Leader as an Oxymoron:
How Leadership and Communication
Studies Can Be Better Wed Together

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This paper questions the use of the term "leader" in leadership studies with insights of rhetorical studies, and claims that it has oxymoronic status. In the light of "leaderless" activism/activity in contemporary political scenes, this paper argues that leadership studies should jettison the idea of leader and instead focus on how leadership is performed. By extending Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014) who founded a communicative perspective of leadership studies, the paper attempts to offer two specific vantage points for future leadership research: 1. group dynamics and 2. judgment and decision making.

Keywords: leadership studies, leader, oxymoron, communication studies, rhetorical studies

1. Introduction

Many contemporary scholars of communication have found it desirable, if not indispensable, to negotiate their relationship to their own discipline. Whether it is the discipline's scholarly history (Cohen, 1994; Mailloux, 2006; Keith, 2007a; Miller & McKerrow, 2010) or pedagogical practices such as public speaking and debate (Keith, 2007b; Woods, 2018), it is imperative that the disciplinary roots and basic theoretical assumptions be identified because they have consequences for our profession, the contents of our teaching, and the future of the field and students. As these scholars have already eloquently enunciated, communication scholars are not and should not be mills of thoughtless works: They are themselves a dynamic site of power that reproduce and constitute their own presence and future.

As a discipline, communication studies has a unique starting point and course of development. Born in 1914 in Chicago, Illinois, during the backlash against "English" teachers' adamant denial to present studies of "unsophisticated" materials such as political and legal speeches, scholarship of communication studies have traced a unique route over the last 100 years, maintaining relentlessly reflective attitudes (e.g., Gehrke & Keith, 2014). For communication studies, therefore, disciplinary identities have not been a taken-for-granted matter.

As a younger sister of communication studies, leadership studies have explored the dynamics of leadership communication as well as the roles, functions and effects of leadership. These two disciplines are now contributing to each other by exchanging ideas and knowledge (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). Yet, modern and contemporary scholarship of leadership has been primarily driven by practical needs to understand diverse forms of leaderships in organizations and cultures, leaving little room for contemplating its own presence and future.

My other concern about leadership studies is the rigid research methodological frameworks of individual research; e.g., qualitative, quantitative, mixed, and critical investigations (Collinson, 2011; Bryman, 2011; Jacquart, Cole, Gabriel, Koopman, & Rosen, 2018). As far as recent articles of major leadership journals such as *Leadership*, *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies* and *Leadership Quarterly* are concerned, the research methods of leading scholars of leadership are being solidified into the four research methods above.

This short paper offers a perspective on the current status of the discipline of leadership through the lens of one of a major branch of communication studies: rhetoric. Rhetorical studies pursue the process of meaning-making and the definition of important terms in public — in judicial, political, and social arenas of society — and

here I would like to firstly point out that, given the current political context, the term leader(ship) in the leadership studies has a critical feature of being oxymoronic. Secondly, the paper explores a way in which leadership studies can better develop with the knowledge of communication and rhetorical studies.

2. Leader as an Oxymoron

In 1973, a rhetorical scholar Karlyn Kohrs Campbell pointed out that the rhetoric used in women's liberation is oxymoronic because it has distinctive substantive and stylistic features that are impossible to be investigated by traditional canons of rhetoric. Substantively, women's liberation rhetoric violates the traditional female role in public communication. Stylistically, the women's liberation movement rejects the traditional persuasive model of a small number of leaders persuading followers; the role of participants mostly shutting up and listening to the leader's voice, and then reiterating the leader's voice, and so forth. Campbell (1973/2000), under these circumstances, called the rhetoric of women's liberation an oxymoron, or a combination of contradictory or incongruous words, and claimed that their rhetoric should constitute an independent genre by itself.

Respecting her point of view that see the relation between her interest and the larger field of study, this paper also delves into the term leader in the literature of leadership studies and calls it an oxymoron in the context of scholarly works in the discipline. That is, this study explores how the very word leader has been used in the literature of leadership studies, rather than investigating specific types of leaders in specific settings in small-group/organizational/ communal/social scales. In the end, I attempt to encourage a shift away from traditional frameworks to a new set of ideas and conceptualizations in order to encourage discussions of the disciplinary status of leadership studies.

The term leader presupposes *someone* or *something* to be lead. That is, the term dichotomizes functions and roles between persons or ideas that are leading and to be lead. Also under this assumption is an absolute majority of leadership works such as textbooks, journal articles and scholarly books — let alone articles and books for general readers has followed this framework. Of course, the functions and roles of leadership and the target of study in the discipline have expanded beyond the traditional image of leader as a consistent commander of a group's order, as we have witnessed newly emerging ideas such as follower-centered approaches (e.g., Bligh, 2011) complexity leadership theories (e.g., Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2011) and discursive theories (e.g., Fairhurst, 2011). However, these new studies still presuppose the aforementioned leader-follower roles. That is, a focus on various other roles and functions based on findings from these new ideas still revolves around who is (supposed) to lead group dynamics (Bligh, 2011). Even though potential underpinnings of organizational management are speculatively pointed out by the knowledge of other disciplines such as anthropology, biology, neuroscience, and design, the absolute majority of leadership studies still understand leaders as leaders or are interested in inquiring some factor that manage and lead their groups (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2011, pp. 468–469).

Likewise, the shift of the scholars' focus from leadership psychology to discourse, communication, and relational stances of leadership has "problematized the interpretive flexibility of terms like 'leadership' and 'management' and helps to unpack how competing truth claims about these terms both emerge and coexist" (Fairhurst, 2011, p. 495). Still, individual works with post-structural discursive theories rather tend to provide focus on micro-elements of discursive formations in group dynamics such as materiality of discourses, (dis)empowered agencies (most notably in relation to gender, sexuality, race and class), and other kinds of *praxis* (i.e.,

individual members' act of sense-making, positioning and playing in organization). While their individual efforts have attained their own goals, such research designs have rarely problematized the very term of leader in the discipline. In summary, although a variety of newly emerging fields appear in leadership studies, the term leadership has not received sufficient attention from scholars.

However, there is a need for scholars of leadership to pay closer attention to leaderless organizations and social mobilizations. In the context of social movements, for instance, there have been many of these in the last twenty years or so. As Castañeda (2020) stated, contemporary social movements have sometimes no identifiable leaders or even no organizations that consistently initiate and lead the movement (p. 175). Instead, it is a network of independent individuals and fluctuating groups which collectively enables movements. Examples are abundant: Movement for (illegal) immigrant rights, Occupy movements, movement for "black lives," and the appeal for prisoner rights in the United States (Tilly, Castañeda & Wood eds., 2020).

One notable instance of such activism would be the work of "hacktivists" or hacker+activist, most typically by the group Anonymous, for the Anonymous has had significant contributions in maintaining social order or causing social change without any identifiable leaders. In cyberspace, they have conducted DDoS (Distributed Denial of Service) attacks on the targeted websites, which are slowed down or crushed by a flood of data transmission. Another "doxing" attack is to disseminate private information such as email address, telephone numbers and a home address. Analyzing their activities, McDowell (2015) states that they are not "completely a free-for-all; the people who join Anonymous' operations or start their own are still encouraged to act ethically and reasonably" (n.p.). For instance, the Anonymous has hacked the Ku Klux Klan's twitter accounts and shut down their website in the rise of

the black lives matter movement in 2014. Also, they took down web pages of credit card companies and Amazon when they announced withdrawal from donating to Wikileaks. For the Anonymous, setting no leader is a critical part of their tactics. Like a swarm of bees or a flock of birds, the members of the Anonymous come together once their target has been collectively decided. The members vanish once their mission has been accomplished (McDowell, 2015, n.p.).

Likewise, in Japan, demonstrations and rallies for youth workers and their working rights are sometimes quite sporadic. Ushida, a member of the Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy (SEALDs) stated:

> People just come in and go out, so our group SEALDs is not really commanded or even organized by anyone. They think and judge on their own to join rallies, so they just happen to walk together. So, our group SEALDs is just a group of these people. So, if you want to know opinions of the SEALDs you should listen to each one of us. (Takahashi & SEALDs, 2015: 48)

As Ushida says, the SEALDs intentionally avoided setting leaders because it was an intercollegiate organization, but nevertheless their movements expanded far beyond the population of college students.

As shown above, we can see leaderless social mobilizations in many locations in the world. Yet, conventional leadership studies on social movement do not capture the dynamics of social movements. For instance, Ganz (2010) discusses the role of leadership in social movements and lists three important devices for leaders of social movements: 1. building and maintaining relationships, 2. story-making and -telling, and 3. strategizing the movement. Ganz (2010) explains that various instances such as Moses, the Greater Boston

Interfaith Organization, former US President Barak Obama's speech, and even stories of David and Goliath fail to capture the aforementioned newly emerging features of contemporary social movements. Indeed, these devices are impossible or even unnecessary for many leaderless social movements. Having relationships among members is possible if and only if they have consistent participants and leaders. Stories are already provided and shared among participants. Devising creative strategies and tactics is almost conventional, as we have seen the act of occupying the street, wearing facial masks in Hong Kong youth demonstrations, flash-mobbing and dancing, and these strategies and tactics have been shared almost instantly among participants. Thus, generalizing "social movement leadership" and listing potentially "effective" devices can even be detrimental to individual organizers of social movements now and in the future.

My point is that such misconceptions as Gantz (2010) do not illuminate how social movements are formed and practiced. My speculation is that such treatments of a specific topic (in Gantz' case, social movements) could happen in leadership studies insofar as we do not cast a critical perspective on the term leader, for it has an established canonical position and has become a god-term in the discipline. That is, even though readers of leadership studies are primarily interested in leadership, there is a logical incongruity between practical aspects of social dynamics and the term leadership. If that is true, then such research would not provide little benefits to the field of leadership studies because they do not share the same vision(s) of the field.

3.　To Better Wed Together

In the last section, I examined a terministic and logical gap between the topics of leadership studies and the interests of leadership scholars. Then, how can leadership studies contribute to

an understanding of the creation and activity of social movements? In order to explore this topic, I propose that leadership studies should firstly depart from the idea of leaders and instead focus on the idea of leadership.

The idea of leadership has been explored in many studies. For instance, Rost (1993) argued that leadership is "an influence relationship wherein leaders and their collaborators (followers) influence one another about real changes that reflect their mutual purposes" (p. 100). While Rost (1993) assumed that individuals occupy roles as leaders and their followers, his definition does not limit the ownership of leadership to the leaders. Also, as Fairhurst & Connaughton (2014) explicitly stated, "[l]eadership is relational, neither leader-centric or follower-centric" (pp. 12–13). More specifically, Collinson (2015) claimed that leadership "is better understood as an inherently relational, collaborative, and interdependent process" (p. 327).

Yet, the idea of leadership has also been misunderstood by some past researchers. Kelly (2008), for instance, problematized the characterization of leadership as the one that is exclusively exercised by leaders and then modeled or theorized, through which scholars observe the advancement of the studies (p. 770). Rather, he argued that these mundane acts of communication be potentially counted as acts of leadership:

> Leadership is expressed through the holding of budget meetings, team meetings, through the telling of jokes, a chat over a coffee, giving speeches, dealing with complaints, sending emails, opening post and generally getting on with everyday ordinary work. (p. 770)

For Kelly (2008), the "discounting of such work activity, … as somehow not contributing to an understanding of leadership

implies that 'leadership' as a form of life exists elsewhere" (p. 770).

His suggestion echoes with how the women's liberation movement is initiated. According to Campbell (1973/2000), many liberation movements have happened in a way that was incalculable or inaccessible according to a traditional (that is, in neo-classical Aristotelian) framework. Specifically, Campbell (1973/2000) notes:

> [Consciousness raising] involves meetings of small, leaderless groups in which each person is encouraged to express her personal feelings and experiences. There is no leader, rhetor, or expert. All participate and lead; all are considered expert. The goal is to make the personal political: to create awareness (through shared experiences) that what were thought to be personal deficiencies and individual problems are common and shared, a result of their position as women. (p. 497)

As a result, Campbell (1973/2000) suggested that the women's liberation movement owns a distinct characteristic that all communication and rhetorical scholars should carefully examine. In quite a similar manner, Kelly (2008) suggested that, with an ethnomethodological lens, we should also take a look at the "mundane practices" of organizations while paying attention to logical/categorical mistakes with Wittgenstein's theory of the language game.

As these scholars made suggestions for future directions of leadership studies, I also contend that leadership studies should be better articulated with approaches adopted by communication scholars. When communication scholars Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014) offered "a communicative perspective" on leadership studies, they claimed that researchers should focus on the process of communication and meaning-making happening intersubjectively between individuals rather than a psychological approach which

inquires individualist and cognitive theories. While I acknowledge and appreciate Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014), I would like to push forward their suggestion to set specific vantage points from which leadership scholarship can better set important values of their scholarship. As shown above with a passage from Kelly (2008), a variety of mundane acts can possibly be counted as an act of leadership. However, these communicative acts would still be off the central interests of leadership scholars as far as they are not well articulated and claimed as a part of relevant meaning-making practices in individual research. Also, taking account of these acts can possibly broaden research targets limitlessly. For these reasons, I suggest that leadership studies specifically pay attention to 1. acts and communication of group dynamics and 2. process of decision making.

Clearly group communication is one of the central interests for the study of leadership, and there has been tremendous research output in this particular area. Ryfe (2006) and Frey (1999, 2002), for instance, have paid attention to the deliberative community and identified some specific roles, including those of facilitator, critical evaluator and harmonizer, as well as the impacts of their interactions. Also, they have shown how values and beliefs can mobilize groups and provide certain leadership roles to reach pragmatic decisions. Their research on roles, group development and the group decision making process would serve as a great tool for leadership scholars.

Critical attention should also be given to the process of decision making and judgment. On this point I believe that leadership studies can be in better concert with the knowledge of rhetorical studies. Farrell (1993), for instance, defines rhetoric as the "collaborative art of addressing and guiding decision and judgment — usually public judgment about matters that cannot be decided by force or expertise" (p. 1). Furthermore, the art of rhetoric is multi-

faceted, as it was defined not only from the perspective of rhetor (speaker or person leading others) but from her or his discourse/communication, as it was famously outlined by Aristotle. Furthermore, Bitzer (1968/2000) outlined rhetoric from the perspective of scene/situation, claiming the rhetorical situation to be:

> … a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence. (p. 63)

As Zarefsky (2008) clarified, this "fundamental defining condition of rhetorical situation is the need to make collective decisions under conditions of uncertainty" (p. 119). Thus, rhetoric has always been focused on the study of contingent issues and probable knowledge, fashioning itself as a practical middle-ground alternative of transcendental truth by potential actions by probable leaders.

By giving closer attention to these two vantage points, I claim that leadership studies and communication studies can better interact with each other to develop their common interests. In a book tracking a centennial history of communication studies, Gehrke and Keith (2014) claimed that "our field, … [has] never had a stable identity" but it has its own "unique strengths and weaknesses… [and in it flows] a dynamic scholarly identity, always in flux, never at rest" (p. 1). And especially for the interest of this special issue, I hope that leadership studies can better develop their future by claiming its own values and interacting with good neighbors.

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