Violent Innocence: A Contradiction at the Heart of Leadership
Russ Vince and Abdelmagid Mazen
Organization Studies published online 22 January 2014
DOI: 10.1177/0170840613511924

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://oss.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/01/21/0170840613511924

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:
European Group for Organizational Studies

Additional services and information for Organization Studies can be found at:

Open Access: Immediate free access via SAGE Choice

Email Alerts: http://oss.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://oss.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

>> OnlineFirst Version of Record - Jan 22, 2014

What is This?
Violent Innocence: A Contradiction at the Heart of Leadership

Russ Vince
University of Bath, UK

Abdelmagid Mazen
Suffolk University, USA

Abstract
The aim of this article is to inform a shift from the idea that we need to have “better leaders” towards a better appreciation of emotions and power relations that make leadership possible and impossible in practice. The article makes two inter-connected contributions to knowledge. First, “violent innocence” is introduced as a construct that is helpful in understanding inter-personal and organizational processes of projection and denial connected to leadership. Second, the construct is used to comprehend a “structure of innocence” in organizations arising from symbolic violence and connected to destructive relations of power that are accepted as normal. Three illustrations of violent innocence are discussed and linked with contradictions that are integral to leadership in practice. These contradictions emerge from particular dynamics: that leadership is often undertaken in a hostile environment covered up with positivity; that it is informed by strategies that create relations of dependence and domination; that it is inseparable from the exercise and experience of power; and that it is bound up with projective dynamics that connect the “unwanted self” of the leader with systemic processes of destruction. The article concludes with a discussion of the productive consequences of integrating the “dark side” into our understanding of leadership practice.

Keywords
dark side, emotion, leadership, symbolic violence, violent innocence

Imagine an institution of a hundred people. Like so many places, it may be strife-ridden; there are unpleasant rivalries, vicious gossips, and powerful people jockeying for positions of authority. Imagine that its shared fantasy is that it is an admirable place, a cut above comparable institutions. Perhaps I should term this as a shared false-self that conceals the true states of mind, as the place, let’s say, believes it could not survive the truth about itself. But in such a place, though everyone knows how awful some of the dynamics are, each also believes that part of the price of continued admission is to collude with a collective false-self. Although privately, to one’s closest colleagues and spouses, one could say how it really feels to be part of the place, in the public domain one reckons it is best to say that it is ‘inspiring’ or ‘stimulating’

Corresponding author:
Professor Russ Vince, School of Management, University of Bath, Bath, BA2 7AY, UK.
Email: r.vince@bath.ac.uk
to be there. We could say that a violent innocence is present in that each appears innocent of the more disturbing truths that are part of the place. And those who are exceptionally gifted at false-self technique will contribute to the structure of innocence that climatizes the institution”.

(Bollas, 1993, p. 184)

**Introduction**

One reason for studying the “dark side” of organization is to develop a better understanding of the complex emotions and politics that are integral to organizations, as well as their impact on our thoughts and actions within organizational roles. Literature in organizational behaviour suggests that: self-awareness, good listening, high commitment and trust, empowering behaviour and the promotion of fairness, are all integral to effectiveness within leadership roles. With some exceptions (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999; Griffin & O’Leary-Kelly, 2004), the literature is less forthcoming about the ignorance, manipulation, corruption and divisive behaviour of organizational members; or the ways in which individuals in leadership roles might confuse, undermine and dominate others. In order to explore these aspects further, we consider what “dark side” behaviour and dynamics mean for leadership. Part of the problem in making this connection is that leaders often want positive prescriptions to become “better leaders”. They find it difficult to accept that leaders act in contradictory ways; that the desire to facilitate others might sit side-by-side with the compulsion to dominate them; and that normative models are unlikely to accommodate such contradictions. Our assumption is that contradictions are important for understanding leadership because they connect individual leadership behaviour with the complex emotional and political context within which leadership action takes place. The specific concept (and contradiction) we address in this paper is **violent innocence**, and we are engaging with this idea in order to make two inter-connected contributions to knowledge.

Our initial contribution is to introduce and discuss the concept of violent innocence in the context of organization studies. Our aim is to add a new perspective on violence in organizations. Other authors have focused on single themes that identify aspects of everyday organizational violence – for example: violation (Hearn, 2003); hatred (Lazar, 2003); derision (Fay, 2008); contempt (Pelzer, 2005); indignation (Sims, 2005) and bad behaviour (Griffin & Lopez, 2005). However, violent innocence is a concept that allows us to explore the effects of the *masking* of violence in organizations, arising (in part) from the consequences of projective processes associated with the “unwanted self” of the leader. For example, Petriglieri and Stein (2012) address the projective dynamics in leaders’ identity work and their systemic consequences. Individually, “the more the leader’s conscious identity work involves striving to craft and maintain a wanted version of the self, the more unwanted selves are likely to be worked on unconsciously” (p. 1221). Systemically, “since leaders function as sources of meaning making, the unconscious use of others as recipients of unwanted aspects of the self may become a collective *modus operandi* that damages the organization and may even cause its destruction” (p. 1223).

The second part of our contribution is to present violent innocence as an example of symbolic violence in leader/follower relations, providing a focal point around which to discuss the intersection of destructive individual behaviour and organizational dynamics (both emotional and political) that are produced within leadership roles. We connect here to critiques of “positivity” in management and organization studies (Fineman, 2006). More specifically, Collinson (2012) describes “excessive positivity” as a recurrent medium through which power can be enacted in leadership dynamics in an attempt to “purify” leadership and ensure that “questions of power, paradox and contradiction have been disappeared from view” (p. 99). He uses the term “prozac
leadership… to denote and symbolize a widespread social addiction to positivity” (p. 89), the effect of which is a reluctance to consider alternative voices. Through our focus on violent innocence in this paper, we propose that these dynamics arise not only from a conscious reluctance, but also from an unconscious desire to silence negative voices, whether these belong to self or other.

It is important to consider the dark matter that exists alongside “excessive positivity”. It takes a certain violence to conceal the negative or to remove contradictions, uncertainties and complexities in favour of a largely positive image of the self in a leadership role. Such violence is mirrored in organizational dynamics through a solely positive interpretation of organizational values such as “fairness” (see below for an example). In this paper, covert violence is seen as a consequence of a self-image, whether individual or organizational, that strives to be free (innocent) of uncomfortable and destructive self-knowledge. We argue that the avoidance of negative emotions connects with political dynamics in ways that transform intentions. Organizations thus become places where helpfulness may harm and where fairness can create injustice. In the final section of the paper we consider the productive consequences of integrating the “dark side” into our understanding of leadership practice.

**Violent Innocence**

Violent innocence is a form of denial that comes, in part, from the individual’s need to be free: of unwanted feelings, of troubling recognitions, of fears and anxieties, and of others’ expectations, both real and imagined. In an organization, such denial might involve the refusal of one person to validate the negative perceptions that others notice, thus providing opportunities to blame others, to provoke them, or even to disturb or distress them, without having to be blamed, provoked, disturbed or distressed oneself. Violent innocence offers a way in which we can deny our “aggressive inclinations” (Van Fleet & Griffin, 2006) at the same time as implementing them. The violent innocent (consciously or unconsciously) burdens the other with the struggle against his or her denials. This is achieved not through the violent innocent’s denial of the other person’s perception, but rather through the victim’s struggles with attempts to repudiate the violent innocent’s perception. To put it a different way, “the violent innocent sponsors affective and ideational confusion in the other, which he then disavows any knowledge of… this being the true violation” (Bollas, 1993, p. 182). This dynamic is particularly likely to surface in inter-personal authority and power relations, where it seems important, for example, to be right, to save face, and/or to maintain a position of control or advantage in relation to others.

Bollas (1993) developed the construct of violent innocence in order to acknowledge a link between individual and institutional defence mechanisms. Although the construct originated in relation to the individual psyche, we think that it can also describe an aspect of the political dynamics of organizations and organizing. As a psychic mechanism, violent innocence is “a self-idealizing defense that denies one’s own aggression and projects it onto an other, who is then... attacked” (Hollander, 2008, p. 31). Violent innocence can also describe psycho-political dynamics within systems, in particular, “the interface between ideology and mental states that produces citizens’ identification with repressive political trends ” (Hollander, 2008, p. 30). Such identification occurs as dominated agents apply categories constructed from the point of view of the dominant to relations of domination—thereby making them seem politically evident and allowing both the dominant and the dominated to appear innocent of their effects. Bollas (1993) refers to this as “a structure of innocence”—in the sense that such identification can stem from, and contribute to, destructive relations of power that are accepted as normal (“the more disturbing truths that are part of the place”; p. 184). We develop and illustrate both aspects of the construct.
Violent innocence is a psychic mechanism in response to negative feelings about the self. Not being able to tolerate what is negative in oneself necessitates projecting the violent aspects of one’s own unconscious onto the other: “which then justifies a permanent retaliatory mechanism. This is doubly emboldening first because others are bad in your view (and you are not), and second because your vision of yourself as not bad depends on you endlessly projecting onto them and destroying in them what it is you can’t bear to see about yourself” (Jacqueline Rose, cited in Bailes & Aksan, 2008, p. 1). As a consequence, violent innocence makes it difficult for individuals “to take responsibility for their own aggression, to feel guilt and remorse and to be able to make creative reparation in an effort to prevent escalating cycles of violence” (Hollander, 2008, p. 31).

As a systemic concept, Hollander (2011) uses violent innocence to analyse the psycho-political dynamics of acquiescent followers (bystanders) in an authoritarian regime. She observed that, through followers’ experience of fear, intimidation or through ambivalence, they became part of “a collective form of projective identification” that was driven by “delusional indignation” (p. 150). These projections served to demonize opposition and helped to undermine followers’ own abilities to interrogate the institutions and ideologies that surrounded them. Under such political structures it becomes increasingly difficult for followers to “elaborate the ways in which this process traumatizes” both the self and others (Hollander, 2011, p. 161) because of the perceived risks or actual dangers of doing so. Although the dynamics of state terror are unlikely to be mirrored in organizations, the structural consequences of overly dependent follower behaviour are common. Dependent followers (who follow blindly, unquestioningly) can give rise to highly assertive, individually orientated leaders; and the leadership behaviour and actions of controlling leaders further reinforces the dependency of followers (Kets de Vries, 2006).

We can illustrate these systemic dynamics further. Gerstein and Shaw (2008) identify strong hierarchies and rigid group boundaries as organizational influences on “bystander” behaviour. These structures support leaders’ inability or unwillingness to accept dissent, and followers’ difficulties in moving beyond passivity in the face of repressive power relations. Vince and Saleem (2004) provide an example of the endurance of such a structure in a UK local authority—where managers’ collective emotions associated with an authoritarian Chief Executive (the need for self-protection, caution about speaking out in public, persistent blaming of others) remained in place for his successor, despite a dramatic change in the espoused leadership style and approach. Such dynamics produce political and organizational consequences. Acquiescent followers can become locked into dependent behaviour or “crimes of obedience” (Hinrichs, 2007) and those who do not acquiesce can struggle to move beyond mere gestures of defiance or “decaffeinated resistance” (Contu, 2008). Fears about the consequences of dissent or conflict can make leaders prone to “excessive positivity” (Collinson, 2012), to the “ambivalent authorization” of subordinates (Neumann, Turnbull-James, & Vince, 2012), and to defences against anxiety that, while seeking to protect individuals against violence, can become a violation of their experience (Pelzer, 2003).

The system psychodynamics of violent innocence

We identify three underlying dynamics that inform and sustain violent innocence as a systemic phenomenon. First, there are projective processes linked to fear or anxiety. These processes represent the tension between an “unwanted self” (Petriglieri & Stein, 2012) and a disavowal of the violence that is unwanted and projected onto others. Second, “excessive positivity” (Collinson, 2012) and “imposing happiness” (Fineman, 2006) serve to mask violence, thereby creating specific relations of domination. Positivity can be a violation of experience when it leads people to deny the dark side of their experience. Thus, being positive can have disciplinary effects—delegitimizing doubts, silencing dissent, stifling debate and creating an environment where the courage to resist
“can be redefined as betrayal” (Collinson, 2012, p. 95). Third, a “structure of innocence” can be created through the political effects of fantasy (Žižek, 1999), which play a key role in sustaining power relations. Fantasy here is not an escape from reality but rather an integral part of real experiences, not a reflection of hidden desires but a “fantasmic frame” (Stavrakakis, 2008; Voronov & Vince, 2012) that attempts to co-ordinate a desired image of the organization.

The political effects of fantasy can be seen in contradictions that are generated in organizations. For example, Diamond and Adams (1999) studied a Department of Public Welfare—“an organization that espoused an ethic of caring yet, through a largely unconscious collusion, systematically undermined ethical behaviour” to create “a false-self system” (pp. 246–247). Here, the fantasy of a caring environment created a contradiction: “the more activity and talk we generate about ethics, the less ethical behaviour we get” (Diamond & Adams, 1999, p. 246). Similarly, Prins’ (2010) study of multi-party collaboration in foster care services identified how unconscious organizational dynamics, aimed at reducing complexity and avoiding uncertainty, changed the emphasis of care. Over time, the objectives of the organization shifted “from finding the best solution for foster children and their parents involving all relevant stakeholders to organizing a minimal form of collaboration between four foster care services in two specific areas” (p. 308). Here, the fantasy of broad collaboration between all involved in foster care also created a contradiction: “who is at the core of this project, the foster care services or the child?” (Prins, 2010, p. 309).

There is often a strong element of fantasy associated with organizational values—in addition to a genuine desire to meet practical aspirations and a political imperative to have them. For example, the mission statement of Coventry University (2010) says: “As an organization we care for each other and value diversity, fairness and equality of opportunity” (one of nine core values). The choice of “fairness” as a core value within an organization can be understood both as an attempt to create organizational justice (see Forray, 2006) and as an attempt to control imagined dangers to the stability of an organization posed by conflict and difference. This second, concurrent, disciplinary aspect to fairness may diminish members’ willingness to engage with the inequalities and differences that exist in the organization. Over time, the legitimacy of organizational members to discuss difference can be threatened, and giving voice to difference can be met with covert forms of persecution or punishment. In other words, the imposition of “fairness” as a defining value within an organization can give rise both to justice and injustice. Members of an organization may have a strong belief in the idea that here we can be in a place where people “care for each other”, but it is likely that the same organization will also be a place where people oppress each other. There are political effects to the fantasy that we care for each other, and positive values articulated in the service of the organization can inevitably produce contradictory consequences because of the emotional and political complexity of putting them into practice. “Fairness”, therefore, can become both an aspiration and a restriction on organizations, a representation of both the slavery and freedom (Willmott, 1993) that is integral to working within them. Thinking about fairness only as a positive value can generate a “structure of innocence” (Bollas, 1993), and it is through such structures that organizations create and reinforce “the violence inherent in the imposition of ordering” (Pelzer, 2003, p. 227).

**Power, Emotion and Symbolic Violence**

A key argument in this paper is that the notion of violent innocence can help to interrogate assumptions and practices about leadership and organization. This initial attempt to describe violent innocence in organizations offers an opportunity to comprehend an aspect of the dynamic interconnection between individual actors and the social structure or system of domination within which action takes place. This is important in organization studies both in terms of avoiding static accounts of
power as a resource (e.g., belonging to the individual leader) and in comprehending that “the exercise and experience of power is central to all leadership dynamics” (Collinson, 2011, p. 185).

Three intersecting ideas about power inform our understanding of the connections between emotion, power and violence and how these contribute to a “structure of innocence” in organizations (and thereby to leadership relations that both sustain and challenge such structures). First, individuals’ identification with repressive political trends is linked to a critical view of power as a “regime of truth” (Foucault, 1977) that is both disciplinary and enabling. Second, attempts to control imagined dangers to stability (through an emphasis on positive notions like fairness) are connected to a relational view of power as habitus, which Bourdieu (1990) defines as “embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history” (p. 56), and thereby to symbolic violence. Symbolic violence is the imposition of ways of thinking and behaving on dominated social agents who come to perceive the existing social order as just or fair. Third, the political effects of fantasy can be highlighted through a psychodynamic view of power as an integral aspect of the “social unconscious” that “ties people together into collective emotional and political relations of which they are largely unaware” (Weinberg, 2007, p. 308). In this third area, we are continuing to develop work already started in organization studies that addresses emotions in organizations as collective processes of fantasy bound up with systems of domination (Stavrakakis, 2008; Voronov & Vince, 2012). Together, these perspectives on power enable us to emphasize a connection between projective dynamics associated with the self and the structures within which selfhood is collectively defined and negotiated.

Foucault (1977) draws our attention to the ways in which techniques and practices of power are normalized into ways of being that structure behaviour; “it is in the little things of socially constructed normalcy that we see power in organizations being slowly constructed” (Clegg, Courpasson, & Phillips, 2006, p. 228). Individuals internalize controls and self-discipline in order to regulate themselves. Power thereby produces its own truths, and to analyse this process “we need to pay attention and try and understand the truth regimes—those authorized by us and located in societies—which function to tell us who we are… it is in this understanding of the limits in knowing self that is a basis of a form of morality with others” (Sinclair, 2011, p. 511). This insight reconnects us to the one-sided consequences of “excessive positivity” (Collinson, 2012) where leadership is undertaken often within a hostile or violent work environment and yet is covered up by pleasant and collegial interaction (Diamond & Adams, 1999) that emphasizes the “sunny side” of organizational life (Krantz, 2006).

Internalizing controls and the operation of truth regimes impacts on followers’ behaviours. From a Foucauldian perspective, violence attempts to remove the capacity of the subject for agency. Therefore, any relationship could be defined as violent (whether overtly violent or not) in which individuals have their actions determined for them: “Violence manifests itself in any relationship between individuals, groups, or societies in which one denies the agency of others by seeking to define for them actions they must perform” (Bevir, 1999, p. 73). Foucault understood the intersection of politics and violence in relation to embodied experience and practice; to historical subjectivities; and in the contexts of rule and government and resistance to rule and government (Frazer & Hutchings, 2011). His concept of “governmentality” refers both to “strategies of organizational governance in a broad sense, and self-governance by those who are made subjects of organizational governance” (Clegg et al., 2006, p. 236). Governance is enacted in particular through the intersection of self-regulation with mechanisms that legitimize domination and mask violence.

However, violence is not only associated with removing the capacity of the subject for agency. It is also exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Such complicity arises neither from a passive submission to constraint nor purposeful adherence to
a set of values. Rather, it evolves from tacit acceptance of relations of domination as “a calculation of enlightened self-interest” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2004, p. 273). Bourdieu (1977, 1990, 1998) provides a theoretical framework of inter-related concepts (capital, habitus, field, practice) designed to understand how domination is incorporated into agents’ dispositions through historical processes of socialization (Golsorkhi, Leca, Lounsbury, & Ramirez, 2009). For example, one way to distinguish between the dominant and dominated is to observe the uneven distribution of volume and structure of the various forms of capital between them—be it economic, cultural, and/or social. Differential relations of power and advantage are transformed into structures of domination as field members recognize and accept the legitimacy of various forms of capital. Over time, frames of cognition, perception, preference, language and action constitute the habitus—“systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72).

Structures of domination are then maintained through the utilization of symbolic capital and the exercise of symbolic violence. Symbolic capital is “the power granted to those who have obtained sufficient recognition to be in a position to impose recognition” (Bourdieu, cited in Steinmetz, 2006, p. 454). Symbolic violence ensures that dominated actors contribute to their own domination by tacitly accepting the limits imposed on them. For example, as organizational members we often accept that remuneration is unequal and we are compliant in the structure of the organization and its inequity (Everett, 2002). Symbolic violence can be a by-product of official social or organizational structures—creating specific relations of domination, using (implicit and explicit) strategies that establish and sustain relations of dependence. For example, in his study of men, violence and management, Linstead (1997) describes how organizational actors can be made complicit in their own abuse. The powerful may “justify their abuse of the victim by placing the guilt and responsibility on the victim’s head… the violence becomes more profound in denying the victim the right to define, and hence oppose, it as an injustice” (Linstead, 1997, p. 1118). Such relations are masked, as they “must be disguised lest they destroy themselves by revealing their true nature… violence is here both more present and more hidden” (Lawrence & Karim, 2008, p. 196, emphasis added).

Of particular relevance to the argument of this paper is how symbolic violence can reveal links between power and emotion in organizations and in leader/follower relations. The ways in which Bourdieu’s framework is linked to emotions is an aspect that was “left largely unexplored (by Bourdieu) and for the reader to imagine” (Sayer, 2009, p. 7). Yet, an emotional aspect that Bourdieu has discussed and we find relevant to our present work is the embodied nature of power—that tacit acceptance of relations of domination “often take the form of bodily emotions—shame, humiliation, timidity, anxiety, guilt” (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 340). Our interest is in understanding how emotions—including the unconscious projection of unwanted emotion onto others—are bound up with power, and how they might contribute both to the reproduction and subversion of institutional order.

It is here where we can see that projective processes between leaders and followers have political effects: “No leader is immune from taking actions that (even if well-intentioned) can lead to destructive consequences, and no follower is immune from being an active participant in the process” (Kets de Vries & Balazs, 2011, p. 390). Similarly, leadership thinking “neglects how power is embedded in the socio-cultural norms and discourses that organizational members reflect upon to make sense of their work relations and settings” (Tourish, 2011, p. 200). In particular, this concerns the vertical power differential in which the leader is privileged. “The problem with power relations such as this is that they potentially lend themselves to situations in which followers may, wittingly or unwittingly, become vulnerable to the dominance of their leaders” (p. 200). Our view is that such dominance can also be mobilized unconsciously through the projection of the “unwanted self” of the leader onto others and through a sole emphasis on the positive aspects of relations between leaders and followers.
Violence and Leadership

One way to engage with “excessive positivity” as a recurrent medium through which power can be enacted in leadership dynamics is by clarifying how violence is an integral part of everyday organizational dynamics associated with leadership, as well as leader–follower roles and relations. A number of studies have contributed to our understanding of violence and leadership, whether focused on the nature of bad leadership or on the narcissism that informs and supports it. For example, the violence implicit in “bad leadership” ranges from the ineffective to the unethical: including leader incompetence, rigidity, intemperance, callousness, corruption, insularity and malevolence (Kellerman, 2005). In addition, Maccoby (2000) points out that “narcissistic leaders” are seen as emotionally isolated, distrustful, lacking in empathy and sensitive to criticism. The narcissistic individual comes to be the centre of attention not only through self-idealization, but also through the behaviour of an admiring audience. The narcissistic organization tends to create “grandiose statements about the company’s excellence” (Gabriel, 2008, p. 193), opening the organization to the fantasy that it is “a cut above comparable institutions” (Bollas, 1993, p. 184) and to excessive positivity. Sustaining this fantasy over the longer term generates a preoccupation with what others say about the organization. Narcissism in this sense has been seen as a common cause of corporate decay (Schwartz, 1990).

Other studies of leadership and violence have examined, for example, the abusive behaviour of “brutal bosses” (Hornstein, 1996) or the interaction between “toxic” or amoral leaders and their “willing victims” (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). The literature also describes categories of “negative leadership” (Schilling, 2009) as well as “destructive leadership” (Tierney & Tepper, 2007), where sustained and repeated destructive individual acts of fraud and deceit, violent acts to harm people, ethical failures, and bad decision-making cause damage to individuals and organizations (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007). Leaders also have to engage with complex emotional pressures arising from their own and others’ uncertainties, from unconscious attempts to idealize or denigrate, and in relation to others’ longing for protection and care. These projective dynamics pull leaders towards underlying emotions that help to structure the status quo (Krantz, 2006). Incorporating the destructive, violent aspects of leadership into one’s sense of self is a “complex challenge” made more difficult by the prevailing fantasy of leadership—“the sunny, idealized image of leaders who transform through inspiration, passion and love functions as a social defence against the darker more troubling realities of leadership” (Krantz, 2006, p. 236).

The violence that arises within leadership relations is not only the result of the behaviour of destructive individuals (whether leaders or followers). As Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser (2007) suggest, it also arises from negative group and organizational outcomes, which result from a confluence of destructive leaders (e.g., charismatic, self-absorbed, narcissistic, hateful individuals), susceptible followers (who individually and collectively conform and collude with destructive behaviours, their own and others), and conducive environments (threats, instability, absence of checks and balances). The violence generated between leaders and followers is a consequence of fantasies, projections and expectations that lock both leaders and followers into attachments that are difficult to break. For example, projecting their anxiety or aggression onto leaders can allow followers to perceive themselves as “freed from the anxiety and responsibility of taking initiative, seeking autonomy, taking risks, or expressing their own fears and feelings of aggression and destructiveness” (Gemmill & Oakley, 1992, p. 119). This becomes a vicious circle where “helplessness breeds a need for strong leadership, and excessive leadership breeds helplessness” (Kets de Vries, 2006, p. 209). Followers become prone to “crimes of obedience” (Hinrichs, 2007) arising from their moral disengagement from any responsibility to participate in leadership.
Discussions of the nature of “bad” leadership or followership are not entirely convincing if they remain detached from the projective mechanisms that sustain leaders as heroic individuals and followers as “grouped in a herd” (Cluley, 2008). For example, Kellerman (2008) in her discussion of bad “followership” identifies six descriptors relating to followers’ need for self-preservation, stability, and simplicity. Although this work is useful in understanding individual and group needs (Kellerman, 2005, 2008) that underpin followers’ dependency on leaders, such analysis does not detail the ways in which underlying projective processes between leader–follower are implicated in the violence that might emerge as a result of either leading or following. If “leaders lead and followers follow not out of the kindness of their collective hearts but because it is in their self-interest” (Kellerman, 2005, p. 42) then the violence that is integral to maintaining self-interest within each of these roles needs to be analysed.

Violent innocence is a construct that can help leaders and followers to look at individual and collective leadership dynamics as bound up with violence. The focus of this approach begins from the assumption that aggressive inclinations (both individual and collective) are often denied at the same time as they are implemented. As a consequence of such denial, violence is both more present and more hidden. Violent innocence is a self-idealizing defence that denies one’s own violence and projects it onto another, who is then attacked. It is also associated with a “structure of innocence” and with symbolic violence that creates specific relations of domination and dependency. The value of this concept for leadership is in understanding why individuals and organizations create and sustain such relations; in comprehending how (unconscious) projective processes are involved in domination and dependency; and in addressing underlying emotions (denial, defensiveness, anxiety) that help to structure the status quo and support “excessive positivity”.

**Empirical Illustrations: Method and Analysis**

In order to clarify and build on our conceptual work, we initiated a small study to begin to illustrate violent innocence within leadership relations—both psycho-political dynamics within systems and the projective dynamics embedded in leadership roles. We show the potential value of the concept in two ways. First, it can be used to explore aspects of symbolic violence in leadership relations and second, such exploration can highlight broader interpersonal and organizational processes of denial, control and domination connected with leadership. We were looking for three indications: projective processes associated with the unwanted self of the leader (and bound up with power); clues about how the unconscious utilization of the other links to collective ways of working that are destructive; and the intersection of destructive individual behaviour and organizational dynamics that are produced by leadership and followership roles. In this third area we are particularly looking for manifestations and consequences of the unconscious desire to silence negative voices (whether they belong to the self or others) representing one aspect of the “excessive positivity” (Collinson, 2012) through which power can be enacted in leadership dynamics. These indicators guided our choice of the illustrative material presented below.

Rather than generating theory from the data, we employed an abductive approach, which allowed us to make inference to plausible interpretations in order to illustrate and discuss the concept in a potentially illuminating way. Thus our approach to the illustrative material was interpretive, based on the assumption that knowledge is created and understood from the point of view of individuals’ emotions (conscious and unconscious/individual and collective) within a specific social and political context. Our emphasis therefore is on the particularity of relational dynamics in context, on the “little things of socially constructed normalcy” (Clegg et. al., 2006, p. 228) and on projective processes that help to privilege some interpretations over others. We do not claim that an interpretation using the notion of violent innocence is the only way to understand the narratives.
we generated. For example, it would be possible to analyse them using notions of toxicity in leadership (Lipman-Blumen, 2005) or to look for the established categorizations of bad leadership (Kellerman, 2005). However, these approaches fail to examine the projective processes that are part of the “unwanted self” of the leader, as well as the ways in which these internal processes may be connected to broader destructive dynamics that have a profound impact on the organization of leadership.

The data were generated from MBA students enrolled in evening Organizational Behavior (OB) courses in a midsize university in Boston, USA, as part of the course assignment. Class sizes ranged from 18–38 students. Although the courses were open to full-time international students, 75% were part-time evening students, typically in their 30s, employed in international, national, and regional organizations mostly in the greater Boston area. The data were collected after a session that focused on emotions and moods in organizations including a presentation on toxic emotions in the workplace. The term “violent innocence” was not raised in class. Students were invited to provide written accounts from their own experience representing “toxicity” in their organizations in order to help them reflect and better understand this concept. The written contributions were optional and anonymous. Interested students sent their individual accounts to the Graduate Fellow of the course, who removed their names, compiled the contributions into a single data file per class and sent them to the Course Leader, who later discussed them in class. In a few instances, students identified themselves or mentioned the names of their employing organization but all such information was removed. A total of 33 MBA students participated in the pilot study and we identified 16 accounts that pertained to the constructs of the present study.

We looked at all 16 examples to identify key aspects of violent innocence (e.g., emotions connected to power relations; the political conditions that promote violence; relations of domination; symbolic violence). Three of the vignettes were selected for presentation in this paper because they capture the intersection between the projective dynamics of violent innocence and the “structure of innocence that climatizes the institution” (Bollas, 1993, p. 184). The vignettes presented were chosen as examples of hostile work environments that are not covered up with positivity. We believe these illustrations capture the ways in which violent innocence is used by individuals and within organizations to sponsor “affective and ideational confusion” (Bollas, 1993, p. 184). The vignettes are self-contained, and represent experience from different organizations.

**Vignette 1**

I report directly to a Department Head who I will call Mary. I have a colleague on the same level as me, who I will call Mark. On this particular Friday, Mary and Mark had agreed to meet. Mary’s schedule kept changing and her time with Mark kept moving later in the day. This was not unusual as Mary often ran late and went off schedule. Mark was going on vacation and leaving by car that night to stay at a hotel near the airport. His wife and two young sons were waiting at home for him so they could start their vacation. The 10am meeting soon became the 3pm, 4pm, 5pm and at 6pm. Mary’s door was still closed and Mark had been told he should wait. Mark’s anxiousness increased as the day went on. It was obvious that he felt powerless and embarrassed for himself and for how this looked to his co-workers and the people that reported to him. When I left at 7pm, he was still there. I saw Mary as disrespectful of his time and family. I saw her as gaining personal satisfaction from her position of control over Mark. I also saw Mark as weak in not being able to affect his situation by either knocking on the door and saying he had to go or sending her an email saying he was leaving and reachable by phone. While he probably correctly assumed Mary would not like this, he was making a choice by waiting to put his family’s feelings last… Humiliating a member of staff who reported directly to her was like her humiliating all of us who reported to her.
Our interpretation of this vignette as an example of inter-personal violent innocence stems from an assumption that Mark is made to wait and to feel weak because Mary has to demonstrate the importance of her role as leader of this team. This may arise from defensive feelings associated with what she perceives as her role as leader (for example—I am supposed to be in control; I will be judged weak; I could be humiliated if I do not show that I can control my staff). Mary emphasizes the importance of her role over Mark’s. In addition, both her unwanted self (she is often late and goes off schedule/she may be afraid of being seen as weak) and the hostility implicit in Mary’s defensiveness (I am in control, I have the right to make him wait) are projected onto Mark (he should know how to behave given the importance of my role) who is then attacked (through being made to wait). Mark is the one positioned as weak whether he does or does not comply. It seems as if he is at fault if he decides to interrupt Mary and that he is at fault for being so weak that he does not say or do anything other than wait. Mark is subject to a double violence. His leader makes him aware of his subordinate role and then reinforces this role by making him wait. Mark’s position attracts additional hostility from the narrator of the story, who is a member of the larger working unit and who also cannot respect him because he has allowed himself to be treated in this way. The views and behaviour of the narrator (unintentionally) legitimates Mark’s position as “weak” and Mary’s behaviour as controlling.

We think that this example also illustrates how the tensions mobilized by violent innocence might play a pivotal role in the political conditions that promote violence, and that link violence and domination. Our argument is that the narrative is not only about the inter-related behaviour of Mary and/or Mark as individual leader or follower. It is also about the ways in which Mary, Mark and the narrator of the story are all performing their respective organizational roles in ways that both represent and reinforce entrenched processes of domination. We think it likely that Mark sees himself as doing things right as a follower (by waiting to meet with Mary) even if he is also aware that Mary is not doing the right thing as a leader by making him wait. Mark is caught in a contradiction between his sense of “the right way” to behave and a “crime of obedience” that contributes to the perpetuation of relations of domination. In particular, for both leader and follower, it illustrates how “disciplinary effects individualize by creating a narcissistic preoccupation with how the self and its activities will be seen and judged” (Roberts, 2001, p. 1553).

The Mary and Mark vignette provides an example of how symbolic violence creates relations of domination that sustain and perpetuate relations of dependence. The more that Mark is ignored by Mary the more he is caught in a dependent role. The more Mark enacts his dependent role, the more Mary has opportunities to reinforce her position of power in relation to Mark (and, vicariously, to other members of the unit). This is done through a vision of herself as a leader that is free of guilt in relation to her own actions. Mary has made herself innocent of the idea that she is in any sense a bad leader. Mary’s violent innocence makes it difficult for her to take responsibility for her aggression and for Mark to break free of the “affective and ideational confusion” that surrounds him (Bollas, 1993, p. 182). This example is expressive of contradictions that are part of leadership roles and relations between the performance and the denial of violent behaviour.

The relations of domination we perceive in this vignette are sustained through implicit strategies. Here, such strategies involve unconscious projective processes associated with the leader’s unwanted self and the power relations that surround and perpetuate both the leader and her subordinates. The narrator of the story concludes with the insight that humiliating one member of staff “was like her humiliating all of us”. We interpret this as a description of an implicit system of domination. While Mary’s behaviour towards Mark is violent (it both defines how Mark is meant to act and keeps him stuck in the uncertainty of how to act), it is the narrator’s own criticism of
Mark as weak that extends his humiliation and reinforces this violence. The narrator’s recognition that, in a certain way, all team members were humiliated by this incident provides an example of how violent innocence moves beyond inter-personal projective dynamics to create a “structure of innocence” in which it becomes difficult to acknowledge that humiliation is an ever-present danger. Humiliation has become more present, it is connected to “all of us”—we humiliate and are humiliated. It has also become more hidden, it is an underlying threat that at the same time discourages and determines team members’ behaviour.

Vignette 2

I was working for a trucking company that lease and rent trucks to businesses around the area. I got an email from the general manager (GM), which I thought was weird since we never heard from him, anything he had to say usually went through our branch managers and they would then impart the information on us. So needless to say I was already surprised before even opening the email. Nothing could have prepared me to what was actually in that email. It turns out that email was sent to me by mistake along with the entire region of employees, and attached was a review of every single employee discussing the strength weaknesses, possible next move in the company and action to be taken with each employee. We saw exactly what management thought of each of us. It was a total break of trust and privacy, especially since our managers had never discussed any of this with us before discussing it with the GM. To make matters worse, one employee’s review was really bad, actually down right offensive. When the GM realized that this email had been sent out company wide, he asked my manager to go up to the branch where that employee worked, see if he had seen the email yet and if he had not seen it, to delete from his inbox.

This vignette provides an example of the intersection between destructive individual leadership behaviour and the organizational dynamics that are produced by and sustain such leadership. In the organization described in Vignette 2, withholding communication has become the norm to such an extent that it is a surprise to even hear from the General Manager (“we never heard from him”; emphasis added). The branch managers are also caught within this way of thinking/working. They produced secret reviews of performance (“our managers had never discussed any of this with us”; emphasis added). When this secrecy is breached and staff could see “exactly what management thought of us” and when a specific and “offensive” review suddenly and mistakenly becomes public, the GM imagines that the problem can be resolved by attempting to make it seem as if the email and the review document were never sent.

To us, this fact represents a contradiction. The GM must have been aware that deleting the email from the inbox does not actually delete the knowledge it had been sent, nor would it remove the evidence (since the vignette shows that it appeared in other inboxes). It is possible that, in an organization where communication is withheld, where secret memos on performance are produced, and where managers are obliged to appear “innocent of the more disturbing truths that are part of the place” (Bollas, 1993, p. 184) then the irrational can be made to seem reasonable. Organizational members within leadership roles might even become subject to the idea that a secret, once revealed, could be restored back to being secret.

We speculate that the political or organizational effects of such secrecy, of not hearing and never discussing (whether deliberate or not) would be to discourage individuals’ voice, to undermine trust, to reinforce the differences between “us and them”, and to limit communication between different hierarchical layers of the organization. We interpret this as an example of the symbolic violence that could sustain a system of domination, one that seeks to privilege certain voices and to diminish others. Therefore, difficulties in this organization are seen to stem from the problematic performance of non-managerial staff and, in particular, an individual staff member who is punished.
not only through a poor review, but also through the violence of making the review public and available for all to see.

Another issue for us in relation to this example is how to make sense of the broader contradiction here between the secrecy that seems to be integral to how this organization works and the unconscious processes that might lie behind the GM sending the “review of every single employee” out to everyone—to make public what is secret. We think that the concept of violent innocence, both as a psychic mechanism and as “a structure of innocence”, can help to explain these dynamics. As a psychic mechanism we can see in this vignette illustrations of the denial of violence (trying to delete it from the inbox), projective processes (singling out an individual’s poor performance), and additional attack (making the reviews, and therefore the humiliation, public). As a “structure of innocence” there are political effects to an organization driven by secrecy suddenly becoming open, which serve to reinforce the present system. In other words, this is not only an individual punishment, but also a warning to all. Here, the shock inherent in the revelation of “what management thought of each of us” is potentially a more effective strategy for sustaining relations of dependence than secrecy because it sustains the fear that other organizational members may become subject to an “offensive” that is deeply critical and widely circulated.

Vignette 3

After having just moved to Boston and accepted a job with (Internet Co.—disguised name), I had been progressing along in my new role. I was the newest employee on the sales team. The company had started to have some issues not long after I had arrived. And it was swirling in the news that there were going to be layoffs at the company. Management immediately pulled all the salespeople into a meeting and told us that they have never laid salespeople off, and as far as they knew salespeople weren’t going to be laid off this time either. So I felt pretty safe in my position, even though I was the newest member of the team. Just to ensure that I wasn’t going to be targeted for the layoffs if they did end up laying salespeople off, I began to work much longer hours. I made sure management heard me on the phones and other senior reps were aware of my contributions. I started to work 11 hour days and skipping my lunches just to make sure I wasn’t going to lose my job, even doing research and work at home on the weekends. Then the day that the layoffs were supposed to happen came… My phone rang. It was my boss who sat in a cube about 10 feet away from me, but he was calling from the conference room downstairs. Immediately my stomach dropped, this obviously wasn’t something good. But maybe I was over reacting, he said nothing was wrong and I should come downstairs to talk to him briefly.

I went down to the conference room my manager was in. I step into the room and sitting there are my boss, his boss and two vice presidents of the company. I knew at that moment I was no longer an employee of (Internet Co). I felt sick immediately (but) I was shocked at my own ability to take the news very well. I was more mature and in control than the people laying me off. The Vice President who was doing the talking said the wrong name when he told me I was being laid off. I jokingly retorted that I actually am not being laid off and perhaps they called me by accident. Obviously that wasn’t the case, but I was shocked when he didn’t even know my name. This man sat in on my training for the last five months and sat 25 feet away from me. The whole incident from being laid off to being called the wrong name during the layoff was surreal.

I had to ride the elevator back up to my desk with my now former boss so that I could clear my desk and be “escorted” from the building like I was some sort of threat. Although I do understand why policies like that are in place, they just take away any bit of dignity one has after something like that. I had to ask permission to say goodbye to people like I was a child asking to go to the bathroom. It was a terrible experience and through all of it, my boss had so little empathy that I found myself apologizing to him because he found the process so difficult. I was consoling him for how doing layoffs weren’t what he thought management was about. I still to this day remember somehow feeling bad for him because he had
to lay people off. And the feeling that he didn’t seem to understand the effect of what he was doing was having on the people he “had to layoff”.

This vignette offers an image of a “structure of innocence” arising from symbolic violence in an organization. To elaborate on this, we make two observations. First, we note the contradiction between the knowledge that “there were going to be layoffs” and managements’ reassurance that “they had never laid salespeople off”. It seems to us that this reaction from management seeks to allay two fears: one arising from staff members’ feelings of uncertainty about the future, and the other aiming to project managers’ own anxieties onto staff, while simultaneously reinforcing their innocence of such feelings through “excessive positivity”. Emphasizing that the organization has never laid off salespeople can be seen as an attempt to make layoffs unimaginable, to free managers from uncomfortable, potentially destructive knowledge. However, the narrator was not reassured. She “began to work longer hours”; to react to the contradiction between “there were going to be layoffs” and “they had never laid salespeople off”; and to take responsibility for the fact that the threat of layoffs could be imagined and was, in fact, very real.

Second, we note the effects of the show of force that the narrator encounters when she learns that she was “no longer an employee” and when “being escorted from the building like I was some sort of threat”. She meets with not just one but four powerful people in the conference room, “my boss, his boss and two vice presidents of the company”. The narrator feels that she “was more mature and in control than the people laying me off” and was “shocked at my own ability to take the news very well”. She finds herself apologizing to her boss and “feeling bad for him because he had to lay people off”. We see this as an illustration of symbolic violence in the sense that the narrator accepts as normal both the managers’ show of force and being escorted from the building (“I understand why policies like that are in place”). The organizational approach to the layoffs seems designed (at least in this illustration) to place responsibility “on the victim’s head” (Linstead, 1997, p. 1118). The narrator’s manager is able to remain innocent of an understanding of the affect resulting from what he was doing.

In this example, a “structure of innocence” is revealed through the interaction between the way the individual is made to take responsibility for the unwanted affects of the layoffs, and the ways in which the organization can place responsibility on the individual to carry (away) the affects of the layoffs. Internet Co.’s approach to the layoffs seems to be designed to control, to deny and to expel the unwanted emotions that are an inevitable part of “letting staff go”. In this vignette, symbolic violence underpins the management of individuals being laid off—it initially makes the individual feel “pretty safe” and then repositions her as “some sort of threat”. This contradiction reinforces the affective confusion necessary for shifts in responsibility that, for example, make the narrator feel bad for her manager in the execution of his task.

We draw some general points from these vignettes about the nature of the violence that can be connected to destructive individual behaviour within leader and follower roles, as well as in relation to the organizational dynamics that both mask and reinforce it. Leadership (whether individual or collective) is a complex and often contradictory process that is always bound up with emotions and power relations. Expectations on leaders and followers—both internal and external—create anxieties or fears that are best avoided. One way that such avoidance is accomplished is through violent innocence, which allows individuals to blame others for their fears and to punish them for their failures. Both as leaders and as followers, organizational members can be implicit in unconscious projective dynamics and defences that promote symbolic violence and contribute to processes and structures of domination.
We offer the example here that humiliation is both a threat to the organization—to be denied by those involved in the fantasy of a collegial environment—as well as an integral and everyday aspect of experience. We have also identified an example where the political and organizational effects of secrecy can be reinforced by a certain form of openness or revelation. Making public what was secret in the context of limited communication between hierarchical levels serves both as a shock and as a warning. It opens the possibility that, at any time, opinions or assessments from above may be used to attack one individual primarily in order to deter others. We have highlighted the way in which an organization mobilizes different notions of responsibility so that leaders can place unwanted emotions associated with laying people off onto the individual who is made redundant. Such contradictions, created from the interplay between emotions and politics in organizations, are integral to leadership. However, they are rarely considered when attempting to understand leadership in practice.

Conclusion: The Value of Considering the Dark Side of Leadership

Mainstream leadership literature and approaches to leadership development tend to focus on the individual leader and on positive prescriptions for leadership behaviour and action (for recent examples see: Northouse, 2011; Yukl, 2012). Leaders do positive things: they listen to us, they help us to make sense, they win resources, they articulate a vision and they have emotional maturity. The idea of “emotional maturity” illustrates well the problem of emphasizing the positive. It is claimed that “emotionally mature people have more self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses, and they are orientated towards self-improvement… they are less self-centered… have more self-control… and they are less defensive” (Yukl, 2012, p. 148). We think that it is unhelpful to claim that leaders are orientated towards self-improvement without a corresponding acknowledgement that they are also, at the same time, orientated towards self-interest. There is a danger that this position “fosters greater dependency in subjects by promoting imaginary love stressing harmony/completeness in the place of symbolic authority” (Costas & Taheri, 2012, p. 1205). To put this in more general terms, the unwillingness or inability of leaders to see the dark side of leadership behaviour and action leads to disconnections between individuals and the emotional and political context within which they work.

Greater focus on the contradictions that underpin leadership roles will help us comprehend that all leaders carry complicated and contradictory feelings into their roles—for example, between the desire to empower and to undermine people—and that such seemingly conflicting desires are concurrent (Kets de Vries, 2004). Balancing the positive turn with “the dark side” has practical consequences for leadership teaching and leadership development. It means that the task of attempting to become “a better leader” through the fantasy of constructing a better self (e.g., an emotionally mature self) can be complemented with a desire to make the contradictory, self-defeating and violent aspects of leadership roles and relations an overt and legitimate subject in learning about leadership.

Violent innocence is an example of the symbolic violence that is present in leader/follower relations. The construct is an important addition to the critique of “excessive positivity” in leadership because it extends the analysis from a conscious reluctance to consider alternative voices, to include the unconscious desire to project the leader’s own negative voice onto others, who can then be held responsible for these feelings. Leaders’ aggressive inclinations can thereby be denied at the same time as they are implemented, through sponsoring “affective and ideational confusion in the other” (Bollas, 1993, p. 184). Violent innocence is a construct that helps to explain the relationship between violence and leadership, both in terms of the projection of violence from the
self onto others and as a contribution to the reproduction of social structure and systems of domination. Leadership is frequently undertaken in a hostile or violent work environment that is covered up with positivity (Collinson, 2012; Diamond & Adams, 1999); it is often informed by strategies that create relations of dependence and domination (Everett, 2002); it is inseparable from the exercise and experience of power (Collinson, 2011); and it is bound up with projective dynamics that connect the “unwanted self” of the leader with systemic processes of destruction (Petriglieri & Stein, 2012).

We think that it is important to encourage leaders and followers to engage with the full range of emotions and politics that influence their leadership roles and relations in order to be able to comprehend the leadership dynamics that affect these roles and relations. In this way we are not seeking to create “better leaders” but rather to create a better appreciation of the emotional and political context of leadership in action. This will involve taking the risk to interpret the projective dynamics that are connected to the leader’s “unwanted self”; as well as understanding how these dynamics pull leaders towards those underlying emotions (denial, defensiveness, anxiety, etc.) that help to structure the status quo and to over-emphasize the positive. We argue that improving the desire of organizational members to notice the violence that is present in leadership relations is more valuable than perpetuating the denial of violence. We think that the concept of “violent innocence” provides one way of describing both the individual denial of violence and the organizational “structure of innocence” that hides and condones violence.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the Special Issue Editors and the anonymous reviewers for their very productive and helpful engagement throughout the development of this paper. We are grateful to Michaela Driver, Yiannis Gabriel, Gail Greig, Kiran Trehan and Maxim Voronov for their comments on earlier drafts.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

References


Author biographies

Russ Vince is Associate Dean, Research, and Professor of Leadership and Change in the School of Management, at the University of Bath, UK. His research investigates the interplay between emotions and politics in organizations, in particular, the impact of underlying emotional and political dynamics on management learning, leadership and change.

Abdelmagid Mazen is Professor of Management at the Sawyer Business School, Suffolk University, Boston, MA, USA. His research interests include the impact of individual and organizational defensiveness on learning in various aspects of management, and testing the implementable validity of management theory in classes designed as action science flight simulators.