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# The Social Construction of Leadership: A Sailing Guide

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## Abstract

A growing body of literature now exists concerning the social construction of leadership. This literature draws on a variety of definitions of social constructionism, multiple constructs, and an array of perspectives, approaches, and methods. To identify and understand the differences among them, this article provides a sailing guide, comprising four key dimensions, to the social construction of leadership. It applies the guide to the social constructionist leadership literature, including the articles in this special issue. It then discusses how the guide can act as a reflexive tool when various choice points are revealed and a means by which to chart future paths for social constructionist leadership research.

## Keywords

leadership, social constructionism, communication

Writing in the mid-1990s, Barnett Pearce welcomed the potential innovation and creativity that *social constructionism* brought to communication studies. However, he was concerned that this burgeoning literature was hindered by confusing and multiple definitions of social construction. He believed that

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there was a need to identify important conceptual and methodological distinctions among them to demonstrate their respective contributions. The question for Pearce was how to achieve this while remaining faithful to the aims of social constructionism. In his own words,

It is tempting to try to reconcile or compare these differences by refining propositions. However, this would be incompatible with social constructionists' own commitments. How precise shall we try to be in our statement that all statements are inherently imprecise? Fortunately, there are preferable alternatives to semantics as a way of sorting out differences among social constructionists. (Pearce, 1995, p. 92)

Pearce's answer was a *sailing guide* to social constructionism, metaphorically drawing from the ways in which sailors of old logged and charted new bodies of water to guide future voyages.<sup>1</sup> Seeking to avoid gross categorization or pigeonholing logics for constructionist approaches, he drew from Wittgenstein's claim that "we are often captured by the grammars of the language games in which we live" (Pearce, 1995, p. 92). He then proposed a three dimensional model of grammars onto which one could plot social constructionist theories and research to discern their commitments.

Pearce's approach serves as a model for the current article as organizational and business communication scholars have joined mainly with management scholars from Australasia and Europe to take up the social constructionist agenda for *leadership* studies.<sup>2</sup> Such an agenda challenges the privileging of a researcher-imposed view of leadership in favor of lay actors' constructions of the concept. Many of these scholars also challenge the individual and cognitive lens of leadership psychology, introducing a lens that is more social and cultural, one that does not relegate communication to a simple input or output status (Fairhurst, 2007). To wit, leadership is co-constructed, a product of sociohistorical and collective meaning making, and negotiated on an ongoing basis through a complex interplay among leadership actors, be they designated or emergent leaders, managers, and/or followers (Collinson, 2006; Grint, 2000; 2005; Grønn, 2000, 2002; Meindl, 1995; Vine, Holmes, Marra, Pfeifer, & Jackson, 2008).

The body of literature on the social construction of leadership is now extensive. It has grown dramatically, especially in the past 15 years, with no sign of stopping. However, we believe that the capacity of this literature to deliver on these contributions is, at present, somewhat undermined. To us, the relatively rapid growth in this literature has been at some cost. The language of social constructionism is often used indiscriminately; too many

studies offer up broad, nonspecific definitions; underspecified constructs; and a bewildering array of methods, approaches, and perspectives. As a result, how people talk about and analyze leadership using a social constructionist lens varies considerably. What is therefore required is a guide to the field, a means by which to identify and better understand the differences in emphases in this body of work. The hope is that it will not only guide the sense making of leadership analysts but also chart future paths in which, among other things, communication is made central.

So with due credit to Pearce's sailing guide as our inspiration, we propose one of our own in which we try to capture the intensification of interest in social constructionist-orientated leadership approaches in recent years. The first sections of the article outline some core premises regarding what we take social constructionism to be and what constructionist approaches to leadership share. We then introduce our own sailing guide, comprising four dimensions, and apply the social constructionist leadership literature, including the articles in this special issue, to these dimensions. We conclude with some observations about the purchase of our guide as well as its implications for social constructionist leadership research.

## **Uncharted Waters: The Social Constructions of Leadership**

### *Social Constructionism: Some Common Tenets*

Given our interests in social constructionist theorizing of leadership, some understanding of what social constructionism is appears necessary. At this juncture, we simply seek to identify some background and common tenets apparent in this work. In terms of background, social constructionism has roots in symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934) and phenomenology (Schutz, 1970); yet it was with Berger and Luckman's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) that it really took hold. More than four decades later, a considerable amount of theory and research subscribe to the basic tenet that people make their social and cultural worlds at the same time these worlds make them (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Burr, 2003; Crotty, 1998; Gergen, 1999, 2001; Hacking, 1999; Harre, 1986; Latour & Woolgar, 1979; Potter, 1996; Shotter, 1993). It is a perspective that brings to the fore social processes "simultaneously playful and serious, by which reality is both revealed and concealed, created and destroyed by our activities." As such, it offers an alternative to the Western intellectual tradition where the researcher "earnestly seeks certainty in a representation of reality by means of propositions" (Pearce, 1995, p. 89).

In social constructionist terms, taken-for-granted realities are produced from interactions between and among social agents (Hacking, 1999). Furthermore, reality is not some objectifiable truth waiting to be uncovered through positivistic scientific inquiry (Astley, 1985). Rather, there can be multiple realities that compete for truth and legitimacy. Material or otherwise, these realities are constructed through social processes in which meanings are negotiated, consensus formed, and contestation is possible. Such a view shows us how meanings that are produced and reproduced on an ongoing basis create structures that are both stable and yet open to change as interactions evolve over time (Giddens, 1979, 1984). As Gioia (2003) argues, we act as if these structures are real, “but none of that changes the fact that they are (intersubjectively) produced enterprises” (p. 189).

Given its emphasis on social interaction, it is unsurprising that social constructionism recognizes the fundamental role of language and communication (Barge, 2001; Barge & Little, 2002; Cronen, 2001; Pearce & Cronen, 1980). This recognition has contributed to the linguistic turn and more recently the turn to discourse theory (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a; Rorty, 1967). Most social constructionists adhere to the belief that language does not mirror reality; rather it constitutes it. Seen in this light, communication becomes more than a simple transmission; it is a medium by which the negotiation and construction of meaning takes place (Deetz, 1992; Jian, Schmisser, & Fairhurst, 2008).

Social constructionism, broadly defined, has its advocates in the organizational sciences (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b; Astley, 1985; Cooperrider, Barrett, & Srivastva, 1995; Deetz, 1992, 1996; Gioia, 2003; Grant, Hardy, Osrick, & Putnam, 2004; Meckler & Baillie, 2003) and its critics (Best & Kellner, 1991; Hammersley, 2003; Reed, 2000, 2001, 2004; Weiss, 2000).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, constructionist approaches to a variety of organizational and management phenomena are not only commonplace but also on the rise. However, why the increasing interest? One answer is that the growing disillusionment with many of the mainstream theories and methodologies that underpin organizational studies has encouraged researchers to look for new ways by which to describe, analyze and theorize the complex processes and practices of interest (Grant et al., 2004; Marshak & Grant, 2008). As a result, researchers have turned to constructionist approaches, and with the ascendancy of this perspective, there has been a greater focus on communicative issues. In particular and, in part, driven by the ascendancy of post-structuralist thinking, there has been a high level of engagement with discourse theory and analysis, which has been used to analyze a variety of important topics in ways that might not have been otherwise achievable. One such topic is that of leadership.

## *Convergences Among Social Constructionist Leadership Approaches*

Social constructionist leadership approaches commonly exhibit two inter-related characteristics. First, they eschew a leader-centric approach in which the leader's personality, style, and/or behavior are the primary (read, only) determining influences on follower's thoughts and actions. When leaders are the primary symbolizing agents, followers putatively surrender their right to make meanings by virtue of their employment contract with the organization (Fairhurst, 2001; Gronn, 2002; Smircich & Morgan, 1982). However, most constructionist leadership approaches place a premium on the ability of followers to also "make sense of and evaluate their organizational experiences" (Meindl, 1995, p. 332). Moreover, the lay theories, discourses, and sense making of leadership actors are not just anecdotal afterthoughts, niceties to be compared with the more objective and sanitized doings of science vis-à-vis scaled measurement and experimental design, but the very stuff of analysis.

Second, emphasis is given to leadership as a co-constructed reality, in particular, the processes and outcomes of interaction between and among social actors. Communicative practices—talk, discourse, and other symbolic media—occasioned by the context are integral to the processes by which the social construction of leadership is brought about (Fairhurst, 2009). As such, there is a resistance to essentializing theory in which leadership is to be found in a leader's personal qualities (e.g., trait theories), situational features (e.g., Hersey and Blanchard situational theory of leadership), or some combination thereof (e.g., contingency theories such as when a crisis and strong leader coincides; Grint, 2000, 2005).

Social constructionists are more likely to endorse an attributional, eye-of-the-beholder view of leadership (Barker, 2002; Calder, 1977; Meindl, 1993, 1995). This is because "what counts as a 'situation' and what counts as the 'appropriate' way of leading in that situation are interpretive and contestable issues, not issues that can be decided by objective criteria" (Grint, 2000, p. 3). In Gallie's (1956) terms, leadership is an essentially contested concept. Thus, social constructionists like Grint (2000, 2005) are more likely to problematize the variability and inconsistency in actors' accounts and analyst findings, address the conditions of their production, and try to understand how conflicting truth claims about leadership come into being and may actually coexist. Analysts often choose a constructionist path over essentializing theory because it supplies the necessary tools to grapple with communication's unending variety and detail (Fairhurst, 2007).

Paraphrasing Hacking (1999), Fairhurst (2007) suggests that a constructionist stance on leadership holds the following:

- I. Leadership need not have existed or need not be at all as it is. Leadership, or leadership as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable.

However, often a constructionist stance will go further:

- II. Leadership is quite bad as it is.
- III. We would be much better off if leadership were done away with or at least radically transformed.

A thesis of Type I that strikes down the inevitability of leadership is the common starting point for constructionist approaches given their rejection of essentializing theory. However, as the discussion below suggest, constructionist approaches may or may not embrace the second and third theses. Some, like Hardy and Clegg (1996), cast leadership as a mechanism of domination (Type-II thesis), a position likely held by many critical management scholars who favor more dialogic leadership/management processes (Type-III thesis; Cunliffe, 2009; Deetz, 1995; Fournier & Grey, 2000; Watson, 1994, 2001). Yet, a discursive approach that embraces critical theory (Types II and III) is social constructionist (Type I), but a constructionist orientation does not presume a critical one. As we will also see, there is great variety in Type-I approaches alone based on whether the emphasis is on the product or processes of social construction. Those who emphasize the processes of social constructionism can be further distinguished by their orientation toward discourse (a de facto content analysis versus a series of “doings”) and so on. In short, until these variations are highlighted and their implications evaluated, the contribution of social constructionism to the study of leadership will likely remain unclear and undervalued.

## **A Sailing Guide to the Social Construction of Leadership**

In line with Pearce’s (1995) approach,<sup>4</sup> we propose a sailing guide that enables us to characterize the grammars of leadership scholars, including those in organizational communication, using a social constructionist approach. This entails consideration of their research along the four dimensions summarized in Figure 1.

The four dimensions are not meant to be exhaustive. We acknowledge that other dimensions could be proposed or that individual dimensions could be

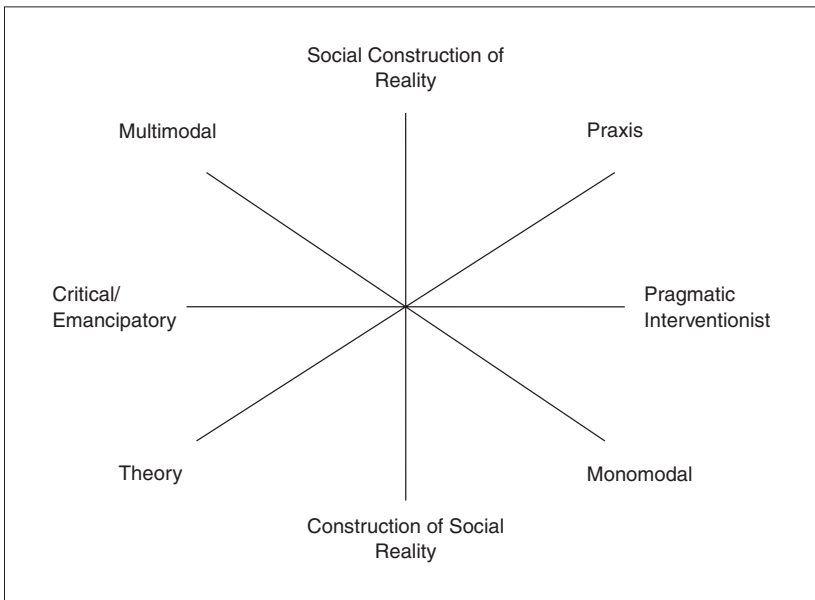


Figure 1. A sailing guide to the social construction of leadership

rendered more complex than a simple continuum connecting two extremes. Nevertheless, we emphasize that our motivation for these dimensions is not to provide hard and fast categorizations of leadership theories and research but rather to let authors' grammars speak for themselves as we point to divergences and commonalities over and above that which is presently understood. In particular, we believe that a sailing guide remains faithful to the idea that this literature is multifaceted, philosophically complex, and methodologically variant. Accordingly, the dimensions are not mutually exclusive; authors and their work could straddle all of these dimensions simultaneously, and thus the guide is an appropriate way of evaluating their crossovers and fusions. Finally, we make no claims to be comprehensive, only representative of the extant literature to date.

### *The Construction of Social Reality Versus the Social Construction of Reality*

Pearce (1995) distinguishes between the construction of social reality, which foregrounds perception, and the social construction of reality, which foregrounds action.<sup>5</sup> Such a distinction is key for social constructionist leadership



studies because the former emphasizes the cognitive products of social interaction—constructions of social reality involving categories, implicit theories, attributions, and sense-making accounts—whereas the latter emphasizes the interactions themselves.

*Cognitive products.* On the cognitive side, Meindl and colleagues' (Meindl, 1993, 1995; Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985) romance of leadership is a follower-centric concept that attributes to leaders more control than they may actually have especially as environments gain in complexity. Be they heroes or scapegoats, Meindl (1995) explains,

The model is focused on construction, referring to (1) the emergence, in the thought systems of actors and observers, of leadership as a way to understand and address organizational issues; and (2) alternative constructions concerning the definition, criteria, or "theory-in-use" through which leaders are evaluated. (p. 333)

Quite consistent with Meindl's follower-centric approach is the work of Lord and colleagues' (Lord & Brown, 2004; Lord & Emrich, 2001; Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984; Lord & Hall, 2003) implicit leadership theories. Their focus is the cognitive categories that define leadership, "explaining leadership perceptions in terms of the match of perceived characteristics to category prototypes held by perceivers, and showing the consequences of categorization for understanding leadership perceptions and the assimilation of information related to leadership" (Medvedeff & Lord, 2006, p. 20). Meindl and Lord's research programs are both schema based and sociocognitive, reflecting "a socially constructed understanding of the world derived from social exchanges and interaction" (Lord & Emrich, 2001, p. 562). Leadership is, in effect, a social construction of perceivers, which lends itself to study with traditional scientific methods (Meindl et al., 1985).<sup>6</sup>

*Attributions, frames, and sense making.* Moving along the axis, we find attributional theories of leadership and sense-making accounts. In Calder's (1977) attributional theory, leadership "refers to a set of personal qualities which are described in ordinary language" (p. 195). It "*exists* only as a perception . . . not a viable scientific construct . . . but extremely important as naïve psychology" (p. 202, emphasis in original). Calder's insight about ordinary language descriptions of leadership takes shape in sense-making accounts. They often draw from Weick (1995) who writes, "The content of sense making is to be found in the frames and categories that summarize past experience, in the cues and labels that snare specifics of present experience, and in the ways these two settings of experience are connected" (p. 111).

Several studies thus analyze the vocabularies and narratives of leadership actors as sense-making accounts, in which meanings are generated for the environments they enact, identities and relationships they manage, change they foster, and so on (Fairhurst, Cooren, & Cahill, 2002; Geppert, 2003; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Patriotta, 2003; Pye, 2005; Watson & Bargiela-Chiappini, 1998). Ordered category systems and framing typologies may be the outcomes of such analyses.

*Social interaction processes.* Finally, at the opposite end of this first dimension are the categories marking the social construction of reality, which are implicitly interactional, explicitly interactional, and sociohistorical interactional. All three invoke sociality, a negotiated interactional order; however, when applying Foucauldian archaeological analyses to leadership and management, such interaction is implicit. This is because Foucault (1972, 1980, 1995) conceives of discourse as a historically rooted constellation of ideas, assumptions, and talk patterns that, in effect, become linguistic resources for communicating actors subject to those discourses. (Following Alvesson & Kärreman [2000b], Foucault's discourse will be designated by a capital "D" [Discourse] to distinguish it from that of talk in interaction designated by a little "d" [discourse].)

For example, du Gay, Salaman, and Rees (1996) consider the "making up" of the manager in the West. As they explain it, "the idea of being 'made up' suggests a material-cultural process of formation or transformation ("fashioning") whereby the adoption of certain habits and dispositions allows an individual to become—and to become recognized as—a particular sort of person." Such a view guards against regarding "a given activity as in some sense 'natural'" (p. 264). The authors thus argue that management Discourses construct what management is and how it is to be performed during any given time period in recent history. Perhaps the most striking example of this is the way in which *leadership* and *management* were largely interchangeable terms until neocharisma Discourses made leaders into change-masters and managers into taskmasters who implement the change (Bass, 1985; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; House, 1977; Kanter, 1983; Kotter, 1990).

The crucial takeaway here is that Discourse remains at the level of linguistic repertoire, realizable but not yet realized in talk in interaction (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell, 1998). As such, Discourse remains a strategic resource necessary for social interaction about leadership/management concerns (Hardy, Palmer, & Phillips, 2000). In the case of multiple Discourses, leadership actors may carve a space of action between and among them to the extent a more nuanced, creative use of these Discourses cum repertoires allows (Daudi, 1986; Holmer-Nadesan, 1996).

Also implicitly interactional is Biggart and Hamilton's (1987) proposed institutional theory of leadership in which the structure of organizational roles confers an "available *array* [italics added] of leadership strategies" (p. 435). Their concern is with leadership performances that, "although the products of individuals, are shaped by the *possibilities* [italics added] of role relations between leaders and followers" (p. 436). Arrays and possibilities are made possible by the sociohistorical legacies of role relations.

In contrast to the implicitly interactional studies are those that are explicitly interactional. For example, Barker (2001, 2002) argues that the community qua system and its politics are leadership's true bailiwick. Leadership is a perception or attribution of emerging structure in a dynamic or chaotic system. It is "a process of transformative change where the ethics of individuals are integrated into the mores of the community as a means of evolutionary social development" (Barker, 2001, p. 491). Hosking (1988) similarly links leadership to influential acts of organizing. She explains that

it is essential to focus on leadership processes: processes in which influential "acts of organizing" contribute to the structuring of interactions and relationships, activities and sentiments; processes in which definitions of social orders are negotiated, found acceptable, implemented and renegotiated; processes in which interdependencies are organized in ways which, to or greater or lesser degree, promote the values and interests of the social order. In sum, leadership can be seen as a certain kind of organizing activity. (p. 147)

Ironically, Hosking does not bring the detailed power of (little "d") discourse to bear in her arguments or research. However, many discourse analysts do stressing the need to study sequential forms and categorization work as the architecture of leadership actors' social interaction (Clifton, 2006; Fairhurst, 2007; Iedema, Degeling, Braithwaite, & White, 2003; Svennevig, 2008; Vine et al., 2008). Regarding sequentiality, Boden (1994) argues that organizational action coheres as a sequence, whereas Gronn (1983) similarly used conversation analysis to demonstrate "talk as the work," or how administrative work is achieved, in part, by the ways in which conversational sequences both tighten and loosen the reins between a school principal and his teachers.

Fairhurst and colleagues (Courtright, Fairhurst, & Rogers, 1989; Fairhurst, 2004; Fairhurst, Green, & Courtright, 1995) argue for sequentiality by positing the interact, or two contiguous control moves, as the minimum units of analysis in leadership interaction. This is because it makes a relational difference whether a leader's assertions of control ( $\uparrow$ ) are consistently followed by

acquiescence ( $\uparrow\downarrow$ ) or competition ( $\uparrow\uparrow$ ) and vice versa with followers. Organic and mechanistic systems take shape as leadership actors' relational control moves form codified patterns over time.

Other analysts study the moves of leadership actors in narrative schemas, episodes, script sequences, and script formulations (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2002, 2004; Fairhurst, 1993a, 1993b; Komaki, 1986, 1998; Komaki & Citera, 1990; Komaki, Zlotnick, & Jensen, 1986; Vine et al., 2008). All seek to study the social construction of leadership in interaction processes via such (little "d") discursive approaches as conversation analysis (Boden, 1994), interaction analysis (Fairhurst, 2004), speech act schematics (Cooren, 2001), and the like.<sup>7</sup> For explicitly interactional studies, it is the connectedness, temporalness, patternedness, and embeddedness of relational moves that define them as social constructionists (Rogers & Escudero, 2004).

The final social interaction process category involves those leadership studies that are sociohistorically interactional. Here the macro influences of society, history, culture, and tradition demonstrably operate within the micro of specific interactions among leadership actors. The clearest statement of this position comes from discursive psychologists Potter, Wetherell, Gill, and Edwards (1990). They argue that Foucault's Discourse is too systematized, overly reified, and underutilized as a construct unless it is cast as an interpretative repertoire—a linguistic tool bag of specific terminology, metaphors, habitual forms of argument, familiar story themes, and so on (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell, 1998).

Such tool bags are ready for use by leadership actors who, in the moment of communicating, are managers of meaning and passive receptors of meaning all at once (Fairhurst, 2007). They exert agency but within the bounds of culture and society's institutions through preferred language and argument forms. Fairhurst and colleagues' (Fairhurst, 2007; Fairhurst, Church, Hagen & Levi, in press) work on the use of tradition-bound gender categories in leadership talk in interaction and popular press texts is a case in point. However, so is Boden's (1994) ethnomethodology-informed conversation analysis of an academic dean's interactions that ground macroorganizational influences within microinteractional sequences such as turn taking, agenda setting, report giving, decision making, and the like.

To summarize, a crucial distinction in social constructionist leadership approaches are those that distinguish between the construction of social reality and the social construction of reality. The former foregrounds the cognitive products of social interaction—constructions of social reality involving categories, implicit theories, attributions, and sense-making accounts—whereas the latter emphasizes sociality or the interactions themselves, be they implicitly, explicitly, or sociohistorically interactional.

## Theory Versus Praxis

A second distinction turns on the understanding of constructionist leadership research that privileges theory, whereas other work emphasizes praxis. As Cronen (2001) reminds us, it was Aristotle who “identified a unique kind of art, praxis, in which the goal of study was not truth (episteme), but practical wisdom (phronesis)” (p. 16). Thus, this dimension might be more properly phrased as theory versus theories in use. This discussion also overlaps with the critical/emancipatory versus pragmatic intervention dimension below but does not privilege issues of power as that dimension does. Note also that the terms leadership and management can be used interchangeably in much of the literature reviewed here.

*Constructionist leadership theory.* Shotter’s (1993) work on “The Manager as a Practical Author” stresses managers’ abilities to “make history,” not simply read the world as if it merely awaits discovery.<sup>8</sup> He observes that

good managers, when faced with . . . unchosen conditions, can, by producing an appropriate *formulation* of them, create (a) a landscape of enabling constraints (Giddens, 1979) relevant for a range of next possible actions; (b) a network of “moral positions” or “commitments” (understood in terms of the rights and duties of the “players” on that landscape); and (c) are able to argue persuasively and authoritatively for this “landscape” amongst those who must work within it. (Shotter, 1993, pp. 149, italics in original)

When Shotter writes about practical authorship, he calls it “*formative* power: the ability of people in otherwise vague, or only partially specified, incomplete situations . . . to ‘give’ or to ‘lend’ to such situations a more determinate linguistic formulation” (pp. 149-150, italics in original). As described below, Shotter’s work is proving influential for many constructionist scholars turning toward praxis.

In Grint’s (2000, 2005) constitutive approach to leadership, the focus is historical, the details of which allow him to cast leadership as an ensemble of arts: philosophical (identity issues: Who are we?), fine (vision issues: What does this organization want to achieve?), martial (tactics: How will we achieve this?), and performing (persuasion to mobilize others: Why should we want this identity, pursue this vision, and adopt these tactics? Grint, 2000). All are dedicated to understanding how leadership actors may indeed make their own histories.

In later work, Grint (2005) characterizes “the environment . . . (not as) some objective variable that determines a response but rather an ‘issue’ to be

constituted into a whole variety of ‘problems’ or ‘irrelevances’” (p. 1470). Based on Rittel and Weber’s (1973) distinction between wicked and tame problems, Grint proposes three kinds of problem-oriented contexts that leaders may pose to legitimate their responses. For example, a crisis, real or fabricated, can justify a command posture (think former U.S. President George W. Bush’s case building for the war in Iraq). Casting a problem as tame can justify a managerial response if there are known solutions to apply (think progressive discipline policies for wayward employees). Finally, overwhelmingly complex or wicked problems (think Middle East peace, global recession, and health care reform) require a carefully calibrated leadership response, although the irony of leadership here is not that leaders must have the answers; they must only know how to organize to go about getting them.

Kelly’s (2008; Kelly, White, Martin, & Rouncefield, 2006) work addresses itself to Alvesson and Sveningsson’s (2003a, 2003b) more critically oriented arguments described below on leadership agnosticism and leadership as the extraordinization of the mundane. Aside from this, Kelly (2008) reconsiders Pondy’s (1978) claim that leadership is a *language game* by reinstating Wittgenstein’s (1953) original use of the term. Not just language use, leadership as a *form of life* must be explored from the perspective of those who would use or assign such a term. Ethnomethodological methods are thus necessary to interrogate leadership in action and to focus on the logics and labeling that organize situated applications of the term—for both actors and analysts alike (Kelly et al., 2006). “Leadership, therefore should be treated as what Wittgenstein (1953, §71) calls a ‘blurred concept’ around and through which language-games orient themselves and can be played out in the practical accomplishment of other kinds of work” (Kelly et al., 2006, p. 775).

Finally, Fairhurst’s (2007) discursive leadership approach is a study in contrasts with leadership psychology. She follows Alvesson and Kärreman’s (2000b) lead in distinguishing between little “d” discourse (talk in interaction) and Foucault’s big “D” Discourse as systems of thought that resource actors as they communicate. Fairhurst draws from discursive psychology to note the ways in which Discourse can be seen as an interpretative repertoire (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell, 1998), guiding the use of categories and sequential forms as the architecture of leadership interaction. However, she also explores the ways in which Foucault’s (1990) examination and confessional technologies operate within executive coaching Discourses to discipline alpha male leaders and “other” female leaders in the process. Her work demonstrates the ways in which the strategic, relational, cultural, and material aspects of power intertwine in discourse to construct leadership in situ. Leaders are passive receptors of meaning as much as they are managers of it.

*Constructionist leadership praxis.* Although it might be tempting to consider the glut of popular press books about leadership here, in fact, social constructionist approaches to leadership/management praxis have a growing literature body of its own due to three main factors. First, in the action science tradition of Argyris and Schön (1996; Schön, 1983), communication scholars' are embracing practical theory (Barge, 2001; Barge & Craig, 2009). Such an interest regards theory as an instrumentality (Cronen, 2001); to use Craig's (1995) words, we use theory not just to learn "what communication is, but also what it should be" (p. ix). Second, a similar sentiment characterizes the emergence of critical management education (CME; the specifics of which are reviewed in more detail below), which foregrounds issues of power and ideology and takes seriously the emancipatory goals of critical theory (Perriton & Reynolds, 2004).

Third, foundational to both previous points is the turn toward discourse (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a; Grant et al., 2004), which is increasingly directed toward praxis. Marshak and Grant (2008) nicely summarize what this means for organizational development and, by implication, leadership/management more generally. Specifically, we see (a) a turning away from classical, objectivist (management) science to solve problems; (b) an interest in how narrative, text, and conversation shapes organizational processes and change; (c) how discourse creates and reinforces certain mindsets that ultimately shape behavior (and vice versa); (d) the potential existence of multiple socially constructed realities; and (e) a growing appreciation that certain power structures require change vis-à-vis the story lines that created them in the first place.

As such, the praxis scholars are giving leadership actors and analysts a glossary of terms for applied social constructionism. For example, several writers problematize meaning construction (Eisenberg, 2007; Fairhurst, 2005; Fairhurst, in press; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996; Hacking, 1999; Weick, 1979, 1986), speaking directly against leadership actors' simplistic treatment of communication in transmissional terms. Fairhurst (in press) casts meaning construction as framing, which "involves the ability to shape the meaning of a subject—usually the situation at hand—to judge its character and significance through the meanings we include and exclude as well as those we emphasize when communicating."

Several writers combine a focus on reflexivity with ethics (Barge, 2004; Barge & Oliver, 2003; Clegg, Kornberger, & Rhodes, 2007; Cunliffe, 2004; Western, 2008). For example, Cunliffe and Lun (2005) stipulate that

reflexivity draws attention to how we relate to each other ethically . . .  
Self-reflexive . . . administrators recognize their place in creating ethical

discourse, in respecting the rights of those around them to speak, and understand how their assumptions and use of words affect policies and, therefore, the social realities and identities of others. (p. 235)

Shotter (2005) and colleagues (Cunliffe, 2001, 2002; Katz & Shotter, 1996; Shotter & Cunliffe, 2003) speak of social poetics and authoring, the latter occurring when leadership actors notice and call attention to a subject, suggest new connections and relations, gather concrete examples, compare cases to lend order to experience, create a surveyable “landscape,” and know one’s “way about” and “how to go on” (Shotter, 2005, p. 128). Social poetics “embodies a precognitive understanding in which poetic images and gestures provoke a response as we feel the rhythm, resonance, and reverberation of speech and sound” (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 134).

There is an emphasis on the social or relational, as compared to the individual (Holman & Thorpe, 2003; Perriton & Reynolds, 2004), much as Shotter and Cunliffe (2003) speak of relationally responsive understanding, “which emerges from the interplay between our own responsive expression towards others and their equally responsive expressions toward us” (p. 16). It is then a short distance from the relational to the systemic (Barge, 2007; Cronen, 2001). For Cronen (2001), “the logic of system functioning evolves inside the system as conjointly created understandings about how to act and respond to others so that coherent action can go on” (p. 19). Barge (2007) advocates systemic story making in this regard, which recognizes that there may be multiple stories to tell whose convergences and divergences must be explored to respect everyone’s place in the system yet “create a coherent narrative about the situation from the various stories . . . in order to take action” (p. 12).

Barge and Oliver (2003) underscore the contributions of positive psychology in working with appreciation in which leadership actors are urged to “inquire into the life-generating and affirmative forces of the organization by eliciting ‘positive stories’ of organizational life” (p. 126). Appreciative inquiry recognizes the power of language to help construct a more positive, life-affirming way to lead organizations.

Finally, all roads seemingly lead to dialogue whose meanings are, by now, multifarious (Anderson, Baxter, & Cissna, 2004; Gergen, Gergen, & Barrett, 2004). At a minimum, dialogue involves “discursive coordination in the service of social ends,” but Gergen et al. suggest it is also an “intersubjective connection or synchrony . . . a form of coordinated action . . . dialogic efficacy that is bodily and contextually embedded . . . (while) historically and culturally situated . . . (and may) serve many different purposes, both positive and negative” (pp. 42-44). Variations on these themes emerge in discussions of participation by relevant stakeholders as a key dialogic commitment



(Deetz, 1992, 1995; Forester, 1999; Holmberg, 2000); reflexive dialogical practice, wherein reflexivity and dialogue combine so we “become aware of how our assumptions, ways of talking, and our practical theories help shape, and are shaped by, our responsive interactions with others” (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 46); and dialogue as the ability to “think together” (Isaacs, 1999).

To summarize, this second dimension of theory versus praxis is a bit of a misnomer if one interprets praxis to be practice sans theory. The dimension we have sketched here posits theoretical knowledge, as an end in itself, at one pole versus a more practical use of theory at the other. In the case of the former, several versions of constructionist leadership theory emerge in the work of Shotter, Grint, Kelly, and Fairhurst, to name just a few. By contrast, there is a growing glossary of terms for applied social constructionism that praxis scholars are using with leadership actors to hone their reflexivity skills—and all that it entails.

### *Critical/Emancipatory Versus Pragmatic Intervention*

Our third dimension concerns itself with issues of power. At one end, we have social constructionist studies that fit into the critical mould when they critique forms of power and dominance that relate to what leaders/managers do and how they do it. Emancipation of the oppressed is a worthy ideal here, although infrequently realized when critical scholars write only for other scholars. At the other end, we have more pragmatically based orientations where issues of power may be contingent or lightly drawn to engage more easily with practitioners. Novice readers may experience some terminological confusion associated with the terms management and leadership in this work as more than a few critical scholars explicitly reject the latter, omit it from their writings, or profess agnosticism. Others argue for its rehabilitation, whereas still others equate the two.

*Critical management studies (CMS)*. The constellation of perspectives in CMS is shot through with power. Scholars draw from critical theory, post-modern and post-structuralist theory, critical sociology, and linguistics to explain and critique the operation of power and control in management processes (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996; Alvesson & Willmott, 1996; Cunliffe, 2009; Fournier & Grey, 2000).

Cunliffe (2009) posits three schools of thought within CMS: (a) post-structuralist in which

realities and subjectivities are constructed both by discursive practices (linguistic systems and ways of talking, texts, ways of thinking, etc.)

and non-discursive practices (institutional structures, social practices, techniques, etc.) that regulate what we accept as ‘normal’ and what we do not. (p. 25)

See, for example, Hardy and Phillips (2004), Collinson (1992, 1994), Kondo (1990), Knights and Morgan (1991), and Fairhurst (2007); (b) Marxist and neo-Marxist, which examine the politics of capitalism, organization, and work. Critical theorists and labor process theorists under this banner critique the various forms of control that privilege elites, such as owners, shareholders, and managers. See, for example, work by Deetz (1992), Willmott and colleagues (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Sturdy, Knights, & Willmott, 1992; Willmott, 1997), and Wray-Bliss (2002); and (c) Postcolonialist in which Western views of management are the source of critique in a global business society. See, for example, Said (1993), Bhabha (1994), and Hall (2008). These are not mutually exclusive categories; gendered leadership/management scholarship, for example, crosses all three as literature reviews suggest (Ashcraft, 2004; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004).

The CMS schools of thought constitute, in Cunliffe’s (2009) words, a “different way of thinking—about social and organizational life as emergent, socially constructed, and inherently ideological and political” (p. 29). More specifically, Fournier and Grey (2000) draw from Alvesson and Willmott (1996) to describe “denaturalization” as a key commitment of CMS. They write that

If we conceive of twentieth-century management theory as being involved in . . . constructing organizational reality and rationality while effacing the process of construction behind a mask of science and “naturalness,” we can see CMS as being engaged in a process of undoing this work, of deconstructing the “reality” of organizational life or “truthfulness” of organizational knowledge by exposing its “un-naturalness” or irrationality. (p. 18)

In this inspirit, other CMS scholars like Mumby (2005) strike out at reductionist views of control and resistance as “an implicit binary opposition that privileges either organizational control processes or employee resistance to such mechanisms” (p. 20). Drawing from Mumby, Collinson (2005) argues that leadership processes would greatly benefit from this post-structuralist view of control and resistance as a set of “discursive, dialectical, contested and contradictory practices” in which “the meanings of such practices are to some extent open-ended, precarious, shifting and contingent”

(pp. 1427-1428). Collinson explores three interrelated leadership dialectics, control/resistance, dissent/consent, and men/women, whereas Zoller and Fairhurst (2007) add an additional five to understand the emergence of dissent leadership, including fixed/fluid meaning potentials, overt/covert behavior, and reason/emotion.

Contra the work on leadership dialectics, CMS scholars tend to be less enamored of leadership per se than other work reviewed here. If CMS scholars mention leadership at all, they cast it as a mechanism of domination (Hardy & Clegg, 1996), view it with suspicion for being overly reductionist (Cunliffe, 2009), or proclaim a need for agnosticism (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a, 2003b). Regarding the latter, Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a) argue that although leadership discourse portrays it as something special, leadership often loses itself amid the everyday aspects of the work, hence the need for a more agnostic stance. Also, Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003b) show how leadership is made extraordinary when mundane acts are performed by managers in the hierarchy. What managers actually do is less important than the social shaping of these acts either by the managers themselves or “highly responsive subjects” willing to buy into managerialist attempts to inflate the job of managing (p. 1457). More recent work on leadership and CMS, however, suggests a rapprochement, especially to understand dissent (Tourish & Vatcha, 2005; Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007).

*Ethnomethodological studies.* This is not a large category, but Boden's (1994) ethnomethodology-informed conversation analysis and others like it (Clifton, 2006; Fairhurst & Cooren, 2004; Iedema et al., 2003) stake out a middle position between CMS and the pragmatic interventionists below in terms of issues of power. Although CMS scholars presume that the operation of power is universal, conversation analysts eschew any a priori analytic concepts (hence, an indifference toward them), unless and until actors make it relevant in their talk in interaction (Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997). As such, conversation analysts espouse unmotivated looking, which means that they prefer to let the data speak for itself versus any a priori concerns, such as power and control or, for that matter, leadership (Psathas, 1995). Such a view is reminiscent of Alvesson and Sveningsson's (2003a) agnosticism toward leadership. However, Boden's (1994) ethnomethodology-informed conversation analysis of an academic dean's interactions reflects her particular orientation. She writes,

As people talk organizations into being, they simultaneously pick out the particular strands of abstract order that can relevantly instantiate the moment . . . . Conversational procedures invoked by members,

characterized as members' practices, operate as both *interactionally* and *organizationally* relevant activities . . . Talk is not *just* talk, but rather the mode and medium through which the structure of the organization is constituted and reconstituted. (Boden, 1994, p. 202)

Boden thus further distinguishes herself from CMS by flatly rejecting any division between macro- and microconcerns, such as can be found in separating little "d" discourse from big "D" Discourse (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b). In an ethnomethodology-informed conversation analysis, interactional processes are simultaneously organizational as leadership actors position themselves vis-à-vis one another and specifically occasion that which is organizationally relevant. In this way, she captures structure in action and grounds the organization similarly (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004), power dynamics operating outside of actors' awareness, a CMS focus, notwithstanding.

*Pragmatic intervention.* In contrast to CMS, where the commitment to critique is overriding and issues of power are explicit as well as the show-me school of power in studies marked by ethnomethodological indifference, are the pragmatic interventionists (Grant & Iedema, 2005). Here, issues of power are always present but may be more lightly sketched given the desire to engage with what leaders/managers are tasked to do or the roles that other stakeholders may wish to assume (Fournier & Grey, 2000).<sup>9</sup> One group of pragmatic interventionists previewed above are critical management educators (CMEs), who try to foreground processes of power and ideology and infuse management education practices with a sense of ethics, moral responsibility, reflexivity, and relational responsibility (Anthony, 1998; Cunliffe, 2004, 2009; Deetz, 1995; Perriton & Reynolds, 2004; Watson, 1994; Western, 2008).

For example, Cunliffe (2009) asserts that thinking about organizational life as emergent, socially constructed, inherently ideological, and political "encourages managers to challenge taken-for-granted realities, places upon them a responsibility for relationships with others, and forms the genesis for alternative realities" (p. 28). Watson (2001) argues, "Critique is an activity engaged in by the wise scholar and the wise man or woman of action equally" (p. 388). Such a principle forms the foundation for Watson's proposed negotiated narratives in which the stories of management students go up against the concepts and theories of (critical) management academics (e.g., big "D" management Discourses) mutually to inform one another in a learning environment.

Likewise, in *The Deliberative Practitioner*, Forester (1999) focuses on the politics of meaning in storytelling among planners where

in planning practice . . . stories do particular kinds of work—*descriptive work* of reportage, moral work of constructing character and reputation . . . *political work* of identifying friends and foes, interests and needs, and the play of power in support and opposition, and, most important . . . *deliberative work* of considering means and ends, values and options, what is relevant and significant, what is possible and what matters, all together. (p. 29, italics added).

For Forester and others in this category, there is a commitment to work within the logics, grammars, and tasks of the practitioners. For this reason, CMEs' efforts are not without controversy, especially to the extent that reaching out to managers compromises the aims of the critical project should managerialism be furthered (Anthony, 1998; Fournier & Grey, 2000; Nord & Jermier, 1992; Watson, 2001). In other words, what happens when managers are not sold on the value of critique or, alternatively, when they use it to further their own interests?

To summarize, the third dimension in our sailing guide is critical/emancipatory versus pragmatic intervention, and it concerns itself with the explicitness of power dynamics in social constructionist research. CMS specifically emphasize the critique of power and emancipatory goals. Studies marked by ethnomethodological difference require actors to first make issues of power/control specifically relevant to the task at hand, whereas pragmatic intervention may tread more lightly on power dynamics to stay within the logics, grammars, and tasks of the participants involved.

### *Monomodal Versus Multimodal*

Our fourth dimension concerns whether researchers limit their attention solely to leadership actors' language in organizations or whether they focus on other means of generating meaning through, for example, the use of space, the body, clothing, technology, and so on. A significant proportion of the constructionist leadership research remains predominantly language focused or monomodal (Iedema, 2007). The assumption here is that an understanding of linguistic representation and practice is adequate to account for and reason about leadership (Raisanen & Linde, 2004). By contrast, others have adopted approaches that are multimodal in nature in which language use is but one means of understanding this phenomenon (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). As the monomodal constructionist leadership research is the norm, this discussion will concentrate on those schools of thought that attempt multimodality. The literatures here are not large and, excepting CMS studies, use the words leadership and management interchangeably.

*CMS studies.* The backstory in this group of studies derives from debates around materialist concerns in theories of discourse. Some charge that an exclusive focus on discourse lends itself to relativism, the collapse of the material into discourse (Reed, 2000, 2001), and/or discoursism, the collapse of all things organizational into discourse (Conrad, 2004). The intent here is not to get into this debate but simply to suggest that post-structuralists like Laclau and Mouffe (1985) would likely argue that jailed Enron executives would not be socially constructing themselves out of prison any time soon.<sup>10</sup> Their point and Foucault's is that our access to the material world is never direct but is always mediated by systems of meaning in the form of Discourse.

However, CMS scholars like Reed (2004) and Cloud (2005) are realists who want the constraints on agency understood in terms of preexisting institutional forms (social and economic structures) and material conditions (technology, space, the body, and so on). CMS scholars are multimodal to the extent that they focus on the institutional and material in addition to issues of language. For example, Keenoy, Oswick, and Grant (2000) offer a multimodal account of organizational leaders' "food they ate, . . . the building projects they financed, . . . their homes, habits, values, procedures, policies, business strategies" (pp. 542-544). Zoller and Fairhurst's (2007) analysis references "the dramatic flourishes associated with the speaking of truth to power (that) are often physical or material such as gestures, . . . chanting that gains in momentum and volume, sloganeering through signage, apparel changes . . . and the like" (p. 1349).

*Post-structuralism.* Sinclair (2005) cogently argues for a multimodal approach in noting that the extant (mainstream) leadership literature "behaves as if leadership was degendered and disembodied" whereas the "accomplishment of leadership is often highly dramatic and full-bodied" (p. 388). Drawing from Foucault (1990, 1995), feminist scholarship and gender in organizations (Acker, 1990; Hassard, Holliday, & Willmott, 2000), and masculinities in management (Collinson & Hearn, 1996; Kerfoot & Knights, 1996), Sinclair's focus is on the physical bodies of women leaders, "the movements they make and voices which emanate from them, as well as representation of those bodies . . . (including) stature, stance and posture, voice, gestures, appearance and costume" (p. 391). Sinclair argues that the attention given to bodies is an inherently political act for both leadership actors and analysts alike.

We see yet another instance of leadership multimodality with Boje and Rhodes' (2005) study of virtual transformational leaders. Drawing from Baudrillard's (1983) work on simulacra, they argue that "virtual leaders can exist at different levels of virtualization, which enact different forms of

substitution for traditional leadership” (p. 408). More specifically, depending on the ways in which leaders become mass mediated, over and above their bodily enactments, these virtualized and resemiotized leaders can be made transformational during a crisis.

*Actor-network theory (ANT)*. Fairhurst and Cooren (Fairhurst, 2007; Fairhurst & Cooren, 2009) draw from ANT to study charismatic leadership presence. In ANT, the focus is on human and nonhuman agents (technology, clothing, money, etc.), their hybrid forms, networked social action, and macroacting, the latter of which enables leaders and followers to speak on behalf of their organizations (Latour, 1994, 2005). Case comparisons of high-profile, successful versus unsuccessful leaders during crises showed that charismatic presence is not so much a force of the leader’s personality but surfaces in specific embodiments, use of technology, arrangement of space, choice of cultural texts, and so on. Rudolph Giuliani’s extensive networking with emotion-laden people, objects, and texts at the height of 9/11 turmoil compared to New York Governor Pataki’s pro forma politician’s performance is exemplary in this regard.

To recap, this fourth dimension captures whether constructionist leadership researchers choose a monomodal language focus or whether they also introduce aspects of the material and/or institutional to explain leadership. Historically, the bias has been toward the former, although more recent work is increasingly moving toward the latter.

## The Special Issue

The remainder of this special issue of *Management Communication Quarterly* comprises six further articles.<sup>11</sup> In various ways, each draws attention to leadership as a socially constructed phenomenon and in so doing draws attention to the important role of language and particularly discourse in constituting the meanings, expectations, identities, and images attached to leaders. Here, we introduce each article and discuss them in relation to the dimensions identified on our sailing guide.

The first article by Brigid Carroll and Lester Levy seeks to examine identity formation in the context of leadership development. It is arguably the core intent of this context; yet the literature remains largely silent on the issue. The authors analyze participants’ online narratives associated with a leadership development program, drawing out the tension, struggle, and ambiguity of leadership identity construction processes. Specifically, Carroll and Levy cast leadership development programs as potential sites of surveillance, discipline, and confession, which complicate the emergence of leadership from within.

Our sailing guide's dimension that contrasts the construction of social reality versus social construction of reality would locate Carroll and Levy's study in the middle category of "attributions, frames, and sense making," given that program participants find themselves amidst "reflexivity and contextual instability that propels social actors into experiences of active and even intense identity work" in the struggle to make sense of it all (pp. 211-231). Although the authors make overtly critical observations, they use them in ways designed to enhance the effectiveness and richness of the leadership development experience suggesting a pragmatic interventionist stance. Their narrative analysis is more mono- than multimodal; yet it effectively mines the power of a linguistic approach.

With an interest in authentic leadership, Helena Liu's article explores the ways in which business leaders are required to answer to public concerns about their past and present failures. In contrast to the extant literature's emphasis on quantifiable measures of poor performance, Liu offers a typology of framing strategies used by leaders to counter the potentially damaging effects of past failures and mistakes. Her study shows that failure framing can indeed influence the construction of a positive leadership image, especially considering the complex interplay between the media, leaders, and public consumers of media stories (Chen & Meindl, 1991). Moreover, such framing "need not necessarily be considered an indicator of inauthenticity" (pp. 232-239).

Similar to Carroll and Levy, we would locate Liu's study in the attributions, frames, and sense-making category of the sailing guide's construction of social reality versus social construction of reality dimension. The emphasis here is on failure frames in media texts of account making (read, sense making) by the actors involved (e.g., leaders' press conferences and interviews as well as journalistic write-ups). The twist introduced by Liu, however, is to characterize failure framing as a rubric of master frames (Snow & Benford, 1992), which are broad and interrelated depending on the various contingencies of the failure involved. Thus, this study is more about theory than praxis as it interrogates media texts to consider what constitutes leadership failure, whether perceptions of leadership failure are always justified, and how leaders seek to address such perceptions. Finally, the study is more monomodal than multimodal in its exclusive focus on framing strategies.

Ray Gordon's study explores the embedded nature of power in what people say and do in social settings. However, his data combine interviews and sense-making accounts with ethnographic observation of naturally occurring interactions. In terms of our sailing guide's construction of social reality versus social construction of reality dimension, the former would fall into the same attributions, frames, and sense-making category as with the previous



two articles, whereas the later falls into the sociohistorically interactional category found at the social-construction-of-reality end of the continuum. Gordon is critical of the extant literature on dispersed leadership, which tends to normalize power and treat it in an apolitical manner. However, in focusing on power, he appears to eschew an overtly critical/emancipatory position and instead takes a more pragmatic interventionist view, suggesting that with his work, “the ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ of dispersing leadership is not the concern, enhancing the knowledge of how to do so is” (pp. 260-287). He uses a communicative framework of analysis in which discourse analysis is used to expose the operation of power in the interactions, narratives, and stories of the police officers involved. Accordingly, the study is more monomodal than multimodal with an emphasis on analyzing the language of interviewees.

The focus of John Shields and Arlene Harvey’s article is imported leaders, specifically high-profile senior executives brought from one country to lead major corporations in another. They analyze print media representations of one high-profile U.S. executive, Solomon Trujillo, who between 2005 and 2009 was CEO of the leading Australian telecommunications firm, Telstra. Trujillo was brought to Australia to lead Telstra during a controversial and politically charged full privatization process. The study shows how he came to act out the stereotypical foreignness with which he was depicted in the Australian media, this being despite his best efforts, at certain points during his tenure, to construct a counternarrative. Shields and Harvey also show how narratives of foreignness and Trujillo’s counternarrative correlate with shifts in market sentiment as indexed by movements in the company’s share prices.

Similar to Liu, Shields, and Harvey analyze media texts; however, from these texts the latter attempt to construct a narrative of Trujillo’s (attributed) leadership writ large and as falling into the phases of culture shock, including the honeymoon, crisis, adjustment, and adaptation. Given this study’s emphasis on attributed leadership (or lack thereof), this study falls into the attributions, frames, and sense-making category as do the other articles. This study is also more theory than praxis and language focused or monomodal than multimodal. Trujillo was described in literal forms (descriptors such as charming, tough, brash, etc.) and in metaphorical terms (e.g., cowboy, evangelist, amigo, and associated phrases) as the data were subjected to a dramaturgical framework of analysis to show the discursive shifts among the dominant culturally charged metaphors emerging throughout the various phases of Trujillo’s leadership of Telstra.

The next contribution to the special issue represents a departure from the conventional format usually found in journals. Kevin Barge and Dennis Tourish provide an exchange of letters in which they consider whether a

social constructionist perspective can provide some fresh insights into the study of leadership. By adopting this format, they engage in an uninhibited, free-flowing, and informative discussion about the potential contribution of social constructionist studies to leadership theory and practice. As the exchange unfolds, we also see them considering a range of issues pertinent to the dimensions of the sailing guide we have outlined in this article. Importantly, Barge and Tourish both use the letters as an opportunity to articulate a future research agenda for social constructionist leadership studies. Both are intent on an approach that allows critical insight sensitive to issues of power. At the same time, such insights gained are to be applied with an eye toward the pragmatic.

The final contribution to the special issue is provided by Keith Grint and Brad Jackson. Their article reviews the articles in the special issue. In doing so, it identifies a number of key themes and issues and how these might inform our understanding of the social construction of leadership and the role of communication within this.

## Discussion and Conclusions

In this article, we discuss the intensification of interest in social constructionist leadership approaches in recent years. To make sense of this growing and diverse literature, we have drawn up a sailing guide. In this final section, we make some observations about the purchase of our guide for those engaged in or considering social constructionist leadership research.

Our sailing guide comprises four dimensions: the construction of social reality versus the social construction of reality, theory versus praxis, critical emancipatory versus pragmatic interventionist, and monomodal versus multimodal. We applied each dimension to the social constructionist leadership literature and to the articles in this special issue. In doing so, we encourage thinking of this body of work as multifaceted because it straddles a combination of these dimensions at any one time. But the value of the sailing guide does not simply lie in its post hoc application to extant research; we should not overlook its potential as a reflexive tool. We see the sailing guide as a means to get researchers to clarify their own constructionist stance and perhaps consider a wider range of approaches to studying leadership than might otherwise have been the case.

To use the sailing guide in this way, we believe it is helpful to draw on the work of Prichard, Jones, and Stablein (2004). Drawing on Denzin and Lincoln (2000), these scholars argue that researchers are likely to encounter five key choice points in any research project. Prichard and colleagues apply these

choice points to the field of organizational discourse, but here we show how constructionist leadership researchers might amplify the value of the sailing guide to their own work by using them. In short, researchers should systematically ask themselves five questions, namely, (a) “who am I?” (b) “which theory?” (c) “which research strategy?” (d) “which methods of data gathering and analysis?” and (e) “for what purpose?” which are discussed below.

*Who am I?* Denzin and Lincoln (2000) assert that researchers should develop a reflexive understanding of the context in which they find themselves. They need to be sensitive to how their research is being influenced by their own social background, preferences, and the circumstances under which the research is to take place. Here issues of gender, race, class, and culture often come into play as do issues pertaining to academic discipline, intellectual traditions, and publications strategies. For social constructionist leadership study, such issues are highly pertinent—much as we, as authors, have discovered. For example, we both share an interest in organizational discourse, but Gail’s home discipline is communication and U.S. based whereas David’s is management, not only U.S. based but also European and Australasian. Critically, any aspect of our respective stances or the synergies they form influence how we write and address the remaining choice points outlined below. For all constructionist leadership researchers, answering “Who am I?” influences the positioning of their research in relation to the sailing guide’s four dimensions.

*Which theory?* A second key choice point, one’s theoretical framework, connects the researcher and their research to a particular intellectual community. This is a critical issue, and the choice made represents an important juncture in the research process. For example, in the sailing guide, a key dimension stresses the construction of social reality versus the social construction of reality. The former drives theorizing around the cognitive products of social interaction—constructions of social reality involving categories, implicit theories, attributions, and sense-making accounts—whereas the latter emphasizes sociality or the interactions themselves, be they implicitly, explicitly, or sociohistorically interactional. At a more basic level, the theorizing of cognitive products emphasizes leadership actors’ inner motors, whereas the theorizing of sociality focuses on actors as cultural products, among other things. Attention to “Which theory?” in the sailing guide may productively lead to “How, and under what circumstances, can we study both?” in future research.

*Which research strategy?* The theory versus praxis and the critical-emancipatory versus pragmatic interventionist dimensions of the sailing guide both point to a choice between purely theoretical research or theory applied to some practical end. This requires the researcher to develop an appropriate

research strategy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), the more traditional of which connects one's theory to a set of research questions and methodology (Prichard et al., 2004) versus one that engages practitioners in some meaningful way in the design of the research process and development of practical theory (Cronen, 2001; Van De Ven & Johnson, 2006). What the sailing guide makes clear is that an increasing number of such strategies are now available to constructionist leadership scholars at both ends of both continuums, especially with the emergence of social constructionist leadership praxis and CME. Reflexivity around "Which strategy?" should spur further theory-praxis debate and the generation of useful knowledge for multiple audiences in future research.

*Which methods of data gathering and analysis?* To a great degree, answering the methods and analysis question determines where one's research sits on the mono- versus multimodal dimension of the sailing guide. If the researcher seeks to limit their attention to leadership actors' language use, then a mono-modal approach focusing on conversation, dialogue, or rhetoric may suffice. However, and as we saw earlier, CMS, post-structuralist, and actor network theory schools of thought encourage researchers to consider language as only one of several means by which to examine leadership. Here, a multimodal focus pushes the data gathering and analysis to be sensitive to the symbolic, material, and/or the institutional—and future research looks to be headed in this direction. In broader terms, however, the choice of data types, methods of data collection, and analytic techniques (discursive or otherwise) requires careful thought (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), such as when aligning one's constructionist theory with the research questions and methodology. Answering the question, "Which methods and analysis?" in this way, we can dispense with the myth that reduces discourse analyses to a simple methodological choice within a larger genre of qualitative research.

*For what purpose?* This question overlaps with "Which research strategy?" where the latter focuses on the generation of theoretical knowledge and debate in one or more intellectual communities within the academy versus seeking to contribute to the welfare of particular practitioner groups in society. Although purpose typically dictates strategy, outcomes are the foci here. For example, choosing to produce some form of text critiquing forms of power and dominance that relate to the practice of leadership remains faithful to the emancipatory traditions and the "appropriate disciplinary practices" (Prichard et al., 2004, p. 230) of the critical school but will likely only appeal to other scholars from that school. By contrast, such researchers may choose approaches that tread carefully in relation to power enabling them to engage with practitioners in ways that provide pragmatic options for addressing the power-related problems identified. However,

there are inevitable tensions that belie the seeming clarity of this either-or choice that should be identified and managed, such as the possible elitism or impracticality of the critical scholar (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996) or the educator who ends up enhancing a leader's power base at the expense of constituents. Answering the question "For what purpose?" then gets constructionist leadership scholars envisioning outcomes and possible intended and unintended consequences.

In this article, we have provided a sailing guide to the burgeoning literature on the social construction of leadership. The value of the guide is threefold. First, it allows us to plot the many social constructionist studies available and identify their various aims and contributions. Second, it can be used by constructionist researchers to reflect on their own approaches to the study of leadership, especially when considering the choice points articulated above. Finally, the sailing guide can help formulate new research agendas that stress the centrality of communicative practices and other symbolic media to leadership. Doing so, we believe, offers the potential for new insights that can only serve to enrich the social constructionist study of leadership.

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### **Notes**

1. Pearce's sailing guide was based on mapping various approaches to social constructionism using a number of key dimensions first proposed in Pearce (1993).
2. This is not intended to exclude social constructionist management scholars from North America, only to point out that there are fewer of them.
3. Many of these opinions are more specifically aimed at post-structuralism and, by implication, a constructionist orientation.
4. The first of Pearce's three dimensions distinguished between theorists who want to be right (quest for certainty) and theorists who are more curious (exercise of curiosity). A second dimension distinguished those who believe the social world contains stable forms (monadic) from those who perceive it to be unpredictable, indeterminate, unfinished, and polysemic (pluralistic). A third dimension sought to distinguish between those theorists who simply conceive of knowledge as a

representation of our social reality (spectator knowledge) and those who conceive of knowledge as some form of practical wisdom that can be used to inform us how to act (participant knowledge). Pearce (1995) was able to use his sailing guide to show how social constructionists gravitate, to differing extents, toward grammars commensurate with the exercise of curiosity (over certainty) and functioning as participants in a social world that is essentially pluralistic.

5. Pearce, is not the only one to wrestle with the distinction between constructing social reality and the social construction of reality (Carbaugh & Hastings, 1992; Pearce & Cronen, 1980; Searle, 1995; Sigman, 1992).
6. We might also include social identity theory here, which examines the means by which individuals transform (self and other) social identities by adopting the categories of the group as membership becomes more salient (Hogg, 2001). Leaders, in effect, emerge as the quintessential group members.
7. For further information on these and other discourse approaches, see Putnam and Fairhurst (2001).
8. Shotter's phrasing of people making history draws from Marx.
9. Indeed, it is somewhat difficult to imagine that CME scholars could reconcile critical theory's emancipatory aims with managerialism (Deetz, 1992) or bring the full weight of Foucault's (1995) perspective on subjectivity to practitioners. Regarding the latter, Knights and Willmott (1989) succinctly describe it as an "appreciation of the subject as the constitutive product of a plurality of disciplinary mechanisms, techniques of surveillance and power-knowledge strategies" (p. 549).
10. Grint (1995) reminds us of Boethius, the 6th-century-AD philosopher, who actually faced this problem and resolved that, as material conditions were transient, they were less relevant than his understanding of the situation.
11. Earlier versions of several of the articles in this special issue were presented and discussed at a 2-day international research symposium held at the University of Sydney, in February 2008. The symposium sought to examine the role of language and other symbolic media in the social construction of leadership and brought together scholars from a range of disciplinary backgrounds, including management and organizational studies and the communications field. The event was funded by the *International Centre for Organizational Discourse Strategy and Change*.

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