Would the field of organization studies benefit from another theory of leadership? This question will likely provoke some skepticism. Such a response is understandable. Leadership has been one of the most widely researched topics across many disciplines. Sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, historians, and organizational scholars, to name just a few, have offered important insights about who is fit to lead, under what circumstances, and what makes leaders more or less effective. In organization studies, myriad perspectives exist that differ in what constitutes the driving force for effective leadership, for example, whether it’s personality traits, situational opportunities and constraints, or person-situation fit. With many decades of research under our scholarly belts, we know a lot about leaders and leading, yet, with *The New Psychology of Leadership: Identity, Influence and Power*, Haslam, Reicher, and Platow convincingly argue that there is fertile new ground to plow in the area of leadership.

Haslam and colleagues offer a social psychological perspective on leadership, grounded in a careful analysis of relevant, yet eclectic empirical research. The title of the book naturally begs the question of what precisely is new about the authors’ perspective. Let’s start first with what is not new—the book’s foundational ideas—as these provide important touch points that readers will likely find familiar and will connect with. Leadership is defined in a conventional way, as the capacity to convince other people to contribute their effort to actions that turn ideas and visions into reality and help bring about change. Leadership therefore is a process of influence. Importantly, it is a group process in which leaders and followers are joined together and perceive themselves as joined together in a common endeavor. Accordingly, understanding the psychology of the leader-follower relationship is fundamental to understanding effective leadership. This premise is the most important building block of Haslam and colleagues’ psychological account of leadership. Because this premise will likely ring true to most people, the book invites a broad academic audience to read on.

With these foundational ideas in place, the authors move into less conventional terrain with the core argument of the book, which is that a shared social identity, a sense of “us” that connects leader and followers as a common group, is a precondition for the emergence of leadership. Leadership therefore is construed as a process of social identity management, and effective leadership is always “identity leadership” (p. 197). It is this idea that captures what is new about the book. This does not imply that the use of social identity
principles to understand leadership is novel. Quite the contrary; we have seen scholars from many disciplines make explicit and implied ties between identity and leadership. Rather, what is new is how Haslam and his coauthors synthesize diverse research to construct a detailed, systematic account of the ways in which effective leadership is tied to social identity. The result is an organizing framework for “identity leadership” that offers new insight into the rise and fall of leaders and, in the process, outlines an extensive agenda for future research.

Haslam and colleagues’ identity leadership framework comprises four key principles. Each principle stems from the core argument that social identity is what allows people both to lead and be led. Principle 1: Followers (group members) need to see the leader as “one of us” (chap. 4), not as someone who is different or otherwise set apart from the group (i.e., “one of them”). Importantly, being an ingroup member may be necessary but is not sufficient. Followers are more likely to confer leadership on ingroup members who are exceptional in that they fully represent the shared qualities that characterize the group and that make it different from other groups. Principle 2: Followers need to see the leader as “doing it for us” (chap. 5). More concretely, leaders need to be ingroup champions that advance the group’s collective interests in ways that are consistent with the group’s own norms and values. Principle 3: Leaders must “craft a sense of us” (chap. 6). Leaders not only work within the constraints of the preexisting group identity but are also skilled “identity entrepreneurs” who shape the shared understanding of what the group represents (“who we are”). Critically, leaders actively represent themselves and their proposals in ways that match the group’s values, norms, and priorities. Lastly, Principle 4: Leaders need to “make us matter” (chap. 7). Leaders need to be “embedders of identity,” taking the ideas, values and interests of the group and making them a reality. Effective leadership requires marshaling followers’ energies and inspiring collective action so that the group’s goals are realized and its potential is fulfilled.

With these organizing principles, the book paints a detailed picture of the practice of leadership. Particularly, it outlines the source of leaders’ influence and how they can wield it to spur collective action that brings real change. The vital role of followers in the practice of leadership is not left to the wayside. Haslam and colleagues cast followers in an agentic role. It is followers who confer leadership, and their collective effort is essential to bringing a leader’s proposals to fruition. It is this effort that provides the ultimate evidence of effective leadership. The ideas and research that fuel the organizing principles in the identity leadership perspective will be familiar to many readers. This is one of the book’s strengths. The combination of a robust theoretical platform, social identity theory, and empirical evidence to support the authors’ theoretically driven ideas is precisely what makes the identity leadership approach convincing and credible. Importantly, this organizing framework creates a common space for diverse scholars to come together to share common interests. For example, the concept of “identity entrepreneurship” (chap. 6) is essentially about social category management—i.e., defining constituencies with categories, managing category boundaries, shaping category representations—which is central to work in cognitive and social psychology, organizational behavior, and organization theory. The book makes clear the opportunity and need
for collaborative interdisciplinary research centered on specific questions, which is an especially appealing feature.

Who is going to find this book valuable? It is intended for an academic audience. This does not mean that the book fails to deliver practical implications. It has clear and actionable strategies that can be taught to leaders of all types of groups—work teams, organizations, political parties, communities, and nations. Chapter 8 provides a useful service by offering a way for researchers to translate this leadership perspective to interested parties, such as business students and working professionals.

So if researchers are the intended audience, what kinds of scholars will be most interested in this book? It is not just for researchers who study leadership but also for those who are generally interested in social influence and power. You do not need to be well acquainted with social identity theory to fully engage with the book’s ideas; a concise and informative overview of relevant social identity principles is provided, lowering barriers to entry for readers. Moreover, the book abounds with historical, political, and organizational examples and anecdotes that breathe life into the concepts and arguments and make them resonate with the reader, providing some entertainment in the process. Also worth noting, the book opens with a review and critique of existing leadership theories to show the need for a psychological account of leadership. This review alone will be a useful reference for researchers in need of a roadmap to navigate this voluminous literature.

The New Psychology of Leadership: Identity, Influence and Power thus has something new to say on one of the most widely researched topics of all time. This is no small accomplishment. It also speaks to a broad audience, creating a theoretical space for researchers from many disciplines to forge collaborative conversations about collective action and effective leadership, which is another significant accomplishment. It will be worth your time to check out this book.

Caroline A. Bartel
McCombs School of Business
University of Texas at Austin
Austin, TX 78712
caroline.bartel@mail.utexas.edu