

**Knowledge leadership:**

**Mobilising management research by becoming the  
knowledge object<sup>1</sup>**

**Michael D. Fischer**

**Sue Dopson,**

**Louise Fitzgerald**

**Chris Bennett**

**Ewan Ferlie**

**Jean Ledger**

**Gerry McGivern**

**Corresponding author**

Michael D. Fischer

University of Melbourne, Australia and University of Oxford, UK

[michael.fischer@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:michael.fischer@unimelb.edu.au)

[www.michaelfischer.org](http://www.michaelfischer.org)

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## **Abstract**

This article explores contrasting forms of ‘knowledge leadership’ in mobilising management research into organizational practice. Drawing on a Foucauldian perspective on power-knowledge, we introduce three axes of power-knowledge relations, through which we analyse knowledge leadership practices. We present empirical case study data focused on ‘polar cases’ of managers engaged in mobilising management research in six research-intensive organizations in the UK healthcare sector. We find that knowledge leadership involves agentic practices through which managers strive to actively *become* the knowledge object – personally *transposing*, *appropriating* or *contending* management research. This article contributes to the literature by advancing the concept of knowledge leadership in the work of mobilising management research into organizational practice.

## **Keywords**

knowledge leadership, knowledge mobilisation, management research, knowledge object, evidence-based management, healthcare management, knowledge-intensive firm, Foucault

The role of leadership in mobilising research-based management knowledge into organizational practice is an important area of research, yet it is largely neglected in the literature. In this article we develop the concept of ‘knowledge leadership’ – in which managers strive to personally become the knowledge object, so mobilising research-based management knowledge (‘management research’ hereafter) into practice.

Previous scholarship has considered managers’ roles in terms of empowering (Srivastava et al., 2006) or motivating (Lakshman, 2005) subordinates to share knowledge, by providing supportive climates for learning and innovation (Viitala, 2004), and knowledge creation (von Krogh et al., 2012). Some scholars suggest senior managers should intervene more strategically by participating in knowledge management initiatives (Lakshman, 2005), by ‘role modelling’ knowledge adoption (Bell DeTienne et al., 2004; Goh, 2002), directing resources (Kimble et al., 2010), or constructing crises to expedite knowledge flows (Kim, 2001). Overall, these perspectives suggest managers have a facilitative but

relationally distant role, directed at mobilising aspects of knowledge in organizational settings.

An alternative analytic framing is raised by Foucault's (1980) concept of power-knowledge, which argues that a power-knowledge nexus operates pervasively through and upon all human subjects. This nexus functions by dynamically shaping how subjects relate to their contexts, the forms of knowledge with which they engage, and indeed how they relate to themselves and others. As adopted within organizational studies, Foucauldian scholarship tends to focus on disciplinary aspects of organizational control (for reviews, see Menicken & Miller, 2014; Power, 2011) such as the regulation and surveillance of employees, consumers, inmates and patients.

An important second strand of Foucauldian thinking investigates, by contrast, how power-knowledge operates through mundane practices, inscriptions and devices of everyday work that produce knowable, calculable objects. These operations notably give rise to the emerging knowledge domains and expert groupings of the 'grey sciences' such as accounting (Miller & Rose, 1990), audit (Power, 1997), and management knowledge (Jacques, 1996). Such scholarship, influential in sociological accounting research, portrays an image of human subjects deeply immersed in, and indeed constituted by, a pervasive organizational apparatus.

However, might more agentic subject positions develop, potentially shaping and mobilising less dominant modes of knowledge? An intriguing third strand of scholarship focuses on Foucault's (1988) 'technologies of the self', exploring how subjects actively constitute themselves through practices of self-formation – whether as subjected to disciplinary power, or potentially as self-actualising, autonomous subjects, through personal desire, truth-seeking and practical critique (Foucault, 2011). Against his original analysis of power-knowledge and its internalization by docile subjects, Foucault's later libertarian ideas offer an alternative lens for investigating how different subject positions and power-knowledge relations may develop within organizational contexts (Barratt, 2008; Ferlie et al., 2013; 2012; Fischer & Ferlie, 2013; McKinlay & Starkey, 1998).

In this article we draw together Foucauldian perspectives on power-knowledge with his later work on technologies of the self, arguing that knowledge leadership involves agentic, effortful and often deeply personal engagement in mobilising knowledge into practice. Drawing on Foucault's (1980) framing of codified, discursive-contextual and subjective axes of knowledge, we suggest that

knowledge leadership operates through mobilising management research between these axes, through three very different mechanisms of *transposing*, *appropriating* or *contending* management research.

We develop this Foucauldian framing through our empirical study of six research-intensive organizations operating in the UK health economy, in which we explored how senior to middle level managers (general, clinical and academic) used management research in their work. We define management research as codified texts that have undergone scholarly peer review and been published in academic journals or books, while knowledge mobilisation is defined as the translation and utilisation of such research-based texts into practice (see Townley, 2008). We purposively sampled managers with demonstrable interest in management knowledge, including doctoral or other postgraduate degrees in management-related studies. Drawing on a comparative study of our six organizations, we explore an unexpected finding in our data: despite their prima facie evidence of prior sustained involvement, few respondents accessed or used management research in their work. Yet we also found some notable outliers whose endeavours to mobilise management research in their work stimulated wider engagement with such knowledge, in what we describe as a process of ‘knowledge leadership’.

Our article contributes to the extant literature on knowledge leadership in the work of mobilising management research in organizations, applying a Foucauldian perspective on knowledge. When individuals strongly engage with certain knowledges – their identities and practices intertwining with, and coming to represent, the knowledge object – this produces a dynamising effect that raises intersubjective tensions, with potential personal and emotional costs. We argue that mobilising codified knowledge into practice entails effortful processes of *transposition* in which individuals are personally involved in converting management research into its utilisation, practices of *appropriation* in which certain elements are selectively used and deployed, or *contention* involving codified knowledge being actively engaged with yet deliberately undermined, as a means of advancing subjective ‘truths’ and alternative ways of knowing.

Our argument proceeds firstly by situating our exploration of knowledge leadership within a Foucauldian framing of practices, through which we elaborate our conceptual framework of three

axes of codified, discursive-contextual and subjective modes of knowledge. We then introduce our empirical research, drawing from a wider dataset to explore our unexpected findings of relatively few but significant exemplars of knowledge leadership in our sites. Finally, we explore analytically the dynamics of knowledge leadership work, outlining implications for mobilising forms of management knowledge into organizational practice.

### **Foucault's organising apparatus: power-knowledge relations**

In discussing his seminal concept of power-knowledge, Foucault (1980, 2002) explores how 'truth regimes' come to be constituted, illuminating how power relations are intertwined with assembling knowledge as 'truth'. These relations are immanent and continuously reproduced through 'nests of practices', such that efforts to mobilise knowledge can be seen as inherently agonistic. These practices involve material artefacts as carriers of power-knowledge, grounded in everyday routines. According to Power (2011), materials and associated technologies are essential in connecting abstract organizational ideas and purposes with routine operations that mobilise these through regulations, technical reports, textbooks and the micro-practices of organizational life. Practices should therefore be studied as a relational network that may become aligned as an organising 'apparatus' forming these knowledge-power relations:

“a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions... The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements” (Foucault, 1980: 194)

Foucault's (1980) sociology of knowledge emphasizes the centrality of practices in forming, and being shaped by, complex interrelations between subjects, contexts and forms of knowledge. In his analysis of disciplinary power, Foucault shows how this is exercised through mundane yet pervasive routines and techniques. A Foucauldian reading posits that formal (codified) knowledge and practice should be analysed as power-knowledge configurations producing various systems of thought such as those associated with science, clinics and prisons. Scientific reasoning is thus embedded in “the passion of scholars, their reciprocal hatred, their fanatical and unending discussions... that slowly forged the weapons of reason” (Foucault, 1977: 78).

For example, Foucault argues that the emergence of psychiatry was established not through progressive advances in formal medical knowledge, but through a shift in broader discursive conditions within society. Psychiatry thus advanced as ‘a quite different (knowledge) game’ of relations between hospitalization, internment, social exclusion, the rules and norms of law, work, and moral values (Gutting, 1993: 252). These broader socio-historical conditions produce a discursive-contextual knowledge axis that Foucault (2002) termed *discursive practice-savoir* – involving such heterogeneous elements as political discourse and rhetoric, institutional regulations, societal norms, narratives and fictions.

Alongside this discursive-contextual axis Foucault (2002) argues that formal, science-like knowledge (which he referred to as *consciousness-connaissance*) develops as a distinct second axis, in the form of codified, rational rules. Whereas this codified knowledge axis assumes an authoritative, science-like status (such as Evidence-based Medicine), Foucault argues (2002) that the notion of ‘scientific truth’ obscures practices, passions and ‘wars of reason’ through which it is fabricated between interested parties and their powerfully and emotionally invested knowledge ‘objects’.

According to Foucault’s power-knowledge thesis, these discursive-contextual and codified axes are pervasive and ‘cannot escape subjectivity’: researchers are also ‘the researched’, modified by the work required in order to know (Scheurich & McKenzie, 2005). Human subjects are necessarily embedded in and shaped by their own discursive-historical contexts. Knowledge of economics is thus known through being constituted as a productive subject, just as knowledge of madness is known through being constituted as a rational subject (Foucault, 2002: 60).

But how might individuals engage with and seek to influence these conditions? Although Foucault originally dismissed the possibility of agency, insisting upon a totalising concept of power-knowledge, in his later research he explored the possibility of more autonomous and agentic subjects choosing how to engage with ‘regimes of truth’, on their own terms (Scheurich & McKenzie, 2005). Notably, in his final lectures on ethics-based practices of the self, he argued that subjects may actively seek agonistic and contested relations to power-knowledge, seeking more autonomous subject positions for themselves, while attempting to induce similar practices in others through free-spoken, practical critique (Foucault, 2011).

Foucault (1988, 2011) argues that subjective forms of knowledge constitute a third knowledge axis as *modes of subjectivity*, reflecting this possibility of a shift from subjection to dominant modes of power-knowledge, to potentially becoming a more ‘intensely-free’, agentic subject. Indeed, he ultimately suggests a more dynamic field of power-knowledge in which the balance between codified, discursive-contextual and subjective knowledge axes may be transformed through politically courageous ‘truth-seeking’ (Fischer & Ferlie, 2013; Kosmala & McKernan, 2010).

Overall, we see in Foucault’s sociology of knowledge a central preoccupation with how subject positions are tied to and indeed constituted by the operations of codified, discursive-contextual and subjective axes. His theorizing suggests a useful heuristic for studying how management research may be mobilised in organizations, but how might we operationalize this empirically?

An interesting example of the use of Foucault’s theorizing for empirical research is Townley’s (2008) study of rationalities in organizations, building on what she terms Foucault’s three ‘axes of practical reason’. Townley uses the empirical setting of the UK criminal justice system to study how performance measures operate as disciplinary knowledge that cascades within this system. This produces individuals with particular subject positions and identities as specific knowledge-power effects. Thus, prosecutors, the accused, victims and the police imply very different power relations, access to fields of knowledge and required subject positions.

According to Townley’s (2008) analysis, codified knowledge seeks to define a field by establishing a science-like status, such as advancing economic or technocratic organizational theories. In her example of criminal justice bureaucracy, this functions through the position of a dispassionate, ‘disembedded self’, operating according to rules. In contrast, discursive-contextual knowledge regulates meaning through a normative system of political, economic and values-based interests. Its subject position is that of an ‘embedded self’ which applies institutional norms such as policing, imprisonment and probation, therefore giving voice to embedded values and interests. Finally, subjective knowledge arises through the ‘embodied self’ as a specific site for the ‘microphysics’ of power, evoking ‘a lived, embodied, corporeal experience of being in the world that functions to give access to knowledge of the world’ (Townley, 2008: 25). Subjective knowledge is accessed through physical sensations, emotions and fantasies, such as victims’ or criminals’ understanding and recognition of themselves as subjects.

Our reading of Foucault and Townley is that the idea of distinct knowledge axes can be seen as ideal types, providing a useful framework for analysing how power-knowledge operates. Townley's (2008) research illustrates this especially through her investigation into dominant organizational rationalities and specific subject positions inscribed within these. However, our research focus on knowledge leadership in mobilising knowledge suggests that these axes may be conceptualised differently as framing a dynamic field. Indeed, studying interactions between knowledge axes (rather than merely along them) is likely to be a promising lens for exploring how managers mobilise management research. We would expect to see different patterns of knowledge leadership work between 'disembedded' subjects attempting to mobilise codified knowledge into practice, 'embedded' subjects seeking to normatively shape research for their contexts, and 'embodied' subjects engaging with knowledge more autonomously.

In the following empirical account, we develop our analytic focus by studying the work of managers in six knowledge-intensive organizations operating in the UK healthcare sector. These settings offer an ideal vantage point to investigate how management research may be mobilised into practice. Each of these organizations is orientated towards using management research in healthcare; they each operate within the socio-political context of the UK public sector healthcare system; and each broadly espouses values-based principles, orientated to the delivery of public services. In the following section we explore our specific research question: how do managers who are influenced by management research mobilise such research in their work?

### **Methods and organizational contexts**

Our empirical data are drawn from a broader, 30-month study (Dopson et al. 2013; Ferlie et al. 2015) in which we investigated under what circumstances and how (general and clinical) managers access and use management research in their decision making, and how such knowledge is utilized in their organizational contexts. To explore these questions we studied six diverse organizations in the healthcare sector, which we saw as likely to draw upon management (as well as more embedded, clinical) research: a global management consulting firm; a policy think tank engaged in health policy research; a major Academic Health Science Centre (AHSC) partnership between a university and its associated hospitals; a region-wide Collaboration for Leadership in Applied Health Research and



Care (CLAHRC) translating research into practice; a not-for-profit hospital undertaking organizational change; and a large primary care trust (PCT) implementing national health policy. These settings demonstrated prima facie evidence of using management research and were widely considered to be leading examples in their respective areas of specialisation.

We focus in this article on managers within these settings as our unit of analysis, drawing from interviews with 45 mid to senior level managers, each of whom demonstrated interest in management research and had doctoral or other postgraduate degrees in management-related subjects. As part of the wider study (involving a further 92 respondents), we explored how managers might mobilise management knowledge within their settings. We explored respondents' careers, motivations to seek management research, practices of accessing and using management research, and experiences and practices of mobilising research and management knowledge more broadly. Our interviews were of 1 to 2½ hours' duration, beginning with open-ended autobiographical narratives, while subsequent questions (informed by our literature review) were loosely structured, focusing on respondents' access to and use of a range of management knowledges.

We worked in pairs to interview respondents and analyse transcripts (professionally transcribed), using NVivo software to assist in data management and analysis. After our original findings were written in an empirically focused report (Dopson et al., 2013), we undertook a further phase of analysis to explore instances of 'knowledge leadership' (which we initially coded broadly). To increase our analytic focus, we re-examined 19 of the 45 cases, where we had initially coded for knowledge leadership. Two researchers independently re-analysed these 19 transcripts and produced narrative reports that we compared and discussed with the wider team. In narrowing our focus on contrasting approaches to knowledge mobilisation, we first drew upon broader theoretical literature on practices of knowledge mobilisation, then gradually focused on Foucauldian perspectives on power-knowledge which we found helpful in framing our analysis. We developed a loose initial framing (see Pentland, 1999) through which we progressed from open to focused coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) for contrasting mechanisms of transposing, appropriating and contending management research. We refined our analysis through comparing cases where participants exercised strongly agentic practices within their settings. Our analysis of these data is summarized in Table 1, drawn from our 19 cases.

Finally, through consolidating our codes, we identified four focal cases that most clearly represent the knowledge leadership mechanisms of transposing (Peter), appropriating (Clive), and contending (Ben) management research, and a final example of integrating all three mechanisms (James). In doing so, we followed Lockett et al.'s (2014) study of social position in organizational change in which they focused on a small number of cases to exemplify their codes. As Sveninsson and Alvesson (2003) also argue, focusing on a small number of representative cases allows for greater focus on the depth and richness of empirical material, which is important in understanding individual actors. In our empirical account, we similarly concentrate on four focal cases to elucidate distinct approaches to knowledge leadership.

### **Knowledge leadership in the mobilisation of management research**

In the following empirical material we introduce our four focal cases, illustrating how individuals mobilised management research in distinct ways. This analysis arose from a surprising finding in our wider data set. Despite our purposive sampling of respondents with demonstrable interest in management research, we found scarce access or uptake of management research texts. Few respondents attempted to mobilise management research, despite working in ostensibly research-intensive settings. As one senior manager and former management scholar (PhD in management studies) described, management practice demands 'very different ways of knowing' compared to academic scholarship:

“Experience, yes it’s experience – because it’s immediate and doesn’t require additional effort compared to reading a journal article. So it’s much more a felt evidence rather than a thought or (research) evidence.”

Indeed, despite respondents’ demonstrable interest in management research, we found management research was the least important source of influence upon management practice for most of our respondents, across the six settings. As one senior management consultant (MBA from a leading business school) commented:

“What the hell does that mean at all ... evidence-based medicine I think is critical, (but) evidence-based management is not something that I’ve heard of before.”

Yet intriguingly, we identified a minority of managers who drew significantly upon management research, striving to mobilise this research into organizational practice, often at personal cost, putting their working relations, reputations and careers at risk. In the following focal cases, we explore four distinct patterns of knowledge leadership in which individuals exercised these strongly agentic practices, actively mobilising management research in their settings.

*Transposing management research: Peter*

Our first example is taken from an Academic Health Science Centre – a partnership between leading teaching hospitals and a multi-faculty university, intended to accelerate the translation of medical research through evidence-based professional education, training and clinical practice. As was typical across our cases, most of our participants in this site emphasised the role of evidence in clinical knowledge, privileging this above management research (which most tended to ignore in favour of populist texts). However, one notable exception was the work of Peter, a medical consultant who describes himself as a lone ‘boundary spanner’ between clinical and management knowledge domains.

“Other people ... can’t see it because it’s not really being applied in healthcare – they’re saying, we’re not (a supermarket), it’s not (a consulting firm). So it’s very hard to be a lone voice saying it.”

Drawing on process engineering concepts such as queuing and flow management (previously developed within acute physical healthcare), he attempted to transfer and test these for the first time in a mental healthcare setting.

“The ideas that I’m doing for quality improvement is get(ting to) the operations management heart of the organization... The first thing (I’m) doing is going out to literature to check that the methodology would come from an evidence base ... on every, every occasion... Well, in the MBA you’re taught always to go for the numbers, never go on your opinion... Whether that be financial data, or activity data, or outcome data, whatever it is,

but you're measuring something and gathering evidence as to why and how you're going to ... make an improvement.”

During our fieldwork, we heard many accounts of Peter's work on quality improvement, which was respected and often highly regarded. Yet he also experienced repeated setbacks from his fellow clinicians and senior managers, many of whom found his strongly evidence-based approach challenging. When he developed an initiative to improve patient flows (capacity management) within the mental health hospital, this encountered strong resistance, producing heated confrontations with managers and some clinicians, which ultimately derailed his project.

“Very defensive from the managers... I guess it could be perceived that I'm threatening them, showing knowledge that maybe they don't have ... taking on their job and telling them how to do it rather than adding to their knowledge... My (change project) was one of the biggest things that caused a lot of upset around the flow of patients. It had a lot of evidence behind it, a lot of maths... (Managers) found it very hard and one of them said he couldn't see me for a while because he felt so angry ... even three years on. They got the terminology but not the understanding. We certainly realised how important and crucial that is.”

His repeated proposals to the hospital board, addressing service improvement, were often returned to him for further work – although interestingly, his initiatives were seen as persuasive and rarely rejected. Despite such tensions, which he experienced personally as rejections, his personal convictions about using management research to improve healthcare quality led him to explore further means of engaging senior leaders and clinicians across various institutes to develop his approach. He sought advice through coaching and joined an action learning set with senior colleagues, focused on how to embed more evidence-based organizational change.

An intriguing aspect of Peter's engagement in management research was his resolve and increasing commitment over several years to drive healthcare quality through service improvement, despite experiencing this as “a weight around my neck”. Although he was perceived by his fellow doctors as having “gone over to the dark side” of management, and was seen by certain managers as intruding

upon their domain of authority, Peter had an enduring and personal engagement with translating management research into healthcare service improvement.

How might we understand Peter's commitment to mobilising research in this way, given the criticisms and personal attacks he experienced? After gaining a PhD in clinical medicine, Peter had gone on to study an MBA, researching operations management to "bring management theory into practice". Yet he described his interest in management research as driven by "probably my childhood and nothing else" – influenced by early family discussions with his father (a professor of medicine involved in healthcare policy) and siblings who worked in senior positions in the health industry. Peter's deep sense of personal commitment to using management research appears intrinsically bound with his personal values and a drive to improve what he saw as outdated organizational (and associated clinical) practices. His strong personal identification with his transposing work was reflected in his reputation within the AHSC – by colleagues who saw him as exemplifying this approach, as an internal expert in the operations field.

*Appropriating management research within discursive practice: Clive*

In our next example, this time from a not-for-profit hospital, we focus on the work of its 'hybrid' (McGivern et al., 2015) CEO, Clive, who was medically and managerially trained, with a PhD in medical science and an MBA. His academic work and publications, focused on his medical specialty, were widely respected within his organization and externally. His interest in management research was reflected in participating in executive education programmes and in developing collaboration between his organization, business schools and medical faculties. Interestingly, Clive described being less interested in management research than in selectively assimilating ideas, phrases and data from a variety of sources, moulding these into a narrative that he constructed to produce organizational change.

“(I) don't use a huge amount of hardwired, standard management knowledge... I have a few key management theories or phrases batting around in my head that I use from time to time... My team obviously provide (numbers and facts) and I then work that up into a narrative to explain why one's doing something. I don't find reading routine management journals (important)... I've bought books on leadership and management (and) sort of

assimilate them into my model, but the books that stand out are not management books... You may have picked up this slightly abstract way with some of that managing stuff. I'm in a kind of fairly loose-thinking world."

In contrast to our earlier example of Peter's strong adherence to management research, Clive described having moved on from his detailed mastery of theory and texts to a broader conception of knowledge as embedded within day-to-day relations and practices:

"Earlier in my career... I'd sort of burn my way through journals. There are some management jobs where ... attention to detail is the appropriate approach. I've sort of moved on from that model to a kind of complexity systems model where I wander around, seeing where there are emergent patterns... In that different way of being, you learn differently, looking for patterns and not specifics. You're looking for a fit between ideas triggered in your mind with ... stuff in the organization, putting them together in a very sort of chaotic way ... 'oh, that's what we need to do'."

If Clive's account suggests a drift away from management research, in practice he drew powerfully on certain texts, drawing on examples that seemed to "kind of fit" with his systems view. He described using these to "cause a certain amount of chaos", following which he created project groups to "sort it all out". Of particular interest, from our perspective, he selectively drew upon a junior colleague's MBA dissertation focused on Kaplan and Norton's (1992) balanced scorecard. Interested in this idea, Clive read a balanced scorecard textbook that he then assimilated into his own 'model', using this to produce written frameworks, reporting systems and templates that he used to powerfully drive organizational reform.

"So I read up a little bit at that time and the understanding I got was ... (figure) out what was really important and (focus) on it regularly... (So) I had a meeting with the senior clinicians and managers, and the oldest of them said to me, 'what's your agenda here', in this rather suspicious way. I found myself saying in a sort of Thatcherian (sic) tone 'occupancy, occupancy, occupancy'. Well, there was this sort of shocked silence. And since then I've looked at the occupancy figures every week. I'm just hammering down on (them) all the

time. I have a simple management theory that if I pay attention to it, everybody else just has to keep at it.”

In Clive’s example, then, we see a model of knowledge leadership in which as CEO he was positioned to bring in knowledges that ‘kind of fit’ with his interest in converting these into powerful techniques for producing organizational change. Thus, he selectively used management texts to justify ‘ranking and yanking’ to tackle poor staff performance, ‘regularly deconstructing hierarchies’ to disrupt established power positions, and hammering down on occupancy figures.

In Clive’s pragmatic approach to management knowledge, (“go to the frontline ... get involved, make lots of mistakes”), he saw the deployment of management research as a means of powerfully exerting influence within settings that appear resistant to organizational change. He was strongly influenced by a commercial logic which Clive attributed to his childhood grounding in his parent’s healthcare business: “I worked in every role (there) that you could as a schoolboy... I’d literally sit on the kitchen table and my father would explain it to me”. Indeed, he described this prior experience as inspiring his ambitions to lead his own service early in his medical career. Against the trend of colleagues, who joined large consultant teams in teaching hospitals, he “always wanted to be the number one consultant ... to have a service with potential for development”. In this example we see a stronger orientation towards discursive context in which personal investment is portrayed as political, involving a more distant mode of subjectivity (“avoid getting emotional or irrational ... business is business ... just don’t get upset about it”). Knowledge leadership involves shaping settings through carefully crafting and deploying selected management research to drive ambitions.

#### *Contending management research as an agonistic struggle: Ben*

In the examples portrayed thus far we have described either privileging management research or more selectively drawing upon and reassembling such research, mobilising these into organizational practice. In our next example from a large primary care trust (PCT) implementing national policy changes, Ben, a medically trained clinical director, drew upon management research to challenge and refute it. Ben was strongly interested in management research, held a doctoral degree (MD) based upon research on whole systems in health care, and had worked at leading universities. Yet in his clinical director role he sought to challenge the prevailing research-based models of organizational

change favoured by health authorities and management consultancy firms operating within UK healthcare. He became increasingly frustrated with what he regarded as a paternalistic medical paradigm and sought to develop instead community-led solutions to local problems, inspired by examples he had seen elsewhere.

“I gravitated towards the kind of role I [have] now, which is helping people to think broader. I (have) deep questions in my mind about contemporary understandings of health, organizational development and science... Well, that is very uncomfortable for most academics ... because it strikes at their entire discipline and sense of meaning. Managers find this deeply discomfoting ... how do you manage it?”

Convinced by his experience that “this is how you need to run health services ... for people to come together for the collective good”, he became engaged in stimulating community-led organizing and decisions that challenged prevailing ways of working within his organization.

“The really big influences came after I tried to apply this thinking ... that stage where the mismatch between my observations and the available theory to me, that made it into a quest rather than idle interest. So I’m looking for ideas ... (but) I want to push them away and come back to people ... community organising, how you get various (groups) to agree to collaborate over small win issues, mobilising different interest groups.”

An important aspect of his ‘quest’ was Ben’s search for more subjective forms of ‘truth’ derived through deeply shared experiences. He described his method of discovering such truth and meaning as requiring new organizational processes and ‘cultural agreements’. He thus actively engaged with and strongly refuted data-driven healthcare improvement theories, along with linked organizational performance and productivity metrics which he saw as neglecting experiential and more tacit forms of knowledge.

“All this stuff ... it’s all full of straight lines and pyramids and how to control people stuff, every single page of it. Where is the rapprochement between what I do and what are they doing...? The notion of evidence, of course, I seriously contest the (‘evidence-based’) stuff



... they start off with assumptions that everything is a given and their perspective is their given.”

Although Ben’s approach was effective in creating a community-driven initiative, focused on locally prioritised health issues, other managers experienced his opposition to managerialist efforts to implement top-down changes as provocative. Indeed, he actively refuted attempted data-driven changes, arguing that these should be rebalanced with more context specific and subjectively held knowledge held by community groups. He made active use of this local knowledge to challenge managerial ideas in community meetings.

“There’s virtually no committee meeting my end where there is a point to be made ... where I don’t throw in an anecdote from yesterday’s (clinic)”.

An important aspect of this work is the personal effort and cost involved in Ben’s efforts to ‘speak truth to power’ (Foucault, 2011). Tensions between contrasting modes of knowledge are experienced here as an impassioned and increasingly conflictual arrangement in which Ben argued for and sought to stimulate, a deeper understanding of subjective ‘reality’. Actively contending management research and codified data in favour of this subjective knowledge was perceived (by himself and others) as identified with, and even integral to, his efforts to drive community-led change.

“When you succeed and succeed with it to a degree that (authorities) could not imagine possible, it’s very scary, it’s like witchcraft... (I) had a period when it got summarily executed, a difficult six months when I was marginalised from everything. One (director) was extremely destructive, and saw me personally as a threat ... these ideas were extremely controversial and extremely uncomfortable.”

In the above example, then, we see strong orientations towards subjective knowledge, motivated by personal belief in the ‘truth’ value of (inter)subjective experience. But what explains these efforts which involve significant personal, emotional and reputational costs? Ben described his ambitions as driven by formative experiences in which an early trauma (the death of a parent) influenced his career in medicine, while later experiences travelling in developing nations led him to address the

gap he saw between the supposed certainty of medical science and his experiences of how meaningful social change works in reality. Analytically, we suggest his more subjectively orientated concept of knowledge was in part developed through an ongoing agonistic struggle with increasingly data-driven policy and managerial ideas.

*Integrating codified, discursive-contextual and subjective knowledges: James*

Our final example, a senior policy manager in a health policy unit, illustrates more integrated but unusual practices in which knowledge leadership involves mobilising across codified, discursive-contextual and subjective modes of knowledge. James, who held a PhD in information science, was highly regarded within his organization for his evidence-based approach, using management research as a means of informing and implementing organizational change.

“What’s the state of the literature right now? That’s really, really important to me. If I don’t know what’s being written, then I have a fear.”

Yet he was critical of some mainstream efforts to apply management research to the particular context of healthcare organizations. Instead of searching for and applying more generic management texts, James actively sought out and strove to transpose lessons from wider related research fields, such as the sociology of science and the military literature.

“You can’t rely on the normal texts. People start quoting Peter Senge, Jack Welch, all this stuff, and you say to yourself, what are you talking about? This doesn’t work here and it never will – it’s not going to work in this organization. You have to think of some other way of doing it.”

He sought to directly translate such wider research into his own management practices, adapting his approach to working with others – and advocated others to do the same, motivated by his wish to ‘be the guy that helps people’. This interest in translating and personally embodying certain management research in his own management practice led him to span established demarcations and hierarchies within his organization. His approach was highly effective at bringing in new ideas and stimulating debate, prompting questions about the possibility of organizational change

“I really want to get a transformative way of working. So I go to the management literature about this on what made different groups collaborate: ‘Where is the tension? What’s at stake? What do we believe in?’ So this is what Leigh Star’s doing right now: how do you know when you choose the right boundary object? One way is by making differences explicit, raising tensions – in a sense you’re making problems for people. And you just have to wait for them to calm down, because there’s a hell of a lot of emotion in organizations ... they’d want to wring your neck. I discovered what you need to do is to back off (a bit), so you’ve got to be really, really careful, recognising the traps... The best thing to do is just kind of lay back, subside a bit and be patient.”

James ability to stimulate meaningful discussion was generally well regarded by colleagues, some of whom welcomed the energetic debates this generated across departments. Yet these practices also evoked emotional reactions that reduced his personal and political support amongst colleagues, undermining James confidence and risking his standing within his organization.

“If you’re trying to work across boundaries (within your own organization) and it’s creating tensions, no matter how much people think that they want to be reflective, nobody wants to do it. (Looking back), I would have worked very differently, recognising ... the traps.”

As we have seen in previous examples, transposing management research into practice is effortful and can involve significant personal costs. In James’ example, we see a rather novel and in many ways highly effective approach to knowledge leadership, although it seemed to destabilise his position within the organization. So how can we explain his motivation to challenge established knowledges internally? Despite his evidence-based approach being seen as more typically ‘academic’ than most colleagues within his organization, he described his practices as being driven by an underlying fear of humiliation.

“Now I’ll tell you something – a lot of people could misinterpret this and say ... he’s an academic with chalk up his nose. That’s not the answer. The answer is, I came from a poor background, and if I tried to take shortcuts when talking with people smarter than me, I always looked stupid ... people would turn around and say how could you be so naive? I

said enough is enough; I'm not going to go through life like that, looking stupid... I feel it very personally.”

However, James' original efforts to draw on research as a means of protecting his personal reputation were later articulated through his values-based commitment to healthcare delivery – “you are working with human beings – I mean, take the goddamned time to read (up on) what you're doing” – even if this entailed a personal cost. Analytically, we see a stronger interplay in James' example between codified, discursive-contextual and subjective knowledge axes.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

How does knowledge leadership operate to mobilise management research? Our findings of significant tensions in the practices of knowledge leadership suggest a relationally and dynamically ‘charged’ process through which individuals activate key mechanisms for mobilising management research. Our focal cases were not just ‘facilitators’ (Kaplan & Norton, 1992), ‘brokers’ (von Krogh et al., 2012), or ‘translators’ (Lakshman, 2005; Srivastava et al., 2006), but deeply and personally immersed in how management research was mobilised, actively disrupting and reshaping aspects of their settings.

We capture in Table 2 three very different mechanisms through which knowledge leadership *transposes*, *appropriates* or *contends* management research, by mobilising knowledge between Foucault's codified, discursive-contextual and subjective knowledge axes. Through transposition, managers become deeply involved in converting management research into practice through actively disrupting their settings – stimulating a relational attention to their specific roles and practices of ‘activating’ processes of knowledge mobilisation. In appropriation, managers craft how various knowledge artefacts are selectively fashioned and deployed, using these to produce authoritative materials and effects in their settings. Through contention, managers openly critique and undermine the credibility of established texts, inducing more intersubjective and potentially agentic search for experiential truth in their settings. Whereas these mechanisms operate very differently, our analysis suggests that these are actively developed through assembling power-knowledge relations across the following dimensions.

First, managers' sense of purpose and agency is tied to their personal engagement with *texts, technologies and devices*, with which they tend to closely identify. Managers had been immersed over long periods with research texts and models (each of our focal cases had a doctoral degree), with which they were intensely familiar. These managers readily interpreted, critiqued and deconstructed management research texts, along with tangible materials, which they used in various ways to mobilise management knowledge in their settings. Hence, we find hermeneutic readings of unfamiliar texts to reveal their 'hidden truths', synthesised narratives and templates mixing clinical and commercial logics, and deconstructing authoritative texts to stimulate more experience-based forms of truth-seeking.

Second, we find knowledge leadership requires a dynamically charged *organizing 'apparatus'* (Foucault, 1980), refashioning diverse materials and texts in ways that stimulate the wider engagement of organizational participants. Our focal managers drew upon these materials to reshape key aspects of their settings: 'raising tensions ... you're making problems for people'. Such tensions can be a source of creativity that mobilises resources and action, as well as being potentially conflictual and destructive (Fischer, 2008, 2012). Indeed in each of our focal cases, managers brought together diverse knowledge materials and devices to powerfully shift embedded mentalities, practices and contexts. Managers may seek to craft an organizing apparatus for personal gain, or for other shared or altruistic purposes, such as in Peter's data-driven redesign of patient flows, Clive's enforced upwards weekly reporting of bed occupancy, and Ben's development of a participatory, community-led initiative. However, a key finding is that such preparedness to stimulate and withstand tensions arising from an organizing apparatus is a significant driver for mobilising management knowledge.

Third, whereas many of our wider respondents commented on the formative role of prior experiences (educational, career, and sometimes childhood), in our focal cases of knowledge leadership, personal biographies were closely interwoven with *modes of subjectivity*. Subject positions varied from Philip's rational-analytic transposition of management research into practice to Ben's impassioned challenge to 'de-contextualised evidence' in his search for deeper meaning. Yet an important aspect of these positions is their functioning as biographical projects tied to managers' 'will to know', which individuals actively cultivated and attempted to develop within their organisational contexts. Strong personal identification with these modes of subjectivity may explain

sustained engagement with knowledge leadership, despite the emotional costs and risks to professional standing that such commitment often entails.

Finally, through personally striving to mobilise knowledge, our managers *became the knowledge object*. Whereas previous literature suggests knowledge leadership involves participation in or ‘role modelling’ (Bell DeTienne et al., 2004; Goh, 2002) knowledge, in our cases managers effectively ‘personify’ knowledge as a powerful relational dynamic. We found intensive modes of engagement in which managers crafted pivotal, disruptive roles for themselves, which stimulated reactivity to, and engagement with, the knowledges they introduced within their settings. As our empirical material shows, such modes of engagement tends to raise tensions (‘making differences explicit ... making problems for people’) that may escalate into what managers experience as personal attacks and isolation. In their commitment to and identification with mobilising knowledge, managers became synonymous with the knowledge they advocate and represent.

In summary, our empirical findings illustrate how knowledge leadership assembles these four dimensions in very different ways, so producing the distinct mechanisms we find of transposing, appropriating or contending management research. How might these findings advance our understanding of how power-knowledge operates in knowledge mobilisation?

Returning to our original Foucauldian schema of codified, discursive-contextual and subjective forms of knowledge, we should expect to see managers’ practices and associated subject positions concentrated around specific knowledge axes. As Townley’s (2008) study shows, the pursuit of science-like knowledge (such as economics or management science) entails rather dispassionate and ‘disembedded’ subjects; the advancement of contextual-political knowledge (including institutional and cultural norms) involves ‘embedded’ subjects; while the search for more subjectively experienced knowledge requires ‘embodied’ subjects, sensitive to bodily impulses and emotions. According to this schema, then, managers’ practices should be firmly tied to codified, discursive-contextual, or subjective modes of knowledge.

By exploring mechanisms of transposing, appropriating and contending knowledge, though, we reveal how managers actively mobilise knowledge *between* axes. In contrast to Foucault’s (1977, 2002)

original notion of power-knowledge, in which docile subjects have scant possibility of agency but might develop it through his third axis of courageous practices of the self (Foucault, 2011), our three forms of knowledge leadership involve strongly agentic practices, acting with and upon management research. Indeed, our focal cases can be seen as examples of personally meaningful ‘self-projects’ in which individuals sought to mobilise knowledge through deep engagement with management research texts, shaping an effective organizing apparatus, and pursuing influential subject positions in which they appeared to personify – and indeed effectively became – the knowledge object within their settings.

We suggest our findings develop and extend previous accounts of knowledge leadership in the mobilisation of management knowledge. Previous scholarship finds that knowledge tends to be ‘sticky’ and does not readily flow across organizational and professional boundaries (Szulanski, 2006); this can be explained theoretically, as knowledge is embedded within a nexus of social institutions, discursive contexts and embedded practices (Foucault, 2011; Schatzki, 2001). Our research supports these broad arguments, but suggests that such ‘stickiness’ is likely to also be connected with how diverse knowledge axes operate and may be acted upon by organizational actors.

We contribute to the literature by elucidating the concept of knowledge leadership and its mechanisms for mobilising management knowledge. In particular, a major finding of our study is that the work of knowledge leadership is less directed towards facilitating knowledge flows than embodied in managers who strongly identify with and effectively *become* the knowledge object. We suggest this is an important and novel finding that offers promising directions for future research. By drawing together Foucauldian scholarship on power-knowledge and his later ideas on technologies of the self, we analyse specific mechanisms of transposing, appropriating and contending management research. We argue that these mechanisms are central to the work of knowledge leadership, involving agentic individuals whose ‘will to know’ (Foucault, 2002) activates and sustains their development as central actors in mobilising management research.

Does our empirical study have wider implications? Some limitations of this study are that it is based on only six organizations, specifically in the context of healthcare, and we focus here on a relatively small number of polar cases. Nonetheless, our finding of significant (if rather infrequent) cases of

knowledge leadership suggests that managers' intensive and sustained personal engagement in management research – especially at doctoral or related postgraduate levels – is an important and under-examined aspect of knowledge mobilisation. Further research is needed in other research-intensive settings such as in biomedical science, engineering, and education, where managers may be similarly motivated to mobilise management research.

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**Table 1. Summary of data analysis**

Theoretical constructs	Practices in use	Illustrative empirical data		
		<i>Connaissance axis</i>	<i>Savoir axis</i>	<i>Subjectivity axis</i>
<i>Agentic 'will to know'</i>	<i>Crafting identity narratives</i>	I was trained to be the grit in the oyster, with a strong notion about evidence... trained to be mavericks.	I couldn't see myself in an academic life, so I left for a job where I felt I could change the world... I get bored very easily.	I have a philosophy around always developing, it's core to what I do. It's not so much about ambition (but) growth and development.
	<i>Relations with management research</i>	I was fascinated by (these) difficulties so I went to the literature... I'm interested in (and) want to learn about.	This is about client impact, pragmatically we can't experiment with clients... it doesn't work if you're a consulting firm... there are different interests.	I (felt) quite stuck – this management work can have a brutalising effect... I was becoming rather harsh in my approach. So this is what led me onto the [doctoral] training.
<i>Material practices</i>	<i>Accessing and using texts</i>	I'd done loads of reading... looking at what evidence there is around what works (and) the knowledge you get through data collection.	I am very invested, it's worked extremely well... the book itself is a powerful thing for us, but even more powerful is the fact we no longer have the framework wars.	I'm not a great seeker after knowledge in a formal sense, what I am a seeker after is experience.
	<i>Techniques for applying knowledge</i>	I take something and apply it to the healthcare setting, something relatively theoretical and empirically elaborate upon it.	I am very explicit in making that learning contract with myself, I steal something from everyone I work with... I nick good ideas.	The key is that the solution to the problems are actually in your head – it's a question of facilitation and you get those solutions out.
<i>Type of subject positions</i>	<i>Subject positions in relation to knowledge axes</i>	I can see the overlap hugely... how much we're missing out by not incorporating business knowledge... It's very hard to be a lone voice saying it.	(Avoid) getting emotional or irrational. Whatever happens, you just have to be unblinkingly accepting. Whatever the challenges are, whatever your expectations or dreams, don't get upset about it.	It's a kind of shared endeavour where I'm offering some of my experience... the biggest tool we bring to it is ourselves. My personal experience and training is more relevant than books and stuff.
	<i>Pattern of intersubjective relations</i>	The barrier is, you have to find somebody people can really identify with and respect, [who] can tell their war stories. That's when you're able to get buy in.	I describe myself as an academic salesman... charismatic delivery. (But) I'm not entirely a believer, and I'm not sure if this will work.	There is a way of thinking which is about engagement (with clinicians)... trying to get alignment between heart and head.

*Power-  
knowledge  
apparatus*

*Creating an  
organizing  
apparatus*

Management knowledge (is) a tool to help people think differently... there were quite a lot of parallels to how I work as a (clinician).

The key issue is... we conclude by saying "so what?" The ability to push people to (and I'm bashing the table...) answering the 'so what?' question.

What influences me most is (others') experiences... very real and dynamic. It doesn't feel like I'm talking about knowledge very much.

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**Table 2. Knowledge leadership mechanisms**

Dimensions	Mechanisms		
	<i>Transposing</i>	<i>Appropriating</i>	<i>Contending</i>
<i>Texts, technologies and devices</i>	Immersion in interpreting and assimilating management research texts. Accurate representations of codified knowledge.	Selective adaptation of management research texts and popular/grey literatures.	Seeking and critiquing management research texts, testing their truth claims.
	Measuring and analysing specific contexts to create fit between codified knowledge and organisational settings.	Synthesising knowledges to create rhetorically persuasive representations.	Deconstructing codified knowledge to discover 'underlying' truths.
<i>Organizing apparatus</i>	Establishing authority based on privileged knowledge of management research texts.	Inscribing figures and templates for specific contexts to broker and legitimate unifying ideas. Establishing authority through the production of pragmatic technologies with practical effects.	Testing codified texts and figures against subjective and experiential truth-seeking. Establishing authority through authentic exchange, inducing truth seeking in oneself and others.
	Judging correct correspondence between local empirical data and management research texts.	Inducing self-monitoring, recording and reporting by organizational members.	Stimulating shared participation and enquiry into subjective experiences.
<i>Mode of subjectivity</i>	Transposing codified knowledge into locally significant 'registers' to focus attention and comprehension. The 'will to know' involves close identification with and interpretation of management research texts.	Assembling abstractions, standardisation and syntheses of organisational data. The 'will to know' involves a pragmatic identification with producing 'knowledge that works'.	Openly contending prevailing texts to mobilise practical critique and truth-seeking. The 'will to know' involves deep identification with a search for subjective meaning.
	Representing and exemplifying the transposition of codified knowledge into organizational practice.	Creating compelling knowledge artifacts to enlist others' interest and engagement.	Evoking authentic intersubjective exchanges and courageously 'speaking truth to power'.
	Sustaining personally meaningful projects for research-based organizational change through rigorous models and techniques.	Crafting plausible and sustained performances through emotional distance to intersubjective tensions and resistance.	Working upon oneself to elicit subjective truths, provoking care for the personal growth of oneself and others.
<i>Becoming the knowledge object</i>	Personifies privileged access to, interpretation and articulation of authoritative texts, and their faithful transposition into (and for) organisational settings.	Personifies privileged access to and synthesis of a range of knowledges, rhetorical devices and techniques; crafting compelling knowledge artifacts with pragmatic effects.	Personifies courageous and agonistic challenge to 'decontextualised scientific truths'. Disrupts established assumptions by testing truth claims against (inter)subjective experiences.

Michael D Fischer is Senior Research Fellow in Organisational Behaviour and Leadership at the University of Melbourne, Australia. He is also Visiting Scholar at Saïd Business School, University of Oxford. His research focuses on emotional-affective and political dynamics of leading and mobilizing organizational change in research-intensive healthcare organizations. Trained as a clinical group analyst and social scientist, he leads research projects using longitudinal and ethnographic case studies to explore processes of major organizational change. His research is published in leading social science journals including *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, *Human Relations*, *Organization Studies*, *Public Administration and Social Science and Medicine*. [Email: michael.fischer@unimelb.edu.au]

Sue Dopson is the Rhodes Trust Professor of Organisational Behaviour and Faculty Dean at Saïd Business School, University of Oxford, UK. She is also Visiting Professor at the University of Alberta, Canada. Her research interests lie principally in the area of innovation, change and health-care studies, and she has led a number of research projects in the health service sector. Her most recent research commission is concerned with increasing the motivation and ability of healthcare managers to access and use management research. She has published widely, and her research has appeared recently in *Human Relations*, *Organization Studies* and *Journal of Public Administration and Policy Research*. [Email: Sue.Dopson@sbs.ox.ac.uk]

Louise Fitzgerald is Visiting Professor (Organizational Change) at Saïd Business School, University of Oxford and Emeritus Professor at De Montfort University, UK. Her research interests focus on the following: the implementation of organizational change in complex, professionalized organizations in the public sector; innovation adoption and diffusion; and knowledge mobilization across sectors. She has published widely, and her research has appeared in *Leadership Quarterly*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *British Journal of Management* and *Human Resource Management*. [Email: louise.fitzgerald@sbs.ox.ac.uk]

Chris Bennett is a research psychologist and works as an independent research consultant. She was previously employed by the Medical Research Council and as a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Corporate Strategy and Change, University of Warwick, UK. Most of her research and publications have involved looking at different aspects of change within the NHS and other public



sector bodies. She has a longstanding interest in risk and decision-making and is currently investigating the effect of perceptions of risk on the behaviour of hospital staff in relation to patient safety. [Email: [chris.e.bennett@btinternet.com](mailto:chris.e.bennett@btinternet.com)]

Ewan Ferlie is Professor of Public Services Management at King's College London, UK. His field is the study of organizational change and restructuring in public services settings, notably health-care and higher education. He has an interest in knowledge mobilization processes in organizations. He uses mainly qualitative methods, including comparative case studies and documentary analysis. He has published widely in journals such as *Academy of Management Journal*, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, *Organization Studies* and *Public Administration*, and has authored or co-authored handbooks, monographs and editions with Oxford University Press, Routledge and Palgrave. [Email: [ewan.ferlie@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:ewan.ferlie@kcl.ac.uk)]

Jean Ledger is a Research Associate at the School of Management & Business, King's College London, UK. She specializes in healthcare policy and reforms, public sector management and knowledge mobilization. Her PhD focused on understanding knowledge dynamics in primary healthcare during a period of large-scale service restructuring, and she is now working on a study of Academic Health Science Networks (AHSNs). She is an experienced qualitative researcher using case study research, interviews and ethnography. Before joining King's College London, Jean worked at a research consultancy specializing in deliberative research and public engagement. [Email: [Jean.Ledger@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:Jean.Ledger@kcl.ac.uk)]

Gerry McGivern is Professor of Organisational Analysis at Warwick Business School, UK. His research focuses on professionals' knowledge, practice, identity, leadership and how they are affected by regulation and organization, primarily within healthcare. He has led NIHR and ESRC funded research projects focused on these topics. He has previously published in *Human Relations*, *Organization Studies*, *Leadership Quarterly* and *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*. [Email: [gerry.mcgivern@wbs.ac.uk](mailto:gerry.mcgivern@wbs.ac.uk)]