

“And who are you?”: A performative perspective on authority in organizations

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### ABSTRACT

As work and organizational reality become increasingly “post-bureaucratic,” the conventional and stable bases of a person’s authority—their position, their expertise, or the acquiescence of a subordinate—are eroding. This evolution calls us to revise our understanding of authority, and to consider more deeply how it is achieved in contexts that are both fluid and fragmented. Building on a six-month autoethnography of a consulting assignment, we show that authority is a practical, relational, and situated performance. It exists in a tension between two mirroring processes, activation and passivation, through which relations are either leveraged or downplayed to shape the situation and steer collective action. Our study also reveals that the performance of authority involves not just people, but also a broader range of actants, including artifacts and abstract entities. In line with current research on performativity in organizations, our findings contribute to the relational program on authority and the revelation of its sociomaterial dimension. Thus, we provide an action-based understanding of authority that is better suited for the study of post-bureaucratic organizing.

**Keywords:** Authority, Performativity, Relationality, Management consulting, Ethnography

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And who are you, the proud lord said, that I must bow so low?  
– Lyrics to ‘The Rains of Castamere,’ the Lannisters’ song in *Game of Thrones*, from the novels  
by George R.R. Martin

Authority has long been acknowledged as central to organizations and crucial for people to fulfill their work roles (Crozier, 1964; Follett, 1926; Weber, 1968). Historically, someone’s authority has been perceived as deriving from their hierarchical position (Aghion & Tirole, 1997; Fayol, 1949; Mintzberg, 1983). Alternatively, authority has been associated with people’s expertise (Barley, 1996; Bendix, 1956), or others’ acceptance of a communication as authoritative (Barnard, 1968; Simon, 1997). However, such theories assume the presence of stable bases for authority, and may not account for the contingencies of today’s working life, where organizations have become “post-bureaucratic” (Kellogg, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2006). In such a context, workers must deal with a gradual erosion of the hierarchical basis of authority; instead of the clear rules laid down by hierarchy, control is increasingly exercised through broadly defined and emergent principles that are negotiated by peers with different occupational affiliations (Hodgson, 2004). The expertise basis for authority, while crucially important in technical work (Barley, 1996; Dobrajaska, Billinger, & Karim, 2015; Huising, 2015), may be more relevant to engineers, technicians, and medical professionals than to management practitioners, whose knowledge base is more ambiguous (Alvesson, 1993). The circumstances of modern work, and the weakening of the structures and resources that guarantee unwavering authority, warrant a closer examination of how people practically orient collective action.

A few studies have raised the question of authority in more fluid and fragmented contexts, such as self-managing teams (Fairhurst, Green, & Courtright, 1995), new cross-disciplinary departments (Holm & Fairhurst, 2018), non-public agencies (Cooren, 2010), medical

surgery (Kellogg, 2009), or scientific laboratories (Huising, 2015). These works hint at the benefit of addressing authority from a relational perspective. Such a stance entails an examination of how people acquire “their properties only in relation to other subjects, social groups, or networks,” as opposed to more substantialist approaches that regard entities as being already constituted (Østerlund & Carlile, 2005: 92; see also Emirbayer, 1997; Kuhn, Ashcraft, & Cooren, 2017). Within this perspective, Huising (2014: 263) defines relational authority as “the capacity to elicit voluntary compliance with command.” In the case of the biosafety officers she studied, she shows that this capacity emerges not through esoteric knowledge or hierarchical position but through “scut work” (taking on menial tasks) that helps professionals relate to their clients. Similarly, in a study of surgeons struggling with a change process at their hospital, Kellogg (2009) suggests that a group’s authority can be gained by constituting “relational spaces” where colleagues can build a common sense of identity and control. These studies point to the relational features of authority by describing categories of macro-practices through which one professional group attempts to elicit compliance from another. There is a need for more focused research on the micro-processes through which relations contribute to an actor’s ability to orient collective action. Therefore, we ask: How does an actor effectuate authority when they lack the traditional endowments of expertise and hierarchy?

Using an autoethnographic approach, we offer a detailed analysis of the work of a management consultant during a high-stakes corporate restructuring assignment. As an extreme case, a management consulting assignment offers a unique, information-rich context in which to study authority, for it exposes the limitations of more conventional perspectives. Consultants cannot benefit from institutional endorsement or rely on technical expertise as the sole basis of their authority (Bourgoin, 2015; Bourgoin & Harvey, 2018). Instead, they must find ways to make a difference without pre-established organizational legitimacy or leverage (Block, 2011). In order to experience intimately the processes by which authority is achieved in the situation, we adopted the unique vantage point afforded by the autoethnographic approach (Anderson,

2006). We collected data during a six-month large-scale restructuring assignment in which the first author participated as a consultant. In contrast to the traditional external observer role, autoethnography allows for a richer and more focused exploration of how an actor, immersed in a situation that was crucially important to them, performed their authority. Drawing from this original setting, we analyze 13 empirical episodes where the consultant's authority was on trial, and delve into the micro-processes by which relations contributed to guiding collective action.

We offer a performative theory of authority that builds on the profoundly relational ontology of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and the Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO) tradition. We suggest that performing authority is the process by which an actor contributes to shaping a situation in such a way that it orients collective action. It emerges from the interplay between two micro-processes, which we name *activation* and *passivation*, through which relations to other actants, human or otherwise, are leveraged or downplayed. Our findings contribute to the literature on authority in three main ways. First, we offer a performative perspective that extends current work on relational authority (Huising, 2014, 2015; Kellogg, 2009) by specifying how relations become authoritative, and describing the micro-processes through which a focal actor, even with no support from a professional group, may orient collective action. Second, we extend the literatures on ANT (Callon, 1986, 1991; Latour, 1986) and CCO (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009; Holm & Fairhurst, 2018; Kuhn, 2008; Taylor & Van Every, 2014) by analyzing, at the level of the situation and with particular attention to discursive practices, how material-semiotic relations are woven by a focal actor to accomplish their authority in an organizational context. Finally, we offer an analytical approach to studying authority that cuts across static roles, hierarchy, and expertise, and is therefore better suited to work dynamics in post-bureaucratic contexts.

### **THEORY: FROM THE SOURCES OF AUTHORITY TO ITS PERFORMANCE**

Authority scholars have long reflected on what might induce one person to follow the commands

of another. Answering this question would allow us to distinguish authority from both power—which would imply coercion (Lukes, 1998)—and influence, which rests on the ability to substantively change someone’s beliefs (Simon, 1997). It would also reveal that authority is a broader concept than credibility. While authority and credibility are often seen as overlapping (Epstein, 1995), credibility has been principally conceptualized as emanating from an actor’s perceived believability and trustworthiness (Milewicz & Herbig, 1995), and is therefore less transactional than authority.

Traditional views of authority have focused either on the sources of authority—formal position or expertise—or on recognizing its effect through its acceptance by others. In what follows, we review extant literature along these lines, before building on recent relational approaches—professional authority at work, actor-network theory, and communication studies—to propose some elements of a performative understanding of authority.

### **Traditional Views on Authority: Position, Expertise, and Acceptance**

The positional view of authority assumes that people are distributed within hierarchies, and that those who are higher up in such hierarchies, or their delegates, have “the right to give orders and the power to exact obedience” (Fayol, 1949: 63). People, therefore, draw their authority from an institutional or social space (Bourdieu, 1991; Thompson, 1956), from contractual arrangements (Aghion & Tirole, 1997; Albanese, 1966), or from the ownership of specific resources (Grossman & Hart, 1986). Those who can alter the social organization’s structures, whether formally or informally, therefore have more “authoritative resources” (Giddens, 1984: 258)—a notion that is shared by institutional work scholars (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011; Rojas, 2010).

An alternative perspective posits expertise as the locus of the effective or actual exercise of authority (Aghion & Tirole, 1997; Bendix, 1956). In this view, authority “arises from an individual’s superior expertise, which is made up of specialized and often tacit knowledge that is difficult and costly to transfer among people” (Dobrajska et al., 2015: 688). Expert authority

relies on a person's ability to access esoteric matters by dint of their specialized skills (Reed, 1996) and their capacity to provide an immediate response to problems (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 2005). The relationship between expertise and authority may be traced to Foucault (1965), for whom experts produce knowledge that establish their own authority as true. In that sense, studying expertise means looking at the way experts produce the kind of knowledge that grants them authoritative status (as in medical expertise; see Eyal, 2013).

Both the positional and expertise research streams tend to embrace a substantialist view of authority. One "has" authority because one occupies the right position or is endowed with the right expertise. However, such a possessive epistemology does not explain how these sources may have authoritative effects in the first place. Furthermore, the positional perspective fails to recognize the "uncertain and amorphous relationships" in organizations (French & Henning, 1966: 187), where an increasing number of workers are located outside clear delegational hierarchies (Barley, 1996; Sturdy, Handley, Clark, & Fincham, 2009). Stability becomes the exception, not the norm, as people conduct their careers across several organizations (O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006) and as contract or temporary workers with nebulous relationships to the rest of the organization become more prevalent (Barley & Kunda, 2004). The expertise view, for its part, is mostly relevant to occupations that have clearly delimited "jurisdictional domains" that may be "constructed and policed" (Reed, 1996: 576). However, it is less relevant to management knowledge, which is contextualized, experience-based, and relies on complex interpersonal dynamics (Morris & Empson, 1998).

Rather than concentrating exclusively on the sources of authority, some authors have suggested that authority depends on its acceptance by the subordinate, who must display some form of voluntary compliance or willingness to contribute (Simon, 1997; Weber, 1968). Indeed, "even under an extreme condition of battle, when the regime is nearly absolute, authority nevertheless rests upon the acceptance or consent of individuals" (Barnard, 1968: 164). In this respect, research has focused on identifying the most effective communication style to elicit

compliance from subordinates (Madlock, 2008). Other studies have tried to isolate the characteristics that impel someone to accept a leader's authority, such as their own personality traits or cognitive patterns, or their perception of the leader's emotional intelligence (e.g., Hetland, Sandal, & Johnsen, 2008; Milgram, 1974). Along this line of inquiry, Kahn and Kram (1994) suggest that individuals hold internal (psychological) models of authority that affect how they react to figures of authority under anxiety-generating situations.

Acceptance theories also substantialize authority in their own way by focusing on the other pole of the relation, and by reducing it either to a communicative formula or to specific cognitive mechanisms. Additionally, these approaches typically assume a stable context in which a situation of authority exists and the roles of superior and subordinate are already established. While such assumptions are necessary for the experiment- or survey-based studies that give the acceptance perspective its empirical grounding, real-life situations are rarely as predictable. A prime example is consulting, where roles are fuzzy, knowledge is experiential, order-giving and order-taking are conflated, and the outcome is all that matters. There is a growing need to assess the way that authority is put into practice in real-life situations, and to document the "effective use of authority" (Albanese, 1966: 138). By looking at the way daily interactions unfold, we may avoid reducing authority to any of its components, and identify processes that cut across organizational forms and roles.

### **Toward a Performative View of Authority**

Rather than locating authority in either its sources or its acceptance, several studies suggest that authority lies in the practical enactment of relations between individuals, and between those individuals and elements of their environment. Several streams may be identified within the research focusing on relational authority. The first is found in the sociology of profession, and builds on detailed empirical studies of authority struggles involving technical experts. For instance, Huising (2014) describes how a research laboratory's administrative personnel undermined safety experts' authority through "censure episodes"—i.e. patterned communicative



endeavors presenting these experts' practices as misaligned with the organization's goals. In the same setting, Huising (2015) shows that biosafety officers' authority over lab technicians did not rely on abstract technical skills, but rather on "scut work"—a term that describes mundane maintenance tasks that facilitate relationships with clients. In the same vein, Kellogg (2009) analyzed how, as their hospital went through a major reform, a group of surgeons and interns challenged their superiors' authority by leveraging "relational spaces"—informal and private locations, such as vacant conference rooms or spots at a cafeteria—where they could collectively mobilize across formal ranks and build an oppositional repertoire.

These studies have the merit of shifting attention towards authority as it is exercised in relation to those who are not necessarily subordinates, such as clients, experts, or even hierarchical superiors. Adopting such a perspective would lead us to expect that the consultant in our case achieves authority by aligning his actions with the organization's goals; by focusing on support tasks that build proximity with staff members; and by cementing a group identity in free, informal spaces. However, by focusing on authority as compliance with command (Huising, 2014: 2014), this stream remains close to the acceptance perspective. Additionally, these studies mostly focus on the macro-practices through which technical experts build their group's authority against a clear opposing group. A distinctive aspect of our context is that the consultant we observe is the sole representative of his profession within the client organization, that his alignment with any particular group there is far from given. Besides, in contrast with technical experts, who have a clear domain of jurisdiction over a set of abstract technical skills, the consultant's managerial expertise is not clearly distinct from that of high-level managers within the client organization (Bourgoin & Harvey, 2018). In such a context, what are the micro-processes through which people build their authority without the endowments of formal ranks, differentiated expertise, or group support?

Elements for a relational understanding of authority may also be found in actor-network theory (ANT), which views social reality as the outcome of material-semiotic relations. For ANT

scholars, authority lies in associations. In this sense, the distinction between someone “having” authority and others deferring to their command does not hold: If you “have” authority—*in potentia*—nothing happens, and when you exercise authority—*in actu*—“others are performing the action and not you” (Latour, 1986: 264). ANT’s shift towards relationality is ontological, since it contends that any single actor, as far as action is concerned, is already a network of many other “actants” that share their agency with them. The term “actant” refers to “anything that makes a difference in the situation” (Latour, 1987), including both human beings and other entities. Empirical studies taking an ANT perspective have focused on the way a person or group becomes authoritative by enrolling the agency of a network of actants into their own (Callon, 1986). For instance, a scientist’s authority is the result of their ability to funnel the agency of microbes, measurement instruments, budgetary conditions, corporate actors, and so on into their own actions (Latour, 1988). ANT’s perspective has been described as “pluralistic” (Denis, Langley, & Rouleau, 2007) and embraces a truly relational view of society that seeks to explain the emergence of hierarchies and social positions, instead of presuming them (Gond & Nyberg, 2017).

ANT has inspired a perspective in the field of organizational communication known as the Communicative Constitution of Organization (CCO) approach, which suggests that organizing is a co-orienting effort that relies on the interplay between conversation and texts. This last stream of research suggests that people may become authoritative by making “figures” (i.e. ideas, documents, methods, etc.) present in their interactions, thus giving additional weight to their own actions (Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009). Just like the ventriloquist who makes their dummy “speak,” the person who speaks on behalf of another and summons their name, position, or idea in conversation is channeling that person’s authority to support their own course of action (Cooren, 2010). People enroll figures through speech, as when they refer to a rule or invoke a prior agreement, but also through the use of documents such as meeting minutes or contracts (Cooren, Bencherki, Chaput, & Vásquez, 2015; Cooren & Matte, 2010). Taken together, these

figures form “texts”—either concrete artifacts or tacit understandings—that may become authoritative if they are upheld to guide the actions of the collective (Kuhn, 2008, 2012; Holm & Fairhurst, 2018). In this vein, recent studies on the agency of texts show their “force potential” to shape the organization (Vaara, Sorsa, & Pälli, 2010).

Drawing on the common etymology of “authority” and “authorship,” CCO research highlights that when people produce authoritative texts, they are also co-authoring their organization in the sense that they continuously define and enact its purpose (Taylor & Van Every, 2014: 27). Authority, then, is less about one person telling another what to do, than about their agreement to take instructions from a third: the organization that they constitute by producing authoritative texts (Taylor & Van Every, 2014). Indeed, agency in any given situation always “vacillates” or “oscillates” between different actants contributing to a joint authorship of action (Cooren, 2010; Taylor & Van Every, 2014). This idea aligns with earlier communication studies on relational control (Courtright, Fairhurst, & Rogers, 1989; Fairhurst et al., 1995) that looked at the concrete ways in which people use discursive practices to author the situation in which collective action takes place. For instance, Courtright et al. (1989) demonstrated that in mechanistic systems, managers tend to impose a reading of the situation through commands and assertions, while negotiating it through questions/answers and conversational elaboration in more organic ones (see also Fairhurst et al., 1995). These studies suggest that authority is an outcome of struggles “over the meaning to be assigned to situations, including whose and which ideas (read, authored acts) are going to prevail vis-a-vis the task at hand” (Holm & Fairhurst, 2018: 696). Authority displays, in turn, must be captured at the interactional level, in the acceptance or rejection of such authorship through communication (Fairhurst, 2007; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012).

The relational ontology of ANT and CCO invites us to uncover the details of how the consultant in our case draws on his relations with others in order to give weight to his own actions. Authority, in this sense, is understood as being “grounded in action” (Fairhurst &

Putnam, 2004) and as taking place between people (and other actants) in a transactional manner. Conversely, resistance and delegitimation are also constituted in each situation through interaction (Vaara & Monin, 2010; van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). ANT and CCO, therefore, predict that the consultant's authority will result from a negotiation between his ability to enroll others' agency through speech, writing, and artifacts—for instance, by invoking authoritative texts—and others' resistance to such enrollment. Empirical research in ANT, though, has mainly focused on large-scale technical and scientific controversies (e.g., Callon, Lascoumes, & Barthe, 2009) and, while the concept lies at the heart of ANT, the theory's potential to study authority as such has yet to be explored. CCO, for its part, has suggested that making figures present in interaction and weaving authoritative texts may grant authority, but has yet to identify the general micro-processes by which an actor may leverage relations to orient collective actions, and whether there are moments when authority requires figures to be effaced or resisted. Such general micro-processes may take us beyond discursive practices and conversation analysis, to encompass a broader range of relational practices, actants, and situations.

We define the performance of authority as *the process by which an actor contributes to shaping a situation in such a way that it orients collective actions*. This shaping is relational and implies the aligning of various actants. In this sense, authority is a situated performance and it is effectuated through continuous (inter)actions. While there are multiple perspectives on performativity, ranging from discourse to sociomateriality (Gond, Cabantous, Harding, & Learmonth, 2016), they share a concern for the practical accomplishment of the phenomenon under study. In line with ANT and CCO theorists, we adopt this performative view of authority, which posits that reality is an outcome of material-semiotic relations in the making, without reducing it to any particular source, disposition, or communicative formula (Ashcraft & Kuhn, 2017; Hennion, 2007; Taylor & Van Every, 2011). Such a view reveals that a focal actor relates to various actants (people, artifacts, and abstract entities) through the microprocesses of activation and passivation, in order to shape situations and orient collective actions. This

performative take is particularly relevant to our case, which traces the actions of a consultant thrown into a complex organizational setting with no notable authoritative endowment.

### METHODS

We follow Clifford Geertz's (1973) advice to offer "thick descriptions" of the realities we study; we describe not only the action itself, but also its meaning for the participants. We choose to rely, in particular, on autoethnography, because high-level encounters between consultants and their clients are rarely accessible by external observers (Sturdy & Wright, 2011).

Autoethnography combines elements of autobiographical and retrospective stances to reveal organizational processes, uncover organizational deadlocks, and account for the vicarious nature of organizational relations (Boyle & Parry, 2007). In this vein, we describe the content and meaning of certain moments where the consultant's authority was on trial, regardless of the outcome. By paying equal attention to both more- and less-conclusive performances, we follow an intuition put forward by ANT: that breakdowns allow for the unpacking of taken-for-granted and "black-boxed" features of reality (Latour, 2005).

The choice of this approach was also motivated by a recent body of literature that points to the necessity of "relaxing the taboo of telling our own stories" (Anteby, 2013) and emphasizes the value of autoethnography for grasping power relations in organizations (Alvesson, 2009; Prasad, 2013). Research conducted from an external vantage point risks attributing authority to its externally visible signals, such as expertise or structural positions. If authority is a performance, not a pre-constituted object available for external appraisal, then it must be traced from the specific viewpoint of the focal actor, to gain a more complete understanding of the micro-processes that only a reflexive account can provide.

Autoethnography poses, in the most acute way, the "involvement paradox"—the need to get close enough to the field to understand it, yet remain distant enough to analyze it and avoid biases. It pushes qualitative researchers to make choices in the way they represent involvement

in their accounts (Langley & Klag, 2017). We believe that autoethnography need not be “evocative” (Ellis, 1997) or “political” (Denzin, 2003; Reed-Danahay, 1997); it can also be what Anderson (2006) termed “analytical.” Our commitment to analytic autoethnography insists on the researcher’s status as entirely visible within the text. It also puts particular emphasis on dialogue with informants beyond the self and commitment to theoretical analysis, in order to avoid authorial solipsism (Anderson, 2006). In Van Maanen’s (1988) terminology, the “tale” we tell is in more of a “realist” than a “confessional” genre, since our main point of focus is the situation and the way the first author interacted with its participants.

### **Empirical setting**

Consulting represents a fertile setting in which to reveal the performative nature of authority, as management consultants must interact with people at all hierarchical ranks without holding any particular position of their own, as well as juggling various fields of expertise. As such, consultants find themselves in liminal and ambiguous situations, acting as external post-bureaucratic agents of change in a typically bureaucratic client organization (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003). Consultants are faced with the paradox of “making a difference when [they] do not have direct control” (Block, 2011: 190), and without a clear work position (Barley & Kunda, 2004). Despite their reliance on “authoritative knowledge” (Kipping & Engwall, 2002), and unlike more traditional experts such as lawyers and doctors, consultants can hardly draw on external credentials such as standardized education, training, and qualifications as the foundation of their professional or occupational authority (von Nordenflycht, 2010). Consultants’ managerial knowledge has been described as “weak” and “ambiguous” (Alvesson, 1993; Clark & Fincham, 2002), as well as undifferentiated from that of their clients, making it harder for them to claim a clear domain of jurisdiction over abstract technical skills as a ground for their authority (see Bourgoin & Harvey, 2018 for a review). Almost by definition, they enter situations where strife is rampant, where progress has ground to a halt, and where many actors view the involvement of an external consultant with suspicion. Establishing authority is, thus, a

*sine qua non* for the consultant's success—yet it always involves a risk of failure.

Consistent with our analytical approach to autoethnography, we use the codename “Thomas” to depersonalize the first author's account and maintain distance between his dual positions as analyst and character in the events being analyzed. Our case consists of an assignment that Thomas conducted as part of ConsultCorp, a mid-sized consulting firm with around 150 consultants and a 25-million-euro turnover (all company and individual names are pseudonyms). ConsultCorp provides generalist management advice in various fields, from banking to healthcare. It specializes in “transformation” assignments, during which it helps executives implement long-term, complex programs. These may consist of post-merger integration, reorganization, adaptation to market deregulation, and so on.

Our focal assignment dealt with the restructuring of EnergyCorp, a mid-size energy group employing 630 people for a 300-million-euro turnover. EnergyCorp had recently been acquired by MotherCorp, a world-leading French multinational in the energy sector, with more than 15,000 employees and a 3.5-billion-euro turnover. Both companies' core business dealt with the conception, setup, and management of sophisticated heating systems for institutional clients (including cities and hospitals, for instance) and individual customers. MotherCorp engaged in a restructuring program to integrate its newly acquired subsidiary. The main objective was to streamline EnergyCorp's activities to meet MotherCorp's standards and thereby reduce operating costs drastically. While the guidelines of the restructuring program were defined ahead of time by MotherCorp's top executives, Thomas's assignment was to conceive and implement 20 functional and operational projects, at both EnergyCorp's headquarters and decentralized operational centers (heating plants), that would eventually lead to the subsidiary's integration and the streamlining of operations. Projects included reworking EnergyCorp's organizational structure, reviewing personnel roles, optimizing core and support functions (including finance and sales), upgrading the IT system, and multiple projects to improve operational centers.

Thomas was hired by Henri, MotherCorp's Chief Strategy Officer, but his day-to-day

client was Gerard, EnergyCorp's CEO. Thomas was the only full-time consultant operating on EnergyCorp's premises, with the status of senior consultant, and occasional support from Charles, a manager at ConsultCorp (approximately half a day per week). A single consultant might seem a modest commitment, given the scale of the project—but Henri wanted to maintain tight control over “his” consultant, whom he personally trusted from a prior assignment, and support him with a team of internal experts rather than rely on external resources.

Specifically, Thomas was in charge of two kinds of tasks: (1) steering the overall restructuring program—for example, by facilitating executive committee meetings and producing high-level strategic documents; (2) more operational tasks related to the management of each project, involving internal teams and the production of specific deliverables (organization charts, a People Review tool, etc.). He also played a mediator role by transposing executive directives to the field, conveying members' concerns to the top management team, and making sure functional teams spoke to each other. In our findings, we offer a detailed description of the consultant's activities as part of the restructuring program, and an analysis of the micro-processes he used to establish his authority.

### **Data collection**

Access to the site was made possible by Thomas's professional participation in the restructuring assignment. He was appointed at EnergyCorp in the context of a three-year work contract with ConsultCorp, which was supported by a government program aimed at increasing research within French businesses. Thomas worked as a full-time consultant on several assignments, the EnergyCorp assignment being one of them, affording him the opportunity to collect first-hand empirical data. ConsultCorp partners, close colleagues, and clients were aware of Thomas's research activity, but none had a personal or organizational stake in its outcome. He was given full access providing he didn't use a recording device and kept the research results entirely anonymous. Overall, Thomas' colleagues and clients treated him as a “regular” professional consultant, since he cost the same rate, worked the same hours, and was subject to the same



performance requirements.

The first author collected empirical material in 2011, over a span of six months (the duration of the EnergyCorp assignment). As the consultant in charge of the restructuring program, he had unparalleled access to a wide array of data sources. While data collection may be more easily bracketed and tracked in traditional qualitative research (counting the number of interviews, the duration of recordings, etc.), Thomas's involvement in the field meant that every meeting, project, or document of the restructuring program was a potential source of data. In a typical day, Thomas would arrive at 8am and leave at 9pm, attend as many as 10 meetings, and prepare several notes, reports, or memos. This rich data set included (1) observations made across the full range of formal and informal settings that make up the bulk of consulting practice (meetings with clients and colleagues, work sessions, appointments with managers, etc.); (2) field documents (emails, memos, deliverables, strategy notes, etc.); and (3) informal conversations with insiders. We triangulated these data to support the empirical episodes described in the findings, as illustrated in Table 1.

-----Insert Table 1 about here -----

*Observations.* Thomas took field notes of what he observed while working and meeting with a variety of actors. Field notes were taken on the spot as part of consulting work or shortly afterwards, depending on what seemed appropriate. They comprised factual descriptions and recollections of events and conversations, as well as more egotic perceptions of what was going on (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Taking field notes was not obtrusive, since consultants often play the role of "recording machines" (Starbuck, 1992), and since producing minutes for meetings was one of Thomas's tasks. Thomas kept a diary throughout the period of observation, resulting in over 300 single-spaced pages of field notes, classified chronologically and then thematically. After work and during weekends, Thomas typed out the handwritten notes on his computer and consolidated a narrative while adding initial theoretical insights to the story.

Thomas entered the field with the aim of understanding “value creation” in consulting work and collected data during the first weeks of observation in rather general terms. When he realized that establishing authority was instrumental to his work, Thomas focused the data collection on this specific issue.

*Field documents.* Thomas systematically collected his working documents, amounting to a total of 26GB of data archived on a hard drive. They comprised: professional emails; the restructuring masterplan (new structure and organization charts); auditing reports for operational centers and functional departments; due diligences for operational centers; and restructuring tools developed using Microsoft’s Excel spreadsheet software and the Access database system; as well as presentations, minutes, memos, etc. for the various projects. Thomas kept the successive versions of key documents as they evolved from draft to final versions. Field documents were pivotal to the analysis: They stabilize the meaning given to situations by various actors and complement more interpretative observations. Field documents were duly anonymized and reconstructed when used for research purposes.

*Informal conversations.* Thomas refrained from conducting structured interviews while working as a consultant, so as not to create confusion between his two roles in the field. However, as a full-time consultant, he had many conversations with informants at various levels of the organization that can be considered as open-ended, informal interviews (124 of which are reported in his fieldnotes). Such conversations were friendly chats supported by what Spradley (1979: 60) calls “contrast” questions—i.e. those focusing on the meaning of an event for informants. In addition, in the few months following the end of the six-month assignment, Thomas had nine follow-up meetings (usually friendly lunches) with EnergyCorp’s CEO (one meeting); Barbara, the quality engineer (three meetings); Henri (three meetings) at MotherCorp; and Charles, his manager at ConsultCorp (two meetings). These meetings allowed Thomas to dig deeper into specific episodes of the story, validate his recollection of events, and seek additional information.

### **Three steps of data analysis**

Broadly speaking, our analysis comprised three main steps. Following a grounded theory approach, these steps did not form a strict sequence, but rather a constant back-and-forth between the data and the theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Besides, in line with analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006), our analysis was driven by a collaborative effort to balance the first author's involvement with an outside perspective, in an effort towards theory-building (Wadham & Warren, 2014). We therefore created an "insider-outsider" research team (Evered & Louis, 1981) with a new author entering the team at each step of the data analysis.

The first step of analysis was done by the first author during data collection. It resulted in the production of a coherent narrative of 167 single-spaced pages: a chronological and highly descriptive "raw story," presenting events and ideas that Thomas felt were interesting in his work. Throughout this first narrative, the tensions surrounding authority in practice appeared consistently in a variety of forms: positioning adequately, satisfying clients, gaining legitimacy as an outsider, juggling expertise, moving ahead with tasks, overcoming resistance in coordination, etc. These events were translated into 34 episodes (situations, projects, meetings, etc.) where the issue of the consultant's authority came to the forefront.

The second step consisted in coding these episodes using open coding techniques (Miles & Huberman, 1994). It was at this point that the second author joined the research team. During multiple meetings, he critically reviewed, validated, and evaluated Thomas's notes and recollections. The two authors considered that establishing authority was constantly at risk of failure, and that moments of contention were especially interesting. Together, they narrowed down the number of episodes to 13. These were chosen because they illustrate moments where authority was on trial and where the consultant had to readjust his relation to actants, making it necessary to describe the temporal unfolding of events. Moving between the various sources of data available, the authors thoroughly rewrote these episodes in order to flesh them out with more empirical evidence. Both authors made sure that any "enhancements" made to Thomas's

story for the sake of comprehensibility did not sacrifice its correspondence to facts (Humphreys & Watson, 2009). These first rounds of coding made them realize that authority involved human beings, but also material artifacts and seemingly abstract entities such as principles and rules. At this point, the research team felt it was necessary to go back to the data and proceed to a more systematic axial and selective coding of the episodes (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) to understand *how* the various actants were set in motion in order to establish authority. This led to the definition of first-order categories (*mobilizing* or *distancing* from human allies; *equipping* or *gearing down from* material artifacts; and *invoking* or *revoking* abstract entities) and second-order processes (*activation* and *passivation*) mapping out the ways in which the consultant related to various actants.

The third author then joined the research team. During multiple meetings and working sessions, he offered a new and more theoretical take on the analysis produced so far. He specifically challenged the existing codes and tested whether they were supported by the data. He also underlined the need to identify the way situations changed following the consultant's contribution, and whether or not they had guided collective action in the directions he was hoping for. Accounting for both outcomes allowed us to avoid the pitfall of observing only successful performances (by Thomas's expectations), which would generate a one-sided and somewhat tautological theory. At this point, we proceeded collectively with the writing of the paper, which is indeed an integral part of the research: Ethnography is not done in the field and then written down; *ethnography is writing* (Humphreys & Watson, 2009). Although we adopt a performative and relational approach, we tell the story from Thomas's point of view due to our autoethnographic method and to present a meaningful narrative of events and situations. This is not to imply that other actants did not have agency in the situation, or contribute to the performance of authority. The problem here is not one of who or what has agency, but how to make sense, as humans, of a story involving humans, while at the same time decentering the source of action and intention (e.g., Callon & Law, 1995). Moreover, presenting data in the form

of episodes could give the impression that authority happens—or breaks down—in a series of segmented occasions. We stress that authority is a continuous performance, and that we are using episodes only as an analytical bracketing device.

#### **EMPIRICAL EPISODES: RELATING TO VARIOUS ACTANTS TO ORIENT COLLECTIVE ACTION**

EnergyCorp's restructuring program was radical because the group had to be brought into line with MotherCorp's standards in all aspects of business and operations within a brief period. This meant reshuffling structures, procedures, and tools all at once, while cutting operating costs and letting go nearly half of the employees. At the peak of the program, more than 20 different projects were in progress concurrently. Despite the significance of the restructuring plan—particularly for employees whose livelihoods were at risk—this radical shift was enacted progressively, through the consultant's ordinary tasks: attending meetings, producing various analyses and documents, coordinating staff members on specific projects, and so on. While they may appear mundane, these tasks were instrumental to a program that led to the gradual assimilation of a 630-employee company.

Table 2 describes the 13 episodes in which Thomas attempted to orient collective action in a variety of contexts. For each one, we provide additional evidence in terms of quotes and field-note extracts in Table 3. Together, these tables provide the empirical basis for our analytical categories. We chose to develop six of these episodes in order to elucidate the key points of our analysis through thick description. That way, we could showcase the richness of our data and transport the reader into Thomas's experience. We selected these six episodes because they are important turning points in the restructuring program. Episodes 1 and 2 focus on Thomas's day-to-day attempts to orient collective action with two significant groups of insiders—operational staff members and top managers—while he pushes forward specific projects. Episodes 3 and 4 consider Thomas's coordination of the politically sensitive "People Review project," which aimed at letting employees go and therefore put a lot of pressure on participants. Finally,

Episodes 5 and 6 look at a technical controversy where the consultant was asked to choose between two different options for a new IT system.

----- Insert Table 2 and Table 3 about here-----

### **Relating to human allies**

As he carried out his work, Thomas could rely on a variety of people to augment his capacity to act, so to speak, and contributed to guiding collective action. The precise way in which he related to these individuals, however, varied greatly depending on the precise challenges he faced, the audience he had to deal with, and other aspects of the situation. In the following two vignettes, we focus on his relationship with one person, Barbara, with whom he worked closely, but whose contribution was equivocal.

***Empirical episode 1: “I need my insider expert.”*** As part of the restructuring program, Thomas took responsibility for designing and implementing a new organizational structure that consolidated EnergyCorp’s operational centers from 12 to four, reducing the firm’s headcount by nearly half in the process. The centers’ staff resisted the proposed plan in several project meetings, arguing that Thomas, as an outsider, lacked familiarity with EnergyCorp’s day-to-day business, and that he was merely implementing headquarters’ requirements, which had no practical relevance. MotherCorp’s Chief Strategy Officer, Henri, had assigned Barbara, an experienced quality engineer with 10 years’ field experience at various production sites, to help Thomas with support tasks. Thomas quickly realized that Barbara had a unique knowledge of operations, as well as wide-ranging contacts within the organization. He understood that relating to her by closely collaborating with her would allow him to bring her knowledge of day-to-day operations into the conversation, thus making his change proposals more practically applicable and aligned with the concerns of the workers. During project meetings with operational workers, Thomas consistently invited Barbara, sat next to her at the table, and entrusted her with fleshing out his recommendations for new plant organization and procedures. He would highlight her contribution to their shared work, publicly crediting her as his main informant for technical facts,

cosigning reports with her, and actively building on her past engineering work to substantiate his requests. The pair would also regularly have lunch together at the EnergyCorp cafeteria, where Barbara would initiate informal conversations with skeptical colleagues who would get a chance to understand Thomas's role. By mobilizing her in all aspects of the restructuring process, Thomas considered Barbara his partner, and presented her as his "inside expert" when addressing workers from operational sites.

Working in close contact with Barbara allowed Thomas to overcome operational workers' resistance in situations where he was seen as an outsider. He was able not only to save time on the usual stages of trust-building, but also to relate to employees as a colleague who shared their concerns. For instance, during an auditing process at one of the operational centers, Barbara helped Thomas to access most of the finance department's staff without having to ask permission from the financial director, and led several interviews jointly with Thomas. This allowed technical details to be ironed out, and helped reassure participants about the objectives of the project. As Barbara told Thomas with respect to an interview with an accountant who refused to align with the newly defined accounting process: "Because I was there, she skipped straight to the problems with the analytical structure of the financial statements with you [...]. One of the accountants was certainly unhappy with the new process, as it meant making significant changes to her routine, yet she resigned herself to adjust to it when she saw I was also involved" (field notes, informal conversation, May 2011). Thomas observed a rapid and consistent effect from relating to Barbara when it came to orienting projects with the accounting department, as illustrated by an operational worker who mentioned in front of his colleagues: "You guys at the project team are doing a good job. Everyone's willing to collaborate with you since Barbara helps take our technical requirements into account" (field notes, project meeting, July 2011).

***Empirical episode 2: "You need to keep her at bay."*** While relating to Barbara allowed the course of action to be altered when working with operational workers, top executives did not see

the quality engineer's participation in sensitive restructuring matters in such a positive light. During the weekly executive committee meeting, as Thomas was presenting his draft of a new structure for operational centers, he publicly referred to Barbara as a source of ideas. This incurred the wrath of the CFO, who dryly remarked that "EnergyCorp was paying for consulting advice, not Barbara's two cents on the organization of plants" (field notes, executive meeting, June 2011). In another executive meeting, as Thomas was presenting instructions for streamlining the sales process due to reduced headcount, the Sales Director accused him of "missing the big picture" (field notes, executive meeting, June 2011) with his emphasis on Barbara's analysis of operations. Following these events, it gradually dawned on Thomas that executives had little interest in field-oriented input from staff members like Barbara. On the contrary, they favored consulting models and "outside comparisons in the form of benchmarking" (field notes, informal conversation with CEO, July 2011). Thomas also noted, when talking with the Sales Director, that Barbara was "tainted" in the eyes of executives, who blamed her for having a rather "procedural and persnickety approach to quality management issues" (field notes, informal conversation, June 2011).

Both Thomas and Henri were concerned about this turn of events, which they had not expected. They concluded that if the consultant remained too closely associated with Barbara, he would not be able to convince EnergyCorp's upper management that, although his recommendations were operationally sound, they were also fully aligned with their higher-level viewpoint on the restructuring process. As Henri advised him, "Don't let Barbara introduce you to the executives and top managers. You need to keep her at bay. She will harm your image more than anything else" (field notes, informal conversation, June 2011). Despite his fondness for Barbara, and his continuing reliance on her valuable information and advice in their joint work, Thomas accepted Henri's suggestion. He started distancing himself from Barbara on many occasions and emphasized his own role in shaping business recommendations instead. For instance, he attended several executive committees and project meetings on his own, putting



forward his own models and analyses, as well as showcasing Henri's contributions to the project. Showing strong team spirit, and "having read the same signs from executives" (field notes, informal conversation, June 2011), Barbara conceded that the project would progress more favorably if Thomas handled the top floor on his own. In this vein, she agreed, for example, not to have her name mentioned in documents intended for high-ranking managers, while she continued to take charge of relations with the production plants.

**Summary: *Mobilizing and distancing from human allies.*** These first two episodes show that Barbara was instrumental to Thomas's ability to orient collective action when working with a variety of employees. Yet, she was not a well-defined "resource," since neither her knowledge nor her connections could grant authority to the consultant once and for all. While Barbara's operational expertise had a lot of traction with staff members and frontline workers, that very same expertise also appeared removed from the concerns of top executives when they considered whether to adopt a given program of actions.

Thomas was caught in a dilemma: While he needed Barbara's help, he also had to keep her at arm's length. However, what Thomas intuitively understood is that this was not a binary choice. What mattered was not only whether he related to Barbara, but also *how* he did so, depending on the situation. As the episodes show, on certain occasions, the consultant *mobilized* her through a variety of practices that were integral to their collaboration, such as attending meetings or conducting interviews together; contributing jointly to analyses and to the production of deliverables; crediting her as a source of information during meetings; and so forth. This mobilization could be witnessed in several encounters, from the more mundane (lunches or coffee breaks with workers) to the more strategic (project meetings or formal introductions). On other occasions, such as those following Henri's pointed warning, Thomas was *distancing* himself from Barbara. He would then tone down her role and contribution to the project and highlight different sources of information and his proximity to others, such as Henri.

**Relating with material artifacts**

Thomas was also able to count on a variety of artifacts that, in some situations, turned out to contribute to his ability to steer collective action in the direction he hoped for. The next two vignettes focus on Thomas's use of a software application that not only helped him manage one aspect of the restructuring process, but also led people to follow his recommendations.

***Empirical episode 3: "The tool did the job."*** What was known as the "People Review project" was the most politically sensitive part of the restructuring program that Thomas had to carry out. In view of the impending redesign of the organization, it consisted of evaluating and reassigning employees, and letting go nearly half of them. Once these goals became known, a strong counterblast arose, as did frequent coordination breakdowns among the many individuals involved in the project.

First, executives sought to protect their turf by shielding their own people. They also fought over where certain key employees should be reassigned. For instance, the Sales Director and the Technical Director both wanted the engineers from the design bureau (who had a dual technical and commercial role) in their department. They ended up vociferously arguing with each other in front of Thomas during a project meeting. Second, executives had to cope with the tension between the ever-changing blueprint of the future organization and EnergyCorp's current organizational structure. They spent several project meetings advocating for competing staffing plans, quarreling over organizational charts, and failing to agree on a common vision. Thomas, who was leading the project, was in a difficult position due to his outsider status and his limited knowledge of the employees. When he tried to meet personally with the executives to advance decisions, they would push back and argue that they did not "need to be told how to organize their own departments, that resource allocation was their prerogative, and that the project was too political for him to take charge" (field notes, informal conversation with the Sales Director, June 2011).

Given the complexity of the People Review project, Thomas created a computerized tool

to support the decision process. The software kept track of each employee's current organizational position and allowed a dynamic modeling of how they would move to a new location within the new structure. The tool made possible all kinds of simulations, optimizations, and calculations.

After a few weeks, Thomas realized that using the People Review tool gave him the unexpected ability to unite otherwise feuding parties. During project meetings with executives, union representatives, and others at EnergyCorp, Thomas would take over the conversation by projecting on a screen the expected new entities, personnel transfers, and HR savings. Thanks to the graphical interface, Thomas could share his "global vision of the project" and "align people around it" (field notes, project meeting, September 2011). Once each person's input was entered into the software, it would compile all their contributions and display a simulation of the ensuing organizational structure. If the same resource was claimed by two departments, the software would highlight the issue. When people contested his choices, Thomas would answer that, "it is the tool, in fact, that is doing the job," not him (field notes, project meeting, July 2011).

Executives, unable to master details and blinkered by a "silo" perspective, increasingly deferred to Thomas to mediate their differences and coordinate among them to reach compromises concerning staffing. He was privately invited by each director to help make final decisions on staffing issues. During People Review meetings, executives could rely on the tool to visualize how the new organization, as a whole, would look, and the impact of various scenarios on their own and each other's departments. These put Thomas in a particularly strong position, as he mentioned in his field notes: "As the walking memory of the project, they are even putting me in the position of arbitrating conflicts, given that I am the only one with a global vision on the restructuring project" (field notes, project meeting, September 2011).

***Empirical Episode 4: "You are only good at putting people in little boxes."*** Thomas's use of the People Review tool also led to rejection from several participants. For instance, Benedict, the Chief Financial Officer, accused the consultant of being "only good for putting people in little

boxes” because of his indiscriminate use of the tool. During a project meeting, he told him: “You can write down anything in the tool, but that doesn’t mean it’s workable” (field notes, project meeting, June 2011). On several occasions, Thomas faced resistance from Benedict, who felt that the tool imposed a very rigid understanding of the restructuring process in terms of predefined categories into which personnel had to fit. The chief HR officer, Samira, to whom Thomas wanted to give a larger role in the project, told him for her part that “she didn’t need a piece of software to do her job” (field notes, project meeting, June 2011). Samira stated that “mastering database software wasn’t where she brought the most value,” and that “it wasn’t her job to become the technical expert on the tool” (field notes, project meeting, July 2011).

In view of these two executives’ disapproval of the tool, Thomas ceased using all of its calculation functions, and was careful to rely on the software purely as a presentation device when working with them. During project meetings at Benedict’s office, he purposely used a simple pencil and a chart—even though, at the end of the day, the information would in fact be transcribed into the tool. On another occasion, Thomas showed Benedict that the tool’s simulations and calculations ultimately rested on data provided by Benedict’s own office, and that he could adjust all the parameters to his needs. In other words, the software was not imposing any hidden assumptions, and Thomas could change inputs that the executives found inappropriate. As for Samira, the CHRO, Thomas later learned from Henri that she worried that the ad-hoc computer software she used to keep track of HR cases would not be compatible with the tool, and that she would need to learn how to use a whole new application. To assuage her fears, Thomas emphasized that he had created the tool himself, and that he could customize it to Samira’s needs, and import her data into it. As a result, after several weeks of reluctance, Samira agreed that her teams would take charge of the People Review tool—although she remained suspicious of it.

*Summary: Equipping, and gearing down from, material artifacts.* The two People Review episodes show how *material artifacts*, such as the tool, played a part in the consultant’s

contribution to orienting collective action when discussing staffing issues. The tool lent him calculative and representational abilities that placed him in a brokering position at the center of a complex network of potentially conflictual relations. Yet, material artifacts are not reducible to freestanding authority-granting resources; their uses, abuses, and misuses are directly driven by the demands of the situation. While Thomas's relation to the tool was largely acclaimed, as it facilitated conversations among executives, the consultant-software duo was also seen as constraining by the CFO, or intimidating by the CHRO. Moreover, when Thomas appeared to be overly complicit with the tool, their respective contributions might have become indistinguishable—as when Benedict accused Thomas of letting the formal frame of the tool's calculations take precedence over sound, “workable” business decisions.

As in the episodes concerning Barbara, Thomas managed to unite executives around a common reading of the People Review program by aptly modulating his relation to the tool depending on each situation's specifics. At times, Thomas would *equip* himself with the tool—a term that captures the way that the relation rested on the combination of their respective abilities. The notion confirms ANT's idea that knowing or rationality are not located only in cognizant humans, but also in their interaction with “calculative devices” (Callon & Muniesa, 2005). The case of the tool shows that the same applies to authority: The tool conferred additional abilities on Thomas, such as analytical power and augmented recording capacity, as well as ordering and visualization functions, which proved crucial when it came to orienting collective action. Conversely, we also observe in the episodes that, at other times, Thomas would not hesitate to downplay the importance of the tool in order to adjust to the CFO's and the CHRO's specific concerns. He *geared down* and separated himself from the material artifact. For instance, he would refrain from using some of its functions, emphasize his ultimate control over it, or abandon it altogether in favor of pencil and paper.

### **Relating with abstract entities**

In addition to relating with people and objects, Thomas also related with seemingly immaterial

things such as rules, principles, and methods. These abstract entities either helped him guide collective action or prevented him from doing so, depending on the manner of his relation. We focus on the abstract entities that Thomas related with as he was carrying out an important IT transition project.

***Empirical episode 5: “I scrupulously followed MotherCorp’s auditing method.”*** Thomas’s capacity to orient collective action was put on trial once again when he was involved in the review of EnergyCorp’s IT system—one of the most prominent technical controversies of the restructuring project. EnergyCorp’s IT system was considered ineffective and in need of a complete overhaul. Thomas’s role was to provide expert advice to EnergyCorp’s CEO, Gerard, during the decision process that would lead to the selection of a replacement. Two options were on the table, as outlined in the project’s strategic plan. One option was to deploy MotherCorp’s system at EnergyCorp, with the project being handled by the global IT services and billed internally. The other was to upgrade EnergyCorp’s current system by purchasing software modules from vendors and having the local IT team build additional in-house tools. The stakes were high, since the system was instrumental to EnergyCorp’s operational work and client billing, and the solution represented the single largest cost item in the restructuring program.

As part of an auditing process, Thomas led several analyses that compared each option’s technical specifications, performance, and costs. He based these analyses on different sets of data, including various figures, observations, and interviews with the IT team and users. The data was gathered not only at EnergyCorp, but also at a MotherCorp subsidiary operating in a related industry. During his interviews, Thomas realized that EnergyCorp’s IT Director, as well as some technicians, feared that Thomas would favor the first option (going with the MotherCorp system) because he doubted they had the skills to upgrade the existing IT system and manage it in line with MotherCorp’s standards. To undermine his work, they repeatedly “contested the consultant’s authority” (in their own words; field notes, project meeting, September 2011) to evaluate EnergyCorp’s IT system performance and that of the IT team. “How can you judge us

in a few days,' an IT engineer asked Thomas, 'when we've been working on the solution for years? It may not be perfect, but it has done the job so far'" (field notes, informal conversation, September 2011). Although Thomas referred to Gerard during several project meetings by reminding his interlocutors that the CEO was the one ordering the audit, the IT department remained reluctant to participate, and the IT Director refused to share the system's "technical procedures and specifications" with the consultant (field document, September 2011).

To get the IT team on board with the project, Thomas took care during audit interviews to refer specifically to "the MotherCorp method" for auditing IT services—a fully specified method including various templates and policies for carrying out an evaluation—and to point out that "[he] was only there to apply the method rigorously" (field notes, project meeting, October 2011). He emphasized the procedural importance and fairness of this method by going through its technical specifications during a meeting with the IT team, and also in any written presentations and deliverables. In a personal conversation with the IT Director, Thomas insisted that he had "scrupulously followed each phase of MotherCorp's auditing method to reach his conclusion," and that "the method had been successfully applied in other subsidiaries to make these kinds of decisions" (field notes, informal conversation, October 2011). Although the IT Director still mostly saw Thomas as a threatening outsider, he felt obliged to recognize the validity of the conclusions reached via the auditing method, given that he was himself a former MotherCorp top manager who had helped craft its IT policies. In front of his team, he acknowledged that he was indeed "very familiar with the process and willing to use it at EnergyCorp, since he had made sure in the past that it was technically relevant" (field notes, project meeting, October 2011). As a result, the IT Director provided Thomas with additional insights on how to proceed with the software audits and encouraged his team to collaborate more closely with Thomas.

***Empirical episode 6: "I can produce rigorous and principled analysis on my own."*** Based on the results of the first auditing process, Thomas recommended the first option—implementing

MotherCorp's system— to Gerard, EnergyCorp's CEO. While it did involve a higher initial investment, Thomas argued that the expense seemed justified by "better performance and by the expected longevity of the new acquisition" (field document, November 2011), which would make it worthwhile harmonizing EnergyCorp's IT system with those of other subsidiaries. Yet, even though the solution was also supported by EnergyCorp's IT Director, Gerard strongly contested the consultant's analysis, arguing that "something was wrong" in the way Thomas had approached the situation and justified his recommendation (field notes, executive meeting, November 2011). In an email to Thomas in response to his report, Gerard wrote: "I feel like I'm caught between two experts: local IT services and the implacable system of MotherCorp, with its own interests. [...] I would like to see an objective assessment by a consultant, and that is not what I am seeing right now" (field document, November 2011). Through the grapevine, Thomas later learned that Gerard saw his plan as a tactic by MotherCorp to gain control over EnergyCorp. The CEO also objected to the cost of the proposed solution, which was higher than the in-house option: "Why should I pay two million euros for a system that already exists and a project that consists of transferring data into it?" (field notes, project meeting, November 2011). Gerard did not recognize the consultant's assessment of the situation, or the soundness of the auditing method. Instead, he blocked the project and remained adamant that it was a MotherCorp plot to take control of his subsidiary by infiltrating people and unifying IT systems.

To address Gerard's concerns and unfreeze the situation, Thomas announced that he would embark on a second audit of tools, roles, and procedures and compare EnergyCorp's IT service to other subsidiaries. This time, he made sure that he omitted any reference to MotherCorp's auditing method. He even publicly downplayed its importance during a project meeting attended by both Gerard and IT engineers from the group, by telling them that the auditing method "is only good when the data is clean enough to be transferred between systems without additional costs, which is not the case here. So, we don't need MotherCorp's auditing method to guide how we should proceed" (field notes, project meeting, November 2011).



Instead, Thomas made it clear to Gerard that the recommended path forward would be based on “ConsultCorp’s return on experience” from similar assignments—for instance, “the general cost of IT systems, the cost of data transfer between systems, technical risks, and the expected return on investment” (field document, strategic memo, November 2011). He argued that short-term costs should not overshadow long-term returns on investment, and that the compatibility of the new system with the group’s would be an important long-run asset. During multiple private encounters with Gerard, Thomas was sure to mention that the continued blockage of this IT project could imperil the corporate-wide restructuring program and antagonize MotherCorp’s executives. Though the second report ended up coming to the same conclusion as the first, Gerard grudgingly agreed to comply with the consultant’s recommendations. While he continued to distrust the holding group’s intentions, he stopped his blocking actions against MotherCorp’s IT system and proceeded to its implementation.

**Summary: Invoking and revoking abstract entities.** In these final two excerpts, we see that relating to what we call *abstract entities*, such as “MotherCorp’s auditing method,” was key in eliciting compliance from both the IT Director and the CEO. We use the term “abstract entity” to refer to any idea, institution, principle, professional norm, value, way of doing, and so on, that may participate in defining the situation when it is referred to in conversation. Indeed, people rarely say “I am authoritative,” but rather assert their authority indirectly by pointing to the need to follow best practices or standards. In this example, “best practices” or “standards” are abstract entities that are selected to lend weight to the speaker’s proposed course of action (Cooren, 2010). In the empirical episodes, a particular emphasis is put on “MotherCorp’s auditing method,” but other abstract entities are also at play: “ConsultCorp’s return on experience,” the “long-term goals of EnergyCorp,” the “IT department’s expertise,” and so forth.

At times, the consultant *invoked* MotherCorp’s auditing method to elicit compliance, in the sense that he referred to it as motivating or aligning with his suggested course of action, as when dealing with EnergyCorp’s IT Director. On other occasions, however, the consultant

*revoked* precisely the same method, pointing to its misalignment with the situation, especially following Gerard's rejection of the initial report. In this vein, our data shows that the consultant and other protagonists did not bluntly contradict each other. Rather, they counterpoised different readings of the situation by invoking or revoking methods, ideas, and other abstract entities that they presented as pointing to a particular course of action. Whether the evoked entities are objectively valid is secondary to our argument, since even the most substantially accurate idea must still be made to count in the situation through relational practices of invocation and revocation.

These six empirical episodes illustrate moments where the consultant's authority was on trial: contested in different ways by a variety of actors. They reveal two important features of Thomas's ability to orient collective action. First, his authority was neither stable nor given in advance. Without denying the importance of expertise, rank, and norms in eliciting compliance, our analysis shows that these elements must be practically made to count anew in each situation. No single resource—Thomas's charisma, his status, the management mandate he was given, his professional credentials or esoteric consulting methods—definitively granted him authority over people. As he discovered, what worked in some situations failed in others, and what helped him alter operational workers' courses of action turned out, on occasion, to have the exact opposite effect on top managers' behavior. Authority, the episodes reveal, should be regarded as a practical and situated accomplishment that is susceptible to failure; in other words, it is a *performance*.

Second, the ethnographic data also points to the fact that authority could be performed through relating with three types of actants: *human allies*, *material artifacts*, and *abstract entities*. These categories neatly sort out the infinite array of people, groups, tools, documents, principles, methods, etc., that actors can relate with in order to orient collective action when faced with an equally infinite range of unique situations. The consultant related to each category of actant through specific movements: either *mobilizing* or *distancing* from human allies;

*equipping* or *gearing down* from material artifacts; and *invoking* or *revoking* abstract entities. In the following section, we investigate how these movements are specific to each actant, yet have commonalities in supporting the performance of authority.

### HOW THE RELATIONAL SHAPING OF THE SITUATION ORIENTS COLLECTIVE ACTION

#### The micro-processes of activation and passivation

A closer study of the interactional moves we identify above—mobilizing and distancing; equipping and gearing down; and invoking and revoking—reveals that they all point to the idea that Thomas presented himself either as acting with others (whether human allies, material artifacts, or abstract entities) or, conversely, as acting alone. This suggests that authority relations are distinct from other types because they deal with the intrinsic tension surrounding the authorship of collective action (Holm & Fairhurst, 2018; Taylor & Van Every, 2014). From a relational perspective, it could be said that when action is shared, the focal actor *activates* their relations with others in the situation; conversely, when others' contribution is downplayed, the focal actor *passivates* their relations with others. We view these as micro-processes, and hence call them *activation* and *passivation*. In what follows, we define and illustrate both (1) activation and (2) passivation, and (3) analyze how they are dynamic and mutually constitutive processes. Figure 1 provides a schematic representation of our model and Table 2 summarizes our empirical data and reinterprets it through the prism of activation and passivation.

----- Insert Figure 1 about here -----

**(1) Activation.** Whether by mobilizing human allies, using artifacts, or invoking abstract entities, the consultant put forth his relations to other actants, and, therefore, oriented collective action by downplaying his own authorship of the situation. For instance, in the first empirical episode, when attempting to maneuver operational workers who doubted his technical relevance, Thomas teamed up with Barbara and placed her contribution center-stage; she was his “insider expert,” his main source of information, and an active contributor to their joint deliverables. In

the third empirical episode, when faced with the challenge of coordinating reluctant senior executives on the People Review project, Thomas created a software tool, which he positioned as the cornerstone of the decision-making process, even going as far as to maintain that “it is the tool, in fact, that is doing all the work.” Finally, in the fifth empirical episode, Thomas systematically invoked MotherCorp’s auditing method to overcome the IT Director’s concerns, remarking that he himself was only there to apply the method, which emanated from MotherCorp itself and had proved successful in the past. In all these cases, Thomas put forth the contribution of a wider array of actants to the authorship of the situation. In doing so, the consultant gave weight to his directive by suggesting that it was partially, if not completely, motivated by others. He also specifically related with actants from whom he expected people would be more willing to “take orders”: Barbara, the tool, and the auditing method. Therefore, we define activation as the *micro-process by which someone foregrounds and leverages relations with other actants in order to orient collective action*. This, in turns, means that the actor takes the focus away from their own contribution to the situation.

**(2) Passivation.** At other times, Thomas relied on a different process to alter others’ course of action. When distancing from human allies, gearing down from material artifacts, and revoking abstract entities, he symmetrically hid his relations with other actants, reminding clients and insiders of his own authorship of the situation. For instance, in the second empirical episode, when he was striving to coordinate the work of reluctant executives, the consultant downplayed Barbara as a source of ideas, removed her name from key documents, and, instead, emphasizing his own part in the formulation of the suggested actions. In the fourth empirical episode, he managed to quell the initial misgivings of the CRHO and the CFO about the People Review project by refraining from using the tool and, instead, resorting to it as a mere presentation device to highlight his control over it. Finally, in the last episode, Thomas gained Gerard’s assent by revoking ConsultCorp’s auditing method as the guiding framework behind his suggestions, and, instead, underlining his own professional experience in reaching his final conclusion. In

doing so, the consultant took authorship of the course of action he recommended and reminded others that he was the focal point in the wider array of actants. Passivation, in this sense, can be understood as *the micro-process by which someone backgrounds and downplays their relations with actants in order to orient collective action*. This, in turn, means that the actor puts the focus on their own contribution to the situation.

### **The situational sensitivity of activation and passivation**

Despite Thomas's best efforts in choosing one micro-process or the other, both activation and passivation sometimes failed to orient collective action in the direction he was hoping for. This is attributable to the reaction of other actors, the continuous evolution of the situation, or the consultant's occasional misreading of it. When such setbacks occurred, we observed that Thomas had to adjust on the fly from one micro-process to the other, to bring new actants into the situation or, conversely, to remove them from it. For instance, as illustrated in episode 2, when the consultant realized his relation to Barbara had no traction with executives, he downplayed his relations with her and put forth a more prominent role for himself in their joint work. The same phenomenon occurred in episodes 4 and 6, when Thomas moved from activation to passivation of his relations with the tool or MotherCorp's auditing method to gain collaboration from the CRHO and the CFO, or from the CEO.

We also observed that when the process of activation did not yield the results he expected, Thomas did not necessarily resort to passivation. On certain occasions, he used activation again, but with a *different network of actants*. For instance, in the second episode, after distancing himself from Barbara, the consultant gained traction over executives by mobilizing Henri, invoking sophisticated consulting models, and so forth. In the fourth episode, taking the tool off the table when it antagonized executives also meant equipping with a new set of material artifacts: a pencil and a simple chart. In the last episode, when the consultant noticed that invoking MotherCorp's auditing method was counterproductive with the CEO, Gerard, he shifted to activating a different set of actants—namely, other abstract entities such as

“ConsultCorp’s return on experience.”

The data analysis also shows that passivation and activation must not be understood as dualistic opposites, but rather as located on a continuum of two mutually constitutive processes. An actor can never entirely diffuse their relation with other actants, because authority only makes sense in the context of collective action. When one person seemingly orients collective action, they are in fact backed up by a variety of human allies, material artifacts, and abstract entities that must be made present in the situation. On the other hand, an actor can never entirely hide behind their relations with others, as it would amount to disappearing entirely as an actor. Thus, the performance of authority is not reducible to any particular posture. What matters is keeping activation and passivation in balance, depending on what the situation demands, and thus continuously contributing to its reshaping. The art of the dancer, to use a metaphor, does not lie in any one figure, but in the very movement that produces one figure after another, without ever staying still.

As the consultant activates or passivates his relations with various actants, he is attempting to shape the situation in such a way that it orients collective action. A performative understanding of authority highlights that the situations encountered by the consultant throughout his work are not stable contexts *in which* passivation and activation occur. Instead, the situations were continuously morphed by the consultant (and, arguably, other people) as he engaged in the micro-processes of passivation and activation. For instance, in the fifth episode, when Thomas invoked the “MotherCorp auditing method” during meetings, he shaped the situation by enacting a specific role for such an actant—a role that other people then had to consider with particular attention. At the same time, other actants—such as prior auditing data, Thomas’s own expertise, and the first report—were moved away from the situation. Similarly, in episode 3, when Thomas orchestrated coordination among executives by equipping himself with the People Review tool, he made it *de facto* a key actant to which executives had to relate in various ways, in all situations concerned with the People Review project. Situations, in this

sense, are dynamic configurations of material (implying people and artifacts) and semiotic actants (implying abstract entities). They emerge from the mundane activities of shared work, from the details of how tools are used to the vernacular intricacies of speech. Emphasizing the continuous shaping of the situation via material-semiotic relations makes it clear that the performance of authority involves mediation via the situation. People are not giving orders or complying with each other; rather, they are trying to impose a shaping of the situation with which actants must align.

### DISCUSSION

In this paper we analyzed how a focal actor orients collective action by activating and passivating relations with other actants in order to shape the situation in such a way that others defer to it. Specifically, we found that the performance of authority amounts to relating to three types of actants through three symmetrical movements: mobilizing and distancing from human allies; equipping and gearing down with respect to material artifacts; and invoking and revoking abstract entities. These movements have two underlying micro-processes in common, activation and passivation, by which the authorship of collective action is situationally distributed. Deploying these micro-processes orients collective action by aligning actants with the demands of the situation.

The performative approach to authority we propose makes three distinct theoretical contributions. First, it departs from substantialist approaches and augments the relational program on authority (Huisin, 2014, 2015; Kellogg, 2009) by pinpointing the micro-processes through which relations orient collective action. Second, it engages with ANT and CCO research by showing how authority emerges from material and semiotic relations enmeshed in the shaping of a situation (Cooren, 2010; Holm & Fairhurst, 2018; Kuhn et al., 2017; Latour, 2005). Finally, it provides new insights as to how authority unfolds in non-hierarchical, fragmented, and fluid post-bureaucratic contexts.

### **A performative perspective on the construction of authority**

In contrast to previous substantialist approaches, our performative perspective emphasizes that authority is not a static “thing,” or the intrinsic property of any specific “source,” but an outcome of the weaving of relations in a specific situation. In the case of the position view, authority is conflated with a particular location within the hierarchy or the assets that the order-giver controls (e.g., Aghion & Tirole, 1997). The expertise view, for its part, equates authority with the more or less “esoteric” knowledge that the order-giver possesses (e.g., Dobrajska et al., 2015). Finally, the acceptance view locates authority in the order-taker’s cognition, and focuses on identifying which messages and signals allow one’s authority to be more readily accepted (e.g., Tyler & Lind, 1992). Each of these perspectives seeks to single out a clear basis for authority: If you have the right position or the right knowledge, or send out the right, acceptable message, then you are assumed to “have” authority. Our study reveals, instead, that authority is not reducible to any one source or pole of the relation; it emerges from the interactions between participants and depends on the specifics of the situation (Emirbayer, 1997; Nicolini, 2011; Østerlund & Carlile, 2005). It takes the notion of *interest* in its deepest etymological sense: The word comes from the Latin *inter*, meaning “between,” and *esse*, which means “being,” and concerns the links required for people and things to sustain themselves among their peers, their project, or their organization. When people follow their “interest,” they defer to situations where relations that matter to them are put to the forefront. This performative attitude invites a methodological and epistemological shift: The point is not to explain *why* people obey an order, but rather *how* authority is actually done—whether successfully (from a given actor’s viewpoint) or not.

This understanding of authority advances the relational program set forth by scholars studying authority in professional settings (Huising, 2014, 2015; Kellogg, 2009). These studies focus on macro practices—such as doing “scut work” (Huising, 2015), producing “censure episodes” (Huising, 2014), or creating “relational spaces” (Kellogg, 2009)—used by groups of people to engage with each other and perform or resist authority, especially in the context of



expert work. By specifying the micro-processes through which relations orient collective action, our performative approach provides an integrative theoretical framework that cuts across these practices, unpacks their pattern of action, and specifies their situational relevance. For example, Huising's (2014) analysis of how a group of administrative personnel resisted the authority of experts through censure episodes is a case of invocation of abstract entities—the goals of the organization—that shaped a situation in which experts' practices were undermined. When the author proposes that biosafety experts performed their authority over lab technicians through “scut work” (Huising, 2015), she focuses on various instances of activation of a network of material artifacts (such as lab equipment) that were meaningful to low-level employees. However, scut work seems counterfactual when considering how professionals could perform their authority in relation to high-status individuals. This was duly exemplified in our case, in which top executives did not value the consultant's activation of the quality engineer's operational knowledge—as has also been demonstrated in classical research on professions (Hughes, 1962).

In Kellogg's (2009) study, “spaces of relational mobilization” were crucial to a group of surgeons' capacity to foster institutional change against an opposing group. These spaces were material-semiotic hybrids where people mobilized each other, geared up with specific tools, and invoked abstract entities—such as their common identity—that were put forth to perform their authority. In our case, we observed that the consultant also used relational spaces to strengthen relations with a variety of actors (i.e., Barbara, Henri, etc.) yet did not align with any specific group, as it would have meant losing the support of the others. Rather, the consultant had to dynamically activate/passivate his relations to each group (executives vs. operational workers; MotherCorp vs. EnergyCorp), which allowed him to circulate within the organization more surely than if he had associated with the strongest camp. Our performative approach, in this sense, extends current research on relational authority, by showing that it is also available to external actors without a strong professional affiliation or group identity.

**From a human-centric to a relation-centric view of authority**

Our performative understanding of authority also responds to recent calls to take relationality seriously in management studies (Kuhn et al., 2017). We found that people orient collective action through the distribution of agency made possible by the activation/passivation of their relations with other actants. This does not deny the importance of expertise, hierarchy, contracts, etc., but shows that structures and resources, no matter how deep and permanent, must be made to count via relational practices in enacted and multiple situations (Kuhn et al., 2017). While our performative take portrays authority as fluid and emergent, it can still explain why some people's authority endures across contexts. Actors may be involved in more stable or durable relations with other actants—material relations being more robust than semiotic ones, for instance—and may be more skilled at sustaining them over time. For instance, the authority of the President of the United States appears consistent because it rests on a wide and stable network of people, material artifacts, and abstract entities, including a large bureaucracy, courts of law, the US Constitution, and the state's monopoly on violence. But it does not follow that the President's authority has been achieved once and for all: In a sandbox, trying to convince a small child that it is time to leave, the President would be just as helpless as the next adult. In a performative view, the consistency of authority is, therefore, accounted as an effect rather than a starting point. It is contingent, in the sense that it is only “stabilized for now” (Law, 1992) and always at risk of being challenged again.

ANT was the first theory to take seriously the performative nature of sociotechnical entanglements and the sharing of action between actants (Callon, 1991; Latour, 1986). ANT's analysis, especially its concept of “blackboxing,” captures how a focal actor acquires authority by incorporating the action of others into their own (Callon, 1986). This enrolment is said to be truly effective only when the work necessary to hold the network together is hidden or, at least, made opaque (Latour, 2005; Law, 1992)—what we call “passivation” of relations. Authority, we

suggest, lies instead in the dynamic adjustment between activation and passivation, and in the continuous redistribution of agency between actants. It is only when others' work is not completely "blackboxed" that their spokesperson can be authoritative. Otherwise, the question arises: On behalf of whom or what are they speaking? Additionally, ANT has been prolific in describing the constitution and stabilization of networks over long periods of time, e.g., large-scale technology projects. In contrast, our interaction-centered analysis pays specific attention to emergent situations and discursive encounters. It grounds ANT's conceptual repertoire at the micro level by emphasizing the work done by an actor to navigate contradictory networks of actants in organizations, rather than simply joining and strengthening one of them.

Our findings answer recent pleas within CCO to investigate how authority also stems from contributions besides discourse, including those of objects (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Holm & Fairhurst, 2018). By considering human allies, material artifacts, and abstract entities all at once, we show the importance of teamwork, physical proximity, and the use of tools in complementing the invocation of figures in speech to give weight to one's actions. In doing so, our findings also open up the definition of the situation to a broader range of actants besides human co-conversants (Courtright et al., 1989; Fairhurst et al., 1995). Broadening CCO's understanding of authority also offers a finer look at how authoritative texts, both *concrete* (the People Review tool) and *figurative* (the "goals of EnergyCorp"), are woven to guide collective action in a given situation (Kuhn, 2008, 2012). Through the dynamic tension between passivation and activation, figures and texts become authoritative when they are aptly brought into a situation where other actants care for their relationship with them. This also means that, at times, authority may be obtained by *revoking* some figures—i.e., taking them out of situations, thus placing emphasis on the focal actor (i.e., passivation of relations). Therefore, our contribution integrates the different

modalities through which collective action is guided (Cornelissen, Mantere, & Vaara, 2014) and invites us to speak of both authority and resistance in the same terms (Erkama & Vaara, 2010).

A performative approach to authority reveals that the messy entwining of actants is a practical concern for organizational members, not just an analytical problem for researchers. Debates over material vs. human/social agency in sociomateriality's program (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Leonardi & Barley, 2010; Orlikowski, 2010) have dedicated efforts to sorting out "whether the social and the material need to be disentangled [...] or to the contrary, analyzed together via a relational ontology focused on constitutive entanglement" (Faraj & Azad, 2012: 249). We adopt a different take on this debate. Our research shows that what matters in the field is not so much who or what has agency, but the strength of their joint effect in shaping the situation. It was only by weaving the relations between actants of different ontologies that the consultant could distribute authorship of the situation, thereby orienting collective action.

### **Performing authority in post-bureaucratic organizations**

Our study illustrates how people creatively manage to orient collective action despite limited pre-existing sources of authority. A core implication of our research is to support calls for novel theories in the study of organizing that extend beyond traditional and static perspectives of organizational structure, boundaries, roles, resources, or other antecedents of action. As work becomes more contingent, an increasing number of managers have become "consultant managers" focused on functional integrations, projects, and internal clients. They must cope with flatter hierarchies, lateral careers, and the fragmentation of relationships in project-oriented and cross-functional knowledge teams (O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006; Sturdy, Wylie, & Wright, 2015). In our findings, acting authoritatively means crossing the traditional fault lines of organization theory: internal/external; functional/operational; top management/staff; social skills/technical expertise; etc. Due to the fluid nature of post-bureaucratic organizations, these

categories are increasingly blurred (Hodgson, 2004). Looking at activation and passivation as micro-processes while acknowledging that they may take a multitude of empirical forms provides tools to study authority in even the most unstable settings.

To account for such contexts, we need theories that transcend the classical distinctions between a giver and a receiver of authority, or between a superior and a subordinate. In this vein, our performative approach shows that authority is not an either/or question, where some people are passive while others are active, but rather a continuous accomplishment involving the careful blending of activation and passivation to shape each situation. Indeed, the crucial notion here is that of *situation*, which is the common ground for more equal participation, as Mary Parker Follett pointed out a long time ago: “One *person* should not give orders to another *person*, but both should agree to take their orders from the situation” (Follett, 1940: 59). Our performative perspective allows us to account for how any actor, even a subordinate, may end up telling others what to do, given the right situation. For example, if a doctor’s actions endanger a patient in trauma care, a hierarchically subordinate nurse can overrule them by invoking safety rules, medical standards, or procedures (Faraj & Xiao, 2006). The performative view of authority does not negate the importance of rank, predetermined positions, and expertise. Rather, it stresses that these factors are neither homogeneous nor sufficient, and that their relevance emerges from the co-constitution of actants and situations through relational micro-processes. In this sense, we illustrate the power of performativity when it is employed in organizational contexts to tackle a key concept of organization and management theory (Gond et al., 2016). Performativity offers an excellent approach to study authority in new work contexts where its usual forms can hardly be delineated.

Finally, our performative approach highlights the contested nature of authority. People may contribute to shaping a situation by selectively relating to people, tools, and principles, but this empowering effect comes at a price. Selectively altering relations may undermine one’s capacity to act as much as reinforcing it, as when Thomas downplayed Barbara’s contribution to

their common work to attempt to gain collaboration from executives. Others witness the moves of the focal actor from their own perspective, reach their own conclusions as to motive, and may suffer a blow to their own role or public image. Thus, taking the performativity of authority seriously reveals its political dimension, and invites researchers to adopt a critical stance when investigating how organizational actors shape situations to which others shall defer. In this respect, future research based on the performative lens is needed for a subtler understanding of the power dynamics unfolding in increasingly non-hierarchical work settings.

### CONCLUSION

Our research demonstrates that people can perform authority even if they do not “possess” its usual attributes. As our study shows, a commitment to relating to other actants in each situation can provide the chance to be authoritative and overcome liabilities, such as outsider status or limited knowledge of the organization. Our analysis of activation and passivation draws attention to the idea that others’ contribution is a crucial facet of one’s authority—for participation is integral to actions that matter, even though it may be muted or rendered invisible. An implication is that it may no longer be possible to provide a step-by-step recipe for authority, given that performances always unfold locally and with an element of surprise. Yet, it does create a space for sharing the endeavor of crafting, as William James put it, a world “still in the making” (James, 1921: 257).

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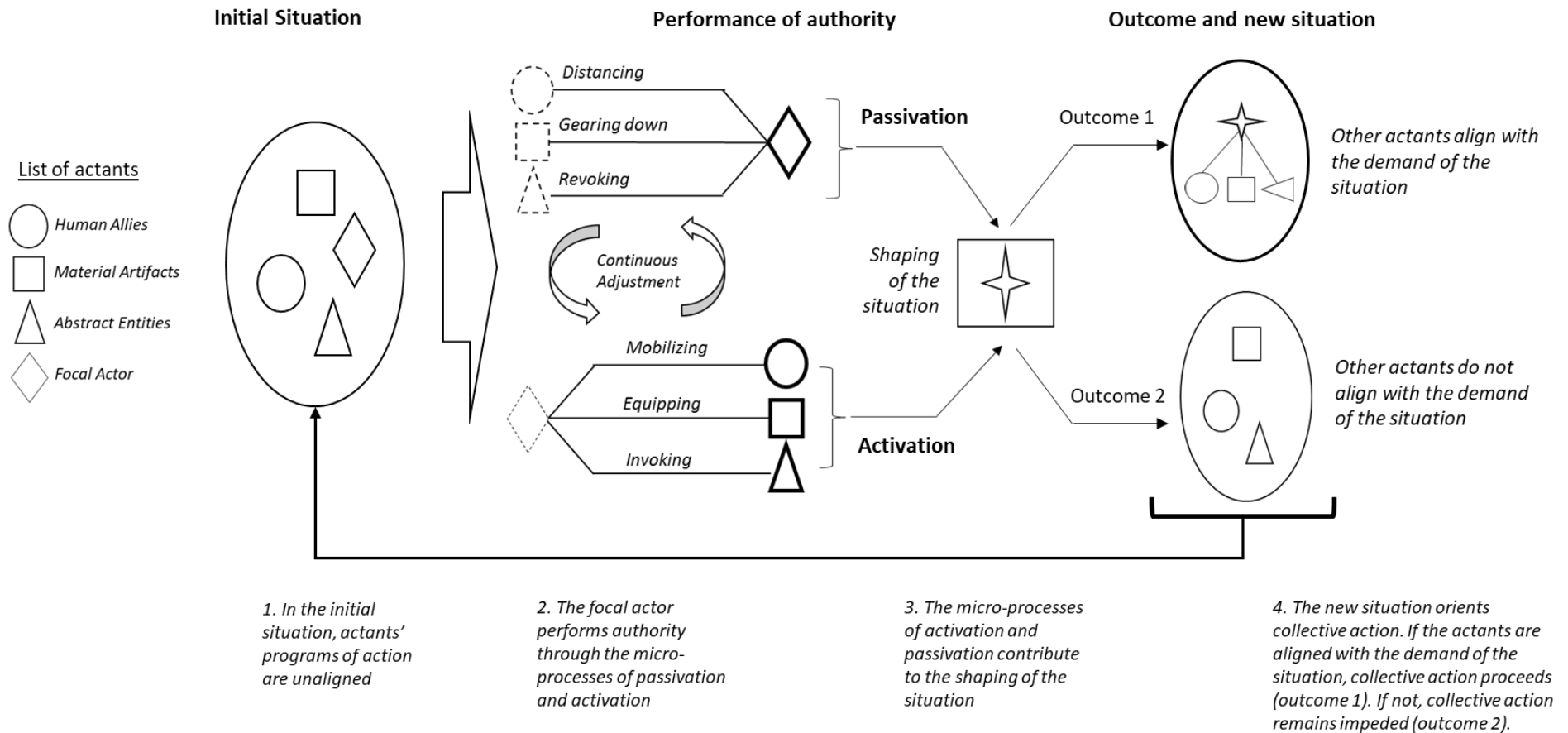
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**Figure 1: The performance of authority through the relational shaping of the situation**



**Table 1: Use of data for each episode**

<b>Episodes</b>	<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Key events and data collection</b>	<b>Data</b>
E1: "I need my insider expert."	May–July 2011	Informal conversations with the quality engineer, work sessions on project documents, and project meetings with operational workers	20 researcher field notes; 7 team meetings with Barbara; 6 project meetings; 12 project documents; 1 auditing report; 3 meeting memos; 3 emails
E2: "You need to keep her at bay."	June–August 2011	Executive meetings, project meetings, informal conversations with top executives, and working meetings with the quality engineer	15 researcher field notes; 3 executive meetings; 6 project meetings; 4 team meetings with Barbara; 4 strategy documents; 4 emails
E3: "The tool did the job."	May–October 2011	Meetings and work sessions related to the People Review project. Field documents related to the tool itself were also pivotal	40 researcher field notes; 9 project meetings; 3 meeting memos; 1 People Review tool (Excel); 1 People Review tool (Access); 3 strategic documents
E4: "You are only good at putting people in little boxes."	June–October 2011	Project meetings and informal conversations with the CFO and CHRO	10 research field notes; 6 project meetings; 3 meeting memos; 1 People Review tool (Access); 1 HR tool (Excel)
E5: "I scrupulously followed MotherCorp's auditing method."	September–November 2011	Auditing process of the IT system, executive meetings, project meetings with the IT director, and meetings with the CEO	30 research field notes; 10 project meetings; 3 meetings at ConsultCorp; 1 auditing report; 2 policy documents
E6: "I can produce rigorous and principled analysis on my own."	November 2011	Project meetings on the IT system, another auditing process, and multiple conversations with the CEO. The auditing report and strategic documents were also pivotal in the analysis	10 researcher field notes; 4 project meetings; 2 executive meetings; 1 work email; 1 auditing report; 2 strategic documents
E7: "I'm in charge of the restructuring project."	June 2011	Project meeting with top executives on the transfer of EnergyCorp subsidiaries	3 researcher field notes; 1 project meeting
E8: "I'm here to support all you guys."	June 2011	Project meeting with top executives on the transfer of EnergyCorp subsidiaries and informal conversations with executives	4 researcher field notes; 1 project meeting 1 meeting memo
E9: "I used the report as my business card."	June 2011	Auditing process in production plants and project meetings with operational workers	8 researcher field notes; 3 project meetings; 1 auditing report
E10: "I am the project leader."	May–July 2011	Project meetings and informal conversations with the CFO	5 researcher field notes; 3 project meetings; 3 work emails; 2 meetings with Barbara
E11: "The success of the program depends on it."	August 2011	Project meetings and informal conversations with the CFO	10 researcher field notes; 4 project meetings; 1 work email
E12: "The contract is clear on this point."	September 2011	Several meetings and informal conversations with Henri and Charles related to the contractual arrangements of the assignment	4 researcher field notes; 2 meetings with Henri; 1 meeting with Charles; 1 field document
E13: "You've known me for a long time."	September 2011	Meeting and an informal conversation with Henri related to the contractual arrangements of the assignment	2 researcher field notes; 2 meetings with Henri; 1 field document

**Table 2: Activation and passivation in the consultant's performance of authority**

Episode	Initial situation	Performance of authority	Outcome and new situation
E1: "I need my insider expert."	<i>Initial situation:</i> Thomas needed to get operational workers on board with a new financial structure, even though he lacked day-to-day knowledge of EnergyCorp activities. This was crucial, since the restructuring process could not be completed without cooperation from workers in charge of operational processes.	<i>Activation:</i> Thomas <i>mobilized a human ally</i> by teaming up with Barbara, the quality engineer, to make up for his lack of practical knowledge. He took her to meetings, sat next to her, credited her in key documents, had lunch with her, emphasized her contribution, publicly gave her credit, etc. For instance, he enthused: "Barbara really is my fairy godmother on this project. She knows all about the plants and the accounting structure of the subsidiaries. I couldn't do this without her" (field notes, June 2011).	<i>Why activation worked:</i> Thomas's visibly close collaboration with Barbara allowed him to make his abstract recommendations relevant for operational workers and showed that Thomas cared about their concerns. They saw him as more competent, interested in technical aspects, and more trustworthy. An accountant commented, for instance: "I'm not sure that what the project team is doing is best [for EnergyCorp], but the fact that Barbara is involved is very reassuring for us" (field notes, July 2011).
E2: "You need to keep her at bay."	<i>Initial situation:</i> In contrast to operational workers, senior executives did not value recommendations based on Barbara's insights. For instance, they said: "We have known for a long time what Barbara is capable of [...] and we don't want that" (field notes, July 2011). Henri also explained to Thomas: "You must manage Barbara and take a strong lead if you want executives to take you seriously" (field notes, July 2011). However, Thomas did need collaboration from top executives, since each of them was the sponsor of a particular project within the restructuring process.	<i>Adjustment to passivation:</i> Thomas <i>distanced himself from a human ally</i> , namely Barbara. He began attending meetings alone, authoring reports on his own, removing Barbara's name from documents, and emphasizing his own role and knowledge of consulting methods and models. In an executive committee meeting, he mentioned to executives: "Barbara is only here to help me with support tasks. I'm the one doing the analysis" (field notes, July 2011).	<i>Why passivation worked:</i> Executives reacted positively, since they valued expert advice and consulting models and had little regard for the detailed engineering knowledge that Barbara represented to them. Thomas observed increased collaboration from executives, who also called for his support and insights, asked him to arbitrate during delicate situations, and involved him in informal conversations.
E3: "The tool did the job."	<i>Initial situation:</i> Thomas had to secure the cooperation of feuding executives in order to design the target state of the organization and review the status of affected employees. The People Review project was a high-stakes process that could result in many employees changing positions or being let go. Executives engaged in intense negotiations and disputes to protect their own teams and preserve their own resources.	<i>Activation:</i> Thomas <i>equipped himself with a material artifact</i> —the People Review tool—that allowed him to simulate, visualize, and record personnel movements. The software allowed executives' suggestions to be integrated and then showed the organizational state that would result if they were implemented. Thomas emphasized the importance of the tool—telling the commercial director, for instance, that "it is the tool, not me, that is taking the decisions" (field notes, July 2011).	<i>Why activation worked:</i> The tool's ability to visualize and simulate personnel movements led executives to rely on its projections when structuring their departments. Thomas gained a key role in the project's coordination. An executive asked him to "come with the tool to all department meetings concerning the People Review, in order to decide what should be done with other services" (field notes, August 2011). Another executive asked him: "Can you tell me what we wrote in the tool last time? So, what does it say I should do? It is very well structured and transparent, this tool" (field notes, July 2011).
E4: "You are only good at	<i>Initial situation:</i> While most executives appreciated Thomas's approach to People Review project, two—Benedict (the CFO) and Samira (the CHRO)—	<i>Adjustment to passivation:</i> To unfreeze the situation, Thomas <i>geared down</i> from a material artifact (the tool). He changed his approach with reluctant executives and began	<i>Why passivation worked:</i> Seeing that the project was not controlled by the tool, and that Thomas could adjust it to their needs, Benedict and Samira agreed to participate in

<p>putting people in little boxes.”</p>	<p>accused him of relying too much on the tool. They felt it constrained them, and blinded Thomas to the human reality of the project. They dismissed the projected organizational design, and the CHRO refused to take over the tool herself when Thomas was ready to transition out of the project.</p>	<p>using the tool merely as a presentation instrument, emphasizing his own capacity to adjust its features to each executive’s needs. He stopped using the tool altogether in meetings with Benedict, and showed Samira the compatibility of the software with her existing ways of working.</p>	<p>work sessions. They came to agree that the tool was useful. Samira admitted, for instance: “It is very well made, this tool, very powerful.” She also noted that “it is the tool that helped us win over the union representatives on the project” (field notes, October 2011).</p>
<p>E5: “I scrupulously followed MotherCorp’s auditing method.”</p>	<p><i>Initial situation:</i> Thomas had to conduct an audit of EnergyCorp’s aging IT system and suggest possible alternatives. Replacing EnergyCorp’s entire IT system was a multi-million-euro project, and such an investment would determine the firm’s ability to maintain its operations in the future. Given the high stakes, Thomas had to be careful in conducting his audit so as to persuade Gerard, the CEO, of the soundness of his advice. He also had to get the IT director to collaborate in the audit, despite the latter’s refusal to share crucial information and his distrust in Thomas’s legitimacy to conduct technology audits.</p>	<p><i>Activation:</i> Thomas <i>invoked an abstract entity</i>: In a conversation with the IT director, he quoted “MotherCorp’s auditing method” to underscore the relevance and legitimacy of his own work. He referred to the method as guiding his solution and included it in all deliverables. Henri remarked, “Because this method is tailored for the subsidiaries and well known in the group, it will be helpful in pushing the solution forward” (field notes, September 2011).</p>	<p><i>Why activation worked:</i> Because EnergyCorp’s IT director had participated in the crafting of the method (as a former executive from the parent firm), he felt obliged to support an approach that had originally emanated, at least in part, from him. He supported the auditing process in front of his teams, and shared crucial information with the consultant.</p>
<p>E6: “I can produce rigorous and principled analysis on my own.”</p>	<p><i>Initial situation:</i> When the CEO read the IT audit report, he interpreted Thomas’s reliance on MotherCorp’s methods as a lack of objectivity and as indicating his complicity with the parent firm’s attempt to take over EnergyCorp. He rejected Thomas’s recommendation. As Gerard explained, “I’m not sure this method would apply to EnergyCorp, or whether we need an external consultant to apply the group’s method” (field notes, November 2011).</p>	<p><i>Adjustment to passivation:</i> Thomas <i>revoked an abstract entity</i> by dissociating himself from the MotherCorp auditing method. He wrote a new report where he downplayed the role of MotherCorp’s data and methods. He also better highlighted the contribution of his own expertise and experience as a consultant in the formulation of his recommendation during multiple meetings with Gerard.</p>	<p><i>Why passivation worked:</i> Seeing that he came to the same conclusion even without resorting to the MotherCorp method, Gerard recognized the validity of Thomas’s recommendation. He told the consultant: “I admit that the recommendation is sound, although I’m still not convinced it is the best choice” (field notes, November 2011). Ultimately, the IT system was implemented according to Thomas’s advice.</p>
<p>E7: “I’m in charge of the restructuring project.”</p>	<p><i>Initial situation:</i> Thomas organized a workshop with the executives, some of whom he was meeting for the first time. The group had to conduct an analysis of EnergyCorp subsidiaries, decide which ones should be transferred to MotherCorp, and specify the modalities of each transfer.</p>	<p><i>Passivation:</i> Thomas introduced himself as “the consultant in charge of the restructuring project” (field notes, June 2011). He <i>distanced himself</i> from several <i>human allies</i> by neglecting to acknowledge that there were other contributors involved, and putting himself forward as the one who was making decisions and expecting results. He proceeded to describe an action plan where each executive was allocated a task.</p>	<p><i>Why passivation failed:</i> Quite unexpectedly, the whole room burst into laughter, with each executive throwing in their two cents: “Is that all?” “You’re in charge? [Laughs]” “Who are you again?” “And what about us? Are we worthless? You work with Henri, right?” (field notes, June 2011). Faced with this pushback, Thomas realized that the executives resented an outsider taking charge of the project without giving due consideration to their own roles and responsibilities.</p>

<p>E8: “I’m here to support all you guys.”</p>	<p><i>Initial Situation:</i> Thomas’s cavalier introduction left executives with a bad impression of him that could impede their participation in the project. To get it back on track, Thomas tried to repair his relationship with them.</p>	<p><i>Adjustment to activation:</i> Thomas apologized for his clumsiness by <i>mobilizing a human ally</i>, Gerard, and mentioned that Gerard had seconded him. He then <i>mobilized</i> another set of <i>human allies</i>, namely the executives themselves, as main contributors to the project. He reassured them that he would not make any decision without their approval: “I’m here to support all you guys in the process. You are the functional experts and your role in pushing the project forward is paramount. You’ll be the sponsors of high-priority tasks” (field notes, June 2011).</p>	<p><i>Why activation worked:</i> By positioning himself as acting on their behalf, Thomas reassured the executives that all decisions resulting from the action plan would be theirs. At the end of the meeting, the legal director, who was the sponsor for the subsidiary transfer project, asked him to be “in charge of the project” and “coordinate the contributions of the team” (field notes, June 2011).</p>
<p>E9: “I used the report as my business card.”</p>	<p><i>Initial situation:</i> Although technical workers regarded Thomas as an outsider working for headquarters, he needed to work with them on several of the restructuring program’s subprojects, since they were experts in charge of production processes.</p>	<p><i>Activation:</i> Thomas <i>equipped himself with a material artifact</i>, namely the report of an audit of the plants that he had previously conducted. When he met with workers, he would bring out the thick document, thus showing that he had been in the field, spoken to workers, and taken the time to understand their reality. “Any time I met with operational workers, I’d send the report ahead as my business card, so they could see I was not so useless to them after all” (field notes, June 2011).</p>	<p><i>Why activation worked:</i> Technical workers had a deeply held conviction that their reality was different from that of the head office. They resented “functional experts” who actually knew nothing about their world. With the audit report, Thomas showed them that his recommendations took into account the intricacies of their work. As a result, following the completion of his audit, Thomas gained the trust of technical workers who all agreed to be members of expert teams for the restructuring program.</p>
<p>E10: “I am the project leader.”</p>	<p><i>Initial situation:</i> Thomas needed Benedict, the CFO, to provide him with financial data—and “commit” to its reliability (field notes, June 2011)—in order to create a performance scorecard for Gerard. The CFO refused, arguing that that “his role as CFO was not to focus on this scorecard,” and that “the opening balance sheet was the top priority” (field notes, July 2017).</p>	<p><i>Passivation:</i> Thomas <i>revoked abstract entities</i> by being very direct and ignoring the “CFO’s role” that Benedict was attached to. Thomas also disregarded the opening balance sheet the CFO deemed to be a priority. Instead, Thomas explained that, as the leader of the restructuring project, he was the one defining priorities and, whatever Benedict thought the scope of his job was, he, Thomas, needed the data from the CFO. He explained: “I need your forecasts quickly to move forward with my assignment; this is my decision to make” (field notes, July 2011).</p>	<p><i>Why passivation failed:</i> Feeling that Thomas was belittling his part in the project, the CFO refused to comply, raising the objection that Thomas’s “demands were not specific enough” (field notes, July 2017). Benedict also viewed financial issues as his turf, and took Thomas’s brusque request for data as proof that the consultant had little consideration for his role and responsibilities.</p>
<p>E11: “The success of the program depends on it.”</p>	<p><i>Initial situation:</i> Thomas’s relationship with Benedict remained in a deadlock for several weeks, during which the performance scorecard stayed blank. During a meeting, Thomas also understood that the CFO saw the consultant’s proximity to the CEO as a threat. Benedict complained: “Every time we see you, we come back with a grocery list, and we know that you have the CEO’s ear and that it will backfire on us at some point” (field notes, August 2011).</p>	<p><i>Adjustment to activation:</i> Seeing that the situation was stalled, Thomas asked the CFO to meet privately, face to face. This time, he justified his request for data by <i>invoking abstract entities</i>, i.e. “EnergyCorp’s best interests” and “the success of the program.” He reminded the CFO that “some people want to dismantle EnergyCorp to integrate its activities with MotherCorp. We need to avoid that, which is why I need financial data to demonstrate the economic viability of the project” (field notes, August 2011).</p>	<p><i>Why activation worked:</i> By finding common ground with the CFO, and putting forward abstract entities that he knew his interlocutor held dear, Thomas managed to get the CFO to see the broader importance of providing the data for the scorecard. In a project meeting, Benedict later asked his team to provide Thomas with “any relevant financial information that he might be asking for, as they were all working in the same direction” (field notes, August 2011).</p>

<p>E12: “The contract is clear on this point.”</p>	<p><i>Initial situation:</i> Thomas had to negotiate a hike in the cost of the consulting assignment with Henri. The project had turned out to rely more heavily than expected on ConsultCorp resources, including some oversight by Charles, Thomas’s staffing manager, which had to be billed. However, Henri insisted these were not needed, since he was able to supervise “his” consultant himself.</p>	<p><i>Activation:</i> To counter Henri’s claim that “EnergyCorp won’t accept a rise in costs” (field notes, September 2011), Thomas <i>equipped himself with material artifacts</i>—the contract they had signed and a workload management schedule—which he showed to Henri. The subsequent conversation unfolded as follows:</p> <p>Henri: There’s no way I’m paying for Charles’s input; I don’t want that! We were clear that there would be no extra time.</p> <p>Thomas: Well, the contract did mention the possibility of some extra resource. [Showing the documents] Look at my workload management schedule as well—I’m completely snowed under with work (field notes, September 2011).</p>	<p><i>Why activation failed:</i> To Thomas’s surprise, Henri saw right through Thomas’s passivation attempt, and said so immediately. Instead of deferring to what the documents said, he pointed to his and Thomas’s shared involvement in reaching the agreement: “Stop hiding behind your contract! [...] I’m the one paying [...], the contract isn’t set in stone [...] I hired a consultant to help me, not work against me” (field notes, September 2011).</p>
<p>E13: “You’ve known me for a long time.”</p>	<p><i>Initial situation:</i> Following that conversation, Thomas understood that Henri felt that appealing to the contract or the workload management schedule was a disavowal of their prior relationship and a strain on their mutual trust. Thomas therefore had to repair their relationship so they could carry the project through to its conclusion.</p>	<p><i>Adjustment to passivation:</i> Thomas mirrored Henri’s attitude: He <i>geared down</i> from the contract and the workload management schedule, and quite literally took them off the table. Instead, he stressed that he was the one making decisions, and that his skills and experience made him competent to decide whether Charles’s input was necessary. He told Henri: “You’ve known me for a long time, and you know I would never work against you [...]. I’m asking you to trust me on this. I know what is best for us and for the project” (field notes, September 2011).</p>	<p><i>Why passivation was successful:</i> By emphasizing his own competence and trustworthiness as a consultant, Thomas convinced Henri that his request came from the heart. Henri was still not convinced the extra cost was entirely justified, but he agreed that if Thomas said ConsultCorp resources were necessary, then perhaps indeed they were. He eventually agreed to cover the extra costs.</p>

**Table 3: Additional evidence of constructs**

	<b>Illustrative examples</b>
<i>Activation</i> Mobilizing human allies	“I decided that I would not go to any internal meetings without Barbara in attendance. The execs started joking about it, saying that to get to me you had to go through my bodyguard” (E1, field notes, May 2011).
	“I’ve been doing quality audits with [operational worker] for six years [...]. He told me that he wouldn’t be speaking with the project team if it wasn’t for me. I know everybody here; I’ve worked with them” (E1, Barbara, informal conversation, June 2011).
	“Forgive me if I wasn’t clear enough in my introduction. I’ve been seconded by Gerard; he’s the one who asked me to help you guys” (E8, field notes, June 2011).
Equipping material artifacts	“Now the [People Review] tool is set up, I’ve become a respected voice on everything to do with [the project]. I use the tool as an argument to convince functional directors to meet with me, as I can claim to help them structure their ideas better [...]. The tool is on everyone’s lips—so much so that Henri and I tried to give it a proper name, but it will remain ‘The Tool,’ with a capital T, out of habit” (E3, field notes, June 2011).
	“When meeting with the operational workers, I could use the report as proof that I had been in the field, and [use it] as a reservoir of examples on technical problems. [...] [Operational worker] didn’t believe me; I said, look it up on p. 39, I’m not making anything up, it’s all in there” (E9, field notes, June 2011).
	“You tell Henri you’re overworked? He doesn’t care, he doesn’t see it. You’re a consultant, pal, it’s what you signed up for. We need to be able to establish for a fact that you work too much. [...] We need to make your workload factual. Prepare a work management schedule” (E12, Charles, informal conversation, August 2011).
Invoking abstract entities	“The IT director had budgeted the in-house option and feared that outside analysis would reveal the system’s weaknesses. [...] So, I started by saying that MotherCorp had guidelines and a group-level IT policy. And since EnergyCorp was a newly acquired subsidiary that had to be leveled up to MotherCorp standards, there was no reason not to apply these guidelines to the company. [...] I felt like I had pretty good backup” (E5, field notes, October 2011).
	“I know this method. I was actually one of the main contributors to designing it with [branch director], so I don’t need you to explain to me how it works and why it is relevant” (E5, quote from IT director, informal conversation, November 2011).
	“I know you might think I am undermining you with Gerard, but I’m telling you that I’m working in EnergyCorp’s best interests” (E11, field notes, informal conversation with the CFO, July 2011).
<i>Passivation</i> Distancing from human allies	“You can’t be the one steering the executive committee meeting while also crunching data and doing support tasks with Barbara. It blurs your image with top executives. [...] Right now, you must dissociate yourself from her [...]. And try to have lunch with the executives sometimes—not just the same people all the time” (E2, quote from Charles, informal conversation, July 2011).
	“I understand that we need to position ourselves at the top level. There is a problem with Barbara; she can’t be the one introducing you to executives. I won’t be there either before next week, so you’ll have to go and introduce yourself on your own” (E2, Henri, informal conversation, June 2011).
	“My name is Thomas. I’m a consultant in charge of the restructuring program and I’ll be leading the project office. I’ll be the one checking in with you regularly to make sure that everything is in order” (E7, field notes, June 2011).
Gearing down from material artifacts	“The tool could be useful beyond the restructuring program if HR keep feeding data into it [...]. I realized she was afraid of it for technical reasons. So, I spent several meetings showing her how easy it was, and [told her] that if she didn’t need it for most of the work, she could just record her decisions in it” (E4, field notes, September 2011).
	“I said to Henri, ‘OK, forget about the workload schedule. This was just a work in progress anyway’” (E13, field notes, September 2011).
	“I know you are a hard worker and that you’ve helped me in the past, but please don’t bring the contract into all this, because this has never been binding between me and ConsultCorp” (E13, Henri, informal conversation, September 2011).
Revoking abstract entities	“I didn’t use MotherCorp’s auditing method in the second report, since it was based on subsidiaries that already had monitoring tools for large projects, which we don’t have here. We need a much more fine-grained system for small contracts, which are the bulk of our activity” (E6, field notes, November 2011).
	“You’ve done several assignments of this kind, and I’m sure you guys at ConsultCorp have your ratios and tools to assess the system [...] That is what I want to hear from you: an objective assessment, rather than a presentation of our own method” (E6, Henri, informal conversation, November 2011).
	“I’m not sure who told you that the opening balance sheet was a priority, but let me tell you that for now I’m making these calls, and I’m the one who has to deliver the scorecard by the end of the week [...]” (E10, field document, email to CFO, July 2011).