

The poststructuralist ontology on leadership: identity and materiality in evidence

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Abstract

Leadership is considered a relevant topic for organizational studies, which can be verified by the numerous academic journals dedicated exclusively to the theme. However, despite the proliferation of journals and several publications on the subject, the definition of leadership is still vague, generally considered by the mainstream to be a male attribute of heroic individual leaders. This article presents a critical analysis of the mainstream on leadership, focused on analyzing the poststructuralist ontology on leadership. The study contributes to the ontological debate on leadership by addressing what leadership is for poststructuralism, emphasizing its ontological differences in relation to the mainstream. Poststructuralism promotes an alternative ontology of leadership to the mainstream that breaks with the universal conception of leadership by highlighting its microsocial and discursive characteristic, conceiving leadership as a micro-political discursive process. It is fundamental for understanding the poststructuralist ontology of leadership to comprehend (1) the production of the identities of leaders and followers and (2) the materiality of leadership.

Keywords: Leadership. Poststructuralism. Ontology. Identity. Materiality.

A ontologia pós-estruturalista sobre liderança: identidade e materialidade em evidência

Resumo

Liderança é considerada um tema relevante para os estudos organizacionais, fato que pode ser verificado pela existência de diversos periódicos acadêmicos dedicados exclusivamente ao tema. Contudo, apesar da proliferação de periódicos e várias publicações sobre o tema, a definição de liderança ainda é vaga, sendo geralmente considerada pelo *mainstream* um atributo masculino de líderes individuais heroicos. Assim, este artigo busca realizar uma análise crítica do *mainstream* sobre liderança, tendo-se como lente de análise a ontologia pós-estruturalista sobre o tema. Portanto, este artigo objetiva contribuir com o debate ontológico sobre liderança ao abordar o que é liderança para o pós-estruturalismo, enfatizando suas diferenças ontológicas em relação ao *mainstream*. O pós-estruturalismo promove uma ontologia de liderança alternativa ao *mainstream* que rompe com a concepção universal de liderança ao evidenciar sua característica microsocial e discursiva, concebendo liderança como um processo discursivo micropolítico, sendo fundamental para a entendimento da ontologia pós-estruturalista de liderança compreender (1) a produção das identidades de líderes e seguidores e (2) a materialidade da liderança.

Palavras-chave: Liderança. Pós-estruturalismo. Ontologia. Identidade. Materialidade.

La ontología posestructuralista sobre liderazgo: identidad y materialidad en evidencia

Resumen

El liderazgo se considera un tema relevante para los estudios organizacionales, un hecho que puede verificarse por la existencia de varias revistas académicas dedicadas exclusivamente al tema. Sin embargo, a pesar de la proliferación de publicaciones sobre el tema, la definición de liderazgo sigue siendo vaga, y considerada por el *mainstream* como un atributo masculino de líderes individuales. Así, este artículo busca llevar a cabo un análisis crítico del *mainstream* sobre liderazgo, teniendo como lente de análisis la ontología posestructuralista sobre el tema. Por lo tanto, este artículo tiene como objetivo contribuir al debate ontológico sobre liderazgo al abordar qué es el liderazgo para el posestructuralismo, enfatizando sus diferencias ontológicas en relación con el *mainstream*. El posestructuralismo promueve una ontología del liderazgo alternativa al *mainstream* que rompe con la concepción universal de liderazgo al evidenciar su característica microsocial y discursiva, concibiendo el liderazgo como un proceso discursivo micropolítico, haciéndose fundamental para la comprensión de la ontología posestructuralista del liderazgo entender (1) la producción de las identidades de los líderes y seguidores y (2) la materialidad del liderazgo.

Palabras clave: Liderazgo. Posestructuralismo. Ontología. Identidad. Materialidad.

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INTRODUCTION

The mainstream considers leadership to be a product of individual leaders who exhibit certain traits, styles or behaviours (Sutherland, Land & Böhm, 2014). Despite attempts by the mainstream to outline what leadership is, there is still no clear and universal definition of leadership to the point of Ford (2005, p. 237) affirming that “there are as many (if not more) definitions of leadership as there are people who have attempted to define it”. Therefore, the concept of leadership remains illusory and lacks definition in most of the research developed (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Ford, 2005; Ford & Harding, 2007; MacKillop, 2018; Sutherland et al., 2014) and it is characterized as a vague concept (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Spicer & Alvesson, 2011; Sutherland et al., 2014) or an empty signifier (Kelly, 2014).

This reality deepens with the proliferation of new approaches to leadership in recent years, bringing new ontological challenges to the definition of leadership (Dinh et al., 2014). Such challenges demonstrate that the relevance of academic knowledge is not in the reproduction of legitimate knowledge but in its ability to look and critically analyze the legitimate knowledge in which leadership is socially built (Carroll, Firth, Ford & Taylor, 2018). Then, this article aims to carry out a critical analysis of the mainstream on leadership, having as a lens of analysis the poststructuralist ontology (Ford, 2005, 2010; Ford, Harding & Learmonth, 2008; Ford, Harding, Gilmore & Richardson, 2017; MacKillop, 2018; Sutherland et al., 2014), seeking mainly to understand the ontological differences between these two approaches in the definition of leadership and their consequences in the leader concept. An analysis is considered critical when “radically questions widely accepted assumptions and aims to minimize domination” (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012, p. 376), using social science theories (Ford & Harding, 2007), and challenging legitimate knowledge and its way of thinking (Alvesson & Willmott, 2003). Thus, this article aims to advance the ontological understanding of the leadership, challenging the naturalized mainstream concepts of the leadership. Mainstream approaches to leadership are called functionalists/positivists, and privilege quantitative methods, conceiving leadership as a natural object that has its own existence, waiting to be collected and analyzed objectively (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Boje, Alvarez & Schooling, 2001; Ford, 2005). In general, functionalist and positivist approaches have in their ontology the necessary connection between leadership and a leader’s person (Sutherland et al., 2014), declaring the need for a leader’s physical existence for leadership to exist. Poststructuralism offers us an alternative ontology to the mainstream by problematizing specific aspects related to the identity construction of leaders and followers and the materiality of the leadership phenomenon.

It is worth mentioning that leadership is a significant subject (Ford & Harding, 2007) and frequently analyzed by organizational studies (Collinson & Tourish, 2015) and considered a tool capable of solving any problem in the organization (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012) and improving organizational performance (Ford & Harding, 2007), declaring that there is a lack of studies that approach leadership critically (Ford, 2010; Ford & Harding, 2007). For example, Dinh et al. (2014) show that the most used approaches in the new millennium are charismatic and transformational leadership, and the authors did not find articles with a poststructuralist approach. This finding is also presented in the world most used books on leadership (Northouse, 2016; Yukl, 2013), as they also do not address poststructuralism in their contents (Carroll et al., 2018), showing that there is a gap in leadership studies related to poststructuralism.

To accomplish the article aims, the next topic discusses the main mainstream approaches to leadership, seeking to analyze their main characteristics and similarities. Then, the poststructuralist approach will be analyzed, showing that leadership is an empty signifier for poststructuralism. Subsequently, the importance of identity and materiality to understand the poststructuralist ontology of leadership is highlighted, evidencing the principles that rule the poststructuralist approach to leadership: criticism of the leader heroic and romantic vision; focus on power relations, and rethink followers. Finally, the main ontological characteristics of leadership for poststructuralism will be addressed.

MAINSTREAM LEADERSHIP APPROACHES

Mainstream approaches are called positivist (Ford, 2005) or functionalist (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Sutherland et al., 2014) and they believe that leadership studies should be conducted in a similar way to research carried out by the natural sciences. Leadership is considered a phenomenon that has its own existence, an object that through systematic data collections could reach a truth that would allow predicting the phenomenon. This realistic narrative considers leadership an “organizational artifact, an object-text in laboratory [...]” (Boje et al., 2001, p. 135), conceiving leadership as a “stable construct that is amenable to observation with the correct tools, which in turn will provide leaders with the techniques they need to reliably influence others” (Collinson & Tourish, 2015, p. 578). Thus, the use of quantitative research methods predominates, based on the belief that the truth about leadership can be revealed through the use of objective data collection and analysis that allows unveiling correlations between variables related to leadership (Ford, 2010). Therefore, the mainstream believes that leadership is an objective phenomenon that can be unraveled through quantitative scientific methods (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012).

For Ford (2005), there are six mainstream approaches to leadership: leadership traits; behavioural or style leadership; situational or contingency leadership; transformational and charismatic leadership; theoretical speeches by gurus; and post-heroic leadership. For the traits approach, leadership is a set of personal attributes that are born with the leader, characterizing leadership as the leader’s innate and intrinsic attributes. This type of literature focuses on traits of historical people called Great Men, establishing a heroic and masculinized vision of leadership (Ford & Harding, 2007; Spector, 2016), seeking to identify and describe universal traits that would define leadership in any situation and context (Ford, 2005; Yukl, 2013). Thus, a mythological view of the leader is constructed (Ford & Harding, 2007; Kelly, 2014), from which leaders present certain innate physical and psychological characteristics that enable the exercise of leadership (Sutherland et al., 2014), placing leadership in the leader’s body.

The behavioural approach focuses on how leaders act rather than seeking to establish innate universal characteristics that would define who they are. Thus, it seeks to understand leadership styles and how these styles can contribute to more effective leadership in the organization (Ford, 2005), valuing the skills and behaviours that constitute an individual as a leader (Sutherland et al., 2014). Situational or contingency leadership highlights how the environmental context, labor and followers’ variables influence the leader’s exercise of leadership (Ford, 2005). The main premise of the situational or contingency approach is that different situations lead to different types of leadership, declaring that in different situations certain leadership styles are preferable to others (Sutherland et al., 2014), neglecting the power relations in these analyzes (Collinson, 2014; Ford, 2005).

Transformational and charismatic leadership attaches importance to the followers’ perceptions and attributions instead of focusing their analysis on traits, styles, environmental and labor aspects. The transformational leader is responsible for creating for followers a vision of organizational change that promotes better organizational performance (Collinson & Tourish, 2015). The leader exercises a religious pastoral role, guiding followers in the search for better organizational results through his charisma. Charismatic leadership believes that leaders can make subordinates committed to organizational performance, producing high performance in them (Shamir, House & Arthur, 1993). Similarly, for the guru’s theories of leadership, the leader must be a guru capable of promoting a supernatural transformation of the organization, leading it to a higher level of success. The guru leader is a manager of meanings for his followers, being considered the redeemer of the organization (Ford, 2005), aiming to reduce bureaucracy and hierarchical levels, promoting innovation, teamwork and greater employee participation (Huczynski, 1993).

Post-heroic or collective approaches claim that leadership is exercised collectively rather than an activity exercised only by heroic, charismatic, transforming or gurus’ leaders. The focus of the leadership is redirected, starting to focus on the followers, not on the leaders, giving voice to all people in the organization, considering the collective intelligence of all members in the leadership process (Ford, 2005). It is worth mentioning that collective leadership encompasses several leaderships approaches whose main focus is on distributed and shared aspects of leadership. The focus of analysis is no longer the heroic natural person of a leader and becomes the collective relational dimension of leadership, seeking to understand how leadership is built from social interactions (Ospina, Foldy, Fairhurst & Jackson, 2020). Although post-heroic approaches question the leader’s unique role in the leadership process, they still maintain a top-down logic. For example, the distributed leadership

process remains based on the top-down delegation of authority, disregarding in its analysis possible bottom-up processes (Collinson & Collinson, 2009). Such a process gives leaders a prominent and privileged position (Ford, 2005; Ford & Harding, 2007), reifying them as responsible for providing direction, vision and objectives for the organization. However, despite “these attempts to expand the notion of leadership, the assumption that it emanates from an individual (albeit ‘democratic’) leader remains [...]” (Sutherland et al., 2014, pp. 761-762). Thus, when analyzing how individuals are able to create a collaborative environment and delegate tasks to others, collective or post-heroic approaches still place the leader as the primary catalyst for this process – that is, leaders precede leadership (Sutherland et al., 2014). Therefore, in these approaches, the idea that a leader is necessary for leadership to exist remains.

Despite the differences between all mainstream approaches, Sutherland et al. (2014) state that they have some characteristics in common: (1) leadership is the product of individual leaders who have certain skills and are responsible for influencing the organization to achieve high performance; (2) ontologically conceive leadership as an object that has its own existence and that can be predicted through causal relationships; and (3) they work through a top-down belief in the leadership process in which leaders occupy hierarchical positions of authority and have the power and the right to influence followers – thus making a clear distinction between leaders and followers, characterizing followers as passive and susceptible to the leader’s behaviour and style. Regarding the ontological conception of leadership as an object, Alvesson and Spicer (2012) add that the mainstream conceives leadership as something that has an independent existence, which can be located in a network of causal relationships, establishing leadership as a neutral phenomenon that allows promoting organizational effectiveness and efficiency.

Besides, mainstream approaches do not consider broad social and cultural aspects in their construction of the leader and do not perform a critical analysis of the content produced (Ford & Harding, 2007). Leadership is treated as something neutral, a purely technical activity, not addressing power, resistance and gender relations that build asymmetries and social hierarchies that affect social construction on who is appropriate or not to exercise leadership (Ford, 2005). Therefore, power and resistance are silenced by the mainstream (Kuipers et al., 2014; MacKillop, 2018). In this article, this ontology of leadership is problematized by poststructuralism by showing the non-neutrality and discursive limitations of mainstream leadership approach.

LEADERSHIP IN POSTSTRUCTURALISM: AN EMPTY SIGNIFIER

What differentiates poststructuralism from other approaches to leadership is the relevance attributed to discourse to understand leadership. In poststructuralism, “attention shifts decidedly towards an appreciation of the power of language in constituting the world, in the sense that language/discourse is taken as how human actors engage, make sense of and construct the world” (Delbridge & Ezzamel, 2005, p. 607). Discourses are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak [...]. [They] do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention” (Foucault, 1974, p. 49). Therefore, language is not a mirror or a representation of reality; language is what constitutes reality (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). For poststructuralism, leadership is a discursive phenomenon (Ford, 2006, 2010), “a set of changing discursive practices [...]” (MacKillop, 2018, p. 205). Ford (2006) highlights that language is located in the discourse, and the discourses constitute a language about leadership, establishing a discursive position for a subject idealized as a leader (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012), showing the connections between discourse and power (Foucault, 1974). Therefore, poststructuralism analyzes power relations situated in specific contexts by which discursive leadership practices are built (Collinson & Tourish, 2015; Kelly, 2014).

For poststructuralism, leadership involves ideological, political and discursive aspects (MacKillop, 2018) whereby power is disguised and hidden, making leadership act as a camouflage so that the exercise of power is perceived as neutral, technical and rational (Collinson & Tourish, 2015). In the mainstream, power relations are camouflaged by a romantic and mythical vision of the leader, privileging to enumerate his/her universal and essential characteristics, prescribing elements for organizational success (MacKillop, 2018) by which the interests of leaders and followers cohere, where resistance and conflict are considered an anomaly (Collinson & Tourish, 2015). In contrast, poststructuralism invokes the need to de-essentialize leadership (Grint, 2005), seeking to highlight the complexity of the relationships between power, resistance and conflict (MacKillop, 2018).

Thus, power and conflict are not considered a barrier or threat to the exercise of leadership, but rather as evidence of the existence of different alternatives and paths in the leadership process (MacKillop, 2018), power dynamics that mainstream approaches deny (Collinson & Tourish, 2015).

The prominence of quantitative methods in mainstream research on leadership builds an idea that leadership would be a static, well-defined and universal concept (Toegel & Conger, 2002), creating “the iron cage of personality profiles” of leaders (Ford & Harding, 2007, p. 485), focusing much more on understanding the leader than on leadership itself (Kelly, 2014; Wood, 2005). Poststructuralism avoids this universalism and essentialism by which leadership is found in the leader’s personal qualities or situational characteristics (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). The danger of conceptualizing leadership as a universal object or a set of accepted practices is not to recognize the plurality and contextuality that involve leadership. Leadership is a discursive social construction, not a natural object with its own existence. It is a discourse continuously under construction about practices, contexts and approaches, not an objective science (Carroll et al., 2018). For poststructuralism, leadership is not a tangible object, nor is it a top-down process between stable categories of leaders and followers (Kelly, 2014). Therefore, leadership cannot be conceptualized as a fact, an object or an entity, but as “discursively, historically and contextually constituted practices” (MacKillop, 2018, p. 209). Thus, leadership is the result of a discursive battle in which a particular discourse seeks to be hegemonic, making organizations understood as a space in which discourses and strategies compete with each other to redefine a set of consensus and alliances (MacKillop, 2018), conceiving leadership as an empty signifier (Ford et al., 2008; Kelly, 2014; MacKillop, 2018). Therefore, leadership is a discursive concept that comes to life through language as an empty and floating signifier - that is, leadership “does not signify specific or fixed, but instead serves to create the conditions of possibility for many competing and complementary definitions, meanings and interpretations” (Kelly, 2004, p. 906). Empty signifiers symbolize a “multiplicity of contradictory demands” (MacKillop, 2018, p. 209), characterizing leadership as incompleteness (Kelly, 2014).

The fact that leadership is a discursive battle with multiple meanings makes it an empty signifier. Whatever the technique or method used to understand leadership, there will always be something that exceeds your understanding, a “surplus of magical stuff that makes that thing what it is” (Kelly, 2014, p. 906), never capturing everything that leadership is because the totality of leadership will never be achieved, affirming its incompleteness, characterizing it as an “object whose existence is impossible but which is central to that discourse of which it is a part” (Ford et al., 2008, p. 11). Thus, leadership is an empty signifier explains why leadership resists a definition (Kelly, 2014), becoming a vague term. Leadership does not have a single ontology; operating as an empty signifier it acquires several forms, meanings and ontologies (Kelly, 2014) whereby “the empty signifier ‘leadership’ provides the space for an exercise of power in the form of deciding whose interpretation matters most” (Kelly, 2014, p. 914).

Therefore, for poststructuralism there is a need to consider the cultural and social context in which leadership materializes, highlighting the power relationships by which the subjectivities of leaders and followers are built. Ford (2005, p. 242) states that accepting “someone as leader or recognizing leadership characteristics is as much about what we call the social and cultural context [...]”, because “a social and contextually specific (local) definition of leadership allows us to be receptive to the meanings ascribed to leadership by the community employed within the organization under study”. The organizational, social and cultural context shapes the dynamics of leadership and the ways of understanding leaders and followers (Collinson & Tourish, 2015), establishing leadership as a concept that must be understood at a microsocial level, highlighting specific local and cultural aspects of the context in which it is analyzed (Ford, 2010). For example, although mainstream leadership approaches seek to employ quantitative analysis techniques to generalize the results found, many of these approaches are domestic theories, not universal, as they end up discussing leadership models and behaviours that value and have beliefs and ideologies of American society, with its ideology focused on individualism and the masculine as ideals of leadership (Ford, 2005). The fact that American society favors individual heroism means that the leadership approaches developed in this context end up favoring individual heroic leaders (Collinson & Tourish, 2015). Different groups tend to define leadership in conflicting and contradictory ways (Grint, 2005), demonstrating that the meaning of leadership and its practices differs in each space (MacKillop, 2018). Therefore, the meanings of leadership are specific to each cultural and social context analyzed. Thus, leadership and leader are spatially, temporally and socially constructed realities (Alvesson, 2002) through speeches that convey

power, which makes it possible to emerge different conceptions and understandings of leadership. Thus, “poststructuralist approaches recognize the significance of context and the role and power of discourse in shaping organizational and social practices” (Ford, 2006, p. 79).

Poststructuralist studies on leadership can be classified into two broad categories: (1) identity construction of leaders and followers; and (2) corporal materiality of leadership. The identity construction category focuses on the analysis of themes on (a) power and resistance relationships in leadership processes; (b) an end to the dualistic conception between the identities of leaders versus followers; (c) the emergence of new forms of identity for leaders and followers; and (d) fragmentation of these identities. The category corporal materiality of leadership involves themes that: (a) analyze leadership as a situated corporal practice and its nature embodied; (b) analyze gender identities and their effects on exercising leadership and building leaders; and (c) include micropolitical leadership practices that do not require the physical figure of a leader to occur. Materiality and identity are fundamental aspects for the understanding of the poststructuralist ontology of leadership, crossed by the principles described by Collinson and Tourish (2015) that govern the poststructuralist approach: criticism of the heroic and romantic vision of the leader; focus on power relations; and rethink followers, as will be shown below.

THE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION OF LEADERS AND FOLLOWERS: FRAGMENTATION, POWER AND RESISTANCE

Poststructuralism deconstructs the Western philosophical conception of a unified and coherent subject (Ford, 2006), breaking with the unitary, essential and universal conception of the subject (Ford, 2010) and with the dualism leader versus followers (Collinson, 2006). This concept of the subject in poststructuralist will influence the definition of what leaders and followers are, making one of the central points to understand leadership to be the understanding of how the individual is constituted as a leader and follower. It is worth noting that, seeking to break with the binary logic of thought, poststructuralism does not separate the individual from the social, as mainstream approaches do, considering the positivity of power in the production of identities through a mutual process of identity construction (Collinson, 2006).

Poststructuralism provides new ways of conceiving identity and power (Collinson, 2006), reframing and deconstructing identity categories, highlighting the relevance of building leaders and followers through difference (Ford, 2006). The identities of leaders and followers are constructed within discourses that circulate in discursive formations and local and institutional historical practices (Ford, 2006). Identities are produced within discursive formations by their own enunciative strategies located in specific historical and institutional places. Ultimately, identities are formed by discourse and there is not the production of identities outside the discourse (Ford, 2006). Thus, “identities can be regarded as the meeting point in discourse and practices in which we position ourselves as the social subjects of particular discourses” (Ford, 2006, p. 79). However, the subject occupies at the same time several discursive positions, causing several identities to coexist simultaneously in a single subject (Collinson, 2006). Elements “of these multiple identities may be overlapping and mutually reinforcing, others can be in tension and even incompatible” (Collinson, 2006, p. 183). For example, when researching leaders of a public sector organization, Ford (2006, p. 78) states that their identities are “complex, multifarious, contradictory and ambiguous”, showing the fragmented and antagonistic nature of these identities. While for the mainstream the identities of leaders are unitary, homogeneous, coherent and central (Ford, 2005), poststructuralist approaches affirm the “significance of multiple, contradictory and fragmentary nature of subjectivity [...]” (Ford, 2010, p. 51). Leaders and followers try to shape or adopt their identities according to the portfolio offered by the hegemonic discourses about leadership that circulate (Ford & Harding, 2007), with a relationship between the fact that leadership is a discursive phenomenon with the discursive production of these identities.

Thus, it is the discourses that circulate about leadership that offer the discursive positions that can be occupied for an individual to be formed as a leader or follower, since the discourses are formative of the leader and follower identities (MacKillop, 2018). Therefore, what we depend on the positions made available by discursive practices that produce meanings for our lives (Ford & Harding, 2007). However, the identities produced are contradictory, plural and ambiguous, they are not essential, unitary and universal (Ford, 2006), they do not have an internal coherence (Ford & Harding, 2007), and there are a plurality of subjective positions that leaders and followers occupy at the same time, even if contradictory, changeable and transitory (Ford, 2006). For poststructuralism we simultaneously occupy several antagonistic, multiple, highly ambiguous and fragmented positions of subjects, a confederation of contradictory identities, built by regimes of power and knowledge in processes of

identification and differentiation (Collinson, 2003, 2006) by which “contradictory and multiple discourses construct the leadership identities [...], and these identities are simultaneously compelling and coercive, fluid and constraining” (Ford, 2006, p. 82).

Therefore, identity is never finished or ended product, because the subjective positions offered by the discourse can have a long or temporary duration, because “identities are in constant flux, depending on the changing positions we take up or resist” (Ford, 2006, p. 79), which makes identities always unstable and divided, mainly since the discourse connects the words leader, follower and leadership with history, society and culture (Ford & Harding, 2007). For poststructuralism there is no a priori or pre-social self, as we become subjects only if we occupy the subjective positions made available by language with its social meanings (Ford, 2006), challenging the essential, unified and coherent concept of leader and follower present in the mainstream.

Also, poststructuralism highlights several forms of followers’ identities that are not characterized as docile or domesticated, with the possibility of emerging followers’ identities that act actively, even in subordinate positions, becoming the leader-follower boundaries permeable and unstable. This leader-follower interdependence means that the exercise of power does not only happen in the top-down direction so present in the mainstream (Collinson & Tourish, 2015; Sutherland et al., 2014). There is always the possibility of changes in the direction of the power flow, contradictions and challenges (Collinson, 2011), breaking with the dualism between leaders versus followers that tends to deny followers power, agency and autonomy. The mainstream believes that followers should be docile and that any form of resistance is a bad thing for leadership, considering dissent and resistance from followers somewhat dysfunctional. For poststructuralism resistance, conflict and dissent from followers are important, as they have the potential to provide useful feedback from the leadership exercised (Collinson & Tourish, 2015). Therefore, the dynamics of building followers’ identities are more complex than the mainstream describes, and it should consider that many leaders also occupy the position of followers and are subordinate to other leaders within the organization (Ford, 2005). Leaders are not free agents of power relationships “who enjoy the power and of their positions, but people with complex identities that contain within them forms of coercion and control over the leadership self” (Ford, 2010, p. 52), declaring that power and agency are not the property of leaders (Collinson & Tourish, 2015). In poststructuralism, the leader-follower relationship is interdependent, not asymmetric, because leadership “is co-constructed, a product of sociohistorical and collective meaning making, and negotiated on an ongoing basis through a complex interplay among leadership actors, be they designed or emergent leaders, managers and / or followers” (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010, p. 172).

Thus, the leaders and follower’s agency are neither voluntaristic nor deterministic, as it must recognize “the importance of both structures (avoiding voluntarism) and agency (avoiding determinism)” (Collinson, 2006, p. 180). Resistance is exercised by multiple voices of fragmented identities and not by essential and unified categories of leaders and followers (Thomas & Davies, 2005a). Resistance operates in poststructuralism at the microsocial level of subjectivities and meanings (Thomas & Davies, 2005b) rather than in a macrosocial reaction to repressive power. Thus, resistance operates in a subtle, hidden and multidirectional way at the microsocial level, not operating in a linear and unidirectional way (Thomas & Davies, 2005b). Thomas and Davies (2005a) claim that there is no resistance derived from an essentialist perspective of oppressing identities, establishing resistance as micropolitical practices. Resistance “arising from the micro-level negotiations taking place between the subject positions offered within this script (and others), which may result in adaptation or re-writing of the script” (Thomas & Davies, 2005a, p. 717). Thus, resistance operates on a smaller scale at the local level, aiming to destabilize truths, challenging normalized discourses and subjectivities. Poststructuralism favors local analyzes of the relationships between subjectivities and resistance rather than large universal and revolutionary emancipatory projects. Its focus is on discursive forms of resistance that defy normalizing and unjust discourses, seeking to reframe and deconstruct subjectivities and meanings considered natural (Thomas & Davies, 2005a).

Resistance does not mean action or behaviour against an oppressive power, but the production of new meanings and subjectivities. For poststructuralism, resistance must be understood and analyzed in the production of meanings that offer different identity and subjective forms by which “individuals struggle to create, appropriate and transform discourse [...]” (Thomas & Davies, 2005b, p. 684). Followers and leaders are not merely passive recipients of the discourses that form them as subjects, and everyone is capable of exerting micropolitics of resistance (Thomas & Davies, 2005b). Even though they are constructed by

discourse, individuals have a resistant self that derives from the clash between contradictory subjective positions and social practices (Thomas & Davies, 2005a). Therefore, resistance “is understood as a constant process of adaptation, subversion and reinscription of dominant discourses” fostered “by the contradictions, weakness and gaps, between alternative subject positions” (Thomas & Davies, 2005b, p. 687). Thus, the analysis of resistance in poststructuralism focuses on the re-signification of identities and meanings (Thomas & Davies, 2005b).

Another relevant aspect of understanding poststructuralist ontology is the materiality of leadership. The centrality of the leader’s physical body to exist leadership and the leader’s generalized corporeality are problematized by poststructuralism. Thus, the next topic will address the relationship between gender and leadership to later address why poststructuralism leadership does not depend on the leader’s physical existence to exist.

THE BODILY MATERIALITY OF LEADERSHIP

The subject conceived by the Western philosophical tradition is a subject without a body because in the search for a universal subject this tradition disregards bodily aspects in the constitution of the leader, such as gender and race. Mainstream theories, influenced by this tradition, do not consider the importance of bodily aspects in leadership, considering leaders such as “sites of disembodied traits, characteristics and abilities” (Ford et al., 2017, p. 1553), considering leadership a commodity that can be aggregated to an individual (Carroll et al., 2018). Therefore, leadership is conceived as a product of individuals who exhibit certain traits, behaviours or styles (Sutherland et al., 2014). However, this universal vision of leadership means that leaders are always “described and represented by somebody or something else” (Kelly, 2014, p. 906), disregarding gendered aspects that affect leadership, constructing the leader with only a single face: the heterosexual American heroic white man.

Contrarily, poststructuralism states that leadership is a materially situated bodily practice, affected by places, discourses and power relations in which it materializes: leadership “is embodied - leadership is practiced through and between bodies [...]” (Pullen & Vacchani, 2013, p. 315), establishing also which bodies are abject for the exercise of leadership. Thus, leadership has an embodied nature that affects its materiality (Pullen & Vacchani, 2013). Leadership is something materially gendered that “embraces materiality, embodiment and corporeality” (Ford et al., 2017, p. 1553) and gender is used to create senses and meanings about who can be recognized as a leader. It is worth mentioning that mainstream approaches also analyze the relations between gender and leadership. However, most of these studies focus on gender behavioural aspects and their relationship with the leadership styles of women and men, seeking mainly to understand the possible differences and similarities in leadership styles between men and women, and how these styles influence organizational performance (Aarum & Hansson, 2011; Ayman, Korabik & Morris, 2009; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Gipson, Pfaff, Mendelsohn, Catenacci & Burke, 2017). Ford (2006, 2010) highlights that, concerning these mainstream studies, poststructuralism allows a more subjectivist interpretation of leadership, analyzing in the speeches given the complex relations between gender, psyche and self. It shows, therefore, that leadership works differently between men and women, unraveling the power relations that establish the male dominance by which women are considered inappropriate leaders or without credentials (Marshall, 2007).

In the mainstream, a patriarchal model of leadership prevails and keeps in operation an entire androgen device that favors the construction of the image of the leader and leadership as being of superheroic men and male behaviours (Collinson & Tourish, 2015; Ford, 2010), perpetuating unitary hegemonic conceptions of subjectivity and identity that maintain androcentrism in organizations (Ford, 2006). These discourses reproduce gender asymmetries in organizations, valuing masculinity. This makes mainstream literature more of masculinity literature, reinforcing individualism, competitiveness, aggressiveness, rational logic, manipulation and control as essential, true and legitimate practices for exercising leadership (Ford, 2005, 2010). It is noteworthy that, for poststructuralism, not only leaders have a gendered body, but also their followers (Collinson & Tourish, 2015), demonstrating that gender asymmetry expresses itself when the mainstream attributes to the leader a dominant role, therefore masculine, while followers are described as subordinate and passive - that is, an expression of the feminine (Collinson, 2006).

In the mainstream, leadership is an activity carried out by heterosexual white men (Collinson & Tourish, 2015; Marshall, 2007), reproducing historical gender inequalities (Marshall, 2007). This androcentrism present in the mainstream causes male experiences to be considered those of all leaders, conceiving the theory of leadership as a male theory in which leaders are considered individuals “with male stereotypic powers, attitudes and obligations” (Ford, 2005, p. 243), reifying the masculine as the ideal for leaders, managers and workers (Ford, 2005), and establishing the masculine body as a natural ideal model of leadership while producing the intelligibility that the masculine is a neutral body. In this process, the leader is disembodied and constituted as a disembodied being, describing the ideal leader as “a disembodied and rational figure, one which fits more closely with the cultural images of masculinity rather than femininity” (Ford, 2006, p. 81).

The conception of leadership as a naturally masculine attribute, on the one hand, establishes leaders as heroes (Collinson & Tourish, 2015), but never heroines (Fletcher, 2004), naturalizing the premises that leadership is masculine (Davies, Yarrow & Syed, 2020; Ford, 2010). On the other hand, while men are conceived disembodied, women are constituted as possessing a body and the Other of that relationship. Female characteristics are considered a threat to the organization and need to be tackled so that the organization remains rational, objective and competitive. Consequently, the presence of women leaders means that individual and collective strategies are used by both men and women to reestablish the “neutral” order of threatened gender (Gerhardi, 1995). Women try to perform the masculine to pass for one of the “boys”, an “honorary man”, adopting masculine styles of leadership (Ford, 2006). This makes several poststructuralist works (Calás & Smirchich, 1991; Collinson, 2006; Ford, 2005, 2010; Ford et al., 2017; Marshall, 2007) seek to break with this reproduction of gender asymmetries, highlighting body aspects and gender identities in their work, understanding leadership as a broader social process (Ford, 2010).

Materiality refers not only to gender but also to how leadership is materialized and constituted in a specific context. The mainstream believes that leadership only materializes with the existence of a leader. Thus, there is leadership only if there are leaders, and an organization without leaders is an organization without leadership (Sutherland et al., 2014). Studying leadership is studying individuals who have characteristics considered essential to shape the leader-followers relationship, either through their traits, behaviours or individual charisma, making mainstream approaches focus much more on understanding the leader than on the leadership itself (Kelly, 2014). Poststructuralism avoids the privilege of the leader in the conception of leadership (Thomas & Davies, 2005a), considering leadership a social phenomenon, not an individual one (Kelly, 2014), whereby leadership materiality is defined as a process instead of a phenomenon dependent exclusively on the individual existence of a leader, and there may even be leadership without a leader (Sutherland et al., 2014), breaking with the need attributed to the individual leader to materialize the leadership so present in mainstream approaches with their heroes. Leadership “does not exist within a person, or even within a relationship between bounded figures called leaders and followers. Instead, leadership represents a kind of epiphenomenon that organizes and determines our experience of social reality and our experience of ourselves” (Kelly, 2014, p. 908). In this way, leadership is shifted from a phenomenon about individual actors to a social organization.

Thus, power and authority are not in the hands of an individual but are shared, constituting leadership as a micropolitics (Kelly, 2014), making “leadership into a social reality rather than a physical one [...]” (Kelly, 2014, p. 911), breaking with the concept of leadership as an object with its own agency, causing a decentralization movement that makes it possible to understand leadership as a way of organizing an interpretive space of collective actions and responsibilities (Raelin, 2011).

In mainstream approaches, leaders, through their charisma, their behaviours and their attitudes, shape leadership, establishing it as an individual phenomenon, while in poststructuralism leadership is a social and discursive phenomenon (Kelly, 2014). Leadership “is a process between rather than discrete entities either side that characterizes the ontological structure of leadership” (Kelly, 2014, p. 909). Thus, leadership is “a set of multiple and changing practices, pragmatically deployed by organizational subjects to re / draw alliances and, ultimately, exercise power” (MacKillop, 2018, p. 206). The dynamics between these practices allow leadership not to depend on the figure of a leader to exist, that is, “just because an organization is leaderless, it does not necessarily mean that it is also leadershipless” (Sutherland et al., 2014, p. 759). For example, Sutherland et al. (2014) when analyzing social movements demonstrate how these organizations have leadership, despite not physically having a

leader, demonstrating that there is no need for a leader for leadership to exist. Because it is based ontologically on the belief that there is only leadership if there is a leader, the mainstream cannot explain the leadership process of the various social movements that have emerged in recent years, such as the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement or the 20 cent demonstrations in Brazil. Poststructuralism, by decentralizing the leader of the leadership process, offers an ontology that makes it possible to understand these contemporary phenomena.

CONCLUSION

Leadership becomes an even more relevant topic in the current context in which democracies are at risk. Western (2008, p. 21) points out that “critical theorists must go beyond identifying ‘bad leadership practice’ and aim to create and support successful ethical frameworks for leadership”. Thus, this article sought to analyze how poststructuralism can contribute to the formation of an ethical paradigm about leadership, analyzing its ontological aspects. When considering that power and leadership are not the property of leaders, breaking with the mainstream unidirectional logic of the mainstream that disregards agency, resistance and autonomy from other organizational members, poststructuralism conceives leadership as a relational and multidirectional phenomenon. The leadership ontology in poststructuralism aligns with Western values of democracy, to promote a better world (Kelly, 2014). Thus, poststructuralism highlights the complexity of the relations of power, resistance and conflict (MacKillop, 2018), resignifying the concept of leadership as a space of “absent presence through which individual and collective desires for leadership are given expressions” (Kelly, 2014, p. 905), breaking with the leader versus follower dualistic frontier (Collinson, 2011), moving away from the analysis of heroic individuals.

Most leadership studies are still related to charismatic/transformational and traits approach, seeking to highlight tales of individual heroes and charismatic and transactional skills of leaders that promote effective organizational change (Dinh et al., 2014; Herold, Fedor, Caldwell & Liu, 2008). Poststructuralism is opposed to this vision of leadership by showing that leadership is not in the hands of an individual, conceiving leadership as a multidirectional social process and mutually constructed by multiple actors in the organization, not having as a starting point the traits or charisma of a leader (Kelly, 2014). For poststructuralism, leadership is a micropolitics that organizes collective actions and responsibilities (Raelin, 2011), and therefore it must be understood in the context in which it is analyzed. The social and cultural context shapes the dynamics of leadership according to their specificities. Therefore, leadership is a historical discursive construction located in each time and space and need to consider the cultural and social context, highlighting the power relationships by which identities and materiality of leadership are built. Thus, the discourse acquires relevance in poststructuralism to understand how senses and meanings about leadership are constructed and materialized.

Poststructuralism - by focusing on the analysis of identity and discursive micropolitics to understand leadership, and when considering leadership as a local and temporal phenomenon - allows the emergence of different and different definitions of what leadership is according to the context analyzed, characterizing leadership as an empty signifier. However, considering leadership as an empty signifier does not weaken or eliminate the phenomenon itself, as incompleteness and fragmentation give longevity to leadership discourses. Thus, leadership is not an object or an entity, but a process of becoming that can take many forms and involve different actors (Kelly, 2014). Leadership is a socially constructed discursive phenomenon through constant interactions and negotiations in a process of creating meanings and realities that involve knowledge and power (Collinson, 2011).

Finally, in terms of limitations, this article made a critical analysis of leadership using for this the poststructuralism, one of the possible Critical Leadership Studies (CLS), to understand this phenomenon critically. Other critical approaches would make it possible to rethink mainstream ontology about leadership, such as Marxism, anarchism, feminism and labor process theory. Concerning a future poststructuralist research agenda on leadership, the development of empirical research in other organizational kinds, beyond to those developed in social movements, becomes relevant to understand in other sorts of organizations the process by which leadership is established as a micropolitics that does not depend on the existence of a leader. Furthermore, since leadership is an embodied process, there is still a gap in research on bodily practices related to leadership in transgender bodies and people with disabilities.

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