

## **Becoming the leader: Leadership as material presence**

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### **Abstract**

This paper seeks to understand leaders as material presences. Leadership theory has traditionally explored leaders as sites of disembodied traits, characteristics and abilities. Our qualitative, mixed method study suggests that managers charged with the tasks of leadership operate within a very different understanding. Their endogenous or lay theory understands leadership as physical, corporeal and visible, and as something made manifest through leaders' material presence. This theory-in-practice holds that leadership qualities are signified by the leader's physical appearance: the good leader must look the part. Actors consequently work on their own appearance to present an image of themselves as leader. They thus offer a fundamental challenge to dominant exogenous, or academic, theories of leadership. To understand the unspoken assumptions that underpin the lay theory of leadership as material presence, we interrogate it using the new materialist theory of Karen Barad and the object relations theory of Christopher Bollas. This illuminates the lay theory's complexities and sophisticated insights. In academic terms it offers a theory of how sentient and non-sentient actors intra-act and performatively constitute leadership

through complex entanglements that enact and circulate organizational and leadership norms. The paper's contribution is thus a theory of leadership micro-dynamics in which the leader is materialised through practices of working on a corporeal self for presentation to both self and others.

### **Keywords**

Leadership, materialities, appearance, psychoanalysis, Barad, Bollas.

### **Introduction**

This paper explores how those charged with the task of being leaders *materialise* themselves as leaders within organizations. In some ways leadership theory, as an aspect of organization studies more generally, has always been a theory of materialities: it presumes leaders influence followers through the power of their necessarily material, corporeal presence, from where can be beheld their charisma (Bass, 1985; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999), authenticity (Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens [2011]; Ladkin & Spiller, 2013) and so on. Contemporary theories of distributed or shared leadership, that is leadership as group practices, similarly imply corporeal encounters (Ropo & Sauer, 2008). Yet the ever-expanding literature on leadership somehow de-materialises leadership, reducing leaders and followers to 'a shapeless, hapless, colorless, lifeless condition' (Hansen, Ropo & Sauer, 2007, p.545), where corporeality is an 'unwanted and unwelcome guest' (Hansen et al., 2007 p.553), and leadership appears as a 'charisma emanating from nowhere' (Harding, Lee, Ford & Learmonth, 2011), with its embodied, material and mundane aspects rarely accounted for (Sinclair, 2013).

A small but developing body of literature challenges this ontology of absence. Its focus is largely on leadership as an embodied, and thus material practice. It explores such issues as bodily presence, body language, body work and embodied knowledge

(Fisher & Reiser Robbins, 2014; Ropo & Parviainen, 2001; Ropo & Sauer, 2008; Sinclair, 2005). Guthey and Jackson (2005) have explored how photographs of leaders provide iconic representations of (otherwise immaterial) organizations, while Melina, Burgess, Falkman and Marturano's (2013) text on *The Embodiment of Leadership*, seeks both to conceptualise the relationship between the body and leadership and also to explore ways in which to articulate and translate leaders' embodied knowledge. A special issue of *Leadership* (2013) focused on embodiment, aesthetics and affect (Pullen & Vacchani, 2013). Its editors critique the dominance of 'disembodied, over-cognitivated and pseudo-rational approaches' (p. 318) to understanding leadership and advocate research that embraces materiality, embodiment and corporeality. Ladkin's (2013) phenomenological account of felt and bodily based experiences emphasises the invisible inter-subjective relations at the heart of leadership, interactions in which bodies, presumed gender and gender appearances are 'markers' used by employees to make sense of leaders and leadership (Muhr & Sullivan, 2013). Leadership can thus be interpreted as an emergent and creative process of inter-practices of leading and following (Kupers, 2013) that are embodied within space (Ropo, Sauer & Salovaara (2013), in ways akin to a musical performance where leader and follower bodies move and gesture to one another (Bathurst & Cain, 2013). But because passions are embodied in leadership, followers can become demoralised if they surface in non-charismatic ways (Thanem, 2013).

This body of work argues the merits of understanding leadership as corporeal practice. However, there is a need for recognition of not only bodies but other materialities such as technologies and places, as well as discourses, language, power and resistance, in the emergence of leadership (Pullen & Vacchani, 2013). A few theorists attempt this using Actor-Network theory. Fairhurst and Cooren (2009) for

example explore how the leader is constituted through the inter-actions of a plethora of actants, including followers. In Hawkins' (2015) study of the materialization of leadership in the British Royal Navy the actants include ship, water and history. Her study illustrates how non-sentient actors both limit and make possible various leadership practices that may be unique to such configurations as a 'Royal' Navy. Leadership studies, like organization studies more generally, is thus in the early stages of understanding materialities in the constitution of organizational phenomenon such as leadership, and thus to giving substance to what has previously been insubstantial. We turn now to our own study, that brings new materialist theory to leadership studies by way of leaders' own understanding of how they materialise themselves as leaders.

Our empirical research explored how people charged with the tasks of leadership materialise themselves as leaders through work on their embodied appearance. It was inspired by research into leadership training courses, attended by managers worldwide, which teach that leadership is something that can be *seen* (Burgoyne, 2004; Ford & Harding, 2007; Smolovic Jones & Jackson, 2015; Storey, 2011). Managers appear to take this understanding back to their daily practices: within companies 'metaphors of the visual, of looking, of being seen, and the light which facilitates seeing recur when people envisage leadership' (Harding, Ford, Lee & Learmonth, 2011, p.935). Our study therefore asked: if this is the case, how do participants make themselves visible and recognisable as leaders? Data analysis suggests that leaders draw on an endogenous (Pérezts, Fay & Picard, 2015) or lay theory of how to materialise themselves as leaders. Through interrogating this lay theory we show its sophisticated and complex underpinnings and how, through its location within micro-practices of leadership, it counters the ontology of absence in exogenous, or academic theories of leadership.

Participants' accounts suggested the value of new materialities theory for organization studies in general, and leadership studies in particular, because it challenges the dominance of discursive approaches that explore only language/discourse in the constitution of organizational life, to the neglect of the actual experience of working as material subjects in physical places. New materialities theory explores the performative interactions of discourses, sentient participants and non-sentient actors. It argues matter is not mute and inert but agentic, immanent and lively: leadership, it follows, would be constituted as an 'emergent interplay' (Tuana, 2008, p.189) between the cultural and the natural (Hekman, 2010), an insight shared, as we will see, by leaders themselves.

This paper therefore contributes a new, endogenous theory of the material micro-dynamics of leadership. It thus introduces new materialities theories to leadership studies, and takes forward its contribution to organizational studies more generally. We begin by outlining the academic theory we used to make sense of the endogenous or lay theory of leadership that informs participants' accounts. We draw specifically on Karen Barad's material theory of performativity, combining it with Christopher Bollas's understanding of the body in the psyche to address some shortcomings in the new materialism literatures. We then turn to the analysis of the interview materials.

### **Bringing materialism in from its exile**

Unrest at the dominance of discourse has inspired the emergence in the social sciences of 'new materialism' (called 'new' to differentiate it from Marxist theories of materialism). This interweaves the material with the discursive: it regards matter as immanent and lively, and understands both language and matter as agentic, living energies (Colebrook, 2008). Language, matter, technologies and other elements are

understood to interact in the formation of subjects or 'reality', breaking down classical divisions between culture/nature and sentient/non-sentient (Hekman, 2010).

Two influential review essays (Ashcraft et al, 2009; Phillips & Oswick, 2012) advocate a material turn in organization studies. An on-going but inconclusive discussion (Hardy & Thomas, 2015; Orlikowski & Scott, 2015; Putnam, 2015) has debated the merits of such a move, with Hardy and Thomas (2015) notable in their resistance to the claim that the material turn is 'new'. Organization studies, they argue, has always been cognisant of materialities. Others disagree, including researchers whose empirical studies demonstrate the value of regarding the material as agentic. For example, Symon and Pritchard's (2015) study of employees' use of smartphones indicates that identity does not determine the use of smartphones but emerges from the tangle of practices of employee and smartphone resulting in the co-emergence of employee and smartphone. A similar influence of technology on practices is seen in Orlikowski and Scott's (2014; 2015) exploration of how social media has changed ways of evaluating hotels and how this in turn shapes hotel owners' activities. Dale and Latham (2015) meanwhile show how it is not so much entanglements of flesh and prosthetics that constitute certain bodies as dis-abled and others as able, but discourses of choice and necessity that are entangled with flesh and prosthetics. In a classic move in new materialities theory, they argue there is 'no necessary or essential inside or outside between human and non-human bodies' (p.171) but a 'cut' is performed that creates boundaries between the two.

Karen Barad's (2007) combining of quantum mechanics with poststructuralist and feminist accounts in developing a material-discursive theory of performativity is a major influence in new materialism. She builds on Judith Butler's highly influential theory of performativity that focuses on iterability, or 'constantly repeated "acts"'

(Butler, 1990, 1993), but adds a materialist perspective that commentators argue is missing from, and thus weakens, Butler's thesis. Butler takes us to the level of the iterated movement carried out by a sentient actor but Barad invites us to analyse each of those re-iterated micro-movements and the influence of non-sentient actors. In Barad's thesis, the performative should be understood as 'intra-actions that reconstitute entanglements' (p 74). The more familiar term, 'inter-actions', refers to relationships between distinct entities: for Barad there can be no such thing as separate and distinct entities, hence the term 'intra-actions'. This neologism captures the idea that entities are not ontologically separable – each and every entity is constituted within and through its meeting with numerous other entities, that affect it and that it affects. In our case, entities may include actors, suits, mirrors, hair, and so on, but each is not a singular phenomenon. Rather 'each' are phenomena that emerge through complex entangled intra-actions in which all these seeming entities influence and inform each other, and are entangled with and inseparable from each other. Leaders, suits, mirrors and hair become understood as leadersuitmirrorhair.

The term 'entanglements' explains this: it refers to the inseparability of subsystems. Sub-systems are mutually informative (Barad, 2007, p. 283) and engaged in 'intra-actions' in which each influences all others and is influenced by all other sub-systems in the system (or phenomena) of which it is a part. For example, the business suit, the office and discourses of leadership may 'intra-act' in the constitution of leader identities, but they also intra-act to constitute business suit, office and discourse (Harding, Ford and Lee, forthcoming). What appear to be distinct entities emerge through their sub-systems and the sub-systems' sub-systems, all of which are entangled within and through each other. What we regard as 'boundaries' (such as

between suit and body) and ‘entities’ (e.g. the leader) are performatively constituted through these complex intra-actions.

Here ‘matter’ is an active participant: it is ‘neither fixed nor given ... [but] ... is produced and productive, generated and generative. Matter is agentive, not a fixed essence or property of things’ (Barad, 2007, p. 137). From a Baradian perspective, therefore, the leader cannot be understood separately and distinctively from her material presence, physical location, clothes worn, accessories, and so on: all these affect her as leader even as she affects them as office/suit/briefcase. Barad’s thesis explains assumptions contained within the endogenous theory of leadership-in-practice told to us by the research participants

However, Barad’s thesis cannot account for how subjects emerge in entangled intra-actions – Barad’s human actor appears agentive but has no more consciousness than non-sentient actors. How then do bodies and artefacts become agentially incorporated within and through the subjectivities of leaders? Barad (2007, p. 374) suggests that language or representations are lenses that mediate between the object world and the mind of the knowing subject, but she does not explore this assumption’s implications. The version of object relations theory developed by psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas does, however, do just that. Bollas’s theory of subjectivity highlights how encounters with objects are consciously thought about or unconsciously absorbed via free associations, and become part of the internal texture of the self. That is, Bollas explores how the voice that speaks in one’s ‘mind’ is stimulated into thought through its encounter with external objects that become internalised as they enter the imagination. This provides the necessary link with Barad’s work.

The mind, for Bollas, is restless. It is occupied by constantly flowing streams of thoughts evoked by the objects it encounters. In his poetic description, ‘As we inhabit this world of ours, we amble about in a field of pregnant objects that contribute to the dense psychic textures that constitute self experience. ... [We] sort of think[...] ourself out, by evoking constellations of inner experience’ (1993, p. 3-4). This is done through both deliberate choice of, and chance encounters with, people, things, and events. ‘Thus we oscillate between thinking ourself out through the selection of objects that promote inner experience and being thought out, so to speak, by the environment which plays upon the self’ (Bollas, 1993, p. 4). Much of this is not knowingly or consciously done, that it is ‘only ever partly thinkable’ (Bollas, 1993, p. 29). The ‘psychic intensities’ evoked by objects are full of latent thoughts that become condensed into single images, much like dreams condense the events of an entire day (Bollas 1995, pp. 51-55 *et passim*). Bollas’s theory makes sense of the work-on-the-self reported by participants in this study and highlights how evocative objects (such as ‘leader’) ‘“drive a shaft” down into the self’s unconscious, where it will join existent and moving lines of thought’ (Bollas, 2009, p. 83).

Bollas’s subject is, like Barad’s, heterogeneous and non-linear. His work complements Barad’s in its recognition of the multiplicity of moment-to-moment intra-actions between materialities, discourses, affect and, in Bollas’s case, psyches, but it facilitates understanding of how suits, offices and so on become part of the ‘inner structure’ of the leader. At the same time Bollas’s work is enhanced by Barad’s much richer perspective on materiality, her emphasis that the encountered object is agentic, and her questioning the taken-for-grantedness of ‘the suit’, ‘briefcase’ and so on.

This is the theoretical perspective that makes sense of interview materials in which we discussed with people charged with the tasks of leadership their perspectives on physical appearance, and the work they did or did not do to (re)present themselves as leaders. We now discuss the study's methodology.

### **The study**

The aim of this study was to develop understanding of leadership as material practice through engendering insights about if and how leaders manifest themselves as leaders by and through their physical appearance. Research into organizational materialities is bedevilled by the problem that the material can only be approached through the discursive, so studies must infer from the spoken word how sentient and non-sentient material actors intra-act. We were thus interested in exploring how participants talk about appearance, how they judge it, its influence on them and the work they do on their own appearance.

The study's objectives were to explore leaders' perceptions of the role of physical appearance in leadership, how they judged appearance in others, and the work they do or do not do on their own appearance as part of their materialisation of themselves as leaders. Using qualitative research methods to explore subjective experiences, we interviewed 20 managers who had been on leadership development programmes or who otherwise described themselves as leaders, using snowball sampling techniques to identify people from a range of positions, experiences, professions, organizations, genders and ethnicities. We did not seek a representative sample, not only because there is no standard population of leaders from which such a sample could be drawn, but also because our aims as qualitative researchers are not generalisation from a sample but theorising from 'knowing subjects'.

Interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes and had three stages. Stage One used a life history approach to develop understanding about the study's participants and their career path (Crossley, 2000; Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995). We added to this a question about their appearance and the work they invest in it.

The second stage involved an adapted repertory grid technique. Repertory grid techniques are designed to facilitate people's translation of their mental representations of the world into language (Kelly, 1955). They enable participants to put into words what is abstract and difficult to articulate. Like many other users of repertory grid techniques (Fransella, Bell and Bannister, 2004), we adapted the approach to suit our study by recording and fully transcribing the interviews. However, we used the traditional repertory grid approach of 'triading', that is, we asked participants to think about two excellent, two average and two poor leaders they have worked with. Through exploring what they saw as the differences and similarities between random triads of the people they had chosen, they were able to articulate thoughts they might otherwise not be able to put into language. We asked them to describe the appearance of each of the people they had chosen as their exemplars.

In the final stage, we combined repertory grid and photo elicitation techniques so as to mimic everyday responses to others' physical presence and explore how participants 'read' and interpret other's appearance. Photographs (Banks, 2001; Pink, 2007; Rose, 2007) elicit an aesthetic response to visual stimuli, conjuring up sensory experiences (Warren, 2008) and giving some approximation to the leader/follower encounter. We presented participants with 50 photographs cut from newspapers and magazines, of 25 men and 25 women in suits and less formal dress, covering all ages, sizes and ethnicities. We asked interviewees to choose two photographs of people

they thought looked like ideal, mediocre and poor leaders. Again we asked them to work with triads, that is, to compare and contrast excellent with excellent, average and poor, average with excellent and poor, etc. We asked them to explain their choices, and to imagine what would be said in an encounter with the persons in the photograph, something they did without difficulty. This conversational element gave insights into how participants interact with people they think are excellent, average or poor leaders.

Data analysis required two stages: data reduction to make manageable the 200,000 words in the transcripts, and in-depth analysis of the themes that emerged. Data reduction was achieved using template analysis (King, 2012). This approach involved the development of a coding template which summarises *a priori* themes identified in the literature review as important for the study and incorporated into the interview schedule. For this study, these themes included ‘work on appearance’, ‘the appearance of leaders they have worked with’, and ‘judgements about appearance’. Template analysis also allows for the emergence of unanticipated themes, so provides a flexible, experiential approach that researchers can tailor to their own requirements (King, 2012). King’s (2012) analytic framework led to the identification of two overarching themes: ‘reading appearance’ and ‘work on the self’. A third theme was to emerge during the second, intense stage of analysis of the themes.

The second stage involved intense exploration of these two themes. We turned for guidance to researchers who have worked with Barad’s perspective on performativity (Mazzei, 2014; Taylor & Ivinson, 2013). Their approach to data analysis focuses on data ‘hot spots’ (MacLure, 2013, in Ringrose & Renold, 2014) that ‘glow’ for the researcher, whether encountered during the fieldwork, analysis or later. Authors A

and B each chose a transcript from one of the interviews they had themselves carried out and immersed themselves in it, exploring how each theme ‘spoke’ to them. All three authors then met and spent 15 hours together debating, discussing and exploring, with Author C interrogating her colleagues about the reasons why these specific transcripts had been chosen, and the feelings/responses these particular interviews had invoked in them. In this way the ‘hot spots’ were shown to be moments in each interview that had evoked chains of thought in the interviewers (Hollway & Jefferson, 2012). These ‘hot spots’ were then subjected to stringent analysis, following MacLure’s (2013, in Ringrose & Renold, 2014) suggestion that we should not rush into fixing meaning but should adopt an ‘affective’ approach that can help slow down our processing and consider carefully what has captured our interest and fascinated us.

Through this long, intensive process of debate and discussion we recognized *something that did not make sense*. The multiple in-depth joint readings and discussions, paragraph by paragraph, of the two transcripts, resolved itself into recognition of the similarities between each interviewee’s self-description and that of their ideal leader. We call this third theme, ‘the self as ideal leader’. Checking showed it appeared in all 20 transcripts. We thus had three themes incorporating a range of material artefacts (clothes, hair, appearance more generally, and mirrors).

We turn next to the findings. In what follows we outline each of the three themes listed above and focus predominantly on the two participants whose transcripts we had studied so intensively, and who embody the organizational problematic (Clarke, 2002). We draw on other participants to demonstrate how these two speakers articulate perceptions similar to all other interviewees. This stage of the research led us to recognising an endogenous or lay theory of the materialisation of leaders, that we discuss next.

## **Findings**

Pen-portraits of Sasha and Richard (pseudonyms) written immediately after the interviews describe Sasha as a 40-something woman with well-cut hair, dressed neatly and fashionably. An upper-middle-level manager in the U.K.'s National Health Service, she is neither thin nor fat, pretty nor plain. Her voice is low and well-modulated; she is a little shy but projects warmth and competence. Richard is 45, a middle manager in the private sector. Slimly built and smart, he takes pride in his appearance, is loquacious and enthusiastic, ambitious, passionate about leadership, sometimes deliberate in his choice of language. He seemed an eager and enthusiastic manager who wished to appear authentic and committed to his work. Both are white and British.

### *Theme one: Reading appearance*

This theme that emerged from the photo-elicitation stage of the interviews provides a context for the remaining themes. 'Appearance' here refers primarily to the presentation of the self so as to 'look good' or 'look the part', but also to how participants thought physical characteristics, such as 'cold eyes' signified personal characteristics. The word 'appearance', used in this sense, is haunted by its other meaning, of making one's self manifestly present.

Participants were adept at attaching personal characteristics to people in photographs. We asked them to select examples of poor, average and excellent leaders from a pile of miscellaneous photos cut from magazines and newspapers. We did not define 'poor', etc., but encouraged participants to use their own definitions. They selected people whose looks, they felt, represented their leadership capabilities.

Asked to imagine a meeting with each person, they quickly articulated how conversations might go. Dee (female chartered accountant), chose a *'guy from the minority community'* who is *'likely to be more sensitive erm but he's also more likely to stand by what he believes in to an extent that other people might not be erm because if you've worked hard to get somewhere you fight when you're there'*. Chris (female business owner) contrasted two photos, one of a woman she thought must have *'an absolute passion for something'* who would be *'just absolutely, totally committed to what they're doing ... that can be infectious'*; the other of a man with *'cold eyes'* and a *'stern'* face, who would *'be straight down to business so with no acknowledgement that you're a person underneath it all'* and *'being quite critical and challenging as well ... he's right, he knows how it should be done, he knows what the answer is'*.

These speakers exemplify theories of looking in post-modern capitalism's 'looking culture' (Denzin, 1991), in which the visual representations of material subjects and objects have performative effects (Barad, 2007), and physical appearance presents an image that communicates identity (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Goffman, 1959; Roberts, Dutton, Spreitzer, Heaphy & Quinn, 2005; Roberts, 2005). People are visually literate, so physical appearance can be read not only like any other image (Rose, 1988), but in ways that are as 'complicated and indeterminate as any literary manuscript' (Grosz, 1994, p.117).

Richard and Sasha help us understand this. Richard made direct links between objects (such as hands) and characteristics (such as authority), in the photo he had selected of someone who looked like an excellent leader:

*She has quite a casual look but still a look of quiet authority or, or you know, I think that you can have a good conversation with her and be quite opinionated ... You know, not shabby, casual but very smart...Her stance, hands in pockets .... it looks quite authoritative (sic) there*

With scant, two-dimensional information he generates a description of the sort of person he imagines this woman to be.

Sasha reacted similarly. She selected as examples of poor leaders two women who were, she thought, dressed inappropriately for leadership – one *'looks like she isn't particularly bothered about how she's looking'*, and the other

*'there is something about her expression that is. I wouldn't – her clothes wouldn't seem, wouldn't be the sort of thing I would wear for work anyway'.*

One woman pictured, Sasha said, *'looks rather arrogant'* and if she could speak would *'be quite loud and quite opinionated, um and probably not not ready to listen to other people's points of view'*. The other would not *'say anything at all'*.

These statements contain judgements located in assumptions that looks reflect behaviour. Bollas's philosophy explains how images evoke such understanding: the mind is like a film director, taking the self through imaginary adventures and anticipated encounters. Freud's ideas of free association inspire his argument that *'we think by not concentrating on anything in particular – moving from one idea to the next in an endless chain of associations...'* (Bollas, 2009, p.6). That is, a photo may

spark a train of thought that leads to endless further trains. Importantly, those trains of thought are part of the work of constituting the self, of finding answers to the question: who am I? Barad's thesis suggests it is not only photos (and artefacts represented therein) that set off such trains of thought, but other artefacts such as desk, interviewer, interviewee, audio recorder, the office and its furniture, and so on. Each sets off multiply-branching trains of thought, so many they barely influence the conscious mind and remain unspoken. The numerous objects will be defracted through one another, that is, they will engage in an endless play of intra-acting images and discourses that challenge boundaries (such as between subject and objects) even whilst they are active in making the 'cut' through which 'real' entities emerge. Bollas and Barad thus complement each other. Interview participants were inundated by objects and discourses that were all thrown into the melting-pot of the mind, as it were, where some sort of sense is made of this bombardment as the subject makes sense of itself, because an 'illusion of understanding is essential to the creation of meaning' (Bollas, 1995, p. 20). In the particular space-time of these interviews, participants configured themselves as people able to judge a leader's characteristics through extrapolating from their visual representation.

This theme suggests leaders have a theory that physical appearance signifies leadership abilities. How then does categorisation take place: what heuristic defines excellence, mediocrity or inability? We explore this question in the third theme, but first we explore how participants work on their own appearance.

### *Theme two: Work on the self*

Theme one proposes that managers charged with the tasks of leadership believe appearance signifies leadership qualities. Theme two suggests they apply this

judgemental gaze to themselves: they work on their own appearance to present an image of themselves that they believe will influence others. Typical statements include *'when you're meeting people for the first time you think about what impression you're going to make on them'* because *'it's about playing the role so that people are not taking their eye off who you are and what you do'* (Jo, female, assistant director); *'I think appearance is really important.... But I think from an impact point of view I think it's important that you take care and attention over your clothes'* (Leslie, female, senior administrator); *'For me appearance is very, very important. I think it sets an impression straight away of the person that you are and what you want to achieve'* (Laurie, army captain and environmental manager).

Sasha and Richard similarly judge others by their appearance, presume others will judge them correspondingly, and aim to dress accordingly. When Sasha says:

*If I see somebody who looks together and fairly smart, not too trendy or way out, I tend to think that that's maybe their approach to life in general.*

She makes an epistemological claim that materialities (clothes and other aspects of appearance) reflect that other's entire being. Both Sasha and Richard constitute themselves as leaders within the terms of this claim. Sasha, asked what style of clothes she wore to work, answered:

*I do think that how you appear is very important. And because my job relies on me influencing people ..... I need to develop a respect and understanding with them very quickly and I'm very conscious that when I meet somebody for*

*the first time I'm very aware of the impression they create and I assume that's what's happening with other people as well.*

Sasha's answer starts with an unprompted measure of the value of appearance, followed by an insight into her personal theory of why appearance is important. This is: appearance is a material signification of a person's 'character'; people possess the skills of being able to read another's visual presentation of itself; when people meet they judge the other through extrapolating from appearance to character. This, perhaps, is a lay version of Grosz's (1994) and Kirby's (1997) arguments that flesh and bodies are themselves texts, and, in our case, of how appearance is also a text.

Richard's answer to the same question expands upon the agentive aspects contained within this theory. He describes using appearance as a tool for leading change:

*[T]wo years ago when I joined the production facility ... I turned up with a new suit. And I'll wear white shirts ... but people say 'You can't run production like that' and I say 'well why not?' ... These guys have seen something you know one way for the last five years, maybe part of the step change is I look different and I act different to the previous manager.*

Both knowingly use dress to aestheticise themselves and project an image they believe will work upon and influence others. They check their success at achieving the necessary guise through looking in the mirror every morning:

*every day before I go out of the house, even though I'm working in a manufacturing environment I'll still look and take a second look or say to my wife 'Do I look alright?' (Richard).*

Sasha is emotionally affected by the image reflected back at her:

*I'm obviously very conscious about appearance. Um, I hate going to work on a bad hair day (laughs). I do my hair.*

Sasha's and Richard's lay theory of the signification effects of appearance is shared by all participants in this study. Indeed, other studies have explored how staff knowingly choose clothes that portray a desired image (Rafaeli, Dutton, Harquail & Mackie-Lewis, 1997), although conscious image management is often achieved without knowledge of the multiple layers of meaning embedded in their clothes (Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997). However, such studies presume it is the clothes-wearers who are agentive; we explore below the agency of business-wear and accompanying artefacts.

These first two themes suggest a lay or endogenous theory of leadership, a theory-in-practice, which states that work on one's physical appearance is important because self-presentation signifies leadership capabilities. Bollas's emphasis on the importance of sight in forming the self helps explain this. Following Winnicott (1967) he argues that being seen (via the parental gaze and the reflection of the infant in the face of the mother/father) is important in the initial emergence of the infant as an 'I' with a sense of itself as a self. This continues throughout life – one emerges as an 'I', from moment to moment, through recognition given when subjecting oneself to the gaze of the other. That is, the subject (me, the leader) works on itself to present itself

as an object (the embodiment of leadership) that requires approbation and thus proof of success from other objects (colleagues, followers, customers and clients).

Barad agrees: subject and object are inseparable and co-emergent. Rather than fixing subject and object in advance, we should ‘read insights through one another in ways that help illuminate differences as they emerge: how different differences get made, what gets excluded, and how these exclusions matter’ (2007, p. 30). That is, participants should be understood not as subjects (me) describing objects (hair, suits, shirts) but as co-emerging and multiply intra-acting actants. If this is the case, then language, clothes, hair, make-up, discourses and the norms they carry, including those of gender, organizations and hierarchies, technology, mirrors, assessments, and so on, all intra-act so that the leader-self performatively emerges within moment-to-moment intra-actions with, say, clothes that are performatively constituted as ‘business wear’. Bollas shows us the importance of the witness, *the judgmental gaze of the other*, in this emergence. We expand on this below, when we interrogate this endogenous theory of leadership’s materialization.

The third theme explores the gauge against which participants assess how they look.

#### *Theme three: The self as ideal leader*

We asked participants to define what they understood as ‘poor’, ‘average’ and ‘excellent’ leaders in a separate part of the interviews from that which asked them to describe themselves. Cross-checking their definitions of themselves with their definitions of leadership illuminated that leaders’ own self-concept is the measure against which they define ‘excellent’ leadership and against which they judge others. That is, ‘excellent’ leaders are similar to, and poor leaders different from, how they see themselves. There is thus much variation in definitions of leadership qualities.

Jay, for example, described herself as short and looking too young for her job. Overall her self-talk is of androgyny: *I dress very neutrally for work erm and that's very conscious. [...] My clothing is not a statement in any way, my jewellery is not a statement in any way. Erm my hair, makeup, it's extremely neutral. [...] I don't wear sexual clothing at all so I don't wear tight skirts'*. She chose ideal leaders who were similarly androgynous: *'My ideal ... leader is neither a man nor a woman and ... they wouldn't wear clothes that were sexualised in any way'*. One of her choices of an excellent leader, *'was [like her] quite short. He ... was very concerned to be very neutral at work'*. Jo, meanwhile, was consciously surprised that all her choices of leaders were men, but her self-description is of someone who strips all signifiers of femininity from her appearance – she does not wear high heels, wears little make-up and emphasizes that she does not *'have my finger nails painted, I don't really show my nails at work'*. Leslie, on the other hand, does a great deal of work on her appearance, describing it in depth: everything has to look right. She distinguished her ideal from mediocre leaders by the amount of attention they paid to detail: *'those two [excellent leaders] have a quality of appearance and care over their appearance'*. Ray, passionate about his work and wearing suits only when he has to, specified that excellent leaders were similarly not bothered about appearance but were highly engaged in their work; like him they focused on 'substance' rather than 'surface'.

Thus for the androgyne the excellent leader is an androgyne; for the masculine female the ideal leader is masculine; for the enthusiast the ideal leader is enthusiastic; and so on. We explore the significance of this below.

Richard is the only participant who *specifically* stated that excellent leaders looked like him: *'what would they look like? Mmm. Me!'* Others did not appear consciously aware of the similarities between their self-definitions given at the start of the

interviews and their later descriptions of excellent leaders. However, Richard gives us insights into the relationship between self-concept and the excellent-leader concept. Richard identified only one person as an excellent leader: himself, but defines himself in relation to others he regards as bad leaders. He focused on bullies: one ex-boss was the: *'Absolute biggest bully I've ever met in my life. ... you thought, I'm dealing with ... a barrow boy who can rip me to pieces if I step out of line.* His predecessor in his current job was a 'bad' leader because of his bullying and destructive behaviour. Richard sees his role as protecting staff from bullies: he took his team with him when he left a firm run by a bully, and is changing the bullying culture bequeathed by his predecessor in his current job.

Richard defines poor leaders as the opposite of himself: he is compassionate, they are bullies; he dresses smartly, they are unkempt. However, he refused to identify anyone except himself as an excellent leader, always turning the discussion back to himself if asked to describe excellence in leadership:

*'an ideal leader ... would pass [their] knowledge on, they would share that knowledge ... They don't take over and take the glory ... You know, I could take tools off some of my workers, in fact I have you know taken a saw off someone as recently as three weeks ago and I said 'look, you're going to hurt yourself, this is how you use a saw'. ... That is coaching. If I completed the job and finished it and polished it all up and stood back and said what a good job I've done, that would be totally wrong.*

Richard consciously articulates what appears in other participants' talk to be an 'unthought known' (Bollas, 1987), that is something that is apprehended but not yet consciously articulated. Sasha typifies this. She denies that she is a leader:

*I certainly don't think of myself as charismatic. I think I am (long pause) I think I'm reliable and I provide reassurance, um, I provide a (long pause) I think I probably lead from the side rather than lead from the front, so um I'll be a very good lieutenant for the charismatic leader ... Um (long pause). In fact I'm not sure that I'm much of a leader at all really.*

However contradictions between this statement and her self-concept and definitions of excellent leadership emerge in the transcript. An excellent leader:

*would be somebody who gets results, because you can talk until the cows come home and you can be full of good i.. good visions and you can (laughs) um pontificate at great length but unless there's actually some substance behind it and you can see that things are changing and you're achieving what you're trying to achieve then, um. ....*

Sasha dismisses theories of leadership. The talk that, say, transformational leaders should do in sharing their vision is something she denigrates as 'pontification': she prefers 'seeing' changes happen in the present. She emphasises 'doing' as the ideal leadership characteristic. It is interesting then that she described herself as:

*I'm more a doer and a person that does the background, the spadework to make things happen....*

For Sasha, getting things done distinguishes excellent from poor leaders, and she describes herself as someone who gets things done. She may not admit it, may not be consciously aware of it, but her understanding of the excellent leader is mimetic of her image of herself.

In these accounts the speakers talk of 'character' and 'personality' rather than appearance. In Bollas's terms 'character' and 'personality' are woven into one's physical presence, that is, into a 'personal idiom' or aesthetic of being, an 'itness' that distinguishes one person from another (Bollas, 2007). This includes the voice, manners of speech, how the person moves and uses their bodies, the texture added when occupying spaces and the shape of their absence after they leave. Elusive, it is an important feature of unconscious communication (Bollas, 1993 64-5 *et passim*). Bollas thus expands upon Barad's understanding of materialities in an important way. Barad includes specific human actors, such as Ronald Reagan and Alan Turing, in her accounts of intra-action and entanglement (see model in Barad, 2007, p.389), but she does not 'deconstruct' them, as it were. Introducing Bollas's understanding of the complexities of individuals is therefore invaluable in illuminating how individual's affect, aesthetics, sensory signals and responses are entangled in intra-actions of 'personal idiom' and materialities.

This third theme suggests that, conscious of it or not, individual's definitions of leadership qualities reflect perceptions of their own self. In some ways this echoes long-standing research by social psychologists that suggests people are attracted to those who resemble themselves (e.g. Bretz, Ash & Dreher, 1989). But in the terms of

this study, the direction of influence is unclear: do people define leadership based on their self-perception, or do they model themselves on their definition of leadership? Barad would rule this question inadmissible: self-definitions are not prior to conceptions of leadership, nor conceptions of leadership prior to self-definitions: each is complexly entangled and intra-acting.

### **Summary: an endogenous theory of the materialisation of leaders/ship**

In aiming to understand how leadership is made palpably, materially present, this paper has analysed interview materials that suggest managers charged with be(com)ing leaders work within the terms of an endogenous theory of the materialisation of leadership. Their lay theory, or theory-in-practice, is that: other's leadership qualities can be read off from how they look; one's own physical presentation therefore must represent one's own leadership abilities; and so physical appearance must be worked on to project images of the self's qualities as a leader. Participants' own self-image, consciously or unconsciously, matches their image of the ideal leader. Pérezts, Fay and Picard's (2015) distinction between exogenous and endogenous theories of ethics is useful in locating this lay theory. That is, rather than exogenous perspectives that dominate leadership theory through prescribing how leadership *should* be practised, this *endogenous* leadership theory is subjective and conceives of leadership, like ethics, as an 'ongoing organizational phenomena ... pertaining to being' and thus leadership, like ethics, is 'an epicentre ... embedded in .. subjects' (p. 218) rather than in academic or management consulting theories. However, where Pérezts et al explore embodiment, our focus is on appearance, that is, on what covers over the flesh of bodies.

This endogenous theory's focus is on a morphology of the material self as something that can be manipulated through working on one's appearance. There was no mention of flesh or bone, illness or disability in the interviews, so the body itself was absent from the discourses through which participants articulated their accounts of leadership (Leder, 1987). References focused on those aspects of appearance that are amenable to being worked upon by the subject – her/his clothes, hair, and so on – and presented to others (and the self) as if it were the literal embodiment of leadership qualities.

However, there was no overt theorising by participants about *how* working on one's appearance makes one's leadership qualities, and thus leadership, manifest. We have indicated above certain similarities between lay accounts and Barad's new materialities theory, albeit that participants' accounts, unsurprisingly, use simpler language. We next draw on Barad and Bollas to explore how the concepts embedded in this endogenous theory explain how it 'works'. This shows how sophisticated and complicated it is, and thus how the theory we develop in this paper offers a new, experiential account of leadership as material micro-practices.

### **Discussion: Towards a theory of leadership as material micro-practices of the self**

The long history of exogenous or externally-imposed theories of leadership has been based on presumptions about leadership that are unsupported by in-depth exploration of leadership-in-practice. Indeed, some have questioned whether there is such a thing as 'leadership', with difficulties in observing it in practice leading to suggestions of leadership as a negative ontology (Kelly, 2014). However, the ubiquity of the term itself, its incorporation in business school degrees and participation by numerous

managers in leadership training courses suggest the performativity of the term brings that very thing, leadership, into being (Ford & Harding, 2007). But definitions of leadership are ambiguous and conflicting (Harding et al, 2014), and ‘so we go – as language permits – repeating a never ending chain of ambiguous signifiers, attached to other ambiguous signifiers, and so on, as if there were somewhere an original – fully present to itself’ (Calas, 1993 p. 323). Calas is here talking about charisma, but her arguments can be applied to leadership more generally. We have seen in this study that the ambiguity of definitions of excellent and poor leadership is resolved by participants drawing on their self-image as a way of achieving clarity about this identity they have been told they must adopt. They turn themselves into leaders through making themselves look like how they think leaders should look.

We next explore this lay theory’s explanatory power. We read it through Barad’s and Bollas’s work, thus suggesting this endogenous theory’s complexity. It is a theory of how non-sentient actors convey a multiplicity of complex and even chaotic images that are condensed, in the mind’s melting pot, into what appears as a deceptively simple account: by looking like the kind of leader I rate, I become more that kind of leader.

We follow our speakers’ focus on dress and mirrors, understanding them as agentive actors that performatively materialise leaders. New materialism understands objects as agentive – they act upon the world. This is echoed by the participants in this study: appropriate appearance signifies their leadership qualities. That is, clothes, hair, make-up, etc., are, in academic terms, themselves morphologically active and generative agents. This does not negate or reverse the sentient actor’s agency, but leads to an understanding of the constitutive interaction of sentient and non-sentient

actors. Sasha put this graphically in referring to a ‘bad hair day’ – on such days her work on her hair fails because it refuses to present itself as she desires. In some ways the intra-actions of self and ‘bad hair’ constitute her as ‘not-leader’ or ‘not-good-leader’, at least for a day. The rarity of such direct references to materiality’s agency necessitates exploration through other avenues.

Barad suggests (2007, p. 370) that a specific body’s ‘differential materialization is discursive – entailing causal practices reconfiguring boundaries and properties that matter to its very existence’. In our study this reconfiguration involves the transcendence of flesh, as seen in the absence from the interviews of any mention of bodies and flesh. No doubt water, deodorants, soap, showers, shampoo, scissors, emery boards and so on were used by participants to achieve contemporary standards of hygiene, but their absence from the interviews signifies that in lay theory leaders transcend nature and the disruptive aspects of bodies (Kem, 1974). Bodies and embodiment appear in lay leadership theory only as an absent presence, controlled and then forgotten about.

The non-sentient actor of most importance in the interviews is business dress. It is here understood as agentic, influencing the materialisation of leaders through what Barad (2007) terms causally productive forces of knowing and being. That is, in putting on the suit, as participants described it, they *became* leaders. But *why* does business dress signify professionalism (Kelan, 2013) and ‘the business leader’ while other forms of clothing do not (Mavin & Grandy, 2016)?

The business suit’s discourse constitutes wearers through its imposition of these norms. Leaders, looking in mirrors at their besuited reflections, may have little conscious awareness of these instructions beyond somehow knowing what is ‘right’:

they swim in the discourse of the suit with its sedimented layers of meanings, and, as Barad argues, are performatively evoked within and by its subtexts.

Bollas explains this through a theory of ‘object relations’ or relationship between the psyche and objects. This provides a means for understanding how ‘leader’ and ‘business suit’ constitute each other. Bollas understands individuals as a unique set of evolving theories that articulates its theory of who it is by selecting, using and being used by objects. The object here is the reflection of the putative leader, seen in a mirror. A glance in a mirror is an extraordinarily complex soliciting of the self through an experience (of endless ‘free associations’) that involves a dense condensation of known, half-known and unknown stimuli experienced in the encounter with the object (Bollas, 1992, p.29). It is only ever partly thinkable, a tumble of virtually simultaneous thoughts evoked by the glance in the mirror and rendered comprehensible through an image (me, the leader, in a suit) that simplifies radically all that is absorbed in that single glance. In reducing complexity to simplicity the mind does not eradicate the multiple meanings that are communicated in that glance in the mirror – they are there as sub-texts, unconscious but agentic.

Business dress and mirror together thus act, *effecting* the leader through the tumble of meanings represented and encapsulated within it. So the answer to the question posed above, of why it is the business suit or its equivalent and not other forms of dress that constitutes leadership, is that business-wear forms a visual discourse encapsulating norms, histories, cultures, economics, class, gender, etc., that other forms of dress typically do not offer. In other words, when dressing so as to look the part of the leader, the actor is immersed in norms that have evolved over decades, if not centuries. New labels may be attached to the suit-wearer: ‘leader’ rather than ‘manager’ or ‘administrator’ (Learmonth, 2005), but the norms encapsulated in the

suit inform wearers how to look, how to act, and how to take on the identity of ‘leader’, through these every-day, material micro-practices of the self.

A certain agency is permissible within these norms: we saw that participants chose their own self-image as a reflection of the excellent leader. Some, for example, were androgynes, some highly disciplined, some masculine and others rebels who defined themselves through refusing to wear suits. They worked on their appearance to project the desired image of the leader-self. So, for example, the masculine female chooses short hair, severe suits and no ornamentation, each of these carrying norms that, entangled, spoke of her as a masculine leader. But none defined themselves as very feminine, or dishevelled, or casual – such clothing and its related manifestations do not inherit the centuries of meaning of the business suit, and cannot therefore do service in the materialisation of the leader.

It is curious then that there was so little reference to charisma in any of these interviews, even though, as Calas (1993) reminds us, it has been integral to dominant (exogenous) theories of leadership since Weber identified charisma as a legitimate form of authority (Weber, 1946). Calas points out indeed (1993, p.324) that ‘transformational’ and other theories of leadership are ‘surrogates’ of Weber’s theory of charisma. Participants demonstrated their knowledge of theories of leadership through speaking of their desire to be transformational or authentic, yet the word ‘charisma’ was only mentioned in one interview as part of a claim by Sasha that she did not perceive herself as charismatic.

Could it be then, as Weber wrote in his later work, that charisma has become *routinized*, or domesticated (Calas, 1993)? In other words, rather than it encapsulating an aesthetic encounter between leader and follower as Ladkin more recently (2006) suggested, is charisma incorporated into that every-day glance in the

mirror when the putative leader checks that s/he looks like the leader they desire to be? Ladkin (2006) writes, following Weber, that the ‘follower must *believe* in the leader’s charisma’. Our study implies that *leaders* must believe in their own charisma if they are to be leaders. Borrowing again from Pérezts, Fay and Picard (2015), could we say that charisma is now so routinized that it is ‘an epicentre ... embedded in .. subjects’ (p. 218). The glance in the mirror, in this reading, becomes a sublime encounter (Ladkin, 2006) in which the putative leader not only persuades themselves that they look like a leader should look, but that those looks mark them out as special enough to be excellent leaders.

This is only speculation: it suggests that the next stage in exploring this endogenous theory of leadership is a study of those who feel themselves incapable of being leaders, or who can report as having failed at leadership. What do *they* see when they look in the mirror?

In summary, the seemingly mundane tasks of preparing for work through showering, dressing and making the self presentable can be understood as complexly-coded acts of *materialisation* of norms, codes, cultures, histories, economics, legal systems, and so on, all of which coalesce as rules about how ‘the leader’ should look. Participants in this study encapsulated this themselves in an endogenous theory that understands that leadership emerges through work on the self.

### **Conclusion: Future research?**

Leadership theories have omitted materialities such as the physical presence of leaders from their understanding of how, say, the transformational leader emanates charisma (Bass, 1985), the authentic leader makes her authentic self available for the emulation of followers (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999), the servant-leader provides a

model to inspire followers (Greenleaf, 1977), and so on. In these dominant exogenous theories leadership is understood to be something peculiar to certain individuals who possess the desired characteristics (Collinson, 2014; Ladkin, 2010), but these individuals seem disembodied (Pullen & Vacchani, 2013), as if they have no material presence. Such perspectives have recently been radically challenged by constructionist accounts (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010) that explore how leadership emerges through interactions between leaders and followers (Bligh, Kohles & Pillai, (2011). This implies the presence of physical selves in material places, but as yet the materialities of such encounters between leaders and followers remain unexplored.

Our study however sets out an endogenous theory of leadership in which the leader emerges as a material presence through intra-actions between the subject and non-sentient actors such as the business suit and the mirror. That is, before appearing on the organizational stage in which interactions between leaders and followers can occur, those who must take on the mantle of organizational leadership have worked on themselves through micro-practices of the self to constitute themselves as material articulations of leadership. In this perspective, there is no leader who pre-exists leadership practices, as the long history of leadership theory has presumed. Rather, the leader must constitute him/herself as leader and then perhaps practise leadership. However, leadership's long history has informed leaders about what 'the leader' should be: the business suit and other aspects of their appearance encapsulate and articulate these norms and discourses of leadership.

This study, in contributing to leadership theory and thus to organizational theory more generally, did not explore intra-actions between leader-selves and organizational space, where buildings, technology, furniture and décor intra-act with suits, hair, brief-cases and individuals constituting themselves as leaders, so further study is

needed. Power has appeared only implicitly in this paper – it needs explicit exploration. For example, the absence of bodies from leadership theory, which we observed in the introduction to this paper, is a form of architectural regulation that is an operation of power (Butler, 2015) and needs to be understood through further research.

This paper thus offers a new theory of leadership that emerges from practitioners' own experiential understanding of leadership in everyday practice. This endogenous theory challenges the terms of exogenous theories, and suggests the need for further studies of how leaders articulate and understand leadership in the everyday of organizational life.

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