Favouritism: Exploring the 'Uncontrolled' Spaces of the Leadership Experience

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Abstract

In this paper, we argue that a focus on favouritism magnifies a central ethical ambiguity in leadership, both conceptually and in practice. The social process of favouritism can even go unnoticed, or misrecognized if it does not manifest in a form in which it can be either included or excluded from what is (collectively interpreted as) leadership. The leadership literature presents a tension between what is an embodied and relational account of the ethical, on the one hand, and a more dispassionate organisational 'justice' emphasis, on the other. We conducted twenty-three semi-structured interviews in eight consultancy companies, four multinationals and four internationals. There were ethical issues at play in the way interviewees thought about favouritism in leadership episodes. This emerged in the fact that they were concerned with visibility and conduct before engaging in favouritism. Our findings illustrate a bricolage of ethical justifications for favouritism, namely utilitarian, justice, and relational. Such findings suggest the ethical ambiguity that lies at the heart of leadership as a concept and a practice.

Keywords

Leadership, ethics, favouritism, empathy, ethics of care.

Introduction

In this paper, we seek to reframe the relationship between leadership and favouritism in ways that give such a relationship more nuance and complexity. Relationships in the workplace are often considered an asset to work settings. Much more than authority or dominance, relationships seem to be fundamental to what leadership represents today (Barge and Fairhurst, 2008; Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012) and relational approaches to the study of leadership allow consideration for the notions of "changing, and adapting" (Ford and Harding, 2007, p. 488) roles. The emphasis on social and interpersonal aspects (Gabriel, 2014) suggests that certain things are valued, for example the way people relate, and certain other things are back grounded, for example planned management approaches (Ford and Harding, 2007).

Some approaches to leadership - for example, Nystrom, 1978; Blake and Mouton, 1985; Bass, 1985; Bass and Stogdill, 1990; McClane, 1991; Avolio and Bass, 1995; Schriesheim, Castro, and Cogliser, 1999; Yukl, Gordon and Taber, 2002; Burns, 2003; Bass and Riggio, 2006 - do not fully shed light on the nuances of those social and interpersonal aspects. In fact, social processes influencing leadership can even go unnoticed, or misrecognized if they do not manifest in a form in which they can be either included or excluded from what is (collectively interpreted as) leadership (O'Reilly and Reed, 2011). By looking at the margins of leadership discourse and experience (Gabriel,

1999), we identify favouritism as an uncontrolled domain of leadership, core to the leadership relationship.

Favouritism might be a difficult 'word' to discuss because it seems to have a negative connotation. It is defined as "the practice of giving unfair preferential treatment to a person or group at the expense of another" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2017). It is commonly associated with the violation of justice norms in organizational settings as well as to the generation of low morale, inertia and low achievements. It is also frequently associated with unethical leadership, political behviours, and corruption in the workplace (Case and Maner, 2014; Dubrin, 2009; Karakitapoğlu-Aygün and Gumuslouoglu, 2013; Khatri and Tsang, 2003; Robinson and Bennett, 1995; Rosenbllatt, 2012; Scott, Colquitt and Paddock, 2009; Woodilla and Forray, 2008). Having said so, its intersections with friendship, empathy, connection, bonding and trust make it a rather complex construct, and encourage us to look at both, its drawbacks and benefits.

We explore studies showing existing tendencies that indicate potential for favouritism together with the ethical issues that relate to it. The literature shows a tension between what is an embodied and relational account of the ethical, on the one hand, and a more dispassionate organisational 'justice' emphasis, on the other.

We framed our research within a comparative case study design conducting twenty-three semi-structured interviews in eight consultancy companies, four multinationals and four internationals. There were ethical issues at play in the way interviewees thought about

favouritism in leadership episodes. This emerged in the fact that they were concerned with visibility and conduct before engaging in favouritism. Our findings illustrate a bricolage of ethical justifications for favouritism, namely utilitarian, justice, and relational. Such findings suggest that favouritism represents a hidden construct of leadership theories that draw on social dynamics. Our focus on favouritism reveals the ethical ambiguity that lies at the heart of leadership as a concept and a practice.

Favouritism and Leadership

In this section, we illustrate favouritism and the leadership literature developments that we used to frame our paper. We explore the studies that offered scope for a focus on favouritism as well as those overlapping with leadership ethics. We explain the latter as closely tied to reframing the relationship between leadership and favouritism in a way that can better illustrate the complexity of such relationship.

Favouritism emerges when different interests meet (Dubrin, 2009) and it unfolds in different ways based on the ethics of actors' orientations (e.g. the extent of their compassion, sense of justice, responsibility taking, humility, etc. [Eisenbeiss, 2012; Craft 2013]). As it is a process whereby someone may obtain a specific scarce resource to the detriment of others (Zellars and Kacmar, 1999), individuals that have equivalent merit do not receive equal treatment (McName and Miller, 2009; Sidanius and Pratto, 1999; Charles and Hurst, 2003; McName and Miller, 2009; Rosenblatt, 2012). This happens

because people's relationships and self-interests are privileged over their performance or competence (Zellars and Kacmar, 1999).

Our interest in the relationship between favouritism and leadership draws from the relational leadership literature. We tie our understanding of leadership to contributions that frame it as a shared and distributed process (Spillane, Halverson and Diamond, 2004). Raelin (2016) argues that distributed leadership is dispersed over a number of sub-streams (e.g. shared leadership, stewardship, collective leadership, empowering leadership, integrative leadership, discursive leadership and relational leadership, to name a few) which do not suggest a specific set of conceptual identifiers (Raelin, 2016). From our standpoint, leadership is socially constructed, negotiated, interpreted, and shared by those involved in its definition. Our interest lies in understanding the day-to-day experiences that make leadership.

Barge and Fairhurst's (2008) and Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien (2012) reflect on the value of theorizing on practical leadership matters: the way leadership takes place; what counts as leadership; the implications of particular leadership constructions; and the impact of the discursive aspects involved in the relational process. Unpicking this process requires attention to everyday conversations, specifically in terms of unifying and dispersing discourses, tensions that people experience, responses to those tensions, actors' character, self-reflective questioning, moral standing, and reciprocal assumptions individuals hold (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011).

In our view, the everyday experience reveals what living relationships can shape. To those who prefer the hyper-reality of leadership the everyday experience might appear ordinary and flat (e.g. just as Baudrillard [1988] argued about reality being recognised only when reproduced in simulation, some scholars might be more interested in leadership when this is reproduced in models emulating its dynamics). We would argue that the everyday experience could reveal the aspects of inter-relatedness, attentiveness, empathy, responsiveness and responsibility for others (Gabriel, 2014) that can characterise the leadership relation.

Two types of relationships can emerge from interactions in leadership settings. The first is the instrumental exchange relationship, based on which individuals wonder what they can do for others in exchange for what others can do for them. The second, is the 'self in/through the interpretation of others' relationship. This happens when actors perceive others, and, in turn, through others' perceptions, perceive themselves, their roles, and influence span (Ladkin, 2013).

The expression of power mobilised in those relationships, and the prevalence of one type over the other will both vary according to the sociocultural context and the dynamic unfolding of actors' identity roles (Raelin, 2016). Having said so, we do not wish to neglect those instances affecting individuals' identity self-perception when the role of the leader is established in advance. Identifying somebody as the leader (e.g. team leader, group leader) influences actors' interpretation of their role (e.g. those 'tagged' as leaders

might feel more powerful than those 'tagged' as team members) but still offers scope for role identity re-construction and negotiation between individuals (Gabriel, 2014).

One aspect that we feel has been slipping away from leadership literature is the way "unspoken, uncodified and shifting standards" (Gabriel, 2014, p. 3) are mobilized by actors, and affect them. The uncontrolled spaces of individuals' leadership interactions can reveal "unconscious motivations" (Ford and Harding, 2007, p. 489), "moral intuitions" (Weaver, Reynolds and Brown, 2014, p. 101) and dynamics that are relevant to the definition of leadership relationships. For example, the underlying influence of control, emotions, power, and individuals' expectations can alternate quickly in actors' relationships. Such shifts can give rise to questions on how the negotiations and re-negotiations of actors' identities actually happen in a framework of "inter-relations, tensions, asymmetries, and contradictions" (Collinson, 2014, p. 47). When we speak of uncontrolled spaces, we mean dialogical spaces that stand at the margins of prevailing discourses (e.g. leadership, legitimation, control, power, ethics), that are interstitial, and that might go unnoticed or uncodified because of that.

Favouritism and the ethical norms of a context

We suggest that one type of unspoken and uncodified dynamic that might be relevant for understanding leadership interactions is favouritism and the ethical norms of a context. Looking at favouritism as "a way of being in relation to others" (Cunliffe and Eriksen,

2011, p. 1430), could facilitate the understanding of leadership relationships. As Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) suggest, there is scope for exploring the intersubjectiveness leadership encompasses. We would argue that favouritism is a new, different way of doing so. Although our main aim is to look at favouritism for shedding light on the relational dynamics of leadership, it is worth illustrating how extant literature frames favouritism as a notion per se. This helps understand why we consider it fundamental to leadership.

Early studies that consider the notion of favouritism in the field of social psychology, loosely tie it to the wider topic of intergroup conflict and cooperation (Sherif, 1966). Research interest in favouritism becomes more apparent with scholars using it to explain cultural stereotypes, suggesting that the tendency to favour in-group individuals over out-group ones draws from perceived similarities "in behaviour, attitudes, and preferences" (Turner, Brown, Tajfel, 1979, p. 187; Cuddy et al., 2009).

To us, it appears that the majority of scholarly contributions explore it from a justice perspective. This is clear in authors who illustrate it as a deviant political behaviour (Robinson and Bennett, 1995; Greenberg and Baron, 2003; Vardi and Weitz, 2004; Ferris and Treadway, 2012; Robinson and Bennett, 1995; Greenberg and Baron, 2003; Vardi and Weitz, 2004; Dubrin, 2009) emphasizing that it occurs "by means that are not officially sanctioned" (Ferris and Treadway, 2012, p. 74). The justice pattern is evident also in authors who see favouritism functional to work settings, as long as it can benefit

a large number of individuals (Ferris and Judge, 1990; Robinson & Bennett, 1995; Dubrin, 2009).

The justice trend can be observed in leadership studies loosely focused on favouritism, too. In those instances it is linked to unjust, negative and dysfunctional traits and behaviours of leaders (Karakitapoğlu-Aygün and Gumuslouoglu, 2013; Tepper, 2000; Einarsen, Aasland and Skogstat, 2007; Schilling, 2009; Whiteside and Barclay, 2016; Zapata et al., 2013; Long, 2016) either with regard to the impact of nepotism on people's career advancement (Ford and McLaughlin, 1986; Padgett and Morris, 2005), or to gender-based preferential selection (Heilman, Lucas and Kaplow, 1990; Heilman, Battle, Keller and Lee, 1998; Padgett and Morris, 2000).

Undeniably, favouritism can lead individuals to break justice rules, and negatively affect organizational systems (Dubrin, 2009; Ferris and Treadway, 2012; Greenberg and Baron, 2003; Kalshoven, Den Hartog and De Hoogh, 2011; Robinson and Bennett, 1995; Vardi and Weitz, 2004; William and Dutton, 1999; Ferris and Kacmar, 2002; Miller et al., 2008; Gotsis, 2010; Dean at al., 1998; Robinson and Bennett, 1995) but we think there is more to it, as we shall argue in this section.

Apart from assuming justice as a pivot, the literature on favouritism seems quite focused on meta-analyses showing antecedents or consequences of preferential treatment (Scott et al., 2009; Ferris and Treadway, 2012; Khatri, 2003; Spector et al., 2005; Mount, 2006; Atinc et al., 2010). There is an assumption regarding the existence of some type of

exchange between individuals for preferential treatment to occur. However, little emerges on what this exchange looks like, and how it unfolds. We find this very limiting. From our point of view, the notion of favouritism has a mixed, complex connotation, one that does not clearly emerge in previous studies, especially those inspired by justice and focused on a static view of the phenomenon.

We argue that looking at the ethical conduct of actors involved in leadership exchanges can help identify where or when, in this exchange, favouritism might find fertile grounds. Rhodes (2012) identifies a tension between leadership justice and ethics. Such tension lies in the fact that while the former aims at creating a perception of fairness for the purpose of organisational effectiveness, the latter values the face-to-face relationship between two and the uniqueness of the 'other' in that relationship. Although, ethics in its most noble definition (Rhodes, 2012) is compromised when a third party disrupts the interaction between two individuals, it still pursues the aim of acknowledging the plurality of the voices that express the singularity of 'the other' (Rhodes, 2012). Ideally, justice in leadership should be a way of tackling "the ethical dilemmas of how to proceed when the needs of all can never be met" (Rhodes, 2012, p. 1322).

In light of this tension between justice and ethics, it is difficult to have a clear standpoint on ethical leadership. In fact, when speaking of ethical behaviour, the reasons behind a leader's actions can be related to the duty to act, or the consequences expected, or even the belief that a particular line of conduct would identify the kind of leader one would

want to be identified with (Knights and O'Leary, 2006). Utilitarianism, deontology, and character equally stand at the basis of the ethical leadership debate (Knights and O'Leary, 2006).

Rhodes (2012) argues that leadership theory stresses the idea of achieving "self-effectiveness through measuring perceptions of fairness" (Rhodes, 2012, p. 1323), placing less emphasis on the fact that equal treatment is impossible to achieve in practice. A face-to-face relationship with one other establishes how that particular self cannot exist outside of that particular other, and vice versa. As soon as a third party - an additional other - makes an entrance, the initial relationship is compromised because one's complete attention is suddenly 'spread' across more than one other (Knights and O'Leary, 2006). Yet, each engagement with a specific other is unique.

In relationships where the role of the leader is established in advance, actors would expect him/her to be morally sound, articulating values that express courage and caring. Gabriel (2014) elaborates the idea of the ethical, caring leader by identifying clusters of fantasies that reflect individuals' archetypes of leaders. On the one side, there is the ethical leader that embeds capability, courage, knowledge, expertise, achievement, interest in the collective good, and commitment to participation in moments of need. Conversely, there is the unethical leader who embeds fearfulness, external drive, self-promotion, fallibility, usurpation, selfishness, and absence in moments of need.

Actions associated with negative leadership behaviours (which can range from ineffective/incompetent to unethical/destructive [Kellerman, 2004; Padilla, Hogan and Kaiser, 2007; Karakitapoğlu-Aygün and Gumuslouoglu, 2013; Zhang and Bednal 2016]) might be difficult to spot unless they can be openly linked to "intimidation, manipulation, coercion, and tactical bullying" (Karakitapoğlu-Aygün and Gumuslouoglu, 2013, p. 111). Although not all 'leaders' are caring, based on the differences between ethical and unethical leaders, every leader would lose legitimacy if they were perceived as uncaring (Gabriel, 2014).

We would argue that adopting an ethics of care perspective in a context of relational leadership might be helpful to understand the role of favouritism in leadership interactions. The ethics of care has emerged as an addition to the rational and justice perspectives (Gilligan, 1982). It contributes to a wider understanding of the role of ethics without necessarily contrasting the dominant idea of justice. It relies on interpersonal interaction and on the recognition that all people are involved in a network of social relations. Such a network fosters greater care and attention for individuals who are closer to one another than for those who are distant. In Held's (2006) words, the ethics of care contrasts the dominant rationalist approaches by valuing emotions, such as "sympathy, empathy, sensitivity, and responsiveness" (Held, 2006, p. 10).

Favouritism is typically rejected by rationalistic moral theories because it compromises impartiality. In an ethics of care perspective, preferential treatment may be acceptable

when the set of emotional and relational capabilities characterizing the context make it a morally viable claim. As Gabriel suggests, an ethics of care implies personal relations among actors and a secondary focus over "the interests of abstract justice or those of anonymous others" (Gabriel, 2014, p. 10) and equal treatment for all. Looking at favouritism with a care lense implies attention to both the depth of the context, and the premise of interdependence. This change in the terms of the conversation about favouritism illustrates a problem that has not been seen before: the varied nature of the aspects affecting the intersubjectiveness leadership encompasses. It is when perspectives shift that we see what we had taken for granted until then. Drawing on this, we look at favouritism exchanges and how those unfold and affect leadership relations.

Research context and methodology

We conducted our research in eight consultancy companies based in Portugal, four multinationals, and four internationals. We chose consultancy firms because two aspects that characterize those types of organizations struck us. First, more than in any other sector, consultancy firms need to preserve the best individuals and performers who have access to important groups of clients. Alvesson and Robertson (2006) argue that consultancy companies are more dependent on individuals than any other type of firm. Second, consultancy companies are not strictly regulated by professional standards (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003). Those two aspects highlighted, respectively, the

significant role of relationships, and the precarious equilibria between ethical and non-ethical behaviours in those contexts. For example, the potential discretion so called 'team leaders' have in allocating resources (e.g. client-projects) would not stop them from preferring 'team members' who evoke affection and sympathy. Similarly, the lack of regulations encompassing formal sanctions in case of unethical conduct, for example, might not discourage individuals from behaving as such.

The four multinational companies in our sample mainly operate in auditing, financial consulting, and tax support and count between 700 and 1200 employees. The international ones, instead, operate in Human Resource Management consulting and have a number of employees that ranges between 50 and 300. We selected the companies based on convenience sampling (Coyne, 1997; Bryman, 2012) while we used a mix of convenience and snowball sampling for selecting our interviewees. There were 23 participants in our sample, 11 males and 12 females. We used pseudonyms to protect their identity. All of our participants were in senior management positions and led teams of at least five members, at the time of the interviews. Their experience in consultancy firms varied from three to 12 years, whilst their overall work experience varied from four to 25 years. We did not instantly assume that senior managers were leadership subjects, rather we understood they were explicitly involved in leadership instances, which they acknowledged as such.

Initially, we approached them wishing to know more about how their relationship with their 'team members' unfolded, how they were being in relation to others, how they negotiated and framed their roles in that relational interplay. However, when they spoke about relationships, the reference to favouritism started emerging. Intrigued by this pattern, we went on to explore how interviewees created and contested this notion through their prevailing accounts. Our research took a subjectivist, interpretivist stance; it focused on the depth of the data rather than on the possibility of replicating constructs and premises (LeCompte and Goez, 1982). We framed it within a comparative case study design as it enabled us to use the same research methods across eight consultancy companies (Druckman, 2005; Bryman and Bell, 2011). Our primary unit of analysis were individuals who identified favouritism in leadership episodes. We collected data through a semi-structured interview, which helped us place emphasis on how the participants framed, understood, and negotiated their roles in the leadership relational interplay.

Interviews lasted between 50 minutes and an hour and a half. We carried them out in Portuguese. We then transcribed them and translated them into English, reflecting as carefully as possible the expressions, words and meanings interviewees portrayed in their accounts. We carried out the transcription, translation and transliteration of the interviews in an accurate way (Halai, 2007; Hernandez, 2010). The final translated material resulted in a transmuted text that reflected the original although it had been recreated (Zanola, Palermo, Bisignano, 2012). We asked each participant to sign an ethical form, we

informed him/her that the interview was going to be recorded and transcribed verbatim, and we offered him/her the possibility to read the transcript once this had been available. We started every interview asking ice-breaking questions related to general personal data (e.g. age range, role, years in the company, etc.). Following from that, we asked interviewees to tell us about how they made sense of the leadership experience; how they related to their colleagues; how their colleagues related to them; how they felt they were perceived by their colleagues; what challenges they faced; what opportunities they sought; what meanings they attributed to their role and to that of others. When the pattern of favouritism started emerging in every interview, we asked more questions related to this topic. We did so for understanding what they thought it to be, what reasoning was supporting their judgements and justifications while favouring others.

We were aware of how sensitive and personal this topic was for them, therefore we phrased the *impromptu* questions in a way that would have not implied any judgement of their behaviour from us. This helped us obtain rich and extensive accounts. We looked at similarities, differences, and contradictions in our interviewees' accounts. The common thread in those accounts was the justification for favouring. When we took a closer look into the individual views, we realised that there was a rich variety of justifications. Initially we coded the patchwork resulting from their way of making sense of their favouritism experience with labels such as friendship, empathy, reciprocation, and personal image management. Then we identified the interconnections between labels and

began to reflect how those were expressing interviewees' understanding of favouritism in the leadership exchanges they had experienced (Braun and Clark, 2006; Bryman, 2008; Bryman, 2012).

The notion of justification, and the variety of justifications we identified raised an interesting question on ethical leadership and the ambiguity around it. In selecting our quotes, we wanted to show this ambiguity. We displayed how interviewees resorted to friendship, empathy, reciprocation, and personal image management to show the patchwork of justifications coming into play during their leadership experience.

We analysed all participants' accounts more than once for eliminating the risk of biases. We considered that, as they were being asked to express their opinions on a sensitive issue, they could have omitted information, or amended their accounts in order not to appear (what they thought would have been considered as) 'unethical'. We teased out interviewees' views with prompts, requests for further explanation of concepts, ideas, happenings, requests of real life examples (as a consequence, in all interviews there were turning points that exposed interviewees' past favouritism behaviours). We analysed accounts iteratively within the research team questioning any possible taken-for-grantedness on our side. This enabled us to deal with potential interpretation biases.

Findings

Our data shows a bricolage of ethical justifications for favouritism. Our interviewees identified it as a physiological aspect of leadership instances, particularly evident in the relationship between a leader and his/her team members. By looking at friendship, empathy, reciprocation, and personal image management, we identified three categories of ethical justifications for favouritism, namely, utilitarian, justice, and relational.

The utilitarian justification

We understood our interviewees' concern for the leadership role they were covering, and for how this role affected others. The aspect of reciprocation that distinctly emerged from the interviews expressed this concern. It linked favouritism to the exchange that involved the leader and his/her team member. This exchange implied the leader favouring a team member with the expectation of obtaining something in return, at some point in the future. Here are some examples:

> If I favour someone I would expect something in return, it is a win/win situation… you know. [Sebastian, consultancy team manager with for 10 years].

In some cases, the expectation of reciprocation was blunt at the point that an act of favouritism per se was subject to obtaining something in return:

> You do not give anything to another person without expecting something in return. [Anna, senior consultancy team leader for 8 years].

In other cases, the expectation of reciprocation was a looser idea, and it covered a vaguer time span:

> If I favour someone I have to admit… emh, I do expect something in return, maybe not now, not immediately, but when I will need it… that is for sure. [Michael, senior consultancy team manager for 10 years].

> I do have my favourite team members, eh eh eh… I care for them, I do… but you know favouring someone is also about favour exchange. Is it the best part of it? Yes, most of the times. [Lisa, consultancy team manager for 5 years].

Such understanding of favouritism led us to consider the instrumental exchange relationship (Ladkin, 2014; Raelin, 2016) and the way it influences actors' identities and roles in leadership instances. Reciprocation highlighted the interactional nature of favouritism and the utilitarian idea of maximising the results of the interaction for benefitting the interests of the individuals involved in (Knights and O'Leary, 2006).

Although our interviewees might have been in a position to favour others, favouritism might have not occurred without the relational contribution of those who were being favoured. Whether or not our interviewees will obtain the expected, future gain is not the key point. We would argue, instead, that the continuation of the relationship with specific individuals was emphasizing the relational and utilitarian nature of favouritism. Evidence

of an instrumental exchange dynamic suggested that favouritism is a social process that can produce and enable (Uhl-Bien, 2006) this type of leadership relationship.

The justice justification

The recognition of the self through the interpretation of others was an interesting aspect that emerged in what we identified as the justice justification of favouritism. In this case, the mutual influence emerging from the interaction between our leaders and their team members shows the strength of the notion of leadership justice (Rhodes, 2012). Our interviewees wanted to ensure that their team members would not perceive any unfair treatment, as this would have altered the portrait of the just leader. Interviewees showed that they were affected by others' opinions of them. Here are some examples:

> I am not sure if my team know that I prefer working with some of them rather than with others… emh… would that make me a bad leader? I do not think so… you know if there is no major impact. I am sure that those with whom I did not have a strong relationship would be happier if I worked more closely with them. [Cassandra, senior consultancy team manager for 6 years].

The concern of being perceived as a bad leader was tied to some hesitation around the 'condition' that explicit favouritism would not, or might not be generating any major impact.

We observed interviewees' simultaneous reference to their care for the closer team members, and to their concern of appearing unfair to others. Unfairness was illustrated as capable of challenging interviewees' role and authority:

> I give special support to some people and not to others… you know I have a higher sense of empathy with those that I support the most. Sometimes, I think that this can affect others, if they notice… emh… I do not think they notice, though. I would not want to be perceived as an unfair boss, you know, my role and authority could be challenged… but I do not think anybody notices. [Antonio, senior consultancy team manager for 7 years].

Even greater emphasis on the justice justification emerges from the extract below. It shows both the side related to care, connection and empathy and the side related to the negative implications of being identified as a bad leader:

> I was often in the situation where I had two team members and I got along with one of the two more than with the other one… you know, I had a stronger connection, empathy, understanding…and I often gave more support and better projects to the one I preferred. I cared more, just that. But this was never visible to the other team member… you know I think I would have lost her trust in me, as a good manager, a good leader.

> [Jeremias, consultancy firm partner with 11 years of experience in this role].

When looking at this justice argument we noticed the similarities with the type of leadership relationship by which actors recognize the self in/through the interpretation of others (Raelin, 2016). Participants were worried about not being seen as 'good enough for their role' by those who they had not normally favoured. Such concerns seemed to have implications on the legitimacy of their role as team leaders. There was a sense of preoccupation about others' views.

The relational justification

We asked specific questions for understanding what interviewees meant by favouritism and how they interpreted it. In their words:

> Favouritism is unfair […] a team leader normally favours someone to the detriment of others. [Alina, consultancy team leader for more than 5 years].

> Favouritism is unethical because it is about discrimination. [Celine, consultancy team leader for more than 5 years].

> Something that underpins favouritism is the lack of ethics. There is also the focus on one's personal objectives as well as the lack of professional commitment and intelligence. [Carlos, senior consultancy team leader for 10 years].

The unfairness of favouritism became less evident when interviewees' started highlighting exceptions powerful enough to counterbalance its negative connotation:

> Sometimes, there are some things that annul the negative effects of privileging a specific team member over others… emh, for example, if I favour someone so that I can attract the interest of new clients in the firm, then it is not bad… you know this generates revenues. [Roderick, senior consultancy team leader for 8 years].

This quote hints to the overarching interests of the firm, which would have benefitted from new clients and a stronger network. Hoyt and Blascovich (2011) suggest that leaders define their actions as moral when they can show a connection to overarching goals and achievements. This quote provides an interesting example of that.

If the overarching good of the firm was relevant for counterbalancing favouritism, its 'invisibility' was equally important, as the quote below highlights:

> Favouritism is bad only if people find out, only if the behaviour is obvious to everybody else. [Anna, senior consultancy team leader for 8 years].

Participants' accounts started showing contradictions: the more they articulated their thoughts and experience, the more favouritism became ethical and moral. Ultimately, they identified aspects that could turn it into an expression of leaders' care for team members. By looking at their accounts, at some point, we felt that they were portraying instances of unintentional favouritism. The claim that favouritism is not noticed by others, or is unintentional seems highly unlikely. One might argue that our interviewees rationalized their preference for some people over others in a morally blind way (Martin et al., 2014) for normalizing their unethical behaviour. We suggest that the underpinning morality that comes into play here does not hold back the instinct of caring for others.

In the example below, the interviewee emphasized the strong, uncontrollable influence emotions, relationships, and trust exert on his actual behaviour. He acknowledged the ethics of justice as a principle that should guide resource allocation, in theory.

> I should allocate work and resources based on the competences people show, but obviously, when I like someone and we have a good relationship I give them more projects, on a regular basis. Trust is

> relevant in my view […], empathy is also important. When a relationship develops, if there is empathy then project allocation is more regular. Friendship develops… you know…There are things you cannot control, there are people with whom you identify more…emh…then you hang-out with them more often, you have lunch together… you trust them more than others, you care for them. Therefore, you offer them more advantages at work. [Joseph, senior consultancy director for 20 years].

The emphasis on relationships and empathy surfaced repeatedly in interviewees' accounts. Interviewees accounted for preferential treatment in a reflective way, portraying their feelings as natural, understandable standards.

> If I feel empathy for somebody then… well, I admit that in some way I tend to favour them, it comes natural, and it is easier to be in a relationship with those people. If that person is a friend of mine, it is inevitable… I am going to give her the best project, a project that gives her visibility and maybe a project that does not require too much work… you know, you bet more on the horses you trust, the most beautiful horses, the ones that you like the most. You care for those people. [Alba, senior consultancy team manager for over 10 years].

When favouritism drew on empathy and friendship, then it just reflected the connection research participants had with their team members. This way of understanding

favouritism recalls Gabriel's (2014) portrait of the caring leader, the one who offers followers his/her "time, advice, recognition, and support" (p. 9). The ethics underpinning this type of favouritism does not rely on justice; rather it is an ethics whereby a leader acknowledges that all people are dependent on others for their well-being and need to support one another. The patriarchal element that has been associated with leaders in the past can still side-line care as a feminine type of ethic. A type of ethic that can be good but not in a universal sense (Gilligan, 2011). In a leadership setting, the *selfless* aspect associated with caring might make this type of ethics difficult 'to buy'. However, there is no selflessness in caring. The investment in relationships does not happen at the expense of a clear sense of self (Gilligan, 2011). Our interviewees' accounts show how emotional responsiveness is an alternative standard to justice, rather than a deficiency in justice. Whether this is good or bad is not the point. Rather, the denial of favouritism visibility and the different types of justifications that permeated interviewees' accounts (utilitarian, justice related and relational) expose the ambivalence surrounding favouritism and the notion of ethical leadership.

Conclusion

Our analysis of the literature led us to consider the unmanaged and uncontrolled spaces of the leadership experience as interesting contexts for furthering our understanding of this social phenomenon. Looking at leadership as a way of being in relation to others

suggests the exploration of similar dynamics that, at a first glance, might not be associated to leadership exchanges. Yet, those dynamics could offer a better look into the intersubjectiveness leadership encompasses.

We would argue that one type of unspoken and uncodified dynamic that might be relevant for understanding leadership interactions is favouritism. We believe one must go beyond the negative connotation this term encompasses in common language. There is more to favouritism than attributing, or obtaining scarce resources to the detriment of others (Zellars and Kacmar, 1999) and there are two reasons that lead us to say this.

First, favouritism is a relationship and, as such, it involves weaving, shaping and influencing the roles of the individuals involved in it. Although the outcomes of this relationship might, or might not be in line with what actors hope for at the offset (e.g. the possibility of a future favour), it would be very reductive to limit our understanding of this notion to a purely, straightforward, utilitarian action of resource distribution. It would also be reductive to limit it to a mere intentional behaviour that is ethically reprehensible (Treviño, Weaver, and Reynolds, 2006). Our findings show that actors' emotions and moral intuitions have a role in their decisional process (Weaver et al., 2014). There is a depth to the notion of favouritism; we would miss it by only considering that a person with access to resources gives some of these to another person who does not have that access.

Second, people relating to one another in a favouritism exchange construct a social reality that carries rather complex meanings. Its ethical underpinnings should not be 'measured' only against those expressing universality, equality of treatment, and 'absolute' justice. They could be also interpreted in light of an ethics of care (Gabriel, 2014). The latter can better explain the influence of friendship, empathy, connection, bonding and trust from which favouritism relationships draw. In a setting where the role of the leader is established in advance, the ethics of care also emphasizes others' expectations of the caring leader, and the extent of trust and respect they can invest in the relationship with him/her. Understanding favouritism only based on individuals' orientations to equality, perception of fairness, and justification for treating people the same way would understate the influence that interdependencies and shared experiences have on the definition of this relationship. The investigation of favouritism entails looking at how this exchange comes to be considered legitimate and how it informs action. How the meaning of favouritism comes about is what we think tips the balance between it being ethical or unethical, in a work setting.

By looking at favouritism from this point of view - with some drawbacks and some benefits - we would argue that it could constitute a hidden construct of leadership theories based on social dynamics. It sheds light on the central ambiguity of leadership ethics, stressing the tensions between rational justice, on one hand, and ethics as a way of "being

for the other" (Rhodes, 2012, p. 1321), on the other. The ambivalence of favouritism helps magnify the tensions affecting leadership both as a concept and as practice.

Favouritism displays characteristics of the instrumental exchange relationship, and the 'self in the interpretation of others' relationship. The way those two relationships unfold sets the context for actors' mutual expectations, their display of emotions, their reflections and adjustments to their ongoing work. The social interaction that mobilizes favouritism produces the realization of the ambiguity experienced as a subject participating in a leadership exchange.

We would like to point out that, in our wider interpretation of favouritism, we do not aim to side-line, or underestimate the issues that can draw from preferential treatment. Aspects like unfairness, unethical standards (Dubrin, 2009; Ferris and Treadway, 2012; Kalshoven et al., 2011; Khatri and Tsang, 2003; Gotsis and Kortezi, 2010), engagement in corruption acts (Khatri and Tsang, 2003; Rosenblat, 2012; Weaver et al., 2014) and promotion of one's own interest for personal power purposes (Case and Maner, 2014) are matters that can upset relational exchanges in a work setting (and not only there).

The prevailing role that the ethics of justice (Gabriel, 2014) has had, traditionally, is not sufficient for unpicking the relational context. There is scope for future research to explore how the dynamic equilibria between justice and ethics can influence the construction of the leadership experience. Some interesting contexts for investigation can be teams, for example. Such settings can offer an outlook on the interplay between

individualistic vs collective goals, on that between individual vs collective accountability, on that between dyadic vs collective relationships, on that between trustworthy vs instrumental relationships. How those aspects might enable or constrain the autonomy, rationality, expertise, and reflexivity involved in leadership would help address some of the questions raised at a theoretical level (Raelin, 2016).

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