

Toward an integrated theory of leadership

Mark van Vugt and Anjana Ahuja, *Naturally Selected: The Evolutionary Science of Leadership* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 272 pages. ISBN 978-0061963834, Hardcover, \$25.99.

Ronald F. White
Department of Philosophy
College of Mount St. Joseph
5701 Delhi Road
Cincinnati, OH 45233
Ron_White@mail.msje.edu

A decade ago James McGregor Burns, one of the pioneers of leadership studies, assembled a group of scholars to formulate an “integrative theory of leadership.” Burns hoped that such a theory might help “legitimize a field that some skeptics still dismiss as lightweight and ill defined”—and thereby transform leadership studies “into an intellectually responsible discipline.”¹ Thus far, groups of social scientists and philosophers have failed to achieve that idealistic goal. If leadership scholars ever convened, hopefully Mark van Vugt and Anjana Ahuja would be among the list of invitees. Indeed, *Naturally Selected* comes closer than any previous leadership theory to fulfilling Burns’ vision of an “integrative theory of leadership.” But how orthodox leadership scholars will receive this theory remains to be seen.

Two leadership markets

Before we get too far, a recent trend in the economics of scientific research publication should be noted. Since the 1970s, scientists have expanded their literary audience by targeting two distinct markets: the academic market and the popular market.

The academic market for books on leadership is relatively small, but growing. Authors are usually trained social scientists affiliated with academic programs in leadership or business management. They

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write books and publish articles in the hopes of literally and figuratively selling their research to other researchers, professional organizations, publishing companies, journals, and academic libraries. Career advancement is the primary motivation on the academic side, that is, earning tenure and promotion at a college or university and enhancing one’s prestige in the intellectual marketplace. Therefore, academic authors do not expect to be financially enriched by the modest royalties offered by the scholarly market. To capitalize on the academic market, books must have a scholarly tone, be copiously referenced, and peer reviewed—and then favorably reviewed within peer-reviewed journals.

The popular market for books on leadership is potentially much more lucrative and consists of two main groups of buyers: business leaders and the public. Books that target business leaders must be free of academic jargon and offer industry readers prescriptive guidance; that is, they should address and answer how business leaders can improve their leadership skills and increase the profitability of their business ventures. Many of the authors who pursue this market are successful businesspersons themselves. They usually describe how their particular style of leadership contributed to success and typically offer a short list of rules or steps toward improved leadership and even a profitable bottom line. And many of these authors become paid consultants who sell their books, lectures, and other materials to corporations that hope to improve their competitive position. These books are usually light, easy reading and inspirational, but incompatible with the rigorous scholarly demands of the academic market.

The recent economic slowdown (and showdown) has sparked a growing interest in leadership among the general reading public. Books that divulge the sordid details of bad or unethical leadership are popular among general readers. If an academic author hopes to tap into both the business and general public segments of the popular market, a book must be well written, generally free of academic jargon, inspirational, and prescriptive.

The ultimate goal of this stream of contemporary academic publishing is to produce a work that appeals to both the academic and popular markets. *Naturally Selected* certainly has the potential for tapping into both markets by synthesizing evolutionary psychology with prescriptive relevance and well-crafted popular science writing. Mark van Vugt is a professor of social and organizational psychology at the VU University Amsterdam and a research associate at Oxford University. He is the author of more than 100 scientific articles, books, and book chapters that employ evolutionary science to understand social, political, and corporate behavior. Anjana Ahuja is a well-respected science journalist and has written for the *London Times*, *New Scientist*, and *Elle* magazine. She has also appeared on television and radio as a science commentator and has held advisory posts at the Royal Society and British Council. The academic market in both leadership studies and business management has yet to incorporate theories of evolutionary psychology and biology, so the authors appear to be blazing a new trail.

The state of leadership studies

There are two main criticisms of the leadership studies discipline that have persisted since the 1970s. First, there are numerous incommensurable or irreconcilable leadership theories, including Great Man theory, trait theory, psychoanalytic theory, charismatic theory, behavioral theory, situational theory, contingency theory, transactional and transformative theories, servant leadership theory, and complex leadership theory. Critics argue that leadership researchers have thus far been unable to produce replicable scientific results capable of either verifying or falsifying these theories. Second, leadership researchers tend to focus on a narrow set of issues and neglect many obviously important questions, including whether and how the relationship between leaders and followers has changed over the millennia. What were the forces that brought about these changes—was it bad or unethical leadership? If so, what are its origins, and how can unethical leadership be avoided?

The Great Man theory of leadership is the most enduring account of power and organizational dominance in the Western tradition. Already in full bloom during the Homeric era, leadership theory was first

rigorously described in Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*. Most of the subsequent work within the Great Man tradition is gleaned from biographical accounts of heroic political leaders, military commanders, military commanders who became political leaders, and, more recently, business leaders. Throughout most of the twentieth century, most leadership theorists operated within the broad parameters of six core tenets. First, leaders are always members of the species *Homo sapiens*; second, leaders are always men; third, leaders are born, not made; fourth, great leaders perform heroic acts; fifth, real leaders are both effective and ethical; and sixth, followers are passive participants in the leadership process.

The first major refinement of the Great Man theory was a diverse collection of trait theories, which sought to identify the essential psychological traits that differentiate leaders from followers, and contribute to the success or failure of leaders. Even with this modification to the Great Man theory, all six tenets remained intact. But by the late 1970s, conflicting lists of essential traits emerged from the data and cast doubt on the empirical status of the theory.

The limitations of trait approaches gave rise to behavioral theories. Consistent with the larger behaviorist movement in psychology, these theories strived to make leadership research more empirical by focusing on the observable external behavior of leaders rather than their internal psychological traits, motives, or beliefs. Moreover, behaviorists challenged the “born, not made” tenet, and argued that anyone could be taught leadership behaviors or skills. Although much of the research conducted by behavioral psychologists was performed on animal subjects, behavioral leadership theories remained staunchly anthropocentric. Similar to the earlier trait theories, the behavioral studies were often not replicable and a definitive list of empirically verifiable behaviors that comprise leadership never emerged. The shortcomings of both the trait and behavioral approaches led many researchers to conclude that the traditional focus on *individual* leaders might be misguided and that leadership studies should refocus on the *relationship* between leaders and followers.

An early attempt to account for this relationship is the nebulous concept of charisma. The earliest proponents of charismatic theory were religious scholars, who observed that some leaders had an uncanny and

mystical ability to attract and maintain followers. Most charismatic theorists supported the “born, not made” tenet, while behaviorist scholars argued that charismatic behaviors were acquired skills. The idea that charisma can be reduced to a skill set and then taught to aspiring leaders contributed to the expansion of leadership training among some business entrepreneurs and business schools.

But many philosophers and social scientists argued that the concept of charisma was too vague to support empirical research. In recent years, charisma has been replaced by the less subjective term *influence*, and the once mysterious force of attraction between leaders and followers has been gradually demystified by a growing body of scientific research on emotions.

James MacGregor Burns, who is also a noted biographer and historian, is widely credited with moving the study of leadership away from individual leaders by refocusing research on leader and follower relationships. Burns argues that effective transactional leaders lead by manipulating incentives and disincentives. Ethically, this implies adherence to modal values; that is, instrumental values that might evaluate the means by which leaders “get it done,” including honesty, responsibility, fairness, and honoring of commitments. Transformational leaders, on the other hand, are more committed to the pursuit of end values, such as liberty, justice, and equality. If transactional leadership theorists argue that the behavior of followers can be controlled via external incentives and disincentives, transformational leadership theorists assert that successful leaders are capable of transforming the internal feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of followers by inspiring, cajoling, or convincing them to pursue higher and more altruistic goals or purposes. Thus, transformational leaders transform followers into leaders.

Bernard Bass expanded upon the relational perspective by reviving charismatic theory, and by differentiating between transformative leaders, who are both efficient and moral, and pseudo-transformative leaders who are immoral.² However, even under the influence of Burns and Bass, leadership studies continued to focus on the traits and behaviors of leaders while downplaying or ignoring the active role that followers play in the selection and retention of leaders.^{3,4}

Today, leadership studies is dominated by relational theory that explores the relationship between leaders

and followers. But as Burns discovered, an *integrative* theory of leadership remains elusive. While most readers of this journal already accept the idea that evolutionary biology, in concert with environmental influences, provides the underlying explanation for human social behavior, it is important to keep in mind that *Naturally Selected* targets leadership scholars and business leaders—constituencies that, historically, are less than hospitable to evolutionary biology.

The authors carefully and respectfully approach these bastions of nonevolutionary awareness.

Our theory accommodates all the familiar features of the leadership landscape—charisma, personality, traits, alpha males, the glass ceiling for women, nature versus nurture—but unlike other leadership theories, brings them together in a way that makes sense (p. 3).

So how might *Naturally Selected* integrate the various stands of leadership theory under the banner of the life sciences? And, what does an evolutionary leadership theory have to say about the fundamental, yet neglected questions—namely, about the historical changes that have taken place in the leader and follower relationship? And, what is the nature of bad or unethical leadership? Further review of their argument offers some perspective on these questions.

Historical changes in leader-follower relationships

Consistent with its anthropocentric moorings, the Great Man theory and its immediate successors operate on the assumption that leadership is a distinctly human behavior that has remained constant throughout the course of history. To evolutionary scholars, this narrow perspective can be readily attributed to the discipline’s historical failure to integrate research from the life sciences, especially ethology, anthropology, and evolutionary psychology. *Naturally Selected* hopes to correct this omission by integrating findings from disparate fields in an interdisciplinary manner.

The guiding principle of van Vugt and Ahuja’s Evolutionary Leadership Theory is that leadership and followership arose in humans and other species in response to survival and reproductive challenges. Problems of social coordination led to group decision making around such *activities* as foraging for food,

finding a place to sleep, collective migration, and group defense. Evolutionary leadership theory “transports us back to the beginning, to trace how leadership emerged and changed over an evolutionary time period of several million years” (p. 4).

Although many species exhibit social coordination based on leadership and followership, *Naturally Selected* focuses on the transition from the great apes, especially chimpanzees, to Pleistocene hunters and gatherers, to *Homo sapiens*. They argue that this transition from ape to human leadership marked a shift from competitive, authoritarian social organization to a more cooperative, egalitarian model. Van Vugt and Ahuja’s theory attempts to explain “how evolution steered us away from the despotism of our primate cousins and towards a society of (relative) equals, under the protection of the wise, benevolent leaders predicted by Evolutionary Leadership Theory” (p. 95).

Throughout the twentieth century, Great Man theory and its subsequent variations assumed that followers were mostly passive in the leadership process and that effective leaders either succeeded or failed to effectively transform their followers. An evolutionary leadership theory explains “how the role of food sharing may have seeded the beginnings of politics, by teaching both chimpanzees and humans how to forge alliances and coalitions” (p. 95). Hence, among humans and chimpanzees, leadership is not so much about individual leaders transforming followers as much as it is about how coalitions of leaders and followers interact.

The authors suggest that our Pleistocene forbears had no concept of obedience outside of the family and were naturally intolerant of powerful, authoritarian leaders. Van Vugt and Ahuja explain “how our own species perfected the art of speaking truth to power, allowing our ancestors to keep aspiring despots in check using strategies that ranged from the salacious to the murderous.” Over several million years, they evolved numerous “strategies to overcome the powerful,” which include public gossip, discussions, satire, humor, disobedience, deposing, deserting, ostracizing, and assassination. These strategies, which are deeply rooted in our evolutionary past, remain viable weapons against despots throughout the modern world, as illustrated by the recent democratic uprisings in Islamic Africa and the Middle East.

The rise of bad leadership

A second problem for Great Man theory and its successors concerns how early scholars defined leadership as the pursuit of morally praiseworthy goals by moral means, and how researchers dismissed unethical or ineffective leaders as not worthy of study. By limiting the scope of leadership studies to “good leadership,” little light was shed on bad leadership, which, today seems to have reached epidemic proportions. Although recent scholars now acknowledge the role of despots and tyrants, they have not been able to agree upon an ultimate explanation for the persistence and frequency of bad leadership in human affairs.^{5,6,7,8,9}

Naturally Selected explains bad leadership by way of the “mismatch hypothesis,” or rapidly expanding chasm between our slowly evolving brain and rapidly evolving culture. As the authors put it, we have “ancient brains [and are] trying to make our way in an ultra modern world; where shiny new corporate ideas rub up against our creaking, millennia old psyches, the clash can make us feel uneasy” (p. 5).

The tipping point for this growing mismatch began 13,000 years ago during the Neolithic revolution, when stationary agriculture and husbandry replaced nomadic hunting and gathering. As the cultural traditions associated with food provision evolved and in-place societies grew, democratic leadership began to revert to its authoritarian roots. Small wandering bands of 100 to 150 genetically related hunters and gatherers gradually disappeared and larger, place-bound groups became more common. The size of these groups increased over time with the rise of bands, clans, tribes, chiefdoms, and ultimately nations. These increasingly larger political entities stockpiled resources and “created vast inequalities in wealth and power between individuals” (p. 125). Living in these larger stationary settlements increased the necessity of territorial defense and elevated the role of military leadership in human affairs. This new model of formal leadership tended to concentrate power in the hands of a few self-interested leaders who ruled more by brute force or charisma than consensus and competence.

Today, formal leaders who occupy the higher rungs of large scale hierarchies in both politics and business tend to be isolated from their followers. Their power is not based on demonstrable competency so much as

managerial expertise and provisioned abstract qualities such as vision. As this new breed of formal leaders became more powerful, they enjoyed increased reproductive opportunity and consumed a greater proportion of the community's resources. Today, these dysfunctional kleptocrats continue to dominate contemporary politics and business.

Leadership among genetically related Pleistocene hunters and gatherers was mostly decentralized, democratic, and based on social prestige and demonstrated expertise. Post-Neolithic leadership became increasingly centralized, authoritarian, and formal. As the size of social groupings dramatically expanded, we inadvertently lost touch with our natural democratic instincts and reverted back to apelike authoritarianism.

The basic problem today, van Vugt and Ahuja argue, is that we tolerate bad leadership. The prescriptive formula offered by the authors to fight the current epidemic of bad leadership in business and politics involves realigning human leadership with its biological moorings. "By gently tweaking our mindsets to properly accommodate the twenty first century, we can make the dynamics of group living better for everyone" (p. 186). Their final chapter offers ten recommendations: Do not overrate the romance of leadership. Find a niche and develop your prestige. Keep it small and natural. Favor followers. Practice distributed leadership. Mind the pay gap. Look for leaders within. Watch out for nepotism. Avoid the dark side. And, do not judge a leader by his or her cover. All of these prescriptions should resonate among contemporary leadership scholars.

Evolutionary leadership theory and leadership studies

Readers will certainly appreciate *Naturally Selected* for its evolutionary perspective and psychological research. But it is important to keep in mind that the target audiences for this book—scholars in leadership studies and business professionals—are likely to be either unfamiliar with or lukewarm about biological explanations of social phenomena. Therefore, if science writing is to cultivate both the academic and popular markets, *Naturally Selected* may face an uphill battle. Although the book can certainly provide an integrative theory that leadership scholars have long sought while cultivating neglected areas of research, it is not the final

word on leadership. In fact, an Evolutionary Leadership Theory raises a completely new set of important questions for leadership studies.

Among evolutionary scholars, there is still debate centered on the degree of evolutionary continuity or discontinuity between chimpanzee and our Pleistocene hunter and gatherer forebears. Indeed, one of the enduring controversies in evolutionary politics has been over whether we were socialized to lead (or be led) in a dominant way via centralized dominance hierarchies—or in an egalitarian way, via decentralized cooperation. Or, as the authors put it, "whether we are primates first and egalitarian hunter-gatherers second; or vice versa" (p. 41). The question of whether chimpanzee social structure is, or has always been, primarily despotic or egalitarian, or whether hunter-gatherer social structure was despotic or egalitarian, remains contested.

Some scholars follow Frans de Waal and defend the "good natured hypothesis." They argue that chimpanzees, bonobos, and humans are moral species—that there is more continuity than discontinuity in the transition from chimpanzee to human social organization, and that all three species were once highly cooperative and democratic.^{10,11,12,13} Other scholars follow Richard Wrangham and Dale Peterson and embrace the "bad natured hypothesis."^{14,15,16,17} They argue that chimpanzees and humans share a distinctive "male bonded patrilineal social structure," which has predisposed both species to a violent, authoritarian form of organization. Today, most scholars probably agree that modern humans and other primates possess both good natured and bad natured genes that find expression in different environmental settings.

Although modern humans have managed to survive for 200,000 years with a brain designed for hunting and gathering, one might argue that surviving is not identical to flourishing. And, although the hominid line survived for millions of years without large scale agriculture and husbandry, no one seriously advocates returning to hunter and gatherer lifestyles. Many economic scholars would contend that the human species did not really flourish until after the Neolithic Age and would argue that *Naturally Selected* undervalues the positive role played by agriculture, husbandry, urbanization, and commercial enterprise. Indeed, the human species has flourished over the past 300 years under the watchful eye of those oft-reviled formal leaders.

Some scholars might make the case that the book underestimates the power of modern technology, such as advanced weaponry, information and communication media, and transportation infrastructure, to make or break leaders. Philosophers might quibble over whether it is a critical endorsement of evolutionary ethics that does not address the question of whether the authors' natural prescriptions commit the naturalistic fallacy.^{18,19} And finally, the empirical evidence required to confirm or disconfirm either the "good natured" or "bad natured" hypotheses remains elusive. There is no direct knowledge of the social behavior of chimpanzees and early hominids that lived 5.5 million years ago, and our knowledge of the social behavior of early *Homo sapiens* is rather scant.²⁰

And, finally, while most general readers will appreciate van Vugt and Ahuja's light prose and folksy descriptions of science, at least some academics may find some of the language to be a bit over the top. Here's their description of a gorilla's leadership style: "If your boss were a gorilla, he would arrive unannounced at your house, help himself to your food, kill your children, and then go be with your wife" (p. 101). These concerns notwithstanding, van Vugt and Ahuja stand poised to not only expand the frontiers of leadership studies but in the process have raised the bar for popular science writing.

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