Investigating leadership ethnographically: Opportunities and potentialities

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Abstract
Whilst recent years have seen increasingly ethnographic-focused writings in Organisation Studies, similar developments have not been mirrored within Leadership Studies, where the field is still dominated by positivistic approaches. Various theorists have noted problems with this, often pointing toward ethnography as a way of investigating leadership from new angles. However, to date it remains underrepresented. Potentially, this could be due to the fact that leadership is an ill-defined concept, and this paper suggests developing a clearer understanding of the phenomenon – building on the work of Smircich and Morgan and Fairhurst. That is, understanding leadership as constituted by meaning-making and reality definition, which is performed through discourse (or: intersubjective talk, communication, language and interaction) as well as being influenced by Discourse (or: extrasubjective frames of reference). This paper suggests that ethnographic methodologies are apt for studying both, and may be able to shed new light on leadership practice.

Keywords
Leadership, ethnography, discourse, language, meaning-making

Introduction
Past decades have seen an increase in the number of ethnographic writings in Organisation Studies, with researchers elucidating textured stories from people in organisations – moving away from the generalisability of quantitative methodologies (e.g. Collinson, 1992; Kondo, 1990; Van Maanen, 1988; Ybema, 1996). However, it is surprising to see that similar developments have not been mirrored within Leadership Studies, where the field is still dominated...
by positivistic approaches. Granted, there has been an interpretivist shift since the 1990s, but there are still some underlying issues. As Yukl notes: ‘[Leadership Studies] is in a state of ferment and confusion […]'. Several thousand empirical studies have been conducted, but the results are contradictory and inconclusive (2011: 253). Although a variety of theorists have pointed toward ethnography as a useful methodology for investigating leadership from a new angle (Alvesson, 1996; Kan and Parry, 2004; Kramer and Crespy, 2011; Shamir and Eilam, 2005), to date it remains underrepresented.

There are a number of potential reasons for this. Some have suggested that ethnographies are too resource-heavy (Bryman, 1996), and others have wondered if the ‘conservative’ nature of Leadership Studies discourages an ethnographic stance (Conger, 1998). Another reason may be the lack of clarity of the object of inquiry, that is, leadership researchers often do not know what they are studying. This is problematic from an ethnographic standpoint, as researchers must be able to ‘see’ the phenomena that they are investigating; to recognise it when it occurs (Crang and Cook, 2005; Ybema et al., 2009). In a situation where two-thirds of scholars do not even define the term ‘leadership’ (Rost, 1991), it is clear to see why ethnographic studies remain scarce. Therefore, a starting point may be developing an operational definition, and herein, I pay attention to Smircich and Morgan’s (1982) focus on meaning-making, which refers to the process of making sense of what is going on in organisational life; where actors define ‘who we are’ and ‘what we do’. I also go further by building on Fairhurst’s (2007) work: emphasising the importance of ‘discourse’. Whilst the literature review will expand on this, Fairhurst draws on Alvesson and Karreman’s (2000) distinction between (little ‘d’) discourse – referring to everyday talk and interaction – and (big ‘D’) Discourse – which assumes a more Foucauldian stance. Throughout this article, I suggest that ethnographic methodologies are apt for studying both.

Regarding discourse, importance is placed on language and communication, where through framing, storytelling and narrative construction, actors ‘do’ leadership by ‘express[ing] ideas in talk or action that are recognised by others as capable of progressing tasks or problems which are important to them’ (Robinson, 2001: 93). Conceptualised in this manner, leadership becomes increasingly tangible and visible – something which is well suited to being studied ethnographically, as researchers may observe how individuals work together and how meaning-making work ‘actually “gets done”’ (White et al., 2006: 16).

However, if we are to assume this focus, Fairhurst (2007, 2008) argues that attention should also be paid to the extrasubjective factors – Discourses – that influence everyday activity. Foucault (1979, 1980) notes that Discourses can be understood as the ‘rules of formation’ that govern what constitutes legitimate knowledge, and regarding leadership it may be seen that in order for meaning-making efforts to be understood as meaningful, they must rely on certain forms of knowledge that are perceived to be relevant to the reality of other organisational members (Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012; Olivier and Johnston, 2000). In this sense, Discourse may be understood as providing the ‘ground’ for the performance of leadership, and actors who attempt to ‘do’ leadership draw on these ideas when engaging in intersubjective discourse. Ethnographic methods can also help researchers to explore these kinds of issues, as ‘language use is seen as a social and cultural phenomenon which needs to be analysed both in its own detail and in relation to other social and cultural phenomena’ (Maybin, 2003: 12). Hammersley goes further, arguing that ‘It is clearly possible to use ethnographic data to document the character and operation of various Discourses in much the same way that Foucault and others have drawn on documentary evidence’ (2005: 7–8).
Accordingly, this paper is structured as follows. For context, I begin by recounting the methodological traditions in Leadership Studies, starting with the dominant quantitative approach before noting the later interpretive shift. Here, I highlight that whilst qualitative interviewing has become increasingly popular, researchers have stopped short of conducting ethnographies. The second section will question why this might be, particularly focussing on the notion that leadership has conventionally been ill-defined, resulting in a term that encompasses everything and nothing. In the third section therefore, I argue that in order to be able to ‘see’ leadership and study it first hand, we must develop a definition that turns it into a concrete and observable phenomenon. The remainder of the article is then given over to exploring the primary potentialities of utilising ethnographic methods in the study of leadership: that it is apt for a focus on everyday discourse and intersubjective meaning-making; and that it also allows researchers to explore extrasubjective Discourses. To illustrate these points, I will provide examples from a year-long ethnographic investigation of a small social movement organisation – the Radical Student Group (RSG). Ultimately, I argue that ethnographic investigations of leadership may advance our understanding: enabling us to move away from broadbrush positivistic approaches, and to augment the more nuanced and complex research that has emerged since the move to qualitative forms. Going further, I suggest, opens up new lines of investigation that are inaccessible through other methods.

**Literature review**

*Previous leadership research: Quantitative and qualitative approaches*

Various theorists have noted that quantitative studies have dominated leadership research for decades (Bryman, 2004; Bryman et al., 1988; Klenke, 2008; Stentz et al., 2012; Yukl, 2009), where importance is placed on generating methodologies that can be used in any situation, with the ultimate aim of creating universalistic and generalisable propositions. A commitment to positivism runs strong, where an external, objective and visible reality can be understood by ‘counting occurrences and measuring behaviour’ (Wildemuth, 1993: 451), and should be investigated from an ‘objective’ and neutral stance (Burrell and Morgan, 1979).

Throughout Leadership Studies’ history, whilst some quantitative researchers have performed laboratory experiments (Binning et al., 1986; Howell and Frost, 1989); confirmatory factor analysis (Dyer, 2005), statistical analyses (House et al., 2001) and structural equation modelling (Au, 2003; Chokchaiworarat, 2014), the primary method has been administering questionnaires and surveys (Bass, 1985; Bass and Avolio, 1995; Fiedler, 1967; Fleishman, 1955; Hersey and Blanchard, 1977; Yukl, 1981). Although each document is different and is designed to investigate specific aspects or ‘styles’ of leadership activity, they can be rendered similar in that all are based around a number of closed-answer questions directed at organisational leaders (and, sometimes their subordinates and supervisors); little to no option is given for any kind of qualitative additions; and emphasis is placed on quantity over quality – that is, single questionnaires need not be expanded on, given that the intended sample size and resulting data set is so large. Arguably therefore, these approaches allow for the development of more ‘representative’ findings that relate to broader populations rather than singular organisations and people. Overall, Sims remarks that these forms have enabled the investigation of leadership-centric ‘concepts that are generalisable across many different organisational situations’, which can be utilised by researchers internationally.
However, whilst quantitative studies continue to be popular, recent years have seen increasing dissatisfaction with their processes and outcomes – arguing that they: provide no detail of the nuance of organisational life; are overly reductionist (Hesse, 1980); produce conflicting findings (Cummings, 1981); and fail to incorporate arguments of context (Ford, 2015). Damningly, Bryman et al. note: ‘In large part […] the widespread disenchantment with much leadership research is to do with a recognition of predominantly quantitative research strategies within the field’ (1988: 14).

In reaction, the 1990s saw a shift toward interpretivist paradigms and qualitative research (e.g. Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Brown and Gioia, 2002; Collinson, 2006; Knights and Willmott, 1992; Parry, 1999; Shamir et al., 1994; Sutherland et al., 2013). Whilst acknowledging that qualitative research encompasses an array of methodological approaches, it is generally characterised as being small-scale and in-depth; inductive; holistic; and subjectivist – where multiple realities are recognised and events are ‘view[ed] through the perspective of the people being studied’ (Bouma and Atkinson, 1995: 207). Parry et al. (2013) suggest that this provides flexibility and opportunities for developing more interesting and relevant ideas, with explorations into various areas now commonly understood as part of the Critical Leadership Studies (CLS) grouping, addressing ‘what is neglected, absent or deficient in mainstream leadership research’ (Collinson, 2011: 181), including: the ‘dark side’ of leadership (Tourish, 2011); relational, distributed and emergent forms (Fletcher, 2002; Gronn, 2002; Sutherland et al., 2013; Uhl-Bien, 2006); followership (Collinson, 2005); and the importance of symbolism (Winkler, 2008), language (Pondy, 1978) and storytelling (Auvinen et al., 2012). All of these areas were previously obscured from view, as they are potentially ‘inaccessible’ to the quantitative study (Bryman, 2004), yet ‘tell us more about our social worlds than decades of positivist research has ever done’ (Klenke, 2008: 34).

However, whilst a number of scholars (Bryman, 2004; Bryman et al., 1988; Conger, 1998; Steiner, 2002) have encouraged researchers to experiment with a range of qualitative research methods, to date the interview is still the most popular form. Some have taken a structured and standardised approach (Blase, 1993; Kirby et al., 1990; Rosener, 1990), others constructing semi-structured guides (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Treveleyan, 2001), and others acting in a more flexible manner (Ford, 2010; Sutherland et al., 2013), but what is similar amongst all is that they are investigating leadership post hoc, and are asking their participants to recount tales about leadership from memory. Whilst this is not inherently problematic, it does leave some gaps: respondents may self-censor, or ‘unconsciously edit’ (Mishler, 1986); researchers are only able to access organisational life through the lens of the interviewee, rather than experiencing it (Bryman et al., 1988) and related to this, it gets us no closer to understanding what leadership looks like in action (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Barker, 1997; Cummings, 1981).

Leading on, despite the advancements that interview-based qualitative research has allowed, there are still calls for others to take on more in-depth forms of data collection – those, such as ethnography, that have been recognised as useful and practical in Organisation Studies for many years preceding (Alvesson, 1996; Kan and Parry, 2004; Kramer and Crespy, 2011; Shamir and Eilam, 2005). Indeed, since the late 1970s we have witnessed an ‘ethnographic turn’ (Ybema et al., 2009) which emerged from similar discussions, but it still remains underrepresented in Leadership Studies. To delve into this further, the following section will explore the potential importance of such a move, asking: why have scholars stopped short of investigating leadership ethnographically? And, following this – what can an ethnographic approach bring to the study of leadership?
Why are there not more ethnographic studies of leadership?

There are a number of potential reasons explaining the lack of ethnographic investigations of leadership. First, some have noted that ethnographies are too resource-heavy – requiring considerable time in the field, with more financial backing and data analysis (e.g. Edwards et al., 2015; Schedlitzki et al., 2016; Sutherland et al., 2013). Elsewhere, others have highlighted access issues, arguing that organisations are reluctant to open their doors for prolonged periods, or are more concerned about confidentiality (Bryman, 2004). These issues are not to be belittled, especially with the struggles faced when applying for funding; skepticism over research projects from practitioners; and increasing teaching demands. However, it would perhaps be naive to assume that these are the only reasons for the lack of ethnographic research within Leadership Studies. Indeed, other Organisation Studies phenomena – culture, space, power, politics, identity and technology – are still commonly investigated ethnographically (Ybema et al., 2009), so we should ask: what is different about the study of leadership?

As highlighted earlier, clearly there has been a ‘lag’ in the acceptance of qualitative methods within Leadership Studies, and it has still not reached the same depth or breadth as other subject areas. One explanation, according to Fines et al., is that Leadership Studies is a ‘conservative’ domain, where research has traditionally been carried out by North-American social psychologists who valorise quantification (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; House and Aditya, 1997). Consequently, ethnographic investigations do not fit with the dominant understanding of what Leadership Studies is ‘for’. Where previous research has been governed by scholars seeking to find the one-best-way through scientifically rigorous, standardised research designs, ethnographies are inherently small-scale, with comparatively little ‘hard’ data; they are not ‘objective’ or ‘reliable’; and do not aim for generalisable conclusions.

Conservatism aside, one of the most significant problems with Leadership Studies is the lack of clarity over the object of enquiry. Indeed, Rost (2001) notes that under two-thirds of leadership scholars ever define ‘leadership’, and where it is attempted, is often a ‘shaky’ construction. This feeds into others’ commentary, such as Barkers’ claim that ‘after years of research, we are still no closer to understanding what this thing we call “leadership” actually is’ (1997: 348), and Mintzberg’s suggestion that ‘there may be an issue of what exactly it is that one is observing’ (1973: 12). In fact, this inability to define has led others to question the very existence of leadership as a concept and practice (Fiedler, 1966), and several scholars have been critical of the notion that leadership can be investigated ethnographically (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Bresnen, 1995; Kelly et al., 2006), with Kelly noting that ‘leadership as an empirical object of inquiry has a tendency to disappear among the milieu of everyday life’ (2008: 765). From this perspective it is argued that, because scholars tend to shy away from defining what they understand ‘leadership’ to be, it becomes a vacuous term that incorporates everything and nothing. However, rather than throwing the baby out with the bathwater, I propose that the first step should be to generate an operational definition of leadership. Doing so would provide researchers with the ability to recognise and analyse leadership in action; to be able to understand the meanings attributed by respondents, as well as developing interpretations that ‘go beyond the participant’ (Bleicher, 1980: 111); and ultimately, to turn leadership from a woolly construction into one which is well suited to being studied ethnographically.
Defining ‘leadership’

As highlighted above, ‘leadership’ is a contested concept. Traditionally, it is simply seen as ‘just something that leaders “do”’ (Grint, 2001: 32): a hierarchical act performed by ‘superhuman’ individuals. However, this is somewhat problematic when it comes to investigating the process empirically, and others reconceptualised it as a socially constructed process embedded in context and culture (Fairhurst, 2007; Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014; Fairhurst and Grant, 2010; Grint, 2000; Pfeffer, 1981; Robinson, 2001; Smircich and Stubbart, 1985; Tourish, 2014; Vickrey, 1999). This line of thought was taken on by Smircich and Morgan (1982), who noted that leadership can best be understood as the ‘management of meaning’, which refers to the intersubjective process of making sense of what is going on in organisational life; to the ‘multitude of processes involved in creating, recreating, uncovering, preserving, maintaining, nurturing and evolving meaning’ (Wilkens, 1982: 56). This may be likened to mapmaking, in that meaning-makers seek to convert ‘a world of experience into an intelligible world’ (Weick, 2001: 9); structure the unknown (Waterman, 1990); construct a sense of what is, and what is important (Drath and Palus, 2000); and create a coherent and plausible account of what is happening (Fairhurst and Grant, 2010).

A variety of theorists suggest that when meaning-making occurs in a collective context, leadership is happening (Fairhurst, 2007; Ganz, 2000; Grint, 2000; Pfeffer, 1981; Robinson, 2001; Vickrey, 1999; Wilkens, 1983), when individuals ‘succeed in attempting to frame and define the reality of others’ (Smircich and Morgan, 1982: 258); amongst a ‘chaotic welter of impressions’ (Shotter, 1993: 13), and when they define ‘who we are’, ‘what we do’ and ‘how we do it’ (Sutherland et al., 2013). With this in mind, it may be fruitful to call off the search for ‘leadership’ more abstractly, and instead focus on identifying meaning-making, that is, asking: ‘what are the structures of meaning operating in organisations? These are the stuff of leadership and we need to understand them. How do meanings arise? How are they sustained? How are they evolved and changed? These are the key processes of leadership, and understanding them is important’ (Wilkens, 1983: 67).

One way to simplify this hunt is to turn to ‘discourse’. In a comprehensive review, Alvesson and Karreman (2000) suggest that the term has been used in various ways, and for the purpose of this article, it is valuable to distinguish between two relevant definitions. In the first case, discourse (with a little ‘d’) refers to ‘the study of talk and text in social practices’ (Fairhurst and Cooren, 2004: 132); speech, language and communication (Fairhurst, 2007); and based in the study of linguistics and semiosis (Fairclough et al., 2004). In another strand of research however, others have assumed a more Foucauldian understanding of Discourse (with a big ‘D’), and instead focus on the embedded general systems of thought that influence people on a day-to-day basis (Burrell, 1988; Cooper and Burrell, 1989; Knights, 1990; Knights and Morgan, 1991; McKinlay and Starkey, 1998; Riad, 2005; Townley, 1993). Discussing ‘discursive leadership’, Fairhurst (2007) effectively marries these two concepts together, noting that scholars should pay attention to both discourse and Discourse; to understand how intersubjective language, talk and communication (discourse) is performed through extrasubjective structures (Discourse). I will now turn our attention to these two concepts, and argue that ethnography is apt for studying both.

Leadership and (little ‘d’) discourse. Alongside Fairhurst, various others have pointed toward the importance of intersubjective discourse (specifically, storytelling and ‘framing’) in the study
of leadership (Auvinen et al., 2012; Conger, 1990; Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014; Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996; Ganz, 2000; Grint, 2000; Halliwell, 2008; Pondy, 1978; Smircich and Morgan, 1982). Arguably, it provides a way of examining specifically how leadership actors communicate their ideas; how proposals are articulated; how social reality is defined; how meanings are managed; and how organisational goals and purposes are described. Storytelling, for example, can be understood as an important part of leadership, as it is one of the ‘fundamental ways through which we understand the world’ (Berry, 2001: 59). Because of the narrative structure, storytelling sequences events (Weick, 1974), makes history readily available and understandable (Boal and Schultz, 2007) and can help organisational members learn from the past (Brown and Duguid, 1991). Stories can therefore convert the ‘chaos of experience’ (Forest, 2000) into a linear form, mapping out reality by coding experience as an opportunity or threat, as helpful or obstructive. Attention must be paid to these factors, as they ‘play [...] a vital role in the acceptance and accomplishment of leadership efforts’ (Conger, 1990: 43).

White et al. suggest that ethnography could be apt for capturing this ‘everyday’ leadership work, through observing how individuals work together and how leadership ‘actually “gets done”’ (2006: 16). This is supported by a variety of leadership scholars (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Bresnen, 1995; Grint, 2002; Gronn, 2002; Knights and Willmott, 1992), who agree that leadership must be studied as a situated phenomenon which is produced through everyday meaning-making practices and discourse. Therefore, attention should be drawn to the intimate details of organisational life and leadership work: seeing, feeling and hearing how conversations unfold; how language is constructed; what rhetorical devices are employed; what stories are told; how ‘influence’ happens; and how actors’ and organisations’ realities are defined, maintained or changed. Through this kind of participant observation, a thick description can be built up of situated work practices (Geertz, 1973), which less involved methodologies may miss.

However, if leadership is understood to be constituted by meaning-making, then it becomes necessary to not only investigate how leadership actors communicate through day-to-day discourse, but also to ask: why do certain actions emerge as meaningful in the first place? Similarly, Islam asks how meanings, values and beliefs are established and sustained amongst the ‘blooming buzzing confusion’ of organisational life (2013: 50), and Anderson (2006) suggests that researchers should spend more time attempting to recognise and clarify the historically embedded understandings – or extrasubjective Discourses – that influence day-to-day goings on.

Leadership and (big ‘d’) Discourse. Foucault defines Discourses as the ‘rules of formation’ and general systems of thought which are located socio-historically, providing implicit cultural codes which impact on the way people think and behave, and influencing the everyday assumptions of organisational actors (Rouse, 2001). This offers a useful starting point, because it may be seen that in order for meaning-making efforts to be understood as meaningful, they must rely on certain forms of knowledge that are perceived to be relevant to the reality of other organisational members (Olivier and Johnston, 2000). Indeed, discussing meaning-making, O’Leary and Chia suggest Discourses shape the practice by directing the process of selection, determining what is appropriate and ‘centering the flux of our phenomenal experiences according to its pre-specified rules of formation’ (2006: 23). Cunliffe (2009) also notes that interpretations of reality are reliant on and influenced by Discourses, which ‘simplify and categorise patterns of social reality’. Islam (2013) continues with this line of
thought, noting that although meaning-making may most visibly and obviously occur at an intersubjective level (through storytelling, for example), we should also pay attention to the extrasubjective Discourses which influence this; those which generate certain rules, principles and conventions that render stories as intelligible within specific communities and organisations. Finally, O’Leary and Chia (2006) conclude that Discourses must exist for meaning-making to be possible at all, as for meanings to be understood as legitimate and plausible, they have to (implicitly or explicitly) conform to extrasubjective structures of expectation. In this sense, Discourse provides the ‘ground’ for the performance of leadership. It is Discourse that makes discourse meaningful in the first place, and actors who attempt to ‘do’ leadership therefore draw on these ideas when engaging in small-scale, intersubjective framing activity. That is, they frame within a larger frame of reference.

Arguably, ethnography is also apt for investigating these extrasubjective Discourses. Indeed, Maybin notes that the two go hand-in-hand, as from an ethnographic perspective ‘language use is seen as a social and cultural phenomenon which needs to be analysed both in its own detail and in relation to other social and cultural phenomena’ (2003: 12). That is, as well as seeking to investigate how meanings are made and communicated ‘on the ground’, we should seek to ethnographically examine how discourse is influenced and constituted through Discourse (Macgilchrist, 2011; Naples, 2003). As Hammersley notes: ‘It is clearly possible to use ethnographic data to document the character and operation of various discourses in much the same way that Foucault and others have drawn on documentary evidence’ (2005: 7–8).

Contextualising the case: Researching with the Radical Student Group

To illustrate the points outlined above, I will provide examples from an ethnographic investigation of an anarchist social movement organisation – the RSG – conducted between 2010 and 2012. They were a small grouping, with 8–10 members, who had been active for several months before the research project began after springing from the ashes of a previously defunct group. Apart from myself and one other member, all others had been there from the beginning, until the group eventually lost steam and disbanded following the departure of three members (one who moved abroad, and two who decided to concentrate their efforts into other organisations), some months after the research project was completed. Throughout, I was interested in understanding how leaderless organisations ‘led’ themselves more collectively. Indeed, members framed the structure of the RSG as ‘anti-leaders’, and organised under historically located anarchist principles and values: direct democracy, anti-hierarchy, mutual aid and prefigurative politics. Primarily, grievances were directed at government cuts initiatives – particularly to do with student experiences – and they set up discussion groups; raised awareness; wrote and distributed literature; and engaged in peaceful protest. Bi-weekly face-to-face meetings served as the main method for decision making, and were used to plan for upcoming events, as well as reflecting and identifying strengths and weaknesses. Throughout these sessions, members actively constructed various practices and processes to ensure that no one person would assume complete control over proceedings and decision-making, and instead made space for all to contribute equally, to ensure that the organisational structure remained non-hierarchical.

Whilst the analysis in this article will pay some attention to the collectivisation of leadership within the organisation, the primary aim here is to reflect on the benefits of utilising
ethnographic methods during the study – for understanding d/Discourse. Indeed, because focus was on an organisation without permanent leaders, I was unable to assume the stance of previous leadership researchers and ‘follow the leader’. This forced me to confront the questions outlined in the literature review above: given that I could not rely on asking individual leaders about their and actions, and had to be able to ‘spot’, interpret and analyse leadership moments occurring first-hand, as well as paying attention to the Discourses that influenced decisions. That is, rather than observing the actions of a select few individuals, I had to understand leadership more holistically, and as a process: something that CLS scholars have argued for many years preceding. I could only do this once I had stopped thinking about leadership in an abstract sense; when I re-framed my study as a search for moments of meaning-making. Whilst I acknowledge that other scholars may not choose to research anarchistic organisations specifically, there are nevertheless important lessons to be learned from this, particularly: defining leadership, and re-conceptualising it as an intersubjective, observable phenomenon may be the first step in investigating it ethnographically, regardless of the context.

**Methods, fieldnotes and analysis**

The study used a combination of participant observation and unstructured interviews – with the former as the primary method, given that interest was in the performance of leadership, and seeing how events, interactions, conversations and argumentation unfolded. Throughout, I helped to organise demonstrations; co-organised events; did legal observing work; managed online groups; took part in direct actions; acted as a ‘representative’ at other groups meetings; attended activist seminars, conferences, workshops and forums; booked rooms and venues, and swept floors and cooked food. In meetings, I acted as a facilitator and minute taker; suggested ideas that were taken up and acted upon, and numerous more that weren’t; and stayed on late to continue heated discussions. Through participating in meetings, events and actions, I was able to develop understandings of how practices actually worked – being ‘on the ground’; experiencing them first-hand; immersing myself; knowing the various implicit and unspoken rules and guidelines; encountering problems and issues; and enjoying successes (Bourgois, 1995; Geertz, 1973). Interviews were also important, but as a supplement to participant observation. Patton (2002) notes that unstructured interviews often take place during participative fieldwork sessions and rely on spur of the moment question generation within the natural flow of social interaction (Punch, 1998; Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009). The primary merit of this type of interview is that it occurs in ‘natural’ settings, and is conversational in nature, which ‘allows the interviewer to be responsive to individual differences and situational changes’ (Patton, 2002: 234), as well as gaining an in-depth understanding of ‘what is going on’ in a particular context (Burgess, 1984). It allows people to expand on their opinions by ‘giving them a voice’ (Honey, 1987: 23), and individuals are also able to introduce topics, ideas and concepts which were important to them, free from the constraints of a more structured interview technique.

As is common throughout ethnographic processes, fieldnotes were my main form of data (Emerson, 1995; Van Maanen, 1988). I did not use any audio or video recordings because, as Lagalisse has previously noted, there is often a ‘wariness’ amongst radical groups ‘that recordings and photographs evidencing their participation may be used against them if they fall into the wrong hands’ (2011: 22). Therefore, although recordings may have been useful for most accurately recollecting what was said during the research (Goodwin, 1993;
O’Reilly, 2011), and may be preferable in less precarious situations, the fact that they may constitute ‘evidence’ was the main reason for me shying away from such methods. Fieldnotes are far less risky, especially when anonymised, and thus they became my primary form of data.

In fact, the process of writing fieldnotes was instrumental for interpreting data. I had struggled to ‘see the wood for the trees’ in the early days of the project, due to my ‘insider’ position and inexperience in dealing with more involved qualitative data collection techniques (Crang and Cook, 2007: 84). I found it difficult to identify noteworthy moments; to interpret on-going d/Discourse; or to understand the meanings attributed to certain actions. It was only once I developed a formalised and structured method for recording and analysing fieldnotes that I noticed myself becoming more comfortable during participant observation settings. This went through several stages, starting with minimal jottings during meetings and events, to a slightly more descriptive account after the session had finished, to a comprehensive analysed document the following day. Establishing a routine was pivotal here, and allowed me to record and recollect conversations and interactions most accurately.

Following this, data analysis became a continual practice. Arguably it began as soon as I started writing up my fieldnotes, but continued through a more formal stage. Indeed, coding was an iterative, and physical, process where I ‘got to know’ my notes (Taylor-Powell and Renner, 2003: 2), going beyond describing *what* went on, and emphasising *why* it happened, or *what* it meant. In the early stages I worked relatively closely with CLS literature, to try and ‘spot’ any empirical examples of what I had previously read about (Blum Malley, 2012; O’Reilly, 2011) – meaning-making; the ‘dark side’ of leadership; relational behaviours, for example. Over time, I became more confident and started to rely on the literature less, and more on my own gut feelings, interpretations, understandings and observations. In fact, after finding my ‘groove’ and pattern for writing up fieldnotes, I found that I was more observant during sessions, and started to notice things that I might have otherwise overlooked – sideways glances, subtle behavioural shifts, in-jokes, language use. Through immersing myself in the various stages of the process therefore, I was able to feel a certain closeness to both ‘sides’ of my role – the participant and the observer – which others have noted as an often tricky negotiation (Lagalisse, 2010; Maeckelbergh, 2009). As I categorised the data, as well as highlighting the most salient topics and themes, I also sought to identify emergent sub-themes and subcategories that ‘may not have previously be considered’ (Bernard, 1994: 67). However, I ensured that I was working alongside my research questions and the extant literature to make sure that I kept on track and didn’t dwell *too* much on areas that may be interesting, but not relevant to the study (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

**Investigating leadership ethnographically: An illustration**

In what follows, I present an illustration of how I carried out an ethnographic investigation of leadership activity in the RSG. As has been flagged elsewhere (and is expanded on in the conclusion), whilst this paper talks of one study in a niche area, in fact, there are transferable lessons that may aid future scholars who are interested in asking similar questions in dissimilar organisations. The examples below therefore give an indication of *some* of the (seemingly mundane) locations and situations to examine, and *some* of the pertinent questions to
ask – those that can help enrich our current understandings around the practice of meaning-making and leadership. These include:

- Being present during face-to-face interactions and meetings, in order to . . .
- . . . Observe argumentation, negotiation, framing and storytelling (i.e. ongoing discourse)

and

- Interpreting and ‘accessing’ ongoing values, beliefs and cultural codes, in order to . . .
- . . . Understand how leadership actors ‘frame within frames’ (i.e. through Discourse)

As a sidenote: The vignettes and examples that appear were picked as those most representative of group-level discussion. Of course, there was no such thing as a ‘typical’ meeting or discussion point in regard to content, but the form of those deliberations, arguments and negotiations was often similar. As will become clear, the content of discussions takes a back seat in this paper’s analysis, and therefore, we hear stories that encapsulate certain issues in the most concise and digestible ways. It is noted in the conclusion that there were many other events and tales which illustrated similar acts of leadership, yet took place over several weeks of meetings, and would require considerably more contextualisation.

Investigating intersubjective meaning-making (or, discourse)

Meetings as forums for meaning-making: Argumentation and negotiation

As highlighted earlier, the main site for participant observation was during the RSG’s bi-weekly meetings. Meetings are important for meaning making, and thus leadership, as they provide the setting where meanings can be negotiated, debated and regulated. Indeed, as Schwartzman notes: ‘meetings are sense-makers’ that ‘may be the form that generates and maintains organisational meanings’ (1987: 98). Here, attendees would discuss pertinent issues; form action plans and organise themselves. Meetings were packed full of back-and-forth conversation, which initially felt chaotic, given that none assumed the visible position of ‘leader’. However, structurally the sessions were tightly organised around consensus decision-making principles. Members would not speak without putting their hand up, and a variety of practices were introduced to ensure that no one monopolised ‘floor time’, including rotation of key roles (such as chairperson and minute-taker), collective agenda setting, and ‘go-rounds’ (where all were offered the chance to air views). During meetings, moments where leadership was exercised were of particular interest, and although stable leaders were not present, there were no shortage of moments when meaning-making happened, when actors defined ‘who we are’ and ‘what we do’.

One of the primary ways that meaning-making was seen was through the observable process of argumentation and negotiation. It is important to note from the outset that arguing ‘need not imply ill will or loss of temper’ (Weick, 1974: 124), indeed, ‘moods of anger are not a necessary part of argumentation and […] may inhibit argumentation as discussion’ (Billig, 1989: 10). Instead, argumentation can be understood as valuable for shaping common understandings and for deciding on which proposals and ideas will be acted upon. This is not a straightforward process, as there are often ‘multiple and sometimes conflicting messages’ that actors must grapple with in order to transform abstract
ideas into practice. However, through negotiation and persuasion, people reason from one idea to another (Brockriede, 1974), and thus, argumentation creates a context where the most ‘appropriate’ explanations are valued and adopted as intersubjective meanings that ‘provide the basis for organisational action’ (Robinson, 2001: 93). Fairhurst (2007, 2009) suggests that theorists should place emphasis on the interaction between and amongst organisational actors, including communicative practices, as these are ‘the processes by which the social construction of leadership is brought about’ (Fairhurst and Grant, 2010). Furthermore, Boden notes that ‘organisational theorists and researchers should take seriously the role of language [. . .], since it is through and with language that organisational members describe and provide accounts of their activities and decisions’ (1994: 16). This is a significant point when examining how leadership is done ethnographically, as we can directly investigate and observe how meanings and realities are made, and how they are discursively constructed, negotiated, rejected or accepted (Hymes, 1962, 1964). Indeed, various theorists have noted the appropriateness of ethnographic methodologies for this kind of investigation, as it allows for sensitivity in understanding individual and collective constructions (Scherzer and Bauman, 1986), understanding ‘situated meanings’ (Garfinkel, 1986), and recognising the specific ways in which actors communicate with each other (Saville-Troike, 1997). In what follows, I will present some examples from the case study, giving a glimpse into the areas that ethnographers interested in studying leadership may focus on.

Observing framing and storytelling during meetings: Selecting ideas ‘in’ or ‘out’

In any decision-making period that requires negotiation, actors will be faced with a number of interpretations and meanings, and there must be some editing process for engaging with a message or dismissing it, and this, arguably is the very ‘stuff’ of leadership (Sutherland et al., 2013). As meaning-making is highly context dependent, there is no prescriptive format for deciding what is rejected, although there were some commonalities amongst ideas that were dismissed in the RSG. Here, we pay specific attention to the process of framing, the ‘communication process’ that is used to ‘create meaning and construct [. . .] realities’ (Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014: 11).

For example, one reason for discarding ideas was that they were currently unmanageable. Because of the small size of the RSG, it was not always possible to act on every new proposal and ideas were regularly dismissed in busy periods on the basis of lack of time and resources. This could be problematic on occasions, as some felt local struggles weren’t supported enough. During one summer, a pop-up kitchen serving food to homeless people had requested assistance, although it became apparent that every RSG member had prior commitments. Sophie, who was minute-taking, put her head in her hands:

I feel bad that we’re not going to be able to help, but . . . nobody is around. It’s a shame . . . sometimes there’s the perfect amount of people here, but at times like this I wish there were more of us

Commenting on this, Owen optimistically noted that:

But look at it in another way . . . it’s a good problem to have. I’ve been involved with groups who had meetings upon meetings about meetings, but don’t do anything. That’s a bad problem

Through this, we see that whilst the choice to not engage was based on instrumental grounds, the subsequent framing involved some meaning management. Even with dismissed
invitations, members would still discuss the perceived importance of the task to the group, and, as above, sometimes expressed disappointment for stepping aside. Furthermore, Owen’s comment, about being in other groups that had ‘meetings upon meetings about meetings’, can be seen as story of self (Ganz, 2000), which centre on turning points in an individual’s lifetime, where the storyteller encountered a challenge, dealt with this issue, and learned something. This can empower the listener, as they make the leap of connecting the original story with their own personal experiences (Forest, 2000). Furthermore, this story may also facilitate more intersubjective meanings, as listeners may be able to project toward the experience of the organisation more generally. What may originally seem to be a very individual story can be transformed into a guiding principle for further action. That is, the meaning-making process that once influenced a person on an individual basis enables collective, intersubjective and ‘shared’ understandings. This is important for leadership, as the relative ‘success’ of meaning-making efforts is dependent on the extent to which actors are able to forge meanings that can be understood, valued and taken on by other members of the organisation (Smircich and Morgan, 1982). Utilising ethnographic methodologies to investigate this kind of talk-in-action is vital, as it is through ethnography that researchers can ‘truly understand […] what the discourse is being used to do […] and the social consequences of that use’ (Hammersley, 2005: 8).

Elsewhere, other activities were selected out for being too ‘big’ to achieve. This was raised at the end of a skill-sharing group, when an individual from another activist group said:

It’s good to hear what you’re doing, but, it left me wondering. You say that you’re mainly about the small-scale but isn’t there a problem with that? I mean…its all well and good getting these little victories, but what about the big questions? What about the state? It’s still there…capitalism still exists internationally. Wouldn’t it be better to switch your focus to that?

Graham, a member of the RSG, thought for a moment, then replied:

Thanks for your question… Yeah, it’s something we’ve spoken about quite a bit. For us, those international questions are really significant…but, we prefer to focus on the…what you call the small-scale, because we know we can make a difference. Setting up this group was always about bringing about real changes in people’s lives. We have to start small. If we went about trying to bring international capitalism down, it’s very likely that we’d fail. I’ve seen it happen time and time again, and groups fold because everybody is so exhausted.

Where the previous anecdote offered an example of a story of self, this framing rests on a story of us, which articulate values that are important to ‘us’ as a community. Generally speaking, these stories include narratives about key choices and decisions; challenges faced; tactics and strategies; and failures and achievements. Indeed, Ganz (2000) notes that these stories are necessary for a collection of people to become an ‘us’: stories that interpret experience, transform it into a meaningful narrative and, ultimately, initiate and develop common understandings and intersubjective meanings (Adler, 2002). In this sense, storytellers construct narratives through which shared values are defined, as well as the particularities that make an organisation an ‘us’.

A final reason for selecting ideas out was an unwillingness to work with groups who were seen as ‘incompatible’ with the aims of the organisation. The RSG were an overtly anarchist organisation, but often collaborated with groups who were not. Predominantly, if a request for assistance was perceived as authentic, and concerned about radical values, they received support. However, other organisations were seen as incompatible with the principles of
contemporary anarchism. Larger groupings, such as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) for example, were dismissed as hierarchical and non-democratic, and on several occasions invitations to attend SWP-run events were turned down:

It’s not about them not being anarchists... it’s about how they run themselves. It’s so... top-down. They have all these charismatic people getting up and preaching about their revolution, but it’s not one that’s built from the grassroots

These groups were understood as ‘glory hunters’, who were more focussed on garnering public support to ‘feed the egos of the leaders at the head of the organisation’. SWP-run events were therefore framed as unworthy of people’s commitments, whereas others were seen as meaningful because they were perceived to be committed to radical politics and processes. Throughout this example, it is clear to see the importance of ‘othering’ for leadership work, which helps to ‘define the self and to affirm identity’ (Lister, 2004: 102) through the ‘objectification of another person or group’ (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2003: 78). Even though individuals may not have had any direct experience with the SWP, there was still a tendency to speculate from ‘inherited’ stories – from those discussing the organisations hierarchical nature, non-transparent process or reliance on leaders, for example – constructing a negative perception of groups as not only ‘unlike us’ (Dervin, 2011: 372), but as an ‘enemy’ (Calvin, 2000: 12) to anarchistic relations. By ‘othering’ the SWP and rejecting their invitations, the RSG were further defining what their organisation was, through delineating what it was not. Indeed, this is a form of meaning-making as it defines boundaries through selecting what is appropriate; what is meaningful. Once again, these nuanced discussions are arguably more difficult to access with non-ethnographic methodologies (Reeves, 2008). Whilst actors may discuss such ideas within an interview context, through observing group-based, collective meaning-making, researchers are able to gain more of an insight into the complex and ambiguous discursive practices and social interactions; ‘to “get inside” the way [the] group of people sees the world’ (Hammersley, 1992: 34).

The value of ethnography during meetings, argumentation and storytelling

From these examples, we witness the importance of discourse during meaning-making (and thus, leadership) work. Through discourse, people can learn how to manage themselves and organisations, how to face difficult or uncertain choices, how to navigate unfamiliar situations and what outcomes to expect (Ganz, 2000). Language and stories can therefore convert the ‘chaos of experience’ (Forest, 2000) into a simple linear form, mapping out reality by coding experience as an opportunity or threat, as good or bad, as helpful or obstructive. In all, these examples demonstrate how meaning-making is a vital part of leadership work, and helps to determine the relative ‘success’ of leadership actors efforts. As shown, if actors could articulate senses of ‘who we are’ and ‘what we do’ in a way that was relevant to others (and their understandings of organisational purpose), then it would be more likely that they are taken up.

Arguably, discourse is only possible to access ‘in the moment’, because it is so fluid (Poole, 1990). I consistently found that interviewing members afterwards only allowed some insight to the process, because events that weren’t thought of as ‘critical’ were forgotten in amongst the rest of the conversations. However, these mundane moments should not be overlooked. Indeed, whilst many studies focus on ‘critical’ leadership acts, that is, when there is a dramatic period of meaning-making that significantly impacts organisational
performance, it could be argued that the same underlying process happens in less noticeable
moments. Leadership exists outside of critical periods, and accepting this enables a move
away from more ‘grandiose’ notions (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003: 1456), and toward
understanding the ‘leadership work’ (Kelly, 2008) that occurs in everyday situations.
Therefore, through engaging in participant observation, I was able to augment the post
hoc perspectives of members, and observe the nuanced processes of argumentation unfold.

Through these examples, we witness the first benefit of studying leadership from an
ethnographic stance: that it is apt for an investigation that assumes intersubjective discourse
to constitute leadership. This is not possible to capture with other methods, as they do not
necessitate the researcher being there to observe leadership in action. The various points
discussed here – understanding decision making and argumentation processes; witnessing
interpersonal interactions; listening to and analysing ongoing discourse; the importance of
‘mundane acts’ – all provide examples of areas that future researchers interested in studying
leadership ethnographically may investigate in dissimilar empirical locations.

**Investigating extrasubjective factors (or, discourse)**

So far, I have concentrated on the interpersonal interactions that occurred during meetings.
However, as Fairhurst (2007) has noted, whilst it is useful to understand how individuals
articulate their ideas on a small scale, it is important to take this one step further, to delve
into the Discourses (Foucault, 1979, 1980) that influence day-to-day meaning-making efforts,
and in this section I will illuminate how well suited ethnographic methodologies are for this
investigation.

**Defining ‘Discourse’**

To reiterate, I follow Foucault in defining Discourses as general systems of thought that
provide rules and guidelines for particular cultures, which shape actors’ values, beliefs, rules,
practices and conventions (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000; Fairhurst and Putnam, 2004;
Jackson and Carter, 2006). In this sense, Discourses can be understood as sets of ‘ideas
and practices which condition our ways or relating to, and acting upon, particular phenom-
ena’ (Knights and Morgan, 1991: 253). An investigation into this requires an examination of
organisational member’s senses of self – subjectivities – and ‘what [they] find good and
bad, right or wrong, and what [their] actions and goals try to respect or achieve’
(Van Dijk, 1995: 138). Tamboukou and Ball note that ethnographic methodologies are
apt for this enquiry, as they ‘interrogat[e] the validity and universal authority of scientific
knowledge’, adopt ‘context-bound’ perspectives, and enable researchers to examine the ways
in which Discourse is discursively maintained over time (2003: 311). Similarly, Schieffelin
(1986, 1990), Watson-Gegeo (1990) and Poole note the value of the ethnographic lens when
examining how ‘discourse practices’ are ‘tied in significant ways to the given cultural context’
(1990: 43).

This kind of investigation requires a conceptual shift from previous approaches. Indeed,
whilst mainstream leadership perspectives are concerned with examining issues around iden-
tity and the self, few have explored subjectivity and Discourse in relation to meaning-making
and leadership. In fact, Potter and Wetherell note that the core assumption behind trad-
titional approaches is that the ‘self’ is conceived of as a unitary entity with one true nature;
and thus ‘theorising about the self is thus thought to be rather like theorising about a
Predominantly, these theories assert that people are made up of a number of deeply rooted, inherent and measurable personality traits, abilities and behaviours, which outweigh the influence of the context surrounding the person (Allport, 1936; Cattell, 1965; Eysenck and Eysenck, 1964; Rorty, 1976) – assuming that leadership has an independent and coherent ‘essence’ and is performed as if in a vacuum. However, Hosking (1988) argues that mainstream leadership scholars have been too preoccupied in assuming that individuals are self-contained entities, and fail to question how they came to be in the first place, how they continue to maintain themselves, or how they interact with extrasubjective environments.

Leading on, the post-structuralist turn has challenged mainstream conceptualisations by considering subjectivities as dynamically constituted through social practice (Biehl et al., 2007; Collinson, 2003, 2006; Fischer, 2003; Henriques et al., 1984). Collinson notes that by rejecting ‘the essentialist notions of personality [...]’, post-structuralist perspectives suggest that people’s lives are inextricably interwoven with the social world around them’ (2003: 527–528), which informs the subject ‘about who, what and how to be in a given social situation, occasion, interaction’ (Kress, 1985: 39). Specifically, Foucault writes that Discourses ‘categorise the individual, mark him out by his own individuality, attach to him his identity, impose a law of truth on him which he must recognise and which others have to recognise in him’ (1983: 212). Whilst these ideas have long since been accepted in Organisation Studies more generally, further investigation is needed in regard to leadership, to examine the ways in which meaning-making is also constituted, shaped and made possible by extrasubjective Discourses.

Although the literature on Discourse and subjectivity is vast, ‘seeing’ its construction in action is difficult, precisely because it goes on in individual’s minds. However, it is not an impossible feat, and can be aided by analysing how people communicate their ideas, articulate their senses of self, and shape their environment. Fairhurst underscores interpersonal deliberation and communication here, as ‘in communication, speaking subjects skilfully position themselves within [...] Discourses as they coordinate their actions with others’ (2007: 45). Subjectivities are discursively represented, as individuals articulate their sense of self through language and behaviours, or, through discourse. As alluded to earlier, an ethnographic methodology is particularly apt for this, and by directly participating in discussions around subjectivity, it is possible to access ‘thick’ descriptions about individuals and organisations. Indeed, the ultimate aim of any form of ethnography is cultural interpretation, that is, the ‘ability to describe what the researcher has heard and seen within the framework of the social group’s view of reality’ (Fetterman, 1989: 28). Therefore, ethnographic methodologies enable researchers to examine how discourse plays out, which – by proxy – allows an insight into the Discourses which inform it. In what follows, I suggest that ethnographers may find it fruitful to understand core values, beliefs and cultural codes in any given organisation, which will then give a clearer understanding of dominant Discourses, and ultimately a view of the extrasubjective factors that make leadership possible.

**Understanding values and beliefs: Anarchistic Discourse and the performance of leadership within the RSG**

Regarding the RSG, it emerged that all interpersonal discourse and meaning-making was constituted through Discourse. Given that the group was initially set up as an explicitly anarchist organisation, a commitment to radical Discourses ran strong: anti-
authoritarianism and a rejection of hierarchy (including their ‘anti-leaders’ stance); widespread democracy and participation; a focus on grassroots struggles; and a large-scale anti-capitalist focus. Consequently, there was a general acceptance that because ‘I am an anarchist’, that I also hold certain values, come to see them as a part of myself, and prioritise them above others. This highlights the process of subjectivisation, ‘the process through which results the constitution of the subject’ (Foucault, 1996: 472), where individuals are positioned in relation to Discourses, and are ‘transformed into subjects who secure their sense of meaning, identity and reality through participation in […] Discourses’ (Knights and Morgan, 1991: 45). Herein, I demonstrate that when leadership actors occupy subject positions in relation to Discourse – that which other members recognise – and frame their ideas effectively, then their attempts at leadership are more likely to be acknowledged as sensible and actionable. Without such a grounding in ‘appropriate’ Discourses, others may find it difficult to ‘express ideas in talk or action that are recognised as capable of progressing tasks or problems which are important to them’ (Robinson, 2001: 93).

Whilst values and beliefs were rarely explicitly discussed, they nevertheless provided implicit, unspoken, criteria upon which meaning-making efforts were judged. To explore this, let us return to an example from the previous section, to the debates centred on whether or not to assist other groups. As mentioned, organisations that were perceived to be authentic were supported, whereas others, such as the SWP were dismissed as non-democratic ‘glory hunters’. This framing, and subsequent action/inaction, is dependent on a certain form of knowledge that is bound up in Discourse, which brands one course of action as acceptable and meaningful, and another as unsuitable. Here, Discourses convince people that certain ideas are ‘true’, although this doesn’t mean that the decision is objectively correct. Rather, it is legitimate as it is communicated in relation to a certain Discourse in a specific context, and it may not be considered as true if carried elsewhere. Indeed, a member of the SWP would have a different worldview. On this, Foucault suggests: ‘each society has a regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned […] the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true’ (Foucault, cited in: Hall, 1997: 49). These regimes of truth impact on subjects, and thereby constitute legitimate forms of knowledge. Therefore, whenever actors engage in framing activity, they are doing so within a larger frame – that of Discourse – which regulates what is considered as ‘normal’, suitable and possible.

Framing within frames: Further exploring the inextricable link between leadership and Discourse

We can further understand the importance of Discourse by examining another situation. During the project, the RSG held an open forum to discuss organising a local anti-cuts demonstration. Various ‘new’ people attended the session, and were welcomed, with space being given to informal introductions and networking. When the meeting began, the first 20 minutes saw various ideas being introduced and debated – primarily revolving around independently organised, non-violent direct actions. During this time, those who spoke were broadly in agreement with each other, using phrases such as ‘that’s the anarcho thing to do’, and ‘it fits in with what we are… y’know… ideologically going for’. However, before long,
one new attendee noted:

I can see what you’re saying…but I can’t see how this is going to bring about any real change.

Even so…do you want to bring down the capitalist system? I would have thought that a better way of doing things would be to speak with our MP and listen to their thoughts on it.

Following this, there was a moment of silence, before a number of others began to speak at once. The original speaker’s idea was quickly dismissed as being against the ethos of the group, with Evan replying:

I know you’re new here, and we’re always open to new ideas, but I’m not sure that this one is going to go very far. I would suggest is that we park it for now, but I don’t want to silence you. My suggestion is that we arrange another get-together to educate each other and share ideas about alternative forms of action.

There are two notable points from this. First, we witness Evan’s act of reality definition (and thus leadership) through rejecting the proposal. On a surface level this was achieved through discourse, but if we delve deeper, the importance of adhering to Discourse becomes significant. Indeed, his act of meaning-making can be seen as a result of his ability to recognise, understand and articulate anarchistic values (Fairhurst, 2009; Weick, 2007). However, simultaneously we also see that if others did not ‘fit’ with the perception of the Discourse that others have occupied a subject position in relation to, their ideas would not make sense within the overall structure of intersubjectively agreed values and beliefs. Discourse therefore provides cultural codes, and given that leadership can only happen when actors express ideas that the rest of the members see as meaningful, we can see that Discourse provides some ground for the performance of leadership. Without understanding the specific values and beliefs of the organisation, it is reasonable to assume that this act may have simply been passed off as a result of Evan being an objectively ‘better’ leadership actor. However, instead we observe that his act of leadership was only successful in this situation due to his ability to frame within a particular extrasubjective frame of reference.

The value of ethnography for understanding values, beliefs and cultural codes

As mentioned earlier, ethnographic methodologies allow deeper understandings of Discourse in leadership work. Through participating and observing the practices of organisational actors, ethnographers can develop knowledge around specific situations and contexts, and may be able to access the deeply rooted values people and organisations (Goodwin and Duranti, 1990; Poole, 1990). Indeed, as been shown, values and beliefs provide codes and guidelines which actors (implicitly or explicitly) adhere to when engaging in meaning-making work. From this, we can recognise that leadership and Discourse are interlinked, and that leadership does not happen in a vacuum, but is a culturally specific phenomenon. This is something that has received little attention from leadership scholars in the past, and particularly not from mainstream theorists, who tend to focus exclusively on the overt characteristics of individual leaders, including their styles and behaviours through more detached methods. From this perspective, if an individual is in possession of the ‘correct’ attributes, if they have the ‘magic formula’, then they will be effective at leadership in any situation (Grint, 2000).

Although there is an ever-increasing fascination with attempting to understand how permanent leaders lead, it may be worthwhile to think about how Discourse influences the process of leadership, in any organisation. Given that it has been argued that beneath our
intentional, everyday actions there are deeper understandings, values and norms serving as ‘background conditions’ (Digeser, 1992: 981), studies of leadership may therefore benefit from seeking to investigate not only what happens in the ‘foreground’ (the tangible; the overt; the interpersonal), but also the ‘background’ (the unspoken rules of formation; the subjective; the non-verbal meaning-making). As I have shown, ethnographic methodologies are appropriate for this kind of study, and may enable leadership research to move on from the ‘impasse’ (Yukl, 2009) in which it currently resides.

Conclusions

This article has made a case for studying leadership ethnographically. Through defining leadership as a process of meaning-making, and following Fairhurst’s (2007) work in arguing that it is performed through discourse (or: intersubjective talk, communication, language and interaction) as well as being influenced by Discourse (or: extrasubjective frames of reference), it is possible to see how the phenomenon can become more concrete and tangible than previously thought, and well suited to being studied ethnographically. Indeed, ethnography seeks to uncover various cultural aspects by unpicking organisational life; aims to supplement the spoken words that interviews rely on (Ybema et al., 2009); and explores historical, social and political contexts (Schwartzman, 1994). If we are to understand leadership as a process constituted by meaning-making, discourse and Discourse, then it is clear to see that the aims of ethnographic investigations allow researchers to generate a nuanced picture of leadership activity.

However, it is worth noting that it is unlikely that this will lead to any objective or universalistic propositions and hypothesis that construct a ‘magic recipe’ applicable to leadership practice everywhere. Indeed, values and beliefs differ from organisation to organisation, as each and every social unit would privilege certain Discourses over others, and have different sets of guiding principles which they see as appropriate and normal, justifiable and coherent. For example, for the organisation at the centre of this project, leadership actors emerged when they framed and communicated ideas that spoke to a certain set of values that other organisational members held as core. However, this is not to say that the same ideas would have been received as well in another organisation – a bureaucratic, capitalist business, say – as they would be working from a different Discourse, and thus, the proposals would not have ‘made sense’ within that environment. Therefore, leadership cannot be conceptualised as a generalisable phenomenon, but instead should be seen as context specific.

On this, it is worth noting that the suggestions from this article are only relevant to specific empirical locations. In fact, the lessons have a wide-ranging impact, suggesting that future researchers might find it interesting to ask similar questions in dissimilar organisations. Indeed, as has been indicated throughout, there are a number of areas that can give an insight into the deep and complex process of meaning-making and leadership. Arguably, these are only possible to understand through engaged, first-hand, participatory research: to not just listen to what people say they do, but to be present and hear conversations play out; to hear the kind of language people use; to listen to rhetorical devices; to understand cultural codes, underlying values and beliefs; to hear the stories that people tell to get their point across; to engage in argumentation and negotiation; to see ‘influence’ happening in the context of meaning making; to actively observe times when group’s realities are maintained, changed or questioned. Through this, researchers can identify relationships amongst group members; understand how things are organised and prioritised; and observe what members
deem to be important in terms of manners, politics and social interactions. This all gives an insight into discourse, and can generate a more holistic, representative and rich understanding that is arguably much more difficult (if not impossible) to obtain from more detached methodologies. Granted, this is far from the large-scale generalisations that others have sought to achieve, but given that these have been widely criticised as overly broadbrush and universalistic, perhaps new ways of researching leadership could shed light on the area, as it has done elsewhere in Organisation Studies. Whilst I have demonstrated some of the potential avenues that future researchers may follow, it would be an oversimplification to suggest that this is the only way to conduct an ethnographic investigation of leadership. Indeed, the beauty of ethnographic studies is their diversity and difference (Maeckelbergh, 2009), and later studies would undoubtedly shed new light on other areas associated with meaning-making, discourse and discourse.

Before finishing, it is worth briefly reflecting on some of the continuing challenges of ‘seeing’ leadership in ethnographic field settings. Indeed, to the untrained eye, meaning-making is not always a particularly evident process (Weick, 1995), and whilst it has been presented here that it was obvious when leadership happened, in reality the boundaries were less clear. In fact, seeing leadership was continually difficult throughout the research period, and it was often difficult to pinpoint the moment(s) when meaning-making happened. Discussing managerial meetings, Huisman notes a similar issue, stating that: ‘participants rarely explicitly state that they are deciding something...’. Participants [...] retrospectively interpret that a decision has been made’ (2001: 77). Working closely with the formalised minutes document during the meeting (through minutes, for example), went some way to alleviating this, as the designated minute-taker was responsible for not only recording key discussions relating to a particular decision, but also for noting what decision was actually agreed upon by present members, literally writing down: ‘It was agreed to act on ‘A’’. Although minutes rarely captured the intricate nuances of deliberative periods, they were nevertheless a way of interpreting when, why and how decisions were made, which often included and highlighted the process of meaning-making and particularly salient framing efforts. Therefore, an ethnographic investigation of leadership not only requires a keen eye and ear at the point of discussion, but also being able to recall and analyse data post hoc.

Second, in contrast to how the anecdotes have been presented here, discussions during meetings were not always exclusively about decision making. Rather, there was considerable chat that went on between moments of leadership, with ‘large amounts of time [...] consisting of non-decision-oriented discussions and the sharing of information’, as well as ‘generating points of reference’ (Haug, 2009: 23). An obvious and unanimous decision is an example of such a reference point, but there was considerably more informal talk that went on. During any periods of argumentation, even in single agenda points, there were often myriad ideas raised, some were discarded at once, some adopted straight away, and others modified. Sometimes discussions were sidelined, or descended into non-decision talk, and elsewhere, decision making episodes ended without resulting in an explicit decision. In various cases, decisions were made relatively quickly, which made the process of tracing back discussions more straightforward. However, regardless of whether or not a certain moment of meaning-making can be pin-pointed, even non-decision related discussions may still be important for meaning-making – for strengthening internal bonds and developing a sense of ‘us’, for example. An important lesson can be gleaned from this: ethnographers interested in leadership must be able to distinguish the differences between various ‘forms’ of conversation, and categorise them accordingly.
Despite these difficulties, this article highlights that not only are ethnographic methodologies suitable for the study of leadership, but that they can also shed new light on the phenomenon. The perspectives, tales and stories of organisational actors are too often lost or left unreported within previous leadership research (Anderson, 2006), but, by focussing squarely on processes of meaning-making and reality definition, ethnographic investigations may open up new horizons for leadership research, through exploring nuanced and complex social interactions. As Foucault has noted: ‘There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all’ (1990: 8).

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Author biography

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