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The Performativity of Leadership Talk

Barbara Simpson

Strathclyde Business School
University of Strathclyde
UNITED KINGDOM

E: barbara.simpson@strath.ac.uk
Ph: +44 (0)141 553 6141

Linda Buchan

Strathclyde Business School
University of Strathclyde
UNITED KINGDOM

and

John Sillince

Newcastle University Business School
University of Newcastle
UNITED KINGDOM

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ABSTRACT

Leadership-as-practice holds great promise for the re-theorization of leadership in ways that reflect the dynamics of ongoing practice in the day-to-day realities of organizing. However, in order to progress this agenda there is an urgent need to develop more dynamic theories and complementary methodologies that are better able to engage with the continuities of leadership practice. This paper responds to this need firstly by teasing out the conceptual implications of the practices/practice duality, differentiating between leadership as a set of practices, and leadership in the flow of practice. Then, drawing theoretical insights from Austin and Mead, the performative effects of turning points in the flow of ordinary conversation are examined in the context of the leadership talk of a senior management team. The paper makes contributions to both theory and methodology, which are elaborated empirically to show how different types of talk relate to different phases of leadership practice.

Introduction

Developments in the leadership literature over the past two decades have increasingly drawn on adjacent disciplines to critique the leader-centric arguments that have long dominated the field. This trend has stimulated a flurry of new theories that inject a refreshing vibrancy into traditional leadership debates. For instance, we see mounting concern with the social contexts within which leadership is accomplished (Fairhurst, 2009), with the pluralistic (Denis, Langley, & Sergi, 2012) and relational (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011) dimensions of leadership, with critical issues such as gender (Ford, 2006), or power and agency (Collinson, 2014), and indeed whether leadership even exists as a 'real' empirical construct beyond the realms of discourse (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). Drawing

some of these threads together, the notion of leadership-as-practice (Carroll, Levy, & Richmond, 2008; Raelin, 2016) radically decentres individual actors, whether they be 'leaders', 'followers', or 'objects', attending instead to the dynamics of 'how' leadership work is accomplished in the day-to-day unfolding of social practice. Here, leadership is seen, not as attributable to the actions of individual 'leaders', but rather as continuously constituted in the ongoing creative and improvisational movements that bring about change in the trajectories of social action.

All these theoretical innovations come with their own particular methodological challenges. It is fair to say though, that methodological innovation has not kept pace with new leadership theory. For instance, in their review of the 353 articles published in Leadership Quarterly in the first decade of this century, Gardner, Lowe, Moss, Mahoney, and Cogliser (2010) observed that only 3% had an explicit methodological orientation, and of the top 50 most cited articles, not one was classified as methods-focussed. Much more effort is required if the field is to be effective in its empirical response to the growing body of new and different theories. Tried and tested methods that build on retrospective constructs and simple causalities seek to represent the 'whats' and 'whys' of a world presumed to be more-or-less stable. Such approaches are grounded in a substance ontology and a representational epistemology, making them of questionable value in tackling research inquiries into the dynamics of 'how' leadership emerges over time. Dynamic theories require dynamic methods capable of engaging with a world on the move. We suggest this call to methodological pluralism is one of the key challenges for contemporary leadership research (see also Bryman, 2011).

Whilst scholars have become adept at explaining the leadership phenomenon in terms of system inputs (e.g. Bennis's (2007) tripod of leaders, followers and their common goals) or system outputs (e.g. Drath et al.'s (2008) Direction, Alignment, and Commitment), the 'black box' of processes that transform inputs into outputs still remains seriously under-examined. And yet it is precisely these transformational processes that are of direct relevance to the practice domain, where 'how' leadership is co-created, 'how' it emerges, and 'how' it is actually accomplished continue to be

burning questions. Addressing such questions calls for research methods and concepts that can flow with emergent action rather than seeking to establish stable, autonomous structures that assume certainty and permanence. So for instance, employing discursive methods Wodak, Kwon, and Clarke (2011) identified five types of action used in leadership consensus building (bonding, encouraging, directing, modulating, and re/committing), Carroll and Simpson (2012) found three distinct movements in leadership conversation (kindling, stretching, and spanning), and Crevani (2015) proposed the notion of 'clearing for action' to express the spatio-temporal processes of constructing leadership. In each of these examples, the authors have identified dynamic concepts, which they have used to sensitize and condition their empirical engagements with living situations. Unlike conventional empirical constructs that seek to mirror a more or less stable reality, these actually constitute emergent reality by opening up new windows onto ever-expanding vistas. These dynamic concepts thus offer a novel way of working empirically with leadership movements as they are being constituted in practice.

This paper presents the results of an empirical study of leadership movements in the regular weekly meetings of a senior management team. We begin by positioning our argument in the theoretical domain of leadership-as-practice where leadership emerges, not as the actions of individual 'leaders', but as collective movements and shifting trajectories in the conversational processes of interacting and relating. Taking inspiration from Tourish and Jackson's (2008) observation that communication sits at the very heart of leadership, we focus on talk as the actual work of doing leadership (see also Boden, 1994), a view that we extend by considering the agencies and temporalities of performative talk. In this, we draw on the Pragmatist thinking of George Herbert Mead, and in particular his notion of turning points in the flow of conversation. We see turning points as dynamic concepts that may be observed empirically in leadership talk. Our analysis traces the performative effects of turning points in the senior managers' talk as they work together to resolve a structural problem in their business. This paper thus offers theoretical, methodological and empirical contributions and shows how these are entwined and mutually informing in the dynamics

of our research practice. Firstly, we extend leadership-as-practice theory by articulating the performative nature of talk in terms of the juxtapositioning of remembered pasts and anticipated futures in living presents; then we translate this understanding into a methodological approach that focusses on the movements generated by turning points in the flow of conversation; and finally we demonstrate these movements empirically in the conversational flow of collaborative leadership practice.

Theory development

Leadership-as-practice (L-a-P) is a relative newcomer to the leadership literature, having first surfaced less than a decade ago when Carroll et al. (2008) drew parallels with the already flourishing field of strategy-as-practice (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Whittington, 1996). The central focus of L-a-P is not the exceptional individual as in more conventional leadership theory, but rather the ordinary doings of ordinary people as they co-produce directions for their work together. Rejecting the individualistic competency and skills models that continue to dominate the leadership literature, Carroll et al. (2008, p. 366) borrowed from Whittington (2006) to argue for a more processual approach that focusses on the dynamic interplay between practitioners ("those actors active in the domain"), practice[1] ("consistent or routine types of behaviour"), and praxis ("the interconnection and embeddedness of action, actor and institution"). They proposed that this perspective not only invites re-scoping, re-theorizing, and re-languaging of leadership, but it also calls for sophisticated methodologies better able to connect with the complexities and temporalities of ongoing social engagement. Subsequent developments have responded to these challenges by grappling with the day-to-day mundaneness (Crevani, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2010) and messiness (Denis, Langley, & Rouleau, 2010) of leadership practice when it is treated as an inherently social and profoundly democratizing affair. Introducing a recent collection of essays on the topic, Raelin (2016, p. 3)

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[1] Whittington (2006) used 'practices' rather than 'practice' in his framing of strategy-as-practice.

presented L-a-P as "concerned with how leadership emerges and unfolds through … social and material-discursive contingencies … [that] do not reside outside of leadership but are very much embedded within it". Although this offers a distinctive and potentially very productive view of leadership, this potential is unlikely be realised without more and better theory that can explicitly inform new types of empirical studies.

The point of departure for our theoretical argument is the practice literature, which is vast, tremendously diverse in its philosophical and disciplinary reach, and unsurprisingly lacking in any single unifying theory. Nevertheless, the significance of practice is well recognized in the so called 'practice turn' that has become manifest in both organization studies (Miettinen, Samra-Fredericks, & Yanow, 2009) and social theory more generally (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, & Von Savigny, 2001). Rather than trying to make sense of the whole of this protean literature, we have elected to follow a singular pathway into this maze by focussing on the dual nature of practice(s) as being both 'things' that shape and guide what we do (practices), and at the same time the activity itself (practice or praxis). Following Pickering (1995) and Reckwitz (2002), we understand practices as the stuff of human activity; they are the routines and standard operating procedures invoked to simplify and clarify the uncertainties and ambiguities of living; within any given community of practitioners, they are the customs and traditions that define norms of thinking and action. Practices are socially constructed, but they often take on a certain solidity, a being-ness, that is resistant to change. By contrast, practice (or praxis) is about the ongoing, never-ending, always changing flow of action that emerges out of social engagement. It is in the collaborative act of constituting this flow that situations are transformed and new meanings are created. Practice then, is the transformative dynamic that occurs inside the 'black box' where system inputs are translated into outputs in a perpetual process of becoming (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

Simpson (2016) has elaborated this distinction between practices and practice in the context of L-a-P. She sees them as different lenses that offer complementary, but ultimately incommensurable

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views of leadership. A 'practices' perspective attends to the interactions between pre-defined entities, whether these be 'leaders', 'followers', or other discrete agents, which embody certain attitudes and habits of action (i.e. the stuff of leadership). So, for instance, practices involving leaders and followers (presumed to already exist prior to their interaction) have become a major preoccupation for leadership scholars (Drath et al., 2008; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), while new theories of collective, shared, participative, or distributed leadership also tend to start with the assumption of relatively stable and discrete entities, exploring what happens between them as a secondary effect (Denis et al., 2012). Interactions between such entities are characterised by an influencing pattern that expresses a dyadic relationship in which one entity seeks to assert "power over" the other (Follett, 1996, p. 103). Researchers who are interested in these interactional practices tend to adopt a representational approach to inquiry that seeks to apprehend reality using constructs that have been abstracted out of the lived context of experience.

A 'practice' perspective, by contrast, affords ontological primacy to a world that is continuously on the move, where stuff does most certainly appear, but only ever as a transient phase that provides temporary structuring in the ongoing flow of action. In this context, leadership is evident in the changing directions of flow, as provisional entities arise and fade away. Here, the motive force is what we call 'in-flow-ence' to reflect the mutually forming nature of "power with" (Follett, 1996, p. 103). Researchers who seek to engage with the ongoing emergence of practice invoke a processual alternative to the familiar representational idiom of inquiry, one that can flow with living experience as it unfolds in real time (Simpson, 2016). This perspective is far less evident in today's leadership literature, although empirical studies such as those by Crevani et al. (2010), who traced real-time leadership movements in meetings, and Carroll and Simpson (2012), who followed the emergence of leadership directions in online conversations, have engaged a distinctively processual orientation in their work. It is this lacuna that provides the methodological and empirical motivation for this paper.

Our analysis so far points to a fundamental distinction between leadership-as-practices and leadership-as-practice. The former is constructed on the assumption that 'what' and 'why' questions about leadership can be addressed using representations of abstract entities and their inter-relations, while the latter sees leadership first and foremost as a continuous and emergent social process that offers insight into 'how' questions. Naturally there are methodological implications that flow from these basic assumptions. Whereas variance and other representational methods are commonly used by the leadership-as-practices camp, there is no such commonly accepted solution for conducting research from an ontologically processual perspective (Langley, 1999). Pickering (1995) proposed that researchers wishing to engage with practice as a social process must adopt a performative idiom that equips them to inquire into the dynamics of perpetually co-emergent worlds and agents, where nothing is permanent or stable, at least not for very long. A performative approach attends to the real-time doings of intertwining human and material agencies as practice proceeds; there are no meaningful starting or ending points in this process, only ongoing unfolding action. Resonating with this performative view, Weick (1979) famously argued that researchers need to give more emphasis to verbs than to nouns if we are ever to arrive at a deeper appreciation of the dynamics of organizing. What then, would constitute a performative perspective on leadership practice, and how might this inform empirical work?

Towards answering this question, we accept Tourish and Jackson's (2008) invitation to engage more deeply with the communication dimensions of leadership. As Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014, p. 8) have demonstrated, there is already a significant body of research that considers "communication to be central, defining, and constitutive of leadership", although by their own admission much of the published work on leadership communication adopts a dyadic "transmission" perspective that in our view is more consistent with practices than with practice, as we have defined these terms. Fairhurst and Connaughton also usefully distinguished between the linguistic orientation of discourse and the more dynamic and dialogical qualities of practice as it is constituted in, and by, the social to-ing and fro-ing of talk in contexts of change (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Shotter, 2011;

Tourish, 2014). For the purposes of our argument, it is this latter perspective that is of interest as it attends to the generation of the new directions and creative actions of leadership in the gestural flow of conversation (Mead, 1934) or dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981).

Taylor and Van Every (2011) have developed a pragmatics of organizational communication that rejects the idea of organizations as mere containers or sites for communication in favour of a performative understanding of ordinary everyday talk (see also Boden, 1994; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009). For them, communicative practice precedes the possibilities of existence for both actors and their contexts, which are brought into being through performative communication. Their notion of performativity originates in the seminal work in linguistics by John Austin (1962) who recognized that language functions not only as representational reportage of the truth or falsity of states of affairs, but it also has an active, creative function that actually performs actions (Culler, 2000; Gond, Cabantous, Harding, & Learmonth, 2015). For instance, if you go into work one day and your boss says "You're fired", these words have the effect of putting you out of a job. However, somebody else saying these words, or even your boss saying them in a different context, may not have the same performative force.

Austin realised that any linguistic utterance has a performative potential "in which to say something is to do something; or in which by saying something we are doing something" (1962, p. 12). He argued that every speech act is comprised of three aspects: the locutionary, which is the act of uttering something factual; the illocutionary, which is the act intended by the utterance; and the perlocutionary, which is the effect accomplished by the utterance. "For example, saying: 'there's a bull in the field' is a locutionary act (the speaker is describing a fact about the scenery); it might also be intended as a warning (an illocutionary act); and its effect could be that listeners change their minds about entering the field (a perlocutionary act)" (Gond et al., 2015, p. 6). Austin's account of performative utterances departed radically from the linguistic conventions of his time by attending to the real-time, active and creative functioning of language in bringing the world and its actors into

being. He focussed specifically on the performativity of individual speech acts, while later writers have been more concerned with the iterative, literary and discursive processes by means of which practices come to be socially constructed (e.g. Butler, 1997; Derrida, 1992), or the agential dynamics that provide continuity in ongoing performative practice (Barad, 2003). Despite these rich contributions however, there still remains a lack of clarity about exactly 'how' it is that talk performs actions in practice.

The issue for practice theorists is to find a way of accounting for the emergence of novelty in speech acts; how does talk create something new, and how can it change the direction of leadership movements? Mead (1932) proposed that novel actions arise in talk when an existing state of affairs and a potential alternative condition are juxtaposed. He departed from the familiar 'arrow of time' in which past, present and future follow in clock-ordered sequence, to develop an experiential understanding of temporality, where a 'present' is constituted as an active turning point in the flow of social practice. It is "the occurrence of something which is more than the processes that have led up to it and which by its change, continuance, or disappearance, adds to later passages a content they would not otherwise have possessed" (Mead, 1932, p. 52). Remembered pasts and anticipated futures are, in Mead's formulation, epistemological resources that are continuously reconstructed to inform present action, but for him it is in the actions or turning points of 'presents' that ontological reality resides. By bringing together a particular past and a particular future, present action is generated. This juxtaposition affords a reflexive opportunity to mediate between pasts and futures, potentially generating modified or different actions. Without the future dimension, we are doomed to the unchanging replication of pasts, and without the past, practice becomes a matter of speculation and untethered imaginings (see also Simpson, 2009, 2014). According to Emirbayer and Mische (1998), this practical-evaluative juxtaposition of remembered pasts and anticipated futures continues to be one of the most under-examined aspects of contemporary sociological thinking.

To summarise our argument so far, we have developed a theoretical view of L-a-P that attends specifically to the performative dynamics of practice. Here, leadership is understood as in-flow-ence; that is, as a movement constituted in, and emergent from socially engaged talk. Importantly for our argument, this definition is independent of individual 'leaders' and their influencing actions. Following Austin and Mead, we propose that talk is performative when pasts and futures are juxtaposed to constitute living presents by generating turning points in the flow of leadership practice. We now move on to present an empirical study in which we have operationalised our theory of L-a-P and performative talk in the context of the regular meetings of a senior management team that is faced with a leadership conundrum.

Data and methods

Research context

This research was carried out in a small, arts sector company that was responsible for the management of three busy performance venues in a culturally vibrant city. The company interested us because of the complexity and ever-changing nature of its day-to-day business, as well as its reputation for innovative programming and events. We negotiated research access initially through informal contacts, and then more formally in discussion with the Managing Director and the Marketing Manager. This discussion was very welcoming of us as researchers, and resulted in agreement that we would observe the regular weekly meetings of the senior management team for a period of time that was left unspecified. No particular outcomes were required by the company; rather, the managers simply looked forward to our reflections on their leadership practice. Neither we nor they knew in advance what would happen during our period of observation, but there was a general willingness to see what might emerge. Written consent to our presence as observers was gained from all team members before we attended our first meeting. This consent included provision for making audio recordings of the proceedings, and it also guaranteed anonymity and the right of veto with respect to any of the data that we might publish.

Meetings lasted for up to two hours and generally took place on Wednesday mornings. The team

comprised seven members: Caroline, the Managing Director; Jeremy, the Finance Manager; Morag,

the Sales and Marketing Manager; Jimmy, the Facilities Manager; Maggie, the Events Manager;

Frank, the Stage Manager; and Angus, the Catering Manager[2].We attended 20 meetings over a

period of six months, during which a wide range of business-related issues was discussed. In one of

the early meetings, Caroline announced her wish to resolve a long-neglected structural issue

concerning the function of duty managers in the company. *'We need to have a look at the duty

management … I think we need to, as a team, assess what we've got, what we can do, how much it

would cost, whether we want to do it, and then either make a plan to do it, or not. I think this is one

of these issues that comes up every couple of years and we kind of fudge it. I think now is the time

that we actually look at it and decide how we're going to move on.'* Here we see our first example of

a turning point, where past practices are deemed inappropriate for the future of the company, and

present action is generated in this juxtaposition.

A duty manager is the person on the spot who carries overall responsibility for any given event

staged by the company, including resolving technical glitches, soothing unhappy performers,

anticipating problems during the performance, and ensuring that customers enjoy themselves. This

role had always been undertaken by members of staff moonlighting over and above their daytime

jobs in the company. Indeed most of the senior management team members had been duty

managers at some stage in their careers, and some still were. This arrangement was no longer

adequate for the company's changing needs, but if the duty manager role was to be declared

redundant, this would result in the very unusual situation that affected staff would still remain in the

company doing their daytime jobs. As Caroline observed, '*Normally speaking, you make someone

redundant, it's very uncomfortable, they hate you, you're sorry for them, but you never see them

again'.* It was imperative therefore, that the relational aspects of change were handled with utmost

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[2] All names are pseudonyms

sensitivity. Over the ensuing meetings, the senior managers completely redesigned this role to become a fully professionalized function under the control of a senior Customer Services Manager. It is this restructuring process that provides the empirical setting for this paper.

Data analysis

The data that inform this study were extracted from the verbatim transcripts of the senior managers' conversations over the course of the 20 meetings we attended (more than 220,000 words of transcript). It is always difficult to know when to stop gathering data in a processual study because there is no definable end-point; just ongoing practice. However after six months, although the restructuring had not been finally implemented, it was no longer a major strategic issue on the senior managers' agenda so we decided to call a halt to our observations. The real-time, episodic nature of this data permits examination of the in-flow-encing of events as they actually happened, and provides direct access to the performative actions that arose.

The meetings necessarily traversed a whole range of issues related to running the business, so we began our data analysis by eliminating any topics in the meeting transcripts that concerned issues other than the duty management restructuring. This produced a reduced dataset of more than 45,000 words (1097 speaking turns) across 12 meetings. We then set about identifying instances within this dataset where turning points arose performatively in the juxtaposition of remembered pasts and anticipated futures. We elected to focus exclusively on instances where remembered pasts and anticipated futures were immediately adjacent in the same speech act. This is not to suggest that immediate adjacency is a necessary requirement for all turning points, but rather to provide clarity about exactly what we did in our analysis. It is perfectly conceivable that a past examined in one speech act and a future expressed in another may constitute a turning point, but the analytical links become more tenuous as past and future utterances are more widely separated in the conversational flow.

Working initially independently, and then together, we extracted 253 instances where the

remembered past and the anticipated future were immediately adjacent in the same speech act. To

some extent we were able to draw on obvious clues such as the tense used by the speaker (e.g.

'we've had a very high turnover of customer service managers' or *'there were some figures worked*

out some time ago' are references to remembered pasts, while *'there's going to come a time soon*

when we won't be able to give her that back up' or *'it will take a long time to get there'* are examples

of anticipated futures), but often the past or future orientation of any given phrase was more subtly

determined by context and tone of voice. Where the present tense was used to refer to 'what is',

reflecting something that is already in existence (e.g. *'That's one very good thing about the current*

system. You're very stable for a long time'), we coded these as remembered pasts, while present

tense prescriptions for novelty (e.g. *'really we just want to hear what people think'*) and 'what if'

scenarios (e.g. *'What if we made all the current DMs redundant'*) were coded as anticipated futures.

These 253 turning points were then coded according to their performative effects. We considered

each instance in the context of the conversational flow (using both the written transcript and audio

record) and we also drew on our own experience of attending the meetings. Our initial coding

system used the five actions of practical-evaluative agency originally postulated by Emirbayer and

Mische (1998, pp. 998-1000). However, we found this theoretical scheme contained ambiguities and

category overlaps when applied to our data. Moreover, it seemed to imply a developmental

sequence from problematization, to decision and execution, which we did not wish to impose on our

analysis. Consequently, we built a modified coding scheme grounded in our own data that classifies

the performative effects of turning points, as follows: 'problematizing' recognises an unsatisfactory

present situation, 'committing' concretises the present action required, 'justifying' normalises the

present action as the right or best thing to do in the circumstances, 'imagining' considers the future

potential and broader possibilities of the present situation, and 'recalling' draws on past patterns as

a resource to inform present actions. Table 1 illustrates the coding of turning points in terms of each

one of these five distinctive types of performative effect. We found that all 253 of the turning points

we had identified in the data could be categorized as one of these five types so there was no need to formulate additional codes.

<div align="center">**INSERT TABLE 1**</div>

Findings

Figure 1 summarizes the findings from our data analysis. The horizontal axes represent the temporal dimension of the restructuring process using sequential order rather than clock time: the lower axis shows the sequence number of turning points from 1 to 253, while the upper axis shows the sequence of meetings, from 1 to 12 (note that the duty management restructuring was not discussed at every meeting we attended). The five types of performative effect appear on the vertical axis, and square dots represent the codes assigned to every turning point. A useful metaphor for understanding this Figure is to see it as a musical stave, where each of the performative types signifies a unique pitch, and each turning point is a musical note that resonates outwards, creating harmonies and rhythms in its interplay with adjacent notes. This musical metaphor emphasises the continuity of performative actions in the temporal unfolding of practice. It also invites an improvisational attitude that allows the music to develop its own unique expression in the context of performance.

<div align="center">**INSERT FIGURE 1**</div>

Glancing across the whole dataset, there are several interesting patterns that are immediately apparent. Firstly, problematizing and imagining turning points dominated the first two meetings, but thereafter their intensity declined. Conversely, the justifying turning points that are dominant towards the end of the restructuring process built up progressively from the beginning, while committing turning points reached their peak intensity in the middle of the record. In contrast to these rising and falling patterns of activity, the intensity of recalling turning points remained fairly steady throughout the process. Although recalling actions are clearly important as a resource for the

restructuring talk, it is the other four action types, problematizing, imagining, committing and justifying, that punctuate the change process and propel it forwards. Based on these broad patterns of performativity, we have identified three different phases of talk during the restructuring process, as follows:

Phase A – Generating ideas

During this phase, which occurred in Meetings 1 and 2, the managers engaged in an extended and open brainstorming as they probed each other's understandings of exactly what problems should be addressed by restructuring the duty management function. The problems they identified included difficulties in maintaining standards across a group of managers who, although willing, were largely unsupervised, untrained, and working independently; the need to instil a real sense of responsibility amongst duty managers for whom this was a part-time role; inadequacies in the current Customer Service department; and the problem of ensuring that aspects of the job didn't remain unaddressed because of unclear responsibilities and accountabilities. There was also an acute awareness that any change would directly impact the pension funds of the staff involved, causing pain and discontent: '*we're going to have to upset somebody somewhere*' and '*there is a lot of bad feeling there already*'. The managers also imagined potential solutions to the duty management problem including a staged transition to a new structure; a flattening of the current structure and review of the Customer Service department; a dedicated pool of customer service managers to replace the duty management function; and declaring the duty manager role redundant. Ultimately they concluded '[we need] *a senior person in charge of customer service. Someone who's going to take ownership of that function across all sites and train, motivate, everything else we've discussed. We've got a gap. We've got a missing role'*.

This highly generative phase of talk is characterised by problematizing and imagining actions. Of the 101 turning points in this phase, 33 are coded as imagining, and 29 as problematizing. Of the remainder, 23 were coded as recalling, 11 as committing, and 5 as justifying. The dominance of

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imagining and problematizing and the continuous interplay between them is consistent with the

general tone of problem elaboration and solution seeking that permeated the talk as each manager

brought forward issues and ideas informed by her/his own experience and functional

responsibilities. The free-flowing nature of the conversation allowed equal voice to every manager,

providing ample opportunity for experiences to be shared, issues to be raised, and potential

obstacles to be surfaced. There was a buoyant quality of openness to the talk that seemed to

facilitate the generation of new ideas and 'what if' scenarios. At the same time, the managers were

able to express their reservations and fears about the restructuring process.

It seems then, that during this phase the senior managers' leadership talk was welcoming of diverse

and different ideas, as reflected in their willingness to engage with each other in sustained

problematizing and imagining actions. At the same time, the ease with which they were able to

explore different problems and propose alternative solutions demonstrates their appreciation for

views based on the different practical experience that each manager brought to the conversation.

Phase B – Negotiating a united stance

Phase B was initiated by Frank's pre-emptive action to flatten the duty management structure by

promoting all assistant duty managers to full status '*basically because we're short of people*'. The

implication was more or less business as usual, but with duty managers carrying greater

responsibilities and concomitant increased costs for wages. However, the reception of this change

within the company was far from smooth: '*we know there's people in corners muttering about stuff*'

and '*it's very difficult trying to get people who've been doing things for so long to try and change'*.

Against a rising tide of staff resistance, cracks started to appear in the unity of the senior

management team. On one hand Frank, himself an active duty manager, was arguing that it was not

yet time to make final decisions about the future of the role ('*at the moment we've got to listen to

the people and find out what their suggestions are*'), while on the other hand, Maggie was becoming

increasingly impatient with the apparent stalling of the process ('*I thought we'd already made this*

decision. It seems as if we've gone backwards'). Subsequently, a small sub-committee formed by Caroline and comprising Maggie, Morag and Angus, took the restructuring process outside the formal senior management team meetings with the clear purpose of pursuing a change agenda. It was during this phase that Jeremy joined the company as the new finance manager, and he also became a member of this 'ginger group'. We did not have access to the meetings of this sub-committee so we can only infer the movements of their talk from their subsequent contributions to the senior management team's conversation, which emerged in an atmosphere of mounting confidentiality. Caroline explained '*I'm going to have to use the R word, we are going to make all existing duty managers redundant*'. Eventually, towards the end of Phase B, the team appeared to have reached a consensus on how to move forward: '*I think we've got the basis for a job description now'*.

This phase, which extends from Meeting 3 into Meeting 8, comprised 67 turning points, of which 28 were committing, 14 imagining, 11 recalling, 7 problematizing, and 7 justifying. The general tone was quite different from that of Phase A. Although committing is the dominant form here, these actions were not all directed towards the same goal. Indeed, it was in this phase that personal agendas came to the fore, pointing to apparently irreconcilable differences between the senior managers. By comparison with Phase A, the talk here was much more guarded, and indeed, voices that had been very evident at the beginning of the process began to fade away. Only four of the managers, Caroline, Jimmy, Morag and Angus, engaged in committing actions during this phase, their leadership talk serving to constrain the diversity of views in order to achieve the desired outcomes. This resulted in fragmentation and the erosion of trust amongst the team members.

Evidently the restructuring process became politically charged during Phase B as different positions became more hardened and immutable. This observation is consistent with studies that focus on "power over" influence, but here we show it also has expression in the in-flow-encing of "power

with" where the political process is reflected in the intensity of committing actions that served to demarcate the lines of debate.

Phase C – Moving forward together

With an apparent consensus accomplished, in this phase of the restructuring process the managers turned their attention to refining the details of implementation. Jeremy introduced a new, more legalistic style of language to the meetings: '*there will still be, for want of a better word, a customer services pool, but that will be a different type of contract, a zero hours contract*'. He strongly emphasised the importance of following due process in dealing with potential redundancies. Detailed plans were developed for implementation so that '*when we push the button we do it as quickly as we can*', and one entire meeting was dedicated to rehearsing the rollout of the new structure. The general tone seemed to be one of reassurance that they were doing the right thing: as Caroline said '*I'm confident that we are absolutely working in the best interest of the company, that what we're doing is legal and decent. What I'm more concerned about is making sure we present this in a humane and sensible way'.* The more dispassionate, almost clinical style of their talk in this phase contrasts markedly with the open expression of fears and excitement in Phase A.

Phase C comprised 85 turning points, of which 27 were justifying, 29 recalling, 16 committing, 7 problematizing, and 6 imagining. The dominance of justifying and recalling is the defining character of this phase, distinguishing it from the committing of Phase B, and the combination of problematizing and imagining in Phase A. The talk here was focussed on naturalizing the intended course of action within the context of past practices. Interestingly it was Caroline who contributed most of the turning points in this phase, with her talk accounting for 22 of the 27 justifying actions and 15 of the 29 recalling actions. Here she is fulfilling her formal leadership role by claiming responsibility for executing the restructuring efficiently and effectively, but importantly, her talk continues to be conversationally engaged and inclusive of the entire senior management team. Thus she remains committed to in-flow-ence and avoids the directive language of an individual 'leader'.

Ultimately then, the managers appear to have arrived at a shared view that although the restructuring was a difficult and unpleasant process, it was nevertheless necessary for the future of the company. The justifying and recalling actions that characterised Phase C were critical in arriving at this shared position.

Discussion

This study has examined how the performative effects of leadership talk in a senior management team vary over the course of an extended and very sensitive restructuring process. The dynamic constructs that constitute leadership movements are mapped as turning points in the flow of talk, where turning points are empirically operationalized as the juxtaposition of a remembered past and an anticipated future within a single speech act. Our data analysis reveals five types of turning point in the senior managers' talk that are distinguished by their different performative effects (problematizing, committing, justifying, imagining, and recalling). Although all five of these types occur throughout the restructuring process, there is an overarching pattern that moves from problematizing and imagining actions (Phase A), to committing actions (Phase B), and finally to justifying actions (Phase C).

Readers may well query why we see this talk as leadership rather than simply as a management process. To answer this question we return to our original definition of leadership, which attempts to radically de-centre, or indeed eliminate, the notion of the individual or positional 'leader', focussing instead on the movements and changes in trajectory that signal the presence of leadership in the ongoing transformation of practice (Gergen & Hersted, 2016; Hosking, 2007; Shotter, 2016). The key distinction we are making here is that leadership is always about transforming the situation, whereas we see management as primarily concerned with stabilising the situation. A familiar metaphor for this dynamic and transformative expression of leadership is a murmuration of starlings that continuously forms and reforms in swirling and swooping patterns of flocking. Here there are no identifiable 'leaders', but leadership is evident in the amazing display of coordinated mass

movement. Our specific interest is in mapping the in-flow-ence of these movements rather than making causal attributions to influential 'leaders'. We recognise that this is an unusual, and perhaps counter-intuitive definition, but it is essential to understanding leadership in the flow of 'practice' rather than as a set of 'practices' employed by 'leaders'. We are not for one moment suggesting though that 'leaders' are unimportant. Rather, we propose that there are two alternative ways of thinking about, and researching leadership: on one hand we might consider those recurring practices engaged by discrete entities such as 'leaders' to produce certain outcomes; on the other hand, leadership practice may be understood as an endless ongoing flow of emergent becoming. Both perspectives offer unique insights that are complementary, but they are not commensurable because they are constructed on dialectical sets of philosophical and theoretical assumptions (Collinson, 2005). The latter perspective (emergent, becoming practice) remains significantly under-explored in the leadership literature, so our objective here is to develop this as a distinctive approach for further research.

The theoretical contribution that this paper makes is to elaborate leadership talk as performative practice. By combining Austin's (1962) realization that talk is inherently performative with Mead's (1932) temporal understanding of turning points in the unfolding of conversation, we have proposed that leadership talk is talk that is transformative, that changes the trajectories of conversations, and that produces new movements in the emergence of practice. Leadership talk is characteristically redolent with conversational turning points, which provide the creative impulse to bring about change. Of course, not all talk is leadership talk, and not all meetings are generative of leadership. Many conversations simply affirm what is. We suggest, however, that without emergence and change there is no leadership practice going on even though putative 'leaders' may quite conceivably be involved in such conversations. In our view then, the talk we have reported here is indeed leadership talk, not because of who is talking, but because of how practice emerges from it.

Just as 'practice' and 'practices' call for different theorizations, so too do they require different research methodologies. The 'practice' orientation underpinning our argument invokes a performative idiom (Pickering, 1995) that is consistent with an ontology of becoming (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). The methodological challenge then, is to apprehend a fleeting world that is continuously enacting leadership as it engages, and is engaged by actors in the emergent in-flow-ence. This performative approach has been developed strongly within the SSK (sociology of scientific knowledge) community (e.g. Barad, 2003; Latour, 1986; Law, 2002; Urry, 2007) but has yet to have a significant influence on the doing of research in leadership practice. The particular methodological contribution that we advance in this paper is the operationalization of Mead's notion of turning points as the juxtapositioning of remembered pasts and anticipated futures to create performative effects in the living present. In so doing, we stay close to the movements of practice as we map the unfolding performance of leadership through the turning points of talk (see Figure 1). We maintain that such methodological innovation is essential if leadership research is to take advantage of the wave of new theories informed by more critical and processual approaches to leadership, which seek answers to the 'how' questions of 'practice' rather than being bound to the 'who' and 'what' questions linking 'leaders' to their 'practices'.

The third and final contribution of this paper relates to the empirical observation of the three phases of leadership talk (A, B and C in Figure 1), each of which is uniquely characterised by the performative effects accomplished by its turning points (respectively problematizing and imagining, committing, and justifying). This patterning resonates with John Dewey's notion of *Inquiry* (1938 [1986]), which he saw as a social process of learning together in which uncertain situations are transformed in such a way as to allow the flow of practice to continue, at least until new uncertainties arise. For him, the first phase of *Inquiry* defines exactly what the problem is. This process invokes an abductive logic of speculative hypothesising. The problematizing and imagining talk during Phase A of our case is consistent with this process of hypothesis formation as the managers progressively articulated what really is the problem with the duty management function

and imagined potential solutions or explanations for this. The second phase of *Inquiry* uses a deductive logic to test the explanations generated. The contestation of ideas in Phase B of our case reflects a process of hypothesis testing as the managers used committing talk to narrow down their options to a single agreed plan of action. The final phase of *Inquiry* engages inductively with the evolving situation to confirm that this is indeed the appropriate course of action going forward. The justifying talk in Phase C served to reassure managers that collectively they had chosen the right solution to the duty management problem.

This learning process has a family resemblance to Weick's (1995) sensemaking, but whereas the latter tends to be triggered by some sort of crisis, *Inquiry* is always embedded in ordinary everyday practice. A closer examination of the patterns of leadership talk in our study suggests, furthermore, that within this broad cycle of *Inquiry* there were many smaller inquiries that followed the same pattern of abduction (problematizing and imaging), deduction (committing), and induction (justifying). Thus processes of *Inquiry* are multiply embedded in leadership practice. These surprising results offer novel insight into leadership in terms of the empirical performatives that arise in leadership talk as *Inquiry* unfolds. They also suggest productive ways in which leadership talk might be developed through conscious attention to the interplay between abductive, deductive and inductive phases of *Inquiry.* This is quite contrary to conventional research wisdom, which tends to advocate either deductive logic for theory testing, or inductive logic for theory building, or occasionally abductive logic for some types of engaged research (e.g. Agar, 2010).

Conclusion

This paper responds to growing awareness in the leadership literature that theoretical innovation is not in itself enough to move the field forward. New theories must be accompanied by new methodological considerations. We have approached this problem in the particular context of leadership-as-practice (Raelin, 2016), which is an inherently dynamic and performative perspective that invites an alternative, more processual approach to both theory and methodology. Our ultimate aim is to place less emphasis on 'what' leadership is or 'who' is leading, focusing instead on the

interesting avenues of research that emerge when we ask questions about 'how' leadership does

stuff. To this end, our argument is threaded through with ideas appropriated from the American

Pragmatists, especially Dewey and Mead, which offer a comprehensive and coherent philosophy of

practice that provides a rigorous platform for the integration of theory and methodology (Simpson,

2017 (forthcoming)). In this pursuit we have been mindful to not simply preserve the Pragmatist

tradition, but to bring it to life as a practical way forward for leadership studies. We further suggest

that beyond leadership, the approach we have developed here may be equally relevant to other

areas of 'as-practice' theorizing where scholars are seeking to engage with the performative and

emergent dynamics of the actual doings of organizing.

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TABLE 1

Examples of how turning points were coded

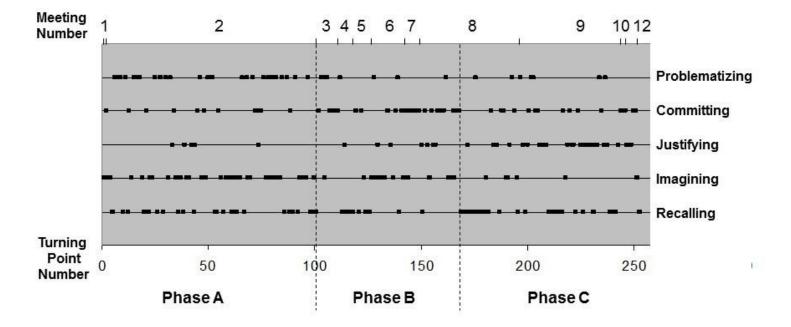| Juxtaposed past and future	Performative effect
'That's one very good thing about the current system. You're very stable for a long time.[past] *Customer Service Managers that we bring in will gain experience and leave all the time. It will be 18 months, 2 years tops, so it will be a continual turn around.*[future]'	**Problematizing** Changing the current system will increase staff turnover
'it's like the look of the place. You need somebody …[future] *I mean I walk around here and you're forever putting stands away, flowers at the top of the main stairs* [past]'	**Problematizing** There's no-one who currently has responsibility for the appearance of the facilities
'And we've lost all that. [past] *I think we need a strong person, I think, to bring that back.* [future]'	**Committing** Appoint a different sort of person to do the job
'They need to be their own department. [future] *At the moment they feel that they're this department supplemented by everybody and …*[past]'	**Committing** Redefine the structure and function of the department
'I don't think there's a single person who would defend the system as being the way we should be working [past], *so I think it's a basis we all agree we want to improve this* [future]'	**Justifying** Consensus about the rightness of the present action
'The attitude I'm taking is that you know I'm the person that's been charged by the board to run the business [past] *and this is the way I'm going to do it.* [future]'	**Justifying** Moral authority to act
'What do you think we should do for the next step then? Someone is going to have to pull all this together.[future] *I can't see Frank typing up an action plan of events.*[past]'	**Imagining** Anticipating obstacles to future action based on past experience
'we're in a big process of transition here [past] *so maybe we say to people maybe we don't give them full time* [future]'	**Imagining** Tentatively suggesting a way forward from the current situation
'She is a good front person. [past] *That's what you need.* [future]'	**Recalling** Past experience as an exemplar for the future
'from the current duty managers' point of view you could get people going, well what's in it for me [future]*, as opposed to what I'm doing just now* [past]*, which means I'm working a bit harder but I'm not getting any more?'*	**Recalling** Past practice is more attractive than an uncertain future

FIGURE 1
Turning Points and Phases in the talk of a Senior Management Team