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Larsson, Magnus

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**Magnus Larsson**

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# Leadership in interaction

Magnus Larsson

## Abstract

This chapter reviews studies of leadership in interaction from a broad range of perspectives and using a variety of methods. These studies are discussed in terms of theoretical approaches as well as in terms of methodology. They share a focus on organizational practices rather than on the competencies or characteristics of the individual leaders. But they differ in terms of how to conceptualize and problematize this practice. Three major themes are identified in the content of existing studies: leadership as enactment of a formal role, construction of leader identities in interaction, and accomplishment of influence in interaction. Within each theme, illustrative studies are described and some of the major findings and contributions are identified. The methodological approaches are discussed in terms of types of empirical material as well as analytical and interpretative strategies, including conversation analysis, sociolinguistics, critical discourse analysis, and ethnographic participant observation. The merits and potential of each of these methodological approaches are discussed. Finally, the contribution of studies of interaction to the larger field of leadership studies is discussed, and future research possibilities are outlined.

## Introduction

A chapter on leadership in interaction might appear to address an odd topic because many observers would contend that interaction is integral to all leadership. However, empirical studies of the processes of interaction are relatively rare in the leadership field. In recent years, though, this perspective has been emerging; therefore, this chapter will present and discuss this emergent work while also clarifying its contribution to date to our understanding of leadership and the potential paths forward.

### Object of study

Here, interaction is taken to mean verbal as well as non-verbal exchanges in real life organizational situations. Studies of leadership interaction generally rest on the assumption that for leadership to

exist and have actual consequences, it needs to be 'visible' in some form in organizational practice. Discussing the wider field of organizational studies, Hindmarsh and Llewellyn (2010, p. 13) argue as follows:

If one of the problematics of the discipline [organization studies] is to show and analyze, rather than theoretically stipulate or presume, the reproduction of organizational settings, at some point the discipline will have to analyze how organization is apparent in, and sustained through, ordinary work practice.

In line with this argument, studies of leadership interaction rest on the idea that we need to be able to locate leadership in everyday organizational practice for research to credibly grant it any role in the shaping of organizational reality. We are thus interested in

investigating, and problematizing, the practices of leadership rather than how ideas about leadership are attributed, by academics or lay persons, to particular individuals or forms of behavior (Knights & Willmott, 1992, p. 765).

Such an approach has the potential to complement other approaches to leadership studies in important ways (Fairhurst, 2007a; Knights & Willmott, 1992; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). Through studies of interaction, we might for instance achieve a deeper understanding of leadership competences (Carroll, Levy, & Richmond, 2008; Lord & Hall, 2005; Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, & Fleishman, 2000) as they are drawn on and utilized in practice, and we might achieve a deeper understanding of the dynamic process of accomplishing influence (Clifton, 2009; Larsson & Lundholm, 2010). Such studies clearly move away from a focus on the leader as a person to more of a process perspective on leadership (Crevani, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2010; Grint, 2005a).

Interaction clearly includes behaviors, but studies of leadership interaction typically have a different focus than studies of leadership behaviors. While the latter focus on identifying classes of behaviors (Courtright, Fairhurst, & Rogers, 1989; Yukl, 2012), often identified through self-report questionnaires, the former tend to focus on specific acts in specific interactional contexts. Rather than working to decontextualize behaviors (Fairhurst, 2007a, 2009; Osborn, Hunt, & Jausch, 2002), studies of interaction instead direct the analytical gaze to how behaviors and actions are deeply situated in the immediate context. Further, instead of only focusing on the actions of one part of the leadership relationship, the leader, studies of interaction necessarily involve and acknowledge

contributions from all parties.

Studies of interaction generally draw upon a discursive orientation to leadership (Fairhurst, 2007a), including the assumption that leadership, as well as its consequences, is established in interaction and thus in some sense is socially constructed. Fairhurst (2011) contrasts this interest in the social arena to the dominant tendency in leadership research to focus on a "mental theater" (Cronen, 1995, as cited in Fairhurst, 2011), where the essential phenomena are cognitive, affective or behavioral processes that are internal to the actor(s). With such a perspective, interaction as well as language use tends to be seen as secondary routes, at best, to obtaining information about the more important cognitive phenomena. In contrast, a discursive and interactional perspective takes the social arena as a distinct ontological and empirical field in its own right and assumes that this is where leadership, as well as where organizations more generally (Hindmarsh & Llewellyn, 2010), is shaped and realized.

What is most clearly distinct in studies of interaction is the choice of empirical material. Rather than being based on surveys or interviews, these studies utilize observations and typically audio or video recordings of interactions. Further, the focus is on interactions occurring as part of the ongoing work and life in an organization, rather than on interactions produced by the researcher (as are experiments or interview situations). Analyses of such interactions are typically (but not exclusively) qualitative and may draw upon a vast range of methodological traditions with attention on different levels of abstraction. Studies with a greater ethnographic orientation tend to focus on the somewhat larger themes and structures in the observed situations, while studies drawing on interactional sociolinguistics or conversation analysis tend to focus on more micro-level mechanisms of the interaction as it evolves turn by turn.

Overall, these differences in approach mean that questions of validity and generalizability need to be addressed somewhat differently from in a standard hypothetical-deductive study. Studies of interaction tend to aim towards what Yin (1994) calls theoretical generalization, meaning that knowledge is gained by using well-chosen cases to test and develop theory. For instance, by demonstrating the "machinery" of leadership influence, a deeper theoretical knowledge can be gained that is relevant to our general understanding of leadership.

The existing studies with a focus on the micro level of interaction cover a wide variety of themes and pose a number of different research questions. In the following, I will discuss them organized in three broad themes: how a designated leader enacts his or her role; how identities relevant to the leadership process are constructed in interaction; and what influence and organizing processes exist in interaction. The aim with this is both to create an overview of the literature and to discuss the major contributions that this emerging research field offers to the broader field of leadership studies. However, I acknowledge that there are other ways to organize the literature that might bring other features to center stage.

The formal structure and division of roles within an organization, such as between leaders and subordinates, form an important part of the context in which organizational interaction is embedded. Studies of interaction demonstrate how these roles are enacted and realized, that is, how the somewhat abstract organizational structures are brought to life given the situated meaning and how consequences are produced (Boden, 1994). Two major themes in the existing studies are a focus on the role of the chair in meetings and how a designated leader performs his or her role through various leadership styles.

### **The role of the chair**

Meetings are a crucial aspect of the management of organizations (Boden, 1994), and central aspects of the function of meetings are connected to the role of the chair:

"The chair provides a means of coordinating turns at talk, of operationalising an (agreed) structure, and represents the voice of contextualised authority" (Holmes, Marra, & Vine, 2011, p. 61).

According to the everyday understanding of how meetings work, the chair is endowed with certain exclusive discursive rights (Asmuss & Svennevig, 2009; Clifton, 2006, 2009) that might be utilized to accomplish influence and generally to perform organizational work. Although it is not always the formally highest-ranking leader who chairs a meeting, being the chair is a natural part of most leadership roles (Svennevig, 2011; Van Praet, 2009).

Even if the role of the chair is endowed with certain discursive and interactional rights, these need to be accepted and treated as legitimate by the other participants. The formal authority held by the person acting as chair is one important legitimizing resource. Studying a clearly hierarchical situation, van Praet (2009) shows an ambassador, with clear formal authority, enacting his role by "supervising, directing and streamlining team performance" (p. 86), verbally emphasizing the importance of the task and role of the team and being explicitly evaluative of team performance. In contrast, Pomerantz and Denvir (2007) showed how a chair who was not the formal manager was constantly oriented toward the need to secure legitimacy for his decisions from the president of the firm:

1014 Sam S: That's why you're here tonight=  
 1015 Harry S: = Well eh Jim in the view of the eh (0.5) we agree to adjourn  
 1016 at nine I don't think there's much sense in starting the next  
 1017 item on the agenda, which is succession (.) With your  
 1018 agreement, I suggest we adjourn (.) here and now gives us a  
 1019 good night's rest  
 ((4 lines omitted))  
 1023 ( ): I think we'll all sleep on it.  
 1024 Harry S: Alright, we'll all sleep on it (0.5) ((someone starts to speak))  
 1025 (1.0)  
 1026 Harry S: Alright the (.) meeting is adjourned 'til tomorrow morning at  
 (.) nine o'clock when we'll discuss succession

(Pomerantz & Denvir, 2007, p 37; transcription simplified)

In this extract, Harry S acts as chair, while Sam S is the president of the organization and thus has the highest hierarchical position. In lines 1017-1018, the decision to adjourn the meeting is formulated as a suggestion, placing the right to decide in the hands of the participants including the president of the organization. Harry thus displays awareness that his own authority is dependent on the president and crafts his contributions to secure the necessary support. This is an example of how establishing and maintaining legitimacy even in such a scripted role as the chair is a practical problem for the incumbent that is naturally attended to in interaction.

Apart from managing the agenda, the role of the chair is important for at least two other tasks in a meeting: managing decision making and managing conflict.

To discuss the role of the chair in decision making, we first need to consider how decision making in meetings is performed in practice. Studying actual interactions, those interactions retrospectively treated as a clear decision turn out to be rather fuzzy and difficult to precisely identify. As noted by several researchers, decision making is an incremental process, and it is often not immediately obvious that a decision has been made (Boden, 1994; Clifton, 2009). In the following extract from Huisman (2001), Jaap is the senior manager and chair, and the other participants are managers. One of the managers, Henk, asks whether the people who will visit a management presentation in the evening can claim overtime for it, and it is agreed that this is not the case.

Henk: h-okay (.) eh tonight is a presentation uh (region b) and uh Thursday  
in (region a), (.)  
where it has come to my ears [that a number of people  
Jaap: [((opens the door, comes in, sits down))  
Henk: ask whether there can be written overtime hours (.)  
how do we go about this.  
what is the tradition of this uh division.  
Jaap: for what?  
Henk: for the presentations upcom- or today and Thursday. (.) in the  
evening hours  
(1.6)  
Karel: oh for those presentations whether you fir those you {can write}  
overtime hours  
Henk: mechanics uh it particularly come from the mechanics groups that  
there uh  
(1.2)  
Jaap: the answer is no  
Henk: [((chin upwards))  
Jaap: [((looks at Jan))  
Jan: ((looks at Jaap, lateral head shake))  
Jaap: ((looks at Henk))  
Jaap: what do you think?



Henk: well I completely [agree  
 Geert: [((nods, agreeing gesture))  
 Henk: but well if it was,  
 [if [it was the case in the past  
 Karel: [((shakes head))  
 Jan: [no  
 Henk: [then I found it a bit difficult to uh  
 Marcel: [((lateral head shake))

(Huisman, 2002, p 78, transcription simplified)

Even though in this extract there is clearly consensus about the question, there is no specific point when the decision is “made”. It could have been when Jaap (the chair) says “the answer is no”, or with Jan’s nonverbal confirmation (the head shake), or after each subsequent agreement, verbal or non-verbal, but the conversation on the topic continues. Despite the consensus on the issue, there is no clear closure to this episode and no announcement of a decision being or having been made. Nevertheless, the participants (and probably the reader) easily understand the situation as a decision being made. This understanding is displayed in their later treatment of it and in references to the decision. The point here is that this understanding does not rest on any identifiable element in the interaction but rather on a retrospective sensemaking of the sequence as a whole.

Instead of decisions, Huisman (2001) calls such interactional sequences “decision-making episodes”, that is,

an interactional process in which participants jointly construct the formulation of states of affairs, and through further assessment and formulation build commitment to particular future states of affairs. (p. 75).

In the extract above, the managers construct a description of the issue of overtime in relation to the management presentation, that is, there will be (and already are) questions about the possibility of claiming overtime. This is followed by the development of a positive assessment to decline future claims on overtime.

This perspective on decision making has important consequences for our understanding of leadership. Rather than focusing only on the process of *making* decisions (influencing others to agree), attention is also turned to leadership as a process of convincing others that a decision *has been* made, that is, shaping the collective sensemaking of what has been going on.

The role of the chair provides powerful resources both for shaping the decision-making process and for claiming that a decision has been made. The chair is typically endowed the right to shift topics, that is, with managing the agenda (Svennevig, 2012). Treating a topic as closed and moving on to another is one way to claim that a decision has been made. When a decision cannot be produced, that is, when it is difficult to find an outcome that is positively assessed by the relevant people, the chair might try to change the interaction order. Turns can be distributed differently, for instance, reaching out to participants who have been reticent about their views, or the discussion might be moved to another occasion and possibly involve other participants.

In building consensus around states of affairs and assessments, summaries—which conversation analysts call formulations—play an important role. Formulations are “repeat utterances that display a characterization of prior talk for confirmation or disconfirmation” (Barnes, 2007, p. 275), or more generally, they are summaries of the gist of what has been said before (Heritage & Watson, 1979). Barnes (2007) and Clifton (2006) both show how formulations build and stabilize consensus, thereby functioning as “harbingers of decisions” (Barnes, 2007, p. 292). Formulations might be produced by anyone, but the chair normally has both a particular right and an obligation to summarize and thereby to influence the decision-making events.

Broadening the perspective somewhat, Wodak, Kwon and Clarke (2011) identified five different discursive strategies employed by leaders in the process of building consensus: bonding; encouraging; directing; modulating; and re/committing. Bonding concerns the construction of a group identity that supports the motivation to reach consensus and decisions and is accomplished, for instance, by the skilled use of the pronoun “we”. Encouraging concerns involving speakers, thus furthering participation and “buy-in” to a decision. Directing concerns bringing the discussion towards closure and resolution, while modulating concerns regulating the perception of external threats or internal imperatives to act. Re/committing, finally, concerns a move from consensus around an issue toward a commitment to action.

The diametric opposite of consensus is conflict, and the management of conflict is another

conventional expectation for the role of the chair. While furthering consensus is a way to prevent conflict, clear conflict management strategies can also be identified. In a study by Holmes and Marra (2004), five discursive strategies for managing conflict in meetings were identified: conflict avoidance by asserting 'the agenda'; conflict diversion; conflict resolution using negotiation; and conflict resolution using authority by imposing a decision (p. 441). In their study, individual leaders engaged in different strategies in different contexts, showing that the exercise of authority is complex and highly situated.

Clearly, the role of the chair includes managing several sensitive interactional issues. The studies discussed above not only show various tactics employed by the chair but also demonstrate the contextual dependence of both the issues and their management. While there is a range of more general rights and obligations endowed to the chair, the actual enactment of this role is highly varied and to a large degree dependent on the evolving interaction with other participants.

### **Leadership styles**

Focusing on the actions of a designated leader offers the possibility to more closely examine concepts such as style. Most of the studies that use the concept of leadership style draw on a classification of leader actions along a dimension between centralized and clear authority on the one hand, called authoritarian (Svennevig, 2011; Wodak et al., 2011), hierarchical (Van Praet, 2009; Wodak et al., 2011), or transactional (Holmes & Marra, 2004; Holmes, 2005), and a more decentralized and shared authority on the other hand, called egalitarian (Svennevig, 2011), laissez-faire, transformational (Holmes & Marra, 2004; Holmes, 2005), or bottom-up (Yeung, 2004a).

A somewhat more elaborate analysis of leadership style is proposed by Walker and Aritz (2014). Using a framework suggested by Coates (2004), they analyze five aspects of communication: the meaning of questions; links between speaker turns; topic shifts; listening; and simultaneous speech. The authors identify three different styles, which vary in their degree of collaboration between leader and subordinates: directive, cooperative, and collaborative. The directive style is characterized by one-way communication, with questions used to direct members, few links between turns and abrupt topic shifts. In contrast, in the collaborative style, questions are used to frame the interaction and check for agreement, topic shifts are smooth, and there are frequent cooperative overlaps of speech. The cooperative style is located between these: turns are linked through the acknowledgment of contributions, and listening is active, but relatively little speech

overlaps.

The conceptualization of leadership styles along the dimension of centralized versus decentralized authority, or authoritarian versus egalitarian style, captures a central aspect of leadership (see for instance DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Studies demonstrating how such styles are realized in live interaction clearly contribute to the existing literature. However, it is somewhat striking that the studies mainly focus on the dimension of centralized versus decentralized authority, leaving other aspects unexplored, such as charismatic<sup>1</sup> (Conger & Kanungo, 1998), visionary (Bryman, 1992), authentic (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), or shared leadership (Pearce & Conger, 2003).

Most of the studies examining styles build on the assumption that styles are consequential for interactions. For instance, in the previously cited study by Wodak et al (2011), the authors argue that an egalitarian leadership style, as opposed to a more authoritarian or 'hierarchical' style, has a clear positive influence on building a durable consensus. Similarly, Holmes, Schnurr and Marra (2007), in studying changes in leadership style and team culture, suggest that "[a] detailed analysis of leadership performance may thus provide valuable insights into the impact leaders actually have on the construction, maintenance, and change of workplace culture." (p, 448).

Clearly, such a claim has much face validity. However, as the notion of romance of leadership (Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985) implies, the tendency to see leadership as a causal factor might be as much a consequence of our sensemaking processes as of actual causal relationships. Obviously, a formal leader has access to specific symbolic resources that can be used to influence the interaction, including access to information and formal authority to make decisions with material consequences (such as, for instance, hiring and firing subordinates). The way that formal authority is enacted is therefore obviously important in shaping the interaction. However, it needs to be shown rather than assumed that the causal relationship runs in the direction from leadership to interaction. At least in some situations, it is possible to see a certain leadership style as an alignment with the evolving interaction instead of as a force shaping it. For instance, a style might emerge as response to a developing conflict [Holmes & Marra, 2004]) or as alignment with cultural expectations providing legitimacy (Yeung, 2004a, 2004b).

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1 Despite using the label "transformational", Holmes and Marra (2004 and Holmes (2005) mainly focus on the degree of subordinate involvement and of collaboration rather than on elements of charismatic or visionary leadership in the interaction.

## **The ontological status of roles and structures**

In summary, the studies focusing on leadership as an enactment of a formal role bring a range of phenomena into focus, not least the complexities of such an apparently scripted and common role as chairing meetings.

This line of studies also makes some more general comments relevant. Taking a formal role as the starting point for studies of interaction raises questions of how the relationship between structure and interaction is to be understood and about the ontological assumptions about what an organization "is". At least two different interpretations of a role are available. Following an essentialist assumption, the role can be seen as a structural context that is ontologically real and existing prior to the interaction. Interaction is the arena where this context is enacted and becomes visible (the bucket theory of context, Heritage & Clayman, 2010), and the analysis focuses on the variations and contingencies in the actual enactment. Causality runs from the role to the interaction.

The second, more constructionist, interpretation is that the role does not exist in any sense other than its accomplishment. Interaction is here seen to have ontological primacy, and the resulting roles are something emerging from the interaction. Causality then runs from the interaction to the structure, and structure is seen as created and re-created in interaction (through what Garfinkel [1967] calls the "documentary method of interpretation", that is, creating the impression that a structure exists by treating the interaction as an evidence of it) and denied any ontological existence outside of this.

Clearly, many of the studies cited demonstrate that even though the role as leader or as chair of a meeting rests on certain assumptions regarding pre-existing structures, any enactment of this role needs to be recognized as such by the participants in the interaction. As most clearly expressed by Huisman (2001), decision-making depends on a consensus among (at least the relevant) participants to "be" a decision, and what the participants actually hear as a decision varies with the context and culture of the group. Despite drawing on somewhat different assumptions about the ontological status of roles, the cited studies taken together provide strong support for the importance of the dynamics in the interactional arena for the outcomes of the actions of the role's incumbent. As argued for instance by Grint (2005a), although both a formal position and the person holding it are important, leadership reasonably consists of a complex interplay between a number of aspects, including the processes of the evolving interactional dynamic.

## Leadership and identity

A second theme in the studies of leadership interaction concerns identity. Within the field of leadership research, identity has been seen as important for, among other things, taking on leadership roles and the performance of leadership, and as an important aspect of developing leadership capacities. Using the common distinction between individual, relational, and collective identities (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; DeRue & Ashford, 2010), most studies of leadership identity can be seen to focus on the individual level. For instance, Lord and colleagues (Lord, Brown, & Freiberg, 1999; Lord & Hall, 2005) draw on the concept of a cognitive self-concept to explore leadership relations, while Shamir and Eilam (2005) describe the importance of leadership self-narratives. Another range of studies, drawing on social identity theory, tend to focus on collective identity in the sense of self-categorization as a member of a certain collective (without necessarily interacting with this collective; Ellemers, De Gilder, & Haslam, 2004; Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004).

Studies of leadership interaction, however, tend instead to focus on relational identities. Here, identity is typically seen as negotiated and constructed in interaction rather than as an individually held concept or self-categorization. Identities are thus always at stake, fragile, and potentially rapidly shifting (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998; de Fina, Schiffrin, & Bamberg, 2006).

Identity as a leader might be inferred through the staging of the situation (Rosen, 1985, 1988; Van Praet, 2009), where the formal leader is positioned at the end of a table or given a stand in front of subordinates. Such physical arrangements shape the expectations of the participating actors, thus creating a specific interaction order (Goffman, 1983), that is, specific "rules of the game".

Of more interest to us here, however, is how identity is negotiated in interaction. Aspects such as control over the agenda (Svennevig, 2012; Van Praet, 2009), control over topic shifts (Walker & Artiz, 2014), and access to symbolic resources such as knowledge (Nielsen, 2009) have all been shown to be used to claim and establish a leader identity. Further, the interactional functions of humor have received considerable attention. For instance, Schnurr (2009) showed how the use of teasing humor helps to provide interactional identities for leaders in relation to their groups. By using teasing humor, leaders display their power and their right to criticize their subordinates while simultaneously adhering to the group norms for such humor use. An identity is created of someone who has more power but still belongs to the group.

Within membership categorization analysis (at times considered a part of conversation analysis; Hester & Eglin, 1997, Schegloff, 2007), identities are seen as the categories that individuals and collectives are interactively placed in (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998). Such categorizations are consequential because they are associated (by the participants of the interaction) with certain characteristics, actions, relationships and so forth. For instance, categorizing a woman as a mother brings expectations of her being adult, having a child, and displaying caretaking of the child.

Drawing on this methodology, Nielsen (2009) showed how leaders in interaction claimed a variety of identities associated with authority and how these identities were accepted and responded to by the participants in the meetings. For instance, by explicating how things should be labeled and explaining why, a manager is seen to claim an interactional identity as an 'interpreter':

2 Lone: and there one can say that that project which Sigurd is  
responsible for  
3 .h (.) he has in effect ONE such page  
4 ( . )  
5 Kirsten: hm  
6 (0.4)  
7 Lone: and there he has managed eighty percent of his marks  
8 (1.0)  
9 Per: [no] ( . ) [that's not] that's not [correct [right] because  
10 Lone: [one could] [say right] [OH] that's  
11 ?: [no] [that's not - -  
12 Lone: not correct ei[ther]  
13 Ki: [no]  
14 (0.2)  
15 Per: you may say ( . ) you may say there could be a project here  
16 that was called [(0.2)] for instance (0.8) e: :h (.)  
17 Lone: [h]  
18 Lone: hrm  
19 (0.2)  
20 Per: ad(.)justment that's y'know the words to use right,  
21 [(0 .4)]  
22 Lone: [hh m]  
23 Per: adjustment of the department of development  
24 (0.9)  
25 Lone: and that then stands as one project

(Nielsen, 2009, p. 34-35, transcription simplified)

This extract is from a meeting where the manager Per and two HR consultants, Lone and Kirsten, discuss a layoff process and more specifically how to translate this process into the vocabulary of projects used in the organization. In lines 20-25, Per calls the process a project concerning adjustment and notes that “adjustment” is the correct term to use in this organization. He interprets the process in the available language and in doing so, implicitly categorizes himself as an “interpreter”. This illustrates the notion of category-associated actions (Hester & Eglin, 1997; Schegloff, 2007), meaning that certain categories of actors are associated with certain actions (a teacher explains, a thief steals, and so on). Performing a category-associated action interactively categorizes the actor accordingly. Identity in interaction can thus not only be verbally claimed but also accomplished in action. However, such categorizations need to be accepted by other participants for any interactional consequences to be accomplished (Schegloff, 2007). In this extract, Lone's comment in line 25 works as a completion of Per's in line 25, thus demonstrating alignment with his interpretation. She thereby accepts his interactive identity as an “interpreter”, and Per manages to fulfill the important leadership task of communicating the organizational vocabulary to his subordinates.

Of course, interactively establishing identities as leader and follower is not always a straightforward process. Schnurr and Chan (2011) used the notion of face to analyze episodes of disagreement among co-leaders, that is “two leaders in vertically contiguous positions who share the responsibilities of leadership” (Jackson & Parry, 2008:82). Face is here understood as the positive social value a person claims for him- or herself. Disagreement not only constitutes threats to face but also challenges the relative power balance between the two co-leaders:

”[B]y orienting to or challenging each others’ face, members of co-leadership constellations at the same time portray themselves (and each other) as more or less powerful and in charge, and thereby construct their intertwined professional identities as leader and co-leader.”  
(Schnurr & Chan, 2011, p. 204).

Disagreements caused rapidly shifting identities between leader and co-leader as the discussion unfolded. The interactional identity as 'leader' emerges as a fragile and complex achievement, closely tied to interpersonally sensitive issues, such as face.



Instead of focusing on the individual identity of a "leader", Larsson and Lundholm (2013) emphasized how the participants in an interaction sequence in a bank were occupied with negotiating the task at hand and finding ways to work on this task. In this process, task-based interactional identities were constructed, such as being account manager attending to potential risks with the customer in question. Their analysis supports Fairhurst's (2007b) earlier observation that close attention to interaction tends to show how leadership in practice is engaged with advancing the task at hand rather than being "something that floats ethereally above task accomplishment as some metalevel commentary" (p. 59), as is common in approaches relying more on interviews or surveys.

Further, Larsson and Lundholm (2013) suggest that the process involves construction of not only individual but also situated collective identities. For instance, in their analysis, the small collective consisting of the group manager and the account manager together analyzing a problem with a customer is constructed by using the pronoun "we" with reference to the interacting parties and by using subtle categorization moves indicating membership in this small collective. Similarly, Djordjilovic (2012) utilized a multimodal analysis (analyzing both linguistic and non-linguistic interaction) to show how two group members "team up" and act as a unit with shared accountability in relation to a task area. By co-constructing their contributions to the team and being addressed as a unit by other units, the two team members were endowed epistemic authority over their task, that is, shared authoritative knowledge. It is to be noted that this type of interactional collective identity is distinct from Brewer and Gardner's (1996) concept of collective identity, indicating self-categorization to a group without necessarily interacting with it. The collective identities described by Djordjilovic (2012) and Larsson and Lundholm (2013) are instead established in interaction as a 'we who are in this together'.

However, interactional identities are also constructed in larger scale contexts, such as more general discourses (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Collinson, 2003, 2006) and organizational contexts. Using positioning theory, Clifton (2014) analyzed storytelling in meetings and showed a complex interplay between identities constructed in the stories (e.g., identity of the company), identities in the ongoing interaction, and in relation to large scale discourses. The local practice of storytelling thus allowed the manager to claim and establish an interactional position from which strategic organizational issues might be managed.

### **Which identities are relevant to leadership?**

Although studies of leadership in interaction generally focus on interactional and relational identities in contrast to the dominating interest in individual and collective (in the sense of membership in larger collectives) identities, some of the studies clearly share an interest in the labels of leader and follower. The studies by Schnurr (2009) and Schnurr and Chan (2011) cited above provide two such examples. These studies resonate closely with the general theory for identity construction proposed by DeRue and Ashford (2010), where leader and follower identities are seen as being established through an iterative process of claiming and granting respective identity.

Other studies, however, demonstrate the interactional significance of other types of identities. Svennevig (2011) suggests that epistemic authority, that is, the claim of having authoritative knowledge, is an important identity dimension. Similarly, Nielsen (2009) showed how identities such as "interpreter" and "expert" were constructed in interaction and worked to move the organizational agenda forward. Larsson and Lundholm (2013) argue that negotiation of situated, task-bound identities are conducive to problem solving. Leadership is here accomplished through the construction of identities that further the task at hand rather than through the identities of leader and follower as such.

Using the language of ethnomethodology, the emphasis on leader/follower versus other identities might be seen as illustrating the difference between participant and analyst concerns. In many of the studies, the label of leadership is an analytically driven concept rather than something that the participants visibly orient toward. Participants often appear to be more occupied with the task at hand, be it organizing the interaction or solving problems with customer accounts, than with sorting out more abstract labels such as leader and follower.

The interest in identities, of course, rests on the assumption that these are important to the leadership process. Within cognitively and social-cognitively oriented research traditions (Lord et al., 1999; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993; van Knippenberg et al., 2004), it has been shown that follower self-concepts exert significant influence on follower motivation and behavior. These theories say less, however, about the processes through which identities are shaped and constructed or the processes through which established self-concepts in turn influence performance and leadership effectiveness.

An interactional perspective on identity suggests that identities might be of importance for the leadership process beyond their role in shaping self-concepts. Establishing an identity in interaction allows certain subsequent moves and makes other less available. For instance, it is crucial for the manager in extract 3 that his interactional identity as 'interpreter' is established for him to be able to fulfill the task of communicating the organizational vocabulary. This perspective allows an understanding of the leadership process more as a shaping the local context of available moves by molding interactional identities than as the establishment of leader and follower identities as such.

Clearly, the relevance of the study of identity depends on the relationship between identities and core aspects of the leadership process. In the next section, we turn to a closer examination of how the studies of interaction to date have thrown light on interpersonal influence, which is probably the most central aspect of the leadership process.

## **Interpersonal influence and organizing**

A third area where studies of interaction contribute to our understanding of leadership concerns the core processes of exerting interpersonal influence and organizing action.

Influence is generally understood as the process through which power is realized (Pfeffer, 1992, p. 30). Influence might in practice be accomplished in a variety of ways. In an early study, Kipnis, Schmidt and Wilkinsoon (1980) identified eight dimensions of influence. This list of tactics was gradually refined by later research (e.g., Yukl & Falbe, 1990), until Yukl, Seifertz and Chavez (2008) finally extended the list to 11 types of tactics: rational persuasion, apprising, inspirational appeals, consultation, collaboration, ingratiation, personal appeals, exchange, coalition tactics, legitimating tactics, and pressure.

Such dimensions and classes of behavior might in practice be realized in a number of ways, with attention to the specific situation, its possibilities and its constraints. In interaction, a range of practical problems need to be managed, such as creating legitimacy for a demand or finding ways to ensure that proposed actions will be carried out, while managing face (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Clifton, 2009) for all participants and following the norms inherent in the local culture (Holmes, 2007).

A number of studies demonstrate that influence might be accomplished in interaction through a

large number of interactional moves that are also found in many other contexts. For instance, Samra-Fredericks (2003), studying how a strategist managed to influence his colleagues to agree to a certain understanding of the company's strategic situation, observed that the strategist's talk included six important features: the ability to speak forms of knowledge (knowledge embedded in social interaction, for instance, displayed in the skilled use of relevant categories and labels); to mitigate and observe the protocols of human interaction; to question and query; to display appropriate emotion; to deploy metaphors; and finally to put "history" to work. These tactics were all used in varied ways to put his case forward and convince others, but none of these tactics are distinct to strategists' talk, or to talk that accomplishes influence.

Acknowledging the flexible and situated nature of influence, a number of specific mechanisms used to accomplish influence have been examined in more detail. First and foremost are formulations (summaries of the gist of what has been said previously), which were already discussed in relation to decision-making. Formulations have an influence function: they fix the meaning of what has transpired before and thereby define the available interactional moves for the participants (Clifton, 2006; Huisman, 2001; Larsson & Lundholm, 2013).

Laughter might also have important influence functions. Holmes (2007) shows how humor and laughter can work to establish cohesion and community, thereby influencing commitment and the available range of interactional moves. Distinguishing between 'laughing with' and 'laughing at', humor might also work to exclude and make certain positions and arguments less legitimate. Clifton (2009) shows how the treatment of one participant's contribution as a "laughable" (something to which laughter is a reasonable response) constructed it as deviant and as reflecting sub-standard performance and excluded its influence on the further treatment of the topic. Laughter might thus work to shape the boundaries for acceptable contributions in addition to performing an inclusive function.

The management of meaning (Smircich & Morgan, 1982) and sensemaking (Pye, 2005) are generally seen as central to leadership. Some of the practical mechanisms for accomplishing this in interaction include labeling and reframing issues in terms of organizationally relevant concepts and discourses, thereby linking local concerns to organizationally strategic issues. Clifton (2012) showed how the assessment of a previous decision was influenced by the introduction of a political, as opposed to artistic, frame and by portraying the organization as primarily a political entity.

Similarly, Larsson and Lundholm (2013) as well as Nielsen (2009) showed how labeling and introducing a specific vocabulary shaped not only the understanding of the current and future situations but also held identity implications for the participants. Working on a task that is semantically linked to broader organizational concerns links individual identity to organizational identity. Framing, translating, and labeling thus have potentially broad ranging consequences, echoing the importance tied to categorizations within ethnomethodologically oriented research (Hester & Eglin, 1997) and broader organizational theory (for instance, Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

In Larsson and Lundholm's (2010, 2013) work, influence is closely tied to negotiation of the task at hand and to the organizing of actions. For instance, they show how a group manager persuades a subordinate to see the task at hand in a new way (Larsson & Lundholm, 2013):

- 50 Roy: so if we look at (.) the full picture  
there's no risk associated with him
- 51 Harriet: but I'd like you to have a look at the security (.) do you need  
(.) do you nee:d (.) eh he has a credit limit of four (.) hundred
- 52 Roy: mm
- 53 Harriet: does he (0.8) does he need to have (0.5) do you nee:d  
(0.5) four hundred (.) as the value for this (2.0) security
- 54 Roy: what does it look like then (.) doesn't he have ((inaudible))  
security  
(0.8)
- 55 Harriet: but you have (.) because you have reserved four hundred there  
right
- 56 Roy: yes
- 57 Harriet: and he has a credit of four hundred
- 58 Roy: yes (.) yes(((inaudible)))
- 59 Harriet: [so] I mean as soon as he touches it (.)  
then he'll be overdrawn (0.5) since he doesn't have any (.)  
he has no other shares ((inaudible))  
(1.1) it seems he had that before, right
- 60 Roy: yesyes he's had (.) about a million there (1.1)
- 61 Harriet: so I mean (.) to have it like this will be difficult right (.)  
that he has a limit of four (1.2) and a collateral engagement  
of four hundred (.) for as soon as he uses any of it he'll be  
overdrawn
- 62 Roy: unusually stupid
- 63 Harriet: yes (0.9) ((both Ha and Ro looks at the screen))
- 64 Roy: .hhyes
- 65 Harriet: it doesn't work because I mean the shares never have full  
collateral value
- 66 Roy: no

(Larsson & Lundholm, 2013, p 1114-15; transcription simplified)

In this extract, the group manager, Harriet, performs a step-wise elaboration of her understanding of the issue at hand. She starts out at line 51 by asking about the credit and continues through turns 53, 55, 57, 59 and 61 by developing the understanding that there is something wrong with the construction of the credit. Of importance here is that she does not develop this in one long turn, but stops several times and allows the subordinate, Roy, to contribute (turns 52, 54, 56, 58) and even to add some substantial information (turn 58). Through his active involvement, he becomes an active part of the developing understanding and is finally placed in a position where his only reasonable choice of action is to accept her argument (turns 62, 64, 66). He thus moves from an understanding of the issue as being related to risk (turn 50) to an understanding that it is a question of the construction of the credit (and thereby of profitability). The task at hand shifts from managing risks to constructing credit. The stepwise character of the elaboration thus has a strong persuasive effect on Roy by gradually shaping his viable interactional options.

This extract further illustrates how leadership might have organizing properties. Although leadership is often seen as closely related to organizing (Fairhurst, 2007b; Hosking & Morley, 1988), organizing processes are rarely demonstrated empirically. In one of the few studies attempting this (without discussing leadership), Cooren and Fairhurst (2004) show organizing to be accomplished on a turn-by-turn basis in discursive interaction.

Larsson and Lundholm (2013) argue that leadership might have organizing properties by shaping the obligations of the participants, that is, as a consequence of shaping identities. In the extract above, the persuasion results in new rights and obligations for Roy. He now has an obligation to act according to his new understanding and to provide a better construction of the credit<sup>2</sup>. These obligations are constructed in relation to Harriet, as the other party in the “we working on the credit” team (a situated collective identity, as discussed earlier). The influence process thereby shapes both the understanding of the task at hand and the commitment to act accordingly. Similarly,

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2 Of course, this says nothing about what Roy thinks or whether he believes what Harriet says. The interaction is not a shortcut to individual cognitive processes (the “mental theater” discussed earlier). His overt display of understanding, however, produces an obligation toward Harriet, and his potential lack of belief could later become problematic in terms of her trust in him.

Clifton (2009) argues that decisions include a commitment to action and that the decision-making episodes described earlier therefore have a certain influence and organizing aspect.

Clearly, attempts to influence another are a sensitive interpersonal issue. Persuasion attempts are regularly coupled with a number of mitigating moves and tactics to preserve the interpersonal context and to preserve face for the interacting parties (Walker & Aritz, 2014). For instance, the use of discourse markers such as "but" softens any suggestions for action (Samra-Fredericks, 2003), and when requests for action are made, these are designed with attention to and respect for the recipient's situation and other constraints (Curl & Drew, 2008; Larsson & Lundholm, 2013).

These studies clearly demonstrate that although leaders perform influence attempts, the accomplishment of influence is a collaborative achievement. Subordinates actively contribute by challenging and offering new ideas (Clifton, 2009, 2014), by using the labels and categories offered by leaders (Nielsen, 2009; Larsson & Lundholm, 2013), and generally by collaborating to produce influence effects. Leadership as influence is thus placed firmly in the arena of interaction and relation rather than as an individual attribute or action on behalf of the leader.

## **Summary and contributions to leadership knowledge**

The studies of leadership in interaction discussed here together provide a number of unique contributions to the existing body of leadership knowledge. First, studies of actual work interactions obviously portray leadership as deeply situated and embedded in a local context. While this is hardly surprising, it is in stark contrast to much of the theorizing in the leadership literature. This lack of attention to context has repeatedly been lamented by scholars (Bryman, Stephens, & Campo, 1996; Fairhurst, 2007a; Liden & Antonakis, 2009; Porter & McLaughlin, 2006). However, these scholars mostly focus on the lack of attention to the wider organizational context, while the studies reviewed here bring attention to another type of context. Focusing on talk-in-interaction as the central means of exercising authority and performing leadership (Gronn, 1983) reveals that the leader is highly dependent on actual interactional opportunities and available situations. Contributions need to be tailored to the specific interactional "slot" in which they are produced and to connect to the topic as well as the relational context.

The embedded nature of leadership is shown in the illustrations throughout the chapter. In extract 3,

the manager Per engages with an emerging discussion about how to interpret and label a lay-off process, positions himself as an 'interpreter' and explicates how the organizational vocabulary is to be used. The detailed understanding of this particular version of an identity (as shown in Nielsen, 2009) brings a different type of insight compared to studies of frequencies and variation. Similarly, the analysis of influence performed through the step-wise elaboration of an understanding of a task, shown in extract 4, offers unique insights into the particulars of the actual performance of influence. As argued by Fairhurst (2007a) but also Conger (1998), variable-based quantitative studies might establish causal relationships but are less useful for clarifying the mechanisms through which the observed effects are established, that is "the 'cellular biology' that ... explicates the mechanisms linking the outcomes [to] ... the variables which assertedly engender those outcomes" (Schegloff, 2001, p. 315, as cited in Fairhurst 2007a, p. 16). Studies of interaction throw some light on these mechanisms, not least by suggesting that the identities of leader and follower might not be the most important factor from the perspective of the participants.

This deeply embedded nature of human interaction explains some of the variability in the phenomena under study and possibly the fact that leadership has often been described as difficult to observe. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) talk about "the great disappearing act" and Kan and Parry (2004) discuss leadership as repressed in practice. These difficulties in observing leadership can to a certain extent be understood as a question of attempting to identify specific acts, recognizable through ordinary observation, while the phenomenon in reality is far more varied. The studies presented together here forcefully demonstrate that leadership is clearly observable but primarily as a situated accomplishment on the micro level of interaction, which normally requires a careful analysis of recorded interaction to be made visible.

The studies presented here all build on observations and recordings of live workplace interactions. In contrast to interviews and surveys, such recordings do not rely on the participants' own sensemaking of interactions and relationships. The participants' sensemaking process is turned into an object of study rather than as a window providing access to the central phenomenon. As shown by Huisman (2001) and illustrated in extract 2, decisions are more a question of the participants' retrospective sensemaking than of any particular interactional action as such. Leadership, then, concerns at least as much the shaping of this later understanding that a decision has been made (for instance, through the use of summaries—so-called formulations) as with the *making* of decisions. As noted by Clifton (2006), decisions are clearly relevant to leadership, as decisions work to fix the organizational reality.



Studies of leadership in interaction further contribute to the interest in identity within leadership studies. The focus on identity as being negotiated and accomplished in interaction supplements the dominating focus on individual (Lord & Brown, 2004; 2005; Shamir & Eilam, 2005) and social (Ellemers et al., 2004; Knippenberg, Knippenberg, Cremer, & Hogg, 2004) identities. The interest in interactional identities resonates strongly with the framework proposed by DeRue and Ashford (2010), who argue that the negotiation of relational identities is fundamental to both individual and collective identities and to leaders and followers. In extract 3, Nielsen (2009) shows an identity claim by a leader that is acknowledged by a follower. Extract 4 shows a more elaborate process of influence, where a specific follower identity is offered to the subordinate (Roy) and gradually accepted by him as he aligns with the perspective developed by the leader. This type of analysis contributes to the understanding of identity negotiation as proposed by DeRue and Ashford (2010) by demonstrating some of the mechanisms and dynamics involved.

Even more importantly, these studies suggest that the focus on leader and follower identities might not be the most important concern for the participants. As earlier noted by Fairhurst (2007a, 2007b), close attention to actual practice reveals that engagement with the task at hand is a dominant concern, making work a central context to consider (Barley & Kunda, 2001) in leadership processes. Advancing the task at hand often requires identities other than leader and follower that are more focused on practical problems and their management. To the extent that leadership is seen as concerned with advancement of the task at hand (Fairhurst, 2007b), construction of such problem-oriented identities would be a central aspect of the leadership process. In essence, studies of interaction suggest that an occupation with the identity labels of leader and follower might be as much a consequence of the analyst's interest in leadership as a necessary element in the practical work. Focusing instead on the identities relevant to the participants of the interaction opens the potential for a deeper understanding of the mechanisms linking identities to effects and outcomes (Fairhurst, 2007).

Studies of interaction further provide a unique window into the central processes of influence. Rather than being distinct tactics, influence is here shown to be accomplished through the skilled use of ordinary discursive mechanisms (Samra-Fredericks, 2003). As shown in the discussion of extract 4, influence is partly accomplished through the turn construction, where pauses allow the follower to engage with an evolving new understanding of the task. This goes beyond the typologies of influence (Clifton, 2009) by showing that the effect here is less a question of which “type” of

influence is employed but more a question of how it is produced in the actual interactional situation. Studies of interaction thus contribute a process oriented understanding of influence to leadership knowledge in which, for instance, identities and turn construction (Larsson & Lundholm, 2013), stories (Clifton, 2014), and use of knowledge (Samra-Fredricks, 2003) might play important roles.

Finally, the study presented here offers a perspective on the leadership process as basically shared and distributed. Decisions emerge as collaborative achievements (Clifton 2009, 2012; Huisman, 2001), as do identity construction (Nielsen, 2009; Holmes, Marra & Vine, 2011; Walker & Aritz, 2014) and influence attempts (Clifton, 2009; Larsson & Lundholm, 2013). To be legitimate, leaders need to connect to and build on cultural values within as well as surrounding the organization (Jones, 2005) and to visibly engage these cultural values in their interactions (Holmes et al., 2007). In essence, acknowledgment of these constraints on leadership works to shift attention to more distributed (Gronn, 2002; Pearce & Conger, 2003), relational (Uhl-Bien, 2006) and contextually oriented (Fairhurst, 2007b; Grint, 2005b) perspectives.

## **Ways forward**

Clearly, studies of leadership in interaction are demanding, as they require the analysis of messy empirical material. They require access to analytical resources, such as conversation analysis and interactional sociolinguistics, that currently are not standard methodologies in organizational behavior or organization studies and that are seldom found in the curriculum for doctoral studies in these areas. Moving this research field forward thus heavily depends on doctoral students being brave enough to take on new fields and on collaborative research between scholars with different disciplinary backgrounds. This gap is also reflected in the fact that many studies of leadership in interaction are found in discourse- and language-oriented journals, such as *Discourse & Society*, *Pragmatics*, and *Text & Talk*, rather than in traditional leadership journals (although some are found in *Leadership and Human Relations*). Fortunately, a certain amount of work has already been published that makes this approach better known and more accepted among organizational and leadership scholars (Llewellyn, 2008; Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2010; Samra-fredericks, 2000).

Studies of leadership in interaction also face a number of analytical challenges. Although a fair amount of work has already been performed to operationalize leadership on an interactional level, more work is needed to connect the empirical analysis to theoretical problems in the leadership

field. An illustrative case is the studies of leadership style. While drawing on central concepts, such as transformational and transactional leadership, the analysis here tends to focus on the single dimension of the centrality versus the distribution of authority. Here is a clear opportunity for a deeper engagement with the existing theoretical challenges facing, for example, the theory of transformational leadership.

In essence, the import of studies of leadership in interaction could be increased by a stronger problematization of leadership theory than is currently found in many studies. The relatively low level of problematization of leadership theory, of course, resonates with the outlets chosen. Publication in discourse- and language-oriented journals naturally places these phenomena at center stage, leaving engagement with leadership theory less central. However, as this review illustrates, these studies hold the potential to constitute a far stronger contribution to leadership theory than is currently the case. Of course, publication in leadership and organizationally oriented journals also depends on the general knowledge and acceptance of the methodologies used here (Clifton, 2006; Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2010; Llewellyn, 2008).

One such area where studies of interaction has a strong potential for contribution concerns influence and organizing, processes that are often seen as being central to leadership (Fairhurst, 2007a, 2007b; Hosking & Morley, 1988; Rost, 1991; Yukl, 2013). Studies of interaction offer the ability to examine these processes on a level of detail far beyond surveys and interviews. Further, as argued by Fairhurst (2007a), to the extent that we really are interested in interpersonal processes as the ontological object, also taking these same interpersonal processes as the analytical object holds promise for a deeper understanding. The potential to do this has already been demonstrated in studies attempting to study influence, but far more work remains to be done.

## **Appendix: Transcription symbols**

- [ ] Overlapping speech
- = Latching on to previous or next turn
- (.) Short pause
- (0.5) Pause in seconds
- over Underlined: emphasis

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