

## **Leadership in Interaction** **An Introduction to the Special Issue**

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## **Leadership in interaction. An introduction to the Special Issue**

One of the most widespread ways of defining leadership as a phenomenon seems to be that of considering it to be a process of personal influence through which organisational goals are achieved (Northouse, 2010; Rost, 1991; Yukl, 2013). Further, rather than considering leadership to be a capacity or a state, most researchers also consider it to be something that happens or which is enacted, performed, accomplished or something similar. However, despite this seemingly shared understanding, until fairly recently, very few studies existed that focused on the observation of action, interaction, or performance of leadership as it occurred in a naturally-occurring environment. While behaviourally oriented studies have ostensibly focussed on overt actions, these behaviours are very rarely observed and reported in any detail. Similarly, interview based studies have typically relied on individual accounts of action, and the respondents' interpretation and understanding of them, but they are less attentive to the actions themselves. However, drawing inspiration from a few early and influential studies (Boden, 1994; Gronn, 1983; Knights and Willmott, 1992), over the last twenty years we have begun to see an increasing number of studies which offer close and detailed analyses of leadership in interaction, across a range of scholarly journals (see for example: (Choi and Schnurr, 2014; Clifton, 2006; Larsson and Lundholm, 2013).

This increasing interest in the enactment of leadership as an observable and reportable workplace phenomenon was amplified by the publication of Fairhurst's (2007) influential book *'Discursive Leadership: In Conversation with Leadership Psychology'*. Fairhurst's basic argument was that leadership research would benefit from complementing the use of surveys and questionnaires with various forms of discursively oriented studies, including the analysis of situated interaction. Through doing so, she argued that researchers would be able to make visible, and thus analysable, the way in which leadership is brought off in the here-and-now of in situ social practice. Since 2007, there has been a flurry of publications that, under the umbrella term of discursive leadership, have sought to reveal how leadership is achieved in and through interaction (see Larsson (2017) and Schnurr & Schroeder (2019) for recent and comprehensive overviews of such work).

As so often in leadership studies, this development has, to a large degree, been fuelled by developments in other disciplines, in this case mostly linguistics and sociology. An unfortunate consequence of this is that studies of leadership in interaction still remain somewhat fragmented and spread across disciplines (Schnurr and Schroeder, 2019).

Consequently, highly developed methodological approaches to analysing leadership in interaction have mostly been published in linguistically oriented journals, see for example, Wodak et al., (2011), Ladegaard, (2012), and Baxter (2012) who use discourse analysis, politeness theory, and interactional sociolinguistics, respectively. Yet, this body of work is not always well connected to current theoretical developments and controversies in the leadership field and, despite the rise of interest in interactional approaches to leadership within the community of leadership scholars, the methodological possibilities offered by linguistically and micro-sociologically oriented approaches have often been overlooked.

The aim of this Special Issue is thus twofold. First, we wish to showcase the argument that the field of leadership in interaction is well established, if fragmented, and that it contributes to ongoing debates in leadership studies. Second, we wish to bridge the divide between linguistically-oriented researchers and researchers who identify more with leadership studies. More specifically, in this introductory paper we define what we consider leadership in interaction to be. We then set out what we perceive to be the advantages that such an approach offers and the challenges that it faces, together with ways in which these challenges have been, or could be, addressed. Finally, we provide an overview of the papers in this Special Issue and we outline avenues for future research.

### **What is leadership in interaction?**

In a nutshell, leadership in interaction involves the analysis of the specific interactional processes through which leadership is accomplished at the micro level of interaction – with the aim of gaining a better understanding of the everyday practices that constitute leadership. This has principally involved the analyses of talk and text. Thus, studying leadership in interaction has been, in part, an upshot of the linguistic turn in social sciences whereby language is considered to be social action through which leadership is accomplished.

However, despite the fact that most work to date that considers leadership in interaction has focussed on talk and text, the role of artefacts and non-human ‘things’ in interaction should not be overlooked. This is because, as Grint (2005: 2) points out, there are “almost no cases of successful human leadership bereft of any ‘non-human’ supplement – that is naked”.

Consequently, artefacts are also part of leadership practice and their role in interaction should also be considered (see, for example, Van De Mierop’s and Arvedsen and Hassert’s contribution to this Special Issue). Studying interaction thus means attending to both the mundane, seen but unnoticed, discursive *and* material artful practices through which our

social world is produced. In short, far from being an epiphenomenon, interaction is taken to be the very arena in which the processes that can reasonably be theorised as leadership are produced as ongoing, precarious, and dialogic accomplishments which involve both social and material practices. Studies of leadership in interaction therefore rest on the idea that “we need to be able to locate leadership in everyday organisational practice for research to credibly grant it any role in the shaping of organisational reality” (Larsson, 2017: 173).

### **Challenges and advantages of studying leadership in interaction**

We consider that there are two main advantages in studying leadership in interaction. First, to the extent that we conceptualise leadership as referring to interpersonal processes, this approach builds on direct observation of the core phenomenon, rather than on second hand reports. Consequently, it is able to provide thick descriptions of how leadership is brought off in the here-and-now of interaction. Thus, for example, Van De Mieroop (in this issue), conceptualising leadership as a process of social influence and using video-recordings of naturally-occurring interaction during decision-making episodes of talk as data, demonstrates exactly how leadership is achieved through the negotiation of deontic rights.

An interactional approach to leadership thus stands in contrast to other empirical research strategies which draw on the respondent’s self-report of their experiences of leadership, for instance through questionnaires or interviews. Such post-hoc accounts of how leadership *is perceived to happen* provide only limited insights into how leadership *actually happens* as in situ social practice. Of course, investigating how leadership is perceived is a valid researcher activity, but these second order accounts of leadership should not be confused with actual workplace practice. Indeed, the use of post-hoc accounts for leadership studies has been criticised since at least the 1970s and more recently these criticisms have been extensively developed (Antonakis et al., 2016; Clifton and Dai, 2020). Particularly, the role of social cognition, including prototyping (Lord and Shondrick, 2011), attribution (Martinko et al., 2007), and performance cue effects (Lord et al., 1978) in producing, what on the surface look like reports of observations of leadership, has been clarified and more broadly acknowledged (Crawford and Kelder, 2019). This literature suggests that post-hoc accounts of leadership actions and interactions are constituted as much by observer characteristics (such as expectancies, knowledge categories, preferences etc.) as by what is actually observed. A central advantage of taking an interactional approach to leadership is that it sidesteps such

situated second order accounts of leadership in favour of direct observation of what actually happens in everyday workplace practice.

The second main advantage of taking an interactional approach to leadership is that it enables researchers to gather empirical evidence with which to challenge, or substantiate, widely circulating leadership theories (Schnurr and Schroeder, 2019). For example, in their overview of leadership research since the mid-20th century, Parry and Bryman (2006) note the current interest in post-charismatic and post-heroic notions of leadership. However, as numerous researchers (e.g., (Crevani et al., 2010) have noted, there is a lack of empirical work that demonstrates just how distributed leadership is enacted as in situ social practice. This lacuna has prompted Denis et al. (2012: 266) to go as far as to suggest that distributed leadership promotes an ideology, rather than a renewed definition, of leadership. However, recent studies that take an interactional approach to leadership (notably, Clifton, 2017; Choi and Schnurr, 2014; Van De Mierop et al., 2020) demonstrate how leadership as a shared phenomenon is enacted as part of everyday workplace routines. Such research thus goes some way to providing empirical evidence, said to be missing from emerging post-heroic trends in leadership research, of distributed leadership in action.

Despite the advantages, outlined above, that taking an interactional approach to leadership entails, it also raises two significant challenges. Considering that direct observation of actual workplace interaction, especially if based on video or audio recordings, offers a confusing amount of detail, the first challenge concerns how to methodologically manage this wealth of detail. Traditionally, this has been handled through the development of observational categories as typified, for example, in Mintzberg's (1971) classic study of managers' work in which he used ethnographic research to categorise the activities of managers. Using such a technique, the observer might quickly reduce the bewildering details of everyday workplace practice by recording categories, rather than observations of the actual interaction itself. Eschewing categorisation, researchers who take an interactional approach to leadership favour research traditions such as: conversation analysis (see all the contributions to this Special Issue); interactional sociolinguistics (for instance, Schnurr, 2009a; Vine et al., 2008); and ethnography (Crevani, 2018). These approaches, almost exclusively based on the analysis of recordings of naturally-occurring interaction, provide, we suggest, the necessary tools, techniques, and concepts to grasp the recurrent interactional patterns, and social actions they perform, which constitute leadership in action.

The second challenge that we perceive is the question of how to theoretically specify the relevance of this complex mass of data, or, to put it another way, how to specify a notion of leadership that allows for an analysis of this kind of data. Working with observational data highlights the theoretical problem of identifying leadership, or more precisely, of deciding how the concept of leadership will be utilised in a particular study. Whilst questionnaire-based studies rely on the operationalisation of leadership-related phenomena that are constructed through the measures used, and interview-based studies tend to let the interviewees interpret the concept of leadership, working with interactional data calls for another strategy. In essence, for each study and each single analysis, the researcher not only needs to specify what the phenomenon of interest is, but he/she must also decide how the link between leadership theory and interaction is to be made (that is, how to handle the problem of operationalisation). However, since leadership is a complex, contested, and ambiguous concept (Grint, 2005), this necessarily implies that researchers taking an interactional approach are obliged to draw on a myriad of potentially conflicting, contestable, and ambiguous concepts of leadership for their own work.

Within the field of leadership in interaction, there seem to be four main ways to approach the challenge of deciding which concept of leadership is to be used in a particular study. These can be summed up as:

1. Equating leadership with position and focussing on what the formal leader does. Studies adopting this approach (e.g. (Holmes, 2007; Schnurr, 2009; Yeung, 2004) have, for example, identified how different leadership styles are accomplished in practice, thereby developing and deepening our understanding of both the realisation and the interactional consequences of such styles. At the same time, they have also contributed to problematizing the notion of styles. This is because ‘style’ cannot be clearly differentiated in the cut and thrust of everyday practice in which there is also a strong element of collaboration and co-production (Schnurr 2009a).
2. Seeing leadership as essentially a question of interpersonal influence, and identifying influence in interactional sequences. Such studies therefore seek to explore how influence is accomplished in interaction and to make the influence processes visible and thus analysable (see for example, (Clifton, 2006, 2009; Larsson and Lundholm, 2013).
3. Going beyond influence in sequences of interaction to the possible consequences of such influence, some studies attempt to explore how leadership also organises action.

While many researchers have suggested a close relationship between leadership and organising (Hazy and Uhl-Bien, 2013; Hosking, 1988; Pye, 2005), studies that take an interactional approach to leadership utilise empirical studies of actual organising to develop the theoretical understanding of the organising properties of leadership (Crevani, 2018; Larsson and Lundholm, 2013; Meschitti, 2018).

4. Focusing on the construction of leader and follower identities (Clifton, 2017; Larsson and Nielsen, 2017; Schnurr and Zayts, 2011), some studies investigate the ways in which leader (and follower) identities are constructed in interaction. These studies, contrary to psychologically-inspired approaches to leader identity, consider leader (and follower) identity to be a fleeting and fragile phenomenon that is negotiated in everyday workplace practice. Consequently, from this social constructionist perspective, leader identity is neither something that people have and which they bring along to an interactional event, nor is it necessarily commensurate with hierarchal position, rather it is something that people do – and this doing takes place in and through interactions with others.

Clearly, the richness of the field of leadership studies offers numerous ways to conceptualise leadership and to connect this concept to the details of lived interaction. While this offers opportunities for individual studies, it might at the same time also contribute to the fragmentation of the field. Clearly there is a need for integrative texts, such as this introduction, Larsson (2017), and Schnurr and Schroeder (2019), which: situate studies in relation to each other; identify possible synergy between studies; and offer avenues for further research.

### **Brief overview of the contributions in this Special Issue**

Drawing on different kinds of empirical data and using different methodological and analytical frameworks, such as multimodal discourse analysis, conversation analysis, and ethnography, the papers in this Special Issue showcase research on leadership in interaction. They address several of the points raised above, and thus provide valuable examples that illustrate some of the many benefits that such an approach brings to the study of leadership. Although each paper explores different aspects of leadership, such as virtual leadership (Arvedsen and Hassert) or formal and informal leadership (Gadelshina), they all draw on the concept of leadership to explore real-life organisational interaction. All contributions

conceptualise leadership as a collaborative process and draw on empirical data in the form of authentic, naturally-occurring interactions, paying particular attention to the situated context in which the interaction occurs. Each paper thereby illustrates some of the benefits of working with interactional data and engaging in fine-grained analyses to provide thick descriptions of complex phenomena. Taken together, the papers in this Special Issue thus make an important contribution to current leadership research by addressing some of its central theoretical issues, while at the same time showcasing a viable, yet under-employed, approach to studying leadership.

In the first paper in this collection, Gadelshina focuses on organisational sensemaking, going beyond existing understandings of leadership as the management of meaning and sensemaking to include the legitimisation of doubt. Combining conversation analysis and ethnographic data, she explores how leadership actors, during meetings of a customer relations management team at a university in the UK, deal with uncertainty in socially meaningful ways. The paper focuses on the interactional processes in which both expert claims to epistemic authority and a ‘no knowledge’ display lead to collaborative action, and thus can be seen as a case of informal leadership. Conducting a fine-grained analysis of an instance in which one actor is put in a situation of uncertainty, this research contributes to existing work on organisational sensemaking which recognises that the ability to shape the views of others and influence their sensemaking is a key leadership skill. It also makes the intricate interplay between formal and informal leadership visible, and so suggests the relevance of a shared leadership configuration.

Next, arguing that leadership is not only accomplished in and through language alone, Van De Mierop’s contribution demonstrates how a micro-interactional perspective which integrates discursive, sequential, and multimodal analytical layers can capture the complexities of leadership, both verbal and non-verbal. In her analyses of decision-making episodes she draws on video-recordings of authentic meetings in the Belgian healthcare context and uses multimodal discourse analysis to explore the interaction between a superior (who does not chair the meeting), the meeting chair, and the other participants. Making a distinction between proximal and distal deontics, she illustrates how leadership – even when it is authoritative – is essentially a collaborative accomplishment in which all meeting participants engage. This collaborative nature of leadership, she argues, can be best captured by drawing analytical attention to the diverse verbal – as well as non-verbal – means that interlocutors utilise throughout an encounter.



The third contribution, in which Arvedsen and Hassert investigate the largely overlooked aspect of virtual leadership, also moves beyond an exclusive focus on verbal aspects of leadership. Conceptualising leadership as the creation of direction, alignment, and commitment (DAC) (Drath et al., 2008) and using multimodal conversation analysis, this paper analyses leadership in interaction during a virtual meeting of an IT project team in Denmark, and explores how actors rely on virtual platforms and ICT objects when communicating with each other. Findings illustrate the ways in which throughout an interaction actors draw on a range of modalities to accomplish leadership. Moreover, Arvedsen and Hassert connect with recent process-oriented leadership research, showing in detail the collaborative nature of what is taken to be leadership. Further, the article contributes to a better understanding of leadership in practice – especially in virtual contexts – by demonstrating how actors utilise both objects and verbal resources in the co-production of leadership.

Continuing this focus on the co-production and the sharing of leadership, the fourth paper in this collection, by Fox and Comeau-Vallée, explores some of the processes through which leadership is shared in the context of hierarchical asymmetry. This contribution examines observed interactions that are steeped in asymmetry inherent in the professional hierarchy of interprofessional teams in two health care organisations in Canada. Using thematic analysis, Fox and Comeau-Vallée conduct fine-grained analyses to identify and compare the discursive strategies used by professionals in a superior hierarchical position with those used by people in subordinate positions when sharing leadership. Findings show that leadership is shared (or not) as a result of how professional hierarchy is negotiated in interactions, and that sharing leadership and hierarchical leadership can be co-present and even intertwined in an interaction. Findings of the study help differentiate the notions of hierarchical position and decision-making from the notion of leadership as an interpersonal influence (and problem construction) process.

### **Avenues for future research**

Taken together, the papers in this issue demonstrate that research in leadership in interaction has already come a long way since the appearance of a few papers at the end of the last century. Further, the contributions to this Special Issue give an indication of the present state of the field and encapsulate the substantial body of literature that has already been produced over the last 20 years, thus providing a foundation on which future studies can build.

We suggest that an avenue for research lies in the transdisciplinary nature of leadership in interaction and its, as yet relatively under-exploited, ability to provide novel ways of investigating leadership inspired by other research traditions. Drawing on traditions such as ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), Goffmanian micro level sociology (Goffman, 1982), interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1982) and ethnography (Knoblauch, 2005) might allow scholars to develop the distinctive relationship between data, in the form of recorded interactions, and theories of leadership. Building such bridges would entail developing a deeper account of what constitutes interactions, and for instance, what notions such as influence and the management of meaning might mean when social order is seen as reflexively constituted by interactants (Garfinkel, 1967). In essence, these traditions offer not just a valid methodology for studying leadership, but they also offer rich theoretical resources for understanding the realisation of leadership in everyday workplace interactions. In order to enrich the empirical findings of leadership research, future studies might fruitfully employ these resources even more.

First, we argue that building bridges between conceptualisations of leadership and the aforementioned methodological approaches that allow for the fine-grained analyses of in situ workplace interaction clearly holds a potential to unpack the central notion of practice. As Raelin (2016a: 8) acknowledges, taking a practice turn entails adopting a process approach to leadership which “would of necessity require slowing down the action sufficiently to study the discernible practices and *interactions*” (italics added). For example, Arvedsen and Hassert’s (this issue) study demonstrates how multimodal analysis allows a detailed exploration of the *practice* of collaborating and accomplishing influence, and establishing direction, commitment, and alignment. Further, while some approaches to leadership as practice emphasise the role of routines (Raelin 2016b) as recurring and recognisable patterns, studies of interaction may be able to shift the lens through which such routines are investigated by raising the question of how exactly interaction becomes recognisable as a routine, by whom, and what it achieves (LeBaron et al., 2016). Drawing on a broad field of interactional studies of routines (see for example, Rawls, 2008), future studies might thus build on Van De Mierop’s (this issue) exploration of the role of the formal leader’s authority and Arvedsen & Hassert’s (this issue) attention to recognisable meeting procedures to explore how routines and recognisable patterns are actually made present in the ongoing flow of work. Theoretically, such studies of interaction might contribute to the conceptualisation of

leadership as practice by firmly connecting theorising about practice to detailed empirical explorations of actual leadership processes.

Second, another area in which an interactional approach to leadership might offer a promising avenue of inquiry is related to the current interest in collective, shared, and distributed leadership in which a central problematic concerns the relationship between formal positions of authority and informal leadership. We argue that studies of interaction offer the possibility of going beyond the investigation of configurations of vertical and shared leadership to providing detailed analyses of the processes involved in negotiating these configurations. As illustrated by Van De Mieroop's paper (this issue), studies of interaction offer analytical resources (such as the notion of proximal and distal deontic authority) which enable the researcher to explore the role and function of formal positions in the process of sharing, without reverting to assuming that formal positions equate with leadership. Further, avoiding conflating leadership with position, papers in this Special Issue show how locally available resources, such as the situated sensemaking of the issue at hand, or control of material artefacts, might play an important role in the process of sharing leadership and thus in the configurations that emerge. Future studies might therefore profitably explore both the interactional tactics through which such resources are shared, and the characteristics of the resources that make them more or less useful for all the interactants, not just the hierarchical superior.

Third, another possible area for further investigation that the papers in this Special Issue seem to raise and emphasise is the question of the role and function of formal (Van De Mieroop) or professional (Fox & Comeau-Vallée) positions in the process of producing leadership relationships, managing meaning (Gadelshina), and accomplishing influence. In other words, rather than either embracing a positional perspective on leadership, where formal position is taken to be leadership, or eschewing formal positions and focussing exclusively on collective processes, the papers illustrate the possibilities for an empirically driven exploration of these questions. Studies of interaction, we argue, offer a lens for exploring the role and function of organisational positions (formal, professional, or other) from a more processual perspective. For instance, the ethnomethodological/conversation analytical focus on what participants to an interaction orient towards and thus treat as real and relevant (rather than a researcher's a priori understandings) enables the researcher to pay attention to the way in which the meaning of formal positions are negotiated in interactions. Future studies might continue this development, and explore how various formal (hierarchical, professional, etc.) roles are made

relevant and utilised for various purposes in interaction. Studies of this kind might thereby contribute to the understanding of the process of sharing leadership in different organisational contexts.

Fourth, studies of interaction are particularly well placed to widen the scope of identity oriented research. Despite the fact that investigating leader and follower identities is a huge and lively field, enduring problems concern how to theoretically connect leader and follower identities to the notion of leadership as an interpersonal influence process. Simply put, while a wealth of studies demonstrate how leader (more so than follower) identities might be established, the question of how this then turns into an influence process is still undertheorised. Van De Mieroop's (this issue) paper illustrates how studies of interaction might contribute here. Focusing on identity as an interactional phenomenon, in which "people continuously shift in and out of 'not necessarily homogenous and consistent' identities" (Schnurr and Chan, 2011: 190), makes it possible to explore not only the process of negotiating relational identities, but also the interactional consequences of this. In other words, as shown by Van De Mieroop's paper, studies of interaction offer the possibility of exploring how particular identity constructions might matter for the ensuing interaction. Future studies might continue on this path, identifying influence in interaction and exploring the role of interactional identities in the accomplishment of influence. Consequently, such studies have the potential to contribute to a deeper understanding not only of the dynamics of leader and follower identities, but also to our understanding of their role in the leadership process.

Fifth, we also suggest that future studies might usefully continue to explore the ways in which material resources come to function as constraints on, or resources for, the process of negotiating the possibilities for various parties to engage in leadership. As Arvedsen and Hassert (this issue) point out, recently, there has been a proliferation of leadership studies which consider the influence of 'things' such as material surroundings, objects, and bodies. However, what is often lacking from these studies is a fine-grained analysis of how exactly artefacts and other material phenomena are mobilised in interaction to do leadership. To date, scholars interested in leadership in interaction have focused on talk and so have largely overlooked the fine-grained analysis of in situ socio-material practice in and through which leadership is achieved. Therefore, an avenue that interactional approaches to leadership could profitably follow is to use video-recorded data of naturally-occurring workplace interaction so that researchers can capture and systematically consider the use of gesture, gaze, artefacts,

and so on as part of the multimodal interactional accomplishment of leadership (see Arvedsen and Hassert's and Van De Mieroop's contributions in this issue).

Finally, we end this introduction by noting three areas that we feel should attract the attention of researchers taking an interactional approach to leadership but which have been relatively overlooked in this Special Issue, as in the field of interactional leadership generally. First, with the notable exception of the work of Baxter (for example Baxter, 2012) and associated researchers (e.g., Schnurr 2008; Marra et al. 2006), so far research has only just begun to investigate the gendered nature of leadership. Consequently, more work remains to be done to investigate gendered interactional routines that may, or may not, have a part to play in the doing of leadership. Second, the papers in this Special Issue focus on what could be called Western 'cultures' (i.e., Belgium, Canada, the UK, and Denmark). A clear avenue for future research would be to investigate the interactional achievement of leadership in other geographic locations, something that to date is relatively lacking, though see, for example, Baxter and Al-A'ali (2014), Holmes (2007), and Schnurr & Zayts (2011). Third, it is noticeable that all the papers in this Special Issue, as with much other research that takes an interactional approach to leadership, draw their data from business meetings. Meetings are, of course, just one venue – perhaps the most easily accessible – amongst many in which leadership occurs. We therefore encourage further research that builds on prior interactional research that also moves beyond formal meetings (e.g. Schnurr 2009a; Van De Mieroop and Schnurr 2014; Darics 2020; Schnurr & Mohd Omar *fc*) and which focuses on relatively overlooked venues such as corridor conversations, email communication, interactions on WhatsApp and other social media, and so on in which leadership may occur.

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