

Ship-shape: Materializing leadership in the British Royal Navy

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Abstract

In this article, I contribute to posthumanist, actor-network influenced theories of leadership, drawing empirically on qualitative data collected at a Royal Navy shore establishment in Great Britain. I demonstrate how a fluid network of hybridized relationships between people and things affords shifting and multiple possibilities for making leadership matter. As configurations of actants evolve these affordances are altered, and the blackboxing processes hiding the material actants co-generating leadership effects are uncovered. A detailed explication of the politicized affordances within actor networks contributes to knowledge about how hybridized relationships co-enable possibilities for action that bring to life, reinforce and call into question the human-centred, gendered, colonialist web of assumptions and practices through which Royal Naval personnel understand and enact leadership.

Keywords

actor network theory, affordances, blackboxing, gender, hybridity, leadership, materiality, military leadership, organizational theory, sociomateriality

Introduction: Locating the missing objects in leadership studies

This article explores the complex interstices between leadership and materiality. My aim is to persuade the reader of the value of materializing leadership (a) empirically, through

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illustrative vignettes and interview extracts, and (b) conceptually and critically, by challenging and/or contributing to existing theoretical work on the process of leadership.

Exploring ethnographic observations and interview data collected at a Royal Naval Base in the UK, I draw on posthumanist perspectives (Braidotti, 2013; Latour, 1994, 2007; Orlikowski, 2007) to argue that material objects play an active role in generating, transmitting, legitimizing and undoing meanings associated with leadership. I develop work on the hybridized relationships that generate leadership effects, such as Fairhurst and Cooren's (2009) exploration of leadership as the hybrid production of presence, by drawing on the concept of affordances: bundles of characteristics associated with material things, which emerge from the relationship of an object with other actants in a network (Bloomfield et al., 2010; Gibson, 1979). This requires that leadership scholars and practitioners develop an understanding of leadership as a politicized effect of practices that emerge from situated, performed relationships between people and things.

The 'thing-ness' of leadership is a relatively new preoccupation. The anthropologist Miller (2005: 5) points out the 'humility of things', suggesting that material objects are of great importance in our social lives, and yet appear so inconsequential that we neglect their implications. Recent scholarship is countering the long and rather curious absence of things within leadership studies (see e.g. Pullen and Vachhani's special issue of *Leadership*, 2013; also Fairhurst, 2007; Fairhurst and Cooren, 2009; Ladkin and Taylor, 2010; Ropo et al., 2013; Sinclair, 2005). Through the works of these authors, as well as more broadly within organization studies (see the edited collections of Carlile et al., 2013; Leonardi et al., 2012), it is becoming clear that leadership is materialized through inter alia human bodily performances, architecture, clothing and other artifacts. In the next section, I explore why the material in leadership has, until the last decade, rarely been articulated.

Separating the transcendental from the terrestrial: The humility of the material within leadership practice

Prown (1982) argues that the significance of material objects for social practice has been neglected owing to the Cartesian separation of the world into hierarchical binaries (e.g. *mind/matter*, *man/woman*, *leader/follower*). As a result, lofty intellectual, cultural and spiritual pursuits are constructed as separate from and superior to baser, material things. The traditional leader/follower relationship assumes that the leader *works with ideas*, using distinctive intellectual abilities to motivate and inspire followers, who *work with things* as they bring the leader's goals and objectives to their material fruition (Collinson, 2005).

This Cartesian schism between leader/sacred and follower/profane is pointed out in the critique of those strands of leadership scholarship that prioritize the skills, attributes and qualities of the *leader* as individual (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Smircich and Morgan, 1982). In contrast, post-heroic perspectives on leadership call this binary into question, regarding leadership as a process of meaning-making, in which individuals are united in the collective construction and enactment of a commonly, or at least loosely, shared understanding of what leadership is (Uhl-Bien, 2006). These approaches draw on a range of theoretical perspectives, including phenomenology (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Ladkin, 2010), social constructionism (Uhl-Bien, 2006) and discursive approaches

(Fairhurst, 2007), but share a conception of leadership as relational, emergent and socially constructed, rather than as the property of an individual (Collinson, 2005; Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011). Leadership is conceived not as belonging to an individual with specific capabilities or traits, but as a social process emerging from the collective interactions of groups as they work together to identify and pursue a shared goal.

This leadership perspective is rooted in a processual ontology, in which reality is continually becoming, wrought into being over time (Langley et al., 2013). Research has explored the identity work, through which social categories like man, woman, leader or follower, are enacted, stabilized or undermined, but never fully and completely secured (Butler, 1999; Svenningsson and Larsson, 2006), and the richly collaborative sense-making processes through which groups of individuals enact their environment and establish plausible courses of action (Weick, 2012). Yet leadership is not a process in which individuals interact only with one another, nor is it one in which language is the only communication resource available to those who participate in it.

Where materiality was discussed by popular mainstream theorists (e.g. Peters and Waterman, 1982; Schein, 2004), objects were considered to play a functional and symbolic role in leadership. Artifacts are argued to 'reflect, consciously or unconsciously, the beliefs of individuals who made, commissioned, purchased or used them, and by extension, the beliefs of the larger society to which they belonged' (Prown, 1982: 2). However, by viewing objects as the tools of leaders or as the passive 'reflectors' of leadership values, we risk assuming that leaders are able to fully master both the objects themselves, and the way in which followers interpret the ideas and values that the objects are intended to represent. Such an approach is not entirely commensurate with a view of leadership as the effect of a precarious, emergent, culturally embedded process, a series of interactions and relationships with unintended consequences, through which meanings and identities are generated, interpreted, rejected and altered, but never fully mastered. This requires an acceptance of objects as co-generators of leadership effects, as is argued below.

A posthumanist framework for materializing leadership effects

In many areas of life, we talk of objects as if they are active participants in our activities. This is especially common where objects have impacts that we cannot attribute to human agency (Miller, 2005). We say that computers 'crash', dishwashers 'break down' and automatic systems 'go on strike' (Latour, 2007). We use phrases like this because the idea that objects perform certain actions for, with, or against us, is central to our meaning-making (2007). Our activities – like leadership practices – take place in a web of relationships incorporating both people and objects, in which no single element has sovereignty over outcomes: 'people do not fly, nor does a B-52 bomber – the U.S. Air Force does' (Latour, 1994: 35).

By talking about the capabilities of objects, we are recognizing the limits of human actions and intentions in constructing knowledge and mastering processes. Therefore, studying materiality is not about examining 'things', but examining the *substance* or *mode of being* of social relations (Cooren et al., 2012). It focuses on the processes by which certain effects, like leadership, come to *matter* to us, or 'materialize' (Cooren

et al., 2012). We cannot study 'materiality' without studying social relations, and we cannot study social relations without understanding how the material gives substance to these relations and contributes to the development of new possibilities for action.

This focus on the relationships and activities between people and things has developed into a number of perspectives collectively known as 'posthumanist' (Braidotti, 2013), all of which seek to acknowledge the intertwining of the material and the social. These include relational materiality (Law, 2004), sociomateriality (Orlikowski, 2010), activity theory (Kaptelinin and Nardi, 2006) and actor-network theory (ANT) (Latour, 2007). Under ANT, practices like leadership are nested within a system or network of relationships between human and non-human 'actants' (Fox, 2000; Latour, 2007). A boardroom chair, for example, when prominently situated at the end of a table, surrounded by several other, smaller chairs, and when interacted with by individuals involved in leadership relationships, works within this network of actants to materialize assumptions and norms about relative status positions. The chair, in its relationships with people and other things, contributes to the (re)configuration of a particular relationship between leader and followers, offering new possibilities to enact status differentials and therefore collaborate in the generation and legitimization of power imbalances and hierarchies amongst a board of directors.

Often, we fail to see the contribution of non-human actants to social relations and fall back on attributing agency, either solely to individuals or to groups of people, rather than to the variously arranged constellations of socio-material actants. This 'blackboxing' of non-human activity is brought to our attention only when a non-human actant fails in its duty to uphold the function of the network (Latour, 1994). For example, when a dishwasher breaks down, the humans in a household suddenly realize that the dishwasher has previously contributed to the maintenance of a busy household routine (1994).

Fairhurst (2007) points out the blackboxed material agencies involved in the accomplishment of charisma, by examining Rudi Giuliani's actions subsequent to the events of 9/11. She interprets charisma as a product of hybridized relationships between leaders, artifacts and other individuals. In a critique of individualistic interpretations of charisma, Fairhurst's contribution draws on Latour's (1994) notion of hybridity, a central concept of ANT in which human and non-human actants join together, resulting in altered possibilities for action. Latour (1994) demonstrates the mediating effect of hybridity using the (here, appropriately military) example of a human and a gun. When human and non-human actants form a hybrid 'gun-citizen' (1994: 32), the possibilities for action are changed. The goals of action may be modified: 'You had only wanted to hurt, but now, with a gun in hand, you want to kill' (1994: 32), and the shared responsibility for the action (gun + citizen + bullet) may be rendered opaque, so that only humans are thought to be responsible (hence the phrase 'guns don't kill, people do').

Orlikowski (2007, 2010) and Orlikowski and Scott (2008) have developed a stream of research examining the ontological 'entangling' of the social and the material, which they argue are wrought into being together, through practice (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008). The distinctions between human agency ('citizen') and non-human passivity ('gun') are the result of 'agential cuts' (Barad, 2003), separations made by discursively and materially situated human observers. Nonetheless, the character of the interstices between the human and non-human remains the subject of debate. Sociomateriality has

been variously interpreted as relating to the ontologically inseparable (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008), interpenetrative (Barad, 2003), relational (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008) and embodied (Sinclair, 2005) ways in which the social and the material are produced together. As Jones (2013; also Faulkner and Runde, 2012) notes, each of these has specific, and sometimes differing implications for how we both research and theorize the material in organizing, some (though not all) of which debate centres on whether 'matter' pre-exists sociality, and the extent to and manner in which it is considered to have agency, as examined in more detail below.

Mapping – and politicizing – the contours of material agency

ANT, and Latour's work on hybridity, in particular, has been criticized for assuming an oversimplified, symmetrical view of agency, on the basis that humans can act consciously and with intentionality, whereas non-humans cannot. Pickering (1993) characterizes this difference in terms of the 'accommodations' made by human agents in their efforts to negotiate the brute 'resistances' of non-human agents, which prevent or circumvent certain actions on the part of humans or other living things. He argues that this is not a return to dualism, emphasizing the temporal, dialectical and emergent nature of human/non-human interactions, which means that although human/non-human agencies take different forms, they cannot be understood separately.

Kaptelinin and Nardi (2006) develop an activity-theory based asymmetrical positioning of agency, articulating three means by which people and objects can act on the world: conditional agency (both objects and humans can produce effects or 'conditions'); needs-based agency (humans and social entities like organizations must act in relation to social and physiological needs, but objects do not); and delegated agency (objects or humans can act on behalf of other humans). They offer an example of a cellphone, low on battery power, as a means of articulating the difference between their approach to agency and Latour's symmetrical approach (Kaptelinin and Nardi, 2006: 249). According to ANT, they argue, human agency is delegated to the phone, which 'acts' by beeping to ensure the human re-charges it. But under activity theory, the phone does not *choose* to act: it is *programmed* to act. The human *chooses* to re-charge the phone rather than switching it off, throwing it away or cancelling their contract.

The limitation of this argument is that Kaptelinin and Nardi (2006) acknowledge these brute possibilities for action without taking into account the fact that the user–phone relationship emerges from within networked power relations and is situated within a wider constellation of relationships. For example, if the cellphone is maintained by the user for work purposes and is paid for by their employer, they might not have the option to turn it off or to cancel the contract. The implication is that forms of agency can only be assessed in context because their limits are not defined solely by their brute attributes, but also by the relationships in which they are embedded. Whittle and Spicer (2008: 614) argue that 'the so-called essential properties of a rock are achieved by the story in which they are narrated. What is a rock for an accident-prone stumbler becomes a sedimentary layer for a geologist' (or indeed a risk of grounding for naval personnel navigating a ship through shallow waters).

The concept of an affordance, a bundle of features that offers up certain possibilities for interaction (Gibson, 1979), presents more a relational, processual, emergent way to understand the contribution of materiality to leadership. Water (or a cellphone, or a rock) may not have consciousness, but it can be said to have potential: to make a difference (Cooren, 2004; Pickering, 1993) by affording certain opportunities for action, such as the possibility to engage in naval warfare. Whether or not water exists separately from human interaction, its affordances emerge only in conjunction with other material objects and artifacts like cannon, ships, bodies, radar systems, ammunition and so on, and in conjunction with human intentionality. Bloomfield et al. (2010) therefore argue that an object's affordances emerge in relation to the rest of the network and are similarly embedded in the power knowledge discourses that produce the configuration of that network and the intentions of actants within them. Following Bloomfield et al. (2010), affordances are not essential categories, as Gibson (1979) originally suggested, but are formed out of the political assumptions embedded in an actor network. Regardless of whether objects are ontologically prior, the affordances they co-generate are not. Therefore, a posthumanist, process-oriented account of leadership must avoid reducing agency to the various essences of objects, but cannot assume that the affordances of objects are inexhaustible (as suggested by Oliver, 2005), because they are produced through power relations that produce and foreclose possibilities for action. Leadership is better understood as an effect of the temporal, emergent and political tessellation, or following Leonardi's (2012: 37) use of Taylor and Van Every's (2000) term *imbrication* – of human and material agencies. We cannot understand them by breaking them apart, because they function together: the whole is more than, or at least different from, the sum of the parts. The following section pays attention to how human bodies are imbricated in the performative materialization of leadership: through affording possibilities to invoke, reproduce and call into question leadership effects.

Embodiment, gender and the disruption of leadership effects in actor networks

The performed nature of power-knowledge relations (Butler, 1999; Fairhurst, 2007) necessitates an awareness of how physical (dis)ability, gender, gesture and emotion afford possibilities to generate leadership effects (Bathurst and Cain, 2013; Küpers, 2013; Sinclair, 2005). Sinclair (2005) notes that whilst bodily performances of leadership are produced through 'wider relations of power and discourse' that normalize assumptions about leadership in relation to gender and class, the sensuous physicality of bodies presents opportunities to disrupt and renew these discursive regimes. This is not a return to a human-centred perspective on leadership. As Küpers (2013: 340) points out, embodied leadership practices are not performed by self-contained actors, they are 'inter-practices', co-constituted, emergent, intertwining, generative relationships between the personal, the inter-personal and the non-personal (2013) that, through the shifting affordances for action they offer, can normalize, undermine or reimagine knowledge about how leadership – and other identities like gender or sexuality – are performed (Murh and Sullivan, 2013).

ANT, in contrast, has been criticized for ‘blackboxing’ issues of gender (Sturman, 2006) by marginalizing those whose interactions with technology or other actants are not ‘standard’ (Wajcman, 2000: 453); but there are others who see this as a consequence of the way ANT has been utilized in research accounts, rather than as a consequence of ANT itself (Berg and Lie, 1995). Combining an awareness of hybridity with an appreciation of the politicized affordances offered, emergently, within constellations of performed relationships, offers a way to expose how these relationships can serve to undo, as well as naturalize masculinist and (dis)ablist assumptions about the accomplishment of leadership. It opens up an opportunity to examine the conditions that make *any* agency (human, non-human and any hybrid configuration) possible.

The question at the heart of my empirical research, therefore, links affordances and ANT by asking how hybrid relationships afford politicized, multiple and shifting possibilities for materializing leadership in the British Royal Navy. The Royal Navy offers a rich empirical base from which to evidence these contributions. Woodward and Jenkins (2011) have demonstrated that military identities coalesce around shared experiences involving intimate knowledge of material things – the equipment of warfare, for example, or the geography of a specific theatre of operation. Military identities are made flesh through enactments of masculinity (Barrett, 1996; Godfrey et al., 2012; Hale, 2012) and regimental discipline (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009). Statues of generals on pedestals, rank slides and gold braid help to call into being the leadership hierarchy; cap badges and uniform styles materialize the affiliation of the wearer to a particular branch of a specific ship, regiment or squadron within the Navy, Army or Air Force respectively. These material artifacts are unique to their context, but the scholarship reviewed here suggests that the concept of leadership as a situated effect of hybridized practices is one that might apply within other corporate, institutional or public organizations.

Method

The Royal Navy of Great Britain was founded in the 16th century and is the naval warfare service of the British armed forces. I collected data during field observations and over 30 interviews conducted at a Royal Navy base that I call HMS NavalBase. The shore-based naval establishment is home to a major leadership-training base for the Royal Navy where ratings (enlisted personnel below warrant officer rank) and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) receive leadership training prior to promotion to the next rank.

I conducted digitally recorded, semi-structured interviews, lasting an average of 60 minutes, with eight officers, three warrant officers and seven ratings, of whom four were women. Discussions were structured around several themes including: naval ethos and culture, rites of passage, leadership training and development, the hierarchy of ranks and divisions between officers and sailors, and material objects of relevance to leadership. Objects that were the focus of discussion included uniforms, buildings, ships, ceremonial artifacts, flags, weaponry, paintings and statues. Often, the interviewees situated their reflections of an artifact within an experience that represented to them ‘the real meaning of leadership’, or that explained how and when they came to better understand the culture in which they were embedded.

For six consecutive nights, I moved into a 'wardroom cabin' – the term for a bedroom in the Royal Navy's equivalent of an Officers' Mess. I shared all my mealtimes and evenings with the resident officers, enabling me to make constant field observations and conduct additional unrecorded interviews with interested individuals and groups. During these informal interviews with 12 men and three women, which took place in the wardroom and lasted up to three hours, I took extensive notes by hand. I ensured the written consent of every participant, whose identities and responses have been anonymized.

Miller (2010) emphasizes the need for contextualized, empirical work on material culture, to enable the researcher to understand how object relations and meanings are locally situated. This is in line with an ethnographic approach to research, which espouses the observation of social interactions in their material context (Willis and Trondman, 2002). My research afforded me countless opportunities to observe the texture of living and working on the base. I shadowed several NCOs and officers working at the leadership-training academy, and was encouraged to ask questions at any time. I observed several leadership training exercises, and accompanied a group of Able Seamen on a visit to HMS Victory and HMS Warrior in Portsmouth, Hampshire. I recorded all my observations in a notebook, which I extended each evening together with my notes from the informal interviews, coding and cross-referencing each entry according to the themes that emerged during my visit. My coding processes gave rise to new questions, which I explored with the participants during subsequent discussions. As a result, the data collection, analysis and coding were an iterative process, involving working through 'first order concepts' (Van Maanen, 1979) in the form of interview data and fieldnotes, to develop 'second order concepts' explaining the significance of, or patterns within, the data, in relation to theory. In this article, I have included data that I considered particularly helpful to the construction of an account, which is authentic (helping the reader understand what it was like to 'be there'), plausible (helping the reader make sense of what is happening) and critical (to sustain an argument that might challenge assumptions about how, and by whom, leadership is produced). These are the criteria according to which Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993) argue ethnographic accounts should be judged.

Case studies do not contribute to knowledge by proving existing theories or identifying a representative sample. They are, however, valuable tools in exploratory research topics such as the materialization of leadership, and more generally in the research of complex social phenomena, because of the ability to generate rich data (Conger, 1998). As Bryman (2004: 754) points out, 'qualitative research on leadership has brought to the fore several aspects of leadership processes that might otherwise have been relatively unexplored'. Where it is assumed, as here, that people collaborate to interpret the world around them and construct loosely shared understandings of reality through hybridized, performed relationships, an interpretive, situated method of investigation is not only justified, but is necessary (Bryman et al., 1996; Lowe and Gardner, 2000; Morgan and Smircich, 1980).

This article emphasizes three ways in which materiality is threaded into leadership:

1. The Royal Navy's seafaring culture is enacted through the configurations of human and non-human actants that make up each ship. I emphasize the mutability and multiplicity of affordances generated within hybridized relationships, as they materialize, break down and compete with new actants entering the network.

2. Within these interactions, I show that leadership is performed through the citation of normative values and assumptions and concurrent blackboxing processes that hide the agential contributions of non-humans, reifying individualistic, stereotypical performances of a ship-shape 'leader'.
3. In practice, the agential potential of the material, historically and geographically situated, is not separate from power but through the shifting and politicized affordances associated with material actants, is active in obscuring, de-legitimizing and un-doing the gendered, politicized norms and assumptions embedded in the network within which leadership is enacted.

Putting the *ship* into leadership: The network through which leadership is understood and enacted

Throughout my research at HMS NavalBase, I was struck by overwhelming material references to ships, seafaring and naval culture. Royal Navy land bases are never referred to as 'buildings' but as 'shore establishments' and, as with all Royal Navy bases, the 'HMS' in HMS NavalBase refers to the title 'Her Majesty's Ship'. Similarly, names given to material artifacts and spaces inside the base make reference to ships and seafaring, with the effect of calling them, and their users, into being in a way that cites the seafaring heritage and ethos of being on board ship (Butler, 1999). Royal Naval officers live and eat in a building filled with naval memorabilia, known as a 'wardroom' – the name given to officers' living quarters on board ship.

Life on base is punctuated by formal rituals and ceremonies, which were originally part of life at sea. Every day begins with a 'colours' ceremony, where a ship's ensign (colours unique to HMS NavalBase) and Union Flag are raised. A series of loud whistles signal everyone to stop their activities and remain silent whilst the ceremony takes place. A similar ceremony called 'sunset' or 'evening colours', takes place in the evening to lower the flags. As ANT indicates, relationships within networks are always in process, and must be repeatedly performed and 'cited' (Latour, 2007) in order to maintain the network. Rituals like *colours*, and the naming of everyday artifacts (living quarters, toilet facilities) after their ship-based equivalents, are vehicles for enacting the significance of 'ships' and 'being at sea' within networked relationships, embedded in the everyday routines at HMS NavalBase.

Here, a senior rate articulates the extent of the ship's significance:

Chief Petty Officer 1: The ship is referred to as 'she' . . . people will ask, 'what is the ship doing?' and that implies what you're doing, and so that's our base level. The ship, whatever the ship's routine is, that's our routine. Wherever the ship's deploying, we're deploying too, so when you are on a ship, everything is about her.
(Extract from recorded interview)

The ship is not an inanimate object devoid of agency or power. She is active: she can deploy, she has a routine and a gender. The ship is a super-system of enacted relationships between people and things, relationships that Orlikowski (2007) terms 'sociomaterial' and that Latour (2007) describes as 'hybridized': a ship-network, from which leadership

effects are generated, sustained, legitimized and produced awry. The *Ship* (henceforth represented in italics to distinguish the ship-as-network-of-relationships, from other naval ships discussed in this article) is the means by which this interviewee makes sense of the Royal Navy's activities. It is a network to be feared, loved, respected and, most of all, to be part of.

The feminization of the *Ship* was the key way that gender surfaced explicitly in my conversations with men and women participants. Where sharply tailored uniforms and physical training help to generate an unacknowledged (by my interviewees) form of masculinity in the 'disciplined bodies' of combat-ready military personnel (Godfrey et al., 2012), the *Ship* contributes to the Royal Navy's masculinist discourses by acting as a visible, explicitly feminine counterpoint (Barrett, 1996; Berg and Lie, 1995). Her femininity is significant because it demonstrates that gender in organizations does not materialize (come to matter) solely through practices associated with human bodies. The *Ship* is a vessel, designed to carry, protect and nurture those who sail in her. She commands pride and affection and her fragile capacity to carry safely must be intensely maintained and protected, even, as I demonstrate later, at a cost to the lives of individual personnel. This is why she encompasses 'everything', all that is meaningful to this sailor.

The number of actants in the *Ship* is not constant. Her relationships materialize and dissolve as time passes and locations change. Becoming part of the *Ship* is a vital part of the transition to member of the Royal Navy, as this Lieutenant vividly recalls:

Lieutenant 3: I can remember my first ship, I was 18 years old and I was joining an aircraft carrier. My first ship, an aircraft carrier! and we were joining it from boat transfers. I was in this tiny little pass boat, coming up to this huge, huge, huge thing, and you got on board, and I was terrified ... and it was fabulous and immediately you were kind of immersed into the whole thing ... (In recorded interview)

This Lieutenant recognizes that she has become immersed into something bigger than herself. She acknowledges that she became just one actant within the *Ship*: part of a giant, tangible 'terrifying', but 'fabulous' collective identity, part of 'the whole thing'. Membership of a *Ship* overwhelms every other kind of identifying category, such as rank or branch specialism:

Chief Petty Officer 2: Your attachment to ships overrule the branch badge and the uniform ... if I have got a roomful of sailors, that room will probably be divided into [sailors belonging to] HMS Liverpool, HMS Chatham and The Ark Royal just because that is how [we] socially interact ... (In recorded interview)

What, then, is the significance of this for leadership theory and practice? How might we put the *Ship* into leadership? My argument here is that the *Ship* represents the constellation of hybridized relationships within which leadership is accomplished, and within which sense is made as to what constitutes leadership and what does not. To continue to produce leadership effects, the relationships between actants constituting the *Ship* must be continuously accomplished in ways that others recognize as leadership. When asked

during interviews to talk about their experiences of leadership, officers and sailors used material actants from the *Ship*-network to make sense of what ‘counts’ as leadership. Here, an officer explains that the divisional system, the formal structure of leadership in the Royal Navy, is based on the historical requirements of ship’s cannon:

Lieutenant Commander 1: When you go on the Victory [warship from the Battle of Trafalgar, 1805], you will see that each gun will have – I can’t remember how many people, depends on the size [of the cannon], but an average of 10 to 15 people – and that will be called a division, and that is where our divisional structure is based from ... So you would have one officer in charge of ... two guns, so they [the sailors operating those guns] would be his division and he would be responsible for their discipline, welfare, promotion and all that sort of stuff – and we still base it on that now. Even within our staff here, everyone has got a divisional officer. (In recorded interview)

This officer describes how a micro-network of hybridized relationships between people (sailors) and material things (cannon), nested within the larger *Ship*-network, affords the possibility of bringing the identities and associated responsibilities of officer/leader and rating/follower into being. Despite the fact that this web of relationships originated over 200 years ago and the number of personnel used to operate a gun on a warship has long since changed, the divisional system still exists, still ‘matters’, because it offers this possibility to materialize the formal hierarchical relationship between an officer and his/her sailors. Sailors line up in their ‘divisions’ (groups assigned to specific officers) on passing out after training, and for the divisions inspection each morning.

The continued existence of the divisional system confirms that the actants and relationships within the *Ship* materialize when they come to matter (Cooren et al., 2012). When actants are not considered to contribute to an effect or outcome, they are subject to blackboxing. As Latour argues, within any network ‘the number of actants varies . . . the composition of objects also varies, sometimes objects appear stable, sometimes they appear agitated, like a group of humans around a malfunctioning artifact/quasi-object/quasi-subject’ (1994: 36). For example, a nail in the hull of a ship might not be considered an actant unless it fails, when its contribution as an actant suddenly ‘materializes’ (or comes to matter) to other, human actants. Such constantly materializing and dematerializing constellations of actants produces different leadership effects at different times and locations, which are varyingly interpreted by human actants. The production of these effects is examined in further detail in the following section.

‘Closing the hatch’: Materializing human-centred leadership effects

The conditions of leadership in the Royal Navy can be extreme – they can emerge quickly, have a human cost and involve making huge sacrifices. Extreme leadership conditions are awarded tremendous mythological significance by personnel and are

often reinvoked, or made to matter (Cooren et al., 2012), by men and women in my interviews and informal conversations. One evening in the wardroom, this heated discussion emerged about what leadership ‘really is’, amongst a group of officers who expressed interest in my research:

- Lieutenant 5:* I’ll tell you what leadership is! Closing the hatch on your oppo! That’s leadership! [Sealing off a flooded area of the ship, which contains your ‘opposite number’, the individual who performs the same job as you on a different watch, so that s/he inevitably drowns.]
- Lieutenant Commander 1:* [shudders] Ugh, I’ve done that before.
- Lieutenant 4:* No! Leadership is what you do AFTER you close the hatch on your oppo. It’s after you do that, that’s when you need to show leadership. (Group discussion, recorded in fieldnotes)

Whilst these naval officers interpret leadership in different ways, they share an assumption that materiality is not a symbolic backdrop. If the material actants – the water, the hatch, the hull – perform in a way that is perceived to breach the integrity of the *Ship*, by leaking, breaking, seeping and so on, their affordances are altered: they enter into a new, more visible hybridized relationship with human actants, resulting in new possibilities to perform leadership effects (Latour, 1994, 2007). Material things play active roles, but this potential is not limited to one form of agency such as resistance to human intention (see Pickering, 1993) or an internal capacity to produce certain conditions (see Kaptelinin and Nardi, 2006). Their significance lies in the mutability and interdependence of the affordances they co-generate *within hybrid relationships*. Ships’ panels leak, or are watertight depending on how other actants enable these affordances to materialize. Water may allow ships to float, but can also flood, depending on the affordances co-produced by other actants.

The importance of maintaining visible, aesthetic performances of leadership during times of crisis has been explored by Bathurst et al. (2010). My interviewees continued to re-materialize these performances in their debates, stories and recollections. The significance of ‘closing the hatch’ comes not from the frequency of its occurrence, but from the frequency of its re-imagining in informal banter and conversations (known as ‘spinning dits’) between sailors. This re-imagining occurs because of the possibilities for action thought of as ‘leadership’ presented by the oppo, the hatch and the flooded water. Leadership is therefore not simply an atomistic individual performance, or a collaborative social endeavour, but an effect produced by appearing to control hybrid relationships with the aim of securing the integrity of a fragile *Ship*.

Certainly leadership-training programmes for sailors are as much concerned with the material, as the social. I witnessed groups of sailors work together, struggling to manoeuvre a series of objects – and each other – from one place to another using ropes and pulleys, without allowing the object to touch the ground. This leadership training presents opportunities to become part of an assemblage of material and knowledge (Haraway, 1991), which comes into being through practice (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008). It demands that sailors understand themselves to operate within the *Ship*’s web of relationships, in

which people and things act in fusion to produce visible leadership effects. The importance – and method – of *visible* leadership practice is explained further in the following extract from an interview with a Chief Petty Officer:

Chief Petty Officer 3: People would have you believe you can't judge a book by a cover. That's not the way we see it in the Royal Navy. You very much can judge a sailor by his cover. Appearances matter ... because, you walk into a room, they have got to see command presence, they have got to see leadership. You walk in, you've got to take charge, and that's from my ABs [Able Seamen] all the way up, and so your partnership has got to reflect that, the way you do your job has got to reflect that, the power and authority.

[*AUTHOR*]: And how do you see that, when somebody walks into a room? How do you see leadership?

Chief Petty Officer 3: In a military environment I see someone that walks in, straight-backed, looking smart, and looks you straight in the eye. It's like the firm handshake ... (Recorded interview)

These comments echo Fairhurst and Cooren's (2009) work on leadership as the 'hybrid production of presence'. Citing 'command presence', the appropriate normative values and assumptions that make one out to be a ship-shape leader, is a hybrid performance, produced by one's stance, gaze, handshake and 'smart' uniform. Performing leadership in this way requires an *apparent* mastery of one's own physical presence, the production of a 'disciplined body' (Foucault, 1977), which, as Godfrey et al. (2012) point out, is generated through power/knowledge regimes conveying a particular type of masculine physicality: one that goes unmentioned by my interviewees, but remains implicit in the strength of the handshake, the straightness of the back, the commanding performance and in the quest to master the fragile, feminized *Ship*.

Rather than supporting an atomistic, individualized or humanistic perspective on leadership, this indicates that the contributions of multiple actants involved in seemingly 'individual' leadership performances are effectively blackboxed or rendered opaque, preserving the illusion of the individual's mastery of leadership effects. Latour (1994) points out that within each black box are further black boxes containing previously unrecognized constellations of actants. Understanding the production of command presence requires that we see human flesh not as a single entity but a series of configurations of body parts, which materialize as actants when they become relevant to the production of leadership effects in conjunction with artifacts such as badges, rank slides and so on.

Command presence places demands on the body to accomplish a constellation of aesthetic performances by eyes ('look you in the eye'), hands ('the firm handshake'), legs ('walk in') and backs ('straight-backed'). Badges denoting rank are sewn onto the left sleeve of the sailors' uniform, so leadership is referred to as a 'left arm thing'. Indeed, 'left arm skills' (leadership skills) and 'right arm skills' (branch specific skills such as knowledge of mechanics or radar) were mentioned often during interviews and informal discussions. However, the reference to 'arm', not badge, indicates the contributions of the badge and sleeve to the leadership effect have been blackboxed. It is the flesh (the

arm) of the leader, rather than the badge, which materializes, because of its capability to suggest that leadership is physically embodied by an individual. When I asked about the relevance of 'left arm skills', one Chief Petty Officer replied 'of course the badge [signalling leadership] is close to your heart, it defines what you are'.

The men and women I interviewed were scathing about the ability of 'scrambled egg' (the gold braid signifying rank that decorates an individual's hat and shoulders) to indicate leadership skill by itself, repeating often 'Leadership has nothing to do with rank'. They reject the idea because leadership is not enacted by one or two actants. Rather, rank signifiers can only contribute towards an authentic aesthetic leadership performance alongside the practices of the left arm, heart, straight back, closed hatch and so on.

The debate about 'closing the hatch' demonstrates that leadership performances are not always universally recognized as such by Naval Personnel. Moreover, not all relationships generate identical implications for leadership practice. Tensions and inconsistencies within configurations of relationships can obfuscate the meanings and normative assumptions associated with leadership, as is explored and examined in the following section.

Conflicting affordances: Enacting the *Ship* on a shore-based establishment

Having shown how the *Ship* is constructed from hybridized, performed relations, in this section I argue that material things can also counter the *ship*-ness of life at HMS NavalBase by invoking a myriad of other ways of performing, thinking and being. Here, Royal Naval personnel work in offices, whose brick construction and solid foundations subvert the seafaring values embedded in the ships' ensigns and emblems that decorate them. From their office windows, personnel look out on parking lots occupied by the cars in which many commute to the base from home each day. The leadership training ground and high ropes course is surrounded by grass, not ocean. There is no sight of the sea or naval dockyard.

Every time a sailor drives onto base or enters the door of a building (instead of through a hatch), they enter into hybrid relationships (sailor + road, sailor + door), which materialize the implications of a land-based posting. The grass, the car park, the absence of sea also have generative rather than constraining effects, but the possibilities for action that they generate are not necessarily associated with the cultural practices of seafaring. As a result, the network of hybridized relationships at a shore establishment remains a partial performance of seafaring culture, never quite *ship*-shape.

This partial enactment of seafaring has an impact on the ability of human actants to *consistently* engage in hybridized relationships that offer the possibility of producing leadership effects. Maintaining the integrity of a *Ship* is difficult when so many hybrid relationships afford other possibilities. Many participants told me that levels of identification and emotional commitment to a shore-based establishment were much lower than those felt towards a ship, as this Chief Petty Officer explains: 'On a shore establishment it is a little bit harder to identify for me, because I don't think we ever truly feel about a shore establishment the way we do about a ship' (in recorded interview).

When enacted ashore, and clouded by other practices that evoke ‘shore establishment’, the collective relationships constituting the *Ship* are less precise in the production of recognized leadership effects than when they take place at sea. Many other personnel agreed that despite the presence of ship-related artifacts, ceremonies and names in a shore-based establishment like HMS NavalBase, leadership effects seem more obscure than when they take place at sea, as this Lieutenant confirms:

Lieutenant 1: For me, leadership at sea is a lot crunchier – that’s what I call it. It’s fuzzier here [at HMS NavalBase]. Here it’s a training establishment, at that point in [the ratings’] career – it doesn’t really cement into their mind, and cementing to them is what it is all about. As soon as they go to their first ship, and they are part of this small cohesive unit, this team, that they can see working, they can see leadership, they can see the rank structure working on board the ship. (In recorded interview)

On board ship, aspects of naval ethos like ‘the team’, and ‘the rank structure’ are embedded, or to use the lieutenant’s materialization ‘cemented’, in networks of relationships that ‘they [the ratings] can see working’. The performances appear more solid, more visible, because they are brought to life by the relatively coherent relationships of the *Ship* when it is at sea. A Chief Petty Officer explains this lack of emotional attachment to shore establishments in terms of what he calls ‘pride of ownership’, which he argues is an ‘important element of leadership’:

Chief Petty Officer 1: [If this room were my office], that scratch on the wall there [he points to a faint mark on the wall], I would make sure that is covered up and gone because I own this office. And when I hand this office over to the next guy, it should be immaculate. [It’s] difficult to get that on a shore establishment but on a warship, that is your ship. If she is not working, the crew is not working. If she works really well, even if one element of her works well, it is pride for the entire ship and it is quite difficult to get that on shore. So [pride of ownership is] an important element of leadership. (In recorded interview)

This Chief Petty Officer argues that pride of ownership requires an apparent mastery of the materiality of the *Ship*. It involves materializing ‘immaculately’ the relationships between actants that make up an effective *Ship*, so that ‘she works really well’. A simple scratch on the wall calls into question the running of a ‘tight ship’. Pride of ownership is therefore important to leadership because it maintains the illusion of individualistic mastery (or ‘captaining’) of the self and the *Ship*. A breakdown of any human or non-human actant (like a wall that develops a faint mark) reveals three things: first, the inability of individuals to master the material; second, the contribution of material actants to the generation of social effects; and finally, therefore, the inability of individuals to perform leadership by themselves.

Fox (2000: 863) suggests that actor-networks can break down at any 'human or ... non-human link'. However, the alterations to the network produced by a change to an actant may be more nuanced than this. An apparently 'broken' actant, a scratched wall, for example, is still a generative actant, but rather than breaking down the network, the scratch on the wall contributes to *an alteration of its effects*. The scratch on the wall, hybridized with other actants, causes a shift in affordances so that pride of ownership is enacted awry, its materialization is skewed or, as Butler (1999) puts it, 'queered' – challenging the normative associations embedded in the possibilities afforded by the straight back, the closed hatch, the left arm and the sailors' stories. Entangled in the collective and relational accomplishment of leadership effects, material things therefore play a role in obscuring, resisting, restraining or undoing the 'ideal' leadership performance by affording conflicting possibilities for action.

In ways similar to previous interview extracts, this participant's comments tie the fragility of the *Ship* to her gender, which like any accomplishment of femininity is precarious, always in process and simultaneously being undone (Butler, 1999). Her 'vessel-ness' is not an essence, neither is it indicative of passivity. It is a product of a vast and fluid multiplicity of hybrid agencies, which ensure – and sometimes jeopardize – her safety, and that of those she carries. Her actants materialize and disperse, they break down and must be seen to be re-conquered by the masculine disciplined bodies (Godfrey et al., 2012) who own her. When networks of relationships afford incoherent or conflicted possibilities for action, they materialize as inauthentic ('not working'), and the 'pride', the illusion of individual mastery or 'ownership', is lost.

These data reveal the challenges faced by human members of the *Ship*-network when engaging in 'showing' leadership. Despite the hybridized relationships that constitute their training, they are assessed as *individuals* on their leadership performance. Naval personnel must materialize a strong 'individual' command presence, an apparent mastery of the self and others in the network, but they are embedded in a web of hybrid relationships that change over time (as personnel come and go, as an immaculate wall develops a scratch), offering a multiplicity of possibilities for action: some of which are in line with normative assumptions, and some of which actively work to produce leadership awry.

Key to this incoherence is the fact that material objects, such as buildings, are produced and imported into the *Ship*-network over time. Networks stretch through time as well as space: historic artifacts and architecture materialize assumptions from the past within the present. Sailors continue to line up in their divisions, ordered by the demands of cannon that no longer exist. Officers are trained in a building that permanently cites the Navy's most famous historic leaders: Drake, Hawk, Howe and Nelson, men whose identities are fused with the building itself, their names carved into its façade in huge capitals. One (male) officer describes the college as:

Lieutenant Commander 3: ... set in granite, this sort of grinding bureaucracy, unchanging, unbending, unyielding, old-fashioned, male-dominated, white-male-dominated ... what does that say to somebody who is female and black that comes to the organization? ... They might consider this is a very introspective, unchanging organization. (In recorded interview)

This is a *Ship* rich in material actants with origins stretching back through a history of colonialism and hegemonic masculinity (Barrett, 1996): a *Ship*, which is always in progress, but always being un-done, and which calls a cacophony of pasts into the present. Statues, figureheads, paintings, buildings, 'colours' and so on are not power-neutral: they form assemblages of knowledge/power relations invoking the eras in which they were designed. The possibilities that they afford for performing pride in the heritage of naval leadership carry with them the potential to materialize and perpetuate assumptions, rooted in that heritage, about colonialism, gender, (dis)ability or ethnicity. The affordances generated within the *Ship*, produced through time, place and power, therefore have implications for understanding how, for example, masculinist practices are perpetuated within military leadership (Barrett, 1996; Godfrey et al., 2012; Hale, 2012).

Closing remarks on the production of leadership effects

In this article, I have suggested that the material be incorporated into accounts of leadership as process, which already view leadership as situated, performed, relational and collaborative (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011). We cannot assume that material objects are simply the tools of leaders, or that they passively reflect leadership values, status and history. To do so is to 'blackbox' the agential role of the material in generating leadership effects, and to legitimize and reify assumptions about leadership as a heroic, individualistic endeavour.

Material actants co-produce leadership, which emerges not as an individualistic phenomenon but as a multitude of hybridized, powerfully-enacted, in-process relational effects produced out of evolving, and sometimes conflicting, assemblages of specific body parts, technologies, clothing and so on. Developing the ideas of authors who have indicated the hybrid production of leadership effects (Fairhurst, 2007; Fairhurst and Cooren, 2009; Küpers, 2013), this article makes three specific contributions relating to the integration of the concept of affordances into actor-network led characterizations of leadership.

First, affordances help us to better characterize the agential role of actants within the hybridized generation of leadership effects. Rather than focusing on the essential properties of actants, recognizing their situated affordances helps us understand how varied possibilities for enacting leadership within a network can emerge, mutate, co-exist and disperse. I emphasize the evolving, gendered, politicized affordances of material actants in the *Ship*, which shift across time as the inhabitants of networks change and as the power/knowledge regimes that produce them evolve. In cooperation with other actants, water produces affordances that make it float-able, but at other times flood-able. Statues of leaders invoke military might, but also 'say' things about the colonial past and heroism of naval warfare. From this, we can see that the contours of material agency are not limited to simple resistances to human accommodations as Pickering (1993) suggests. Furthermore, an object's agential potential does not pre-exist power and cannot be categorized as an essence, separate from the relationships that produce it. Material affordances are *multiple* and *mutable*, generated and undone through hybridized relationships that themselves are the product of power/knowledge regimes that shift and disperse. These are the conditions that make any form of agency possible (Butler, 1999).

Relatedly, an awareness of the shifting character of affordances develops understanding about the limits of 'blackboxing'. The work of material actants is often blackboxed so that leadership endeavours are viewed as the outcome of an individual (human) actor's

leadership, rather than as the effect of hybrid relations. Blackboxing is a crucial process in the perpetuation of individualistic assumptions about leadership – but the shifting affordances generated within actor networks mean it is an impermanent, precarious one. When a hatch is closed, water floods, or a wall develops a scratch, previously blackboxed actants ‘come to matter’ (Cooren et al., 2012) and the dynamic, nested nature of the *Ship* reveals itself. The production of leadership as an apparently individual performance is revealed to be an illusion, to which previously blackboxed constellations of body parts, badges, cannon and other actants have contributed.

Finally, an awareness of how affordances are produced within the power relations embedded in an actor-network contributes to knowledge about how leadership effects are always-already politicized. The possibilities for action that actants co-create are not power neutral, nor are they necessarily aligned with one another, or static in time and place. They repeatedly call into being ways of understanding leadership that are human-centred, gendered, colonialist and anachronistic. Hybridized relationships afford ways of generating, but also resisting obscuring or undoing leadership performances. At HMS NavalBase they produce incoherent and unpredictable affordances for action, unrelated to the seafaring culture in which assumptions about leadership such as ‘pride of ownership’ are grounded. The result is that leadership effects are ‘fuzzier’, or less coherently materialized, than when they take place at sea. The implication of this research for leadership scholarship is that it demands sensitivity to the material actants actively contributing to leadership effects. Looking at relationships between people tells us only part of the story: we need to look at the whole *Ship*, to learn more about how leadership is accomplished, gendered, legitimized, repeated and, perhaps most significantly, worked awry.

The *Ship* might have its counterparts in other industries or organizations: one might similarly characterize a hospital, a university, or the House of Commons as networks of hybrid relationships through which understandings about what it means to be not just a leader, but a nurse, a university lecturer or a parliamentary representative are enacted through collaborative performances, involving, for example, needles and drips, lecterns and whiteboards, or the ballot box (Gherardi, 2001). One avenue for future research might therefore be to explore the leadership effects afforded by other constellations of historically situated hybridized relationships. In particular, this article might serve as a point of departure for considering how leadership effects are materialized, ‘queered’ or obscured in relation to (or in spite of) other performative effects, such as gender, ethnicity or (dis)ability (Butler, 1999). The contribution here illustrates that we can conceptualize the material reach of gender and other identity markers across networks, in ways that have implications beyond human embodiment, and that implicate the entire *Ship*. What is evident is that exploring the *matter* of leadership can contribute to our developing awareness of the complexities of organization, leadership and human relations. Indeed, by ‘blackboxing’ the roles of material actants in the production, gendering and undoing of leadership effects, leadership studies scholars risk perpetuating individualistic, masculinist and heroic assumptions about how leadership effects are generated.

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