

**‘We don’t need another hero’
-Towards the study of leadership as everyday practices**

by

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Abstract

In all theories of management and organization, leadership has a given central place in enforcing principles, motivating employees and communicating future goals and visions to strive for. Leadership is assumed to make a special, significant and positive contribution to action processes in most organizations, and leadership studies as an academic field has thus been preoccupied with the task of identifying the most successful leadership practices. At the same time, the field of leadership studies has traditionally been leader-centered, i.e. focused on the individual leader and his/hers traits, abilities and actions. Leadership practices have been equated with leaders’ practices, dichotomously separated from those of the ‘others’ in this tradition, the ‘followers’. The aim of this paper is to put forward an alternative perspective, based on the idea that leadership is a natural part of what most people do on an everyday basis in organisations. From this perspective, leadership is a set of social practices organised by people in interaction, practices related to intentional processes of organisational change and development. Empirical data from recent case studies will be used to illustrate the tenets of this alternative perspective.

1. Introduction

Leaders and leadership are much in demand in modern society. They are always called for as remedies to almost any existing problem – in business, in politics, in families. At the same time, there are few – if any – organizations in which people are entirely happy with the perceived quality of the exercised leadership. Consequently, the field of leadership – in theory and practice – has been a fast-growing part of management knowledge since the beginning of the 20th century. In all theories of management and organization, leadership has a given a central place in enforcing principles, motivating employees and communicating future goals and visions to strive for. Leadership is assumed to make a special, significant and positive contribution to action processes in most organizations, and leadership studies as an academic field has thus been preoccupied with the task of identifying the most successful leadership practices, a task that is yet to be solved. In analogy with Jones & Spicer’s (2005) analysis of

entrepreneurship, one may thus claim that the leadership research field is driven by its eternal failure to identify successful leaders and leadership positively, beforehand – a failure that will keep the field moving as long as it is seen as a failure.

The field of leadership studies has traditionally been leader-centered, i.e. focused on the individual leader and his traits, abilities and actions. This was a part of the general modernism introduced in the management sciences during the early 20th century, where the best leaders were to be identified and chosen out from their suitability and formal merits rather than from pre-modern bases such as kinship or charisma. The problem was still to determine what constituted a suitable leader, and this question gave rise to a series of different theoretical schools (cf overview in Parry & Bryman, 2006). One stream of thought was psychological, trying to identify personality traits that distinguished successful leaders from other people. Against this, others claimed that leadership was about interaction between leaders and followers, and that different interaction styles (e.g. autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire) implied different group atmospheres and hence different group productivity levels. Yet another stream of research instead advocated a situational perspective, according to which leaders are only effective if they adapt their style to the situation at hand; very simple or very complicated situations are best handled through task-oriented leadership, while most other situations are better handled through socio-emotional leadership styles. The situational perspective became very influential, but it has also been subject to recent criticism for focusing too much on the leader and not enough on the group interaction. It is today instead emphasised that the leader is a member of a group, albeit with specific possibilities to influence the group, and that leadership is actually a series of interaction processes rather than acts performed by a single individual in relation to a collective of followers.

During recent years, there have thus indeed been several theoretical attempts at questioning this taken-for-granted idea that the phenomenon of leadership is to be found in what single managers do and think – instead emphasising leadership as constructed in social interaction and the notion of ‘leadership’ as an influential societal discourse. This may, e.g. imply a critique of the taken-for-granted idea of unitary command (Crevani et al, 2007a, 2007b) and the institutionalised notion of a leader-follower dichotomy (Küpers, 2007; Reicher et al, 2005; Vanderslice, 1988; Collinson, 2006). The most visible trend, however, seem to be the emergence of the *post-heroic leadership ideals* that have been suggested in order to emphasise the relational, collectivist and non-authoritarian nature of leadership practices in contemporary organizations (Eicher, 1997; Fletcher, 2004; Crevani et al, 2007a).

A related way of taking leadership beyond the individualist tradition is to depart from an ambition to formulate new and alternative leadership ideals that may replace existing dominating assumptions on what constitutes ‘good leadership’. One way of doing this has been to depart from the empirical observation that leadership activities often involve more than one person, and that some leaders actually make formal arrangements to share leadership responsibilities and tasks. The resulting literatures contain several conceptualizations of such observations and arrangements, such as *shared leadership*, (Bradford and Cohen, 1998; Lambert, 2002; Pearce and Conger, 2003; Sally, 2002; Wilhelmson, 2006), *collaborative leadership* (Collinson, 2007) and

dispersed/distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002; Parry and Bryman, 2006, Spillane, 2006, Uhl-Bien, 2006; Crevani et al, 2007a).

From our point of view, it is not enough to say that leadership can successfully be shared between two or more co-leaders, or that it is about interaction between leaders and followers – which is a stance taken by several scholars in the past, a stance actually often maintaining rather than dissolving the leader/follower distinction (Küpers, 2007). If we want to take leadership research beyond the leader-centered tradition, we must also try to redefine leadership into terms of activities in between people in interaction, and study that interaction without becoming preoccupied with what formal leaders do and think. Our way of doing this is to formulate new epistemological assumptions – according to which leaders and leadership are seen as subjectively and inter-subjectively constructed in organizations and society (cf also Sjöstrand et al, 2001; Grint, 2005, Uhl-Bien, 2006). Like Parry and Bryman (2006) we want to develop “an alternative perspective that emphasizes the importance of recognizing the need for leadership to be viewed as a widely dispersed activity which is not necessarily lodged in formally designated leaders, especially the heroic leader who is a feature of much New Leadership writing” (p. 455).

The institutionalized expectation that single, formal leaders are the source of leadership activities is indeed an important part of all organizational processes, but it should be treated as a common expectation that is constructed and reconstructed in social interaction rather than as a given fact. The conceptualizations and discursive repertoires we use to describe leadership are also based on these common expectations, portraying shared, dispersed or distributed leadership as curious deviations from the rational and moral imperative of unitary command (cf Crevani et al, 2007b, Koivunen, 2007).

The aim of this paper is to put forward an alternative perspective, based on the idea that leadership is a natural part of what most people do on an everyday basis in organisations. From this perspective, leadership is a set of social practices organised by people in interaction, practices related to intentional processes of organisational change and development. Examples of such processes may be the handling of organizational issues, internal projects, structuring and re-structuring, construction of meaning, identities, norms etc – all of them usually involving several individuals assuming responsibility for common matters. Instead of focusing on how the formal manager participates in such processes and then dichotomising her/his practices from those of the ‘followers’, we analyse these processes as such as leadership practices, co-constructed by several people in interaction. Formal managers contribute to these practices by trying to live up to institutionalised expectations on ‘leadership’, and other individuals contribute from various other perspectives such as professionalism, organisational loyalty, self-interest etc In this paper we will therefore argue the following:

1. Alternative sets of basic assumptions are needed in order to further the theoretical and practical perspective that leadership activities are constructed in social interaction rather than emanating from single leaders.
2. Such a perspective will lead to new descriptions of leadership activities and opens up for theoretical developments on issues of gender, power, identity construction and the performativity of leadership ideals.

The article starts by identifying basic assumptions in leadership research that are related to the individual-centred notion of leadership; thereafter alternative assumptions are suggested. An approach to study leadership as practices is presented and exemplified. The paper ends by discussing the theoretical consequences of a constructionist, practice-oriented agenda within leadership research.

2. Towards a distinction between leaders and leadership: Present and alternative assumptions

As described in the previous section, the dominating literatures within the leadership field have traditionally assumed a view of leadership as the actions performed by single, formal leaders. Although there are several differences between existing theoretical traditions, leadership is always equated with the doings of single individuals and formal managers. Even in the more recent *New Leadership approach* (Parry and Bryman, 2006) – which might be more correctly referred to as a set of related approaches - the leader is seen as the manager of meaning, the one who defines organizational reality by means of articulating a vision for the organization (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Still, the same underlying assumption applies: leadership is a phenomenon that is embodied in a person, the leader, and should be scientifically studied as such. Even though both influence and the management of meaning can be seen as interactive processes enabling organizing, the focus has nevertheless mostly remained on the single individuals that have the power to set agendas and influence the interpretative repertoires of their followers. The leader is now described not only as the one who leads and gives orders, but also as a symbol, a source of inspiration, creativity and aesthetic perfection (Hatch et al, 2006). Pearce and Manz (2005) describe this romantic conception of leaders as heroes in similar terms: heroes...

“...who single-handedly save followers – who are largely viewed as interchangeable drones – from their own incompetence” (p 130).

However, by assuming that leaders alone are responsible to solve complex organizational problems, failures to live up to such responsibilities are looked upon with contempt and indignation. The “leader as villain” image has become increasingly common, even more after cases of corporate corruption as the Enron case in the US (Collinson, 2005), again emphasizing the single individual as the source of both good and evil in the organized world. To sum up, the idea that leadership is always embodied in individual leaders lives on in good health. Individual leaders are still used to personify companies and countries, and most new management books treat leadership as something that is exercised by single individuals. In research, leadership is usually still equated with what individual managers do, say and think; that is, leadership is:

“[...] often routinely connected with managers, for example, when researchers send questionnaires to managers asking them to describe their ‘leadership’ style, behaviour or values. Whatever the managers say they do, it is treated as ‘leadership’. Also, laissez-faire or bureaucratic behaviour is sometimes labelled ‘leadership’ [...]. Still, leadership is viewed by a large number of authors not as any kind of managerial behaviour toward subordinates, but as an activity on a high moral level, reflecting harmony, voluntarism and shared interest, and involving no or little formal power or coercion.” (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003b: 964f)

2.1 The hidden assumptions in leadership literature

During recent years, there have been several theoretical attempts at questioning the assumption that leadership is always embodied in a single leader. Usually, this is done through departing from an explicit counter-assumption that leadership emerges in social interaction between people. Such an assumption is not very controversial; viewing leadership in terms of leader-follower interaction has been a recurrent theme in leadership research since the early 1900's. What is more controversial is the recent theoretical developments in which the division of organisational members into leaders and followers is seen as unnecessary and as a hindrance to the development of new practical and theoretical perspectives on leadership (cf Collinson, 2006, Küpers, 2007, Spillane, 2006). Even more controversial are those developments that show how even when talking of interactions, as for example in LMX theory, the focus has still been on individuals, rather than on the interactions themselves and what is done in such interactions (Drath et al, 2008, Uhl-Bien, 2006).

The reasons why this is controversial should arguably be sought for in the often implicit basic assumptions of the leadership field. We have identified eight such assumptions that are related to the emergent conceptualizations of leadership as social interactions, which are further described in Table 1. The three first assumptions, *individualism*, *psychologisation* and *unitary command*, are well rooted both in practical and theoretical traditions that have developed over thousands of years. Leadership in politics and in the military forces has almost always been equated with extraordinary actions taken by single individuals, and that notion was later brought over also to leadership in commercial ventures. Consequently, there has been a widespread interest in identifying the psychological traits and qualities that characterised these single individuals. With the exception of Taylor's (1911) suggestion of functional foremanship, early management writers always departed from the view that leadership was embodied in single individuals that should be able to exercise a unitary command over an area of responsibility and the resources allocated. The ensuing *hierarchisation and segregation* – i.e. that leaders are seen as special individuals that are different from the rest of the population – is a rest from most religions and became evident in modern management e.g. in the early doctrine of Social Darwinism popular in the USA which could be summarized in the idea that “success entitled a man to command” (Perrow et al, 1986). With the power, the responsibilities and the often devastating consequences for followers of mistakes and misjudgements also came the *heroic* notion of leaders – as the people sacrificing themselves for the good of the rest and displaying courage and toughness in all situations. Leadership has even been elevated to a kind of *moral* activity, based on the honest use of scarce resources, harmony and shared interest; an activity that is moreover needed and that has an important impact on organizational performance (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003b; Crevani et al, 2007b). Leadership research also has a strong performative ambition in that it is directed towards the production of normative advice to be internalized by practitioners. Last, but not least, leadership has been traditionally presented as a gender-neutral concept, but researchers have questioned this assumption and analysed how leadership is a gendered construction in *masculine* terms (cf Alvesson and Billing, 1999; Calas and Smircich,

1991; Collinson and Hearn, 1996; Kerfoot and Knights, 1993; Kark, 2005; Madsen and Albrechtsen, 2008; Tienari et al, 2004).

Basic assumption in leadership research	Description	Implications for research	Consequences in terms of individualizing leadership
Individualism	Leadership is assumed to be embodied in single individuals. Leadership activities emanates from these individuals.	Individual leaders are always expected as mediators of leadership and thus sought for as operationalisations of leadership.	Leadership does not exist outside the individual leader. Leadership must be studied through single individuals.
Psychologisation	Given its interest in individuals, leadership research is primarily about understanding the individuals that exercise leadership.	Focus on psychological traits, repeated behaviours, competencies or expressed values that can be connected to success.	Psychologisation implies a preoccupation with the individual, not with interaction characteristics.
Unitary command	There can only be one responsible leader for one area of responsibility.	Leadership for a certain area of responsibility will always have to be studied through the responsible leader.	Only individual leadership is seen as effective and legitimate. Shared and dispersed forms are seen as exceptions for special situations.
Hierarchisation and segregation	Leaders are a special kind, segregated from other people. Leaders are also – naturally – above others.	Leadership is portrayed as something that can only be taken care of by exceptional, superior individuals. Leadership studies is not about the study of the mundane.	Leadership can only involve a few individuals in almost any population, in most cases only one individual. The rest are followers, implying a subject/object relationship.
Heroism	Leadership is about hard work, being tough and rational, making sacrifices and doing the right thing despite the consequences.	Leadership research tends to focus on exciting, history-making activities involving large values and serious conflicts.	Leadership becomes manifest in extraordinary situations and critical incidents. Heroes and individual agency are expected, not teams or collectives.
Morality	Leadership is needed and matters. Leadership affects organizational performance in a positive way. People want to be lead. Leadership is a morally good activity.	Researchers almost never question if there is leadership, if there are leaders and if leadership matters.	Leaders have a moral function in society that followers do not have. Followers need leaders in order to get guidance and meaning.
Masculinity	Leadership is about individualism, autonomy, (self-)control, confidence, assertiveness, domination, advocacy, toughness. Masculinity and leadership become conflated.	Leadership research tends to construct leadership in masculine terms, thereby reinforcing masculinity as the prime source of leadership performativity.	Leadership interactions not reinforcing traditional masculine norms (such as behaviours emphasising collectives, relations and emotions) are not interpreted as leadership, they “disappear”.
Performativity	Leadership is a set of normative assumptions on what leadership is and how leaders shall behave.	Focus on identifying leadership activities that are good and successful, and factors leading to goodness and success.	The senders and recipients of advice on good and successful leadership are all individuals. Leaders are expected to behave as individuals, both by themselves and by leadership scholars.

Table 1. Basic assumptions in leadership research related to constructionist notions of leadership.

2.2 Towards alternative assumptions

As mentioned in the first section of this paper, there is an ongoing development where several concepts and metaphors have been suggested in order to escape the inherent leader-centered performativity of leadership texts and to capture a distributed view of the phenomenon. For example, there is a growing literature focusing on *shared leadership*, i.e. empirical cases where people actually share leadership duties and responsibilities rather than allocating them to a single person (Bradford and Cohen, 1998; Lambert, 2002; Pearce and Conger, 2003; Sally, 2002; Wilhelmson, 2006). *Collaborative leadership* (Collinson, 2007) is a similar conceptualization, focusing on collaboration rather than competition. Moreover, the taken-for-granted idea of unitary command has been questioned (Crevani et al, 2007a, 2007b) and the dissolution of the leader-follower dichotomy has been suggested (Küpers, 2007; Reicher et al, 2005; Vanderslice, 1988). Gronn (2002) explicitly refers to *distributed leadership* in his plea for leadership studies that focus on collective interaction processes rather than on single leaders (cf also Spillane, 2006; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

These conceptualizations have also been subject to a theoretical debate concerning the consequences for leadership research. For example, Drath et al (2008) questions the traditional focus on entities such as leaders, followers and common goals, instead suggesting a focus on outcomes of leadership activities such as direction, alignment and commitment (DAC) and how such outcomes are produced in organizations. Likewise, Carroll et al, 2008, suggest a 'practice turn' in leadership research – focusing on actual leadership practices than on leadership competencies held by individual managers (cf also Spillane, 2006). Leadership is then seen as a set of shared practices in an organization (Fletcher, 2004). Directly connecting such perspectives on leadership to constructionist epistemologies, Cunliffe (2008) and Uhl-Bien (2006) use the term relational leadership, emphasizing people and organizations as 'made' in interaction. Following Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a), Carroll et al (2008: 372f) holds that leadership "has more power as a discourse and identity, giving practitioners enhanced self-esteem, significance and 'positive cultural valence' [...], rather than a specific or distinctive set of practices or interventions in organizational life."

Our analysis of the existing literature on new models and ideals of leadership portrayed above is that it can, roughly, be divided in two related streams of thought; (1) one that focus on the practicalities of why and how managerial duties and positions should be assigned to more than one person, the *shared leadership* literature, and (2) one that assumes a basic perspective on all leadership as being collective construction processes with several people involved, what we call *leadership as collectively constructed*. Although these two traditions do not exclude each other, they imply quite different research agendas.

In the first tradition, we find several reasons why and how managerial tasks shall be divided between several individuals (see also Crevani et al, 2007a, 2007b, for a summary of the arguments for shared leadership practices). It is connected to the main ambition in leadership studies to be of instrumental and scientific value to practitioners – without challenging any basic assumptions (Gunter, 2001). One problem of this perspective is that it views shared leadership as an exception to "usual" leadership, an

exception to be practiced in special situations (Pearce, 2004) or as a complement to vertical arrangements (Pearce et al, 2007). Shared leadership is also defined from the number of involved individuals, rather than from the individuals' experiences on if the exercised leadership was actually shared or not – i.e. a focus on formal organizational arrangements rather than on practical everyday organizing.

The alternative, as we see it, is to apply a basic perspective on leadership as something that individuals construct together in social interaction (Collinson, 2006; Gronn, 2002; Smircich & Morgan, 1982), a perspective based in an ambition to articulate and challenge taken-for granted assumptions in the field. Several researcher formulate such ambition, even though from different points of view and with different approaches. Gronn (ibid) discuss this in terms of level of analysis, i.e. that the level of analysis should be the exercised leadership rather than the single individual leader. Similarly, Vanderslice (1988) explicitly challenges us to separate the concept of leadership from that of leaders. Collinson (2005) suggests that a dialectical perspective going beyond the dualistic understanding of, for example, the leader-follower couple should help to better understand the complex and shifting dynamics of leadership, by acknowledging interdependences and asymmetries between leaders and followers (cf also Küpers, 2007). Meindl (1995) and Reicher et al (2005) claim that traditional leadership models contribute to the institutionalization of a dualism of identity between leaders and followers in society – a dualism that may be challenged through studies of leadership identity construction. Fletcher (2004) takes this line of reasoning one step further in her discussion of post-heroic leadership in terms of collective, interactive learning processes. The traditional image of leadership is strongly masculinized, she says, and the femininization that is inherent in the post-heroic perspective will challenge several deeply rooted notions of leadership, such as the conflation of leadership with masculinity. Among these Fletcher finds the taken-for-granted individualization of society, to which we can add the contemporary idea that problems of gender inequality are finally being solved (implying that any basic redefinition of leadership would be unnecessary since we have already found the most suitable forms) (cf Vecchio, 2002). What becomes of interest in research is not to promote a feminine leadership as a counterpoint to conventional masculine leadership (Billing & Alvesson, 2000), but to study how practicing gender and doing leadership are intertwined (Alvesson & Billing, 1999, Gunter, 2001; Fletcher, 2004). Finally, Drath et al (2008) propose maybe the most radical shift, a new ontology based on leadership outcomes, moving the focus from individuals to how direction, alignment and commitment are produced working.

The alternative perspective that we propose is a constructionist research agenda where leadership, leader identities and masculinization/femininization are constantly constructed and re-constructed (cf Crevani et al, 2007a), which should be central to advance both leadership theory and leadership practices in the direction of non-individualized conceptions. In Table 2, we summarize our constructionist perspective in relation to the traditional assumptions on leadership outlined in section 2.1:

Basic assumption in traditional leadership research	Basic assumption in leadership as social construction	Description	Implications for research
Individualism	Collectivism	Leadership is assumed to be collective activities between people	Leadership exists outside the individual leader. Leadership must be studied through what happens in interactions
Unitary command	Responsibility assumed in social interaction	The social construction of responsibility, accountabilities and responsibilities are constructed and assumed in interaction. (är det inte lite upprepning?)	All situations of control and command should be analysed in terms of shared and dispersed forms
Hierarchisation and segregation	Co-constructorship	Everybody has potential to be part of constructions of leadership activities	Leadership is portrayed as something that people do together.
Heroism	Post heroism	Rejection of singular image of leadership as being about hard work, being tough and rational, making sacrifices and doing the right thing despite the consequences.	Focus on everyday interactions, processes of common learning and decision making etc.
Performativity	Awareness of performativity	The normative claims of leadership research, and the consequences of labelling activities as leadership, are seen as problematic as they heavily influence the views of leadership in society.	The contents and consequences of the existing dominating conceptions of leadership must be subject to exposure and analysis.
Masculinity	Problematizing gender constructions	Dominating leadership norms contribute to a re-construction of traditional masculinities in work life and society.	Problematizing taken-for-granted constructs of leadership in masculine terms, thereby challenging masculinity as the prime source of leadership performativity.
Psychologisation	Understanding social interaction and social identity	Given its interest in social interaction, leadership research is primarily about understanding the activities as processes of interaction and identity construction.	Focus on activities and how, why these are constructed as they are. Also focus on the identity construction of involved inter-actors.
Morality	Problematizing grandiose conceptualizations of leadership.	Leadership is not a higher moral function reserved to leaders and co-workers do not necessarily need a leader in order to be able to be worthy. Leadership research has a moral duty to question and pave the way for emancipation from traditional conceptions.	Researchers should be more open-minded and not take leadership for granted. Everyone in an organization deserves to be studied when leadership is studied. It can become more interesting to study "trivial" leadership interactions.

Table 2. Basic assumptions in a constructionist leadership perspective.

3. Leadership as everyday practices

We have proposed a constructionist perspective to study leadership and described on which assumptions it may be based. In this section we will discuss how leadership could be studied by taking such stance. Of course, there might be different ways of approaching the study of leadership in interactions. In recent years we have assisted to a “practice turn” in organisation theory and we choose here to take inspiration from this growing community of scholars focusing on practices (c.f. Corradi et al, forthcoming, Gherardi, 2008, Whittington, 2006), and therefore to conceptualise leadership as “done” in everyday work when people interact. The label “practice based studies” comprises different kind of studies. However, there are some common elements (Corradi et al, forthcoming) that are here interesting for the study of leadership. One element is the focus on how conduct is enacted and performed rather than on actors’ intentionality. This also means attention to the micro level and to how work is carried out in organisations (to situations and practicing), but also to how the macro is present and constructed in the micro (to socially defined practices). Not only, but the social dimension of work is at the centre, as well as the repetitiveness and continuity of interaction. Moreover, the importance of the context and of the non-rational, non-reflexive, quick “doings” in everyday life (Martin, 2003) is recognised. In the specific context of leadership research, Knights and Willmott (1992) invited researchers to focus on the practices of leadership by focusing on leadership as a practical accomplishment, but only few answered that call. Among them, Carroll et al (2008) challenge the “methodological individualism” of what they call the “competency paradigm” in leadership research by proposing a practice perspective, which focuses on situated activity rather than abstract processes. They also state that “a broadening and redefinition of who is engaged in leadership work is well overdue and promises the potential for research to be more focused and specific on the constitution of leadership in different sites” (p. 374).

In other words, we do not start with an assumption about where to find leadership, rather we regard leadership as part of potentially every interaction in an organization. This enables us to pay attention to “trivial” interactions and “unheroic” work. It also enables us to study leadership as a collective achievement, i. e. to focus on the interactions and what they do, rather than on individuals.

We will exemplify our argument by referring to the analysis of two companies in Sweden (Crevani, 2009). One of them is a large industrial company, Raw, and the other is a little engineering company, Cleantech. The study, comprising two departments at Raw and the entire organization at Cleantech, was aimed at studying leadership as a collective process. During the analysis, more refined concepts and ideas were developed, and leadership as practice became a central point. The empirical material is composed by both tape recorded observations, mostly formal and informal meetings, and interviews with both managers and co-workers. The transcribed material has been analysed in an abductive manner. Interviews are considered as accounts of how the people studied construct their reality for the researcher, but also as sites for leadership interactions. In particular, the focus has been on trying to analyse what is done in interactions, both in meetings and interviews, that may be named leadership. In this paper we will give just a few examples of what leadership interactions might look like in order to illustrate what an alternative perspective could study and how.

One possible example is the *construction of positions*, which may be seen as contributing to organizational change and development, and therefore be conceptualised as a leadership practice. "Position" is a theoretical concept, but this practice is often named in the empirical material: they speak, for example, of "finding one's role" or "constructing one's role". In fact, discussions about who is going to do what and on other people's roles are common when tasks have to be carried out or new issues arise. Not only, we also include in this construction other interactions that the people studied would probably not recognise as a practice. In particular, identity construction is a very important part of constructing positions, although not necessarily so intentional as the assignment of a task.

In the following excerpt you can see people discussing the order stock and the fact that the data in the system do not correspond to the orders received, something causing problems regarding liquidity calculations and, consequently, money loans. Alice is the sales manager at Cleantech, the other are sales people.

A. men du har lämnat till eva att lägga in xx

Ja. Nej, det har jag inte hunnit, det är på väg

A. men du lämnar det till henne så vi får in denna veckan.

Ja. Alltså jag sitter mycket fast i massa jävla skötsel anvisningar xx, och det gör att jag

PG. hur kommer det sig att du gör det?

Ja. Jag vet inte det, det ställer xx (PG projektledare xx) det är ingen annan som kan.

A. men då får du visa projektledaren så kan xx lösa det

Ja. Ja men de kan inte systemet, de kan inte trycka på de knapparna, de kan inte berätta för scania hur det ska skötas

Ja. Så tyvärr är den krassa verkligheten att mycket av säljtiden det går på sånt.

A. men det handlar om att du måste lämna ifrån dig och lära upp nån annan (Ja. Ah) att få göra det, och gör man en gång så har man det gjort till nästa gång

Ja. Jag vet inte vem man ska hitta på då

A. projektledaren

A. det är deras jobb

Ja. Uhm

The discussion goes on. Although this is just a short excerpt, we can see how different positions are being constructed while discussing the problem, both in terms of what tasks the position includes (who should do what) and in terms of the identity aspect of such position. The sales people are therefore constructed as those who should concentrate strictly on sales activities, but in reality are taking responsibility for a broader range of tasks; they are also constructed as committed, in a almost heroic way, and as privileging customers' satisfaction over administrative routines. Project managers are, on the contrary, constructed in negative terms, they lack interest and competence. These constructions have nothing to do with heroic achievements usually described in the literature, and might be quite trivial, but they are important for what they "do". They develop the organizing process in a certain direction, enabling certain actions/talks, for example. Certain positions may also become institutionalized, one may

become an “expert” if one is regularly involved in interactions on a subject. And institutions as gender and seniority (or age) may play a role, if the practicing of leadership and of gender, for example, are intertwined. Constructing sales people as heroic also re-constructs a certain kind of heroic masculinity. Constructing administrative issues as less important than technical and/or practical issues – as happens in both companies – intersects with the construction of femininities and masculinities.

Another example is the *construction of boundaries*, and of how to cross them. This is an aspect that we can also see in the previous extract, i. e. boundaries defining positions, departments, tasks, etc., are constructed and re-constructed by people in interaction. Again, this is a way of developing and change the organization and it is something done in day to day work. The following quotes are from an interview with a co-worker at Raw and exemplify the accounts people give of how they do their jobs and develop their way of working in interaction with other people.

R. [...] eh, igår hade jag och Andersson och annika och fredrik ett möte om, fortfarande om senaste omorganisationen, vem som ska göra vad, var går gränsdragningen, vad ska du göra, vad ska vi göra, hur ska vi göra. T ex när vi öppnade ett nytt lager, vi är inte ens klara med det än, bara för att vi organisatoriskt, är som det är, att vi, eller, ja, vi tillhör transport och distributionslösningar, och fredrik, han tillhör en annan avdelning och Andersson tillhör Produktionen nu för tiden.

L. kom ni överens?

R. ja, vi kom överens, eh, vi ska låtsas som inte den här nya omorganisationen (skratt), utan vi ska jobba över gränssnitten och, ah, jag tror att vi är ganska överens, för att jag menar, vi vill ju att resultatet ska bli bra, och det blir inte bra om vi ska jobba så som vi har gjort. Utan vi, vi, vi är så beroende av varandra, för att jag gör lite och nån annan gör, och Andersson gör lite så här, vi måste göra det här tillsammans. Så är..

4. Conclusion

In this article, we set out to argue the following:

1. Alternative sets of basic assumptions are needed in order to further the theoretical and practical perspective that leadership activities are constructed in social interaction rather than emanating from single leaders.
2. Such a perspective will lead to new descriptions of leadership activities and opens up for theoretical developments on issues of gender, power, identity construction and the performativity of leadership ideals.

The first argument was developed in section 2 of this paper. The second argument was exemplified in section 3. In this final section, we will develop the second argument further and point at possible conceptual and methodological consequences of empirical inquiry as based on the alternative assumptions.

As observed at the beginning of this paper, leadership has been studied for years, but there is no consensus on either what leadership is or how it should be studied. What has

happened is that leadership has assumed a grandiose meaning and those labelled as leaders are expected to behave in a special and different manner (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a). In leadership research, this dichotomization has implied an ongoing institutionalization, where individual leaders become the operationalization of 'leadership' and thus also subject to performative expectations on behaving as individual leaders. In this article, we have pointed at possible alternative conceptualizations that enable us to take leadership studies beyond this institutionalization.

What we want is not to propose a new model of how to do leadership, but mainly a new perspective on the identification and inquiry into existing leadership practices. When putting the alternative assumptions outlined in Table 2 into empirical work, we were thus able to analyze the leadership activities in Raw and Cleantech in terms of ambiguous construction processes where the contents and boundaries of organization, responsibilities, issues, identities - and leadership as (performative) concept - were constantly articulated, discussed and changed. This indicates possibilities for new theoretical developments within leadership studies.

One such development could be a more detailed understanding of the practices by which masculinities and femininities are constructed and re-constructed. Not only leadership norms are conflated with masculinity, as feminist literature shows (cf. Collinson & Hearn, 1996, Martin, 2003), but leadership interactions are not taking place in a vacuum. Gender (and practicing seniority) can be considered as two institutions and the practicing of gender and seniority going on in the workplace intersects with the practicing of leadership. When studying how leadership is done in interactions it is therefore important to pay attention to what other ordering practices are done in the same interactions.

Another related development is the notion of the complex processes of power in organizations. If focus is only on the formal single leader, it usually implies simplified notions of power relations, either overstating or understating the importance of the leader, either dichotomizing leaders from followers or treating them as a harmonic collective. Instead, we need to take perspective that leadership – and thus also power relations – are constructed in social interaction, and embedded in enduring institutionalized norm systems conveying taken-for-granted views of what is effective and legitimate and what is not. The Foucauldian notion of power also describe this as something always present in relations, as incessantly reconstructed in interactions, and as situated in socio-ideological contexts.

To study leadership as a non-individual phenomenon does not necessarily mean to study a more democratic form of leadership - as might be the case in some studies of shared or distributed leadership. What is important is to study what is going on 'in between' people and to de-grandiosize leadership by describing how it is done in everyday interactions at work including more people than a single formal or informal leader. To study interactions rather than individual leaders also means to take seriously the complexity of what is going on in organizations. Rather than reducing leadership to leaders influencing others, to a quite uni-dimensional phenomenon, we want to study multidimensional interactions where boundary-, responsibility- and identity-work are

central element to be critically analysed. As put by Gunter (2001), dichotomies and binaries tend to separate what should be integrated, to marginalise what should be recognised. De-individualizing leadership studies thus imply the integration of “leaders” and “followers” into a social web of co-constructors, and recognising the tensions between collective practices and individualist ideals.

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