PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHOPATHOLOGY RELATED TO LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. This brief, panoramic contribution deals with the psychology and psychopathology of leaders and followers of various types and fields. **Material and method.** Scope review based on the relevant, detailed documentary search in PubMed and Google Scholar until January 2025, from which n= 94 references considered the most relevant have been selected. **Results and discussion.** The question of leadership is complex and ambiguous, so for practical purposes it will henceforth be assimilated into the concepts of leadership, management and others. The heterogeneous findings and the appropriate qualitative interpretative considerations are summarised below. The personalities of leaders and followers are interdependent. It has been documented that the exaltation of leadership attracts and legitimises the preferences of the more narcissistic audience, and that followers or subordinates often develop a flexible psychology that allows them to accept different leaders in different contexts. The mental and behavioural dysfunctions, traits and disorders of historical leaders often form a complicated web of adaptive and maladaptive behavioural characteristics. Among leaders, it is hypothetically not uncommon to find personality patterns that are considered dark. For its part, authoritarian leadership is positively related to unethical follower behaviour. Ideally, leadership, in which leader–follower interpersonal neural synchronisation is proven, should be helpful and ethical, as well as supported by neuroscientific knowledge. **Conclusions.** A gap in adequate up-to-date research knowledge on the psychology and psychopathology of leaders and followers was revealed, which requires further research.

Keywords: deceptive behaviour; leader identification; authentic leadership; political leadership; personality; health policy; mental health

RESUMEN

Psicología y psicopatología relacionadas con el liderazgo. Introducción. La presente aportación panorámica y breve versa sobre la psicología y psicopatología de líderes y seguidores de múltiples tipos y ámbitos. **Material y método.** Revisión del alcance basada en la pertinente y detallada búsqueda documental en PubMed y Google Scholar hasta enero de 2025, de la que se han seleccionado n= 94 referencias consideradas más relevantes. **Resultados y discusión.** La cuestión del liderazgo es compleja y ambigua, por lo que a efectos prácticos se le asimilarán en adelante los conceptos de jefatura, dirección y otros. A continuación, se exponen sintéticamente los heterogéneos hallazgos y las oportunas consideraciones interpretativas cualitativas. Las personalidades de líderes y seguidores son interdependientes. Se ha documentado que la exaltación del liderazgo atrae y legitima las preferencias de la audiencia más narcisista, y que los seguidores o subordinados suelen desarrollar una psicología flexible que les permite aceptar diferentes líderes en distintos contextos. Las disfunciones, rasgos y trastornos mentales y del comportamiento de los líderes históricos suelen conformar una red complicada de características conductuales adaptativas y desadaptativas. Entre los líderes, hipotéticamente no será infrecuente hallar patrones en su personalidad considerados oscuros. Por su parte, el liderazgo autoritario se relaciona positivamente con el comportamiento poco ético de los seguidores. Idealmente el liderazgo, en el que está constatada la sincronización neuronal interpersonal líder-seguidor, debería ser servicial y ético, además de apoyado en el conocimiento neurocientífico. **Conclusiones.** Se ha evidenciado una brecha de conocimiento investigador actualizado adecuado sobre la psicología y psicopatología de líderes y liderados, que requiere nuevas investigaciones.

Palabras clave: conducta engañosa; identificación del líder; liderazgo auténtico; liderazgo político; personalidad; política sanitaria; salud mental

INTRODUCTION

Leadership, a common term in the social sciences, is a concept that is convoluted, slippery, complex and multifaceted. It is also an important issue in all kinds of past and contemporary social contexts and entities, including crucial health ones (Cheong et al., 2019; Jerjes, 2024; Johns, 2024). Being a boss does not guarantee leadership, nor does being a leader imply having a hierarchical position in the organisation. However, for simplification purposes, both terms and related terms will be used in this contribution as if they were equivalent. The concepts of people led, followers, subordinates and other similar concepts will also be assimilated. In the style of leaders cross-cultural differences exist in order to revitalize the activities of groups, collectivities or organisations. The personality of both the leader and the people led is fundamental, and the emotions of the leader will be a significant element of influence on the latter (Paramova & Blumberg, 2017). Followers also tend to idealise organisational leaders (Cloutier & Barling, 2023). Even today, as it has always been, the question remains: why are there so many flawed leaders? (Hogan et al., 1994; Aycan et al., 2022) However, above the leader there usually has to be a purpose that justifies the commitment, as well as a management or co-leadership team that promotes certain values and attitudes.

This brief, panoramic bibliographical review does not intend to explain more or less in detail the main perspectives of the numerous studies and analyses published on leadership styles in various fields. Given that research on political, educational and work/business leadership, as well as religious leadership, make up the vast majority of those studies published, this contribution will refer to them only incidentally. The main aim here is to provide a current global perspective on the psychology and eventual psychopathology of the people involved, whatever their area or sociological field of action. This concerns the prominent, problematic personality traits and patterns hypothetically most expected in leaders, bosses or managers and their followers, as well as the eventual personality disorders or difficulties that could probably be appropriately diagnosed in an undetermined but significant number of them.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

A comprehensive, synthetic and rapid qualitative and panoramic narrative literature study or scoping review (scoping study or scoping exercise) based on an ad hoc selection of the main qualified publications dealing with

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the issue of leadership in general. The basic question has been: what is known about the psychology and psychopathology related to leadership? An attempt has been made to approximate the research as closely as possible to what is covered in the 2018 PRISMA extension for scoping reviews (Tricco et al., 2018). Given the limitations inherent in the brevity chosen for this study-essay, the aim has been to achieve a rigorous and broad preliminary understanding of the issue, rather than a deep and detailed one that could answer specific questions. To this end, the relatively new scoping review model has been followed, in the form of research based thematic content analysis (Chapman et al., 2015; Im et al, 2023).

The publications, selected up to January 2025, have been collected after using multiple and varied search descriptors in PubMed, a standard database specialising in health sciences, or in the Google Scholar search engine for academic documents, which includes those of the so-called 'citizen science' movement (Sanz et al., 2021), a name that is as anachronistic as it is constantly evolving. Among others, the following descriptors have been used generally combined: Ambition Theory; Cheating Behavior; Dark Personality; Deception; Dominance; Emotional Intelligence; Followership; Healthcare Leaders; Ideology; Interpersonal Perceptions; Interpersonal Relations; Leader Emotion; Leadership; Leadership Motivation; Leadership Styles; Leadership Theories; Leader Effectiveness; Leader Prototypes; Lying; Mental Health; Narcissism; Personality; Personality Disorders; Prestige; Self-esteem; Social Identification; Social Power; Supervisor Support; Veracity; and Well-being.

In the findings of the present study, framed in interpretive epistemology (Patiño & Goulart, 2020), there is a lack of experimental publications, longitudinal research and qualitative approaches. The number of references finally included is n= 94. As eligibility criteria, the quality of the contributions and other sources of information as well as the relevance of the title and abstract have been prioritised. The major limitation of this research is the predominance of grey literature on the topic explored. Also, the inevitable subjectivity of the author, which we have tried to alleviate with the criteria of several competent and expert external reviewers, who have preferred anonymity.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Usual psychology of leaders and followers

Effective leadership (which seeks to improve the organisation, not necessarily transform it) and psychology are intrinsically intertwined, as so-called emotional intelligence (a popular term coined by Daniel Goleman in 1995) (Goleman, 1995; Fletcher et al., 2024) and communication skills are fundamental to any leader. Successful political communication in all domains involves a combination of authenticity, coherence and adaptability in a complex, media-driven world of interaction between political action, relational dealings and society (Sacaluga & Vargas, 2024). In political games, the good reputation of leaders is an invaluable asset (Bjørnå, 2021). CEOs or integral leaders in the highly complex health sector, for their part, acknowledge mixed perspectives on their participatory role in social and political issues (Meltzer et al., 2024). It has been suggested that under situational threat of economic uncertainty more dominant managers are preferred over other respected and admired candidates (Kakkar & Sivanathan, 2017), and that followers strategically promote dominant individuals to leadership to enhance their hostile capacity against other groups (Petersen & Laustsen, 2020; Du et al., 2024). It has been suggested the existence of four types of followers, resulting from the combination of two dimensions, support for and challenge to the leader (Chaleff, 2009; Arbelo et al., 2024).

Followers' individual and group cognitive-affective differences can be related to their ratings of leadership behaviours (Wang et al., 2019). The self-esteem of more or less passive supporters, admirers, subordinates or unconditional followers apparently reliably predicts their perceptions of the leadership ability of authoritative and prestigious leaders (Mercadante et al., 2023). Followers with low self-esteem or low basic self-evaluation may suffer more from their leaders when the latter are narcissistic (a construct that is heterogeneous and multidimensional), as they perceive them as abusive and self-absorbed, with superiority and entitlement beliefs. However, the

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more opportunities followers have to observe their narcissistic leaders, who tend to be expert speakers and creative strategists (so, if they are also productive, they could be socially very useful), the more they will experience the toxic behaviour of these leaders and perceive them as less effective in transforming people, a precondition for changing the collective or organisation as well (Nevicka et al., 2018a,b). After getting a wrong outcome to their decisions, grandiose narcissistic leaders will be more likely to blame others, maintaining self-confidence (O'Reilly & Hall, 2021). That said, leaders' exaltation attracts and legitimises audience preferences that are also more narcissistic (Steffens & Haslam, 2022, 2024).

Followers or subordinates often develop a flexible psychology that allows them to recognise different leaders in different contexts, according to their needs (de-Waal et al., 2020). At the same time, leadership style influences the adherence of subordinates (Molero et al., 2013). Identity is constructed in interaction with other people and environments. The relational identification of subordinate to leader, boss or supervisor and the relational exchange between leader and member have different and important effects on followers' attitudes and behaviours (Zhong et al., 2024). The degree to which leaders are perceived as selfish, pursuing personal goals and lacking concern for the interests of others has been linked to declines over time in leadership effectiveness (Lynch & Benson, 2024), as such leaders are often primarily interested in exerting control. The narcissistic leader's need to feel admired has also been associated with their presumed status-seeking orientation (Zeigler et al., 2019)

It may be, according to recent empirical findings, that power, a concept considered in the literature mainly as specific social power (as distinct from having legitimate authority), often enhances the leader's cognitive functioning (Yin & Smith, 2020). Leader power can make people more effective in their efforts to achieve situationally relevant goals (situational leadership) and reflects control over resources and the ability to influence others through rewards and punishments. In the quest for prestige and guidance, or drive typical of leader-related power relations, different possible profiles have been described: ultra-dominance, prestigious leadership (the one most likely to actually become a boss or leader), and social power. Ultra-dominants tend to be more narcissistic, even if subordinates do not consider them to be the best leaders (Li et al, 2024). Another model has been proposed that could help describe four motivational profiles of the boss or manager: the imperator and the leader, both with high power orientations; and the partisan and the controller, both with low power orientations (Carvalho, 2024).

Psychopathology in certain leaders and followers

The historical sectarian, charismatic, grandiose, arrogant and hypersensitive leaders such as Jim J. D. Koresh, Charles Manson, Yahweh ben-Yahweh, Shoko Asahara and Aum Shinrikyo, with their own psychopathologies and dramatic effects on the mental health and integrity of many followers and even non-followers, are well known in different fields. We should also remember, as different examples, the concepts of collective neurosis by Sigmund Freud and Jean M. Charcot, the pathology of culture by Harold G. Koenig and Raphael M. Bonelli, or the positive vision that spirituality represents in people's lives, by Carl Jung and Viktor Frankl (Akimoto, 2006; Tu, 2014; Gallardo et al., 2022). The so-called Hybris or Hubris Syndrome, also called Hibris, deserves a singular mention. It has been proposed as a non-organic transformation or personality difficulty associated with disinhibition, which can develop after a person has held substantial power for a considerable amount of time (Selten, 2023). Already Sophocles, in his tragic myth of Oedipus, warned about the dangers of arrogance in the fifth century BCE.

Certain personality disorders or dysfunctions in leaders may impair general goals, while, depending on environmental circumstances, they may facilitate others (Gutiérrez & Valdesoiro, 2023). Indeed, such dysfunctions often form a complex web of adaptive (the successful phenotype) and maladaptive traits. The dominance condition is important in multiple psychopathological states. Psychopathic traits in particular, especially those related to social dominance and that are devoid of fear, have been moderately positively associated with holding leadership positions. There is some evidence for the importance of social dominance in various multidiagnostic forms of psychopathology (Johnson et al., 2021). In the ideological community domain, public figures increasingly tend

to promote their own interests, under the guise of the claimed interest of the collective, as well as in the name of scientific observation and reasoning. In this respect, however, idealistic theoretical approaches are to be considered literally as instrumental with a purpose, which is antithetical to true scientific thinking. An example of such corporate idealistic approaches is any subjective partisan proposal, among other possible, more or less shared ones (Lammers, 2023).

Alternatively to the mental health morbidity of many organisational leaders, it has been suggested that the widespread and common concern about their psychopathic tendencies may be exaggerated (Lilienfeld et al., 2014; Landay et al., 2019; Amos & Halasz, 2023; Bertolín, 2024). What is certain is that in the context of political clientelism, including evidently that of political parties themselves, evidence has been found of the so-called truth bias, whereby observers are likely to judge their leaders' statements as true, even if they are false (Mattes et al., 2023). All in all, it seems an undeniable fact that the development of ambition, common in a multitude of leaderships, directorates, leaderships, and so on, is strongly influenced by social, cultural and demographic factors, and evidence suggests that genetic and biological elements also contribute (Yager & Kay, 2023).

The symptomatology of so-called psychopathy (psychopathic personality disorder, psychopathic constitutional state, or personality disorder without personality specification according to the current International Classification of Diseases, ICD-11), whether primary and clinical or subclinical in leaders, will most likely be characterised by insensitivity, superficial affect, manipulation and superficial charm. Such psychopathy could even be considered as a beneficial adaptive evolutionary strategy. Whether or not it is morbidly present in certain leaders, primary psychopathy is also often related to the construct usually referred to as 'Machiavellianism', which involves cunning, manipulative skills and the desire to gain power or social status by any means possible. Machiavellianism is based on deception and involves cynicism, callousness and skilful manipulation of others (Gervais et al., 2013; Ene et al., 2022; Turi et al., 2022; Stavrova et al., 2024; Bertolín, 2025). However, power motivation is considered a key component of successful leadership and can be both dominant (associated with antisocial behaviour) and prosocial, constituting in most cases a unique and peculiar profile for each leader (Li et al., 2024). In particular, the traits of the psychologically dark personality include narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy, which are often interrelated. The core of so-called dark leadership consists mainly of three additional negative and complex traits: dishonesty (dishonest profiles exhibit different strategies), disgust and carelessness, and are conceptualised as personality traits aligned with low degrees of humility, kindness and scrupulousness (Muris et al., 2017; de-Vries, 2018). Regressing social groups intuitively seek malignant narcissistic leadership (described by Erich Fromm in 1964) (Froom, 1964) and personalities with these characteristics are prone to aspire to the corresponding role (Kernberg, 2020; Hussain et al., 2021). It should be noted, according to ICD-11, that authentic psychopathic traits cannot and should not be explained solely by social or cultural factors, including socio-political conflict.

As far as followers are concerned, it has been found that people can reduce their own uncertainty by identifying with groups and following leaders, even autocratic leaders with behaviour that transgresses established norms (Guillén et al., 2023). Authoritarian and despotic leadership (which seeks primarily to maintain dominance and suppress dissent) in social organisations is positively related to unethical behaviour of subordinates or followers (Rui & Qi, 2021). Leaders' ambitions can increase pressure on subordinates' performance, which in turn promotes subordinates' cheating behaviour (Adeel et al., 2023). In a paradoxically similar way, the leader's humility triggers a sense of power in his or her followers. Machiavellianism in the latter fosters the relationship between a sense of power and selfish behaviour, and weakens the relationship between a sense of power and prosocial behaviour (Chen et al., 2022). In group or social collective Machiavellianism, the fundamental motivations are the rewards generated by dominance interactions and behaviours, whereby the behaviours of others are controlled or dictated (Brecht & Hu, 2021). Modern models called 'relational approaches' offer a novel sociological horizon, in line with Paul Hersey and Kenneth Blanchard's Situational Leadership Model (Schermerhorn, 1997), which emphasises the social process of leader-follower or leader-member interaction, which is capable of generating

mutual adaptive benefits (Psychogios, 2021). It has to be assumed, however, that shared adaptive advantages may occur at the expense of truth (Graham, 2020). This is fully in line with the neurobiological hypothesis of the so-called 'social brain' (Dunbar, 2024), as well as with the influential Social Exchange Theory (Ahmad et al., 2023).

Ethical quality of leadership

The real complexity of public moral dispositions needs to be recognised, as political attitudes are often associated with moral-ethical concerns. Fact-checking by those in leadership will improve the accuracy of popular beliefs, but will probably not change the attitudes and preconceptions of followers (Porter et al., 2024). Extraversion appears to be the most consistent correlate of the leader (Judge et al., 2002). The quality of the leader's individual relationships with followers has been related to the leader's reactivity to stress and anxiety and, consequently, it has been proposed that leaders should be attentive to their own emotional behaviours (Moin et al., 2021). On the other hand, we know that fair treatment and participation in decision-making, which are constitutive of ethical leadership, improve subordinates' work engagement (Islam et al., 2024). Ethical leadership also significantly avoids the frequent and common concealment of relevant knowledge (Xie et al., 2023). In healthcare, leadership that is not only ethical but also transformational will motivate and guide team members to drive organisational change and innovation, improve patient care standards and overall team performance (Wu et al., 2024).

Leaders must emphasise that the means they employ to achieve the vision they propose to their collective is as important as its execution. With regard to the media, they seem to portray political opposition leaders in a more negative light depending on their editorial stance (Gallardo et al., 2024). Thus, this can contribute to establishing a certain organisational culture, as every organisation has a characteristic set of knowledge (Milesi, 2024). Relevant attributes of good leadership have been identified, which are: service, self-awareness, transparency, balanced processing, internalised moral perspective, ethical persuasive techniques, shared decision-making and moral-ethical courage (Almutairi et al., 2024). The controversial Goldwater Rule (adopted in 1973, alluding to the US senator of the same name), as an ethical guideline of the American Psychiatric Association (Martin, 2017; Appelbaum, 2017; Smith et al., 2023), which prohibits psychiatrists from giving opinions to the media about contemporary public figures whom they have not personally examined, deserves a separate but important mention. In any case, the leader's relationship to the form of social organisation ensures efficiency in achieving collective goals.

Neurobiology of leadership

Alongside the application of appropriate ethos, improved leadership should be structured on the basis of neuroscientific knowledge. Indeed, leadership has been successfully predicted on the basis of interpersonal neural synchronisation, which is significantly higher between leaders and followers than between followers alone (Jiang et al., 2015). The innovative, multidisciplinary and multilevel concept in human resource management known as neuroleadership was coined by David Rock in 2008 with his SCARF model, an acronym for: status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness (Rock, 2008). It aims to create knowledge, manage stress (sometimes called neuromanagement), foster good relationships and fairness in the collective being led, as well as being aware that these behaviours affect the brain. This can determine the most important qualities of the leader and improve leadership effectiveness.

Neuroscience, a concept in which the aforementioned Rock, as well as Jeffrey Schwartz are referents (Rock & Schwartz, 2024), was developed as a field of knowledge in the second half of the last century. For neuroscience, stimulating skills such as stress regulation and stress management will improve the necessary cognitive flexibility and critical thinking skills of leaders or managers (Frisina, 2024). Neuroleadership, as a propositional trend, is a tool that seeks to understand the processes of brain functioning more broadly, as it observes the style of leadership (especially social leadership, typical of the emerging cognitive and organisational neuroscience) (Boukarras et al., 2022) through emotional intelligence and the different neuroscientific specialisations of health.

Neuroleadership incorporates and brings together verbal and non-verbal elements, knowledge, attention, observation and repetition, and aims to help personalise each leader's message as much as possible. We know that the shared conviction that a leader is instrumental in transforming, inspiring and motivating his or her people triggers specific neural activations in the followers' reward system or brain circuitry (a system that anatomically runs from the ventral tegmental area to the limbic system) (Bergner et al., 2022; Paithal & Satpathy, 2024). The study of neuroplasticity aims to understand how these biological mechanisms have an impact on the functioning of the nervous system and, therefore, on the behaviour of subjects, as cognition and behaviour are emergent properties of brain systems.

Technocracy is not antithetical to ideology, although it is not uncommon in applied scientific fields to have to choose between depoliticised technocratic leaderships or leaders, or politically more convenient opportunistic leaders. We have known for more than half a century, with Gregorio Klimovsky, that political and scientific actions are concepts and tasks that should not be confused or mixed, because science is based on a process of testing hypotheses (Asprella, 2021). The technocratic vision of the merit-based elite leader will favour pragmatic problem-solving through scientific and technical expertise, while rejecting partisan politics as not guaranteeing the common good (Vittori et al., 2024; Greene et al., 2025). Technocratic leaders will be objectively the best in their field, which can be seen in many ways. As an example contrary to what has been mentioned so far, the Spanish Ministry of Health, through the draft bill of the Statutory Staff Framework Statute (Spanish Society of Medical Physics, 2025) wants to reform the law to prevent the heads of public health centres from combining their executive leadership role with private professional activities. Is this not a political decision that undervalues the technical value and benefit to society of the best qualified? In Spain, the Law governing the Basic Statute for Public Employees so far underpins the constitutional principles of equality, merit and ability (Ministry of the Treasury, 2015).

Populist political leaders of convenience may have more followers among their future subordinates and always among the top ideological or political leaders who have appointed or supported them. In medicine and related sciences, at least, professional excellence, which includes renewed lifelong knowledge, integrity, modesty and renunciation of self-interest (personal, family and partisan), obliges managers, technicians and related politicians to promote and protect the interests of others as much as possible. The immediate or reasoned decision of the most qualified technocratic leader will always be preferable to any decision of a leader of convenience, who is probably less competent (Coverdale et al., 2025). Finally, it is worth bearing in mind that, with some exceptions, a leader's social and communication skills can be learned, cultivated or compensated for, but the maximum degree of competence has to be demonstrated, not merely opinionated or predictable. Neuroleadership, to be optimal, will have to operate in a mixture of these and other contexts, although not all are equal, of the same value, or equivalent.

CONCLUSIONS

Our society today is deficient in effective, complete leaders, who need to have and act with power, after having observed, analysed and decided appropriately. Utopically, the leader will have to be able to influence, mobilise and maintain the trust of their followers, so he or she will also have to be creative and committed. But, on the other hand, he or she could also be excessive or destructive, as has very often been and is still the case. After a critical analysis of the widely heterogeneous and important documentary information available, it has been found that the question of the psychology and possible psychopathology of those who make effective bosses, exercising management or leadership, as well as of their subordinates and most unconditional followers, has been little scrutinised. This research has also shown that there is considerable variability and uneven quality in the numerous, albeit insufficient and partial studies published on the subject. Psychological approaches predominate in these contributions and their scientific quality is generally low or very low, so that it can be said that there is currently a certain knowledge gap based on scientific methodology.

Consequently, it is proposed as a potential axis of new future studies, to adequately explore the personality of leaders or managers and their followers in various fields, together (leaders share many common characteristics) or separately. Also, to explore them in greater detail with the research methodologies of the so-called social sciences (with their own methodological and epistemological problems) and with the necessary scientific rigour (in order to be able to estimate the practical and clinical implications of the findings), distancing both, especially in a more scientific way, from rhetoric and ideology. What must be sought is to find the best and exemplary leaders in all situations and collectives, because wanting to lead (which is a common right) is not the same as being able to do so (which is only a selective right). In this sense, and although leadership skills can be learned and developed, when the decision is made to implement any new leadership (which society needs on an ongoing basis) and as a call to action based on both evidence and applied ethics, it will be appropriate to employ strategies that are more based on what is already known by multidisciplinary neuroscience.

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