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RESEARCH NOTE

Leadership, not leaders: On the study of leadership as practices and interactions

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Summary   In this paper, we suggest a perspective within leadership research that has an analytical focus on leadership as it is practiced in daily interaction, rather than on individual leaders. We draw upon recent developments in leadership research that emphasize leadership as processes, practices and interactions in formulating basic scientific assumptions of such a perspective. The suggested perspective will enable us to gain new understandings of how leadership activities emerge in social interaction and of how institutionalized notions of leadership are brought into — and re-constructed in — these same activities. Given this reasoning, we would suggest that the empirical study of leadership should be based in a process ontology, focused on leadership practices as constructed in interactions.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to develop founding scientific assumptions of a perspective within leadership research that has an analytical focus on leadership as it is practiced in daily interaction. Going beyond dominating heroic conceptions of leadership as lodged in single individuals, the suggested perspective will enable us to gain new understandings of how leadership activities emerge in social interaction and of how institutionalized notions of leadership are brought into — and re-constructed in — these same activities. Given this reasoning, we suggest that the empirical study of leadership should be based in a process ontology, focused on leadership practices as constructed in interactions — embedded in a cultural context where societal notions of 'leadership' are both taken for granted and under re-construction.

Beyond individualism

The field of leadership — in theory and in practice — has been a fast-growing part of management knowledge since the beginning of the 20th century. In most conceptions of management and organization, leadership has a given and central place in enforcing principles, motivating employees and communicating future goals and visions to strive for. Leadership is assumed to make a special, significant and positive contribution to action processes in most organizations, and leadership studies as an academic field has thus been pre-occupied with the never-ending task of identifying identities or practices related to successful leadership.

The field of leadership studies has traditionally been leader-centered, i.e. focused on the individual leaders and their traits, abilities and actions (Wood, 2005), placing the abstract phenomenon of 'leadership' into distinct individuals that are detached from their cultural context (Barker, 2001). This was a part of the developments in the management sciences during the early 20th century, in which the best leaders were to be identified and chosen out from their

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suitability and formal merits rather than from pre-modern bases such as kinship or charisma. The problem was still to determine what constituted a suitable leader, and this question gave rise to a series of different theoretical schools (cf. overviews in Parry & Bryman, 2006; Yukl, 2008). One stream of thought tried to identify personality traits that distinguished successful leaders from other people (cf. review in Stodgill, 1948). Against this, others claimed that leadership was about interaction between leaders and followers, and that different interaction styles (e.g. characterized by concern for people or concern for production) implied different consequences (cf. Katz, Maccoby, & Morse, 1950; Stodgill & Coons, 1957). Yet another stream of research instead advocated a situational perspective, according to which leaders are only effective if they adapt their style to the situation at hand; for example, very simple or very complicated situations are best handled through task-oriented leadership, while most other situations are better handled through socio-emotional leadership styles (Fiedler, 1967). The situational perspective became very influential, reflecting the increasing popularity of the contingency approach in organization theory, but it has also been subjected to recent criticism for focusing too much on the leader and not enough on the group interaction (Parry & Bryman, 2006).

In contemporary writings, the leader is described as a member of a group, albeit with specific possibilities to influence the group, and leadership is, consequently, a series of interaction processes where leaders inspire followers by creating common meaningful images of the future (Parry & Bryman, 2006; Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Central to the argumentation is the distinction between *transactional* and *transformative* leadership, i.e. the difference between leadership as a contractual relationship between leaders and followers and as a social relationship where the aspirations of followers are raised to those of the leaders themselves (Bass, 1990). For example, the old concept of *charisma* has been revisited from this perspective (Conger, 1999), and new concepts such as *authentic leadership* (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) have been suggested to overcome the risk of manipulation inherent in the transformative ideal.

During recent years, there has been an emerging debate in the field of leadership studies on notions of shared and distributed perspectives on leadership (cf. Parry & Bryman, 2006; Pearce & Conger, 2003), a debate emphasizing leadership as a collective activity rather than as the doings of formal leaders. This debate emerged from the practical advantages of sharing leadership duties between two or more persons in suitable situations (Döös, Hanson, Backström, Wilhelmson, & Hemborg, 2005; O'Toole, Galbraith, & Lawler, 2002; Pearce, 2004), such as increased capacity of handling a wider range of situations and tasks, widened competence bases and reasonable workloads (Crevani, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2007a).

One way of theorizing these developments has been to start from the empirical observation that leadership activities often involve more than one person, and that some organizations actually make formal arrangements to share leadership responsibilities and tasks. In some situations, leadership is preferably a collaborative and collective responsibility where the responsibilities, competencies and decision-making need to be distributed onto several individuals rather than one (Collinson & Collinson, 2009; Huxham &

Vangen, 2000). The resulting literatures contain several conceptualizations of such observations and arrangements, such as *shared leadership,* (Bradford & Cohen, 1998; Lambert, 2002; Pearce & Conger, 2003; Wilhelmson, 2006), *collaborative leadership* (Collinson, 2007) and *dispersed/ distributed leadership* (Crevani et al., 2007a; Gronn, 2002, 2009; Lindgren & Packendorff, 2009b; Parry & Bryman, 2006). In the same vein, we have seen the emergence of the *post-heroic leadership ideals* suggested in order to emphasize the relational, collectivist and non-authoritarian nature of leadership practices in contemporary organizations — opposing against unreflective mainstream perspectives that sustain heroic, individualist and authoritarian leadership norms (Crevani et al., 2007a; Eicher, 1997; Fletcher, 2004; Koivunen, 2007b; Spillane, 2006; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Towards processes, practices and interactions

From our point of view, these conceptualizations have their merits as conveyors of new practical trends in work life and — if they are not merely used as rhetorical tools while old patterns persist (Gosling, Bolden, & Petrov, 2009) — thus as re-shapers of institutionalized expectations of leadership practices. The problem is that these literatures focus on new possible practical arrangements (i.e. shared leadership) rather than on formulating new basic perspectives in leadership or new assumptions on how to do leadership research. It is not enough to say that leadership can successfully be shared between two or more co-leaders, or that it is about interaction between leaders and followers — which is a simplistic stance taken by several scholars in the past, a stance actually often maintaining rather than dissolving the leader/follower distinction as a subject—object relation (Collinson, 2006; Hosking, 2007; Küpers, 2007). If we want to take leadership research beyond the leader-centered tradition, we must also challenge our deeply rooted tendency to make the abstract notion of 'leadership' concrete in the guise of individual managers (Gronn, 2009; Wood, 2005) that lead hoards of followers towards the achievement of shared goals (Drath et al., 2008). We must instead try to redefine leadership in terms of processes and practices organized by people in interaction, and *study that interaction without becoming preoccupied with what formal leaders do and think*. Like Parry and Bryman (2006) we want to develop

> '... an alternative perspective that emphasizes the importance of recognizing the need for leadership to be viewed as a widely dispersed activity which is not necessarily lodged in formally designated leaders ...' (p. 455).

It is a perspective where *the leadership as such is the level of analysis* (cf. Gronn, 2002), where *the empirical focus is on leadership processes, practices and interactions* (Carroll, Levy, & Richmond, 2008; Hosking, 2007; Knights & Willmott, 1992; Koivunen, 2007b; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Wood, 2005) and *the notion of 'leadership' is seen as a powerful societal discourse* brought into all such processes, practices and interactions (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Ford, 2006; Madsen & Albrechtsen, 2008).

Of course, the development of such a perspective is not a straightforward task, and it can be met by several objections. Are we (falsely) implying that everyone in an organization

have horizontal and equal relationships with each other? If leadership is not what formal leaders do, how can one then empirically separate leadership activities from non-leadership activities? Is everything that happens in organizations possible to study in terms of leadership? Why bother to study interactions and practices in terms of 'leadership'? Clearly, there should be alternatives such as 'organizing' or 'teamwork' that may be met by much less scepticism among scholars and practitioners alike.

All such objections deserve serious treatment. In this note, we therefore aim to develop founding scientific assumptions of this perspective on the scholarly study of leadership, thereby formulating points of departure for empirical inquiry. These include ontological, epistemological and axiological standpoints, as well as suggestions on empirical fieldwork procedures. In the first section to follow, we will discuss a number of interrelated founding assumptions of our perspective. Thereafter, we will give examples from our ongoing studies on what kind of empirical fieldwork and analytical patterns may result from the practical application of the perspective. The note ends by a brief discussion on the theoretical and practical consequences of applying this view of leadership in research and leadership development.

Basic assumptions

As noted above, our suggested perspective relates closely to a broad and ongoing discussion in the leadership field concerning the need, possibilities and implications of studying leadership as interactions and practices rather than as the competencies and actions of individual managers. This discussion — mainly held through articles in leading management and leadership journals such as *Leadership*, *The Leadership Quarterly*, and *Human Relations* — is a rich source of ideas and perspectives, but it is also a fragmented one, characterized by a multitude of concepts and interpretations of concepts. One example of this is the family of similar conceptualizations of distributed/shared leadership (cf. overview in Crevani et al., 2007a), another the differing notions of 'ontology' in leadership research (cf. Wood, 2005). When developing our basic assumptions below, we will therefore also relate to these ongoing discussions in order to clarify our standpoints and sources of inspiration.

The nature of 'leadership': towards a process ontology

First and foremost, the study of leadership interactions and practices is based on constructionist ontological and epistemological assumptions, whereby leadership, leaders, processes are seen as constructed in social interaction (cf. also Cunliffe, 2008; Grint, 2005; Holmberg, 2005; Hosking, 2007; Larsson & Lundholm, in press; Sjöstrand, Sandberg, & Tyrstrup, 2001; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Wood, 2005). In the extant literature, there are several discussions on the nature and implications of such assumptions. One common theme is that current leadership research is built on a taken-for-granted individualism that must be articulated and challenged. For example, Carroll et al. (2008) and Bolden and Gosling (2006) point to the need to study leadership as practices rather than as competencies held by individual managers. Gronn (2002)

suggests the study of leadership activities rather than leaders as the unit of analysis, and Drath et al. (2008) proposes an ontology based on the definition of leadership as activities with certain outcomes.

On a more profound level, Wood (2005) suggests that most practical notions of 'ontology' in leadership research represent a misplaced concreteness where the processual character of leadership is neglected in favour of definitions, delimited courses of action and static accounts. Wood instead argues that leadership studies should be guided by a process 'ontology of becoming' (cf. Chia, 1995), suggesting symbiogenesis (i.e. the collective processes of symbiosis in the natural environment) as a starting point for inquiry on leadership. Barker (2001) makes a similar argument based on the notion of dissipative systems, although he admits that it will not be easy to apply this in practical research:

'Leadership has much more to do with action based upon perceptions of emerging structure in systems where order is periodically breaking down and reforming than it does with the imposition of structure and control relative to an à priori configuration. The 'leader' has no more influence on the emerging structure than the carnival barker has on the crowd.' (p. 489)

This reasoning comes very close to the notion of 'relational leadership', i.e. a perspective on leadership as social processes of relating, processes that are co-constructed by several interactors (cf. Fletcher, 2004; Hosking, 2007; Soila-Wadman & Köping, in press; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Such processes are not mechanically reversible and controllable: instead, they are characterized by a social flow of interacting and connecting whereby organizations, groups, leaders, leadership and so forth are constantly under construction and re-construction (cf. Chia, 1995; Hernes, 2007).

The ontological challenge is thus how one may remain true to the processual ontology whereby leadership is seen as a continuous social flow, and at the same time delimit the notion of leadership to discernible practices and interactions in order to make it possible to study. Our proposal would be to go with the latter while preserving as much as possible of the insights of the former. When identifying what should be studied as 'leadership' according to our proposed perspective, researchers should also bear in mind that one may repeat the main mistake of traditional leadership studies: to simplify and reduce an abstract and complex phenomenon to a clear-cut practical entity. One should remain reflective and critical to suggestions that processes, interactions and practices do have fixed limits in time and space — even though one may impose such limits from time to time for the sake of empirical data generation. Likewise, one should constantly be aware that processes, practices and interactions are fully embedded in a complex social web — even though one may sometimes focus on interactions as such in order to understand their internal dynamic. In that sense, the processual ontology becomes an ideal to nurture and strive for, relentlessly, rather than a handy set of ready-made prescriptions.

Knowing 'leadership': a constructionist epistemology

The next assumption to be discussed is the epistemological one, i.e. what we can know and may want to know about

leadership — including the underlying values of knowledge. The ideal of the processual ontology points to a general need to create a detailed understanding of situated micro-processes in organizations, but also to relate what happens in these micro-processes to societal discourses on leadership on macro- and meso-levels. Such understandings should also be based on in-depth empirical fieldwork where practices and interactions as such are observed, without pre-defined operationalizations. We will develop the practicalities of such knowledge creation further in upcoming sections of this note.

Our above depiction of processual ontology as an ideal to maintain throughout the research process also relates closely to axiological/ideological concerns (Lindgren & Packendorff, 2009a), i.e. the values by which we judge the quality and relevance of research and what consequences of our research we can see as acceptable or unacceptable. The identification of such values is important in all scholarly endeavors, but they are especially important when new and different perspectives on highly institutionalized phenomena are to be applied with some rigor. Without such values, the spirit of ontological re-orientations such as the above proposed will be difficult to maintain throughout the research process. Moreover, the leadership field contains a strong moralizing discourse pointing out leaders and leadership as positive, superior, indispensable and admirable phenomena (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Crevani, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2007b; Kets de Vries, 2003) — which makes it even harder to adhere to basic assumptions whereby this very discourse is seen as immersed in the processes rather than as a given fact.

From our point of view, there are thus guiding values that should be brought into the research process if we want to stay true to our ontological and epistemological standpoints. Central to these values is that our research is a part of an emancipatory process, whereby taken-for-granted notions of leadership are articulated and challenged — both in theory and in practice. In research terms this implies that existing concepts and theories should be judged against the basic assumptions upon which they are built (rather than only against the validity of their conclusions), and the fact that new concepts and theories should explicitly be argued for in terms of basic scientific assumptions. The main reason for this reasoning is that 'leadership' is a well-known and institutionalized concept in society, and that actors often tend to draw upon institutionalized notions of leadership in their daily construction of leadership activities (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). We will return to this in the next section.

In practical terms, the emancipatory ideal is a reaction to the tendency of leadership theories to include some people and exclude others, to obsess with some and suppress the rest, to emphasize the grandiose and forget about the mundane, to violently limit what becomes intelligible in terms of leadership. We must avoid the 'generalization trap' into which so many leadership researchers have fallen before us, and instead study leadership practices and interactions as local-cultural processes, being open to a multitude of voices and interpretations (Hosking, 2007), even elusive and contradictory ones (Koivunen, 2007a). In that sense, we as researchers are obliged to take moral stances of our own concerning basic assumptions of research, what conceptualizations we relate to and use, and the intended and unintended consequences of research and theories. We thus advocate an ideal of critical performativity (Spicer, Alvesson,

& Kärreman, 2009), whereby the theoretical ambition to create in-depth understandings of leadership processes is combined with a pragmatist ambition to

> '... engage in critical dialogue and to wish to encourage reflection, even on one's own certainties. Critical interventions — critiques, concepts, thick descriptions — then are pragmatic. They involve asking questions about what works, what is feasible, and what those we address perceive as relevant. But critical pragmatism also seeks to stretch the consciousness, vocabularies and practices that bear the imprint of social domination. The social engineering of dominant objectives and practices are at least balanced with a strong sense of a better world.' (Spicer et al., 2009: 545)

'Leadership' as discourse: performativity and research ideology

An important aspect of studying leadership in terms of processes, interactions and practices — i.e. as socially constructed, emergent organizing embedded in sociocultural contexts — is that dominating discourses on the nature and quality of leadership must be seen as an inevitable and integral aspect of what is studied. Leadership research is part of a powerful discourse in society that continues to emphasize the individual leader as the incarnation of leadership and (mostly) his traits and doings as the road to prosperity and moral elevation. Leadership processes may thus involve practices and interactions relating to notions of 'leadership', 'followership', 'good leadership', 'bad leadership', 'absent leadership' and so forth. Consequently, any empirical fieldwork intended to understand leadership processes would be enriched by incorporating how leadership norms are constructed in interaction and what such construction 'does' to us.

Not surprisingly, 'leadership' is a most performative discourse (in the sense provided by Butler, 1999) that may invade any organizing process in the guise of grandiose and heroic ideals, strong bases of identity and expectations, principles for hierarchization and segregation, and a myriad of tools and tricks (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Carroll & Levy, 2008; Ford, 2006; Holmberg, 2005; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004). It is a positive discourse on attributes and behaviors linked to success that can be deconstructed through the use of critical management theory perspectives. For example, a gender perspective on leadership can reveal that the leadership discourse contains highly masculinized expectations of how professional leaders should appear, behave, relate and react (Billing & Alvesson, 2000; Calás & Smircich, 1991; Collinson & Hearn, 1996; Fletcher, 2004; Kets de Vries, 2003; Martin, 2003) These expectations are spread through research literatures, mass media and leadership development course programs (Wahl, Holgersson, & Höök, 2005), and are often hidden behind a surface of feminine rhetoric (Lindgren & Packendorff, 2006; Madsen & Albrechtsen, 2008).

The strength and pervasiveness of leadership norms is also an important argument for labeling the proposed research perspective as 'leadership' — even though we are aware of the risk of this label suggesting an entitative rather than processual view. When there are such strong norms, norms

that the research community takes active part in sustaining, they constitute an important societal phenomenon with far-reaching consequences for mankind. If we do not study this in terms of 'leadership', our research will be void of all the aspects of power, domination, identity work, expectations, heroic individualism, normative assumptions, and so forth that come with the word. Articulating and emphasizing such aspects in terms of leadership is to take our role as social scientists seriously. On the other hand, our perspective on leadership is not limited to the study of how traditional leadership norms (for example, heroic leadership) and practices (for example, people allowing a leader to have influence) are constructed and re-constructed. This is only part of the construct of leadership that we are proposing. Considering leadership a performative concept, problematic for how it violently circumscribes social reality, we are also interested in providing a subversive re-construction of the concept. Performativity is in fact based on repetition, and subversive repetition is one way of participating in the very practices that one wants to challenge (Butler, 1999). One may thus repeat the act of constructing leadership as an important matter following 'traditional' definitions, but contesting how that act is done by drawing on alternative sources of inspiration and focusing on other aspects than normal ones. As a consequence, one may contribute to making other practices and notions also as culturally intelligible in terms of 'leadership'.

Delimiting 'leadership' practices and interactions

Given the above discussion, the last basic assumption to discuss is what empirical circumstances could form the basis for a developed understanding of leadership processes, practices and interactions. As mentioned, identifying such circumstances requires caution, in order to be open to the idea that all interactions are potential instances of leadership, while still maintaining a pragmatism that enables us to discern and identify leadership activities in the making.

While the scholars that have treated the ontological problem at its most basic and profound level (cf. Barker, 2001; Wood, 2005) tend to be somewhat ambiguous on what should be studied as 'leadership' in practice, the scholars who hold that their definitions of leadership are ontological statements have more to offer (cf. Gronn, 2002; Pettigrew, 2003). Gronn (2002) proposes the study of 'concertive actions' such as spontaneous collaboration patterns, intuitive understandings that emerge between colleagues, and institutional arrangements supporting self-managed teams and other formal practices. Drath et al. (2008) build on much of the literature hitherto discussed in their plea for an 'integrative ontology' of leadership, in which the 'tripod' — three basic concrete entities of traditional leadership research: leaders, followers and shared goals — need to be replaced. Their alternative 'DAC ontology' instead focuses on the outcomes of leadership — Direction, Alignment and Commitment — as situated in a cultural context, thereby allowing considerable variation in the manifestation of DAC between different local settings, while, in the traditional ontology:

'. . . it is the presence of leaders and followers interacting around their shared goals that marks the occurrence of leadership, with the DAC ontology, it is the presence of

direction, alignment, and commitment (DAC) that marks the occurrence of leadership.' (Drath et al., 2008: 636)

From our point of view, the contributions by Gronn (2002) and Drath et al. (2008) point to important aspects of what is to be studied as leadership processes, practices and interactions, such as the co-construction of a sense of common direction in social interaction. Both contributions offer concrete suggestions on how to discern leadership from general organizational processes, suggestions that may still fit well with a process ontology, given that one remains aware of the fallacies of misplaced concreteness. While thus clearly appreciating the merits, we still want to raise some concerns.

One concern relates to the focus on 'outcomes' in the DAC model, which can be problematic from a process ontology point of view. 'Outcomes' may well be interpreted as results of completed temporary leadership processes rather than as continuously evolving modes of interaction — thus falling back on a 'projectified' understanding of what a process is, i.e. as an orchestrated social development that has means, ends and deliveries.

A second concern is that the DAC ontology is — for rhetorical reasons — constructed as an opposite to the 'tripod ontology' rather than as a construct of its own. Like general leadership research, it may thus focus on instances of successful, present and converging practices, while instances of failing, absent and diverging leadership practices may be neglected. Direction is to us what is basically produced in leadership interactions. However, 'widespread agreement in a collective on overall goals, aims and mission' (Drath et al., 2008: 636) is a quite linear definition. Direction for us means direction in organizing processes. Agreement on goals might be one sort of constructing direction, but direction does not need to be 'one direction'; rather, it is the situated, moment by moment, construction of direction that becomes interesting. Therefore, leadership interactions and practices will also have to include possibly diverging processes and instances of unresolved conflicts, ambiguities and debates — situations most well-known in any organization, anywhere. The DAC concepts thus signal closure and harmonic 'happy endings' where our process ontology should rather lead us to perceive 'never-ending stories'. In line with Hosking (2007) we claim that we must be open to local leadership constructions that involve all participants, and that may result in multiple local constructions and ways of relating.

Finally, the abovementioned concern that the performativity of the societal leadership discourse may be drawn upon in all interactions and practices needs to be repeated — one probable 'outcome' of processes labeled as 'leadership' by their interactors will be that leadership norms are re-constructed (implying also a possibility of change).

To us, the DAC concepts tend to focus exclusively on converging processes of leadership, thereby emphasizing the common and the collective. Hence, we propose the concepts of co-orientation (enhanced understandings of possibly diverging arguments, interpretations and decisions of all involved parties) and action-spacing (construction of possibilities, potentials, opportunities and limitations for individual and collective action within the local-cultural organizational context). While traditional definitions of leadership tend to focus on one person — the leader — limiting others' — the followers' — space for action, in our proposal

we want to study several people constructing in interactions a limited space for action.

Empirical inquiry: what will we see?

In this section, we will provide some brief examples of how to conduct empirical fieldwork and of what possible interactions and practices will be seen when studying leadership according to the above discussion.

As to fieldwork methodology, it needs to be closely related to existing methodologies and vehicles for in-depth processual inquiry in organization studies in general, such as ethnography, thick descriptions, participant observation, open-ended interviews and so forth. The suggested research approach tries to take a different perspective of what is currently going on in organizations, by studying everyday social interaction in terms of 'leadership' (cf. Larsson & Lundholm, in press). We aim to achieve a detailed understanding of the 'relational realities' of the interactors, based on text, written and spoken language, and non-discursive actions, objects, and events (Hosking, 2007). Thus, our fieldwork will have to identify and 'join' ongoing processes in organizations with this in mind, seeking for occurrences of leadership in terms of direction, co-orientation and action-spacing. Whilst certainly open to the rare instances of major, grandiose critical incidents in organizations, it will mainly be concerned with patterns in the daily, mundane processing, and construction, of organizational matters — or better, the production of organizing.

In our own ongoing empirical studies we have identified several such occurrences of leadership. Our ambition has been to keep looking at interactions with our new lenses and to start producing a vocabulary to describe and understand what we are observing, to construct leadership in a different way. Fieldwork has so far taken place in three different organizations — a division of a large heavy industry corporation ("Strong"), a medium-sized environment technology firm ("Cleantech"), and an emergent pharmaceutical venture ("BioCorp") — and that it was carried out through participant observation (tape-recorded meetings) and in-depth interviewing with both formal managers and employees. In our analysis we have therefore looked at both interactions as we have seen them developing and interactions as recalled and accounted for by the people in the organizations. We have interpreted these interactions as instances of situated practices (cf. Carroll et al., 2008; Knights & Willmott, 1992). The label 'practice' enables us to focus on how work is conducted and performed rather than on actors' intentionality, to focus on the social dimension of work and its repetitiveness and continuity (Gherardi, 2009). It also allows us to look at the micro level without forgetting the macro (socially defined practices) (Martin, 2003).

Acknowledging that a longer discussion on the context and analysis of our empirical material would be needed, we still think the proposal of a new perspective risks remaining too theoretical if we do not provide empirical examples, albeit short and 'thin' ones. Moreover, the perspective itself has been constructed in the interplay of our above theoretical considerations and our empirical observations, which implies that empirical examples do have their place in conveying an understanding of issues of interest.

Observing interactions and practices one may choose to concentrate on what certain interactions 'do' as they are performed, but also to follow how interactions develop during a period of time. We have analyzed the following extract in the first way, by looking at what is happening in that moment. We also limit our attention to verbal interactions (cf. Boden, 1994). The extract comes from a meeting at Strong: they are discussing how to handle the fact that, because of financial rules, ownership and management of a warehouse in the US has to be transferred from the subsidiary to the main division in less than a month.

> Alex: But, as I said to John, there must be someone who has been doing this kind of things before [the warehouse has previously been under the main division supervision]
> Henrik: Yes, and then it was done, large part of the job was done in the US then. And tomorrow Frank will have a phone conference with Kristian and someone else over there [US]. I will go there and say that we are not good at these things . . .
> Alex: . . . no, rather it has to . . .
> Henrik: . . . and these things, we are not good at them either, but we should have control over them . . .
> Alex: Yes, we must have control over them, or they have to fix them in our name. They can't just throw lot of work over to us.
> [. . .]
> Henrik: They have best knowledge of the local conditions, we haven't. If we try to do their job, we are lost.
> Daniel: . . . and Kristian's ambition is that we should do all the work, he always wanted us to do that . . .
> Henrik: . . . and it will be precisely the same now.
> Alex: But then you just have to say that the competence is there, they also work for our company, they have to take care, go on, there is no reason we take over now. We will have a discussion with them and make sure to control them.

The discussion goes on. Instead of being interested in what kind of formal positions they have, why they are saying what they are saying, what they are discussing (in terms of the rational content of their discussion), we will analyze how they are doing things by talking about the US warehouse. Starting by talking about what they construct as a problem, they co-orient on how to tackle it and in such a way they also create a certain space for action. As we see it, they are for example *constructing boundaries*. In this case the boundary is between what they should do and what others should do, where the responsibility of one part ends and the responsibility of the other part starts. It has only partially to do with formal arrangements. Rather they are organizing arrangements in a specific situation. They are also *constructing positions* and the relation between these positions. They are constructing roles for the different actors, but also constructing the actors in terms of competences and of attributed intentions. The issue of the US warehouse is not an objective 'input' either, rather it is in itself a construction that took place in the week before this meeting. The 'fact' that the ownership had to be transferred was gradually *constructed into an issue*, i.e. a question assuming a certain importance and provoking emotional reactions — upsetting or engaging. Therefore using an alternative way of looking at the practices and interactions above mentioned, over a

period of time, we can see other constructions take place. While in this example people were most focused on constructing boundaries — between individuals, between departments, between organizations — in other cases, there is more focus on constructing how to cross the boundaries and being committed to solving problems and doing a good job (as well as not letting down other people). As one employee narrates:

> Sandy: Yesterday Andersson, Anita, Fredrik and I had a meeting about, again about the latest re-organization, who should do what, where the boundary goes, what you should do, what we should do and how we should do. For example, when we opened a new warehouse, we are not even sure about that yet, just because if you look at the organization, it is like it is, that we, or, we belong to Transport and Distribution, and Fredrik, he belongs to another department, and Andersson belongs to Production at the moment.
> Interviewer: Did you find an agreement?
> Sandy: yes, we decided ehm, we will pretend that this new organization [structure] does not exist, rather we will work over the interfaces and I think that we agree, because I mean, we all want the result to be good, and you will not have a good result if we have to work as we have done. Rather we, we, we are so dependent on each other, 'cause I do a some part and someone else does some part and Andersson does some part, then, we have to do it together.

While the initiative for the re-organization has been taken in the upper levels of the company and communicated in a classical 'management of meaning' fashion, workers' own accounts make sense of it in another way. What we have described so far is mostly how people construct direction when agreement is prevailing.

The second example we want to offer comes from Cleantech and is interesting as it shows an instance of moderate conflict in which direction is not accomplished in such a 'linear' way. The order stock in the IT system does not correspond to the 'real' order stock and this has implied cash management problems. They just found out that Jakob has not registered a number of large orders:

> Alice: But you gave it to Elin to register into the system
> Jakob: No, not yet, I had no time, I will do it
> Alice: But you give it to her so she can register it as soon as possible
> Jakob. Well, I am stuck with a lot of damned instructions [instruction book for the customer] and therefore I . . .
> Paul: Why are you working with it?
> Jakob: I do not know . . .
> Paul: The project managers . . .
> Jakob: . . . there is no one else that can.
> Alice: But then you have to show the project manager so he can solve it.
> Jakob: Yes, but they cannot use the system, they do not know how to push the buttons, they cannot tell the customer how to take care of it [. . .] So unfortunately, the hard reality is that much of sales time is used for such things.
> Alice: But the thing is that you have to delegate and teach someone else

> Jakob: . . . yeah . . .
> Alice: . . . how to do that [. . .]
> Jakob: I just don't know who.
> Alice: The project manager. [silence] It is their job
> Jakob: Uhm

The discussion goes on. Although this is just a short excerpt, we can see how different *positions* and the relations between them are being constructed while discussing the problem, both in terms of what tasks the position includes (who should do what) and in terms of the identity constructions related to such a position. The sales people are therefore constructed as those who should concentrate strictly on sales activities, but in reality are taking responsibility for a broader range of tasks; they are also constructed as committed, almost in a heroic way, and as privileging customers' satisfaction over administrative routines. In contrast, project managers are constructed in negative terms: they lack interest and competence. These constructions have nothing to do with heroic achievements usually described in the literature, and might be quite trivial, but they are important for what they 'do'. They are produced in the micro interactions, but they also draw on institutionalized identity constructions in our society (as in the example of the 'sales people'). Even though there is no 'agreement' produced, and ambiguity is present, these interactions develop the organizing process in a certain direction, enabling certain actions/talks, for example. Identities are also always in the making and relational (Lindgren & Wåhlin, 2001), implying the articulation of professional boundaries and perceived limitations of action space — such as the never-ending discussions in BioCorp on whether a researcher can become a manager:

> Pat (research manager): Seen as a whole, I think the company would benefit from a more precise definition of areas of responsibility. I assume that Stephen [the CEO] wants us to bring this up ourselves, but in our current situation I think we need to sit down and sort out who is responsible for what and who can make decisions about what. I have always appreciated our open and tolerant climate, you can always propose anything, everything can be discussed. In that way, Stephen is a very good leader. But some clear demarcations of what each employee is supposed to do would definitely be needed.
> Interviewer: But as the research manager, you exercise leadership yourself too?
> Pat: Yes, but it is quite hard to change clothes from scientist to leader. I would like to know more about leadership. I learned to discuss things in Academia, but I also feel that it's in my personality to make the final decision. But I don't know about conflict management. It was always the professor's job to solve conflicts, and as a researcher I could always just tell him to go to hell, it didn't matter. And to keep focused, moving on, not getting stuck, you must think about that too. And leading personnel, I think about my lack of knowledge there. I have coached junior sports, but that's all. If you need to fire someone . . . you cannot tell who is a good leader until there is a crisis. The bad leaders I have seen so far have always been people that could not stand up and fight when facing a problem.

Here, the notion of 'leadership' is discussed both in terms of what Pat expects from her leader (the CEO) and what she would expect from herself if being promoted. The CEO does leadership in a good way when encouraging and sustaining an open and tolerant climate, but not when refraining from imposing clear administrative structures. If she becomes a leader herself (not just the research manager), she is more concerned about her 'soft skills' (e.g. conflict solving, coaching, motivating) and the need to put up fights than about her administrative abilities. Here, institutions such as gender and seniority (or age) play a role, when the practicing of leadership and of gender, for example, are intertwined. Constructing sales people as heroic at Cleantech also re-constructs a certain kind of heroic masculinity. Constructing administrative issues as less important than technical and/or practical issues — as happens in two of the companies — intersects with the construction of femininities and masculinities.

Based on our, and other researchers', dissatisfaction with the focus of leadership studies and our conviction that a process ontology is needed, combined with our empirical studies, of which we have offered a glimpse, we are working toward understanding and constructing leadership from a processual perspective. Concepts such as action-spacing and co-orientation are the first steps we have taken.

Some final words: practical and theoretical consequences

Where the practice of leadership is concerned, we hope that the proposed line of inquiry (which is already ongoing in several research groups around the world) may contribute to new leadership ideals where heroic masculinities can be replaced by less individualistic and more humane constructs, where the potential of leadership in every social situation is emphasized. Thereby it may serve to challenge the dominating leadership discourses and redirect focus onto the mundane and relational aspects of leadership work. Just proposing new post-heroic ideals without studying leadership practices and interactions might lead to the construction of new heroes or to co-optation of the new models (cf. Fletcher, 2004). Hopefully, such insights can also become part of future leadership training programs and indeed a source of inspiration to re-design such programs radically.

In terms of theory of leadership, there is a clear need for a deeper empirical understanding of everyday leadership practices and interactions (in contrast to the current preoccupation with individual leader competences and grandiose deeds), and we hope to have contributed to ongoing and future such empirical endeavors through this text. We do think that a perspective focusing on leadership practices and interactions holds several promises.

For example, it enables us to start with what is going on in organizations rather than from abstract performative ideals, and to take into consideration both the micro and the macro aspects of organizing rather than being limited to the study of a few individuals. The mundane, everyday processes in which members of organizations construct notions of direction, co-orientation and action space are in one sense local (i.e. situated in a specific social setting, time and place) but also instances of reproduction of organizational and societal norms. Instead of traditional voluntarist conceptualizations,

we may thus develop understandings of leadership as continuous processes where performative norms meet the specifics of everyday muddling-through, where people both enable and circumscribe themselves and others, where perceptions of emerging structure and emerging ambiguity are constantly handled in interaction. The notion of performativity and leadership is thus one important aspect that can be developed with the suggested perspective. Another is the notion of power, where simple analyses of how individual managers exercise power may be replaced by far more detailed accounts of how people produce and reproduce power relations in organizations when 'doing leadership'. And finally the development of an understanding of how to conceptualize and study leadership when organizations are considered as processes rather than entities is of utmost importance.

The perspective will also enable us to theorize upon 'problematic' aspects of leadership in a much more nuanced way than does mainstream leadership literature. Instead of characterizing individual leaders as evil, incompetent or manipulative, we may instead study in detail what interactions and practices are involved in perceived instances of bad, absent, megalomaniac, unethical, psychopathic and tyrannical leadership. Just as the heroic notion of leadership leads us to relate success and prosperity to individual top managers, it also leads us to explain abuse, deception and oppression with reference to Enron managers, dictators and cold-hearted bureaucrats. With its focus on the positive, the competent and the successful, mainstream leadership literature has left us in the dark where the dark sides of leadership are concerned.

The intersection between leadership ideals and other norm systems in society (such as gender, ethnicity, race and so forth) can also become subject to much more detailed understandings — not only, but the level of practice becomes interesting. Leadership interactions, interactions in which co-orientation and action space are constructed, are also interactions in which other ordering systems are performed. Doing gender and doing direction may be intertwined, for example. Analyses might therefore consider how the ideals and norms concerning leadership and gender intersect, how these norms are re-constructed in daily interaction — and linked to other ideals, to identity construction, to organizational culture —, but also how the intersection takes form in the practicing of gender and leadership, when leadership is defined as we have done in this paper—one could say the intersection of the "trivial" leadership interactions and the "trivial" gendered and gendering interactions.

While many of the issues mentioned above can be found here and there in contemporary management literature, they have seldom been related to the strong, positive, performative individualism conveyed by traditional leadership literature. Leadership research needs new paradigms and perspectives in order to escape the problematic individualism in which it seems stuck, paradigms and perspectives that need to be grounded in alternative explicit basic scientific assumptions. The suggested perspective may help us to bring the notion of leadership into the core of organizational process studies, thereby opening up for empirical fieldwork and theoretical analysis focusing on the everyday practicing of leadership among people in organizations.

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