Research on collective leadership increasingly attracts interest and a number of approaches have been proposed; some entitative in character, some relational. Relational and distributed approaches to leadership are not new (Hosking, 1988) – they originated already in the mid 20th century (Carson et al., 2007; Fitzsimons et al., 2011). Recently, however, they have expanded by incorporating posthuman positions and shifting interest from mainly concerning human interaction to including non-human actors (Carroll, 2016; Sergi, 2016; Simpson, 2016). Such multimodal approaches1 (Fairhurst and Grant, 2010) implies both an ontological and epistemological shift – what we focus on is processes and relations in which humans and non-humans become. This also entails methodological challenges as it means that phenomena such as leadership must be understood as practices involving human and non-human actors (Latour, 2005). Whereas we argue that such ontological and epistemological shifts are theoretically motivated, it should also be noticed that current technological and organizational developments leading to the introduction of, among others, digital managers and digital coworkers also empirically actualize these issues.

Whereas the epistemological and ontological discussions on relational, process, and distributed approaches to leadership have flourished, empirical studies are still scarce. There may be numerous reasons to this, but we would wager that two such reasons are particularly significant (cf. Sutherland, 2016): (1) a lack of clear conceptualizations of what to ‘look for’ when approaching leadership from a multimodal approach, and (2) a

---

1 The adjective multimodal is used by Fairhurst and Grant (2010) to indicate that leadership is produced not only through language by human actors, but also by and through space, the body, artefacts, technology, and so on. We adopt their terminology but want to acknowledge that similar approaches have mobilized terms such as hybridity, in particular the hybrid production of presence (cf. Hawkins, 2015; Fairhurst Cooren, 2009), embodied experience (Ropo et al., 2013), sociomateriality (Oborn et al., 2013) or heterogeneous agencies and contexts (Vasquez and Cooren, 2013; Bruni, 2005).
perceived need for vast amounts of empirical data, which can be difficult to obtain for a researcher past PhD studies, where everyday academic life takes its toll. In this paper, drawing on recent developments in theories on collective leadership, we introduce the notion of ‘micro-ethnography,’ a method encouraging short-term engagements in empirical work (Knoblauch, 2005; Pink & Morgan, 2013) focusing on the ‘front stage’ of interaction (Goffman, 1959). Our approach also encourages different ways of writing up research and presenting empirical findings. It should be noted that the very idea of this is in no way new; rather it has a long history in for example social psychology, manifest as an interest in the everyday life of small groups (Knoblauch, 2005). Our ambition in this paper, however, is to draw a line from theoretically grounded assumptions in current strands of leadership research and connecting them to fieldwork and writing practices. Such a step is motivated by our own empirical studies combined with analytical efforts of producing knowledge on leadership as a phenomenon – we need to draw such a line in order to have a method to work with – and by a broader aim of encouraging more fieldwork and more engaged empirical studies within leadership research.

In the following, we will review and problematize current approaches to collective leadership, and from this we will formulate eight propositions for multimodal leadership studies: four theoretical and four methodological. (See Table 1.) The paper takes the form of a friendly provocation, made in the spirit of opening up for new ways of discussing and studying leadership, this elusive phenomenon; for, as argued by (Meindl, 1990, p. 161): ‘It is easier to believe in leadership than to prove it.’

Table 1: Eight propositions for multimodal leadership studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical propositions</th>
<th>Methodological propositions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Leadership is defined as a socio-spatial process of accomplishing direction.</td>
<td>5 Leadership studies may take the form of shorter engagements in fieldwork, following processes of staged action and staging, combined with tight dialogue with theory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Leadership studies must pay attention to staged performances and to the staging of such performances.</td>
<td>6 Leadership studies should aim to describe focal situations in empirical detail, with attention to context and non-human actors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Leadership is accomplished in many modalities, by human and non-human actors.</td>
<td>7 Closed vignettes provide detailed and theoretically informed accounts of leadership processes and serve as a basis for creating representations of situations that can be subjected to interpretation and analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Leadership is accomplished in processes of interaction and by relationships stabilized by, for example, spatial arrangements and technologies such as bureaucracy.</td>
<td>8 Closed vignettes serve as representative anecdotes, and provide basis for theoretical generalizations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Background: Leadership studies

Traditionally, leadership studies have been leader-centric, paying more attention to individuals, their traits and their behavior than to the social processes embedding
leadership. This understanding, still significant in ‘folk theories’ of leadership, in media portrayals, and in pop management literature, clings on to a ‘great men’ approach to leadership. This despite a long tradition, even in management studies, of more dynamic approaches to understanding leadership (Follett, 2013).

Recent developments in leadership research have challenged the leader-centric view and moved towards a more ‘decentered’ understanding of leadership (Ospina and Foldy, 2010; Denis et al., 2012; Simpson et al., 2017). Within research on plural leadership, attention shifted from individual leaders towards leadership as a team accomplishment or as a process of relaying power between individuals over time (Denis et al., 2012), thus blurring the leader-centricity. Followership research, in turn, shifted attention from the leader(s) to the followers, thus, if not decentering so at least re-centering leadership to another participant of the interaction (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Thus, leadership here becomes viewed as co-constructed and negotiated in interaction, and as a process relying on mutual recognition of relations of authority (DeRue and Ashford, 2010).

Recently, research on leadership-as-practice (Carroll et al., 2008; Crevani et al., 2010) have pushed this theoretical agenda of decentering further. It attends to ‘how leadership emerges and unfolds through day-to-day experience’ (Raelin, 2016, p. 3) and understands leadership as ‘continuously constituted in the ongoing creative and improvisational movements that bring about change in the trajectories of social action’ (Simpson et al., 2017, p. 2). Contributions such as Crevani (2018), Larsson and Lundholm (2013), and Simpson et al. (2017) have illustrated how talk is key to shaping direction through collective action. Here, leadership is centered neither on the individuals participating in the process, nor on the relation of influence, but on the collective accomplishment of direction (Crevani, 2018). The emergent and unfolding process of interaction is where leadership is located and thus, understanding talk and conversations become key for understanding leadership. This article contributes to the streams of collective leadership studies where collective means that leadership is always a joint interactional achievement, including human and non-human actors (Sergi, 2016).

These developments have, however, led to a multitude of terms and to extensive conceptual confusion. For example, Denis et al. (2012) extensive overview of ‘plural leadership’ encompasses leadership configurations, such as pooled or relayed leadership, as well as positions that emphasize that ‘plurality’ has nothing to do with specific structural arrangements, but is an inherent part of social interaction, and therefore leadership. Moreover, ‘relational’ in relational leadership and ‘practice’ in leadership as practice can be mobilized in more or less processual terms – there is for instance a difference between practice understood as emergent action and practices conceptualized as recurrent patterns of action (Crevani and Endrissat, 2016). This exposes a difference between entitative and relational approaches to leadership, complicated by the fact that in approaches different ideological foundations co-exist – moving beyond a leader-centric approach may in fact be motivated either by instrumental arguments or by arguments based on taking relational responsibility for the other (Crevani, 2015). While plurality of views is a strength, there is a need for development concerning the relation between conceptualization and the practice of doing empirical fieldwork. In the following, we therefore propose our approach to multimodal leadership studies by delineating eight propositions that align a multimodal
conceptualization of leadership with a micro-ethnography as an appropriate method for studying it and closed vignettes as a fruitful way of writing about it.

**Conceptualizing leadership**

Constructivist leadership studies often characterize leadership as a phenomenon deeply embedded in systems of meaning. Following prominent contributions such as Smircich and Morgan (1982, p. 258), leadership has been defined as a ‘process of negotiation through which certain individuals, implicitly or explicitly, surrender their power to define the nature of their experience to others.’ Terms such as ‘management of meaning’ (Smircich & Morgan, 1982) or ‘sensegiving’ (Foldy et al., 2008) have been employed to characterize leadership, then by definition a cognitive and/or cultural process of influence. Moreover, this has opened up for various forms of research on followership, where followers are assumed to actively participate in the leadership process (Collinson, 2006; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014), ‘surrendering their power,’ as in the aforementioned definition. Thus, leadership is a phenomenon largely understood in discursive or phenomenological terms (Ladkin, 2010; Sutherland, 2016).

The multimodal approach suggested here radically departs from this view. Instead we propose that:

**Proposition 1:**
Leadership is defined as a socio-spatial process of accomplishing direction.

Crevani (2018) argues that group members produce direction in interaction, an open ended process which proceeds without necessarily being decisively influenced by a single actor. Such interaction clears the way for future action, and is in itself a continuation of interactions in the past. With this definition, the power to define the situation is not necessarily surrendered – rather, the focus is on how different trajectories (of human and non-human actors) co-evolve in relation to each other (Massey, 2005) and leadership is one process that spaces such trajectories (Vasquez and Cooren, 2013), that is the process in which their configuration is re-produced, thus moving organizing forward.

Following this, leadership can be characterized as a staged activity (Goffman, 1959). By this, we mean that researchers must pay attention to situations where leadership potentially becomes manifest, in concrete interaction. Leadership has often been studied in situations such as meetings and other formal gatherings, and whereas this is certainly not the only stage in which leadership happens, the approach proposed here suggests that actual interaction – rather than possible underlying intentions – should be the empirical focus of leadership studies (Ashcraft et al., 2009). This is not, on the other hand, intended to underplay the significance of backstage activities, such as political maneuvering (Ammeter et al., 2002) or stage setting (Alvehus, forthcoming). Quite on the contrary; as argued by Goffman (1974), staging situations and framing how they are experienced is a complex and multi-layered process, and it needs to be appreciated as such. A focus on staging does not mean ignoring the back stage – rather, it implies that the researcher needs to be sensitive to the process of staging. As argued by Alvehus (forthcoming), ‘we can never be sure that the leadership we experience—as managers,
workshop participants, or even researchers—is the definite answer to what it is that is going on'. What we can do is try to understand any framing from a particular point of view, acknowledging the plenum of agencies in action (Cooren, 2006). Thus, we propose:

**Proposition 2:**
Leadership studies must pay attention to staged performances and to the staging of such performances.

If we keep the dramaturgical metaphor for a moment, we can also draw attention to not only the performance on the stage, but the stage itself. Organizational life consists of many different stages, and expectations of appropriate actions will vary between them (Schultz, 1991). Meetings and other formal gatherings are often framed in space by material objects, such as the walls and doors of meeting rooms, or more flexible arrangements such as the positioning of chairs (Schwartzman, 1989; Simpson, 2016).

Body positioning plays a key role in social interaction (Goffman, 1963), as do things such as clothing and the hue of one’s complexion. In short, social processes are embedded in a material reality. Moreover, drawing on a processual understanding of space, such spaces and places are not containers of action, but rather re-produced as interactions unfold (Massey, 2005).

Multimodal approaches to leadership (Fairhurst and Grant, 2010) have begun to recognize not only the importance of materiality (which is an aspect of both humans and non-humans), but, maybe more radically, the agency of non-humans (characterized as both social and material) in the leadership process. Multimodal approaches take aspects such as time, space, text, and tools into consideration (Alvehus, forthcoming). Fairhurst and Cooren (2009) emphasize the role of objects in shaping leader image, from New York’s Twin Towers to clothing. Other objects such as documents (Sergi, 2016), portraits (Griffey and Jackson, 2010) and furniture (Carroll, 2016) shape the physical context and co-accomplish leadership (Ropo et al., 2013). Also, movements in time and space are key for shaping interaction and the experience of leadership (Alvehus, forthcoming).

Thus, the stage and the props play a key part not only as a backdrop to leadership, but actively co-constitute leadership, while at the same time being re-produced. Therefore, we propose:

**Proposition 3:**
Leadership is accomplished in many modalities, by human and non-human actors.

As an illustration, take Latour’s (1991) famous example of a hotel manager and the hotel room keys. (Please remember that this was written at an age before plastic key cards!) The manager wants the guests to leave their keys at the reception desk, as a lost key is costly for the hotel. At check-in, guests are asked to do this. Likely some but not all will follow. Putting up a sign at the exit, reminding their guests to leave the keys, may recruit a few more; having a concierge verbally reminding them will perhaps lead to some more guests submitting. Finally, the hotel manager comes up with the idea of attaching a heavy metal weight to the keys; and suddenly the guests are more than happy not having to carry it around and gladly leave it at the reception.
This may not be a clear-cut classic case of leadership (although we would argue it could be). But, if leadership is about accomplishing direction, we would likely interpret the reminders from the check-in receptionist and the concierge as a way of leading the guests in the right direction (towards the reception, key in hand). But why would we understand only the interpersonal interaction to be about leadership? The weight attached to the key accomplishes the same direction as the vocal reminders, and more efficiently. The weight itself directs the guests towards the reception desk and ensures it is handed in. Thus, in accomplishing direction and in stabilizing such direction, human and non-human actors alike play an active part:

... how does an actor make the social link hold? Some associations are weaker while some are stronger and longer lasting. Our comparison of complexity and complication, from baboons to humans, suggests that resources play a role in the construction of society and in social stability. (Strum and Latour, 1987, p. 793)

As suggested by Strum and Latour (1987) above, ‘resources’ play a key role in creating and maintaining stability in social relationships – and, we propose, in accomplishing and maintaining direction. In fact, involving non-human actors in patterns of interaction is what humans, more than any other species, do. For example, other primates continuously reproduce their social relationships by grooming, fighting and having intercourse (Stanford, 1998; Strum and Latour, 1987). Humans employ resources – tools and technologies such as bureaucratic arrangements – in order to stabilize relationships. (We do not need to groom the hair of the leader each time we meet her in order to re-establish authority, whereas recurring grooming is key to re-establishing authority relations among baboons.) Following this, we also view leadership as involving the active role of non-human actors in accomplishing direction.

This leads us to our final theoretical proposition. As leadership is about accomplishing direction, and as such direction is shaped by human and non-human actors, and as the latter tend to stabilize social relations, we propose:

**Proposition 4:**
Leadership is accomplished in processes of interaction and by relationships stabilized by, for example, spatial arrangements and technologies such as bureaucracy.

Our approach therefore rejects the problematic leadership/management distinction. The debate regarding this is long established and we will not account for it here. As noted by Sveningsson et al. (2012) most leadership studies tend to take place in formal organizations – they are studies of managerial leadership – and imagining leadership taking place there without any relation to formal authority whatsoever seems odd. Even if a view such as ‘transformational leadership’ characterizes leadership as explicitly that which is not management (Bass, 1990), it is difficult to imagine that the ‘voluntary’ followership accomplished is totally unrelated to for example the threat of unemployment or career concerns in a working life setting. From the perspective advocated here, the leadership/management distinction is but part of the romance of leadership (Meindl et al., 1985; Jackson, 2005), reproducing a mythology of heroism
(Collinson et al., 2017) in separating ‘true leaders’ from ‘mediocre managers.’ But, using the line of reasoning of Weber (1968), social organization is a question of authority.\(^2\) According to Weber, authority comes in traditional, charismatic, and legal form. In a bureaucracy, legal authority replaces charisma and tradition as the basis on which authority is enacted; this is the very point of the bureaucratic Zweckrationalität. Thus charismatic authority, which is the essence of transformational leadership, and legal authority are but two different ways of accomplishing direction, and thus leadership. Instead of viewing leadership as a subset of managerial activity, or leadership and management as mutually exclusive phenomena, we argue that bureaucracy (management) is modernity’s solution to the problem of leadership or, paraphrasing von Clausewitz: management is leadership pursued by legal means.

By this we do not want to undermine other conceptualizations of power. We do not argue against the importance of recognizing and scrutinizing emerging and persisting power relations – something that may be challenging, but not impossible, to address in leadership research (Tourish, 2014). On the contrary we understand power as an ever-present dimension when conceptualizing leadership as a socio-spatial process of accomplishing direction. However, power must be problematized and understood as enacted in social relations and is conceptualized as an outcome of social processes, encompassing relationships between human and non-human actors alike; materiality, spatiality and technologies will all play a part in this regard: ‘power ... is the final result of a process and not a reservoir, a stock, or capital that will automatically provide an explanation’ (Latour, 2005, p. 64).

This conceptualization, manifest in our propositions 1–4, raises new questions regarding the way we approach leadership in actual, in situ studies. Whereas approaches to collective leadership and multimodal leadership have been suggested and discussed in ontological and epistemological terms, empirical contributions in this area are more rare. Often, they merely serve as illustrations to overarching principles. The next set of propositions in this paper will address the practicalities of undertaking empirical studies of leadership understood as multimodal accomplishments of direction.

**Studying multimodal leadership**

Leadership studies have a complicated relationship to their empirical foundations. Whereas most leadership definitions seem to include the notion of exercising influence (Antonakis et al., 2004), most empirical studies are based on either questionnaires or interviews, where the former vastly dominates (Bryman, 2004) – methods that can only obtain second hand data on processes of influence. This is further complicated by the persistent romance we seem to have with the notion of leadership, and its heroic connotations (Meindl et al., 1985; Collinson et al., 2017). The approach suggested here means that such indirect methods of obtaining data become less relevant; instead, the researcher needs to move towards ‘raw’ data in terms of interactions and processes,

---

\(^2\) We would just as well use the term ‘power’, but Weber mainly discusses authority, as he defines power as the use of physical violence. This definition is seldom noted and not overly relevant for our purposes here, but in the parts where we discuss Weber we follow his terminology.
that is, moving closer to the *terra firma* of interaction (Ashcraft et al., 2009), and many have suggested ethnography as a means to this end (Sutherland, 2016; Watson, 2011).

We here introduce the term ‘micro-ethnography’ to characterize a special kind of such empirical endeavors. Whereas ethnographic methods have a long history in organization studies the approach advocated here suggests that ‘all in’ ethnographic methods, involving long periods of fieldwork, may be overdoing things a bit. ‘Micro’ can be understood as referring to both time and space: it signals that we propose a short-term ethnography (time) which focuses on the ‘micro’ and its details, the *terra firma* of interaction (space). We see two problems with the traditional ethnography.

One, the method itself is very demanding in terms of time and resources. Few senior researchers will have the time available for a 6- or 12-month five-days-a-week engagement in fieldwork. Thus, this very demand in itself discourages empirical efforts, for senior researchers in particular, and rather encourages indirect methods (which are unsuitable for the approach here) or theoretical musings (such as, admittedly, this paper). This is detrimental to the further development of relevant theories of leadership. By advocating this approach and showing its relevance for leadership studies, we hope to encourage more direct engagements in fieldwork. While similar approaches have been used to address the practical difficulty of organizing a long-term ethnography and to re-set the ambition level to gathering as much context as reasonable, this seems to us a bit too defensive (Pink & Morgan, 2013). As we explain below, there are analytical reasons that can be mobilized too.

Second, the approach advocated here does not rely, as traditional ethnographies do, on notions of meaning. Ethnographies have their roots in anthropology and are a way of dealing with the difficulties of understanding the meaning system of the Other (Geertz, 1973). Leadership, defined as above, does not rely on such deep engagements with the meaning-making of the Other. Rather, as propositions 2 and 3 emphasize, the approach suggest that leadership has a rather tangible ordering character, and therefore that the deeper meanings attributed to events by actors are less significant in understanding the accomplishment of direction. We are, in other words, less interested in what actors do and why they do it, and more interested in what the process achieves in terms of accomplishing direction. As our proposition 3 also affirms, non-human actors are part of such a process – what is to be explored is thus not how non-human actors are made sense of by human actors (which would mean privileging human agency), but rather what human actors and non-human actors in interaction accomplish – in line with the ethnomethodologically informed perspective in ethnography (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994).

Moreover, whereas a traditional ethnography would enable us to understand how the studied group constructs leadership (the ‘construction of social reality’ approach in Fairhurst and Grant 2010), given the performativity of such a strong concept, we would probably end up with accounts of what leadership ought to be (Meindl et al., 1985). This may be interesting in itself, but it is not the same as how leadership as socio-spatial process is accomplished (the ‘social construction of reality’ approach in Fairhurst and Grant 2010). Knowledge on both aspects is needed, we argue, as social constructions of
leadership inform socio-spatial processes of leadership and socio-spatial processes of leadership gradually change social construction of leadership (Crevani et al., 2010).

To be noticed is also that the quality of fieldwork in relation to ethnographic work has been discussed across disciplines, and voices have raised concerns about the common equation of long-term presence in the field and high quality (e.g. Knoblauch, 2005). Arguing against that, Pink and Morgan (2013) talk of ‘ethnographic place’ as extending beyond the place where the ethnography is performed and including all the entanglements in which ethnographic knowledge is produced: research questions are framed as access is negotiated, fieldnotes are discussed among researchers, results are presented and discussed in parallel with fieldwork, etc. The lone ethnographer of long-term ethnography is thus replaced by field-materials that ‘flow between different people at different times’ (Pink and Morgan, 2013, p. 354). This process may be rather intense, quickly affect the direction of the ongoing fieldwork and heavily influenced by theoretical angles from the start. A theoretical sensitivity directs fieldwork in order to focus on ‘where the action is’ – this does however not mean that research becomes deductive, rather, it is the intense dialogue between theory and emerging fieldwork that characterizes short-ethnographies.

We therefore suggest that:

**Proposition 5**

Leadership studies may take the form of shorter engagements in fieldwork, following processes of staged action and staging, combined with tight dialogue with theory.

This kind of leadership study focuses on interactions between human and non-human actors in everyday life. However, as systems of meaning or culture have less significance for understanding leadership as the accomplishment of direction, the prolonged exposure to strange cultural milieu is not necessary. In fact, our own experiences suggest that a few days of shadowing and observations in combination with a few interviews are sufficient for constructing viable empirical accounts.

Shadowing enables the researcher to follow a subject or an object in time and space and observing everyday activities (Czarniawska, 2007; Bruni, 2005). This method specifically allows for mobility, and as argued above time–space is a key aspect of leadership, as understood here. In studies of managerial work – strangely absent in the leadership literature! – we find this concern with everyday work and processes to a larger extent (cf. Tengblad, 2012).

Observations of interaction sequences provide understandings of the minutiae of interaction. Studies drawing on conversation analysis and more broadly organizational discourse analysis (Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012), have highlighted how language use plays a key role in accomplishing leadership (e.g. Larsson & Lundholm, 2013; Simpson et al, 2017), but as recent contributions have shown, such observations can, and in our view should, include also non-human, sometimes, silent, actors (Alvehus, forthcoming; Carroll, 2016; Sergi, 2016) and thus also move the focus from conversations to communicational events that involve more than spoken interaction (Ashford et al., 2009).
Thus, shadowing helps us follow movements in time–space and how processes develop. Observations of discrete situations help us to zoom in on the minutiae of everyday life. Combining these help us shape an understanding of the local structuring of events, as well as of how these are embedded in a longer process. How long, in terms of time, such a process is, is mainly an empirical question and has to be determined by the purpose at hand. Thus, our suggestion is not that longer ethnographies are inherently wrong; rather, that they are not inherently necessary. Instead we suggest that the time frame of a study should ideally be determined by empirical concerns; a question or problem that ‘travels’ in an organization could be followed until it gets an answer or solution or it dissolves. On the other hand, bracketing the flow of everyday life – identifying where it begins and ends – is always a matter of judgment. While we do have social practices helping us in identifying beginnings and ends, these are always arbitrary and should be used as guidelines rather than absolutes. This means that any bracketing will be subject to analytical considerations, and to practical concerns such as access and the duration of fieldwork. But, it is better to get out in the field and lose some, than not getting out in the field at all.

In ‘traditional’ long term ethnographies, getting to know a new culture or set of meanings is a key concern. As we have emphasized here, it is less so in micro-ethnography. On the other hand, activities in interactions are always embedded in a context of meaning and significance. That is why we keep the concept of ‘ethnography’, as we argue for the need of approaching the phenomenon with an ethnographic sensibility, tuned to understanding with others rather than about others (Pink and Morgan, 2013). In a micro-ethnography, the researcher will use her understanding of the cultural context and the embodied knowledge coming from having enacted different kinds of practices, as well as the understanding of the participants, actively in making sense of what is going on.

Members know, require, count on, and make use of ... reflexivity to produce, accomplish, recognize, or demonstrate rational-adequacy-for-all-practical-purposes of their procedures and findings. (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 8)

Just as members are able to account for their activities, researchers familiar with a context will be able to. But not all activities are of course intentional or overt. Instead, any account of a situation must take into consideration the role it plays in the larger flow of activities in an organization. On the other hand, as noted by Czarniawska (2007), the researcher will always occupy a certain place in time and space and therefore, any account will always and by definition be limited and circumscribed by the practicalities of the laws of physics.

However, the approach proposed here emphasizes that such inevitable constraints should not discourage, but rather encourage, empirical efforts. The trajectories, humans and non-humans, gathering in the place in which the researcher is present can be understood as stories-so-far (Massey, 2005): they are not entities, they are processes, and they thus bring the past and the distant into the here and now of the interaction (Vasquez and Cooren, 2013). By producing knowledge starting in the terra firma of interaction we can see how ordering and organizing are constituted (Ashcraft et al., 2009) – understanding the ‘micro’ allows us to move between emergent local practices...
(for instance producing a professional judgement) and those that analytically can be characterized as having broader implications for the reproduction of society (for instance producing reassurance; see Gherardi, 2010). Also, the increasing use of visual methods (Pink and Morgan, 2013) may help in coping with the level of detail and in developing the way we account for materiality. We propose:

**Proposition 6**
Leadership studies should aim to describe focal situations in empirical detail, with attention to context and non-human actors.

This means that leadership studies are situational in character (Goffman, 1964): they focus on particular situations or interaction sequences and aim to describe the interaction and its context in detail (keeping in mind that interaction and context co-constitute each other). Utilizing technologies other than a notebook and audio recorders, such as video, to a larger extent can assist in this endeavor. Whereas each such empirical instance will have its own idiosyncrasies and contextual circumstances, to the extent that they appear familiar to the reader they provide a fundament for understanding similar situations (Flyvbjerg, 2006); the particular instance illustrates the general pattern (Van Maanen, 2011). This epistemological stance – generalization by theoretical implication of empirical similarity – however requires considering how we construct and relate to the empirical stories we start from.

**Writing leadership**

Any account of an event will inevitably be a montage (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). First, and trivially, textual representation only accounts for a very small amount of what it is that is going on in a situation. Even when using photos or video, we should not fall into the trap of naively thinking that we are reproducing reality more accurately (Bell and Davison, 2013). Moreover, narrative forms and tropes will shape accounts, and the way an account is framed (Goffman, 1974) will furthermore affect its representation. There are several genres of accounting for what happened in the field, each will have impact on the way a reader appreciates events (Van Maanen, 1988). We will here not develop more on this point as it is well established in qualitative research; instead we will develop on how to manage such issues of representation. The ‘micro’ in micro-ethnography also means ‘short representations’, and we propose:

**Proposition 7**
Closed vignettes provide detailed and theoretically informed accounts of leadership processes and serve as a basis for creating representations of situations that can be subjected to interpretation and analysis.

By ‘closed vignette’ we mean that the empirical story is presented to the reader, and more importantly, interpreted for the reader as is: The empirical montage is taken at face value. This can at first seem confusing. Will there not be underlying motifs and tactics of influence by the actors? Will there not be events proceeding and following the situation presented? Will there not be other things of importance going on in parallel?
The answer is, of course: Yes, there will always be. And that is exactly why we as researchers should not rely on them to interpret a situation – there will always be another context. Paraphrasing an informant in Geertz (1973), there are turtles all the way down. Drawing on context to legitimate interpretation is a fall back position in the sense that the reader is presented with an explanation she cannot relate to, she will be in the hands of the researcher. Instead, we suggest that the interpretive work takes the vignette presented as the entire dataset – a vignette does thus not represent something else that we want to interpret. It refers only to itself (it is ‘closed’), and the point of the interpretive endeavor is to provide interesting and thought-provoking interpretations, that can for example serve to sensitize the reader to particular situations, and to encourage theoretical insight ( Alvesson, 1996). Closed vignettes are created and selected in the aforementioned dialogue between fieldwork and theory development – they are theoretically useful – and being stories they enable accounts for processes.

However, we must also ask, how can we assess the scientific value of such vignettes? Of course, subjecting them to positivist notions of validity and reliability will effectively lead to rejecting their value altogether. We propose, however:

**Proposition 8**
Closed vignettes serve as representative anecdotes, and provide basis for theoretical generalizations.

Kreiner (2012, p. 402) has argued that the validity of case studies are based on them representing ‘a localized and time-specific practice and aspire to see it as part of – and as an illustration of – a more general pattern of practice.’ Most events in organizations are not idiosyncratic, and even extreme or rare events will potentially help illustrating more general patterns to be found in other places and times as well. Rosen’s (1985) study of an annual company breakfast can serve as an illustration. The rarity of the situation is per se something of significance for its interpretation, and the breakfast itself becomes a space for the manifestation and reproduction of power relationships.

Burke (1969) writes about representative anecdotes – prototypical accounts that help us get by in everyday life. These can be found in literature just as in everyday talk and folk tales. They are also key, for example, in designing scientific experiments: the relevance of experiments such as Milgram’s or Zimbardo’s directly rely on an implied representation of authority relations in general. Closed vignettes are exactly such representative anecdotes, and by subjecting them to theoretical interpretation and elaboration, we can extend and nuance our vocabulary and or ways of understanding how direction is accomplished, and thus sensitize us to how such accomplishments are enacted in our own everyday lives.

One issue to be dealt with when writing representative anecdotes worth mentioning here is how to reproduce movement, space and process in a way that resonates with the reader. As with ethnography, the researcher needs to carefully organize the text in order to not only report utterances and actions, but also convey the sense of emergence, movement, rhythm (Hallin, 2018). While most often we do organize the presentation of the empirical material as an ordered sequence of actions and interactions, this entails the risk of producing the impression of a linear causal chain of events. Researches may look for inspiration in fiction and how authors work with these issues – drama, thriller,
comics are genre that could be explored with advantage, for instance (Hallin, 2018). Researchers could work with both which situations are presented and how this is rhetorically done in order to create rhythm, for instance by working with the length of sentences (Hallin, 2018), or to present rhythm, for instance with diagrams (Simpson et al., 2017). Finally, the representation of materiality and the spatial may be advanced by recurring to more visual representations than we are used to: photos, illustrations, visualizations could be more present in our texts (Bell and Davison, 2013; Crevani, 2018).

Concluding remarks

We have here attempted to formulate a coherent approach to multimodal leadership studies, from conceptualization, through empirical work, to the writing up of research. We would like to end by pointing to two caveats with this approach.

First, does everything become leadership? We would argue, no. A common approach in studies interested in interaction is to study ‘prototypical leadership situations,’ that is, situations where researchers and research subjects alike expect something ‘leadery’ to happen – for example meetings. Expectations of direction may become manifest in decisions made and documentation provided to stabilize the decisions. Focusing only on the meeting will give the impression of direction accomplished. But potentially, subsequent events may subvert decisions made, or new trajectories are created when the abstract decision is put into practice in everyday work. Thus, the emphasis put on processes and the method of shadowing potentially opens up for understanding both the creation and destruction or dissolution of direction, and therefore for the accomplishment of leadership as well as the accomplishment of non-leadership (where the configuration of trajectories produced does not enable further action in a shared direction), or fragmented leadership (where several, potentially conflicting, trajectories are produced). By the focus on process and emergence, enabled by micro-ethnographic methods, we want to enable empirical challenges to the romantic and heroic understanding of leadership prevalent in management studies. Thus, whereas we identify leadership as an outcome of a process (direction), this will always be temporary and potentially fluctuating – and more importantly, it may not be the direction desired by specific organizational actors.

Second, is leadership and organizing the same? Or, put differently, can we imagine an organizing process without direction? And can we imagine accomplishment of direction without organizing? As shown by Weick (1979), organizing can appear without coordination or the intentionality of actors. Partly the answer to this question is provided above: Activities may very well be organized, but subject to diverging directions. Thus, whether we ‘see’ leadership emerge will depend on the level of analysis; talking about an ‘organization’ as a coherent entity encompasses a different understanding of direction than the one suggested by micro-ethnography, which is explicitly concerned with everyday life work practices. At this level, leadership could be treated as a dimension of organizing (other dimensions being legitimizing or creating resources, for instance), something needed in order to move organizing on. Sometimes it is a dramatic enactment, sometimes it happens almost unnoticed. At the level of the organization, it is on the other hand unlikely that a clearly defined direction emerges.
This is of course not a new observation. Most organizations suffer conflicting goals both on collective level and by individuals’ desires, and as direction is continuously produced in many arenas alignment and co-orientation across time and space are sought for but difficult to achieve. Moreover, as shown by Weick (1979), direction may emerge without intention. Whether this would ‘count’ as leadership in an everyday sense is sometimes questionable, in particular when non-human actors are involved. However, we maintain that the advantage of conceptualizing leadership as a socio-spatial process of accomplishing direction is exactly this: It enables us to see how direction emerges without being dependent of the (romanticized and heroic) meanings ascribed to events by individuals. It also opens up for an understanding of leadership that will likely become more critical with new emerging technologies such as robots and machine learning.

With the risk of repeating ourselves, this is not an attempt at providing the approach to studying leadership – it is about providing an approach. We have presented this as a series of propositions in order to present a clear account of the ontological and epistemological positions underlying our approach. The overarching aim of this is to encourage more empirical studies and therefore more empirically grounded insights in studies of collective leadership. By micro-ethnography we suggest an approach that is limited in terms of empirical effort (micro), sensitive to context and embeddedness (ethnographic) and presents its empirical story in a comprehensive and theoretically informed manner (‘micro’ and ‘ethnographic’). Whereas our approach is clearly constructionist and post-representationalist, it simultaneously encourages more empirical efforts and therefore may contribute to more and broader studies of leadership. The ultimate results of these efforts are to help us see leadership – and absence of leadership – more clearly. The aim is to develop the vocabulary we have when thinking of and practicing leadership (Simpson et al., 2017) – and thereby to expand our space of action and space of reflexivity in leadership studies.

Acknowledgements

Alvehus’ work has been carried out within the projects ‘Framorganiserad profession. En granskning av reformer inom skolan’ (Vetenskapsrådet, grant no: 2014-1937) and ‘Byråkratiskt stärkt profession? Förstelärare, organisering och styrning’ (FORTE! grant no: 2014-0983). Crevani’s work has been carried out within the Digitized management – what can we learn from England and Sweden?-program (FORTE! grant no: 2016-07210).

References


Cooren, F. (2006). The organizational world as a plenum of agencies. In F. Cooren & J. R. Taylor & E. J. Van Every (Eds.), Communication as organizing: Empirical and theoretical explorations in the dynamic of text and conversation (pp. 81–100.)


