

The Intersubjectivity of Leader-Follower Development

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Abstract

Using the philosophical framework of intersubjectivity as drawn heavily from Biesta, it is shown that the relationship between the leader and follower cannot be regarded as one of uni-directional formation. It is shown that the leader and follower are co-dependent upon each other for their formation. Against the backdrop, methodologies of leadership are explored to determine the possible ways they could prohibit or enhance intersubjective relationships. Seeing, Saying, and Listening are shown to be tangible ways to enhance intersubjective relationships between leaders and followers.

Introduction and Thesis

Much is said and written about leadership. One has only to look at the enormity of volumes spread across the bookshelves of the local book store to see that it is an intensely popular topic. The dominant view of leadership has been that of the heroic, visionary, or great-man where the leader is regarded as an individual with innate traits and skills that make him or her bound for success in life and business. What is rarely seen on shelves is books about followers. The very nature of leadership implies that to lead, one must have at least one person following. Very little is said of the importance of followers in the life of a leader

This paper will explore the relationship between the follower and the leader. It will be argued that the leader-follower relationship is reciprocal rather than unrequited. In fact, it will be shown using the philosophical notions of intersubjectivity, that the follower and leader are interdependent for their existence and growth. Finally, this paper will explain how some theories of leadership and management by their very nature are contradictory to a reciprocal understanding of the leader-follower relationship and do more to stifle the development of either than to cause them to flourish.

Overview of Intersubjectivity

It is a particularly Modern conception that there is an empirical way to understand the human and to understand what the human is able to know. This belief is more implied than it is conscientiously practiced and affirmed. Take, for example, the way that in our schools we decide upon what is to be learned; without verbalizing it as such, it is claimed that we know what it is that each person should be learning and in turn how they can be

known. The problem is two-fold and will be explored here.¹

What the Human can Know

Biesta (2004) claims that “the educational project of emancipation through the development of reason has been a central element, if not the most central element of modernity and modernization” (p. 308). In this, it is assumed that the individual human is able, through accumulation of prior knowledge and the use of the 5 senses, to reason objectively and to come to rational conclusions about accumulated knowledge. In this view, knowledge exists as corporeal and definite - an entity that can be accumulated and gained. Against this, Ashworth (2004) counters that “interpretation depends on standpoint, and the meaning 'of something' has to be in terms of the relevance of the thing to the interpreter (or learner) (p. 149). The interpreter, according to Ashworth, cannot exclude him/herself: “the interpreter cannot be disembodied, de-historicized and a-cultured” (p. 149).

In this the tension inherent in an epistemological view wherein there are ‘things’ that can be known objectively outside of experience, is clear. If it is impossible for the human to know anything outside of his/her experience, objective thought becomes practically impossible. Empirical thought processes are possible but completely objective conclusions are impossible. However, it must be stressed, as will be shown below, that what is at stake here is not abandoning “scientific knowledge or ethical concerns”, as

¹ Much of what is written here is gleaned from an earlier unpublished manuscript of mine from 2012 entitled: “Opening up Space for Intersubjective Relationships to Flourish: A Study of Intersubjective Forms of Education and the Spaces in which they (may) occur.” It should also be noted that the literature cited in this area is heavily directed towards pedagogy and not leadership study. However, as a philosophical framework, I believe it has a lot to offer especially in relation to the leader-follower relationship which is one of learning.

Gomes (2012) cautions, “it is about making room for subjectivities and not producing them” (p. 6).

How we are Known

The Modern assumption is that each human is like a blank slate on which truth can be written, like an empty vessel into which facts can be deposited. Uljens (2002) contrasts this when he claims that “even the newborn child is already an experienced subject, a cultural being, she is not a *tabula rasa*, something completely new” (p. 6). The experience of the human must be acknowledged in any attempt to define him/her (if such an attempt can be made). The idea that “we can ultimately know who we are and that we can use this knowledge as the foundation for the way in which we organize our lives...limits and excludes possible other ways of being human” (Biesta, 2004, p. 309). If the human can be known objectively, the end result is fixed and the subjectivity of the individual is erased. If, rather, the understanding of the human is formatted to become one which acknowledges that an objective understanding is impossible, it becomes necessary, Biesta (1999) says, to make a shift from “*what* the subject is to the question *who* this subject, as a singular being is” (p. 208). Smith (1993) describes this as the ‘I-Thou’ relationship, as opposed to an ‘I-It’ relationship.

It is not enough, however, to simply stop at a realization that each individual self must be regarded as a subject instead of an object. It must be claimed with Uljens (2002) that the *other* must also be regarded as a subject instead of an object (p. 4). Without making this important step, the belief is unquestioningly propagated that “the individual by herself constitutes herself and the world, without relation to alterity” (Uljens, p. 4).

Instead, it must acknowledge that “the question of who someone is cannot be resolved through introspection but needs an encounter with others” (Biesta, 2006, 47). The human cannot become fully human, fully individual and unique, without the continually reciprocated interrelation with the other. These relationships can be called *intersubjective*.

One other point is important to explicate here: there is an ethical responsibility for individuals inherent in intersubjective relationships.² This is explained in more detail by Biesta (1998) when he argues in the negative that if we “are with others before we are with ourselves” (p. 91), and “we *are* ourselves (with others) before we *know* ourselves” (p. 91), we, consequently, deny others the possibility of ‘coming into the world’ if we are ourselves unable to ‘come into the world’. Biesta uses the metaphor of ‘coming into the world’ to refer to the subjectivity afforded to an individual when an Other allows him/herself to truly ‘come into presence’ with that individual. Biesta uses the phrase ‘coming into presence’ to indicate a subject’s involvement in truly allowing him/herself to be an active subject in relation to the Other (Biesta, 2004, 2006). Through ‘coming into presence’ we are able to help others ‘come into the world’ (Biesta, 2006, p. 84). This is the communal nature of intersubjectivity: “coming into presence is... a presentation, not to oneself, but to a community” (Biesta, 2004, p. 212). Bonnet (1999) echoes this when he suggests that “there is a fundamental sense in which I exist in my service to the other; my subjectivity is a subjection to the other” (p. 362).

² This thought is unpacked in much more detail than it is here by philosophers like Emmanuel Levinas, and by Joldersma (2008) but it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide more than a cursory overview.

Intersubjectivity as it Relates to the Leader-Follower Relationship

The traditional understanding, at least in popular theory, has been that there are distinct and quantifiable leaders and followers. Leaders are those who have been given (or who take!) a role that is set in authority above those in the follower position who are subordinates. It is because of this dichotomy that so much has been written about leadership and so little about followership. Leadership is regarded as a position of importance that is limited to a select few who have been fortunate enough to have been born with the innate leadership skills, not to mention the work ethic, to propel themselves into positions of leadership. It is beyond the scope of this paper to tackle the myths and misconceptions inherent in this view of the leader. What will be presented, however, is that applying the principles of intersubjectivity to leader-follower relationships can enrich an understanding of how leaders and followers are formed, and further that the two are reciprocal in nature.

One of the primary misconceptions of the leader-follower relationship that is being challenged here is that the leader is an active agent in relationships, while the follower is passive (Hollander, 1992, p. 71). This is false for a number of reasons. Hollander, in his study into how followers are formed into leaders says: “our understanding of leadership is incomplete if we do not recognize its unity with followership” (p. 74). This seems like a simple statement, but it is an idea that deserves some reflection. Although the ‘Great Man’ metaphor of a leader where the leader has been blessed with innate skills, self-confidence and a plethora of other wonderful personality traits has been shown lacking, many still regard leadership to be a skill that only the chosen few are gifted with. From this theory, it is inferred that followers are

passive participants in the life of a leader. If, however, we agree with Maroosis (2008) that “there are no leaders who are not followers, nor followers who are not leaders” (p. 18), a whole new understanding of the leader-follower relationship emerges.

Rosenthal and Buchholz (1995) stress that “the creativity of authentic leadership is two-directional by its very nature” and that “the leader not only changes but is changed” (p. 32). Consequently, it is not enough to end with an understanding that both leaders and followers are active agents. It is necessary to delve into the facets of these relationships to understand them in a greater light. It is not only true that the follower is an active participant with the leader in his/her formation; it is also true that the leader is an active participant in the development of the follower. Maroosis (2008) calls this ‘reciprocal following’ which is “like a conversation where leader and follower both are learning about the law of the situation” (p. 23). He goes on to explain that “like any conversation, leadership and followership can move from person to person as the dialogue twists and turns” (p. 23). It is clear from this understanding of the leader-follower relationship that they are co-dependent upon each other for their respective formation. However, it is here where the framework of intersubjective relationships is necessary to infuse deeper understanding into these relationships.

Recall from above that the defining characteristic of intersubjective relationships is that each individual is incapable of becoming a subject without the continuous and reciprocating ‘coming into presence’ of other subjectivities. Ladkin (2010) calls this reversibility and claims that “the self is fundamentally informed by how it understands itself to be perceived” (p. 63), because “human beings cannot perceive without

simultaneously being perceived” (Ladkin, 2012, *Reversibility and Human Bodies*, par. 1).

Ladkin (2010) clarifies this thought in more detail when she writes:

“As the ‘leader’ acts and is observed by ‘followers’, the ‘followers’ engage relationally with the ‘leader’. Through their gaze, a leader knows him or herself and through the leader’s perception followers understand who they are. This mutually constructed give and take of perceptions constitutes and energizes the ‘between space’ of relational leadership” (p. 63).

In summation of this thought, because individual subjects require the other (and vice versa) in order to ‘come into presence’, leaders and followers are involved in an intersubjective and reversible relationship to bring each other into presence. Maroosis claims that “followership is a reciprocal partnership of ethical responsibilities” (p. 24). An important point is made here. It can be inferred from Maroosis, who seems to be reflecting the work of Emmanuel Levinas, that both subjects in a relationship have an ethical responsibility, indeed an ethical response-ability to the other. Each subject in relationship has a unique ‘voice’; there is no one else who in any given situation can be the person who is in that situation. If one were to deny his/her presence, he/she would also be inhibiting the other to ‘come into presence’ in that moment. This could cause irreparable harm to the other. In this sense, a leader cannot ‘come into presence’ as a leader, let alone an individual subject, without the reciprocating subjectivity of the follower (other). Because these relationships are reciprocating (reversible), the follower is subsequently unable to ‘come into presence’ as a follower without the reciprocating subjectivity of the leader (other).

Leadership Models that Foster Intersubjective Understandings of Relationships

The above framework is not intended to be or become a theory, but rather a framework with which to understand the dynamics of the leader-follower relationship, even human relationships in general. There are a number of existing theories that have aspects that fit well with an understanding of the philosophical framework as written above. A cursory examination of a few of those will be provided here.

James MacGregor Burns developed a theory of leadership in 1978 called Transformative Leadership. He defined transformative leadership as occurring “when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality” (Burns, 1978, p. 20). It is notable that in this theory about leadership he includes both leaders and followers, which is an integral aspect of understanding these relationships intersubjectively. He also confers importance to the idea that leaders and followers are raising one another to higher levels and not delegating this role to the leader as some theories suggest.

Relational Leadership Theory is often regarded as simply inclusive leadership – ensuring that followers have a voice in decision making. Uhl-Bien (2006), however, develops the theory in more detail when she writes that “relational leadership also breaks down the distinction between leader and follower. It sees leadership *not* as management, or managers and subordinates, but instead as an interactive process engaged in by *participants*” (p. 664). She also applies contributions from social constructivism; she explains that “relational constructionism assumes a *relational ontology*...all social realities—all knowledge of self and of other people and things—are viewed as interdependent or co-dependent constructions existing and known only in relation” (p.

665). There are clearly intersections between this and what has been explicated in this paper. Further research is required to determine where the two may diverge.

Rosenthal and Buccholz (1995) describe what they call Participatory Leadership which is not intended as a theory, but to describe “a new philosophical understanding of the dynamics of self and community” (p. 28). They describe that “the leader does not ‘stand apart’ from a following group, nor is the leader an organizer of group ideas, but rather leadership is by its very nature in dynamic interaction with the group, and both are in a process of ongoing transformation because of this interaction” (28). While not using the language of intersubjectivity per se, they are capturing the essence of intersubjectivity in leader-follower relationships by emphasizing that transformation happens only through relational interaction and because of relational interdependence.

Finally, Distributed Leadership provides a partial framework from which to think about intersubjective relationships between leaders and followers. In his definition, Spillane (2006) describes distributed leadership as a “product of the joint interactions of school leaders, followers, and aspects of their situation such as tools and routines” (p. 8). In this, it is evident that Spillane does not regard Distributed Leadership as a theory, but rather as a recognition of occurrences already taking place in situations of leadership and followership (p. 10). His point is that it must be acknowledged that leadership is distributed among those in an environment and that it is necessary to distribute this leadership among the constituents of that environment. In fact, he claims, as has been done above, that “leaders not only influence followers but are also influenced by them” (p. 17). This recognition and the importance of distributing leadership roles is an important application for the framework that has been explored in this paper.

Leadership Models that Prohibit Intersubjective Understandings of Leader-Follower Relationships

While there are leadership models that may be helpful in applying, and understanding intersubjective forms of relationships, there are also those that can be regarded as harmful to developing these relationships.

One of the most dominant forms of leadership during the last century has been what is called Transactional Leadership. Burns (1978) claims that transactional leadership “conceives of leader and follower as exchanging gratifications in a political marketplace”, and where the participants are “bargainers seeking to maximize their political and psychic profits” (p. 258). While being the dominant view of the leader-follower relationship, we must also regard it as prohibitive to the development of intersubjective forms of these relationships. A transactional approach emphasizes the needs and wants of each individual, representing a wrestling match for rewards. The leader gives as little reward as he/she can to achieve a desired result, while the follower takes as much reward as he/she can to do the task for the leader. The reciprocal is also true; the leader takes as much work as he/she can, while the follower gives as little work as he/she can for the purpose of the transaction. It is clear that a transactional approach to leader-follower relationship does not weave well into an understanding of intersubjective relationships. Characterizing intersubjective relationships is the willingness of each individual to take up his/her ethical response-ability to the other. Greed and selfishness are what characterize transactional relationships, while humility and selflessness characterize intersubjective relationships.

Hierarchy and limits to action are organizational practices that may also prohibit intersubjective relationships. In hierarchical relationships it is expected that those higher

in the organizational order provide direction for those lower in the order. This often leads to strict job descriptions and relational borders. Consider that many employees with strict job descriptions are punished by their superiors or colleagues for doing something not under their jurisdiction. Consider also that lower level employees often are segregated from higher level employees. Both of these practices restrict meaningful and honest relationships from developing and may inhibit intersubjective relationships from evolving. As has been shown, the effects of this will inhibit the growth of both the leader and the follower.

Application

The critique of many philosophical papers is that they are too philosophical for any worldly good. To remedy this critique, a few brief suggestions are given that may help for leaders and followers hoping to apply the ideas presented here.

Susan Scott (2004) in her book “Fierce Conversations”, although not attempting to be a philosophical or theoretical volume, provides a few helpful suggestions that may have an impact for an application of the ideas in this paper. Scott claims importantly that “the conversation is the relationship” (p. 97). While those in the social constructionist camp would argue that construction is made through language in general whatever its manifestation, it is important to note that intersubjective relationships depend on individuals accepting their ethical response-abilities and engaging in relationships with the other. It seems apparent that the most intimate manner in which this can happen is through face-to-face encounters with the other. There are three very important actions in this: Seeing, Saying and Listening.

Seeing

Scott iterates the importance of being in physical presence (seeing) with other people. She recommends that even if we're only physically present for a brief moment, that we be "prepared to be nowhere else" (p. 92). This may seem fairly obvious, but consider the circumstances that can be prohibitive in being truly present with another person: distraction by events, endless to-do lists, emails or telephone prompts, inner thoughts, etc. To be able to truly help others to 'come into the world', we need to be truly in their presence.

Saying

The words that are said are also important. However, it's not simply that the right words are chosen, the words must be the unique words of the individual person. This is important because in leader-follower relationships the tendency is to use an official voice, the voice of the organization, when speaking with others. When an individual uses the voice of the organization, essentially he/she is becoming an object, the object of the organization, instead of an individual and unique subject.

Listening

Listening is also crucial in intersubjective relationships. Smith (1993) claims that in an authentic 'I-Thou' relationship, each subject in the dialogue listens to the other with the expectation that what the other says might actually be true (p. 383). This is to be distinguished from dialogic relationships where truth is "brought *into* the dialogue", instead of truth emerging "*out of* the dialogue" (p. 384). Followers and leaders are only able to intersubjectively co-develop if they are willing to truly be present, use their own voices, and deeply listen.

Conclusion

Rather than regarding leaders and followers as separate roles and/or entities unto themselves, this paper articulated why it is important to regard their relationship as co-dependant. Borrowing a framework of intersubjectivity from authors such as Biesta, it was shown that, in fact, as individual subjects leaders and followers are ethically response-able to each other for their formation not only as leaders, but as individual subjects. It was shown that there are models of leadership and followership in a variety of leadership theories that may be helpful in attempting to practice what has been written here. However, it is also important to recognize that there are models of leadership and followership which can actually serve to prohibit those mired within them from becoming individual subjects. Finally, using the work of Scott, it was shown that there are very real and tangible ways to foster intersubjective relationships by Seeing, Saying, and Listening.

It is hoped that this paper can help to develop methods of leading and following that are recognized as co-dependent - that these relationships are dependent upon each other for their mutual formation and development. While it may be true that hierarchies are important for well-functioning organizations, it is hoped that even within hierarchical structures, leaders and followers will be regarded as equals with an ethical response-ability to bring each other 'into the world' by being truly present.

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