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What is This?

Living Leadership: A Systemic Constructionist Approach

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Abstract *This article offers a practical theory of leadership grounded in systemic thinking and social constructionism. A systemic constructionist approach conceptualizes leadership as a co-created, performative, attributional, and contextual process where the ideas articulated in talk or action are recognized by others as progressing tasks that are important to them. Using a systemic constructionist framework, we argue that leadership theory and research needs to give attention to three important discursive practices: (1) sensemaking, (2) positioning, and (3) play. The implications for theory, research, and practice from a systemic constructionist perspective are highlighted.*

Keywords *discourse; leadership; play; positioning; practical theory; sensemaking; social constructionism; systemic*

The study of leadership communication has a long-standing history even though analysts have worried at various times about its peripheral status within the organizational sciences (Barge & Schleuter, 1991; Fairhurst, 2001; Goldhaber et al., 1978; Jablin, 1979; Mumby, 2007; Redding, 1972, 1985). However, with the linguistic turn in the social sciences (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000a), leadership communication has begun to shed its status as an epiphenomena due to ferment in the field not just around communication, but discourse and relational stances (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a; Barge, 2004a; Collinson, 2005; Cooren, 2007; Cunliffe, 2002; Fairhurst, 2007; Grint, 2000; Gronn, 2002; Hosking, 1988; Kelly et al., 2006; Shotter & Cunliffe, 2003; Uhl-Bien, 2006). This special issue of *Leadership* is further testimony to such ferment. Much as organizations are now being cast as discursive constructions (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004), leadership is also being viewed as a discursive construction and a legitimate alternative to leadership psychology's individualistic hold on all things leadership (Collinson, 2005; Fairhurst, 2007; Grint, 2000).

However, such a move glosses the diversity in what is increasingly known as 'discursive leadership' (Fairhurst, 2007). Key to understanding this diversity hinges on scholars' use of the terms 'discourse' versus 'communication' (Jian et al., in press). The former centers squarely on the research enterprise with its ontological

and epistemological commitments to interpretive, critical, or postmodern theorizing vis-à-vis leadership; the latter is increasingly associated with praxis and practical theorizing (Barge, 2004a, 2004b). While this article draws from research on leadership as a discursive construction, it emphasizes communication – leadership as a lived and experienced *social* activity in which persons-in-conversation, action, meaning, and context are dynamically interrelated. Toward this end, we propose a practical theory of leadership grounded in systemic thinking and social constructionism. Using a systemic constructionist framework, we argue for practical theorizing around three key leadership practices: (1) sensemaking, (2) positioning, and (3) play. We conclude by highlighting implications for leadership theory and practice.

Definitions and differences that make a difference

Jian et al. (in press) observe that the terms 'discourse' and 'communication' must be the progeny of Proteus, the Greek sea god, because their forms can vary widely and even be used interchangeably. They are 'protean', and not always helpfully so. While discourse and communication exist in an inextricably close relationship, we argue that organizational actors operate *in* communication and *through* discourse. Leadership actors co-create their subjectivities – personal and professional identities, relationships, communities, and cultures – *in communication* through linguistic and embodied performances. Communicative action can modify and elaborate existing connections among actors, action, meaning, and context or create new ones. Lived moments within the communicative process are inevitably distinct and novel given the unique intersection of time, topic, people, and place. New possibilities for meaning-making and action therefore continually emerge as each utterance introduces new elements that may be picked up as threads for future development. *Communication* speaks to key process issues – such as co-creation, connection, uniqueness, and emergence – associated with the *experience* of interacting with others.

It is *through discourse* where language and communication meet because discourse is 'language that is used for some communicative purpose' (Ellis, 1992: 84). Discourse is always realized in text that is organized interactively, linguistically, and cognitively. Note that our conceptualization of language here brings with it certain affordances (Gibson, 1979) by virtue of the formal properties of a linguistic system (for example, the English language), but also the *range* of communicative uses to which it may be put. Such a view suggests a Foucauldian (1980, 1995) view of discourse, or what Alvesson and Karreman (2000b) term big 'D' *D*iscourse. In this view, *D*iscourse supplies a set of linguistic resources to the social actor because they derive from culturally standardized systems of thought – constellations of talk, ideas, logics, and assumptions that constitute objects and subjects in particular ways. However, when we talk about the actual use of language, we are in the realm of little 'd' *d*iscourse (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000b).[1] This view references the textual form of social interaction, focusing specifically on how action coheres in the sequential flow of messages and the use of language in the patterning of communicative activity. Therefore, communication is perhaps best seen as the 'doing', while text is the 'done', in little 'd' written or spoken forms (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). Little 'd' *d*iscourse thus represents the textual form of the communication process, while big

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'D' *D*iscourse represents its cultural meaning potentials for actors and observers alike.

Researchers who study leadership discourse do not necessarily study communication as a lived experience (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003b; Fairhurst et al., 2002; Taylor & Robichaud, 2006; Tourish & Vatcha, 2005). For example, in her book on discursive leadership Fairhurst (2007) argues that studying: (a) the sequential flow of leadership interaction begets a distributed view of leadership; (b) membership categorization brings leadership as the management of meaning to life as leadership actors prove to be incessant category users; (c) disciplinary power reveals leaders to be passive receptors of meaning as much as they are its managers and transformative agents; (d) narrative logics reveal the narrative foundation of a rational, exchange based theory like leader–member exchange; and (e) material mediations reveal how something as elusive as charismatic leadership can be networked as a series of human-nonhuman hybrids. Such work is intended to challenge leadership psychology's individualistic worldview with a social and cultural one – and says relatively little, in direct terms, about the moment-to-moment lived dynamics of the communicating actors.[2]

A shift toward studying communication as a lived experience raises the question of what is actionable knowledge or *practical theory* for leadership actors. 'Practical theory' is a relatively recent development in the social sciences, drawing heavily from the pragmatism of Dewey (1920/1948) and the more recent work by Barge (2001, 2004a), Craig (1989; Craig & Tracy, 1995), Cronen (1995, 2001), Forrester (1999), and Shotter (1993; Shotter & Cunliffe, 2003). In tune with action science (Argyris et al., 1987), practical theorists transpose the usual figure–ground emphasis on 'theory' over 'use of theory' (Dewey, 1920/1948). Theory for theory's sake, separate from and taught prior to the normal course of action, is not nearly as powerful as viewing theory as instrumental *within* the course of action (Cronen, 1995, 2001). Practical theories thus provide resources for individuals to create situated sensibilities to act within the moment, also known as *phronesis*.[3]

Practical theories differ from scientific theories in at least three ways. First, practical theories are viewed as instrumentalities or tools that help analysts make sense of how people connect with each other as opposed to providing a map of our social worlds. Practical theories are not descriptions or reconstructions of practice, but are sets of ideas, models, and practices that provide analysts the tools to engage and extend the process of inquiry into human systems by helping organize and analyze information. Second, practical theories are overtly heuristic by employing concepts and tools that permit plural readings of situations. Cronen (2001: 36) notes that, 'single explanations blind the inquiry process to alternatives', while Weick (2007) argues that creating rich explanations, accounts, and readings of situations are important elements of theorizing. Practical theories keep requisite variety alive by employing concepts and tools that permit plural readings of situations. When we create multiple readings, we create the possibility for rich comparisons that allow us to consider diverse details constituting situations. Third, practical theories implicate actions leading to the consequence of improving the situation. Similar to the literature on reflective practice and action science (Argyris et al., 1987; Argyris & Schon, 1978; Schon, 1983), the process of theorizing should provide a sense of orientation and enable action from within the flow of interaction.

An organizational theorist like Karl Weick (1979, 1995) qualifies as a practical theorist given his theory of sensemaking. Admonishing scholars to 'read with theories in hand because theories increase requisite variety' (Weick, 2007: 16), Weick's sensemaking theory offers a set of provocative concepts – such as enactment, retrospective sensemaking, and heedful interrelating – that can serve as descriptive diagnostic tools that facilitate analysts' or actors' abilities to develop rich situational accounts. Weick's commitment to thick description has also led to ideas that more than just hint at specific lines of action.[4] For example, Weick and Sutcliffe's (2001) discussion of mindfulness in connection to high reliability organizations (HROs) counter intuitively urges actors to become *preoccupied with failure*.[5] Because success often breeds complacency, Weick and Sutcliffe argue that such preoccupation is the key to keeping one's mental models sharp that, in turn, increases the ability to effectively and spontaneously respond at the moment of crisis. Note how this concept plays out in the lived experience of Vince, a manager of a small manufacturing firm:

> I live in a world of uncertainty, I'm not naïve any longer . . . I come in the morning now and I'm a skeptic. I say, 'Okay, first tell me about all of the casualties, I want to set priorities. What are the things that might take us out of business today?' I'm not being wise, I'm being a realist . . . Right now we're wrestling with keeping two boilers up and running . . . Yeah, we gotta game plan and we try to set a course of direction, but then I live with the reality of the situation. I can go back Monday and the boiler is gone – so how do we address this problem? You really have to be nimble of foot here, you've got to be able to react, you don't know what's going to be thrown at you. You try to prepare yourself for the unexpected, and with a number of eyes looking ahead with me, maybe we'll see a few of the potholes that are approaching us . . . If you look at the plant, the plant itself is like a rickety old car with band aids and rubber bands! (Shotter & Cunliffe, 2003: 24–25)

Concepts such as a preoccupation with failure can serve as tools that simultaneously facilitate diagnosis and description as well as generate subsequent actions to create mindfulness in high reliability organizations – or those wishing to emulate such 'smart systems' (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). For Vince, his 'rickety old car' metaphor serves just this purpose.

Despite welcome and emerging discourse-based leadership research, we argue that there is a concomitant need for more practical theorizing of leadership that takes into account the living, spontaneous, co-constructed performances of leadership actors. Such a construction would provide a framework for understanding the living unity of leaders, leadership, communication, action, meaning, and context. We offer such a construction rooted in systemic thinking and social constructionism.

Systemic constructionism, practical theory, and leadership

A systemic constructionist approach grounds the development of a practical theory of leadership in the lived experience and social practices of persons in conversation. Our development of a systemic constructionist approach is guided by three interrelated questions: (1) how is leadership performed? (2) what counts as leadership? and

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(3) what are the consequences of particular leadership constructions? In order to answer these questions, we need to articulate how systemic thinking and social constructionism interweave in our formulation of systemic constructionist leadership.

Connecting systemic thinking and social constructionism

A systemic constructionist approach to leadership integrates systemic thinking with social constructionism. Campbell (2000) suggests that systemic thinking represents a particular perspective toward describing and explaining lived patterns of behavior,

> Systemic thinking is a way to make sense of the relatedness of everything around us. In its broadest application, it is a way of thinking that gives practitioners the tools to observe the connectedness of people, things, and ideas: everything connects to everything else. (p. 7)

Systemic thinking is grounded in Bateson's (1972) work that explores the patterns of communication that constitute human systems. Rather than reduce descriptions of people's behavior to linear-causal models that emphasize psychological phenomena such as personality traits, belief structures, or motives, Bateson argues that to predict behavior a systemic approach must pay attention to the reciprocal or mutual causality among persons, whereby the behavior of any individual is the product of the interaction among persons (Bateson, 1972; Bateson et al., 1956; Sexton, 1994). Bateson (1972) argues that human beings exist in a world of interlocking sequences of action, or circuits of interaction, which over time become guided by relational rules.

The concept of circuitry draws attention to the importance of feedback within human systems. Cybernetic theory suggests that systems are self-regulating as feedback loops connect different elements of the system. Bateson (1972) argues that it is feedback that creates and sustains patterns of interaction within human systems, and that an individual's identity and experience is informed by his or her place in the pattern. To understand how a human system operates and changes over time, it is important to focus on the pattern that connects members of a human system through their reciprocal feedback to each other and to fully recognize the difference that makes a difference – how introducing new bits of information into a system can create new connections and patterns.

More recent systemic approaches have embraced second-order cybernetics, which has shifted the focus from feedback processes to meaning making (Dallos & Draper, 2000; Hedges, 2005). The focus on human systems as sites for meaning making highlights the need for social constructionist ideas and concepts that explore how persons-in-conversation co-create social arrangements such as identities and relationships through language. Social constructionism is concerned with how the use of language and the structuring of conversations create meaning and subjectivity. Burr (2003) identifies several key commitments that inform social constructionism: (1) language is a form of social action that creates identities, relationships, organizations, and cultures; (2) explanations of social phenomena are to be developed within the inter-actions and social practices of persons; and (3) forms of knowledge are historically and culturally bound. Given that leaders mainly work with 'words and the

interactional surround' (Hoffman, 1990), situating social constructionism within a systemic frame creates a focus on how discourse creates meaning within human systems.

We favor using the term 'systemic constructionist' to describe our theoretical orientation in order to draw attention to each of these important theoretical influences. Campbell (2000) suggests systemic thinking has traditionally been concerned with observing patterns of interaction within a system and asking 'what is happening', whereas social constructionism has focused on the explanation of action, 'why it is happening', how persons use language to account for their social worlds. The term 'systemic constructionism' focuses our attention on the coordination of meaning and action within human systems and how language invites, creates, and sustains particular patterns of coordination and discourages others.

A systemic constructionist approach to leadership answers the three questions that began this section in a particular way. A systemic constructionist approach would address the first question, 'how is leadership being performed?', by focusing attention on little 'd' discourse and examining the sociality or patterns of coordination created by the string of jointly produced utterances by leadership actors. A systemic constructionist approach to leadership would suggest that an appropriate answer to the second question, 'what counts as leadership?', would be 'it depends', recognizing that people's conceptualizations of leadership are variable and contingent on the big 'D' Discourses they invoke through their talk. What counts as leadership is highly contextualized and dynamic; it can only be unpacked by exploring how leadership actors negotiate a working definition of leadership utilizing the meaning potentials that Discourse provides. A systemic constructionist approach would respond to the third question, 'what are the consequences of particular leadership constructions?', by examining the social construction of the system – the reflexive relationships among leadership d/Discourses and the effects they produce, the subjectivities they generate, and their ability to progress tasks through their connectivity.

Articulating a systemic constructionist leadership approach

Drawing on Fairhurst (2007), we view leadership as a co-created, performative, contextual, and attributional process where the ideas articulated in talk or action are recognized by others as progressing tasks that are important to them. At first glance it might seem contradictory to fix the meaning of leadership by offering a conceptual definition, given that social constructionist approaches view meaning as co-constructed, contextual, and contestable. However, it is important to provide some guidance to leadership scholars as to the focus and values informing a practical theory of leadership from a systemic constructionist perspective.

Any conceptualization of leadership is grounded explicitly or implicitly in a set of value commitments that provide a sense of orientation as to what is important for leadership actors in situ as well as what leadership theorists should consider when developing their research accounts. Moreover, Whitehead and McNiff's (McNiff et al., 2003; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006; Whitehead & McNiff, 2006) work on valued-based practice suggests that values also create living standards of judgment for assessing the quality of practice:

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> Criteria and standards of judgement are different things. Criteria take the form of words and phrases that are used as markers of performance . . . Such criteria, however say little about the quality of practice, that is, what is good about the practice . . . Making judgements about the quality of practice means making value judgements, in terms of what you find valuable in the practices. Value judgements then become standards of judgement. You judge things in terms of what you think is good. (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006: 71)

For leadership actors, the values associated with a particular approach provide a means to assess the quality of their current practice as it is experienced within conversational episodes (that is, the degree to which they live out these values in practice) and to make judgments about the quality of elaborations or changes in their practice (that is, the degree to which these alterations improve their ability to create linguistic performances that reflect these values). Similarly, values also create a set of standards through which leadership scholars may evaluate the quality of their theoretical accounts.

A systemic constructionist approach makes several value commitments regarding the importance of communication, connection, uniqueness, emergence, and affirmation (see Table 1). The quality of leadership theory and practice can be judged by the degree to which it: (1) takes into account the way that language creates situations, events, and people; (2) adopts a systemic unit of analysis; (3) captures the unique qualities of situations, events, and people; (4) fosters a sense of emergence and development; and (5) affirms what is good in the situation.

Communication

At the heart of a systemic constructionist practical theory of leadership is the notion that persons co-create their subjectivity in the form of personal and professional identities, relationships, and cultures through linguistic performance. As Grint (2005) observes, '"reality" is constructed through language and, in turn, since language is a social phenomenon, the account of reality which prevails is often both a temporary

Table 1 *Systemic constructionist value commitments*

Value commitments	Description
Communication	Leadership actors co-create identities, relationships, and cultures through linguistic performances.
Connection	Understanding leadership within a human system depends on articulating the connections among persons-in-conversation, action, meaning, and context.
Uniqueness	Leadership actors operate within unique contexts defined by time, place, people, and topic.
Emergence	Focuses on new possibilities for meaning making and action that are continuously co-created.
Affirmation	Leadership actors are encouraged to connect with each other's moral orders and grammars in order to affirm others' lived experiences.

and a collective phenomenon' (p. 1471). The contested and temporary nature of reality also emphasizes the important role that leadership actors play in the 'construction of contexts that legitimates their intended or executed actions and accounts' (Grint, 2005: 1472).

The value commitment of communication is lived out in practice when leadership actors treat aspects of a human system as 'made' rather than 'found' and when researchers focus on the co-construction of identities and subjectivities within leadership. The notion of treating an element of a human system as a 'thing' that has 'causes, attributes, and effects rather than as a co-construction, biases the hypotheses and interventions that can be developed' (Pearce et al., 1992: 78). For example, treating leadership presence as a psychological phenomenon moves us to consider the causes and effects of the 'thing' we call presence as opposed to a co-constructed process involving multiple actants and social practices that contribute to the performance of presence (Fairhurst & Cooren, 2008).

Connection

A systemic constructionist practical theory of leadership values descriptions and accounts of leadership that focus on patterns of connections that constitute human systems versus individual elements. It gives attention to the dynamic connections among persons, communication, action, meaning, and context within human systems. A systemic constructionist approach attempts to grasp the living unity of the unfolding chain of utterances within the larger socio-historical context in order to understand how the different pieces of a system fit together to mutually define one another. For persons creating leader positions, this means that they are more than just readers of situations (Shotter, 1993) engaging in an analytical activity where they logically determine their subsequent action and impose it on others (Grint, 2000). Rather, they co-author situations with others through what may be best characterized as an inventive activity where their actions modify and elaborate existing connections among persons, communication, action, meaning, and context and create new ones. This emphasizes the importance of developing reflexive abilities within conversation that allow leadership actors to create and develop their position within an unfolding linguistic landscape. For researchers, this means that descriptions of leadership must emphasize systemic units of analysis that account for the patterns of relationships connected with leadership communication.

Uniqueness

A systemic constructionist practical theory of leadership values the highly contextualized flavor of leadership by treating conversational moments as distinct and novel given the unique intersection of time, place, people, and topic. Bakhtin (1993) contends that every conversational moment is a 'once occurent event of Being', which means that the distinctive intersection of time, place, people, and topic creates an event that has never before existed. Understanding the 'eventness' of the moment means paying attention to the unique contingencies of the situation. Researchers and practitioners need to appreciate the unique context of leadership enactments by understanding what has brought individuals to a particular point (the historicity of

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the event) and discerning the good reasons why leaders and followers act as they do within a given system, at a particular time and place, along with the consequences of their action.

Emergence

Every communicative action performs gestures toward the future, opening up some and closing off other possibilities for the evolution of meaning making and action (Dewey, 1925, 1938; Shotter, 1993). For example, when a formal leader angrily calls a team member a foul name, this obligates possible future topics and conversation while prohibiting or making irrelevant other topics and conversation. It is likely that the team member will need to inquire into what prompted the outburst as opposed to continuing the current line of discussion. A systemic constructionist leadership theory views emergence as continuous and ongoing within conversation as each utterance introduces new elements and plants seeds for the further development of key ideas. Leadership researchers and actors, therefore, need to give attention to the way that discursive activity keeps the conversation moving forward and emerging. The value commitment towards emergence entails both developing and analyzing discursive openness and closure practices within leadership communication (Deetz, 1995).

Affirmation

Leadership progresses tasks by articulating ideas in an intelligible fashion, which are recognized by others as important and useful. To act skillfully within conversation, it is important to connect with other persons' moral orders and grammars – the values people find important and their rules for meaning and action – that provide them orientation during conversation (Holman, 2000). When individuals affirm some element within others' d/Discourse, they feel that their lived experience is validated and confirmed. Within the literature on appreciative leadership approaches (Cooperrider et al., 1995), affirmation is linked to valuation. Barge and Oliver (2003) suggest that affirmation, or what they call appreciation, 'requires connecting with what others value in the moment and coordinating aims and purposes in ways that enhance organizational life' (p. 130). The ethical and moral obligation for leadership actors, therefore, is to develop affirmative forms of relating and connecting that help connect people in meaningful ways, thus allowing them to move forward with purpose.

In practice, this means that leadership actors must make wise choices regarding which elements of the d/Discourse within the ongoing conversation to affirm and upon which to focus. For example, consider the following utterance by a team member, 'I'm really confused about what I'm supposed to be doing. I feel like the task isn't very clear, which is really stressing me out'. Within these two sentences, there are many different elements to address and affirm: what does it mean to be 'confused', what is the team member's sense of felt obligation to the leader or the organization as referenced by 'supposed to be doing', what about the 'task' is 'clear' or unclear, what counts as advancing the task, and what are the meanings and consequences associated with 'stressing me out'. Affirmation involves a process of

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pragmatic experimentation (Wicks & Freeman, 1998) where, in this case, a formal leader invites others to make certain elements of the conversation the collective focus. As is true of any invitation, it may be accepted, rejected, or modified. An affirmative basis for organizing is thus jointly constructed when the parties to a conversation view the invited focus as moving the conversation and task forward.

In our theory and research accounts, the value of affirmation directs our attention to articulating the way that affirmation and negation are used within conversation. We concur with Gergen et al. (2004) who contend that, 'the meaning-making process is rendered robust by virtue of distinctive voices' (p. 47). They argue that the robustness of the meaning making process is enhanced by introducing a productive difference in conversations that affirms what has occurred previously and initiates the potential for new meaning making. Barge (2004a) refers to this affirmative process as creating 'a difference that connects', whereby utterances must simultaneously connect with what has previously transpired and gesture to new possibilities for meaning making. If too little difference is introduced, the utterances do not add any important difference in the conversation as they simply duplicate what has been uttered previously. On the other hand, if the difference is too large and does not connect, persons may feel their contribution has been negated and become defensive. '[E]ntries that sustain or extend the potentials of a preceding utterance may be viewed as productive; utterances that curtail or negate what has preceded are destructive. They essentially impede the process of constructing a mutually viable reality' (Gergen et al., 2004). Therefore, if our analyses are to focus on emergence, they must also center on how the processes of affirmation and negation unfold in conversations and what gets created.

Creating systemic constructionist analyses of leadership

In light of our conceptualization of leadership and its value commitments, we now turn to the following question, 'what discursive practices do practical theorists need to consider when creating their accounts of leadership?' Any number of discursive practices could be the focus when researching leadership. Nevertheless, we would suggest that a systemic constructionist account of leadership requires practical theorists to focus on three key discursive practices: (1) sensemaking, (2) positioning, and (3) play. By exploring how individuals and systems make sense of their experience and position each other through the use of language, we can capture the co-created and situated flavor of leadership in our analyses. Moreover, by exploring how leadership actors and those they work with play with meaning in different ways and invent new possibilities for action, we can explore how tasks progress. These three discursive practices (see Table 2) do not exhaust the variety of discursive practices one can focus on when inquiring into leadership communication, but represent an initial articulation of concepts or tools that may inform systemic constructionist leadership analyses.

Sensemaking

A systemic constructionist practical theory directs our attention to the ways in which leadership d/Discourse creates resources for individuals and larger collectivities to

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Table 2 *Discursive practices*

Discursive practices	Description
Sensemaking	Directs attention to how d/Discourse creates resources for leadership actors to make sense of the systems in which they participate, organize activity, and progress tasks. Analyses of sensemaking can occur at the individual and collective level using models such as systemic story making, negotiated narratives, and collective mind.
Positioning	Directs attention to the ways that people use language to create social arrangements. Leadership analyses focus on how different kinds of positions (first and second order, performative and accountive, moral and personal, self and other, tacit and intentional) are created through language.
Play	Directs attention to the creation of play within the system to maintain discursive openness. Analyses may focus on the play of differences using the concept of difference from deconstruction to explore how discursive openness and energy are created and sustained in leadership.

make sense of the systems they participate in and how this connects to their ability to organize activity and progress tasks. This suggests that our analyses of leadership need to focus on the discursive practices individuals and collectivities use to perform sensemaking.

Individual sensemaking

Rather than identify traits and other personality variables that influence sensemaking, a systemic constructionist analysis focuses on how individuals make sense of situations through the internal conversations they have with themselves and the external conversations they have with others. For example, Barge's (2004a) study of individuals enrolled in a management development program highlighted how they orchestrated their internal and external conversations to make sense of situations through a practice known as systemic story making. Four key assumptions inform systemic story making:

1. The way leaders make sense of and engage others in a human system depends on the type of systemic story they create.

2. Change is more likely to occur when leaders enter the unique grammars of the other members in a human system.

3. Developing a rich diverse set of systemic stories makes it more likely for managers to engage, elaborate, and change the story of others by working within their grammar.

4. High-quality systemic stories: (a) provide a specific accounting of the details of the situation, (b) respect and appreciate the behavior of the participants in the story, (c) enable action, and (d) introduce difference within organizational life to create change.

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Systemic stories have a different flavor and taste from other kinds of stories. Systemic stories give attention to the unique details of a situation from the perspectives of different members within a human system in a respectful and appreciative way that enables action. For example, Barge (2004a) highlights the following account of how a manager in a psychiatric ward created a story to help her manage the unfolding situation:

> Over a period of 24 hours three nurses came to see me about what they viewed as 'serious problem with the management of one of their patients'. . . . All of the nurses told similar stories about how a young male patient and his girlfriend were 'withdrawn' and 'very private' and appeared 'not to be coping to what was happening'. They all said they could not get through to either of them. They all felt 'stressed' about this and also felt 'helpless'. They felt they did not have anything to offer. They wondered if I could help . . . I was asked if I would go and see the patient and his family. I declined to go and see the patient or his family and chose to see the clinical ward sister who had been one of the nurses who had come to see me. I hypothesized that if I could enable her to consider the situation from more of 'a meta position', this could enable her in turn to help her staff. I hypothesized that if I got involved in this situation one possible 'reflexive effect' would be that the story told could be 'this situation really is a problem, Shirley has got involved!' I therefore considered 'the art of the nudge', 'what is the smallest thing that I can do that will make a difference?' (p. 118)

This particular account is a good example of a systemic story. The leader connects various details constituting the situation – the three nurses, the patients, the stories surrounding leadership in the hospital, and her goals as a leader – into her story. She creates a story of managerial responsibility where managers should provide assistance to staff when requested. Yet, honoring the request and taking action directly with the family would sustain a problematic pattern that would diminish the nurse's present and future ability to manage challenging situations. The manager then connects to the story of managerial responsibility by offering assistance but simultaneously introduces a difference by 'nudging' the nurse toward autonomy and self management rather than comply with the request to meet the family.

A number of other models of individual sensemaking exist, such as Shotter and Cunliffe's (2003) relationally responsive model. Nevertheless, we see a need for models of individual sensemaking to: (a) highlight the discursive practices that individuals use to make sense of situations, (b) articulate how their sensemaking leads them to perform particular actions and create certain positions within conversation and not others, and (c) examine the consequentiality of their sensemaking for the way they progress tasks with others and connect with the system.

Collective sensemaking

At the collective level, the task for practical theorists is to explore how groups and organizations manage sensemaking in their d/Discourse. While Weick and Roberts' (1993) notion of collective mind may be useful here,[6] we focus on Watson's (1994) negotiated narrative as an exemplar of the kind of discursive practices that may be associated with collective sensemaking. A clear move in the direction of learning communities, management students and academics 'negotiate' a narrative by jointly

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considering their diverse accounts of managerial experience either as practitioners or researchers. Discussions of 'what might work and what might not work' in managerial practices are informed by those academic concepts and theories best able to deliver the 'story behind the story' (p. 388).

When Watson's students seek to understand 'flavours of the month' management initiatives (like Total Quality, learning organizations, empowerment, and so on) where new thinking around work and its management seemingly produces a constant barrage of new catchphrases, pseudo-technical terms, and corporate euphemisms, he introduces them to big 'D' Discourse (p. 392). However, big 'D' Discourse only becomes the 'story behind the story' when Watson interpolates it to arrive at 'managism', which is a Discourse 'about directing work organizations (or parts of them) which stresses the role of special techniques, practices, technologies and terminologies' (p. 391). He aids their critique of the linguistic barrage by helping them to understand how the normal problems of human existence, identity, and insecurity on top of work demands engender coping mechanisms like managisms, which – albeit temporarily – may help address these problems with fresh takes. As individuals share their experiences with various managisms in a reflexively negotiated narrative, they become more discerning consumers – situated to make more reflexively informed choices regarding the linguistic resources managist Discourses make available in setting and solving problems in little 'd' discourse. Watson's notion of 'story behind the story' highlights that the collective models of sensemaking we develop need to provide an account of the reflexive negotiation of narratives that guide interpretation and inform action.

Positioning

Positioning directs our attention to the way people use language to create social arrangements. Harré and van Langenhove (1999) suggest that 'positioning can be understood as the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person's actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts and within which the members of conversations have specific locations' (p. 16). A position is similar to a role in that it is associated with particular felt permissions, obligations, and prohibitions for how to make sense of situations and how to act, but is much more fluid and dynamic as social acts continually (re)position individuals during conversations. A position-driven analysis explores the connection among positions, storylines, and speech acts. For example, a formal leader and follower may jointly create a storyline of 'coaching' during a performance appraisal interview where the leader is positioned as the 'coach' and the follower is positioned as a 'learner'. The pattern of speech acts sustains this storyline and positioning as the leader makes suggestions or asks questions and the follower accepts the suggestions and provides answers. Positions, storylines, and speech acts exist in a reflexive relationship within one another; the positions individuals create through speech acts evoke particular storylines, which create social forces that reinforce, elaborate, or challenge positions and, in turn, these positions influence the story lines that are created.

Yeung's (1998) study of consultative management within Hong Kong banks is instructive with regard to how managers position subordinates through language. Consider the following example:

1 Supervisor: Look! How about this? Is it a good idea? We'll get Carson to act as
2   a back-up. Do you think it'll work or not?
3 Staff 1: He'll spend less time working in the front office?
4 Staff 2: Well, perhaps it (the office) hasn't been renovated yet. Once it's
5   been renovated, whoever is manning the counter outside and serving
6   a queue can buzz a light [to get extra help]. Otherwise it won't do if
7   those people come to the counter and you refuse them service.
8 Supervisor: Why not simply do this then, if you think it's urgent. Naturally you
9   don't do what's not urgent. If those things are urgent, then it's better
10   to give them to Carson.
11 Staff 1: That is to say: You people do immediately what you can do.
12 Supervisor: Because for the time being, Carson is still new. If . . . I'm afraid that
13   he may get confused sometimes and the chance for making mistakes
14   will be greater. But if we give him internal jobs like checking bills,
15   it may be better for him. That way, it wouldn't matter that much
16   even if [something did go wrong], as it's something internal.
17 Staff 1: It'd be better if you let me make the arrangements because . . . (reasons
18   omitted).
19 Supervisor: OK then, OK.

The supervisor invites her subordinates to co-create a storyline of consultative management by requesting their input regarding an idea for Carson to serve as a back-up (lines 1–2). Her subordinates pick-up and sustain this storyline by commenting on the feasibility and challenges associated with her proposal (lines 3–7). The supervisor then incorporates the subordinate's suggestion into another proposal (lines 8–10) and returns to her initial proposal that Carson be a back-up (lines 11–16). At this point, a staff member makes a suggestion for how to implement this proposal (lines 17–18) to which the supervisor agrees (line 19).

Yeung (1998) observers that Chinese managers practice a kind of didactic leadership where they are viewed as experts by subordinates and their directives are readily accepted. In a cultural system that values hierarchical forms of leadership, how can leadership actors position subordinates to engage in consultative practices that emphasize more egalitarian relationships? Yeung's analysis suggests that these competing values – hierarchical versus egalitarian relationships – are managed by supervisors creating speech acts that invite the participation of subordinates, but simultaneously tightly regulate it. For example, the supervisor regulates the participation of the staff by introducing the episode with a bipolar question (line 2, Do you think it'll [Carson as a back-up] work or not?), which tightly frames the topic to be discussed. The staff members have a voice, but the decision-making process is clearly in the hands of the supervisor. Similarly, in lines 12–16 the supervisor retains control by incorporating the staff suggestions into her existing proposal. The supervisor's speech acts position the staff to become limited contributors in a consultative management storyline; that is, the staff members subordinate their contributions to the hierarchical and expert position of the supervisor.

The models practical theorists need to develop to explore leadership positioning should enable inquiry into the vibrant living interaction of positions, storylines, and speech acts, making it possible to create fine-grained analyses of leadership

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d/Discourse that portray the emerging patterns of coordination and what they create. Harré and van Langenhove (1999) suggest a number of key concepts for exploring the enactment of different forms of positioning within discursive practice, including first and second order positioning, performative and accountive positioning, moral and personal positioning, self and other positioning, and tacit and intentional positioning. Other possible models drawn from discursive psychology (Edwards, 2005; Potter & Wetherell, 1987), narrative (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2002; Taylor & Van Every, 2000), and conversational analysis (Boden, 1994) also may be employed to inquire into the construction of leadership positioning.

Play

In Bateson's (1972) analysis of monkeys at the Fleishhacker Zoo in San Francisco, he noticed young monkeys playing, 'engaged in an interactive sequence of which the unit actions or signals were similar to but not the same as those of combat' (p. 179). Central to his analysis was the importance of metacommunication in establishing a play frame. Monkeys were able to metacommunicatively signal that the ensuing nip was not to be interpreted in the frame of combat, but rather play. Bateson (1972) went on to observe that human activity such as therapy involves clients changing their metacommunicative habits, that is, operating in terms of a different set of rules following therapy. Therapists in this sense play with meaning making processes in order to alter the client's system of rules they use to organize their life.

While the notion of framing has been explored in relationship to leadership (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996), the idea of play to create different frames to further meaning making and action has not. Eisenberg (1998) highlights the importance of 'flirting with meaning' and playing with the implications of punctuating situations in differing ways to create different frames for meaning making within organizing processes. We want to use the notion of play as it is reflected in the phrase, 'keeping some play in the system'. The notion of play directs the attention of practical theorists to explore how leadership d/Discourse maintains a sense of discursive openness and energy within human systems that facilitate constructive patterns of coordination.

'Keeping some play in the system' means creating and maintaining a sense of discursive openness in human systems. A key tenet in systems theory is that energy needs to be imported into the system if it is to retain its sense of organization; otherwise it becomes entropic and decays. From a communication perspective, this requires that the meaning making process engaged by leaders and followers retains a sense of evolutionary openness. One way for 'keeping some play' within the progression of meaning making occurs through the process of deferral (Calas & Smircich, 1999). As Derrida (1988) points out in his use of the term *differance*, discursive openness is kept alive through the play of differences within symbolic interchanges allowing for the deferral of meaning. Discursive openness can be achieved by deferring meaning making versus fixing the meaning of symbolic action.

However, if leadership actors participate in a world where meaning is continually changing and deferred, how do leadership actors create some stability in the processes of meaning making and organizing in order to perform tasks and produce required goods and services? The leadership challenge is to create a sense of *bounded openness* in the meaning making process whereby our meanings and actions are

simultaneously constrained by what has occurred previously while encouraging new possibilities for meaning making and action to emerge (Eisenberg et al., 2007). As discussed earlier, the robustness of the meaning making process is enhanced by introducing a productive difference in the conversation that simultaneously affirms what has occurred before and initiates the potential for new meaning making (Gergen et al., 2004). The meaning making process becomes closed, repetitive, and lacking progression if too little difference is introduced because the utterances do not add any important difference in the conversation and simply duplicate what has been uttered previously. On the other hand, the meaning making process may become stuck if the difference that is introduced is too large and does not connect such that individuals feel that their contribution has been negated and so become defensive.

'Keeping some play in the system' also highlights the importance of leadership's role in creating and sustaining energy in the system. When we 'play well' with others we are able to coordinate our actions, sometimes effortlessly, and our energy remains high. Quinn and Dutton (2005) observe that energy has a positive effect on the ability of social actors to coordinate their action:

> [E]nergy has motivational effects: it affects the direction a person chooses to act in, because positive feelings indicate the attractiveness of alternatives, and the effort a person invests, because people tend to invest as much effort into activities as they feel they have energy to invest. (p. 37)

The challenge for leadership actors becomes how to create processes of meaning making that create and generate energy during organizing. This represents a shift from traditional approaches to leadership, which Barker (2002) contends have been more concerned with the search for structures that allow organizations and groups to predict and control behavior, as opposed to exploring how leadership creates structures that allow for the emergence of self-organization.

The notion of meaning making and maintaining energy within leadership performances in the communication process can be seen in the following two examples provided by a leader in a non-governmental organization (Jensen, 2008). The leader is in charge of a fundraising team that is charged with securing funding for their work in less-developed countries. Part of the leader's supervisory responsibility is managing the call center employees, or 'phoners', whose major task is to call former donors and persuade them to enter into a PBS (pseudonym for a type of financial arrangement) agreement that allows the organization to automatically withdraw a monthly contribution from the donor's bank account. The following two examples are from a group interview conducted by the leader with the 'phoners':

Example 1

1	Leader:	You defined the supervisor as a factor of making the most PBS-
2		agreements as well. Can you talk some more about that?
3	Phoner:	It matters that you giving good advise and . . .
4	Leader:	Can you deepen it some more?
5	Phoner:	If you, for example say, 'Try saying this instead.' That gives
6		something concrete to try out, and . . . to improve and find out what
7		works the better . . . well . . . sometimes I just get stuck saying the same
8		things over and over.

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9 Leader: Yes. Could you say something more what you mean by getting
10   stuck?
11 Phoner: Ehmmmm . . . well, generally I just think it is nice to talk to somebody
12   about what I am doing. And also to get to know whether I'm on the
13   right track . . . and that someone reflects on my doings.

Example 2

1 Leader: How about, in the future, to get more personal by asking what
2   their relationship to CARE (pseudonym for the organization) used to
3   be. Maybe ask if they have been travelling with us?
4 Phoner: I think it is farfetched talking about that. I probably won't know
5   anything about it anyway
6 Leader: Where I want to go is. . . . If talking about the personal relationship
7   with CARE is a crucial point in a conversation, as you stated
8   earlier, how can we improve doing that, without being farfetched?
9   What would happen if you asked where they had been?
10 Phoner: Most people have been with us 10 years ago, so that doesn't really
11   work.
12 Leader: What I'm looking for – and that's why I'm in love with the issue of
13   'their personal relationship with CARE' is how we improve the most
14   in getting more PBS-agreements.

In the first example, the leader is able to 'play with meaning' as he asks descriptive probing questions that invite the phoners to talk about their experience (lines 2, 4, 9). Each question affirms a thread from the phoner's preceding utterance and asks a question that elaborates the meaning of the thread. For example, in line 7, the phoner talks about getting 'stuck' and in lines 9–10, the leader asks the phoner to elaborate the meaning of 'getting stuck'. The leader subsequently talked about how this part of the conversation was energetic and had a feel of progression. On the other hand, the leader stated that the feeling from the second conversation was one of frustration and a lack of energy because the meaning making process seemed stuck. Upon examining the discourse, the leader has clearly developed a hypothesis that 'talking about the personal relationship with CARE' is a crucial factor in getting donors to commit to a PBS agreement (lines 6–7). However, the phoner does not believe that this is important (lines 4–5 and 10–11). The leader does not affirm or pick up on the phoner's resistance and persists in pursuing his hypothesis that a personal relationship does make a difference, to the point that he confesses his love with the issue 'their personal relationship with CARE' (lines 12–13). This failure to play with meaning and the resulting lack of energy seems to stem from the leaders' continuing negation of the contributions made by the phoner.

As these two examples illustrate, it is possible to examine the way meaning making unfolds during leadership conversation and to identify patterns that seem to slow down or freeze the meaning making process as well as patterns that enliven and enrich meaning making. An important focus for practical theory is to explore how leadership d/Discourse constructs meaning making and energy exchanges which promote patterns of organizing that progress tasks and those patterns that delay or hinder task progression.

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Discussion and Conclusions

The study of leadership has grown immensely over the last several years with the development of communicative, discursive, and relational approaches to leadership. The systemic constructionist practical theory we have developed in this essay conceptualizes leadership in these terms, namely as a dynamic evolutionary process that gives close attention to the living unity of persons, communication, action, meaning, and context. By paying close attention to these interconnections as well as the key processes of sensemaking, positioning, and play, a systemic constructionist practical theory is able to study communication as lived experience and makes it possible to explore the moment-by-moment lived dynamics of leadership actors. As such, a systemic constructionist approach has several implications for leadership theory and practice.

A systemic constructionist approach to leadership articulates leadership as a co-constructed moral activity

Our focus on studying communication as lived experience raises the question of what is actionable knowledge or practical theory for leadership actors. While practical theory shares a family resemblance to the reflective practitioner and action researcher literature by viewing theory as a tool to facilitate our inquiry into situations (Argyris et al., 1987; Schon, 1983), practical theory elaborates action science research by focusing more intently on the moral dimension of action. Actionable knowledge has a moral flavor to it as it determines a set of permissions (what can be done), obligations (what must be done), and prohibitions (what can't be done) within unfolding situations. Moreover Forester (1999) suggests, 'we learn in action not only about what works but about what matters as well', oftentimes in a contested political arena marked by a clash of ideologies (pp. 6–7). It is in communication and through discourse that the good, the true, and the beautiful becomes co-constructed among leadership actors within a human system.

Viewing leadership as a co-constructed moral activity occurring in communication suggests a need for a more relationally responsive approach to ethics. When we view the social worlds of leadership actors as evolving and jointly constructed with others, we need an ethical formulation that goes beyond general principles or character traits to take into account the role of the other and context in determining ethical behavior. As Bakhtin (1993) contends, all communication is ethical as it is answerable to the unique qualities of the unfolding situation, which means that we need to pay attention to the way communication creates and sustains particular moral orders within situations. Furthermore, as Bakhtin (1993) observes, ethical behavior must answer the unique demands and expectations that others, and the context that we have jointly created with others, places upon responses. Therefore, from a communication perspective, the study of leadership ethics needs to explore the way that discourse creates and sustains particular moral orders within situations.

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A systemic constructionist approach foregrounds the importance of improvisation for leadership actors

In a dynamic conversational world, relying on a fixed set of techniques, styles, or scripts is unlikely to produce the kind of situated communication that leadership actors need to generate to fit within the evolving context. Rather, leadership actors need to cultivate the wisdom to improvise their action as they go on with others in conversation. Grint (2007) observes that phronesis is a medium that can help leadership actors get their bearings and set direction within situations,

> It is something intimately bound up with lived *experience* rather than abstract reason (*episteme*) but it is not a set of techniques to be deployed (*techne*) . . . it is about value-judgements not the production of things or the completion of tasks (as in techne) nor the knowledge that facilitates our understanding of the world (episteme). (pp. 236, 238)

Phronesis is a form of practical wisdom that involves making situated judgments which enable leadership actors to see the good in situations and to enact communicative actions that generate the good.

Developing one's phronetic abilities enables leadership actors to improvise within situations as they are able to pick up on what has happened previously, find a way to connect to it, and through their subsequent action, create invitations for others to co-create. Surprisingly little is known about the way leadership actors improvise within conversation, with the majority of the research focusing on the way leadership actors can develop minimally enabling structures for action and foster experimental cultures (Cunha et al., 2003; Vera & Crossan, 2005). We would suggest that the discursive practices of sensemaking, positioning, and play enable us to explore in detail the way that leadership communication is improvised within situations. These practices are not only crucial concepts for facilitating academic inquiry, they are also key processes that leadership actors can employ to further their inquiry into their own situations. They allow leadership actors to learn about and appreciate the wisdom of the human systems they engage, systems that they have had a hand in creating through their participation, from within the flow of conversational activity.

Persons who aspire to create and sustain leadership positions need to develop their ability to work with the unique grammars and moral orders of systems that constitute what 'counts as' leadership within a system at particular time and place. Thus, we need to explore how leadership actors develop their reflexive abilities. There is a growing literature that emphasizes the importance of reflexivity in management and leadership (Cunliffe, 2004; Shotter & Cunliffe, 2003). Leadership actors are encouraged to acknowledge their role in creating the situation that they are engaging in and to recognize that situations are dynamic, as the way they respond to others introduces new material into the situation and changes it. This suggests broadening our view of reflexivity, from being primarily an epistemological activity that focuses on making persons aware of how their assumptions influence how they think and act, such as in the work of Schon (1983), to also acknowledging that reflexivity may be viewed as ontological activity that explores how people create connection from within the flow of conversation whose joint action calls forth and sustains identities and relationships (Barge, 2004a).

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A systemic constructionist practical theory of leadership emphasizes the importance of conducting multi-level d/Discourse analyses

The importance of multiple levels of analysis has long been recognized within the leadership literature (Yammarino et al., 2005), but given its psychological bent, it has primarily focused on parsing out the contribution of individual, dyadic, team, and organizational factors on leadership performance. A systemic constructionist approach also emphasizes the importance of multi-level analyses, but in a different way focusing on the interplay between little 'd' and big 'D' discourse.

From a systemic constructionist point of view, it is important to examine the small 'd' discourse, language use and the sequenced exchange of messages within a human system, in order to grasp the performative elements of leadership. Yet, at another level, it is also critical to examine how big 'D' discourses enter into the local performance of leadership and how it provides a frame or context for the linguistic resources deployed in the conversation that becomes *d*iscourse. Following Broadfoot et al. (2004), we need to construct accounts of leadership performance that examine the interconnections among talk and action and the larger organizational, professional, and cultural Discourses that inform leadership practice. Such analyses should help leadership actors understand where the possibilities lie for systemic evolution and change. Moreover, understanding local performances of leadership and the meaning potentials that stymie or supply new possibilities for relational or organizational change should create the kind of reflexivity that leadership actors' require for phronesis. Indeed, making wise choices in the moment of communication with one or more leadership actor is the ultimate goal of any practical theory, which is why we have been so careful to distinguish d/Discourse from communication from the outset.

A systemic constructionist approach and practical theory of leadership provides a rich opportunity to explore the social construction of leadership within human systems and integrate theory and practice. The challenge ahead for leadership researchers wishing to operate from this perspective is to begin working with these ideas in empirical settings, fleshing out the practices associated with the concepts and ideas we have presented, and reflecting on what their inquiry suggests for provocative new concepts, questions, and tools that create additional insight into the performance and practice of leadership.

Notes

1. Alvesson and Karreman (2000b) actually specify four levels of discourse analysis; however, we follow their convention of more parsimoniously separating *discourse* from *Discourse*.
2. For example, only Fairhurst's (2007) last chapter devotes itself to praxis and serves only as an introductory discussion.
3. However, it is important here to distinguish between a *practical theory* and the way it is used or its *grammar of practice*. The former refers to the key ideas, concepts, and relationships that provide an orientation to situations, while the latter refers to the rules for meaning and action that influence how these ideas, concepts, and relationships are used in practice to conduct inquiry. For example, scholars who adopt a quantitative approach to study leadership use rules to make choices about what statistical tests are

appropriate given the unique intersection of their theoretical presuppositions and hypotheses, the way they operationalized the selected variables, the mode of data collection, and the particular characteristics of the research participant population. A reflexive relationship exists between a practical theory and its grammar of practice as the practical theory suggests particular tools or ways for structuring inquiry, and the lessons we learn from grappling with these tools as we conduct our inquiry subsequently informs the development of the practical theory.

4. Weick (2007) terms this an E-prime mind-set in which he eschews use of the verb 'to be' in favor of rich description.

5. Weick and Sutcliffe (2001) also recommend a reluctance to simplify interpretations, sensitivity to operations, commitment to resilience, and deference to expertise.

6. For example, Weick and Robert's (1993) analysis suggests that the models of group and organizational level sensemaking need to help us explain: (1) how collective representations help or hinder people co-orient themselves to situations; (2) how such collective representations are co-created, sustained, and altered through practice; (3) how the level of detail in collective representations influences the degree to which persons' contributions take heed of the anticipated responses of others within a system; and (4) how the way individuals construct the boundaries of the system, or the system-in-view, influences collective sensemaking.

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