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## Can We Understand Leadership Better? A Framework for Shaping an Integrative Definition of Leadership\*\*

### Abstract

Despite hundreds of existing definitions, defining leadership remains a thorny issue today. We attempted to tackle this issue and summarise here a framework being developed to shape a renewed, simplified definition of leadership. The paper first discusses several critical philosophical and linguistic principles for defining a concept. The paper then integrates these principles to build a three-step process (namely, naturisation) to trace back to the nature of the leadership phenomenon by reducing its meanings from abstraction to simplicity. As a result, and using 12 existing definitions, we found a renewed, simplified definition of leadership, which is *the use of resources*. This definition was finally verified by relating it to diverse bodies of knowledge and differentiating it from management. Beyond the definition and the framework, our paper potentially contributes to moderating the leadership-management distinction debate and offers some premises of leadership for future explorations. In addition, the paper proposes the ‘right’ nature of leadership to augment other approaches examining the trait, the behavioural, and the relational natures of leadership.

**Keywords:** definition, leadership, naturisation, objectivism, property rights, resources  
(JEL: D23, G34, L26)

Reality exists as an objective absolute.  
Facts are facts, independent of man’s feeling, wishes, hopes or fears.  
(Ayn Rand, *Introducing Objectivism*, 1962)

### Introduction

Over 350 definitions of leadership exist, but an agreed one is absent (Harris, 2005). Consequently, the question “What is leadership?” is still being raised today (e.g., Ashford & Sitkin, 2019; Barney & Rangan, 2019). Leadership has even been defined loosely by researchers’ individual perspectives (Bass, 1990; Jost, 2013) or uniquely in each organisation (Probert & Turnbull, 2011). Therefore, Kelly (2014)

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supposed that leadership becomes an empty signifier – that is, a signifier or sign without anything signified (Locke, 1975/1690) or something that has been freely expressed from various perceptions of the phenomenon.

It becomes problematic when new leadership constructs proliferate but overlap with traditional ones (Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Banks et al., 2018; Lemoine et al., 2019), which have been called to be corrected (Yukl, 1999) or even abandoned in favour of a new, but clearly defined construct (Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). First, the flourishing of numerous leadership descriptions has reached a messy state (Blom & Alvesson, 2015). Second, the adoption of unclearly defined constructs has been recently blamed for the failure of leadership theories (e.g., Allio, 2018; Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Andersen, 2018; Antonakis et al., 2016; Fischer & Sitkin, 2023; Gottfredson et al., 2020; Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013; Siangchokyoo et al., 2020). Third, due to the proliferation of leadership constructs and their associated theories, there is little consensus as well as evidence on how to develop leaders and leadership best and how to evaluate the effectiveness of leadership training programs (Bolden et al., 2011; Leavy, 2016). Bewildered by the endless definitions of leadership and its labyrinth, whereas all theories are somewhat unprovable (Allio, 2018), leadership researchers have been laboriously continuing to study everything about nothing (Vries, 1994). Thus, the harm of vague definitions on leadership research, leadership theories, and leadership development can be serious; unsurprisingly, calls for de-ideologizing (Alvesson, 2019; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2015), reorienting (Anderson & Sun, 2017), and delimiting leadership meanings (Blom, 2016) are often repeated. Since it has been proposed that redefinition and redirection are the way forward for leadership research (Glynn & Raffaelli, 2010), if an agreeable definition of leadership does not exist and might never be found (Bolden et al., 2011; Day & Antonakis, 2012), how could these calls be responded and a way out be found?

Having seen some scholars find it unnecessary to redefine leadership because of the compelling influence of the feudal paradigm, Barker (1997) emphasised that redefining leadership is needed for current and newer paradigms. There are several other reasons why an agreeable definition of leadership is urgently needed. First, without an agreeable (or likely objective) definition, there is no rational way of understanding a phenomenon (Andersen, 2016), whereas the alternative adoption of sloppy, careless, or subjective definitions has so far retarded the progress in organisational fields (Locke, 2003). Second, an agreeable definition not only enhances effective communications and collaborations among people discussing leadership but also minimises miscommunications among them and, most importantly, shapes ethical frameworks to help people dialogue and make moral policies (Avery, 2004; Molloy & Ployhart, 2012; Rost, 1995). Third, a clearly defined concept provides a common language for the research community and is easier to operationalise, test, and compare findings (Suddaby, 2010). Fourth, an agreed definition of leadership is likely a prerequisite to leadership development (Barker, 1997; Kaiser & Cur-

phy, 2013; Rost, 1991). In contrast, a poor construct conceptualisation seriously obstructs the development of measures, misleads the specification of the measurement model (i.e., how the construct relates to its measures), and undermines the credibility of hypotheses (MacKenzie, 2003). More seriously, an irrational or false definition can produce self-fulfilling theories, which may finally make the initially false definition come true; consequently, “societies, organizations, and leaders can become trapped in unproductive or harmful cycles of behaviour that are almost impossible to change” (Ferraro et al., 2005, p. 21). Hence, for sound leadership research, training, and practice, an agreeable definition seems to be indispensable.

Scholars who stress the vital role of an agreeable definition also offer many valuable and encouraging guidelines to search for it. For example, Suddaby (2010) generally suggested that a good definition should have three things: (1) capture the essentials of the defined phenomenon, (2) be parsimonious, and (3) avoid tautology or circularity. A good definition, MacKenzie (2003) added, should be consistent with prior research and distinguish the concept from other related ones. Such a definition should be clear, concise, and jargon-free so laypeople can understand it (Locke, 2003; Podsakoff et al., 2016). In the same vein, leadership should be defined in a common language (Gerring, 1999; Podsakoff et al., 2016) with more neutral and less seductive terms (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2015). Finally, justifying counterfactual conditions and identifying causal inferences are essential to improve the precision of a definition (Antonakis, 2017). Thus, the literature on a good definition is considerable and currently quite ripe for shaping an applicable framework to make it.

In response to the calls and guidelines above, this paper presents a framework to shape a renewed, simplified definition of leadership. Our endeavour, as encouraged by Caws (1959), started with the focus of defining a concept from both philosophy and linguistics. Although the paper utilises much of the organisational leadership literature, especially in business, some arguments can be extended to other leadership phenomena, such as leadership of social movements, leadership in teams, or self-leadership.

## Methodology

### Philosophical and Linguistic Principles in Defining a Concept

#### The Philosophical Principle in Defining

Generally, to define is to acquire knowledge of a substance. Thus, a definition which sets up a formula exhibiting the causes of a phenomenon should be universal, commensurate, and differentiated from other concepts (Aristotle, 350 B.C.). Centuries ago, Locke (1975/1690) warned that imposing words without natural signification to other people is cheating and abusing them. To prevent this, he advised that a complex word must be determined by simple terms. Similarly, since

“it is impossible to define all words ... it is necessary to stop at some primitive words which are not defined” (Arnauld A., 1662, as cited in Wierzbicka, 1996, p. 12). To summarise, because the definition of a concept is formulated by other concepts, the defining concepts (i.e., defining terms) must be simpler and universally understandable (Rand, 1990). These assumptions led us to ask further in this paper: *What are the primitive terms that can convey the natural signification of leadership? How can we find them?*

## The Language Primes

Despite philosophers having long been concerned with both defining things and using primitive terms, they could not have further itemised these terms: primes, primitives, or what are atomic in form (Aristotle, 350 B.C., as cited in Deslauriers, 2007). Such a deficiency in defining terms has been otherwise addressed by contemporary linguists. In their *Natural Semantic Metalanguage* (NSM) research, Wierzbicka and her colleagues identified many primes that are suggested for defining concepts. The principle behind this research is that:

Semantic primes provide a “culturally safe” ... vocabulary for analysing and understanding complex words and ideas in any language. ... Conceptual analysis must be formulated in terms of simple, cross-translatable words: *semantic primes* and universal or near-universal semantic molecules. This principle wards off the dangers of obscurity and implicit definitional circularity (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2016, p. 94).

Regarding the use of primes, Wierzbicka (2011) cited mathematician Leibniz in stating that they are inherently understandable to human beings, and complex things can be understood only through them. Therefore, if we want to understand a complex thing, we should reduce it to things that are simple (thus, primes). These primes likely compose a universal and innate common language for all people (Wierzbicka, 2011). In a more practical approach, prior to Wierzbicka’s research, Ogden (1930) reported on a set of 850 basic English words, which was argued to be possible to say almost everything. He claimed that this set, which includes words that are internationally understood, would solve the issue of a universal language (Ogden, 1930). These basic, universal terms (i.e., primes) can now be utilised to shape a simple definition of a concept that is understandable to most people and, consequently, can be agreeable among them.

## Naturalisation: The Inverse Process of Constructing Meaning

This paper uses the verb *naturise* to mean simplifying several similar, abstract words into a prime or basic word. *Naturise* is then core to the following three-step process (called *naturalisation*), which we have developed to trace back to the nature of leadership via locating a simplified meaning of it. The process started with step 1 by identifying (1) a keyword that is likely essential to leadership and (2) a set of promising definitions of leadership containing the keyword. In step 2, the keyword and several other keywords commonly found in these definitions were identified

and then naturalised into primes, or basic words, to formulate a simplified definition of leadership. Step 3 will show how this definition was further challenged by the causal and consequential inferences required for a scholarly definition.

### Step 1: Sorting out Promising Definitions

Robinson (1954) proposed that one step to finding a real definition is to probe into all the usages of an obscure term for an identical meaning. By incorporating the established but agreed-upon meanings of a concept in its definition, the definition can achieve the familiarity criterion (Gerring, 1999). Because leadership has been argued to have been made a freely defined concept and empty signifier, extracting a common, core meaning from the majority of definitions, most of them are highly abstract (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2015; Yukl, 1999), is likely impossible (e.g., compare to the method of Dores Cruz et al. (2021) for defining the concept gossip). Using content analysis to seek common themes (i.e., shared meanings) in 273 definitions of strategy, a fragmented concept, Mishra and Mohanty (2022) identified up to six distinct themes. Their findings imply that determining a single, common meaning from all available definitions of a fragmented concept is unlikely, and this may apply to leadership, an empty signifier. Therefore, we aimed to search for a shared, core meaning in promising definitions only from hundreds of leadership definitions.

To identify promising definitions, we examined each of the following keywords, which have been proposed to signify the core meanings of leadership by notable leadership scholars. They are behaviour, influence, goal, process, relationship, resources, and traits (Burns, 1978b; Northouse, 2016; Rost, 1991; Yukl, 2013). Except for the term “resources”, we set aside all other keywords, as well as their related definitions, for the following reasons.

First, they are deemed too abstract (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2015; Yukl, 1999) and were not transformable into simple terms in our tryouts. Consequently, they failed to be naturalised into any available primes or basic words (please see Ogden, 1930; Wierzbicka, 1996). Second, we found evidence that they might fail to be potentially essential to leadership. For example, every existence in this universe is in a certain process; thus, *process* is more a common attribute and less an essential of something. It is also quite clear that many influential persons are not leaders (e.g., influencers on social media or influential but deceased thinkers). Besides, leaders and followers influence each other (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014; Yukl, 2013), and much research has found that followers are influenced by many factors other than leadership, e.g., common goals or peers (Crossman & Crossman, 2011). In empirical research, *influence* is commonly referred to as relationships among variables. Thus, *influence* seems to be a common attribute as well. We conducted similar analyses and found that behaviour, relationship, goal, or traits are also common attributes (e.g., animal behaviours, marital relationships, personal goals/ traits). Third, from

these attributes, we found no rational way to infer the direct causes of leadership, which are pointed out in more detail below (step 3). Particularly, *process* likely gives no hint of a causal inference, while *influence* has been synonymous with leadership (Maxwell, 2001). Finally, behaviour, goals, or traits can still be added to a simple definition of leadership to produce a complete meaning, as mentioned later in the paper.

**Table 1. The 12 leadership definitions and their core meanings**

Leadership field	Author	Definition	Core meaning
Organisational leadership	Campbell (1991, p. 1)	Leadership as “actions which focus resources to create desirable opportunities”	<i>Actions to focus resources</i>
	Corwin (1978, as cited in Rost (1991, p. 59)	“Leadership consists largely of the ability to influence organizational policy and practice to manipulate organizational resources”	<i>Manipulate resources</i>
	Day and Antonakis (2012, p. 6).	“Leadership is required to direct and guide organizational and human resources toward the strategic objectives of the organization”	<i>Direct and guide resources</i>
	(Grint, 1997, p. 17).	“Leadership should be concerned with the mobilization of resources of all forms ... don't trace the leader, don't even trace the followers; trace the mobilization”	<i>Mobilisation of resources</i>
Political leadership	Heifetz and Sinder (1988, p. 194).	“Leadership is the mobilization of a group's resources to do work ... then the exercise of leadership will require devising policies or taking actions that serve as catalysts of work”	<i>Mobilisation of resources</i>
	Rejai and Phillips (1997, p. 3).	Leadership is “the mobilization of group resources towards solving group problems and achieving group objectives”	<i>Mobilisation of resources</i>
	Burns (1978a, p. 6).	“Leadership is the reciprocal process of mobilizing, by persons with certain motives and values, various economic, political, and other resources ... in order to realize goals”	<i>Mobilising resources</i>
	Dahl (1961, p. 6). (Note: political leaders)	“Stressed the enormous political potential of the cunning, resourceful, masterful leader ... a leader who knows how to use his resources to the maximum is not so much the agent of others as others are his agents [sic]”	<i>Use of resources</i>
Educational leadership	(Spillane et al., 2004, p. 11).	“We define school leadership as the identification, acquisition, allocation, co-ordination, and use of the social, material, and cultural resources necessary to establish the conditions for the possibility of teaching and learning”	<i>Use of resources</i>
	City (2008, p.3) (Note: educational leaders)	“Who want to use resources creatively and strategically to make decisions that support improvement”	<i>Use of resources</i>
Strategic leadership	Hitt and Ireland (2002, p. 3).	“The essence of strategic leadership is managing resources”	<i>Managing resources</i>
Leadership development	Batten (1989, p. 35)	“Leadership: Development of a clear and complete system of expectations in order to identify, evoke and use the strengths of all resources in the organization – the most important of which is people”	<i>Use of resources</i>

Consequently, the term “resources” stands out from the above keywords, which signify attributes. The term, as well as its related definitions, was the suitable candidate to be naturalised into primes or basic words, as presented in step 2. More importantly, this pick is supported by Burns’ (1978b) suggestion that “to understand the nature of leadership requires understanding of the essence of power” and “two essentials of power are motive and resource” (p.12).

We searched for definitions of leadership in university library books (e.g., Rost, 1991) and databases such as Google Scholar, ProQuest, and Scopus. As a result, we gathered over 300 scholarly definitions of leadership. From this definition pool, we shortlisted 12 promising definitions involving the keyword *resources* and then probed for core meanings of leadership in them (see Table 1). The core meanings in these 12 definitions from various leadership fields were extracted to form a simplified definition as presented in step 2.

## Step 2: Formulating a Simplified Definition

From the core meanings of those 12 definitions, we extracted these common keywords and grouped them into two groups: (1) *actions, mobilisation and mobilise, use, manipulate, direct and guide, managing*, and (2) *resources*. The words in group 1 were naturalised into the basic verb *use* (as listed in Ogden, 1930). The word *resources* was naturalised into primes, *someone/something* (Wierzbicka, 1996) or basic words *thing/property* (Ogden, 1930). From these naturalised terms, leadership can be essentially defined as *the use of resources*. Likewise, and at the prime level, one way to define the verb *lead* is *to spend* in any certain manner (Rost, 1991). Hence, to lead generically means to use resources.

Such behaviour of use requires a subject to complete a statement of the meaning of leadership, which raises the critical question: *By whom are resources used?* The question led us to trace the literature around the keywords “resources” and “property”, which subsequently directed us to the two major fields: economics (e.g., resource property right economics) and law (e.g., property law). In these fields, a resource (or property) is primarily defined as a thing being owned individually or collectively and used for strategic purposes, i.e., not household items (e.g., Alchian, 1993; Burvill et al., 2018; Reed, 2004; Riha, 2000). Also, from the perspective of law and “on a narrow interpretation, “use” refers to the owner’s personal use and enjoyment of the thing owned” (Honoré, 1961, p. 116). Hence, it can be inferred that leadership fundamentally means the use of resources by the owner or by a user in a more general sense.

It should be stressed that resources or property discussed here must be valued to be important or consequential to leadership (Harland et al., 2020; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Examples of resources include material resources, such as machines, or social resources, such as information or networks (see Tost (2015), Barney & Delwyn (2007), or McCarthy & Zald (1977) for complete definitions and classifications).



Further, and beyond typically human resources (i.e., subordinates or followers), it has been stressed that a leader and his/her competencies and characteristics also constitute a set of operational resources driving the utilisation of other resources (Barney et al., 2021; Castanias & Helfat, 1991; Hollander & Julian, 1969; Yan, 2019). When resources other than these operational ones are reduced to nil, leadership regresses to self-leadership, in which individual leaders lead themselves without involving followers (Heifetz, 1999; Manz, 1986; Turan, 2018).

### Step 3: Challenging the Simplified Definition of Leadership

When a definition has been formulated, it should be further challenged by several standards that have been set for it. Aristotle (350 B.C.) suggested that another kind of definition is a formula exhibiting the causes of the existence of a thing and that to know a thing's nature also means to know the reason why it is, and a definition must enable causal inference. Searching for a cause thus becomes essential in defining a phenomenon (Robinson, 1954). If leadership is the use of resources, then are there causes of the use of resources? Why do people use resources? Why does leadership occur?<sup>1</sup> Despite their vital importance, these questions, especially the latter, have been rarely asked and responded to.

A few answers can be drawn forth from the leadership literature, though. Chemers (2007) assumed that the coordination of resources is the most critical function of leadership to keep the team or organisation surviving. Hence, the use of resources, and specifically here – leadership – happens both naturally and purposefully to satisfy the unlimited needs of people. Knickerbocker (1948) pointed out that “the functional relationship which is leadership exists when a leader is perceived by a group as controlling means for the satisfaction of their needs” (p. 33). Barker (2001) succinctly reinforced that “leadership is a function of individual wills and of individual needs” (p. 491). In their review, Morgeson et al. (2010) explained that “team leadership can thus be viewed as oriented around team need satisfaction (with the ultimate aim of fostering team effectiveness). Whoever (inside or outside the team) assumes responsibility for satisfying a team's needs can be viewed as taking on a team leadership role. ... Thus, team leadership is fundamentally oriented around the satisfaction of critical team needs” (Morgeson et al., 2010, p. 8). These authors have likewise argued that the satisfaction of needs, whether for the individual, team, or organisational survival, may be the underlying, indirect cause of leadership.

Many more clues are indeed available in the broad resources or property literature. For instance, Aristotle et al. (1998) stated that the use of resources is not only for subsistence but also for a better life. Resources are used to produce wealth, and wealth will be employed in the production of more wealth (LeFerve, 1966). People,

1 A Google search for the questions “Why does leadership occur/happen?” returned no result/two results, respectively, as of March 15, 2023.



as perpetual wanting animals, must use resources for their instant and future needs (Maslow, 1943). For the satisfaction of needs, and because societies are organised around human needs (Riha, 2000), organisations form to coordinate the activities of two or more persons over their use of resources (Selznick, 1948). Moreover, the scarcity of resources motivates people to utilise them effectively, usually in an organised way.

More importantly, while it seems oddly hard to find out from the leadership literature why someone has the right to lead and, thus, becomes a leader, this query has been quite explicitly explained in the property right literature, especially resource property rights (ownership) economics and property law. The ownership of resources subsumes many rights, prominently the right to use resources and the right to decide how and by whom the resources should be used (Alchian & Demsetz, 1973; Heinsohn & Steiger, 2013; Honoré, 1961). From these rights, leaders emerge, and leadership happens in three possible ways under three distinct mechanisms.

First, because an owner has the natural and exclusive right to use the owner's resources (Alchian, 1965, 1993; Gamble & Kelly, 1996; Honoré, 1961), the owner has this natural, primary right to lead his or her resources, including labour and, notably, other productive assets. Thus, ownership entitles the owner to the right to use the resources being owned; consequently, the owner is the ultimate source of decision authority (Claeys, 2018). This ownership mechanism is universally legalised to ensure that authority, as well as responsibilities, rests first with the owners, especially business founders (Andersen, 2019) or shareholders (Hart & Zingales, 2017). Because the owner (or owners) of a firm possesses more authority and responsibility than any other people in the firm, it is the owner who leads the hierarchy of managers and workers (Brunnermeier et al., 2010; Jones, 2013). Hence, the first reason a person leads is he or she has the *primary right* to lead as an owner. Moreover, it has been suggested that this principle can be extended to owners other than the owners of invested capital. For example, because employees are inherently the owners of their talent (Gamble & Kelly, 1996), they lead themselves to commit the usage rights of their talent to an organisation via labour contracts, which is basically the franchise of labour usage. Under this contractual relationship, the employee 'orders' the organisational owner to pay the wage in the same sense that the owner (or the owner's agent) orders the employee to do the job (Alchian & Demsetz, 1972). Such a franchise and the right to control whether their talents are appropriately and ethically used and paid for have been less frequently analysed compared to hierarchically downward delegation.

Second, resource property rights can be separated or partitioned among two or more persons (Alchian, 1965; Asher et al., 2005; Heinsohn & Steiger, 2013). Therefore, a resource owner can either exercise the use of it directly or temporarily delegate his or her usage right to another person – an agent (Alessi, 1973; Jensen &

Meckling, 1976; Kay, 2018). In the latter case, the owner (e.g., a shareholder or a voter) acts as a principal, i.e., a primary leader, whereas the agent acts as a delegated leader, typically a business manager or political leader (Fukuyama, 2004; Jensen & Meckling, 1976).

In the case resource property rights are not clearly defined, such as those of common resources, leadership can still emerge from a delegation mechanism whereby the owners of communal resources collectively delegate their usage rights to communal leaders. In informal leadership, the leader of a team, who has the skills to persuade others to act in a particular way (i.e., operational resources), leads because the team members voluntarily and informally delegate to him or her the right to lead them and use the team resources. In the same way, McCarthy and Zald (1977) argued in their resource mobilisation theory that, to achieve structural changes in a society, the key role of social movement leaders is to mobilise and utilise resources that are delegated for use or contributed by their supporters.

Therefore, the second reason a person leads is that he or she has the *secondary right* to lead as a delegated leader. In other words, some people become leaders because they are temporarily delegated the right to use a set of certain resources. This form of leadership happens very commonly in teams, social movements, organisations, or nations, whereby leaders are delegated the right to mobilise and use resources to realise common goals.

Third, the less frequently discussed case of all forms is when a resource is usurped, and so are all resource property rights associated with it. Under this usurping mechanism, the usurper appropriates the rights to lead from the real owner of the resource. Therefore, the third reason one leads is that he or she has the *secondary right* to lead as a usurping leader, a fake owner, or a usurper.

Since the ownership of resources is the source of rights or authority (Hart, 1995, 1996; LeFerve, 1966), the ownership of resources becomes the primary source of leadership, and those derived primary and secondary rights are its direct causes. Counterfactually, in the absence of either primary or secondary rights as prerequisites, that is, when no resource is available for use, neither being a leader nor exercising leadership is possible, which means leadership is consequently absent. To terminate someone's leadership towards a certain set of resources (e.g., an organisation), either his or her secondary leadership right must be cancelled, or his or her primary leadership right must be usurped. In addition, it is the right to lead, whether primary, delegated, or usurped, that is handed over from leaders to their successors or next leaders during leadership changes. Traits, behaviours, styles, influence, process, relationships, charisma, or intangible power cannot be handed over, transferred, delegated, succeeded, inherited, seized, or cancelled, making these attributes likely subcentral components (Mel'čuk & Polguère, 2018) of a definition of leadership. Challenged by such causal logic and evidence, the simplified defini-

tion may not be very far from having the essence of leadership. To express its causes, leadership can be defined as *the rightful or authorised use of resources*.

Apart from revealing the causes of the defined phenomenon, a definition must distinguish the concept from its outcomes, thus enabling a nomological network of its causes and consequences (Gottfredson et al., 2020). Such a distinction is crucial because defining a concept by its outcomes not only undermines a causal explanation but also fails to capture its nature and validate the measurement of its outcomes (Antonakis et al., 2016; Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). Hence, it is the causal implicitness in the definition of a concept that underpins a causal inference obtained from the correlational relationships between the defined phenomenon and its outcomes. The next paragraph briefly presents how leadership (i.e., how the use of resources) in firms generates outcomes, which has been investigated by economic and leadership scholars.

The mechanism of how competent owners or leaders of firms utilise resources that can finally create values has been warily examined through the transaction cost lens and the resource-based view of the firm (e.g., Barney et al., 2021; Coase, 1937; Foss & Foss, 2005). Essentially, the use of resources in a firm will change the values of those resources, but this change is much dependent on how well the property rights to those resources are defined and transaction costs are reduced (Kim & Mahoney, 2006). With ample evidence, D'Oria et al. (2021) found in their review and meta-analysis that the use of resources, or what managers actually perform, is a crucial factor explaining why some firms create more value than others. More broadly, the use of resources naturally leads to changes in resources, as the outcomes of leadership, in their values, their forms, or both, and this mechanism may apply to other leadership phenomena, such as national leadership. The changes can be in either positive or negative directions or a mix of these. The positive changes in business, as expected from various stakeholders, generally include acquiring more resources from the environment (e.g., profit, investments, loans, or talents) and increasing the values of organisational resources such as employees' skills and satisfaction (Yuchtman & Seashore, 1967; Yukl, 2013) internally. In most cases, such changes can only be acknowledged and evaluated *after* the resources have been used. As such, this simplified definition of leadership tends not to overlap considerably with its outcomes, i.e., predetermines what makes a leader effective or ineffective (Yukl & Fleet, 1992), but makes the prediction of its outcomes possible (e.g., by observing how leaders use resources competently and ethically) and the tautological reasoning of it likely impossible.

### Verifications: Checking and Confirming the Outcome of the Naturisation Process

In this section, we present two verification stages to validate the simplified definition that has been challenged by these above standards – causal and consequential

inferences. Backward verifications were thoroughly done and are briefly presented next, whereas forward verifications are open for future research to confirm this definition in various contexts.

### Backward Verifications

A definition is, in every case, affirmative (Aristotle, 350 B.C.). It is “the condensation of a vast body of observations – and stands or falls with the truth or falsehood of these observations” (Rand, 1990, p. 48). It is thereby essential to know if the definition is possibly valid for many individuals, thus being a more objective one; objective validity is determined by reference to the facts of reality (Locke, 2003; Rand, 1990). Hence, the more supporting theories and meaning convergence has the definition, the less conflictive and the more objective it becomes. The verification of a definition is indispensable both to confirm its validity and to reduce its subjectivity.

We carried out two backward verifications following the argument of Rand (1990) that a definition must comply with the two fundamental functions of consciousness: *integration* (i.e., the integrability of the definition of a concept into the wider knowledge in the human mind) and *differentiation* (i.e., the distinguishability of a concept from its synonyms for logical integration and precise communication). Other scholars have similarly argued that a definition of a concept must orderly fit in a larger literature composed of neighbouring concepts, theories, and ideas (e.g., Bacharach, 1989; Caws, 1959; Gerring, 2012).

Our *integrative* verification was guided by this question: Has the definition ever been mentioned, similarly expressed, supported by, or fitted with the related literature? If leadership is likely the rightful use of resources, then this premise must be mentioned in or compatible with the related literature. As already presented in step 3 above, many of those works represent resource property rights (ownership) economics (e.g., Alchian, 1993; Hart, 1996; Heinsohn & Steiger, 2013), property law (e.g., Claeys, 2018; Honoré, 1961), and agency theory (e.g., Jensen & Meckling, 1976). We next relate briefly to various works mentioning the inherent relationship between resources and the right to lead, typically the resource-based view of the firm (e.g., Barney & Delwyn, 2007; Penrose, 1995) and the theory of the firm (e.g., Coase, 1937; Williamson, 2002).

Indeed, many influential scholars have argued that the use of resources is essential for leadership. For instance, Adams (1975/1776) stated that it is an infallible maxim that authority always follows from resources. Historically and broadly, rights and jurisdictions were all derived from resources; hence, the owners had the rights towards their resources and became the judges in peace and the leaders in war (Smith, 1990/1776). As such, resource property rights naturally give the owner the exclusive rights or authority to lead and/or to delegate to an agent (Alchian, 1965, 1993; Hart, 1996; Heinsohn & Steiger, 2013). The agent can delegate his

or her authority downwardly, and thus, a hierarchy forms and works start. From the literature, O'Donnell (1952) also summarised, but regrettably refuted, that the source of a manager's authority derives from the resource property rights. Since authority is the formal or institutionalised right to make decisions about how to use organisational resources (Jones, 2013), it can be inferred that leadership in organisations is about exercising these rights being granted by ownership, delegation, or both.

Moreover, the premise that resources and resource property rights shape the right to lead and enable leadership has been argued by scholars who have theorised the nature of the firm. For example, in his landmark paper analysing the nature of the firm, Coase (1937) argued that, because of the costliness of organising production under short-term transactions for resources, firms come into existence to legally allow their owners the organising authority to coordinate and direct the firms' resources acquiring from long-term contracts at less cost and risk. In her book, which helps build the resource-based view of the firm, Penrose (1995) proposed that a firm is a set of resources; thus, making use of a firm's resources for production by a hierarchy of authority becomes the core function of the firm. Consequently, managers, even workers, are delegated by the owners to make decisions about the best use of a firm's resources (Ricketts, 2002). Chandler (1962) likewise described that the role of management and the function of the manager in a firm have been to coordinate the use of resources, again reiterating the central role of resource use. Therefore, if exercising the use of organisational resources is not leadership, and the owners and their agent(s) are not leaders, who else could be leaders and by which authority? Thus, from various theories, we have found many supporting arguments for conceptualising leadership as the use of resources.

The recent development of the theory of the firm further elaborates on the association between resources and authority or the right to lead. Aghion and Tirole (1997) and Hart (1996) have justified that someone has formal authority in an organisation because he or she first controls crucial nonhuman assets or resources. This authority over nonhuman assets subsequently "translates into authority over people," and "in the absence of any nonhuman assets, it is unclear what authority or control means" (Hart & Moore, 1990, p. 1150). Hart (1996) further clarified that authority, whether it is formal, real, or something else, is best described as applying to nonhuman rather than human assets. This explanation of authority, together with those theories and descriptions above, is helpful to infer that the focus of leadership research should not be put solely on the leader-subordinate relationship (i.e., the secondary authority). Without considering how a leader makes decisions on other vital organisational resources (e.g., money, technology), such a narrow focus could lead to an underestimation of the complex roles, duties, and decision-making tasks of leaders.

In addition, transaction cost theory proposes that leaders have, flexibly and sophisticatedly, chosen to use different kinds of resources via transactions, and their choice exhibits *make or buy* decisions (Williamson, 2002). For example, a new unit of people may be set up and led to make an input, or, as a better choice, money could be spent to have that input produced elsewhere less costly without leading any person directly (i.e., outsourcing). Presently, the human factor of production can be replaced by machines or robots (Brougham & Haar, 2018). In this scenario, the secondary manifestation of leadership (upon the authority over people) fades while its primary manifestation (upon the authority over resources of any kind) remains intact. Alternatively, the vision in which robots or computers lead people more fairly or severely is equally feasible (Wesche & Sonderegger, 2019). Hence, it seems that the simplified definition of leadership and these above conceptualisations of authority might still be sound in these subsequent yet inverse scenarios.

We conducted another backward verification by differentiating leadership from management, which is its closest synonym. This verification follows both the differentiation principle (Aristotle, 350 B.C.; Rand, 1990) and an argument that a valid definition of a concept must differentiate it from its synonyms (Gerring, 1999, 2012; Locke, 2003). Equally important, a concept defined in a way that it can be differentiated from its synonyms is one that can be operationalisable (Gerring, 1999).

Linguistically, the suffix *-ment* denotes the means or instrument of *the action* (Deverson & Kennedy, 2005; Jewell & Abate, 2001; Kawaletz & Plag, 2015), while the suffix *-ship* denotes shaping or being (Cogaltay, 2015; Carola, 2009). Furthermore, *-ship* generally refers to the rights and duties of *the position* specified in the base, e.g., leader in leader-*ship*, king in king-*ship*, or parent in parent-*ship* (Baeskow, 2010). Hence, manage-*ment* can refer to methods or ways (i.e., the means) to manage (something or someone), whereas leader-*ship* can mean being a leader with the right to lead, as similarly argued earlier. Moreover, management has been widely referred to as how organisational resources are best used (e.g., Hitt et al., 2007; Koontz & O'Donnell, 1968; Rue & Byars, 2003; Terry, 1972). Hence, managers, through their use of resources (i.e., leadership), are responsible for the attainment of organisational goals (Lussier, 2015). It could be, therefore, rational to interpret that management is about suitable methods or ways to use resources, especially in organisations.

Importantly, in some established theories, management has been summed up as the principles of scientific decision-making and techniques to use resources (e.g., Koontz & O'Donnell, 1968; Locke, 1982; Maslow et al., 1998; Taylor, 1967). These principles, as many as fourteen according to Fayol (1987), have been widely institutionalised in organisations. Thus, leadership, determined by the *right* to lead, which can be delegated, transferred, or inherited, is the personal practice of using a certain set of resources. In contrast, management, as a general principle to use

resources effectively, efficiently, and ethically, cannot exactly be so. Indeed, leaders often, but not always, enact their roles by transforming management principles into their leadership practices. Hence, there is some consistency between the linguistic meanings and the theoretical meanings of these two concepts, and the differentiation of their meanings is both linguistically and theoretically possible, if not quite clear thus far.

Practically, leadership is the behaviour of a particular manager, while management can refer to the collection of policies, guidelines, and labour being used (i.e., all available means) to run an organisation. Leadership may be further observed as the personal practice of management of a leader over a specific set of resources, which is either owned by, delegated to, or usurped by him or her. This premise corresponds to a suggestion of Mintzberg (2013) that researchers should observe managers as formally delegated leaders (i.e., formal leaders in organisations) and leadership as management practised. Managers are expected to lead their units/departments by managerial principles and for the organisational goals. Clearly, it is both impossible and unhelpful to separate management from leadership (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003), but it is possible and useful to essentially differentiate between them as the two complementary but inseparable phenomena. From this differentiation and, with the complement of management, leadership could be operationalised and measured more precisely. For instance, the leadership of an organisational leader has been operationalised into three factors and associated competencies, namely self-leadership (i.e., personal or operational resources), people leadership (i.e., human resources), and organisational leadership (i.e., other mobilisable resources) (e.g., McCauley et al., 2010; Nguyen et al., 2021; Testa & Sipe, 2012). Leading other people is, therefore, crucial but not all about leadership.

Finally, as MacKenzie (2003) suggested above, we conducted an adjunct verification by exploring how this simplified definition of leadership could be fitted with power and authority, the two concepts closely related to leadership. We found a more comprehensive conceptualisation of power (cf. to that of French and Raven (1959)) that both links to resources and fits with the simplified definition of leadership. *Power* has been widely defined as the control over valued resources (e.g., Blau, 1964; Hart, 1996; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Schaerer et al., 2018; Sobral, 2000; Tost, 2015). Power, therefore, signifies the strength of leaders and the magnitude of their leadership. Leaders are more powerful if they are able to not only acquire and control more valued resources but also put the resources under their control into more effective usage.

As mentioned above, authority has been defined as the formal or institutionalised rights to use organisational resources (e.g., Alchian, 1965; Alchian, 1993; Hart, 1996; Heinsohn & Steiger, 2013; Jones, 2013). The relationship between leadership and authority is clarified by the succinct articulation of Kegan and Lahey (1984) that “we define leadership as the exercise of authority” (as cited in Rost,



1991, p. 78). As such, leadership – the actual use of resources – is the leader's behaviours of the rights (or authority) to the use of resources. Thus, leadership is sharply different but inseparable from authority, which has been defined as formal rights. From Kegan and Lahey's definition, it can also be inferred that authorised leaders may choose not to exercise their authority as a form of laissez-faire leadership (Antonakis et al., 2003; Boyatzis, 1993). Their choice is, perhaps, the final link in the causal chain of leadership: Leadership cannot happen if the leader does not perform his or her leadership role and duties, that is, when his or her available resources are not utilised. Overall, we found that leadership, management, power, and authority could all be defined and related to each other quite logically using existing but suitable definitions in the literature.

### Forward Verifications

It has been argued that the meaning of a concept is contextually determined and could be modified

in accordance with the development of knowledge (Rand, 1990). Hence, a definition can be modified to apply to new contexts from which knowledge can be developed. This argument implies that a basic definition is not one-size-fits-all, but from it, multiple contextual definitions, or definitions-in-use (Caws, 1959; Rand, 1990), should be deduced. These contextual definitions can be helpful for describing and grasping the complex, evolving meanings of the concept in different contexts. These contextual definitions define the sub-concepts, signifying the sub-phenomena. By successfully advancing these modifications as *forward verifications* (i.e., verifying the contextual meanings of the concept), the definition will be “again contextually valid” and able to “withstand the test of time” (Locke, 2007, pp. 872, 886). In other terms, a definition can be proved to be valid via the bundle of its contextual definitions. Furthermore, these modifications are compatible with language development, which is always from basic to specific and professional.

Therefore, and in organisations, such a simplified definition of leadership is open for multiple modifications and operationalisations within (1) each type of organisation as a distinct set of organised resources (e.g., public, military, industries, or not-for-profit organisations), (2) each level of management (e.g., frontline or director level), or (3) each type of resources (e.g., human, artificial intelligence, money, materials, knowledge). Such contextual modifications and operationalisations appear to have the potential to develop multiple theoretical models of leadership that can be integrated at the definition level. Therefore, quite contrary to the assumption that the “search for an essence of leadership promotes the danger of homogenizing leadership” (Lawler, 2005, p. 221), a simple definition of leadership seems to offer a starting point to help grow divergent, but linkable leadership theoretical models. This outlook tends to align with the pluralism of leadership, i.e., leaderships or leadership phenomena, since it is too multi-faceted to be understood by using only

a few general theories (Tourish, 2011). Indeed, as argued by Andersen (2016), a political leadership theory may need to be essentially different from a business one. This is because legitimate national leaders only have the delegated rights to lead, which are granted for a fixed term by the people, who are the voters (Fukuyama, 2004). Thus, legitimate national leaders are delegated leaders who temporarily have the authority over publicly-owned resources. In contrast, the authority over privately owned resources in a business rests first with the owner-leaders (owners or shareholders collectively) as long as they are still the owners. This difference determines when, to what extent, from whom and to whom, and in what way authority can be exercised and delegated as basic features that further differentiate these two distinct leadership phenomena.

## Discussion and Limitations

Overall, we have presented that, in the leadership field, the integration of definitions could be doable to form a renewed, simplified definition, which is the use of resources. The framework was developed not only to help form a simple definition of leadership, a laboriously studied phenomenon but also to serve as a potential “acid test” to justify the goodness and the agreeability of a definition. Such a test requires the definition of a concept:

- is shaped by many other definitions and by basic terms or primes (agreeability and essentiality)
- potentially reveals causal and consequential inferences (cause-and-consequence inferentiality)
- enables a sound integration into a broad literature and other related fields (integrability)
- enables a clear differentiation from its closest synonyms (differentiability)
- could be potentially operationalised, measured, and developed (operationalisability, measurability, and developability).

A simplified definition is, of course, basic, which means its major role is to grasp the basic meaning of the phenomenon in a manner that satisfies the above five standards that have been consistently suggested for a definition (e.g., Aristotle, 350 B.C.; MacKenzie, 2003). Because no single definition can fit all situations (Yukl, 2013), another role is to develop contextual definitions by which the nuanced aspects of the phenomenon in different contexts can be captured better. Bearing both these roles, a simplified, or down-in-size, definition covers fewer terms but potentially reveals more meanings, a seeming paradox that scholars have consistently advocated (e.g., Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011).

Given growing critiques about the definitions of many dominant leadership constructs (e.g., Einola & Alvesson, 2021; Eva et al., 2019; Gottfredson et al., 2020;

Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013), this renewed, simplified definition of leadership could serve as an underlying premise of leadership under which new research about what leadership is and how it operates could be conducted. Having said that, the definition and its potential development tend not to grow to become an isolated research realm but quite the contrary because there are connections between the definition and other leadership research streams. As presented above, leadership competency models have been theorised and adopted to evaluate leaders (McCauley et al., 2010; Testa & Sipe, 2012). With three components, namely self-leadership, people leadership, and organisational leadership, these components of behaviour demonstrate the operation of three corresponding sets of resources, namely personal resources, human resources, and other mobilisable resources in organisations (Shum et al., 2018). Hence, the definition seems compatible with such models and may open new research directions investigating how leaders use a specific type of resource competently (e.g., labour or capital). Essentially, critical behaviours of leaders relating to their decisions on vital non-human resources (e.g., finance) need to be sufficiently considered in leadership research and development, which have, to date, mainly focused on leading people. The integration of this simplified but broad definition of leadership into the competency models can necessarily resolve the critique of having used a narrow leadership definition in these models (Patching, 2011). Such potential can be evidence supporting a recent proposal that “concept redefinition enhances the health of a literature if one makes a theoretical contribution” (Solinger et al., 2024, p. 1).

We expect the framework and the five standards above to be helpful for researchers to redefine concepts in their fields. Contrary to what has been considered mal-practice, redefinitions of concepts might help mitigate conceptual confusion and complexity in the field of study (Solinger et al., 2024). Management science will progress much more rapidly if we put more effort into defining objectively and clearly what we are studying (Locke, 2003). Thus, researchers may need to consider if their definitions in use have been clearly and objectively shaped and measured. This practice may help to avoid using definitions that have conflicting meanings with other disciplines and, thus, fail to be integrated into the broader literature.

We have experienced limitations that may inform future research attempting to shape a definition. First, we used the set of keywords signifying the core meanings of leadership as identified by influential scholars. Alternatively, and using text analysis techniques, such keywords can be similarly identified in the current pool of leadership definitions. However, the frequency of usage of a keyword may not confirm its role as an essence of leadership. The fact that most people once said the sun went around the earth did not confirm that the sun does so. Thus, naturalisation and verifications are essentially needed for confirmation. Second, the naturalisation process is somewhat intuitive and restricted in the works of Ogden (1930) and Wierzbicka (1996). Future research looking for better definitions of concepts should consider the newest pool of primes since the NSM project is still

being developed. Third, the set of 12 leadership definitions from diverse leadership fields might not be large enough to set up a widely agreeable definition, though many standards have been used to offset this limitation. Finally, though the paper adopts, and can only present shortly, various ideas and theories to justify the simplified definition, many of these are from the resource property rights literature; thus, what has been written here seems appropriate for formal leadership positions. Bias around the definition might occur, and further interpretations should be done cautiously.

## Conclusion

This paper introduces a framework to shape a renewed, simplified definition of leadership using existing definitions and some philosophical and linguistic guidelines. The paper first reports naturisation, a three-step process which is central to the framework, for extracting a simplified definition of leadership from the set of 12 existing definitions. The definition appears to put forward the source of leadership, how people become leaders, and why leadership happens as being extrapolated from the broad literature covering resource property right (ownership) economics, property law, and several organisational theories. In a post-hoc manner, the backward and forward verifications show how leadership could be differentiated from management, fitted with the concepts of power and authority, and potentially operationalised. The paper contributes to the leadership literature with a renewed, simplified definition of leadership, which was parsimoniously reached with only two primes: Leadership is the use of resources. We expect that this generic definition may begin fresh conversations regarding research, communication, and practice of leadership. Moreover, the framework has been detailed for potential modifications and applications. Ultimately, we hope this definition might enrich the leadership literature and serve as a thread connecting leadership research with other crucial fields such as economics and law.

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