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The (In)voluntary follower

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Abstract:

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INTRODUCTION

Leadership research often describes leadership as a relational phenomenon, including leaders and followers (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Hollander, 1978; Uhl-Bien, 2006). This relationship is seen as asymmetrical and involves acts of influencing people's ideas, understandings, values and emotions (Alvesson et al., 2017; Blom & Alvesson, 2015; Ladkin, 2010; Zaleznik, 1977) primarily through interpersonal interaction. An important implication of this understanding of the leader-follower relationship is the basically *voluntary* compliance with these acts of influence and acceptance of the follower identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). In leadership literature this compliance has been described as a 'voluntary reduction of influence' (Alvesson & Blom, 2015:272) or that members of a group 'implicitly or explicitly surrender their power to define the nature of their experience to others' (Smircich & Morgan, 1982:258). The voluntary compliance to be influenced regarding ideas, understandings and feelings is the fundamental difference between a leader-follower relationship and the manager-subordinate relationship, where the subordinate may comply on a behavioural level due to managerial power and formal employment contracts (Alvesson & Blom, 2015).

This aspect of voluntary compliance may, however, be problematized, especially since the follower position has considerable downsides (Alvesson & Blom, 2015). DeRue and Ashford (2010), in their depiction of leadership as a reciprocal process of claiming and granting leader and follower identities does not particularly problematize the potential unwillingness of 'claiming' a follower identity (an identity which might not always be that attractive) and the possible mechanisms involved in pushing a person to accept a follower identity. In fact, DeRue and Ashford (2010) devote the majority of their seminal paper to the construction of the leader identity (a position probably more attractive from a personal point of view) and from there deduce the equivalent process of constructing the follower identity without acknowledging much if its possibly problematic assumptions. In our paper, we would therefore like to problematize the assumption of *voluntary compliance* in the construction of follower identity. Here we use follower 'position' synonymously to follower 'identity'. We regard (self)identity – e.g. leader or follower – as fluid, contestable and where many – sometimes rather incoherent – identities can co-exist, drawing on Giddens's (1991:53) conceptualisation:

'Self-identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is the self as reflexively understood by the person... self-

identity is continuity (across time and space) as interpreted reflexively by the agent.’

The issue of voluntary compliance in the construction of follower identities is important since it helps us to nuance one of the major assumptions in much recent leadership theory. Particularly it contributes to our knowledge of the obstacles of establishing a leader-follower relationship and to the possibilities of resisting the follower identity being imposed by someone else. As it problematizes the condition of ‘free will’ it also has implications on the issue of follower’s responsibility for their actions (Ginet, 2002) in line with the wishes of the leader.

In this paper we would therefore like to problematize and develop the assumption of voluntary compliance in much contemporary leadership texts and discuss different circumstances when voluntariness in the leader-follower relationship may be infringed. Based upon this discussion, we will also suggest a tentative typology of follower voluntariness, from the conscious and reflective acceptance of the follower position to the other extreme, the unconscious, manipulated and involuntary follower position. Even though an empirical investigation is out of reach of this particular paper, we will also discuss the possibilities of studying and empirically confirming the different positions in our suggested typology.

FOLLOWERSHIP AND VOLUNTARY COMPLIANCE

For a long time followers/followership has lived in the shadow of the leaders/leadership, not at least when it comes to text production, training programmes, and so forth (Bligh, 2011). This historic neglect has of course many reasons, but during the last decades there has been a growing interest in studies of followers and followership. Hollander (1992a&b), Meindl (1990, 1995) and Kelley (1988) are all early advocates of a more follower-centred understanding of leader-follower relationships. Yet, studies that use a follower perspective in order to better understand *followership*, not leadership, are still rare birds in the literature on ‘followership’ (Baker, 2007; Crossman & Crossman, 2011; Carsten et al., 2010). In a recent overview, Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) slice the research field into two broad traditions or perspectives; a *role-based view* and a *constructionist view*.

The historically dominating role-based view focuses on how actors enact leadership/followership in the context of formal hierarchical positions. It often relates to traditional studies of leadership, but reverse the lens (Shamir, 2007) and focus on how followers as casual agents antecedent and affect organizational outcomes. Typical research questions target follower role orientations, follower traits, follower schemas and characteristics, and how followers (usually subordinates) work with leaders (usually managers) in ways that contribute to (or not) leadership and organizational outcomes (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Early texts include Kelley's (1988) work on the variety of follower types as well as the active role of many followers described by Hollander (1992a). Kellerman (2008) emphasize the important role followers play in achieving change. How followers to a large extent frame and shape leadership behaviour is also described by Howell and Shamir (2005), suggesting that followers have a much more active role than often assumed in traditional leadership research. The issue of passive versus active followers is further elaborated by Carsten et al. (2010). In their study a variety of empirically based follower schemas are displayed, ranging from passive and deferent to active and even proactive follower roles (see also Grant & Ashford, 2008), where the organizational context is pivotal for what roles are enacted. Even if obedience often is assumed and associated with followership, there are of course also opportunities for resistance (Collinson, 2005; Tepper et al. 2001; Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007). In line with the assumptions dominating the role-based view (formal positions strongly predicts/overlaps leadership/followership behaviour), this means that we can observe 'followers' not following.

In contrast, constructionist approaches view followership and leadership as co-constructed in social and relational interactions between individuals (Blom & Alvesson, 2014; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). Here, followership is not tied to a fixed position but to behaviour, were (emphasis in original) 'leadership and followership are enacted in asymmetrical relational interaction between people, which *might or might not* coincide with formal hierarchical roles (i.e. managers might not lead and subordinates might not follow)' (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. X). From a formalistic point of view it may appear to be unproblematic to sort people into leaders and followers where subordinates are equated with followers and superiors with leaders. Leadership and followership cannot however just be reduced to formal positions (even if formal positions represent important contingencies for leadership/followership identities and behaviour). Leadership needs to be considered as not just leaders doing things to followers, but as a

relational phenomenon where followership is a key element, calling for people to see and define themselves as followers (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Seers & Chopin, 2012). And here there is a significant element of voluntariness from the potential followers' part.

Constructionist approaches on followership often draw on post-structuralist perspectives (Collinson, 2006), with a relational (Dvir & Shamir, 2003; Shamir, 2007) and discursive view (Fairhurst, 2007; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012) on the co-construction of leadership/followership. According to DeRue and Ashford (2010), leadership/followership is a process in which people claim and grant identities – as leaders and followers. Claiming occurs when an actor tries to establish an identity as leader or follower. Granting consists of the bestowment of the claimed identity by others in combination with supporting/corresponding identities (e.g. person A claims a leadership identity that is granted by person B accepting a follower identity for himself/herself). The element of free will and voluntariness is therefore salient when it comes to claiming and granting leader/follower identities. Without correspondence in view of self and other, leadership/followership will not work. There need to be 'symmetrical meanings' about the asymmetry/inequality of the relation and the adjacent identities (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). A formal managerial position is still an important factor in asymmetrical relations and in most cases managers-subordinates will to some degree overlap leader-follower relations (Carsten et al., 2010), but *not necessarily* according to a constructionist perspective on followership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

In this paper, we adhere to the latter view of followership as described above: Leaders/followers can - but has not to - be linked to different formal positions. They can be more or less salient or camouflaged and change over time, but they are still characterized by a clear sense of asymmetry, i.e. a status, identity and power difference (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). In fully egalitarian relations, there is therefore little point talking about leadership. As a consequence, followership can be understood as a partly voluntary reduction of influence or what Shamir (2007) refers to as disproportionate social influence, in favour of being influenced by (associated with an acceptance of inferiority in relationship to) a superior (leader). This is clearly different from a pure manager-subordinate relation, where people may comply as an outcome of formal employment contracts, hierarchy and vertical division of labour. Subordinates often accept the manager's formal obligations and rights, but do not need to become devoted followers (Alvesson et al., 2017; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Since leadership

includes an element of voluntary compliance, ‘followers’ can to a high degree choose their response to leadership attempts. This means that people can exit or minimize leadership/followership relations, within their employment, i.e. avoid placing themselves in follower positions. We then, in line with constructionist view on followership described above, emphasize the distinction between subordinates, formally defined in employment relations, and followers, interested in and willing to be influenced by the leader in terms of values, beliefs, meanings, cognitions and other elements going beyond a manager/subordinate relation and its formal framing.

Leadership typically means, at least to a degree, counteracting free, diverse thinking, valuing and acting, as a consequence of the creation of shared meanings and collective action (Smircich & Morgan 1982). Followership entails the willingness to a considerable degree accept the leader’s definitions of what exists, is good and what one should strive for. This may be accomplished in a ‘positive’, persuasive manner rather than overtly repressive one (we will return to this more in detail below), including appeals to values, norms, obligations, shame and guilt, but nevertheless means that a person’s freedom to do whatever s/he wants is significantly restricted. Even though management and the employment contract partly deals with work tasks and goal accomplishment and leadership involves an element of voluntary compliance, it leads to *additional* reduction of autonomy (Alvesson & Blom, 2015), as also the domains of thinking, feeling, self-view, and so forth, are incorporated under the control of the leader (often but not always the employer/manager/superior).

(IN)VOLUNTARY FOLLOWERSHIP

The interest in voluntariness, and related issues such as choice, coercion and free will, is sometimes said to be in the very core of philosophical thought. One of the earliest and most influential writings on the matter can be found in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean ethics* (book III, chapter 1 & 5), where he conditions voluntariness to be an action originating (being caused) by an agent, that the agent know the relevant particulars (especially what s/he is doing and the foreseeable results of what s/he is doing, see also Raffoul, 2010, on this matter) pertaining to the action and whether s/he rejects the action or not. Recently, Hyman (2013, 2015) has re-addressed the issue of voluntariness in a manner that has received considerable attention (Alvarez, 2016; Sharon, 2016). Hyman argues (2013, 2015), following the example set by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean ethics* (Raffoul, 2010), that voluntariness is at roots an ethical

concept related to responsibility and to the appraisal or non-appraisal of individual conduct. This leads Hyman (2013) to define voluntariness out of negation when he states that ‘a certain thing is done voluntary if, and only if, it is *not* done out of ignorance or compulsion. This is not the same as saying that it *is* done knowingly and freely’ (p. 685, emphasis in original). By regarding voluntariness as a foundationally ethical concept and arguing that its fundamental role is the assessment of innocence and guilt (for instance in relation to a criminal or morally questionable act) he dismisses the classical explanation of voluntariness with the help of mental concepts like intentionality related to the philosophy of mind (Kim, 2011; Sharon, 2016).

It is intuitively acceptable that certain actions, like submission under a threat of personal violence, can be intentional without being voluntary, at least not completely. How much and what kind of duress or other compulsive circumstances that is needed to make an act non-voluntary (and thereby, for instance, exculpate guilt) is, according to Hyman (2013), however not clear and needs to be assessed from case to case. Furthermore, voluntariness is associated with choice, since a voluntary act is normally assumed to be an act that someone chooses to do (or, as Aristotle puts it, originates in the actor). But the relationship is according Hyman (2015) not straightforward, since choice can be interpreted literally, where a person also under threat of violence can have a literal choice to not submit and face the foreseeable consequences, and practically where the price to pay for submission can be considered so high that the act is still seen as non-voluntary even though acting differently was literally possible.

Certain obligations, to which the agent has accepted and promised to follow, also vitiates voluntariness in Hyman's (2013) account, not because it makes certain actions impossible, but since it removes practical choice. It does not matter, Hyman writes, if the act is done willingly or reluctantly, since ‘voluntary’ does not describe a person's attitude or state of mind, whereas ‘reluctant’ and ‘willing’ do exactly that’ (Hyman, 2013: 693). Accordingly, Hyman (2013, 2015) argues that voluntariness is not ambiguous since, at least from his ethical understanding of the concept, certain circumstances clearly negate voluntariness. But in practical situations, for instance regarding circumstances that exculpate guilt, there is a matter of judgment. This calls other scholars to talk about actions as ‘mixed voluntary’ (Alvarez, 2016:669) or ‘various senses of voluntary’ (Zimmerman, 2001:1775).

Following the reasoning above, we will understand voluntary followership to be the claiming, or at least accepting, of a followership identity which implies a less-influential position in relation to someone else by letting your ideas, understandings, values and/or emotions being influenced. This is done out of (at least practical) choice, without ignorance or compulsion severe enough to make voluntariness invalid as well as beyond what is required by obligation.

It seems, however, that several accounts and theories of leadership imply that voluntariness, at least to some degree, could be impinged. Starting with *compulsion*, there are several situations where someone might be pushed towards a follower position without losing at least literal choice to resent that position. One such situation is related to social attraction. According to social identity theory, people cognitively categorize themselves and others according to their match to what is seen as prototypical similarities of relevant ingroups and outgroups. This process of ‘depersonalization’ (Hogg, 2001:187) not only differentiates among groups but also establishes stereotypical feelings, attitudes, and behaviours into being group normative. Relevant to leadership, this process of depersonalization influences also how people feel about one another as they come to be perceived based upon their prototypicality, or in other words social attraction, rather than individual preferences. According to Hogg (2001), people who are perceived to be most prototypical are seen as influencing other group members since they seem to conform to the behaviours and attitudes of the former. This rather passive influence may strengthen over time when the most prototypical person is able to secure compliance and acceptance of his or hers ideas, suggestions and attitudes which perceptively constructs a structural difference of status and prestige between the ‘leader’ and the ‘followers’. The social identity processes of categorization and depersonalization has significant importance to reduce subjective uncertainty and the more consensual prototypes of the groups, the greater effects of uncertainty reduction it has on its members. This makes these groups seem attractive to those who identify with the group prototype, but also highly coercive to comply for those who might deviate:

‘Under high self-conceptual uncertainty, members strive for a simple and distinct prototype, support witch-hunts to purify the group of deviants, express consensual social attraction, are highly attuned to prototypicality, and invest the leader with a highly charismatic leadership personality’ (Hogg, 2001:193).

Obligation is compared to compulsion more self-imposed and arises out of a sense of duty resulting from e.g. organizational hierarchy, interpretation of a job description (vertical and horizontal division of labour), tradition, culture. The element of sanction or punishment is also less evident than in the case of compulsion, even if shame of course can be experienced as a severe consequence of not fulfilling an obligation. In a work life setting, obligation is as suggested above often derived from the formal managerial structure; as a subordinate it is common to think that you *ought* to listen to your formal superior and pay close attention to what she is saying, and that you *ought* to obey and follow her instructions. But obeying and following someone's instructions is another thing than accepting a follower identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) in relation to that person. This means that you can see it as an obligation to do what your manager tells you to do, without defining or letting yourself be defined as a follower in relation to leader. This kind of relationship is sometimes referred to as transactional leadership (Bass, 1985; cf. van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013), but if the element of obligation (in this case based on formal authority) dominates at the expense of enthusiasm and voluntarism it seems more sensible to characterize the relationship in terms of management/subordination instead of leadership/followership (Alvesson et al., 2017; Kotter, 1990; Ladkin, 2010; Zaleznick, 1977).

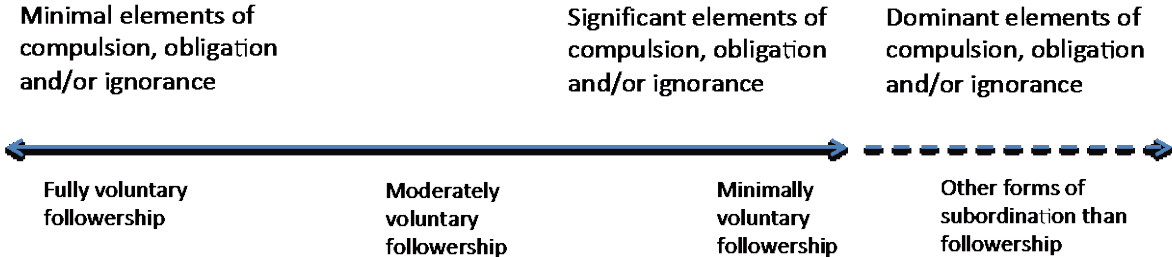
Ignorance, which vitiates voluntariness according to our definition above, concerns acts done out of beliefs which are disturbed or false considering either the particularities of the act or the predicted outcome. Some of the literature on charismatic leadership warns that charisma often is a central characteristic of destructive leaders (Padilla et al., 2007) which leads to a 'strong asymmetrical relationship' (Alvesson et al., 2017:38) with followers that identify intensively with the leader (Conger & Kanungo, 1998). Accordingly, many scholars warn about the powers of charismatic leaders to make followers dependent on them for guidance and direction (Howell & Shamir, 2005), especially in crisis situations (Roberts & Bradley, 1988), which 'undermine followers' motivation and ability to challenge existing views, to engage in self-development, and to develop independent perspectives' (Howell & Avolio, 1992:49). A more severe situation when ignorance undermines voluntary compliance is manipulation in leadership. Manipulation can be understood as a way of influencing without the object knowing the intentions of the manipulator, which makes the influence harder to resist (Auvinen et al., 2013; Wrong, 2004). According to Auvinen et al. (2013), who studied the use of manipulative storytelling in leadership, this form of influencing can be quite

common and includes acts such as lying and the distribution of false or misleading information.

DIFFERENT DEGREES OF VOLUNTARY FOLLOWERSHIP

Following the reasoning above, we suggest that voluntary followership might be understood as a scale, ranging from fully voluntary followership to minimally voluntary followership, based upon the conditions of compulsion, ignorance and obligation. If ignorance, obligation and/or compulsion dominate the relationship it becomes less relevant and meaningful to characterize it in terms of followership. Instead it might be seen as a dominative exercise of coercive power or as subordination to management as a consequence of formal hierarchical authority (see also Alvesson et al., 2017). Our suggested scale (illustrated in figure 1 below) is loosely based upon the terminology of Zimmerman (2001) and DeRue & Ashford’s (2010) definition of follower identity.

Figure 1 – Varieties of voluntary followership



On one end of the scale is the *fully voluntary followership* that describes an acceptance of a follower identity that is intentional and not something one is obliged nor forced to do. This level of voluntariness in followership implies a follower who is actively seeking a leader for guidance, sense of meaning or belonging and would gladly adopt a follower position in relation to a suitable leader, or a person that without any elements of threat, duty or manipulation grants an approaching leader-wannabe his/her leader identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Fully voluntary followership is probably quite rare, especially in formalized hierarchical settings, such as companies, where elements of obligation and compulsion often play a role, at least after a person has agreed to enter the organization. Outside formal hierarchies, however, it might be more likely to find this form of followership. A historical

example is Madeleine Slade, a British woman born into an aristocratic family who got inspired by the writings of Mahatma Gandhi and in 1925, at the age of 32, arrived in India to become his disciple under the given name of Mirabehn. Her stay in India would last for almost 34 years and she devoted much of her life to the advancement of Gandhi's principles, also after his assassination in 1948. The levels of compulsion, obligation and ignorance seem in this case to be very low.

In the middle of the scale we find *moderately voluntary followership*, the acceptance of a follower identity but with some elements of ignorance, obligation and/or compulsion. This type of voluntary followership is certainly much more common in real life than the previous one (clean from all compromising elements). Imagine a contemporary hierarchical organization, where a superior is formally responsible for a group of subordinates (a team, section, department, etcetera). If the superior person starts claiming a leader identity that goes beyond just managing the subordinates' behaviour, the subordinates can grant him/her that identity or not (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). There are however often forces that tend to push formal subordinates towards a follower identity. The formal managerial hierarchy usually implies expectations of taking your superior and what s/he says seriously (elements of obligation). Ignoring or even openly resisting a superior's claim of a leader position/identity can come at a cost for the recalcitrant subordinate (elements of compulsion). Usually better equipped with symbolic and material resources and often with the ability to 'frame' the leadership intervention favourably, the superior can manipulate (lightly and rather innocently) his/her subordinates towards a follower position (elements of ignorance). But despite these forces, it is important to recognize that the intended followers still have a choice to grant the person a leader identity and claim/accept follower identities for themselves. Sometimes, this acceptance comes as an immediate response to a leadership act/claim, and sometimes it comes after a more thoughtful and reflexive process of perhaps several more or less convincing leadership acts (Alvesson et al., 2017).

At the other end of the scale there is *minimally voluntary followership*. Here the acceptance of a follower identity is made out of significant elements of ignorance, obligation and/or compulsion. Clear cases of leader manipulation may trick the follower to adopt the views of the leader. Significant sense of obligation might put the follower in an a priori obedient position with high receptivity towards, for example, persons seen as traditional authorities (Weber, 1947). Or the situation is perhaps compulsive enough, for instance due to severe

threats of social exclusion, to make the choice not to follow almost impossible to resist. In all these cases, the level of voluntariness is so limited that it starts to touch the limit for a voluntary leader-follower relationship. A typical example could be a newly hired, junior co-worker that together with his fellow juniors are invited to listen to the firm's famous and charismatic CEO for the first time. Significant elements of group pressure, expectations based on formal positions and well-directed impression management in combination with less experience, a fragile self-identity under construction and a willingness to 'fit in' easily push the subordinate towards a follower identity. If the elements of compulsion, obligation and ignorance however becomes *to* dominant, it seems less relevant to describe this position in terms of followership.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Purely voluntary followership – with no elements of obligation, compulsion or ignorance - is in deed rare, if even possible. Modern hierarchical organizations usually contain significant elements of these factors, pushing subordinates towards follower positions. But this is far from always always the case. To just adhere to instructions, do what is expected in terms of behaviour or even over-achieve according to defined corporate objectives can easily be done without granting someone a leader identity (enabling the person from that position also to a significant degree affect the subordinate's meanings, emotions, values, morals, mood, etc). There are also many other sources of meaning, direction, inspiration and support – such as colleagues, friends, family, networks, church, communities, literature, and so forth – that compete with the formal hierarchy in terms of influence. Therefore, follower identities among formal subordinates should never be taken for granted or be mechanistically assumed.

Since absolute voluntary followership is an ideal state that is hard to find in everyday organizational life, we probably need to allow for *some* violation of this condition when we refer to followership, especially if we want the signifier to correspond to some observable phenomenon 'out there'. We therefore need to consider different degrees of voluntary followership. But if we stretch the meaning to far, and allow elements of compulsion, obligation and/or ignorance to dominate, the term 'followership' tends to loose vital parts of its meaning (Blom & Alvesson, 2015; Blom, 2016) and other concepts such as for example subordinate (in relation to a superior), target of coercive power (in relation to a more dominant power player), client (in relation to a patron), and so forth, are probably more revealing and useful when trying to make sense of the relationship (Alvesson et al., 2017).

What we refer to as ‘moderately voluntary followership’ is as said probably the far most common form of followership in modern organizations, but the position ‘minimally voluntary followership’ serves as an important reminder of where to draw a line in relation to other similar concepts that describes asymmetrical identity positions and relationships between actors.

To conclude, we adhere to and support the general idea put forward by Alvesson et al. (2017), Seers and Chopin (2012), Smircich and Morgan (1982) and others that voluntariness is a necessary condition of followership. Voluntariness should, however, in our mind be considered as a matter of degree with mechanisms that restricts voluntariness which are hard to avoid. Our contribution is that we, by drawing on recent thinking on the nature of voluntariness (Alvarez, 2016; Hyman, 2013, 2015; Zimmerman, 2001), identify these mechanisms in terms of compulsion, ignorance and obligation and relate these to leadership/followership theory. By doing this we also nuance and develop the argument made by Alvesson et al. (2017) and others that followership should be regarded as a largely voluntary form of subordination. What we suggest also have relevance for the claiming and granting processes described by DeRue and Ashford (2010). A claimed and granted, or rather accepted followership identity that has been established based on significant elements of obligation, compulsion and/or ignorance is arguably less robust, sticky and deeply rooted than one that has been established with higher degree of voluntariness and enthusiasm. This is of course just a first modest step towards a more formal proposition that future empirical research hopefully depart from.

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