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Realistic egocentrism: caring leadership through an evolutionary lens

Romanticizing leaders as caring pastors usually benefits followers, by having someone to protect them or to blame if things go wrong. But, why would leaders want to play along and pretend they are carers? This is a theory-building manuscript, which uses a revelatory context, to explore caring leadership from a novel angle, using evolutionary theory to identify an anomaly within caring leadership theory. The revelatory context used for this study was English higher education. Here, 47 interviews were done with government/organizational leaders, including 24 university Chief Executives (i.e., university Presidents). The revelatory context evidenced that leaders sometimes develop cognitions about their impotence to control things. Thus, leaders play along the caring leadership delusion, because it is a mechanism for them to deny their impotence. The paper expands caring leadership theory, by suggesting that this is not exclusively about authentic caring, but also about convergent denial and realistic egocentrism.

Keywords

Leadership, self-determination, goal orientation, cognition, qualitative research

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'When one is in love, one always begins by deceiving one's self, and one always ends by deceiving others.

That is what the world calls a romance'

—Oscar Wilde

If there is something we passionately love, that would be our heroic leaders. As Meindl, Ehrlich and Dukerich argue, the latter is a corollary of our need to develop 'highly romanticized, heroic views of leadership — what leaders do, what they are able to accomplish, and the general effects they have on our lives' (1985, 79). This need for great men/women (Grint 2005), has produced the ideology of overestimating what leaders can do (see, for example, Alvesson and Kärreman (2016) or Abreu Pederzini (2018a)). It is important to acknowledge that such a proclivity towards the romance of leadership does not mean that leadership is a fantasy. By contrast, leadership in humans and many other animals is key in their survival and socialization. Yet, for humans, leadership tends to function by overestimating what leaders can do and underestimating their limitations and impotence; it is this what we call the romance of leadership. In the end, nevertheless, it is unsurprising that as cognizant beings, we fall for the romance of leadership, because being cognizant means being aware also of many frustrating things that we cannot understand or control (Gabriel 1998). We fix sometimes these frustrations, precisely, by romanticizing our leaders.

How our romance of leadership fixes our frustrations, is very important, as otherwise frustrations we face, in a world we cannot always grasp, understand or control, could be damaging

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to us. Particularly, they could preclude us from successfully completing our power processes (Kaczynski and Skrbina 2008); which relate to evolutionary needs humans must satisfy (Deci and Ryan 2000; Thagard 2010; Solansky 2015; Van den Broeck et al. 2014). In short, human psychology has been shaped throughout evolution in strategic ways to provide us with higher chances of survival and reproduction (i.e., fitness), and as part of this, natural psychological needs, such as feeling competent, autonomous or related to other people, have evolved with us. Such needs push us through power processes, which involve efforts targeted at achieving goals, to feel like we can control and master our lives. Yet, our power processes fail many times, as we cannot control many things, causing anxiety in people and significant frustration. Thus, as a way out of this frustration, humans romanticize their leaders (i.e., they aggrandise and idealize/idolize them as heroes who can control what they cannot, even if this is not true (Felfe and Schyns 2014; Bligh and Schyns 2007; Bligh, Kohles, and Pillai 2011)). The romance of leadership is sometimes expressed, particularly, through the conception of leaders as carers (i.e., they take care of everything people cannot control (Gabriel 2015; Caldwell and Dixon 2010; Gunn 2011)). While the latter explains why followers want the romance of the caring leader, the question is, why would leaders want to play along and pretend they are carers?

In this paper, I contribute to the caring leadership literature (Tomkins and Simpson 2015), by first exploring this topic in the light of evolutionary theory, and hopefully, setting a precedent on how caring leadership studies could be done through an evolutionary lens. Furthermore, the caring leadership literature has sometimes approached caring leadership from a followers' perspective (Gabriel 1997, 2015). By contrast, this paper suggests how things look like from leaders' perspective, something of which we know relatively little so far. The latter will be done through a revelatory in-depth qualitative case-exploration. The case used for this is the English

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higher education sector, where I conducted extensive primary-fieldwork, interviewing 47 senior leaders, including 24 university Presidents/CEOs during a period when they were demanded to be caring leaders. The findings will be partially bounded to this context. Yet, they provide a suggestion as to why leaders want to play the role of caring leaders, and thus, the paper concludes by calling for further research on this topic. Overall, in the end, three important contributions, from my evolutionary approach to caring leadership, will emerge from this study. First, that the evolutionary mechanism of denial, might be expressed in the caring leadership relationship as convergent denial. Second, that caring might be a form of denial, which enables both sides –leaders and followers– to fulfil their realistic egocentrism. Third, that realistic egocentrism demands convincing pretence of caring for caring leadership to function. Like this, this paper will elaborate caring leadership theory by enabling a novel evolutionary approach to it, while developing key concepts, such as convergent denial and realistic egocentrism, to allow for further future evolutionary explorations of caring leadership. Thus, let us begin, by understanding evolution.

Understanding evolutionary theory and its connection to leadership

Evolution through natural selection –Darwin’s theory– is a theory that explains life on Earth. It is underpinned by three essential dynamics: variation, selection, and retention (Dawkins 2006). For example, imagine (at some hypothetical point in time) having various types giraffes –i.e., we have variety. One type possesses short necks and the other far-reaching necks. Giraffes with longer necks would eventually discover that they could reach leafs in trees that few others could, bestowing, like this, their necks an advantage on them. The other type of giraffe, with short necks, would not have such an advantage. As time went by, giraffes with longer necks would better survive and reproduce (i.e., would have increased fitness). Now, if the long-neck feature is built

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into these giraffes through their genes, then when reproducing, these giraffes would pass ‘on to their offspring’ the long-neck gene (Distin 2005, 7), and hence, their offspring would retain the feature, i.e., we have retention. Eventually, the long-neck giraffes numbers would increase, as these giraffes would be more successful at reproducing and spreading the feature, given the advantage that the long-neck feature bestows. By contrast, since short-neck giraffes do not have an advantage, their numbers might dwindle –i.e. we have selection.

Long-neck giraffes, having physical features that give them an advantage, might make us think that these are ‘organisms that appear to be designed’ (Scott-Phillips, Dickins, and West 2011, 39). Yet, as far as we know they are not, they have simply gone through ‘a process of blind variation and selective retention’ (Wilson 2003, 88). Interestingly, evolutionary theory suggests that not only physical features have been shaped through evolution, but psychological ones too (Blackmore 1999). This is not, in any way, arguing for biological determinism (i.e., that everything is determined by biology). Actually, and by contrast, even modern biology tends to acknowledge that psychologically and behaviourally speaking humans have some unique cognitive flexibility – compared to other animals– to change/update/alter socially their ways of being/behaving (Dawkins 2006; Wilson 2014). Nevertheless, evolutionary theory does suggest that within our psychologies, and behaviours, there are some elements that are evolutionarily hardwired in us, as they might have bestowed a potential advantage in ancient environments, and thus, they were naturally selected (e.g., Bloom (2013) argues that a rudimentary sense of right and wrong might have been evolved and biologically inherited to us).

Tricks of our evolved minds: information-processing and denial

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The problem regarding the part of our ‘minds’ that is evolved, is that as far as we know evolution through natural selection is not an intended process, no one is controlling it and no one is designing it. Thus, it is like a trial and error process that with the benefit of time could produce adaptations. Yet, such adaptations could be messy and contradictory. Particularly interesting is the contradiction between humans’ capacity to be cognizant and the benefits that that has, while at the same time this resulting in various issues too (e.g., fear and anxiety), which to be solved have required other contradictory adaptations, such as our need to fantasize and delude ourselves (i.e., denial).

Evolutionarily speaking, our cognition of the realities that surround us is strategic for us to understand risks and threats that could jeopardize our survival. In a word, our brains evolved as computers that ‘extract information from the environment and use that information to generate behavior and regulate physiology’ (Cosmides and Tooby 2013, 203). Yet, the problem with information-processing is that the world in which we live is a nest of complexity, where many variables move together, creating through interaction interdependency among different elements (Holland 2014); and sporadically resulting in events that are difficult to predict, understand or control (Gabriel 1998). Thus, as we become cognizant (i.e., as we process information) of complex things that we cannot fully grasp or control, our information-processing capacity could turn into a maladaptation, if it results in excessive/paralyzing anxiety and fear. Put simply, our ‘information-processing devices instantiated in the brain’ could not be conceived as ‘psychological adaptations’ (Buss 2009, 146) that improve our fitness, if they produce constant fear/anxiety. Make no mistake, some anxiety/fear is necessary to prevent humans from making catastrophic mistakes. The problem is ‘overwhelming fear [, which] would be a dead-end evolutionary barrier, curbing activities and cognitive functions’ (Varki 2009, 684). Therefore, along with our capacity to process the world to

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understand it, we have paradoxically evolved as well a capacity to deny some information and cognitions we develop of it; meaning that, as Varki and Brower argue, we evolved as well, ‘An unconscious defense mechanism used to reduce anxiety by denying thoughts, feelings, or facts that are consciously intolerable’ (2013, 15).

Denial is many times a patch for our minds to function and satisfy our evolved needs. Let us explore this more deeply, by going back to how accurate information-processing is evolutionarily useful. When information-processing results in accurate understanding of what is going on, we can control challenges, which is good for our biological fitness (i.e., increased survival that leads to reproduction). Thus, feeling in control has arguably evolved as a rewarding and fulfilling emotion that makes us keep setting control as a goal, so that we keep getting more of it and along with it the benefits that it carries in terms of fitness. The latter is called the power process, which is about how, for strategic reasons, ‘Everyone needs [to] have goals whose attainment requires effort’ (Kaczynski and Skrbina 2008, 47), so that we feel in control of our lives. For example, imagine a hypothetical primitive man spotting a lion. His chances for survival would be improved if he understood that this was a predator, and then, set a goal of hiding from it (i.e., he took control of the situation). Yet, our hypothetical primitive man might not set such a goal unless he feels like control is something rewarding. Overall, ‘emergent goals and plans help maintain useful information in conscious memory while motivating specific actions’ (Lord, Hannah, and Jennings 2011, 110), if such actions could be linked to needs and produce through them rewarding and fulfilling feelings. In other words, ‘if motives or goals were not linked directly to basic needs, their fulfillment versus thwarting would not be expected to result invariantly in the enhancement versus diminishment of growth and well-being’ (Deci and Ryan 2000, 229). Finally, regarding needs, we have basic biological needs; yet, there are also innate psychological ones.

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According to self-determination theory three essential psychological-needs are, autonomy, competence and relatedness (Thagard 2010; Van den Broeck et al. 2014). This is how information-processing works successfully to push us to get accurate information and then control of the situation, by leveraging evolved psychological needs to enable us to pursue strategic power processes. However, sometimes denial is necessary, as sometimes the accuracy of our information-processing is not useful or strategic.

The problem of processing information to develop strategies to control the world, is that many times there are challenges that we cannot control. In those cases, our need to feel competent or autonomous is diminished, leaving us anxious/fearful. Because of the latter, our psychological rewards from fulfilling our power processes will not be granted. It is here that humans' denial capacity becomes a patch for our minds to function and satisfy our evolved needs; because through it, we avoid the psychological punishments of anxiety and fear, by escaping realities that we cannot handle. For instance, 'where do we come from?', is a question which answer has repercussions on how we organize societies. Yet, in the past (and partly even today) it was/is impossible to answer. Therefore, what our ancestors did was allegedly to deny reality and develop stories. Conventional stories about Gods, for instance, seem to lack scientific support (so far), nonetheless, they fill in our anxious/fearful void. Additionally, groups of people that share such religious beliefs can organize themselves better than those who do not (Dennett 2006). Hence, some religious stories, by denying reality, could provide us with mechanisms to endure, while feeling again competent and autonomous (i.e., successfully completing our power processes).

Denial, leadership and the romance

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Leadership in nature exists in different ways and is expressed by different species. For example, within the order of the hymenoptera, wasps, bees or ants, exhibit widely expressions of leadership. Furthermore, if we move to a vastly different order, the primates, we will also find within its many different families –such as the great apes, including humans– repeated expressions of leadership. Evolutionarily, leadership was arguably naturally selected because as King. et al. discuss (2009), it provides an efficient mechanism for social organization (Van Vugt, Hogan, and Kaiser 2008). However, what is interesting here is how the function of leadership (i.e., originally to enable social organization) could have been expanded, once this was/is juxtaposed with our denial capacities (Kuronen and Huhtinen 2016; Gabriel 1997; Abreu Pederzini 2018a). In short, whenever we process information that makes us anxious/fearful, because we cannot control things, it makes sense that we patch reality by idealizing/idolizing our leaders and romanticizing how they, supposedly, could control what we cannot (Mohammed 2019; Gabriel 1997). Like this, then, leaders play a new or expanded function in human dynamics. This is what in the leadership literature has been called the romance of leadership (Alvesson and Karreman 2016), meaning how ‘people tend to... glorify leadership as a causal category’ (Bligh and Schyns 2007, 343; Bligh, Kohles, and Pillai 2011), beyond what leaders are actually doing.

In sum, evolutionarily speaking it makes sense that followers, in their desperate efforts to get the psychological rewards of completing their power processes, bestow on their leaders the responsibility to accomplish/control/master everything that followers cannot, as long as leaders share the rewards with them (i.e., leaders make followers feel that by having trusted them, followers also deserve to feel as if having controlled the world). Many times this device could actually work. However, these heroic leaders, at the end of the day, are usually nothing else than

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self-deceptions, because as powerful as they could be, they are not almighty, and hence, sooner or later they end up falling/failing.

Self-deception is a way to refer to denial, emphasizing in this case, how the denial emerges from a paradox of first having realized something accurate of such a reality and then trying to distort it because it is frightening. Thus, self-deceptions make it clear that denial is about enabling humans to have ‘simultaneous knowing and not-knowing, in the sense that the individual consciously knows the welcome information... but also has some awareness... [of the] unwelcome information’ (von Hippel and Trivers 2011, 2). Therefore, and in conclusion, human beings, if having doubts about who is in control of things, can always try to deceive ourselves (self-deception), by denying reality and pretending that anything that happens is to be controlled by leaders. Like this, leaders enable more than just social organization, but self-gratification in followers and the protection of their power processes too, even if they, leaders, will not be actually able to deliver on the grandiose expectations followers have on them.

The caring leader

Within romantic self-deceptions on leadership, one that is popular is the caring leader, which is related to the fairy tale of the good mother (Moxnes and Moxnes 2016, 1520). A ‘caring leader is compassionate, giving and concerned for the well-being of his or her charges, willing to go the extra mile to meet their needs and ensure that they flourish’ (Gabriel 2015, 321). Caring happens in two ways. One is that leaders take a paternalistic role, and thus, ‘the carer “leaps in”... to take over responsibility for a current situation’ (Tomkins and Simpson 2015, 1016). ‘The second form of care intervention is one where the carer “leaps ahead”... of the care-recipient to show the way towards a range of future possibilities’ (Tomkins and Simpson 2015, 1016).

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Caring leadership is guided by an ethics of care, which is ‘a feminine approach that solves ethical problems through “intuition” and “personal subjective assessment”’ (Painter-Morland and Deslandes 2014, 846; Gunn 2011), emphasizing the responsibility of leaders to look out for their own people. Within the ethics of care, there is an important debate on the difference between caring about and caring for, which has essential implications for leadership. According to Dalley, caring for ‘is to do with the tasks of tending’, while caring about ‘is to do with feelings for another person’ (1996, 12–13). Thus, empathetic feelings for others might result in caring about them, but not necessarily in the action and process of taking care of them. Tronto, thus, emphasizes that caring is both ‘a practice and a disposition’ (2009, 104), and that it is fulfilled when we not only care about but care for too, something that is usually demanded from caring leaders (i.e., actual actions to show that they care). Furthermore, Tronto stresses that caring does not end with the one caring for others, but with the others taking on the role of care-receivers. This is important for caring leadership, as it means that the caring leader’s mission depends on followers’ disposition to be care-receivers.

In sum, caring leaders, regarding their followers, ‘care about their welfare and are committed to their success’ (Caldwell and Dixon 2010, 92). Now, as much as the caring leader could be sometimes a reality, it could also be many times, regrettably, a romance that eventually fails. Because leaders are far more human and impotent than their followers acknowledge. Additionally, these caring leaders by being human, at some point might succumb to their *spiritus animalis*, and instead of caring for others, will care only for themselves (Grint 2010; Ann and Carr 2010).

To conclude, there is a benefit for followers in developing romantic conceptualization of leaders as carers: i.e., they have someone to solve the problems they cannot solve, still allowing

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them, therefore, to receive the rewards of going through their power processes. Of course, when caring leaders fail, that is not a problem for followers, as caring leaders become the object of blame. Now, the question is, if the caring ideal eventually fails and leaders are harshly judged because of it, then, why would leaders accept to play such a role? In other words, why would leaders want to play along and pretend they are carers?

Methodology

To this day, there is relatively scarce research on caring leadership from an evolutionary approach and from the perspective of leaders on why they play along and pretend to be caring leaders. Because of the latter, a theory-developing approach was considered adequate, to gain in-depth understanding and elaborate potential theoretical suggestions to take evolutionary caring leadership further. Most importantly, since the question is about understanding how caring leaders think, then an in-depth qualitative interviewing method was considered appropriate. The problem, empirically speaking, is that there are so many types of caring leaders in so many contexts. Hence, I chose a revelatory context (see Yin (2003)), to enable in-depth understanding, while acknowledging that the best this case could produce is a partial answer to the research question. Yet, such an answer could result in a call for further research to keep developing the theory here proposed.

The context I selected was higher education in England during the 2008-2013 period, when the sector faced marketization reforms. It is important to acknowledge how this context could be revelatory, in terms of the research question. First, higher education by setting goals related to feeling competent in a discipline, is a traditional tool for modern humans to fulfill their power processes. Additionally, by being an educational sector, higher education is considered a caring

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sector par excellence (see Barnett (2013)), as it pays attention to young people and nurtures them. Precisely because of this, in England in particular, higher education was managed for a long time as a public good, publicly funded (i.e., the government was caring for its young people by paying for most of their higher education). However, as the higher education sector in England expanded through the 1980s-1990s, public funding became insufficient. Hence, neoliberal reforms emerged in the sector (Abreu Pederzini 2018b). For instance, in the 1990s, we saw the introduction of top-up fees of £1,000.00 for home undergraduate students. Later on, in the early 2000s, tuition fees for home undergrads increased to about £3,000.00 p.a.; although students received government loans to pay for them. Subsequently, during the explored 2008-2013 period, reforms moved higher education from a dying public sector, to an increasingly neoliberal one. In 2009, the government commissioned the Browne Review (an independent review of higher education policy in England), which suggested that tuition fees for home (and EU) undergraduate students should be deregulated. Obviously, this represented a threat to undergrads, as they would be forced to pay more (i.e., caring was ending). The government decided not to implement the Browne Review per se, but did deploy a reform along the same lines. Particularly, the government imposed a large tuition fees cap of £9,000.00. The latter meant that students could now be asked to pay as much as triple what they used to. Many students ferociously protested against the higher fees; and, the National Union of Students called them ‘a foolish and extremely risky approach’ (2010, 2).

In their protests, students were demanding government leaders not to introduce higher tuition fees. Most importantly, since the government would not back down, students were demanding their university leaders to protect them. Thus, students were facing a complex environment that they could not control (a condition necessary for a revelatory study on this topic),

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and they recurred to the conventional romantic self-deception of begging caring leaders to protect them (a second necessary condition for a revelatory study on this topic).

Data and data analysis

In this revelatory context, I did extensive interviewing of government and university leaders, to understand what was in it for them from playing the role of the caring leader. These interviews were part of a larger project, and thus, the interview protocol included various topics. As part of the flexible interview protocol, the interviews, which were semi-structured (Fontana and Frey 2000), probed interviewees on their roles during this reformation process, and the ways in which they reacted to events happening. From the information provided by leaders, sufficient insight emerged regarding why they were caring for students and how playing the role of the caring leader benefited them.

Overall, 47 semi-structured interviews were done. The latter included 24 interviews with university Presidents (i.e., CEOs), of which 16 were only the CEOs of their organizations, but the other 8, besides being CEOs of their universities, were also presidents of sectoral lobbying organizations. Additionally, I interviewed 7 senior government leaders, including most of the members of the Browne Review Panel, and 16 university Vice-Presidents. Since there are different types of universities in England, mostly differentiated in terms of varying intensities of research work, I made sure to cover leaders from all different types of universities. Thus, in total the interviewees represented 23 different universities. Finally, I also carried a documentary analysis, covering policy documents, think tank reports, and media interviews by higher education leaders, among other documents.

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A memo was written for all interviews, to record my initial impressions. I personally transcribed all interviews, which accounted for about 65 hrs. I did this using the software NVIVO, which was also used for parts of the analysis. The interviews were analysed through a two-step method (see Gioia, Corley and Hamilton (2013) or Abreu Pederzini and Suarez Barraza (2019)). The first step was a descriptive step, where in vivo codes put order on the data. Through the clustering of first-order codes, theoretical-themes were distilled regarding what could explain the caring leadership dynamics in the data (for similar approaches, see Walsh and Bartunek (2011)). This clustering process was guided by my interest in isolating theoretical-themes that were relevant to the dynamics of caring, while constantly referring to the caring leadership and evolutionary literature. Table 1 provides a summary of the data structure.

Insert Table 1 about here

Findings

The findings evidenced that leaders had exactly that same frustration of not being able to understand/control the world as followers did. In other words, their point of departure was the same as for followers: to become cognizant of a reality that frustrates them.

Leaders' frustrations in a complex reality

For government leaders, this frustration was illustrated by the nasty politics during the period. Originally, when the Browne Review was commissioned the two main parties, Labour and Conservatives, agreed they would implement whatever the review said. However, as the Browne

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Review was working there was an election in the UK, where there was no clear winner (i.e., there was a hung parliament). To achieve majority, the Conservatives had to forge an alliance with one of the smaller parties, the Liberal Democrats. Once they formed a coalition government, they responded to the Browne Review. Regrettably, the Liberal Democrats had run a campaign offering to abolish tuition fees. Thus, deregulation of tuition fees, as the review suggested, was not acceptable to them. Therefore, the idea of introducing a higher cap for undergraduate tuition fees at £9,000.00, impromptu emerged. For the ones that wanted full deregulation of fees, this was not enough. For the ones that wanted fees to be abolished, this was not enough either. Most importantly, during this period, England was hit by the financial meltdown of 2008/09, and as public finances struggled, no one really cared that much about the consequences of new higher education policies; the priority for the government was to increase fees in order to reduce its higher education subsidy and substitute it with contributions coming from students. Hence, illustrating how government leaders had to face things they could not control.

Now, university leaders faced similar pressures. Many were against the hiking of tuition fees. Yet, they had to support them, because the alternative was that the government would introduce funding cuts, which without fees income, universities would not be able to cover. Thus, it was clear that the condition of interviewees as leaders did not imply that they were powerful or in control. By contrast, they were also frustrated to live in a complex and chaotic world. For instance, a university President (UniE), about whether his university was ready to respond to these regulatory changes, said: *'... we didn't push ahead and said: "we know how we are going to respond to this environment", we didn't. And the rules, of course the rules change every year, so is a bit crazy'*. Then, the COO of a major university (UniD), claimed that the challenge was that everything was so messy that it was difficult to understand it: *'because all of this is just so*

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complex, as I was just saying a moment ago, most of the people who work in higher education don't understand it'.

The interesting thing is that leaders (i.e., government, university and sector leaders), given this frustration, focused on things they could partly control, to compensate for those that they could not. It turns out that part of this compensatory process included promoting the self-deception that everything happening was for the benefit of students. In this way, leaders showed that they indeed wanted to play the caring role. However, this caring was made up, as it emerged as an impromptu mechanism to give meaning to chaotic and unplanned policies which had little to do with caring for students and a lot to do with surviving in a tough political and economic environment. This finding was expressed, for instance, in an interview with the CEO of a Higher Education Agency, who about the political mess said:

...we were quite effective to say, look we negotiated the best possible circumstances we can, in a very difficult political position, and in a very difficult financial situation, the best we can do now is just calmly and effectively introduce this in a professional way, and try... always to use our touch point as the interest of the students. So everything that happens from now on has to happen for the interest of the students...

Let us now analyse two expressions of caring in the higher education leaders. The first one is caring as pretending policy changes were for the benefit of students, because they give them choice and information. The second one is a type of compensatory caring, where leaders argued they would try to listen and protect students more, because in a way, and paradoxically, they actually know the policies were not that caring after all.

Policy changes are for the benefit of students

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The first instance where we find this self-deceptive caring ethos is in the government's policies. The policies were guided by the financial short-term pressures of the crisis; yet, the government made significant efforts to change the message. Specifically, the government claimed that the reforms were planned to save the students from a higher education sector that had neglected students. Hence, the 2011 White Paper following the Browne Review –i.e., the official document that put in writing the public policies– was entitled *Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS 2011). Like a Former Chair of a Lobbying Group said, '*Students at the Heart of the System... a very deliberate title*', as they were trying to transform the message, from a utilitarian financial reform, to a reform that supposedly solved 'the challenge... [of] putting the undergraduate experience at the heart of the system' (BIS 2011, 4).

This type of caring was illustrated by the government's obsession with giving information to students, so they could have freedom to make the best choices. In short, the claim was that students, as they would be paying higher fees, deserved to receive transparent information from universities about what they were buying. For instance, the Browne Review says, 'Students need access to high quality information, advice and guidance in order to make the best choices' (2010, 5). The 2011 White Paper goes a step forward and claims that 'Putting financial power into the hands of learners makes student choice meaningful' (BIS 2011, 5). So far, then, in the case of the government, their deceitful caring entailed a crusade to give more freedom, information and choice to the student, something that illustrates partly the deception here, as the reforms did not happen because of these reasons but simply because of financial pressures.

Furthermore, in principle, more information sounds nice. Nevertheless, who said more choice should be the aim? Whenever I read the government's policies, I realize no one in government ever read Schwartz's paradox of choice (2004). Schwartz argues that yes, on the one

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hand, ‘There is no denying that choice improves the quality of our lives’, but on the other, ‘the fact that some choice is good doesn’t necessarily mean that more choice is better.... there is a cost to having an overload of choice’ (2004, 8). Or, why did you think the popular mantra evolved and survived that says ‘ignorance is bliss’? Because the reality is that sometimes, big decisions actually turn easy when you have no choice and not the other way. So how exactly this narrative of information and choice is authentic caring, is something no one in higher education still understands.

University leaders compensatory caring for their students

Deceitful caring for students was also expressed as trying to give students the best university experience to compensate for the higher fees they would be paying. For instance, the Vice-Chancellor of a university (UniY) said:

...you know and there weren’t really any marches against higher fees in [here] because we really worked with the students to explain what was going on, and because we haven’t gone for the highest fee, I think we could still have some confidence that we were doing the right thing to our students....

The latter quote, as other similar quotes shown in Table 2, are focused on caring for students, not necessarily through the concept of choice, but more generally through the concern of giving the students the best experience as compensation.

Insert Table 2 about here

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In sum, the caring university leader facing a complex reality that s/he cannot control, allegedly found meaning in serving the students to accomplish all the dreams they have related to higher education. Where, higher education nowadays represents a modern power process through which students and their parents become obsessed with how it will open doors for them to a better life. For instance, Wolf mentions that ‘the aspiration to higher education is almost universal among the parents of young children’ (2011, 20). This obsession with higher education, evolutionarily speaking, makes sense. Because higher education is about a goal of feeling competent in order to build an autonomous life, which by achieving it, then, provides people with the standard psychological rewards of completing a power process.

Now, this type of caring sounds romantic in principle, because it looks like university leaders are actually trying to help students in their power processes, by making sure their higher fees are spent on providing a better educational experience. Yet, some deception looms here too. First, it turns out that higher education does not always lead to a better and more successful professional life, an example would be the current times of significant graduate unemployment and/or underemployment (see, for further discussion, the CIPD report (2015)). So many students are now paying perhaps for more comprehensive and robust educational experiences, only to end up underemployed (i.e., not using their university degrees and not fulfilling their power processes). Second, it turns out that improving the student experience in many English universities was translated as simply, for instance, inflating marks. Thus, students might be happier that they are now getting higher marks, but would fake and inflated marks really help them in their careers? Most importantly, would receiving a fake and inflated mark really allow students to feel the satisfaction of having completed their power process?

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Discussion and implications

Tricks, such as denial, have evolved in our minds to patch negative consequences of our information-processing capacities. The romance of caring leadership is precisely a powerful evolutionary ‘mind trick’, as it enables followers to evade excruciating cognitions, while bestowing on leaders the responsibility to take care of things followers cannot. Additionally, followers could harshly judge their leaders, based on their caring ideals, so that if leaders do not fulfil the caring role, followers can protect themselves from anxious/fearful cognitions by blaming everything that is wrong on their leaders. Thus, we understand why followers when facing that cognition of feeling impotent, would like to suppress it, by creating the self-deception of caring leaders. But, why would leaders want to play along and pretend they are carers?

According to the exploration here presented, a possible answer to this question is that leaders are going through the same process as followers, but in the opposite direction. In short, leaders might be leaders regardless of whether they want to play the caring role or not. They are leaders simply because they hold positions of authority through which they make decisions to move people. However, while leading, they also face powerlessness and their incapacity to control a complex world. The latter threatens the evolutionary psychological rewards they are aiming for by satisfying needs of autonomy and competence through their power processes, which in their case entail being a successful leader. Yet, luckily for them, they find in followers’ deception of caring leadership a way out of their conundrum, which is why they play along the caring deception.

In the case here explored, we could say that in the previous higher education sector (before the Browne Review), caring, going back to Tomkins and Simpson (2015), was much more in the form of leaping-in. In a word, everything was tightly controlled and both sector and university leaders took care of students and their futures by trying to control everything. Yet, once the Browne

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Review reforms happened, caring became contested. On the one hand, the policies did protect students, because without higher fees the sector would have struggled significantly in light of the financial crisis. However, that crisis was caused by greedy bankers and snobbish elites that played with the economic system, and then, they were rescued, while students were passed part of the bill. Thus, caring during the Browne Review period seems paradoxical. It could be that what is happening here is that leaders used to care in a leap-in way for students before the Browne Review, as long as leaders faced unchallenging environments. Yet, once the recession hit England and the government had to save the economy while reforming higher education, things got out of their hands, and whichever rewarding emotions they might have felt before, by being competent enough to control things in higher education, were now lost. In evolutionary terms, losing control is a significant loss, because it goes against what Kaczynski originally called the power process (2008); meaning that sequence of events that by pushing us to achieve goals to control our lives, generates positive fitness effects (i.e., evolutionary effects). Therefore, this is probably one of the reasons why the leaders in this case, tried to find a way back to being successful caring leaders, by transforming leap-in caring into leaping-ahead caring. Particularly, now arguing, through the ancient device of denial through self-deception, that the market, choice and information will naturally care for students.

Nonetheless, we quickly see how feeble this impromptu solution for caring is. Particularly, we notice this when, leaping-in leadership looms once more in the ideal of how university leaders argue they were going to try to use all the extra income, due to the higher fees, to build the best facilities for students and give them the best experience. In a word, they gravitate here once more towards their desire to control things, and the reason why they gravitate back to control, is probably related to the psychological evolved rewards that control bestows and that these leaders used to

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have but had now lost during the Browne Review period. Overall, what this case suggests, then, is that caring leadership might sometimes be a mutually-reinforced self-deception, because just as followers romanticize caring leaders to escape tough realities, leaders play along because they want to escape the same. Like this, the case is showing that ancient tools that evolution has provided us with are still being used today. Particularly, in this case, we could see a convergent role for denial to produce a social interaction and relationship that could be described as of caring leadership, but that might not really be that. Hence, convergent denial in caring leadership would be about how denial in two groups, follower and leaders, is confluent to produce caring leadership.

The question now is, if that convergent denial is not producing authentic caring but the pretence of caring, then, what is it that convergent denial is really maximizing? A possible answer has to do with egocentrism. Let me explain. One of the oldest debates in evolutionary theory (Dawkins 2006; Wilson 2014) is whether humans have evolved to be egocentric, as it might be inferred from conventional Darwinism, or if they are actually cooperative, as some, such as Nowak have ferociously argued for (2012b, 2012a; Tomasello 2013). Although the debate cannot be really settled, it is fair to say that people exhibit both types of behaviours. Some might argue, then, that by behaving cooperatively from time to time, it is not all about egocentrism for people. Yet, others claim that actually cooperative behaviour is equally egocentric, it is just that sometimes reality gets in between our egotistical desires and their fulfilment. To understand this we could use the very famous Tragedy of the Commons in evolutionary theory, which was popularized by Garrett Hardin:

Picture a pasture open to all. It is to be expected that each herdsman will try to keep as many cattle as possible on the commons. Such an arrangement may work reasonably satisfactorily for centuries because tribal wars, poaching, and disease keep the numbers of both man and

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beast well below the carrying capacity of the land. Finally, however, comes the day of reckoning, that is, the day when the long-desired goal of social stability becomes a reality. At this point, the inherent logic of the commons remorselessly generates tragedy. As a rational being, each herdsman seeks to maximize his gain. Explicitly or implicitly, more or less consciously, he asks, ‘What is the utility to me of adding one more animal to my herd?’ (Hardin 1968, 1244).

The herdsmen obviously realize that if they add one more animal they will get all of the profits. Of course, the price to pay for this is about the overgrazing of the land. Yet, that price is paid between all herdsmen, as they all share the land. In the end, the herdsmen conclude that it is in their best egotistical interests to keep adding animals. Eventually, this, of course, ruins the land and results in a tragedy. In other words, when we all chase our egotistical desires, society struggles, as in reality we live in a world where we share resources. Thus, our egocentrism always needs to face reality, and realize, then, that it cannot be fully materialized. Therefore, Hardin concludes that ‘Under conditions of scarcity, egocentered impulses naturally impose costs on the group, and hence on all its members’ (1998, 683). This is why Hardin himself argues that the solution lies on imposing rules on people, to control their egotistical desires given that in reality not all egocentric manias could be satisfied; but if we cooperate, they could be satisfied in the most realistic possible way. We could call this, then, realistic egocentrism (i.e., the feasible ways in which our egotistical desires could be satisfied despite reality getting in the middle).

Now, Kurzban, takes this debate one step further, by suggesting that if people need each other so much, then, it would make sense that nature would have evolved (i.e., naturally selected) in us the capacity to pretend socially to convince others that it is not all about us. Thus, Kurzban, using a modularity of mind approach to human psychology, argues that the conscious part of the

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brain ‘should be designed to cause people to behave in a way that sends out the most positive defensible message about the person’s worth’ (2010, 92). In short, our personalities are probably a mascara, which is partly evolutionarily programmed to make us desirable to other people. So that in our power processes to receive rewards by achieving goals, we receive the help of others. These socially-desirable personalities are essential for human survival, which is why self-determination theory argues that besides autonomy and competence, relatedness is another innate psychological need (Deci and Ryan 2000). A need that is accomplished by forging sometimes deceptive and pretentious personalities and reputations.

Going back to caring leadership, we can see now how convergent denial, in the caring leadership process, could potentially maximize realistic egocentrism. First, followers like to pretend they believe in their caring leaders, when sometimes –not always– all they want is someone who takes care of things or someone to blame. Like this, then, followers are free to overcome some of the challenges they face in their power processes, as now leaders are the ones who should take them through these. This is the followers’ realistic egocentrism in this process, which is enabled by the self-deception of the leader as a carer. Second, in the case of leaders, they like to pretend they are caring for everyone else even when sometimes they are not, because they do not want followers to see how impotent they could be sometimes. Additionally, as followers praise leaders for their at best incomplete care, then, leaders can feel like they have accomplished something, like if they had successfully gone through their own power processes. This is the leaders’ realistic egocentrism in this process, which is enabled by the self-deception of the leader as a carer.

Finally, it should be mentioned that pretence (including the pretence of caring) in evolutionary terms, as argued by Kurzban, is not necessarily intentional or conscious (2010). By contrast, the caring mascara could feel real to a leader, as evolution has not made us privy to every

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desire we have, and sometimes our egocentrism lies far beyond the realm of consciousness. In the end, the outcome is that by apparently cooperating with each other, leaders and followers are both protecting their egotistical desires in a tough reality. Thus, we could argue that in the end cooperation, including caring leadership, is about realistic egocentrism (i.e., finding optimum ways to satisfy egotistical desires, through social deception, despite challenges we face in a tough reality). This puts into a broader evolutionary and biological perspective, some previous arguments within the ethics of care literature, regarding how caring is many times first about being ‘able to care responsibly for oneself’ (Gilligan 1993, 76), i.e. being egocentric. Of course, it should be mentioned that this interactive process of convergent denial in caring leadership for realistic egocentrism is not necessarily perfect. In the case explored, for instance, some university leaders did not convince their students and followers about how much they cared for them, and we actually saw several university Presidents losing their jobs. Figure 1 summarizes these findings and implications regarding caring leadership.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Conclusions

In conclusion, what this in-depth case has shown us is what Christensen and Charlie (2009) call an anomaly. Caring leadership theory (Gabriel 2015, 1997), as part of the romance of leadership, has suggested, based on rigorous evidence, that the leader-followers bond is built through authentic altruistic caring. The latter is one dimension of caring leadership; I am not denying that. However, the revelatory case here used, shows that ‘authentic’ (abnegated) caring is not necessarily the only

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dimension of caring leadership. By contrast, evolutionarily egocentric needs guide, through convergent denial, the caring leadership process too. Although further research would be needed to keep expanding our understanding of realistic egocentrism and convergent denial in caring leadership, this paper has certainly shed light on the highly important implications of evolutionary adaptations, such as the human capacity for denial, in every day leadership dynamics. Evidencing, thus, that as much as evolutionary theory might be seemed as a grand theory, it has implications and expressions in phenomena that we witness all the time. Like this, the research here presented has aimed to complement current important discussions in the caring leadership literature, by bringing in a new and novel perspective of this important topic.

Overall, this paper has suggested that the ideal of the caring leader might just be that: an incomplete ideal. A utopia that does not always happen. By contrast, followers and leaders face realities where they cannot fulfil by themselves their power processes and the achievement of goals these entail. The complexity of reality gets in the way, showing them how powerless they could be. So that like this, followers need leaders that are willing to play the romantic (grandiose and idealized) self-deception of the caring role; while leaders play along, so that they never have to admit that they are actually impotent in many ways. In sum, three important contributions emerge from this study. First, that the evolutionary mechanism of denial might be expressed in the caring leadership relationship as convergent denial (i.e., both sides aiming to escape/negate a tough reality). Second, that caring might be a form of denial, which enables both sides –leaders and followers– to fulfil their egotistical desires in a realistic way. Third, that realistic egocentrism demands appealing and convincing pretence of caring (which many times may not even be conscious or intentional) for caring leadership to function. Like this, this revelatory case has evidenced an anomaly in caring leadership theory, while elaborating the theory with a novel

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evolutionary approach and developing key concepts, such as convergent denial and realistic egocentrism, to enable future evolutionary explorations on caring leadership.

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