion, we will highlight possible implications for organizational practice where individuals are routinely cast into the categories of leader and follower.

A Lacanian perspective on identity construction in leader-follower relations

Taking a Lacanian perspective allows us to add to our understanding of identity construction in leader-follower relations by focussing on the interaction of both, the existence of imaginary stable selves and their socially constructed nature. It enables us to explore identity construction between the individual and social by focussing on 'the interpersonal dimension that indeed is at the heart of subjectivity' (Driver, 2016: 736). A Lacanian perspective recognises that all our seemingly fixed imaginary self-constructions are always lacking and outside the self, as they are articulated within the symbolic Order of language and discourse

and as such unable to bring us answers to the fundamental question of who we are (Driver, 2009, 2015).

The illusion of stable identities

Broad discussions of a Lacanian perspective on identity construction have been helpfully outlined by Arnaud (2002), Driver (2009, 2013, 2015) and Harding (2007). Our focus here is specifically on Lacan's 'reflection (on) the fundamental need of humans to have their desires recognised' (Arnaud, 2002: 695). In his work on identity construction, Lacan notes the importance of the first image that an infant sees when looking into the mirror, becoming bound up with this memory of a true self. The subject enters a lifelong quest driven by the desire to find this true self and finds him/herself locked in an ongoing interplay of the 'imaginary' order – where the subject finds and loses him/herself in images and identifications – and the symbolic order that determines the individual's sense of self 'through the places offered and taken up within language and discourse by the speaking subject' (Roberts, 2005: 621). In Lacan's view, identity is outside the subject and any attempt to construct 'the self in and through language' (Driver, 2015: 902) is an illusion. Answers to our questions on who we are will always be imaginary as they are expressed through the conventions of language embedded in the Symbolic Order (Driver, 2013) and as such outside the subject (Lacan, 2006: 208). The desire to seek answers is incessant as it 'constitute(s) a conscious effort to cover up the unconscious 'lack' that cannot be overcome'. Lacan (1977) sees this 'lack' as the gap between the individual's imaginary constructions, articulated within the Symbolic Order, and the subject's sense of true self, situated in the Real. It is the driver for the subject's endless desire 'to close the gap within ourselves, to truly become

ourselves, that keeps (the subject) becoming, identifying and speaking' (Jones and Spicer, 2005: 233).

Lacan (1998: 301) further notes that the subject's 'desire becomes bound up with the desire of the Other¹' as it is only in the Other that the subject can find recognition and meaning. Yet, this desire of the Other is an alienating one, always disappointing as it is the true self – situated outside the Symbolic Order – that the subject is really seeking (Lacan, 2006: 208). This demonstrates that 'the power of the Other is the power of recognition' (Roberts, 2005: 631) and the control the Symbolic Order has over the subject's desire to have his/her own social existence confirmed and validated by others. It is these insights into the endless cycle of recognition and misrecognition embedded in the desire to fix and stabilise the self in identifications structured by the Other (Lacan, 2006: 207) that is fundamental to our exploration below of the role of the absent follower image as the feminised, validating Other in leader identity constructions.

Leadership as objet a

In the subject's attempt to articulate their inner desire but failing to articulate what is absent from the Symbolic Order, it attaches the desired meaning of self to objects that act as 'placeholders' (Driver, 2015: 902) – something Lacan called *objet a* (1977: 239) – in the

¹ For Lacan, the big Other ('O') is the Symbolic Order of language and discourse. The subject has to use language to express his/her imagined self and thus is signified by the Symbolic Order – the big Other. The little other ('o') are then other people who are not unified, coherent identities but imagined others as identity is absent for every subject.

hope that if he/she becomes that object their desire of finding their true self will be fulfilled. Hegemonic discourses play an important role in offering such placeholders and structuring their meaning within dominant narratives (Mueller, 2012), providing the illusion of ‘coherent, unitary and definable’ (61) identity constructs that ‘support and validate imaginary self constructions’ (Driver, 2009: 63). These attachments are phantasmic (Jones and Spicer, 2005) and temporary as the subject always realises that this *objet a* is not what he/she is truly seeking (Lacan, 2006: 208).

Leadership has been argued to be an *objet a* (Driver, 2013) within dominant organizational narratives where it is linked to the image of the powerful, masculinised leader and the subservient, feminised follower bound together as one cannot be without the other. Within the organizational context a subject desires to become a leader and create imaginary self-constructions as a way of finding his/her true self, subjugating at the same time to those ‘who are to validate this self’ (Driver, 2013: 418). Whilst noticeably absent (Harding, 2015) in their conceptualisation as having a separate organizational function, followers are imaginary figures (Harding, 2015) assumed to take up the crucial role as the validating Other of the leader within leadership discourse. Costas and Taheri (2012: 1199) argue that ‘leader-follower relations resemble those of subject-authority’ within hegemonic leadership discourse, where the leader is signified as the master that assumes knowledge and takes up the position of power and authority (Driver, 2016) over the follower. This is further reflected in organizational structure and practice where the subject labelled as leader is formally given positional power, elevating the subject to a superior social and legal status, and simultaneously – yet often implicitly – discursively categorising others as followers. As such, the ‘traditional leader embodies the symbolic authority providing followers with master

signifiers' (Costas and Taheri, 2012: 1201). The emphasis of identity construction in this discourse is one that is hence solely focussed on the desirable image and role of the leader.

Deeply embedded in mainstream leadership studies, we have come to take-for-granted this strong power asymmetry within organizationally assigned leader-follower relations (Collinson, 2011) and indeed implicitly assume that we need leaders to control the otherwise dangerous masses of followers (Ford and Harding, 2015) to enable organizational success (Gordon, 2011). In her reading of an interview with a subject who is labelled as the leader in his organization, Harding (2014) explores the power that this discursive category – *objet a* – has over the subject's identity construction, where the only way of being a leader takes the meaning of somebody who works harder than anybody else. This self-construction creates an image of followers as naturally weaker and not as hard working as otherwise they would be leaders themselves. Ford and Harding (2015) add that within most academic leadership theory, this superiority of the leader is normalised and comes only into existence through the follower's subordination.

The absent follower as the feminised Other

Let us then take a closer look at the discursively implied category of the follower within a hegemonic organizational discourse focussed on the leader as *objet a*. The absence of images of the follower as the fantasised, lacking other of the leader is crucial and bears implications for a subject's identity work. Whilst organisations may place a subject in the implied position of the follower due to their structurally imposed relationship with another subject labelled leader, this subject cannot identify his/herself as a follower as such images are missing from the Symbolic Order. This may explain why attempts to develop a follower/ship discourse seem to be failing. Unable to articulate the self through what lies

outside the Symbolic Order, the subject's identifications remain centred on the hegemonic, masculinised image of the omnipotent leader.

It further highlights the gendered nature of the leader-follower relationship as defined and enforced by hegemonic leadership discourse, influencing organizational practice (O'Reilly and Reed, 2010). The silent image of the follower within this discourse (Harding, 2015) resembles the silent image of the woman tied to her place as bearer of meaning where the man/leader is the maker of meaning (Mulvey, 1975). Mulvey's (1975) use of film to discuss gender through a Lacanian lens is particularly useful to explore this further. She argues that the male hero (*leader*) in a film acts out of his concern for the heroine (*follower*) because he is tied to her in his need to have his self validated by her. Yet, Mulvey (1975) argues outside this role within the hero's (*leader*) self-construction the heroine (*follower*) bears little importance. As we see the film (*hegemonic leadership discourse*) being structured around the hero (*leader*) as the person in control, we are drawn to identify with him (Mulvey, 1975). It is the hero's (*leader*) characteristics on screen and his omnipotence displayed in his ability to control the action (*position in organizational structure*), that the viewer (*subject*) is reminded of the 'more powerful ideal ego conceived in the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror' (Mulvey, 1975: 12). Similarly, the subject will seek to identify with the masculine hero ideal of the leader on his/her quest to find the true self as this is the dominant image provided by hegemonic discourses and embedded in organizational structures and control mechanisms. The follower image exists only in its role as the validating Other of the leader's identity as organizational discourses do not usually provide identifications for the subject to desire a follower identity on its own.

This bears implications for subjects within organisationally assigned leader-follower positions. A subject finding him/herself labelled as leader will be driven by an unconscious

desire to become the dominant leader image offered by the hegemonic organisational discourse in his/her effort to fill the 'lack' – the gap between the Symbolic Order and the Real. Through the phantasmic attachment to the leader identity, the subject hopes to find the true self but needs to gain confirmation and validation of this imaginary self-construction by the follower as the feminised Other. Yet, in the absence of other subjects' ability to articulate the self through follower images and validate leader identifications, the subject fails in his/her attempt to find the true self in this leader image. With the leader identity as *objet a* embedded in the hegemonic discourse of organizations, subjects engage in an infinite series of changing and failing imaginary leader self-constructions that provide the illusion of the organizationally assigned leader-follower relationship.

In turn, a subject positioned in the follower category by virtue of his/her subordination to a structurally assigned leader will be equally driven by a desire to find his/her true self. Yet, the subject categorised as follower will not strive to become a follower as follower identifications are absent from the Symbolic Order. Instead, the hegemonic leadership discourse will evoke identifications of stable workplace selves in the subject that are bound up with the heroic leader image through its promise of direction, stability and meaning created for the subject by the heroic leader. Yet, both, the heroic leader image and desire for a stable workplace self are inevitably failing as, in Lacanian terms, a stable identity always remains an illusion. This perspective of on-going, failing imaginary constructions sees the concept of leader/ship as an 'empty signifier' (Ford et al., 2008) or 'floating signifier' (Kelly, 2014) offering an infinite series of possible meanings to the subject who is ultimately striving to find a stable, true self. Importantly, by focussing on the absence of the follower image alongside the abundance of leader images in hegemonic organisational discourse, we come to understand that both, the follower and the leader-follower relationship cannot materialise and

are fantasies within imaginary leader identity constructions. This impossibility of follower identities challenges the social realist focus of mainstream leadership theory on the existence of material, stable leader-follower relationships.

The role of the hegemonic leadership discourse within this dynamic is crucial as it ‘structures phantasmic attachment’ (Jones and Spicer, 2005: 235). This phantasmic attachment, we argue, is creating fantasised stable leader-follower relations as a fundamental part of imagined leader images, i.e. the subject can only become the leader when he/she is tied into an imagined relationship centred on the recognition of him/herself as the leader by a feminised follower. The follower is hence an extension of leader identifications – not an identification on its own. Mueller (2012: 280) has helpfully explored the ‘dialectical relation of lack to hegemony’ where lack on the one hand reveals the rupture in the Symbolic – the failure of the hegemony – and on the other hand reinforces the hegemonic discourse as it offers fantasies of a stable self that the subject can identify with in his/her ‘illusory attempts to fill the lack’ (292). Drawing on Mueller’s (2012) work, we argue that it is in the fantasy of controlling the feminised follower that the subject striving to be a leader experiences failure of his/her own self-construct as a leader. The follower image is absent and there is no feminised, follower other to provide the subject with the sought after recognition. Yet, it is the hegemony of the leader-follower relation and its promise to deliver what we seek, that the subject continues to desire becoming a leader and having control over the fantasised follower.

These insights into identity constructions in organizationally assigned leader-follower relations have important implications for our critical understanding of leader/ship and follower/ship. It advances our understanding by fundamentally questioning the existence and possibility of leader-follower relations. To date, particularly the relational leadership literature (e.g. Crevani, 2015; Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Hosking, 1988; Hosking, 2011;

Hosking and Morley, 1988, 1991; Uhl-Bien, 2006) has tried to offer an alternative discourse to the dominant essentialist discourse on stable leader selves. Yet, at present such alternative discourses have always fallen back to assuming the social reality of leadership processes and thereby leader-follower interactions. We propose that critical, alternative contributions need to consider and explore the nature of *both* follower and leader roles as phantasmic, imaginary constructions rather than material beings and as such continue to question the social realism perspective adopted so readily within leadership studies (Kelly, 2014) and practice.

To advance this theoretical understanding of a subject's identity construction, we now turn to explore an empirical example of organizationally assigned leader-follower relations through a focus on the absent follower image in everyday conversations and its role in a subject's imaginary self-constructions.

Empirical material

Looking to apply our theoretical explorations of the role of the absent follower within leader-follower relations, we turn our gaze first to existing, insightful Lacanian informed interpretations of empirical material, particularly in relation to identity construction (e.g. Driver, 2013, 2014, 2015; Harding, 2007). Much of this work has been focussed on working with individuals' narratives gathered through a process of interviewing or self-reflection to explore the construction and disruption of imaginary selves (Driver, 2013, 2014, 2015), showing 'a workplace self that' is 'multiple and in process' (Harding, 2007: 1770). The Lacanian interpretation of this empirical material is usually and 'purposefully not analytical in nature' (Driver, 2013: 411). Rather it looks towards 'ordinary speech in organizations where Lacanian analytic insights are appropriately applied' and with particular interest in 'the everyday conversations through which (...) identity is commonly constructed' (Driver, 2013:

411). Driver (2013: 412), for example, adopts an approach loosely based on reflexive methodology (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) in her work on leadership as a discursively constructed identity and engages in an iterative process of several readings of her empirical material, moving from ‘surface, conscious meanings towards deeper, less conscious ones’. With a view to exploring moments of lack, she looks for ruptures of imaginary constructions in the form of contradictions, ambiguities and inconsistencies in narratives. This, Driver (2013: 412) argues, allows her to engage with ‘fragmented, disjointed and incomplete identity narratives’ and pay attention to ‘the signifiers, words and phrases as they slide around in the symbolic’.

We are inspired by this discursive and reflexive approach to Lacanian interpretations of empirical material and similarly turn to ‘ordinary speech in organizations’ (Driver, 2013: 411) to explore the presence or absence of leader and follower images in discursive identity constructions. With this focus in mind, we apply elements of Parker’s (2014a) Lacanian discourse analysis framework to structure our reading and interpretation of focus group transcripts taken from a larger ethnographic research project in a small design company – hereafter called DesignCo. Our intention is to provide our interpretation of how imaginary workplaces selves may be constructed and indeed failing, and how these are linked to leader and/or follower images. We do this by paying attention to what is recurrent and what is absent within conversations between participants about their assigned roles and work relationships at DesignCo. As such we were not concerned in our interpretation of the text to ‘uncover unconscious meaning that lies hidden beneath the surface, or even to retrieve the ‘signified content’’ (Parker, 2014a: 39) that would help us formulate a theory of leader/ship or follower/ship. Instead, we were predominantly concerned with the formal qualities of the text, anchors of representation and the role of knowledge (Parker, 2014a). We read through

the transcripts several times, made a note of words and themes that appeared to be recurrent in the text and thereby searched for ‘patterns and connections between signifiers’ that differentiated them from each other. As such we applied ‘the idea of multiplicity’ (Frosh, 2014: 23) where we sought to open up the text by disrupting what appears to be a linear account of subjects’ representation of themselves within the organisational structure and their assigned roles and relationships. By paying attention to what is prominent and what is absent from the text – stands outside language as the ‘radical other’ (Frosh, 2014: 23) – we seek to show through our discussion of extracts from the transcripts the multiplicity and variability in the accounts reflective of how any attempt to put ‘something into language changes it’ (Frosh, 2014: 23). Lacan (2006: 247) saw the function of language in speech to be the evocation of the response of the Other. Meaning is not given but taken and the subject loses itself as an object in the attempt to identify itself in language. We hence approached our reading of imaginary self constructions not as a way of uncovering concrete moments of the subject’s being recognised as who he/she is or recognising others as a leader or follower but as a process of becoming (Harding, 2007) where, by trying to put something about the self into language, it shifts and is being transformed.

It is important to mention at this point that one of the authors was present during the focus groups as one of the two female researchers who conducted the entire project. Another author was also involved with DesignCo in his role as coach following the end of the project. We acknowledge these roles of the authors as fellow travellers (Driver, 2014 drawing on Gabriel, 1998) of the participants and make use of their knowledge to provide information on DesignCo and the research project so as to allow the reader ‘to know something about the conditions in which’ the focus groups took place (Parker, 2014b: 53). The two focus groups were conducted, as part of the wider ethnographic project, following initial workplace

observations and individual interviews with a view to providing staff with a space to reflect on and discuss what they saw as strengths and areas in need of development both as a company and with a view to themselves and their working relationships. Each focus group consisted of 6 participants from a range of teams, where focus group 1 included two male middle managers, three male employees and one female employee and focus group 2 had an equal gender split of employees only. The focus groups were facilitated by the two female researchers and interactive in nature, allowing for structured and unstructured small group and whole group conversations to develop. They were not focussed on the topic of leadership and followership but instead reflect structured and unstructured conversations between subjects and as such offer some resemblance of the mundane, everyday struggles of subjects to assume their pre-defined organisational roles in talk and the prescribed or expected relationships as managers, leaders and followers (Alvesson and Jonsson, 2016).

We recognise that both our interpretation of the empirical material and its presentation in this article are in themselves imaginary constructs (Driver, 2015; Parker, 2010) as we create possible readings of the text. The ensuing discussion of the transcripts is therefore reflective of our focus on a) what recurs throughout, takes a dominant position in the text and is anchored in hegemonic organizational discourse and how this ‘only takes on value by virtue of its relation with’ (Parker, 2014a: 41) b) what ‘is missing, what seems to be covered over, is unconscious to the text, but operates to structure the text’ (Parker, 2014b: 58). We introduce and intersperse this interpretation with information on the context of DesignCo.

DesignCo

At the time of the research, DesignCo was undergoing structural and strategic changes, attempting to make the move from a small management buy-out design company tied to a

main client towards becoming a medium-sized company with several revenue strands and a more diverse client and project portfolio. DesignCo had grown over the course of 6 years from a simple hierarchical structure (CEO, Managing Director and employees) to – at the time of the research - a slightly more complex hierarchical structure including a senior management level (CEO, Managing Director, Operations Director), a middle management level (also called operations board) and teams of employees. The female CEO, who had founded DesignCo based on her long-standing relationship with their main client, had left the UK base to develop a US office and it was uncertain whether she would return to the UK office. The running of the day-to-day business of DesignCo was, in her absence, left to the remaining two senior managers: the female Managing Director who had been with the company from the start and her husband who had joined the company later on as Operations Director.

The two female researchers had initially approached the company through a third party contact with a view to enquiring whether there was any interest in a collaboration linked to leadership and management. This was met with great enthusiasm by the male operations director, who declared during the first meeting with the researchers that DesignCo was in need of leadership development as the newly appointed group of male middle managers was greatly lacking leadership capacity. It was agreed that leadership development training was to be designed and conducted for this group of male middle managers following and informed by ethnographic research including workplace observations, interviews, recorded meetings and focus groups. In subsequent meetings with the researchers, the female managing director and male operations director continued to express their disappointment with their male middle managers for not taking up their leadership role. They saw middle managers shying away from making clear decisions, communicating effectively, dealing with

performance issues, motivating their staff and as a consequence felt unable to concentrate on their own strategic leadership role at DesignCo.

Leader/ship as *objet a*

In the context of the structural and organizational identity changes that DesignCo was undergoing, employees and middle managers talked a lot about the lack of vision, strategic planning and need for somebody to drive the business forward. Whilst the researchers refrained from making explicit reference to leader/ship and follower/ship throughout their ethnographic research, employees and managers repeatedly talked about and used the words leader, leading and leadership in connection with this narrated lack of vision and desire for strategic direction. The words follower, following and followership were never explicitly used by participants. Leader/ship hence operated as *objet a* – the signifier taking a dominant position over the rest of the text, subjugating subjects' identifications. The following focus group extract is reflective of this talk:

Employee A: “ehm... i think that might be one of the issues as to why sometimes you feel like you just kind of wondering... everything is just floating... it's because there's not actually any vision there's no drive there's no... I personally don't feel that there's someone in control pushing the business forward... there's no one driving forward which if there was I think it would actually motivate the teams”

We read the above extract through the lens of Frosh (2015, drawing on Butler 2004) who stresses that the subject is never recognised or recognises others for what it already is. Workplace selves are ‘multiple and in process’ (Harding, 2007: 1770) as the process of

seeking recognition requires the subject's use of language, which changes that which the subject seeks to be as soon as it is spoken. Indeed, we read the above references to personal experiences of floating, not being sure who is in control, who is driving the company forward and what the vision is, as attempts to express in different ways the desire for a self that is stable and being motivated by this 'someone in control pushing the business forward'. Later on in the focus groups, Employee A repeatedly talks about the need for leading and a leader to be this person who takes control and motivates others:

Employee A: "I think... I definitely think people need to be doing leading because in turn even they're gonna be motivating their team to do better... actually giving people the sense of ownership and the fact that how actually they do care as much as we all care and... I just think it does when you see someone physically there heading up a team you can actually not rest on not rest easy... but you know someone is doing something about it and it's not just {bobbing} along"

Formal qualities of the text

Applying Parker's (2014a) framework of Lacanian discourse analysis and looking for the formal qualities of the text, we could say that the feeling of floating and being lost can operate in the context of later conversations to mean longing to be found and stabilised. It is then this longing for stability and clarity – a fixed workplace self – that represents Employee A. In turn, it is this longing for stability that represents Employee A for another signifier which is the person delivering this stability. Using Employee A's language of leadership and applying the language of following, we could say that the longing for clarity and stability is what we usually associate with followers and their desire to follow a leader who delivers

stability through clear direction and motivation – managing the meaning of the organisation (Smircich and Morgan, 1982) and possibly the followers' self. We could then say that following as the quest for a fixed workplace self is the signifier that represents Employee A for another signifier, which is the desired leader. On the other hand, we could turn this around and – focusing on the second extract – say that Employee A's repeated references to someone leading and motivating a team is not a representation of her own desire to follow but to lead. It is then the imagined ability to provide stability and motivate teams that represent Employee A for another signifier which is the lost, floating followers.

What is important to note in both cases, is that the language of following lies outside the Symbolic Order and is not used by or indeed available to Employee A, who focuses her talk on what is dominant in organisational discourse: the leader and his/her actions. Notions of follower and following are imposed by our reading of Employee A's account as the 'radical other' of Employee A's narrated desire for a leader or to be a leader. So it is through the repeated references in the text to leading that Employee A is represented either as a future follower or leader, where leadership as a signifier has no determinate meaning but to represent the feeling of stability and clarity and promise of the management of meaning that represents Employee A's feelings of floating and desire for fixedness. We further note here the gendered images that are provided by Employee A of the lost, hysteric, feminised (Parker, 2014b) employees who blame the organisation for not providing a leader. In the desire for this future saviour, the leader is a masculinised image of a person in control who can solve all problems. This is reflective of the gendered hegemonic leadership discourse present in the Symbolic Order.

Anchoring of representation

It is the absent presence of following as the ‘radical other’ of this dominant leader/ship talk that we construct in our analysis of the text here as a quilting point (Lacan, 2006; Parker, 2014a). It is a fixed point that holds together a little organisational symbolic order in which the participants of the focus groups – and possibly employees of DesignCo – use the signifier leadership to communicate their seemingly shared desire for stability and direction in the hope that this will solve feelings of being lost and cover up the lack they experience in their own failing attempts to construct a fixed workplace self. The attempt to construct a fixed self is, in Lacanian terms, impossible and always failing. Anchored in the hegemonic discourse of the signifier leadership, this failing quest reinforces the role of the absent follower as a quilting point as there is no material leader being that can emerge. There can only be desire for the phantasmic, masculinised image of the future leader as saviour expressed through the feminised image of the absent follower. It is then this absent notion of the lost, feminised follower that is ‘what seems to be covered over, is unconscious to the text, but it operates to structure the text’ (Parker, 2014b: 58).

We further note another recurrent theme within the text, which we construct as a second quilting point linked to and reinforcing the above mentioned symbolic order. It is the recurrent mentioning of the absent female CEO, who is unanimously identified to be the only real leader and simultaneously seen to have abandoned her employees:

Employee C: “the other thing that could be quite an instant thing and this again might be a personal preference is management presence...so present you know...so Anna (Managing Director) hasn’t been present”

Employee E: “yeah”

Employee C: “she has a lot to do and Steve (Operations Director)...it’s to a point that he’s very ehm caught up in process”

Employee E: “do you think that’s a quick term thing?”

Employee C: “ehm I think Debbie (CEO) coming this week could be great I think having that energy and that leader back in the office will be really good but she’ll go back to the States again and I think ehm...that’s a big one for me”

Employee E: “yeah”

Later on in the conversation Employee C adds “hmm I think it just makes employees more at ease when you have quite a strong figure driving in from and Debbie is quite a strong figure but unfortunately she has been in the States”. As the conversation continues Employee C comes back to the issue:

Employee C: “it’s also an energy that comes from a leader... it is and ehm... Steve and Anna are administrating process {inaudible}... which is great just you need... absolutely need... but Debbie was the character the energy”

Employee D: “yeah”

Employee C: “I miss this and you can’t change a person’s personality... so I think Steve and Anna are definitely administrating”

This talk makes reference to memories of a brighter, leaderful past when the CEO was present in the UK office and a hope that she would return and ‘sort everything out’. References to the absence of the female CEO and leader were in some instances expressed quite strongly and bear similarity to feelings of abandonment:

Employee E: “Anna and Debbie are working together... cause she's gone to the US to try and do it... actually she left us a bit hollowing a little bit...”

Employee F: “yea... I would I would... I was overhearing what the other team was saying and ahm... I do agree with what Employee C was saying is that I guess a lot of why Debbie went to the States was to win the US exhibit business which she didn't get so we sort of wander now what her main focus is... and I think we have missed that over the last years... she's been so interested in getting that business maybe we've lacked a bit of drive and a bit of uhm push in other areas that perhaps would have if she wasn't so focussed in getting that business...”

We construct these references to the absent female CEO to be the second quilting point as it is her material absence that we argue enables employees' accounts to attach her romanticised image as the saviour of the company to the signifier leadership and by extension allows employees to position the female managing director and male operations director as managers with a purely operational, administrative and process-oriented focus. This confirmation of the absence of material leaders in the company enables employees to construct an imagined self as the future 'radical other' represented by the desire for the return of the absent female CEO leader in the future.

The role of knowledge

This talk of the absent CEO alongside the professed lack of strategic planning and vision could be seen to put employees into the position of knowledge on what is required to save the

company and themselves – i.e. finding a strong future leader. Speaking from within the Master discourse of leadership and identifying the solution, they are able to explain the troubles of the company by positioning the managing director and operations director as ‘no more’ than micro-managers at a senior level and middle managers as struggling line managers. Parker (2014b: 59) argues that ‘this simple and reductive characterization also taps into and reiterates an ideological characterization of femininity and masculinity, of women who hysterically blame others and men who obsessively compartmentalize the world and others in it’. Yet, it is through the use of the language of leadership and management to compartmentalize others in the company, that employees and middle managers both attempt to manage meaning and represent themselves through the absent feminised account of the lost follower in need to be rescued and blaming others for their lack of leadership.

Against this masculinised leader image of the person in control and by admitting that he and his fellow middle managers had so far failed in gaining visibility and control, one of the middle managers provides a hysterical account of his situation:

Employee G: “yeah it's a sort of tricky one for me that matching because sitting on the operation's board (middle managers) we've got our own challenges and stuff about... really I would say as the company grows to medium size and beyond then actually having individuals reporting directly to an executive board (senior managers) is probably not the best way moving forward... I mean I think that that's one of the major challenges we've got moving forward is not just for the individuals' report but also the work going through... I think at that moment everything inverted and cut off by MD, you know {some grow or fit} and actually again to be growing that is gonna start a bottle neck and I think hold the company back so it's probably our major challenge... I think about increasing awareness of the operation's board and what we

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can do to help them and and training us how to do that and bringing the trust of individuals along and then just really working that the new the new hierarchy which it has to be to some level... without disassociating the executive board out of the mix altogether...”

Employee G later adds: “well the operations board... so really it should be Peter, Paul and myself... ehm but the operations board is never an evolving thing we’re working on visibility and how to do that... but I don't think Peter would disagree saying we’re not where we’d wanted to be at the moment”

This extract illustrates that, whilst the senior managers talk about the need for middle managers to step up and be leaders, the heroic leadership discourse at DesignCo firmly categorises leaders to exist only at the top of the organisation and thereby implies that middle managers cannot be leaders. The above account of the experienced difficulty in taking up the middle management role and failure to be a leader for his team reveals the hysterical attempt of Employee G to position himself as a leader, implicitly challenging the shared discourse of the absent female CEO as the desired leader at the top. By suggesting that there may be a possibility of leadership existent at the middle level of the organisation, he challenges not only the established image of leadership at the top but – in our view – attempts to create the missing image of those he wishes to lead, i.e. the followers. Employee G later on talks about avenues to becoming a leader and can be seen here to struggle in imagining those he wishes to lead:

Employee G: “for me I think it would be some form of management thing again as you are progressing your career you get given more responsibility and that pressing...

but again not naive enough to think that people are born leaders or managers and there isn't certain things that should be done in terms of personal management of people and can't just be do it my way do it this way... so finding a happy balance is where where the team feel they can come to me and see me eventually as a leader... if that makes me... you know that's not something that happens overnight”

This extract also shows the role and absence of the imagined followers as the validating Other that Employee G needs in order to confirm his imaginary self construction as a leader. The hesitant, future oriented nature of this hysterical account then shows how middle managers are trapped within a hegemonic discourse that makes it impossible for them to identify with the image of the heroic leader and to have this image validated.

Our interpretation of the focus group transcripts has – through our focus on the qualities of text, anchors of representation and role of knowledge – enabled insights into the role of follower and leader images in subjects’ identity construction at DesignCo that support and advance our theoretical discussion. We focus our discussion below on the phantasmic nature of leader-follower relations to enhance our understanding of the significance of the absent, feminised follower and the dialectical relation of lack to hegemony.

Discussion

In our reading of the focus group transcripts we focussed on an organisational leadership discourse taking a dominant position in the text and the absence of a language of follower/ship. We suggested that this dominant leadership discourse at DesignCo offered the fantasy of a future heroic leader at the top of the organisation and implied the image of the feminised, lost follower waiting to be rescued by this future leader. Speaking from within this

discourse put employees into a position of knowledge where they could authoritatively attribute their feelings of lostness to the current lack of leadership and state the need for future leadership as the only way for themselves to be saved. This absence of leadership at DesignCo was further signified by the recurrent focus in talk on the fantasised future return of the heroic female CEO, thereby reinforcing the hegemonic image of the omnipotent leader ideal (Gabriel, 2011) at the top of the organisation who can solve all organizational problems (Alvesson and Spicer, 2010; Ford, 2010; Jackson and Guthey, 2007; Meindl et al., 1985). This fantasy enabled employees and middle managers to blame their fate on the absent CEO and the senior managers' inability to be strong leaders and solve all problems. Yet, as they adopt the masculinised language of leadership and blame their inability to be in control on the missing leader, they implicitly represent themselves as feminised followers. In the context of organizational transitioning and the resultant absence of an organizational identity image at DesignCo, it is this phantasmic attachment (Jones and Spicer, 2005) to the omnipotent leader fantasy and consequently the subjugating to subject-authority relations (Costas and Taheri, 2012) with the absent CEO that is the dominant signifier over the subject's self-construction.

Advancing our understanding of the role of the absent, feminised follower within this, we have argued in our reading of the text that the absence of a language of follower/ship works as a quilting point, allowing leadership to take on the value of *objet a* (Lacan, 1977: 239). Indeed, leadership as *objet a* does not carry a determinate meaning but represents the employees' desire to be found and stabilised as a workplace self. By imposing the language of follower/ship, we have argued that following represents this desire to find a stable workplace self. It is then the absence of references to existing processes of following – representing the absence of a stable workplace self – that signifies the authority of the absent heroic leader and implies the need for future leader/ship. The impossibility of a stable self

reinforces and is being reinforced by the image of the leader as a saviour situated in the future only. Indeed, it could be said that it is in this mirror of the heroic leader image offered by the hegemonic leadership discourse that the employees' desire to find themselves is recognised, tying the absent image of the feminised lost follower to the overdetermined image of the masculinised heroic leader. As we have argued in our interpretation, it is then the absent image of the feminised follower representing the subject's desire for a stable self through its desire for the heroic leader that structures the prominence of the leadership talk at DesignCo. What we then see is a chain of signifiers sliding around the Symbolic Order that offers the compartmentalised language of leader/follower within which the follower is the absent, radical other.

This can be seen to exemplify the dialectical relation of lack to hegemony (Mueller, 2012). It is the hegemonic leadership discourse at DesignCo that offers the fantasy of a stable workplace self – represented by the absent image of the follower – through the phantasmic image of the heroic leader bringing stability and direction. Yet, this hegemony fails as the phantasmic image of the leader-follower relationship representing the possibility of a stable workplace self is an impossible fantasy. Indeed, the image of the follower representing a stable workplace self – having been saved from the experience of lostness by the leader – is absent from the Symbolic Order. Any attempt then to construct a follower self in the here and now and provide the required recognition of others as leaders within organisationally assigned leader-follower roles at DesignCo reveals rupture in the Symbolic as there is no such follower image to attach the self to. The subject experiences lack in the failure to construct the self as follower as it represents the failure of finding a stable workplace self. Yet, it is this very experience of lack that reinforces the hegemony of the organisational

leader/ship discourse at DesignCo as it continues to offer the fantasy of a stable workplace self through the image of the heroic leader.

These empirical insights advance our theoretical discussion and thus our understanding of subject's identity construction within organisational contexts that are subjugated to a hegemonic organisational discourse focussed on leader/ship as *objet a*. Firstly, it goes some way towards explaining why other empirical research has shown that few would 'want to be known as a follower' and that 'very few people have ever worked with someone they would describe as an influential leader' (Harding, 2015: 152). We have argued that there is no follower or indeed leader image but representations of the underlying desire to find a stable workplace self through the hegemonic language of the heroic leader image. This very leader image is not real, cannot be material and needs to be a distant desire only, as its permanence and materiality require a follower image representing a stable workplace self. It could be argued that it is the impossibility of the latter and hegemonic assumptions of leader/ship as *objet a* that have led to the absence of the language of follower/ship in organisational life. With regards to our example of DesignCo, this suggests that even when the female CEO returns to the UK office, employees will continue to long for a strong, heroic leader to come and rescue them from their state of lostness as they will continue to be unable to identify themselves with the image of the feminised follower, thereby failing to provide the leader with the needed validation. The romanticised desire of following representing the possibility of a stable workplace self is then what structures a never ending desire for leader/ship and in those aspiring to be leaders a never-ending desire to become a leader. As the subject cannot identify him/herself as follower, he/she cannot validate others as leaders, rendering the leader-follower relationship not only fragile but phantasmic. Follower/ship is

always absent, the desire to be led will never be fulfilled and the fantasy of the strong leader will never materialise.

Contributions and Future research

The insights gained through our Lacanian perspective on unconscious dynamics of identity construction in organisationally assigned leader-follower relations contribute to our critical understanding of leader/ship and follower/ship and offer several strands for future research. Firstly, we have added to our understanding of the frequently reported absence of ‘real’, physical leaders and followers in organizations (Harding, 2015) and the failing attempts of post-heroic discourses of shared leadership and followership to gain strength in organizational discourse and practice. Our discussion has advanced Ford and Harding’s (2016) critical views on the purpose of follower/ship, as it demonstrates that it is the absence of a language of follower/ship in the Symbolic Order that structures the hegemonic desire for a heroic leader ideal as its radical other and represents the impossible strive for a stable self. This would suggest that as long as our language of organisations is centred on leader/ship as *objet a*, following can be no more and no less than the absent, feminised validating Other of leader/ship. Any attempt to theorise follower/ship is futile unless we are able to move away from leader/ship as *objet a*, in which case arguably we have no need for the study of follower/ship. Indeed, this supports other critical voices (Kelly, 2014) and suggests we need to move our focus away from trying to theorise leader/ship or follower/ship as an organisational function or indeed a workplace identity and instead explore the ongoing dynamics of recognition and misrecognition of workplace selves in reflection on humans’ fundamental need to have their deepest desire of a stable self recognised.

Going forward, we strongly suggest that research needs to focus further on exploring the phantasmic nature of leader-follower relations and manifestations of the dialectical relation of lack to hegemony in everyday talk. This is especially important in light of its implications for our understanding of leader and follower images embedded in organizational discourse and roles imposed through organisational structures. Analyses of narrative accounts of individuals assigned to a formal leader-follower relationship may shed further light on articulations of changing imaginary constructions of workplace selves and how these relate to leader and follower images. These may also help to reveal images of the absent, feminised follower as the validating Other and the imagined leader-follower relationship within leader identity constructions. Attention should also be paid in the analysis of narrative accounts to explorations of lack and how this relates to assigned roles and assumed expectations in the formal leader-follower relationship and their link to hegemonic leadership and organizational discourses. Driver's (2013) focus on analysing fissures in leaders' narratives as a means to capture failed constructions and focus on experiences of lack seems of particular value to this research agenda. Similar analyses of fissures could help to illuminate further the lacking, absent follower image and the imaginary ties between the fantasised follower and imagined leader self within narratives of workplace identity constructions.

Based on our reflections on the complex role of middle managers at DesignCo, such critically informed leadership theory may particularly help those who find themselves experiencing recurrent disappointment and anxiety in the organizational reality of being unable to fulfil leader roles. It may further help to raise awareness of the lack of a language of follower/ship in organisational discourse and the implications this has for employee's ability to construct follower identities as a pre-condition of the existence of leadership. This will be particularly important as it provides a critical voice within the growing field of follower/ship

studies and of great value to leadership development programmes where the materiality of leader-follower relations and leader/follower identities is largely being taken for granted.

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