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Moving complementarily and concurrently: Exploring relational leadership in ballet and ice hockey

Abstract

This paper explores leadership as a relational activity. Even if the prevailing leadership literature acknowledges plural forms of leadership, in our view, the theoretical understandings and the empirical illustrations of these forms have remained scattered. In this paper, we aim at uncovering the collectively shared qualities of relational leadership in ballet and ice-hockey. By combining insights from the two diverse contexts, we make a joint effort to explore a complex phenomenon of relational leadership in greater detail. Based on the findings of this paper, we argue that relational actions build on concurrent and complementary movements among collaborative agents in the field. Therefore, this paper argues for a more nuanced and co-constructive theorization of relational leadership in organization studies.

Keywords: relational leadership, aesthetics, ballet, ice-hockey

Introduction

This paper explores leadership as a relational activity. Despite ever louder voice speaking for the importance of the shared, collective, collaborative, distributed and relational forms of plural leadership, organizational researchers have not yet thought adequately of how everyday leadership is actually shaped and negotiated concurrently among organizational agents. In the existing studies of leadership in plural an individual leader still controls over the “self-directive” team (e.g. Klein et al. 2006; Kramer and Crespy 2011). More specifically, if plural leadership is considered as a collective action and the members of the collective are shown to lead collaboratively, however, they are described as passing leadership role from an individual agent to another one at a time (Bathurst and Ladkin 2012). Despite the increasing interest on plural configurations of leadership (Denis et al. 2012), so far scholars have failed to demonstrate leadership as a collaborative performance, which is performed through joint agency (Gronn 2015).

Building upon philosophical insights from the research literature of leadership as a relational activity (Hosking 2011; Uhl-Bien and Ospina 2012), in this study, we take seriously the co-creative, on-goingly and bodily constructed nature of leadership. Earlier leadership literature has raised awareness that leadership roles might be performed as distributed (Chreim 2015), relational (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011), bottom-up constructed (Sutherland et al. 2014) or collectively shaped (Dovey et al. 2017). Moreover, some conceptual studies have exposed that literature on leadership as a relational activity should bind social actors more tightly together with their concurrent and complementary actions (Raelin 2016; Tourish 2014). Nevertheless, the leadership literature lacks constructionist studies which avoid separating the individual agents and their actions and allow collaborative unit to emerge in situ. Therefore, this study brings collaboration into question and provides an answer to the question of how relational notion of leadership is continuously maintained and re-shaped through joint and collaborative agency.

Based on our analysis of ethnographic fieldwork, we identify three overlapping dimensions through which the relational notion of leadership emerges in the day-to-day work of ballet dancers and ice hockey players: 1) hiding the strong emotions in the favor of the collective, 2) interplaying collaboratively between the routine-based script and the aesthetic situational refinement, and 3) appreciating embodied co-presence and relational space at work. These three aspects are visible in both of the contexts and therefore, illustrate how the negotiation of relational leadership occurs in similar and complementary ways in both contexts.

Theoretical background: Leadership as a relational activity

The latest developments in the field of leadership have promoted an understanding which argues leadership to be plural rather than singular activity (Kort 2008; Bathurst and Ladkin 2012). The recent upsurge of pluralism probably originates from the revolt against a long-standing understanding of leadership as a synonym for an individual leader (Wood 2005). However, despite ever more aloud expressed need for leadership which covers agents throughout organization, studies which explores leadership as a joint activity are thin on the ground (Ospina and Foldy 2010). In this study, leadership is seen as an ongoing contextual co-construction process where ‘acts of organizing’ in talk or embodied action have an accepted and expected influence on the local social ordering (Hosking 1988). This particular notion of leadership emphasizes the pluralism in leadership process, while acts of organizing necessitate the acceptance by others around. Hence, in line with Barge (2012: 111-112), this study grounds on the notion of leadership as ‘joint action between or among people’.

We agree with Rosile et al.’s (2016) views on ensemble leadership by understanding leadership as a relational activity in which ‘every follower is a potential leader’, and ‘the distinction between leader and follower is blurred’ (2016: 2). Similarly, Ospina and Foldy (2010: 294) provoke discussions around stabilized leadership by stating that as an outcome leadership may finally “characterize the phenomenon in all its forms, whether hierarchical, shared or networked.” As a conclusion, we claim in line with Alvesson and Spicer (2012) and Cunliffe (2009) that leadership literature requires more studies which take its philosophical background seriously.

In organization studies, the prevailing idea has been that the truth of the reality is ‘out there’ (Cunliffe 2008, 123). Both team leadership and multiple shared leadership literature, which include e.g. distributed, collective, collaborative leadership (Bolden 2011), consists mainly of conceptual studies or alternatively empirical studies which ground their philosophical anchor on entitative world view (Denis et al. 2012; Morgeson et al. 2010). In other words, regardless of the pluralistic standpoint in a conceptual level, in empirical studies, the concepts of team or shared or similar have not gained a status they deserve. Almost in every case, the studies separate organizational agents to be bounded individuals, rather than base on joint agency (Gronn 2015) through inescapable ever-present relating processes among individuals.

In recent years, the entitative thinking has been challenged though, and for example, social constructionist approach has provided an alternative (Chreim 2015; Cunliffe and Eriksen

2011; Dovey et al. 2017; Sutherland et al. 2014). These studies have redirected the focus of leadership research on everyday practices and construction processes of leadership in which agents throughout organization are involved. In our study, we build our epistemological ground on a relational constructionist approach, a particular variant of social constructionism, on leadership (Hosking 2011).

Hosking (2011) builds her thoughts on continuous relating through local act-supplement processes, which construct leadership relations among local organization. In other words, the singular acts are open to interpretations (Uhl-Bien 2006), but when those are supplemented by others' acts and contextual circumstances around, an act and a supplement are together giving meanings to each other and to their joint process (Hosking 2011). Similarly, an appointed leader in organization does not perform in a vacuum as a leader, but the supplements by the followers are needed if his or her actions are given meanings attached to leadership. Consequently, leadership as a relational activity exposes that leadership is a phenomenon which invites all the local agents to participate in its relational construction process.

Furthermore, the individual forms of agency have been popular among organizational researchers (Raelin, 2016: 149). In Western tradition, individual self has been seen in power over relationality and relationships, which have been considered largely instrumental (Gergen, 2011: 280–281). The entity perspective considers human agency as a bundle of separate individual actions and individuals as 'entities', which can be clearly distinguished from their environment (Uhl-Bien, 2006: 656). Therefore, by using a relational approach in this study, a more nuanced conceptualization of agency, particularly its collective form, is brought forward.

In their writings about renewing leadership configurations, Gronn (2015; 2009; 2002) and Raelin (2016; 2011; 2004) propose leadership to be mobilized by group or collaborative agency. In this study, by applying the concept of collaborative agency, we refer to the social entirety, which engages local participants' acts together. However, despite the concept flourishing the collectivity, it derives not necessarily from a coherent and like-minded group. Instead, the collaborative agency allows internal freedom as well as constraints; thus, it cherishes a social and processual nature of human agency. It is a question about a relational framework, which binds individuals to be an interdependent bundle. From this bundle, it is possible to recognize the intersubjective individuals but these individuals are not as clear-cut as it would be possible to praise someone without taking into consideration others in relation to individual (Raelin, 2016: 137).

In organizational practices through collaborative agency, a local social order is continuously negotiated in dialogue. Local agents' every act participates in constructing the entirety. However, what is noteworthy that a certain act affects not only in the extent of its own weight. Otherwise, an appropriate concept would be 'collective agency'. Instead, while collaborative agents are interdependent, every act supplements earlier acts and similarly invites certain supplements by others. Therefore, each act is encountered in the joint entirety. In other words, the continuous interdependent process, the collaborative agency, is not reducible to the sum of its individual agents (Raelin, 2016: 135). As a conclusion, as Raelin (2016: 147) states, 'it would be valuable to identify the settings in which collective leadership is mobilized'.

The context is an important aspect of leadership as a relational activity. We view context as a "multi-layered, co-created, contestable, and locally achieved" (Fairhurst, 2009: 1067), and in this way, it enables to capture the complexity of leadership phenomena. By understanding the context as deriving from the detailed, sensory-based practices of organizational agents, we emphasize relational approach on leadership as firmly linked to the concept of aesthetics, which is 'concerned with knowledge that is created from our sensory experiences' (Taylor and Hansen, 2005: 1212). Furthermore, Taylor (2013) and Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) have argued that the leadership literature has neglected the small moments in which leadership knowledge is created through bodily sensations and in which local social ordering is constructed in the everyday-dynamics of organizational agents. We agree with Cunliffe and Eriksen who argue that relational view on leadership may help the organizational agents to sensitize to the mundane moments with the others that "can reveal new possibilities for morally-responsible leadership" (2011: 1425). Therefore, we attach the concept of aesthetics to our analysis of leadership as a relational activity.

Aesthetics is a complex yet valuable term, widely discussed among organizational scholars (e.g., Hancock 2005; Ropo and Sauer 2008; Strati 1992). Aesthetics can be widely understood as the epistemological approach based on felt experiences and involves perception, imagination, intuition (Ewenstein and Whyte 2007; Ropo and Sauer 2008). In our view, aesthetics involves senses, emotion and memory. Hence, we view leadership as an aesthetic activity, simply because our senses and embodiment always already shape and constitute our intersubjective understandings of leadership. As Ropo and Sauer (2008: 567, emphasis added) write, 'leadership is socially and bodily constructed through *senses*'. Continuing with this idea, Bathurst and Cain (2013) support the relational view of leadership by describing the

aesthetics of gestures, which ‘occur moment-by-moment’ (Bathurst and Cain, 2013: 358). To complement our notion of the aesthetic construction of leadership, Koivunen and Wennes (2011) base the aesthetics of leadership on three dimensions, relational activities, aesthetic judgments and embodiment, which make aesthetics a valuable concept for interpreting and understanding relational leadership in the moving, bodily practices of the contexts of ballet and ice-hockey explored here.

Methodology

Introducing the contexts of ballet and ice-hockey

At first glance, the contexts of ballet and ice-hockey seem to be a rather ‘odd couple’, entailing many controversial aspects and tensions, such as masculinity versus femininity, aesthetics versus performance and effectiveness, and sensitivity versus ferocity. For us, combining these two ‘intuitively’ different kinds of contexts appeared to be a challenge worth exploring more deeply. Furthermore, we need to stress that for both of us, choosing ballet and ice hockey as research contexts for this paper was derived from our own, life-long background in these contexts, and existing connections that we had within them.

The context of ballet is specific in the sense it is based on highly controlled and challenged in the dancers’ daily rehearsals through the demands of both high physicality and the occupational culture of dance (see Aalten 2007). Governed by specific norms and certain regimes, the agency of the ballet dancers appears to be significantly restricted by constraints such as the self, other actors on the field, the garments, the gaze and the mirrors, choreographies, space, the presence of the audience, and not at least its occupational culture and traditions (see for example Barnes 2000; Holland 2010) in a relational way. Hence, in their everyday work practices the professional dancers seem to balance the ability to act as freely as they wish on the one hand, and becoming the embodied instruments of other’s agency on the other, therefore moving in a continuous process of “dialogical or participative person-world making” (Hosking, 2011: 62) and negotiation of how they are going to move in relation to each other. Moreover, the aesthetic ideals of ballet are based on smoothly moving, ‘weightless’ bodies aiming for perfection and beauty.

In ice hockey context then, the beauty of the movement is not at the heart of the actions on the ice. In ice hockey, sole individuals seem to be vulnerable under the collective performance. Visible figures, namely head coaches, team captains or star players, as individuals support their teams through their strategic roles or exceptional skills. However, in professional sport,

an individual excellence is exposed only when it is supplemented by other agents around. In team sports as ice hockey, soccer and basketball, agents are interdependent (Keidel 1984; van Breukelen et al. 2012). Therefore, ice hockey team works as a collaborative unit, which is more than sum of its individual units. Earlier readings in leadership studies about organizing team work and team leadership in sports context (Silva et al. 2014; Arnulf et al. 2012) have urged scholars to take sport more seriously (Adcroft and Teckmann 2009). According to them, the relational nature of social ordering and the collaborative performance especially transparent in sporting conditions provide an avenue to refined knowledge in organization studies.

Finally, we recognize the highly gendered aspect of the contexts of ballet and ice-hockey. While ice-hockey can be viewed as a powerfully masculine context, surrounded by intense and sometimes rough bodily practices, ballet is a context defined by various gendered-laden ideals of the skin body, long legs and the resulting never-achieved perfection of these ideals (see for example Aalten 2007; Satama and Huopalaainen 2016). Nevertheless, for the sake of the focus of this paper, we chose not to further elaborate on the gendered (yet thrilling) viewpoints of the two contexts in this paper.

When looking at the confluences between the two contexts, professional dance and team sports are still overlooked as a context of leadership research (Day et al. 2012). From the methodological point of view, these settings offer naturally occurring and transparent empirical material about concurrent collective efforts through collaborative agency. By forming simultaneously moving well-knit units, the ballet dancers and the ice hockey players we observed demonstrate that their organizational outcome in their fields does not result from their separated, individual efforts. Rather, their success or failure arises from their relational efforts through their use of collaborative agency (Silva et al. 2014). In addition, while organizing their co-playing onstage, the ballet dancers and the ice hockey players put their co-effort into action without the need for a designated leader, namely a coach or a ballet master.

Empirical fieldwork

The empirical fieldwork of our study is conducted among professional ballet dancers and ice hockey teams. The overview of our empirical material is summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1 An overview of the empirical material

Ballet	Ice hockey
Interviews	
8 in-depth interviews with professional dancers (September 2013 – January 2014) - 5 ballet dancers and 3 freelance dancers. - Duration of an interview: 1.5-2 hours; 150 pages of transcribed text. 21 semi-structured interviews with professional dancers (January – December 2009). - Duration of an interview: 1.5-2 hours; 180 pages of transcribed text.	21 semi-structured interviews with 18 professional coaches and players (June 2009 – June 2011) - 8 coaches and 10 players - Duration of an interview: 1-2.5 hours; over 300 pages of transcribed text
Ethnographic observation	
Retired ballet dancers' production (September – October 2012) - 70 hours of observation behind-the-scenes - 30 pages of hand-written field notes. Dutch National Ballet (one intensive week, Aug 2011) - 20 hours of participant observation - 10 pages of hand-written field notes. Informal conversations with the dancers and other agents in the field (May 2011 – December 2015). - 30 hours - 20 pages of hand-written diary notes.	Observation of a Suomi-sarja team (two intensive three-week periods, Nov 2011 and Feb 2012) - 40 hours of shadowing at sporting facilities - on-the-ice trainings (8 events), games on the home arena (3 events) and an away game (1 event) - 50 pages of hand-written field notes

By combining insights from the two contexts, we make a joint effort to explore a complex phenomenon of leadership as a relational activity in great detail. In particular, we view relational interaction through discursive construction and bodily movement towards a strive for smoothly flowing and refined joint performance as vital points of connection between these two contexts.

The analysis was abductive by its nature. We made a continual comparison with raw material, more abstract constructions produced during the analysis, and the leadership literature, which provided concepts and ideas for leadership phenomenon in empirical episodes (cf. Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011). We aimed at providing descriptions of individual and group-level thoughts

and episodes interrelating at particular moments in time, which enable to capture the “multilayered and dynamic view of context” (Fairhurst, 2009: 1623).

We began our analysis by reading transcribed interviews and fieldwork notes from our observation material. One of us produced the material in close collaboration with the ballet dancers and the other one with the ice hockey players and other persons involved in the situation. Our research agenda in mind, we chose representative extracts from our respective fieldwork material and shared and discussed them together by meeting regularly during a several months’ period in 2016. Together we then identified similar processes of social ordering from both research contexts. The analysis process was iterative by its nature. Occasionally the construction process begun from relating elements and the pieces of extracts attached to them, at times we had first a hint or an insight about collaborative leadership practice and then had a need for finding evidence supporting our idea. Gradually, the pieces of our puzzle started to form a coherent whole. In what follows, we present our findings, constructed through an in-depth analysis.

Negotiating relational leadership in ballet and ice-hockey: Three interrelated aspects

By exchanging our thoughts reflexively and openly together, we identified three interrelated aspects of leadership as a relational activity within ballet and ice hockey: 1) Hiding strong emotions in the favour of the community, 2) Interplaying between the script and the situational refinement, and 3) Appreciating embodied co-presence and relational space at work. In the following sections, we aim at elaborating on these three aspects to further develop our analysis.

Hiding strong emotions in the favor of the community

In the first part of the analysis we describe the ways ballet dancers and ice-hockey players balance between their strong emotions and keeping up the coherence and harmony of the group both offstage and onstage. Thus, this part illustrates the ways both ballet dancers and ice-hockey players struggle with their inner thoughts. It is shown particularly how emotions which on the one hand seem to be individual are on the other hand closely connected to the collaborative unit around. By swallowing their personal woes, by suppressing their feelings of fear and shame and by dealing with their bruised ego, they sacrifice themselves as an act of organizing their collective performance.

Scaring sense of shame is captured in the following in-depth interview extract, in which the ballet dancer talks about a moment onstage, and describes the situation as follows:

“I felt a huge embarrassment as I fell onstage and lied there in an X-position in the row with the others. I felt as I had let down the others. Because of the risk to fail, I feel very nervous before each performance we have and therefore, I enjoy the rehearsing behind the scenes a lot more. In my view, failing leads to the sense of shame. But of course, feeling yourself a bit nervous before each performance is a must to perform well. It is professionalism not to show all of your inner feelings onstage to the public.” (Ballet dancer 1, 13 November 2013)

On the other hand, another example from the ballet context illustrates how the strong emotions are kept hidden in the favour of the group in the rehearsal studio. In other words, the ballet dancers continuously swallow their individual woes to maintain the harmony in the group. A ballet dancer describes this aspect in the following way:

“Of course I have very bad working days sometimes. Everybody notices it, and it feels almost impossible to hide it. But nobody never ‘blows up’. I remember only a few times when some of us has left the rehearsal studio by banging the door. We want to keep up the harmony of our group and a relaxed atmosphere in our mundane working.” (Ballet dancer 2, 13 January 2014)

In a similar sense, among ice-hockey players, revealing one’s inner imbalance is considered as a weakness, and therefore, the ice hockey players have to deal with their bruised ego in their daily actions on the ice. Overly individual fanaticism results mainly in a trouble for the team. In fact, players and coaches acknowledge that by derailing competitors to perform contrary to what they have planned provides an opportunity to their own team to success.

For example, undue hard checking is a practice which is used to bruise competitors’ ego, and thus to decoy some of opponent players to react intuitively without considering consequences of their counter-actions.

“Observation sessions demonstrated vividly how intensively players are involved in continuous competition. Shift after shift, they take part in serious contests over who will be a momentary winner and loser. Players try to rob the puck from one another, and they are engaged in elbowing, scuffling, slashing and bodychecking close to a rink board. While watching these strivings to get the upper hand over an opposing player, it was repeatedly proven how some players frayed their nerves

and retaliated by punching or cross-checking. In the following seconds, the referee called a penalty for the offender. At that very moment, teammates and coaches on the bench showed their disappointment openly: ‘Hey guys, let’s keep our heads calm!’ Everyone on the bench understands that their nerves are tested continuously. However, team members show their appreciation and supplement the acts of organising with acceptance if they steer clear of trouble for their team. Intuitive retaliation is construed as an egoistic action which endangers collective power.”

Players feel in their bodies constantly varying sensations of success and failure. From their team perspective, it is crucial how they supplement these experiences. The supplements which originate from unbalanced state of mind cause typically troubles for the collective. Intuitive retaliation is seen as individual and egoistic action. Players experience their manliness to be threatened and they have a need to recover their image in the eyes of true men without considering the interests of their teammates. Therefore, players who manage to deal with their bruised egos and who learn from their momentary failure are particularly appreciated among ice hockey team.

To put it simple, ice hockey is a contact sport. It is allowed to check and shove competitors within the limits of the rules. One critical reason to check opponent players is that it hurts. When opponent players feel bad in their bodies, when it really hurts, players start to fear, and they have not courage to play with a puck as usual. To avoid the fear, the players seem to suppress their feelings of fear during the game situations on the ice.

On the other hand, physical contacts construct power relations among players not only on the ice, but on the bench, as well. A successful check disturbs opponent players’ equilibrium on the bench alike. In other words, all the players witness the incident where their teammate is checked hard and painfully but within the limits of the rules. Based on their earlier experiences on the rink, they all are able to feel in their own bodies how the check hurted. Though only one player was checked, a feeling of fear spreads immediately across all the players.

“From the player bench, it became apparent that one crucial reason to bodycheck was that it hurts. When it hurts, players are on their guard against re-checks and probably do not focus on playing as planned. During one observed game, a player was retrieving a puck from their own zone; meanwhile, one opposing player

charged into him and threatened him physically. The player with the puck stepped aside and lost the puck to an opposing player, who finally created a scoring chance for his team. The coach on the bench responded to events: “You cannot be scared there!” At the next moment, in a similar situation, the player with the puck pressed the panic button and struck the puck at nowhere. The coach on the bench reacted immediately: “Do you s**t in your pants, D-men?” In a contrasting case, a player would show his bravery in the eyes of his teammates by holding the puck on his blade and searching for a chance for an opening pass regardless of the obvious physical threat.”

Physical domination plays visible role in constructing leadership relations in the ice hockey world. Aggressive behaviour, undue hard checking and scuffles on the ice are more or less accepted among the participants. In fact, these are utilised consciously when teams are building momentum and deterring opponents. As a consequence, teammates and coaches appreciate their players who display their invulnerability and manage to suppress their feelings of fear.

In sum, the first aspect of ‘hiding strong emotions in the favour of the community’ indicates that leadership is maintained as a relational activity through compromising between the individual passions, temptations and struggles on one hand and the interests and harmonious spirit of the working group or team on the other.

Moving in between the script and the situational refinement

In this part of the analysis, we describe the interrelations between the formal, rehearsed script and the situational, spontaneous refinement of the movements in the contexts of ballet and ice-hockey. We view the script as a bodily project, largely influenced by the occupational culture, partly unspoken and unconscious rituals and expectations and partly rehearsed practices of both contexts. Repetition allows for variations and “breaking away” of movements and thus enables collaborative agency to take various forms both offstage and onstage. This aspect particularly shows how agents in both fields are walking a tightrope between external script and internal experience while striving for harmonious performance.

The following empirical episode describes the role of repetition in the refinement of the movements. It is thus an endless rehearsing and repetition of the nuances all over again,

which allows collaborative agency to emerge and leadership to be fulfilled as a relational activity through the ballet dancers' mundane work.

"I followed the female dancer to the rehearsal studio in which the male dancer, the trainer and the pianist were already waiting. The dancers gave short looks to me, and the trainer gave the pianist a mark to start playing. The scene started with the male dancer walking from the corner across the stage. The trainer interrupted him several times by arguing: 'No, no, you're not conveying the emotion deeply enough to the audience now. Let's try it again!'

After several restarts the male dancer seemed to be very frustrated. For me, it seemed the trainer and the male dancer did not understand each other's aims." (Field note extracts and notes from auto-ethnographic diary, the Dutch National Ballet, 16 August 2011)

It seems that the male dancer in the empirical episode described above seemed to compromise between his personal ways of moving and the affections of the trainer. In other words, even if the male dancer walked the same section of the dance piece over and over again, he did not seem to capture what the trainer was trying to get him to convey through the movements. Therefore, the refinement of the aesthetic details appears to be sometimes useless and even frustrating as it is a matter of taste. Even so, without the script the rehearsing would have been completely disorganized. The empirical episode above thus illustrates how relational leadership may appear in complex dynamics in which who leads and who is lead becomes blurred.

"I would argue that we have been raised to refine the slightest nuances of the movement and in our work. We are built to think that there is always something you could develop further. You can see the difference between the unfinished and the refined piece. At the end, the slightest nuances or their absence make the difference. It is the most refined dance that is greatest and most outstanding. Nothing else matters." (Ballet dancer 1, 13 November 2013)

The ballet dancer continues with this same idea:

"We repeat the movements hundreds of times, and refine, refine, refine... in that way our working is very routine-based. But it is not until when we have all the bits and pieces together we can start refining the piece." (Ballet dancer 1, 13 November 2013)

As the quote above renders visible, it seems that leadership is built on the basis of relating routine-based actions. It is thus not before the routine-based rehearsing is at its final stage the ballet dancers may move to another level of working. This level entails the refinement of the movements and curving out the different personalities of the dancers. Not only then the leadership may truly emerge as a relational activity. Of course, the ideal of ‘moving’ the perfect performance onstage never actualizes, as at the end, the relationality builds on spontaneous actions between the dancers onstage. Moreover, there are other factors which affect the interrelations between the dancers, as the following interview extract illustrates:

“We have a lot of time pressures. Many dancers would love to rehearse more before going onstage. It is frustrating when you have not had enough time to practice. We have just finished practicing the technical details of the piece when our time is finished. Often we just have to concentrate on the movement and its forms and not to the role character as such.” (Ballet dancer 2, 13 January 2014)

Thus, it seems that there are various cultural, organizational and societal factors, such as the organizational structure, the time pressures, expectations of the wider audience and the openness for developing oneself as an organizational entity, which affect the ways leadership can be actualized as a relational activity in the mundane work of the ballet dancers.

Moreover, in the context of ballet, leadership as a relational activity seems to be in a constant negotiation between the choreographers, the dancers and the knowledge derived from each of them. Actually, there seems to be two types of choreographers: dancer-based and leader-based, which affects to the emergent form of leadership, as the ballet dancer describes:

“There are those choreographers, who search for good personalities for their production. On the other hand, there are those choreographers who are keen on their own style of movement and thus, aim at creating their ‘fantasy’ by cloning the movements despite of the different personalities of the dancers...

Of course, it is much more interesting if the choreographer tells me to move in a certain manner, but I conduct the movement slightly differently. Once I did so and the choreographer was enthusiastic and commented that ‘hey, that was an interesting choice, let’s keep it!’ In that way of leading, the dancer and his or her personal style of moving is in the focus, not the superficiality of the movement.” (Ballet dancer 1, 13 November 2013)

Two other interview extracts from the context of ballet describe the tensions related to how the meaningfulness for one's work is constructed (or not) despite of the personal desires of the choreographer:

"In ballet, our working is highly based on the choreographer's interests and affections, of course. We need to have straight rows and look all the same. I think though, that is a kind of never-achieved illusion because we are never alike, each of us is a unique artist in its own right. But even so, I believe that I as a dancer believe in the choreographer's views and ideology and therefore, the work becomes meaningful also to me." (Ballet dancer 3, 13 January 2014)

"...but sometimes there are moments when I feel the movements don't make sense to me. Dancing becomes a kind of physical performance in which one cannot give anything to the audience. It might me that the audience doesn't notice this. Once there was a dancer, Anna, whose dancing onstage I was watching behind the scenes. In my view, she was awesome that evening! But then Anna got off from the stage by chuffing: 'It felt so difficult today, it didn't work out at all'. And I was impressed because I hadn't noticed anything. When you are a professional, you can perform well even during those hard times. It's like hey, I'm having a time of my life and still your head feels empty. I was going to go to congratulate Anna for her good job but didn't do it when I realized that in her view, it all went wrong. That was absurd." (Ballet dancer 2, 13 January 2014)

In professional ice hockey, the interplay between the script and the situational refinement actualizes in the mundane attempts of balancing between the detailed tactic and the emergent freedom of the players. Hence, the detailed tactic helps players to co-operate. The tactic creates a structure which provides solutions that pop up from the players' subconscious bodies under the hectic game.

"The play book [tactic] helps, because you know roughly what you should do. The coach cannot instruct, however, precisely how you should perform." – player, Liiga

The training sessions serve tactic. During observing training sessions, it was identified that many drills on the ice were planned to serve bodily and intuitive knowledge. Players repeated again and again the same trails. Through repeating processes, for example, left wingers experienced sensations in their bodies which are useful from their position. To rely on the

tactic and its execution in situ base on predicting and reckoning with forthcoming circumstances on the ice. During the game, players rely mostly on gut reactions, and in order to control these reactions, players should have learned to supplement certain stimuli with certain pre-planned ways of action. For example, if a player who retrieves a puck from the corner is pressured by the enforcer, he feels relieved to have pre-planned options to play further. It is needed only a quick glance and a player is able to make a decision.

Alternatively, tactic is a theoretical model about what would happen on the ice, if everything emerged as planned. However, a tactic represents a static structure in which many human aspects are excluded. That is to say that, meanwhile, tactic helps to solve emerging problems by providing solutions, simultaneously it prevents some other ways of action. Tactic can cover only limited amount of details, and while the game is dynamic and mostly an unforeseeable environment, players face constantly situations where they must solve problems together intuitively. On the one hand, a detailed tactic provides for players a structure which is pre-planned outside them and their inner experiences and which helps players to co-ordinate their concurrent actions to form coherent whole. On the other hand, a stable structure shackles players to rely on their bodily knowledge and to co-organize their joint action in relation to others. While organizing their co-operation, there appears a tightrope walk between a detailed tactic and emergent freedom.

Appreciating embodied co-presence and relational space at work

The embodied co-presence is an essential part of both the ballet dancers' and the ice-hockey players' everyday work behind the scenes. In fact, it is through collaborative agency the relational space at work can be expanded and more flexibility to the deeply rooted working practices of both these contexts can be achieved.

The following situation from the retired ballet dancers' production captures the essence of how the dancers complement relationally each other's working:

“I sit in the right corner of the rehearsal studio, and the two ballet dancers are moving side by side in the middle of the room. They are struggling with a certain part of the choreography, and both seem to be very concentrated in solving out how to proceed. Kare comments: ‘I could do this’, and Minna responds: ‘Yeah, that feels good. But how should be end this whole piece?’ The dancers seem to challenge each other's thoughts continuously. ‘I am not sure’, Kare answers. ‘Maybe the lights could just be turned off?’ Minna reacts quickly: Good idea! We

need to put it on the back burner.” (Field note extract, retired ballet dancers’ production, September 13, 2012)

As the empirical episode above renders visible, the ballet dancers seem to support each other’s artistic capabilities so truly that they do not interrupt each other or compete with each other in any way, but rather listen to each other’s ideas and opinions open-minded and without a hurry. Therefore, the atmosphere in the rehearsal studio stays calm and relaxed, and the dancers’ differing opinions pop out rather as a lively exchange of thoughts. Thus, the choreography builds on complementing each other’s movements in the spontaneous working situations off stage. Without this kind of dialogue, the movement would probably remain bold and even somewhat ‘empty’, as one of the retired ballet dancers comments.

Another example from ballet illustrates the “unwritten rules” of the relations of the group as follows:

“We give the peace for each other for example by respecting each other’s working. For example, there might be a dancer who is rehearsing a solo in the middle of the rehearsal studio and there is another dancer who has this same role as a soloist. The one who does not practice never goes to disturb the dancer who is concentrating and practicing the solo. Maybe she rehearses the same steps beneath, but never alongside. In this way, we give space to each other.” (Ballet dancer 3, 13 January 2014)

In a similar way, promoting others over oneself seems to be a key characteristic in the actions towards genuinely relational and appreciative leadership. Some examples of the unspoken rules of how to appreciate each other’s personal space in the mundane work of the ballet company are captured in the following two quotes:

“We have an incredibly well-shaped spirit in our group. If a choreographer asks who wants to go first, nobody is like ‘I, I, I do’! But instead asks the others, would you like to be the first?” (Ballet dancer 2, 13 January 2014)

“We also help each other in various ways. For example, if I rehearse the same role with my colleague, we often comment each other’s work and ways of moving for example commenting that ‘hey, that looked smooth, could you please show me how you did that’, and therefore, support each other’s presence and personal style.” (Ballet dancer 3, 13 January 2014)

As described above, the ballet dancers seem to always respect each other's work in their daily rehearsals in fine-grained ways. In addition, the ballet dancers have certain relational traditions and practices, which strengthen the collaborative spirit of the whole company, as described in the following two interview extracts:

“Then we have this 'toitoi'-tradition, which means that we give presents to each other on the premiere night. If you dance the same role with your colleague, you give a present to him or her and vice versa. In my view, it's a really nice and concrete tradition. And it's unique – I don't know any other dance company in the world which would have the same practice.” (Ballet dancer 1, 13 November 2013)

“I remember when I had to dance a role with a very short notice. My table in the shared dressing room became filled with bottles of champagnes. I even didn't know all the people who gave them to me. They all just wanted to give their support to me in that tough situation.” (Ballet dancer 1, 13 November 2013)

A similar kind of supportive spirit between the workers becomes manifested through appreciative presence in ice hockey. In other words, ice hockey players on the ice recognize that they play the game by supplementing surrounding actions in an applicable way. Therefore, their actions are meaningful only in relation to something outside them. During the game, players relate movements of their body to every other player's respective. When they evaluate where they position themselves, they do it in relation to other players' positions. Moreover, each player moves all the time and therefore the process of re-relating is continuous.

To make this more explicit for the leadership research, there appears not any separated heroic action or leader whose performance is meaningful without clear relation to others around. Each players' positioning adds value for a team collective in relation to other players' positions which results that leadership as an organizing activity becomes constructed as a joint process; every single individual participates in process. In our analysis, we identified that players appreciate particularly those players who are capable to make themselves to be present. In this case, the presence does not necessarily refer to physical closeness, but especially to inner sensation that there is a connection to someone.

“...but my linemate gave so good passes that we always moved on. And I knew already in advance that now he will try that fake, and I should wait for a while. [...] But then

there were players from whom I never received a pass. In this team as well, I have played with two or three players, with who ...I mean very good players, from national team level... I could not play with.” – player, Liiga

Appreciating the presence strengthened when we had discussed with players about with who they prefer to play and why they do so. Players did not underline any individual skills what they expected their linemates to have. We interpreted that a linemate may be the quickest skater, the most skillful puck handler, the most accurate shooter, the hardest checker or the combination of all these, but these individual skills are not helpful for their team if these are not used in relation to teammates. In following, a player elaborate how converging supplements by the linemates to previous and next actions construct bodily experienced presence.

”I suppose that we think in the same way. [...] And then it is easy... If I run into trouble, he offers an open chance to pass the puck which is a lot better alternative than if he comes to the same corner to block or something. ... maybe that is the reason, ...when, I think, our thoughts about playing match together, that is probably the most important reason.” – player, Mestis

It is not required physical closeness but instead the experience of presence. The player is not longing for his teammate to help with wrestling in the corner, but him to be available to play with. Through our analysis, we identified that players appreciate their colleague who empathizes other player’s bodily sensations and consequently adjust their action in relation to those experiences.

In ice hockey, moving a puck from player to another represents how well players co-operate on the ice and how they can relate to each other (and to the puck) through the on-going, passing game. If a puck is not flowing smoothly from a blade to a blade, the play by the line is not functioning well. Moving a puck between players resembles communication among them. When a puck is moving from a player to another, players experience in their bodies to be invited in participating in joint construction process. Thus, the relationship between the players with and without a puck is mutual.

When we observed ice hockey games from the player bench, we identified constantly, first, too hard and soft passes and, second, diverging expectations of how the play goes forward. In both unfortunate cases, an opponent will win a puck for themselves. We noticed that a player who is valuable for his collective has an inner sense of speed and direction of the game. In

collaborative and harmonious performance, the performed actions should not derive from individual, egoistic needs. Instead, their actions make sense only in relation to their teammates' capabilities to supplement these acts in an appropriate manner.

In passing game, there are always two relatively equal partners who negotiate in dialogue through their bodily sensations how they will proceed their joint playing. This is a relevant finding to understand leadership as a relational activity outside ice hockey context, as well.

An overview of our findings is presented in the following Table 2. Table 2 presents collaborative aspects of leadership (in the mid column) and relating elements from both of our research contexts, which provide support for each collaborative aspect.

Table 1 An overview of the findings

Relating 'elements' in ballet	Relational leadership through three interrelated aspects:	Relating 'elements' in ice hockey
Scaring sense of shame	1) Hiding strong emotions in the favor of the community	Dealing with bruised ego
Swallowing one's individual woes		Suppressing feeling of fear
Repeating nuances all over again	2) Interplaying between the script and the situational refinement	Balancing between detailed tactic and emergent freedom
Who knows: choreographer or dancer?		
Open-minded listening	3) Appreciating embodied co-presence and relational space at work	Appreciative presence
Promoting others over oneself		Relating through passing game

In our view, our analysis serves as an empirical exploration of how leadership as a relational activity emerges in the mundane working life of both ballet dancers and ice hockey players. More specifically, we have aimed at giving insights into the ways aesthetic experiences and bodily interactions are translated into *action* and what this means in other workplace contexts

outside these specific contexts explored here. Therefore, we will next discuss the wider relevancy of our paper more detailed.

Discussion and conclusions

In this paper, we explored leadership as a genuinely co-constructed and relational activity, defined by the mutually shared actions in a specific time and place. Through the detailed descriptions of the two complementary and highly physical contexts, ballet and ice-hockey, we showed how leadership as a relational phenomenon builds on concurrent and complementary actions between ballet dancers and ice hockey players.

Based on the analysis, we identified three interrelated aspects through which leadership as a relational activity in these contexts emerges. *First*, by portraying the aspect of hiding the strong emotions, we strived to describe the ways how emotional bursts of individuals crumble the collaborative work within these settings. Therefore, to promote leadership as a relational activity, local agents avoid egoistic thoughts and actions, which would rupture and suppress the harmony of the collective. Instead, the success of the collaborative groups derives from the collectively sensed and shared actions which both the ballet dancers and ice-hockey players conduct in relation to each other. Regardless of the nature of outbursts as humanly natural, intuitive and emotional, in a collaborative performance, of which ballet and ice hockey are examples of, these authentic but in some sense egoistic actions are more or less forbidden for the sake of the harmony of the collective.

Second, by describing the interplay between script and freedom, we recognized the fine-grained ways relational leadership is actualized in the mundane life of ice-hockey players and ballet dancers. In other words, the script, namely game plan or respectively choreography, forms an organized base for the actions to fit to one another during the performance. Therefore, the script is needed to give certain frames for the materialization of collaborative agency (Rosso 2014). Similarly, earlier leadership literature has acknowledged the benefit of pre-planned structure for the emergent joint performance. In the contexts of emergency unit (Klein et al., 2006), fire service (Bigley and Roberts 2001) and music orchestra (Koivunen and Wennes 2011), the ‘onstage’ collaboration is supported with pre-planned and rehearsed performance.

On the other hand, the script also has its restrictive side; if the script is given too strong role in the mundane work of the agents, it may hinder the construction of the emerging relations

between the moving bodies. Also, by following the rules of the script too tightly, the agents may be exposed to ‘institutionalization’ of the practices of the ice-hockey team or the ballet company. In this way, the social relations do not derive from the inner thoughts and aspirations of the agents, but instead, ‘the rules of relating’ are given from the outside. Hence, for leadership to emerge as a relational activity among operational workers, the intuitive and creative work requires softly supportive structure (Rosso 2014; Klein ym. 2006; Bigley and Roberts 2001).

Third, by appreciating embodied co-presence and personal space at work, the ballet dancers and ice-hockey players we observed seemed to move in relation to each other in sensory-based ways and be always available for the group if needed. In the end, leadership as a relational activity is negotiated through the on-going, mutually supported relations in the temporal moments on the ice or onstage. The phenomenon in question equates with ‘kinesthetic empathy’ (Koivunen and Wennes 2011), in which one’s bodily actions, movements and sensations are adjusted to other’s respective bodily experiences.

The contribution of our paper is threefold: first, while there are many inspirational studies in the leadership literature, which argue for the relational approach on leadership (e.g. Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011; Crevani et al. 2010) and promote collaborative configurations of leadership (Gronn 2015; Raelin 2016), there are still relatively few empirical studies which illustrate how leadership is actualized through relational activities concretely in situ. Hence, we contribute to the existing literature on relational leadership by describing the ways leadership is co-constructed in an on-goingly shared process in which multiple agents become inseparably entwined with.

More specifically, our study uncovers how the operational agents of ballet and ice hockey concurrently and complementarily provide their efforts for the benefit of the collective in order to form a well-knit and successful working unit. Furthermore, regardless of their plural configurations of leadership, many existing empirical studies of leadership as a relational activity (e.g. Klein 2006; Kramer and Crespy 2011) make rather clear distinctions between the hierarchical order of the leaders and of those who become led. Therefore, we in this paper extend these earlier studies by illustrating the ways relational leadership actualizes in situations in which the appointed leaders, here the coaches or the choreographers, are only indirectly able to contribute to the formation of relational leadership among the operational leaders, namely the ice-hockey players or the ballet dancers.

Second, we make an ‘aesthetic’ contribution to the relational leadership literature by identifying the various unspoken, fine-grained actions which relational leadership builds on and which have remained hidden in the existing scholarly literature until now. Despite a few exceptions (e.g. Koivunen and Wennes 2011; Ropo et al. 2013), most leadership studies surprisingly overlook the meaning of the embodied, sensory-based dimensions of human actions which, based on this study, are closely attached to the phenomenon of relational leadership. This contribution is likely to be helpful to organizational researchers interested in the everyday lived experiences of work, and life in workplaces. Exploring *how* the ‘below the radar’ actions and sensory-based movement between people manifest at the level of the body is likely to be helpful to ethnographers and other ‘close readers’ of organizational action. The tiny nuances of gesture, movement, proximity, synchronisation, and so on tell us much about the inner states and degrees of emotions, power and inter-corporeal dynamics that people perceive they have in different settings. We often do not know what our bodies show to each other – and this paper has aimed us to see this more clearly. As such, our extension of leadership as a *relational activity* as an elaborated concept would help researchers of strategy-as-(material)practice, gender researchers and those researchers looking at how specific events are played out in between people (and things) – leadership in meetings, public staged events, and so on, and importantly, how these relate to the backstage rehearsals that they build up (and later inform).

Third, this paper makes a methodological contribution to the ethnographic research approach (e.g. Van Maanen 2011) and to its sensory-based dimension in specific (e.g. Warden 2012; Warren 2012; see also Valtonen et al. 2010) by illustrating how field notes of several researchers can “talk together” and by so doing, illustrate the complexities of leadership phenomena. Here, we had the opportunity to dig deep into two specific settings in which the working builds on concurrent actions in extraordinarily transparent ways. By utilising ethnographic approach, our paper worked as an illuminating methodological account of *how* one engages aesthetic sensibilities in the field with those one is studying. Here, we aimed to develop an argument for aesthetic, concurrent episodes of those ballet dancers and ice hockey we studied, and in this way, to learn to know organizational action empathetically in a wider sense. In sum, we hope that this paper works as an inspirational source for those who want to foster the relational and authentically concurrent aspects of leadership phenomena.

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