

## **Point of View: Leadership Studies from Different Perspectives**

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### **Abstract**

By adopting the dictum that all knowledge is knowledge from a point of view, educators can arrange the literature on leadership into nine categories from three conceptually distinct points of view, namely the Leader, the Follower, and the Investigator. Students who come to appreciate and account for point of view not only increase their understanding of leadership, but also prepare to compensate, if not transcend their own point of view – a skill that successful participants in leadership will increasingly require.

### **Introduction**

The philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1967) subscribed to the dictum that all knowledge is knowledge from a point of view. Whether there can be such a thing as a God’s-eye point of view that takes in the whole, as if from high above in Olympus or some Archimedean point outside of all particular points of view -- that is a question better left to philosophers and theologians. As a practical matter, there is much to commend studying leadership from a participant’s point of view (POV).

If leadership studies were to adopt Merleau-Ponty’s (1962, 1967) dictum as well, then, how would that inform leadership education? This article sets forth a simplified way to organize and understand the literature on leadership based on three distinct points of view of particular interest to students of leadership – those of the leader, follower, and investigator. Then, it describes the permutations in which each party is paying attention from their POV to somebody else in the triangle as the focal point. We can adopt Erving Goffman’s (1974) use of the term “role” (p. 128f) to describe each of these POVs. Finally, this article will set forth some of the implications for leadership education.

For those interested in a philosophical context to the following, this article derives from the perspectivism of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964) and José Ortega y Gasset (cited in Dobson, 1989). Nevertheless, perspectivism is not new to leadership studies. In a considerable study of the literature on leadership over the past 25 years, consistent with perspectivism, Nathan Hiller, Leslie A. DeChurch, Toshio Murase, and Daniel Doty (2011) begin by asserting that how we assess leadership from different available perspectives is an important consideration that has been largely ignored. Leadership can be assessed from multiple perspectives, each of which has its advantages and disadvantages. Ultimately, even though Hiller et al. do not sort these perspectives by role, as I have, they – like Merleau-Ponty and Ortega y Gasset (2011) – do favor integrating perspectives. This article attempts to contribute to that effort in a fashion that students will find clear and compelling.

### **Three basic roles**

For present purposes, we shall consider a simplified model comprised of three roles, namely the leader, the follower, and the investigator. In ordinary practice, of course, leadership takes place among a variety of people who influence the process, not least of which would be other followers and rival leaders. A classroom teacher could add other roles, as the circumstances require, such as beneficiary, sponsor, public prosecutor, and so on, but for present purposes we should keep it simple. In other words, this model will be an abstraction that could then be made more complicated and more realistic by adding additional parties, even though the underlying principles should be the same.

In addition, we should keep in mind that an individual's point of view changes over time, depending for example on the particular situation. Thus, a POV is not constant, and neither is it the same for everyone in that particular role. POV varies. Nevertheless, that does not make POV useless for purposes of study.

It is often the case that over time the roles shift among the same people, such that you could be a leader one minute and a follower the next. Followers frequently influence their leaders. In that sense, the simplified model abstracts from the fluidity of social relations by freezing time, isolating the moment when there is one person who leads and another who follows, just as ordinary communication shifts roles between speaker and listener, back and forth, yet we can speak intelligently about these respective roles of a speaker and a listener. Elsewhere, the model can be made more complicated and more realistic by taking account of these shifts, even though the underlying principles should be the same.

Before getting underway, this paper will explain that an “investigator” is neither the leader nor the follower, but is instead an ostensibly disinterested third party

studying a given leadership episode. The investigator can be a student, a professor, a news reporter, a curious bystander – it does not matter, so long as this person has no direct involvement in the activity and yet pays attention to what has happened, a spectator hoping to be able to give an account. Students and teachers readily fit this particular role.

For the sake of this model, let us assume a few things. First, the parties are typical adults with ordinary powers of understanding and communication. We are not going to talk about non-human primates or children or adults with impaired brain function, for example. Further studies can introduce these possibilities elsewhere. Second, the leadership of interest to us will be intended and not accidental, as for example when one person follows another who remains unaware of the influence, which is sometimes the case in leading by example (French & Raven, 1959). Third, we will assume that the investigator seeks the truth, but will not overtly interfere in the interactions between the leader and follower, as for example by interrupting them with questions or attaching probes to their bodies. The investigator is simply left to watch and listen, with access to relevant artifacts such as memoirs and memoranda, and then may make reasonable inferences from what can be observed.

The simplified model can be visualized as a triangle in which each role of leader, follower, and investigator occupies an angle from which each individual can see each of the other two.

Leadership is never so simple, of course, and one way this is true is that the focus of one participant on another person does not give you privileged access to what is going in the other person's mind. The other person may be the object of your focal awareness, although this does not mean you can know precisely what the other person might be thinking. Much of the relevant evidence in leadership takes place out of view, where participants think and feel and hope and fear, directly accessible, if at all, solely from the first-person point of view. Both Roberts (2008) and then Albert and Vadla (2009) recently addressed how to elicit such first-person accounts in the classroom.

Complicating matters further is the fact that how a person views another person will have been mediated by the viewer's perceptions and beliefs. Daniel Gilbert illustrated the difference recently when he wrote that "while rats and pigeons may respond to stimuli as they are *presented* in the world, people respond to stimuli as they are *represented* in the mind." He continued, "Objective stimuli in the world create subjective stimuli in the mind, and it is these subjective stimuli to which people react" (2006, p. 155; see Searle, 1992, p. 69). In other words, students will be advised to appreciate the epistemology of each participant – that is, what they can know about each other...and about themselves.

Educators can then strengthen this portion of the lesson on epistemology by referring to the work of those who, like Karl Weick and Peter Senge, write about the way in which we make sense of our situations, as we try to see things from multiple perspectives and question our own, limited POV reflexively. Choosing to study leadership from a particular POV is fateful, but it is a choice, and students can be guided to imagine themselves in each role: “If you were in that position, what would you do?”

### **Possible Permutations**

Setting forth all of the permutations in which each of the three parties is paying attention from their POV to somebody in the simplified model, we get the following possibilities.

#### **Leader > Follower**

The possibility in which the leader regards the follower from the leader’s particular point of view appears in the literature frequently. One of the classic examples of this would be the distinction between Theory X and Theory Y, created and developed by McGregor (2006). What he proposed is that someone in a position of leadership could regard the prospective follower in one of two ways: the leader might view the follower as a cost to be monitored and controlled because people are likely to be relatively lazy and uninterested in work (Theory X), or the leader might view the follower as an asset to be valued and developed because people are likely to be relatively conscientious and eager to work (Theory Y). We know that Woodrow Wilson, for instance, took a dim view of followers. He wrote, “Men are as clay in the hands of the consummate leader” (1952, p. 26). For Wilson, the question is simple – “There are men to be moved: how shall he move them (p. 25)?” According to Wilson, the leader therefore is the leader of a mass, an organic whole.

The important point is that plenty of studies in the field of leadership try to understand and explain how the leader regards the follower.

#### **Follower > Leader**

The possibility in which the follower regards the leader from the follower’s particular POV appears in the literature as well. One classic example of this would be the concept of an “idiosyncrasy credit” – a concept attributed to Hollander (e.g., 1958). He took the position that based on their perceptions followers will “credit” other team members who make certain contributions, so that over time these credits accumulate and justify – in the follower’s mind –

deference to that team member as a leader. The underlying lesson is that how a follower perceives the leader will influence what the leader will then be able to accomplish by means of leadership.

To cite another example, Lipman-Blumen (2005) stated directly that it was her purpose “to consider the plight of followers caught in the thrall of toxic leaders, who first charm, then manipulate, and ultimately leave their followers worse off than they found them” (p. 29). She wanted to understand what these followers might have been thinking. She asked:

Given that we often recognize toxic leaders for what they are, why do we not only tolerate, but frequently prefer, and sometimes even create them? And how is our vulnerability to toxic leaders related to the tragic choice that most of us make to live by illusions rather than by confronting both our fears and the hard realities that generate them? (p. 31)

Let us consider another example. Haslam and Platow (2001), for instance, asked the following question:

What makes workers willing to “go the extra mile” to enact the commands of their bosses? And why do people sometimes set aside their own personal ambitions to ensure the success of someone else’s? At a practical level, the implications of solving these riddles would appear to be enormous, because they provide the key to a range of behaviors on which organizational success depends (p. 1469).

Mazlish (1990) exemplified this approach to leadership studies in such publications as his book, *The Leader, the Led, and the Psyche*, where he argued that it is an image in the mind of the followers that the followers follow. The followers interpret leaders through their own ideologies or mythic grid (see ch. 16). Accordingly, researchers have measured follower perceptions of leader charisma (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999).

Hiller et al. (2011) recently concluded that “what we know about leadership is largely based on subordinate perspectives” (p. 15). Sadly, these perspectives are limited (see e.g., Bossidy, 2007). As with the previous possibility, therefore, plenty of studies in the field of leadership try to understand and explain how the follower regards the leader.

**Investigator > Leader**

This possibility in which the investigator regards the leader from the investigator's particular point of view also appears in the literature. One of the best treatments of these occurrences appears in Richard Nisbett, Craig Caputo, Patricia Legant, and Jeanne Marecek's (1973) work which relies heavily on Jones and Nisbett (1971) wherein the evidence supports the hypothesis that "actors tend to perceive their behavior as a response to situational cues, while observers tend to perceive the behavior as a manifestation of a disposition or quality possessed by the actor" (p. 154). In other words, "the individual's perspective channels his causal inferences" (p. 163). Accordingly, somebody such as Abraham Lincoln might famously assert in a letter from 1864 that "I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me" (Lincoln, 1992, pp. 419-421). This apparent disavowal of agency has not prevented subsequent scholars from scrutinizing Lincoln's virtues and ambitions, his powers and his knack for politics (see e.g., Goethals & McDowell, 2010).

A typical approach belongs to Hersey and Blanchard (1969), who tried to observe what leaders do. Traits had proven to be notoriously difficult to discern. Instead, they examined overt leader behavior and classified it according to a taxonomy based on the dimensions of "initiating structure" (low-high) and "consideration" (low-high). In this way, they made their POV explicit, thereby reducing the need to interpret evidence.

Philosophers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer who take a hermeneutical approach will allege that we tend to interpret social phenomena through filters bequeathed to us by the particular age in which we happen to live, so that if we had lived in a separate time or a separate place, we would have interpreted the same exact text differently. We find ourselves already in traditions that limit us, that prejudice us. For this reason, the investigator belonging to a culture or an epoch different from the participants in leadership is vulnerable to misreading what had happened (see e.g., Warnke, 2002).

In a survey of the literature on leadership, Hiller et al. (2011) pointed out that each POV has its idiosyncrasies, partly due to different opportunities to observe, different goals, and different factors to evaluate (p. 3f). In this and other respects, investigators often struggle with the limitations inherent in their POV. DiPaolo (2008) published the results of a longitudinal study regarding the impact of a leadership education retreat through the eyes of six undergraduates. The investigator used more than one method to understand whether these students later attributed their success and failure as a leader to their experience of this stand-alone training. DiPaolo admirably typifies the investigator tacitly appreciating the limitation of his POV.

**Investigator > Follower**

The possibility in which the investigator regards the follower from the investigator's particular point of view appears in the literature. The previous citation to Nisbett et al. (1973) applies here as well. In addition, it might be appropriate to cite Gustave Le Bon whose classic analysis of *The Crowd* originally published in 1895 struggled to make sense of mass psychology. He was not so much trying to figure out what the individual participants in the crowd were thinking from their point of view. That would be like studying the follower's POV as it pertains to the leader. In mass psychology, the investigator hopes to diagnose what is going on during unconscious activity, when the followers collectively suffer from what Le Bon refers to as "the extreme mental inferiority of crowds" (1895, 2001, p. 4). It is not unusual for the investigator to regard the aggregated participants as an irrational force, like a beast, something to be treated with fear and loathing, a pathological condition suggested by terms such as "mob" and "rabble". Mass psychology underlay subsequent analyses of fascism, and such investigations continue to this day. Wilkinson, for instance, recently offered to update research on the politics of rioting (2009).

Many years ago, Kelley (1988) argued in the *Harvard Business Review* that leadership scholars ought to dedicate more resources to studying followers. Since then, several scholars have taken up that challenge, perhaps most notably Kellerman (2008). Thus, it is not unknown in the field of leadership for an investigator to try to understand what the follower might be doing.

**Leader > Investigator**

This possibility in which the leader regards the investigator from the leader's particular point of view appears in the literature. The political columnist Charles Krauthammer once played on a fairly common theme when he commented that former President of the United States of America Bill Clinton continued to fight for a legacy after he had left office. Krauthammer wrote: "What gnaws at him is the verdict of history" (2008, Feb 1). If this is so, Clinton would not be the first president to express concern for what others might think about his performance. But then leaders in other walks of life pay attention to how others beyond their immediate circle of influence might think about them. King and Fine (2000) once noted how business leaders operate within a context that includes multiple audiences, which in turn affects their overall reputation in the community. Leaders often keep at least half-an-eye on their general reputation and status, if not on the so-called verdict of history. This realization has led to such works as *Your Leadership Legacy: Why Looking Toward the Future Will Make You a Better Leader Today* by [Galford](#) and Maruca (2006).

It seems that Abigail Adams occasionally asked her eminent husband to burn her letters out of regard for posterity's opinion, although as it happens the couple decided not to. Wood, writing in *The New York Review of Books* (2011), recently doubted the Adamases seriously thought about burning their personal correspondence because they recognized that at some level their letters were becoming part of the historical record of the United States. This why Abigail occasionally worried about how future readers would think of her hastily written letters.

### **Follower > Investigator**

This possibility in which the follower regards the investigator from the follower's particular point of view sometimes appears in the literature, though largely it arises in more general publications about the tendency of people being investigated to exhibit concern for how they will be perceived by the investigator. One of the terms for this is "reactivity."

Researchers are concerned when the people they study know they are being studied, because people tend to alter their responses accordingly. One of the most famous examples of follower reactivity is known as the Hawthorne effect, in which "measurements of behavior in a controlled study were altered by subjects' knowledge that they were in an experiment" (Adair, 1984, p. 334). When the one being investigated knows this, the results could be distorted. But that is only one of the ways that follower POV regarding the investigator warrants study.

Rosenthal (2002) published research under the title, *Veiling and denying the past: The dialogue in families of Holocaust survivors and families of Nazi perpetrators*. There, she notes the understandable tendency of perpetrators who had followed Adolf Hitler and his socialist party to downplay, if not deny to descendants their participation in that era's atrocities. They did not want to be judged harshly.

### **Leader > Leader**

The possibility in which the leader regards oneself can be an interesting topic. Gardner (1990), for example, made the following assertion. "Somewhere, somehow, with all the courses, the extracurricular activities, the lessons learned from contemporaries, the help from wise elders, the young person [who aspires to leadership] must gain the necessary knowledge of self" (p. 170). Kouzes and Posner (1987) claim that "The quest for leadership is first an inner quest to discover who you are" (p. 298). Bennis (1989) identifies self-knowledge as the first essential part of integrity, which in turn is one of the basic ingredients of leadership (see chap. 3). Writing in *The Nature of Leadership* (2004), Manuel

London and Todd J. Maurer add that self-insight is critical. Citing Lao-Tzu, Confucius, Buddha, Plato, and Aristotle, Joanne Ciulla goes so far as to write that “self-knowledge and self-control are, and have been for centuries, the most important factors in leadership development” (2004, p. 324; see Roberts, 2008).

On the contrary, some relatively successful leaders seem not to have spent much time doing this. Presidents Ulysses Grant (cited in Adams, 2004) and Ronald Reagan (cited in Noonan, 1990), for example, have been accused of lacking either the powers of – or an interest in – introspection. This could be because they were satisfied with their self-concept by the time they came onto the scene as leaders and saw no advantage to further rumination.

Scholars frequently try to discern what leaders thought of themselves. Woodworth (1996), for instance, wrote about the “messianic complex” (p. 336) of George B. McClellan, a prominent military general in the American Civil War – a messianic complex being a conviction which Sears (2000) has subsequently argued was not that uncommon among military leaders of the time. Sears has even questioned the utility of diagnosing historical figures using psychiatric jargon. Regardless of the particular merits of psychohistory as an approach to studying leadership, however, these types of debates go to the heart of the question about what leaders might have thought of themselves.

What do leaders think of themselves? This is a legitimate research question (see e.g., Ladkin, 2008). Hiller et al. (2011) found that eighteen percent of the studies they reviewed going back 25 years used some form of self-report, in which the one identified as the leader provided the data. Plainly, the literature contains substantial material of this type.

### **Follower > Follower**

The possibility in which the follower regards herself in ways that influence leadership has also appeared in the literature. One example is a 2004 review of research on the question of follower self-concept, written by Daan van Knippenberg, Barbara van Knippenberg, David De Cremer, and Michael A. Hogg in *The Leadership Quarterly*. French and Raven (1959) have suggested that something as simple as awareness that one is ignorant and in need of an expert could serve as a sufficient motive to follow.

The point is not whether a follower has justified beliefs. As more studies are conducted on the phenomenon of followership, this concern will rise to the surface – How do followers regard themselves?

### **Investigator > Investigator**

The possibility in which the investigator regards oneself in ways that influence the study of any phenomenon has also appeared in the literature for some time, long predating leadership studies as a distinct field of study. It is this particular possibility that should interest all students, as well as scholars and educators professionally. How does this possibly arise?

In the study of any phenomenon, there were at least two poles of investigation. These poles are (a) the event itself and (b) an investigator. This is important to remember in part because no matter what they are trying to understand investigators are clearly constrained by their language, culture, historical setting, and personal incapacities (Mitchell, 2006). Science routinely struggles to compensate for these constraints when it cannot eliminate them completely. Often, progress in science has been made by paying particular attention, not so much to the object of investigation as to the investigator – the investigator’s vantage point, for example, or the methods of observation. The microscope compensates for the investigator’s limited eyesight; the thermometer compensates for the investigator’s subjective experience of hot and cold, as well as the investigator’s physiological inability to tolerate extreme temperatures. Part of science is paying attention to the investigator’s limitations.

Bourdieu (2002) has made a point of urging investigators to turn their considerable powers of investigation onto themselves, to practice what he calls *reflexivity* in order to account for dispositions and bias. In the same vein, Ladkin (2010) urges “greater transparency on researchers’ parts about their own positioning vis-à-vis the phenomenon [of leadership] and how that influences their interpretations and theoretical insights” (p. 29).

Table 1  
Point of view (POV) Sample Leadership Citation

Leader > Follower	Theory X & Theory Y (McGregor, 2006)
Follower > Leader	Mythic grid (Mazlish, 1990)
Investigator > Leader	Situational leadership (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969)
Investigator > Follower	Followership (Kellerman, 2008)
Leader > Investigator	Leadership legacy (Galford & Fazio Maruca, 2006)
Follower > Investigator	Hawthorne effect (Adair, 1984)
Leader > Leader	Know thyself (Ciulla, 2004)
Follower > Follower	Expert power (French & Raven, 1959)
Investigator > Investigator	Reflexivity (Bourdieu, 2002)

### **Some Implications for Education**

Among the advantages of taking a perspectival approach to studying leadership is that it provides a frame for organizing the literature. Unlike in the so-called natural sciences, leadership theories tend not to replace each other, but instead develop side-by-side and proliferate, so we all require some method for classifying them.

A perspectival approach also encourages students to appreciate and account for the POV of those whose research appears in the literature, making students shrewd consumers of what they read and hear. A dose of skepticism about globalizing assertions, for instance, contributes to critical thinking.

Once students come to appreciate and account for the POV of others, they can more readily appreciate and account for their own POV as they reflect on the evidence about leadership. To what extent is the student biased, ignorant, or privileged? As they begin to judge the actions of others, they can also learn to take steps to overcome the limitations in their POV.

The actions of others become more intelligible once a student appreciates the extent to which the social actor operates from a POV. Leaders are now drawn on a human scale. Since nobody enjoys a God's eye point-of-view that takes in the whole, choices become more explicable once one recognizes these limitations.

In a similar vein, students of leadership can be invited to see an episode from the POV of the participants – what would they have known, the teacher might ask, and what must they have been feeling? Not only does this exercise enhance understanding generally, it also prepares students to do the same thing once they become participants themselves (i.e., trying to see things from other people's POV). Presumably, this will increase their effectiveness, if not their empathy.

Another benefit of the perspectival approach is that students will discover that their understanding increases when they integrate multiple POVs. This is one reason they will be expected to read so many different (and sometimes conflicting) accounts of leadership. Also, through classroom discussion and joint projects, they should come to respect the importance of a community of scholars, working together in part to compensate for each other's limitations.

The perspectival approach dovetails nicely with studying the role of worldviews and culture on leadership, inasmuch as groups of people often share a POV and stake their identity in part on how they see themselves and their place in the world. A perspectival approach makes the transition to studying groups and cultures more readily intelligible for a leadership student.

In effect, a perspectival approach tends to undermine ethno-centrism. Verma (2006) recently declared in *The Avatar Way of Leadership* that leadership studies still tend to valorize western models, thereby excluding the rest of the world. Verma wrote, "It is important to ask whether theories that are rooted in the western social context and which revolve around western heroes have any relevance for the Indian situation" (p. 1).

Finally, part of leadership might be helping followers expand their viewpoint and see things in a new way – even if only from the viewpoint of the leader. This is leadership that contributes to sense making. Understanding that others operate from a POV prepares the prospective leader to work on the followers' perceptions of the situation.

## **Conclusion**

So often the remedy for misunderstandings and conflict lies in seeing things from a different POV – often the POV of the other person, as suggested by the proverb about walking a mile in someone else's moccasins. Practical wisdom consists in

part on the willingness and ability to transcend one's own current POV and consider others, thereby blending various POVs. The first step, of course, is to accept that all knowledge in leadership is knowledge from a point of view.

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