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'Ella says it's the secret to the universe':
How eponymic claims ventriloquially constitute relational authority

Authors:
David Hollis, The University of Sheffield, d.hollis@sheffield.ac.uk
Alex Wright, Audencia, awright@audencia.com
Timothy Kuhn, University of Colorado Boulder tim.kuhn@colorado.edu

Corresponding author:
David Hollis, The University of Sheffield, Western Bank, Sheffield, S10 2TN, + 44 114 22 23468, d.hollis@sheffield.ac.uk

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Abstract

Contributing to the ‘relational turn’ within organization and management studies, we deepen authority studies’ handling of relationality by utilizing a communication as constitutive of organization lens to advance a novel understanding of authority’s simultaneously enduring *and* fleeting nature. We introduce the concept of eponymic claims to shift relational readings of authority from questions of presence *or* absence to those of ventriloquial *weight*. Our theorizing derives from an ethnography of an eponymous cosmetics firm. Blending multiple field materials, we show how arrangements of human and other-than-human figures ventriloquially *lend weight* to makeup artists’ situated authority moves, *and* carry an organizational *weight of expectation*, at times resembling a *deadweight*. Developing ventriloquial conceptions of weight helps to show relational authority to be both a momentary *and* a deeply organizational accomplishment, with the traces of eponymic claims’ authoritative and disorienting effects traversing into organizational, client, and social spheres. Finally, the concept of eponymic claims helps to elevate eponymy from something that is largely hidden in plain sight to a powerful organizing force.

Keywords

Relational authority, ventriloquism, eponymy, communicative relationality, communication as constitutive of organization (CCO)

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Eponyms—names that become proper nouns and refer to things other than their namesake (e.g. a person or place denoting a product, institution, or condition)—surround us. We may drive a Chevrolet, Renault, or Honda, or, if we're so inclined, a Bentley, Ferrari, or Porsche. On our way to work we can buy a coffee from a Tim Horton's, a Wayne's, or a Gloria Jean's. We could have studied at Nelson Mandela University, McGill, or Stanford. When we travel, we might stay in a Marriott, a Hilton, or a Hyatt, and relax in the bar with a Johnnie Walker, Guinness, or Shirley Temple. Eponymously named organizations (and drinks) are ubiquitous, but organization and management studies (OMS) generally treats them simply as either interesting research settings (e.g. Elsbach, Stigliani, & Stroud, 2012; Foster, Suddaby, Minkus, & Wiebe, 2011; Maclean, Harvey, Golant, & Sillince, 2020), or as novel branding endeavours (Clarke & Holt, 2016; Smith, 2014).

Eponyms are also deployed in organizational authority efforts. At the Hershey chocolate company in the early 2000s, invoking the memory of founder Milton Snavely Hershey—more than five decades after his death—allowed actors to remind co-workers of the founder's commitment to corporate citizenship as they contemplated withdrawing support from corporate social responsibility initiatives (Kurie, 2018). Similarly, in a study of cooperative financial group Desjardins, Basque and Langley (2018) investigated how a book containing long-departed founder Alphonse Desjardins's beliefs was regularly invoked to both (re)construct the organization's identity and shape its trajectory (see also Foster et al., 2011; Hatch & Schultz, 2017; Maclean, Harvey, Sillince, & Golant, 2014). Motivating us, in contrast, is curiosity about the everyday *doing* of organizing in eponymous organizations. Specifically, we ask how, and with what consequences, eponymy makes a difference in routine coordination and control dynamics (i.e. in *organizing*; Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen, & Clark, 2011)? Given this interest, interactions where authority is at issue is our focus. We

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argue that pursuing eponymic agency offers insight on the communicative constitution of authority during and beyond customer encounters.

Acknowledging that decision and action are less often the result of naked coercion than of appeals for voluntary compliance, OMS thinkers generally see authority as a *relational* construct. 'Relational', in this work, tends to reference differential personal resources in contexts of interdependence, as when a person possesses relevant domain expertise (Barley, 1996; Treem, 2012) or occupies a role that carries decisional rights (Aghion & Tirole, 1997). Here, authority of role, status, or perceived expertise is key to orchestrating predictability and order, particularly when interactants come from different groups. Building on both Chester Barnard (1938) and Mary Parker Follett (1924/1995), the term also references the strength of the relationship between situated actors that induces compliance or agreement. Authority then becomes 'a probabilistic achievement' (Huising, 2015, p. 264) where scholars have the conceptual tools to determine which persons or groups are likely to exercise authority over others under certain conditions of human-to-human interrelating.

Our aim is to contribute to the 'relational turn' within OMS authority research (Pietinalho & Martela, 2024), by widening scholars' treatment of relationality to advance a deeper understanding of the construct's enduring *and* fleeting nature. If organizing is not reducible to the ways persons deploy symbols to induce the cooperation of others—as coordination and control are accomplished through a wide array of human and nonhuman factors—then we need a conception of authority not restricted to conventional understandings of the relational. To do so, we turn to *communicative relationality* (Kuhn, Ashcraft, & Cooren, 2017), a stance grounded in the assertion that communicative practice is always and inherently *sociomaterial*. Recently, work on this theme has explored how technological software, contracts, principles, and norms orient and author collective action (Bourgoin,

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Bencherki, & Faraj, 2020; Slager, Gond, & Sjöström, 2023). Studies like these illustrate how authority continually escapes actors' control and, therefore, either succeeds *or* fails (Bourgoin et al., 2020), and is either established *or* is not established (Slager et al., 2023). Our aim is to break with any lingering binary associations and display authority to be a fragile communicative accomplishment that is, nonetheless, an ever-present constitutive force that (re)orients flows of action (Cooren et al., 2011; Lortie, Cabantous, & Sardais, 2023)—though not always in the directions intended.

Eponyms help to move relational readings of authority from questions of presence *or* absence to those of *weight*. The various configurations of human and other-than-human figures that eponymous utterances invoke can lend weight to actors' claims on action (Cooren, 2010a), *and* they can also weigh down actors. To achieve this shift, we present an ethnography of an eponymously named global cosmetics firm (Ella May[1], a pseudonym). This setting allowed us to closely experience how interactions between makeup artists and clients (members of the public) play out. Ventriloquism (Cooren, 2010a, 2010b, 2012; Nathues, van Vuuren, & Cooren, 2021) is a useful metaphor to frame our approach and analyse our field materials. Its imagery of an on-stage ventriloquist animating a 'figure' (e.g. dummy or puppet) for the benefit of a watching 'audience' allowed us to discern how makeup artists were being spoken through by Ella (the ventriloquist) in front of a client audience. Our findings show how eponymic arrangements of human and other-than-human actors aid authority moves, but can also disorient interactions, costing firms both reputationally and materially. Eponyms' effects traverse space and time, experiencing expression through and beyond the spoken word, in artefacts that carry traces of authoritative or disorienting conversations into organizational, client, and social media realms.

[1] We use 'Ella May' when referring to the firm and 'Ella' for the person. This is the same empirical context as Hollis, Wright, Smolović Jones and Smolović Jones (2021). The data in this present study has not been used in that article or in any other publication.

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Our key contribution is to show how exploring authority relationally entails embracing the somewhat unconventional thesis that the construct is an omnipresent organizing and organizational force. If scholars accept that situated authority claims (especially eponymic ones) comprise conjoining human and other-than-human agencies, lively critique can ensue about the myriad ways in which claims' effects often simultaneously make a difference to—and transcend— the scene of their production. Ventriloquial weight offers an insightful metaphor to catalyse such eclectic exploration.

Our article is structured as follows: In the next section, we review relational handlings of authority. We then assess how communicative relationality helps to expose existing works' limited readings of the relational, and how one of its most developed analytical approaches—ventriloquism—aids our ambition of exploring relational authority's organizing effects all the way down (and out). Then, we explain our eponymous setting and the interactions (cosmetic consultations) that form the mainstay of our ethnographic fieldwork and are the focus of our ventriloquial analysis. The findings are both a presentation and an analysis of our data, which blends field notes, interview excerpts and social media material. Our discussion follows and it is here that we theorize how eponymous utterances invoke ethereal actors whose agency enjoins with those of physically present artists to produce relational authority's effects. We conclude by articulating our theoretical contributions around relational authority and ventriloquism, and how our approach can catalyze OMS interest in eponymy.

Relational Authority

In OMS, authority has traditionally been associated with the 'right to the last word' in decision-making (Simon, 1997, p 182), indexing a capacity to 'write' (or *author*) the path an organization, or some segment of it, follows. That 'last word' could refer to epistemic

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authority (the actor with knowledge about a given problem) or deontic authority (the actor with the right to determine what happens next), or some combination of the two (Caronia & Nasi, 2022; Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2012). As noted above, scholars utilize the label 'relational authority' to draw attention to the fact that putatively stable bases of authority like roles, positions, and expertise do not guarantee others' compliance; instead, it is the character of the interpersonal relationship that leads others to voluntarily submit to those bids for the last word. Although recognition of the importance of relational contexts is valuable for directing analysts' gaze toward processes of 'working out' authority in interaction (Sandholtz, Chung, & Waisberg, 2019; van de Ruit & Bosk, 2021), scholars working in this tradition tend to retain human individuals as the focal units of analysis. Specifically, relational authority studies typically concentrate on the tasks actors—frequently managers or content-area experts—perform to 'exercise' (Huising, 2015, p. 263), 'cultivate' (DiBenigno, 2020, p. 51), or 'generate' (Mukherjee & Thomas, 2023, p. 453) relational authority *over* stakeholders, a stance that closely resembles the model proposed by Barnard almost a century ago. An additional drawback is that these studies see relational authority's success as contingent not only on human skill, but also upon the contexts within which skills are applied. These contingencies create jurisdictional and historical tensions that cause actors' relational authority attempts to 'backfire under certain circumstances' (Sandholtz et al., 2019, p. 5) and be 'thwart[ed] […] on 'the frontline'' (van de Ruit & Bosk, 2021, p. 20). We argue that less limiting and substantialist conceptions are required that do not assume that behind all phenomena are constant realities (i.e. the possessions of persons or positions) that specify outcomes, and instead show and discuss how relational authority is always emerging in interactions, cannot be *a priori* predicted, and is bound up with ongoing organizing practice.

Thus, our aim is to contribute to enriching the notion of relational authority. A first step in this direction involves revisiting Follett's (1924/1995) thinking around relationality.

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Follett (1924/1995) advocated centering what she called the 'circular response': a conception of action that fixed attention on the dynamic interactions characterizing work, where 'reality is in the relating, in the activity-between' (p. 36). For her, ever-shifting communication practices were where authority was to be found; authority was reducible to neither persons' characteristics nor situations. Although this mode of imagining authority has remained dormant in OMS for decades, there are signs of life in the growing leadership-as-practice perspective (Holm & Fairhurst, 2018; Raelin, 2023), practice-based visions of knowing (Bloomfield, Rigg, & Vance, 2024; Kuhn, 2014), and institutional theory-informed analyses of public administration (Raadschelders & Stillman, 2007). Recently, Follett's thinking has been paired with a communicative constitution of organization (CCO) perspective to explore how relational authority becomes collectively authored through dialogue (Pietinalho & Martela, 2024).

Studies that draw on the Montréal School of CCO's notion of organizing as constituted by a plenum of human *and* other-than-human agencies (Cooren, 2006, 2020) have begun to develop a communication-centered view of relational authority (e.g. Bourgoin et al., 2020; Slager et al., 2023). They explore how professionals 'leverage' (Bourgoin et al., 2020, p. 1155) and 'invoke' (Slager et al., 2023, p. 14) relations with other-than-human actors (e.g. material artefacts such as contracts, reports, software tools, as well as abstract actors like norms and values) during client interactions. These works inform our argument by showing how efforts to leverage and invoke 'figures' often fail, which are attributed to professionals who are seen as guilty of 'misreading' (Bourgoin et al., 2020, p. 1156) situations and of 'failing to "strike the right tone"' (Slager et al., 2023, p. 23), providing 'little evidence of relational authority being established' (p. 14). Their findings nuance understandings of relational authority as something that is never fully under human actors' control, but they equate actors' success at exercising relational authority with the construct's presence and

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their failure with its absence. By contrast, we assert that the construct is *always* powerfully *and* fragilely unfolding. Two key premises of communicative relationality, as we explain next, help us to make this claim.

Communicative Relationality

Communicative relationality (Kuhn et al., 2017) is arousing growing interest among CCO scholars who seek to explore how ongoing efforts at coordinating and controlling action are necessarily provisional, owing to the unceasing streams of relations that are forever bringing organizing into being (e.g. Bencherki & Trolle Elmholdt, 2022; Bourgoin et al., 2020; Brummans, Hwang, & Cheong, 2020; Cnossen & Bencherki, 2019; Meier & Carroll, 2023; Smith, 2022). A first premise of communicative relationality is a version of performativity, which holds that things (whatever or whoever they may be) come to 'matter'—in both material and agentic senses of the term—through practices: unfolding relations that could always have turned out differently (Bell & Vachhani, 2020; Cooren, 2020). Such a stance does not imply that physical things *have* or *possess* agency but that it is impossible to separate out, or to assign primacy to, *human* agency because activity is always inter-relationally and provisionally produced by various (human and other-than-human) actors (Kuhn & Burk, 2014). Communicative relationality is therefore fitting for exploring how actors (like makeup artists) enjoin with ethereal figures to exercise agency in ways that may not be readily apparent but nevertheless impact how interactions unfold.

Communicative relationality's second premise is to reject claims that a feature-like structure predetermines conditions of local practice. Kuhn and colleagues join other CCO scholars in likening structure to a 'hodgepodge' concept (2017, p. 57) that lacks explanatory power because it obscures the situated ways in which material agency always comes into being 'for another next first time' (Garfinkel, 2002, p. 182). From this standpoint, histories,

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social and material contexts, and jurisdictions are not overarching structures bearing down *over* interactions but, as with other 'things,' exist as relations that must be shown to materialize *within* interactions (Wright, Kuhn, Michailova, & Hibbert, 2023). Bourgoin et al.'s study is a useful illustration of this point, particularly in their depiction 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' (2020, p. 1138). Accordingly, for work in this vein structure is *done* or *accomplished* rather than presumed; the same, therefore, goes for authority. Returning to a point made in the preceding section on the value of foregrounding practice, this second premise holds potential for freeing relational authority investigations of their presumption that structures operating beneath (or above) the surface of interactions *determine* where and for whom relational authority is accomplished.

Communicative relationality provides a useful springboard, therefore, from which to re-conceptualize relational authority in deeply communicative terms. What is required is an analytical approach that can focus its premises on actual communicative practice. As a final piece of our framework, we return to the notion of ventriloquism.

Ventriloquial Authority and the Question of Weight

Above, we alluded to the value of ventriloquial thinking for understanding authority. Ventriloquism has caught the attention of OMS scholars (e.g. Hollis & Wright, 2024; Meier & Carroll, 2023; Nathues et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2023), but it is its capacity to illuminate relational authority that draws it into our conceptual framework. This stance builds on the notion that agency is always hybrid (i.e. not reducible to persons or things); if this is the case, analysts must look to the myriad of participants and forces brought together to make action possible. For Cooren, the metaphor of ventriloquism means that analysts should understand

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communication not simply as two or more people sending thoughts to one another via symbols, but as the process whereby a ventriloquist makes a figure speak. The catch is that persons are always ventriloquists and figures at the same time: *speaking through* figures when we invoke a belief or a professional standard, and *spoken through* as those beliefs and standards need a vehicle to receive exposure.

> If I invoke a policy or a principle, it is also (my attachment to) this policy or principle that enjoins me to act in a specific way. If I ventriloquize an ideology, whether consciously or unconsciously, it is also this ideology that impels me to defend positions to which I feel attached. The effects of ventriloquism therefore are bidirectional and mark an oscillation/vacillation. (Cooren, 2012, p. 6)

Consequently, when we observe a person talking, ventriloquism forces a reconceptualization: we must ask about all the many human and other-than-human forces combining to produce and make influential a given statement.

In its recognition that a multitude of forces—a plenum (i.e., assembly of multiple) of figures (Cooren, 2006)—are participating in action, ventriloquial thinking provides an important insight: That as ventriloquists conjoin multiple figures in bids for epistemic and/or deontic authority, their claims may become more substantial and influential. In ventriloquial thinking, this is understood using the further metaphor of *weight*:

> Lending weight to what we say thus consists of animating—and positioning ourselves as being animated by—figures that are supposed to support our positioning or say the same thing. In other words, it is a matter of configuration, which consists of staging figures that participate in the definition of what is happening. (Cooren, 2010a, p. 138)

In the same article, Cooren argues that ventriloquism operates on 'a logic of addition or subtraction' because the communicative context supplies many additional 'figures that contribute to (or co-determine or co-define) what is happening in a given situation' (p. 144).

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As figures find material expression through talk and other registers (e.g. artefacts, texts, the face [Hollis et al.,2021]), their authoritative weight holds the potential to carry, multiply, or even atrophy beyond the scene of their initial configuration (Vásquez, Bencherki, Cooren, & Sergi, 2018). Though not employing the same frame, Kuhn's (2024) development of communicative relationality aligns with ventriloquial thinking. He deploys a related metaphor, *gravity*, to show how actors that/who foster attachments with numerous elements of the scene bolster their promise that valued ends will result from conferring epistemic and deontic authority upon them. Weight, in other words, is a feature of the accumulation and/or combination of figures aligned to support a ventriloquist's aims.

This notion of weight sounds suspiciously close to the arguments we critiqued above (that particular characteristics make bids for authority more or less successful), yet we follow a slightly different tack. From the perspective of ventriloquism, what becomes vital is to interrogate the *doing* of authority to understand the consequences of various configurations of weight. With their indexing of multiple referents simultaneously, eponyms provide a particularly fruitful point of entry.

Examining how eponyms shape the 'right to the last word' thus can be understood as the effect of (human and other-than-human) ventriloquists marshalling figures to establish relational authority. Of course, this is not merely about authority in the moment: The ventriloquial deployment of eponyms is also deeply *organizational*. Tracking how particular figures are mobilized by and animate ventriloquists (see Nathues et al., 2021)—how they are drawn upon and how they speak through actors—is key to understanding coordination and control, both in its momentary accomplishment and its extension across time and space. The broader practice literature similarly places a demand for conceptual linkages across sites to move beyond examining local accomplishments to larger-scale phenomena (Nicolini, 2016).

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Consider, for instance, customer encounters in 'high contact' fields, where an employee interacts closely with a customer/client and aims to produce a response in the recipient strong enough to induce purchases in both the moment and the future. Customer service encounters are performances where organizing is constituted, because they re-instantiate enduring patterns of coordination and control via elements like organizational identities, strategies, and brands (Balogun, Best, & Lê, 2015; Cooren et al., 2011; Fachin & Langley, 2023). Understanding these interactions thus requires attention to the resources circulating through them to grasp the consequences of ventriloquism (specifically, here, eponymy) in the doing of relational authority. Consequently, our study investigates customer service episodes to examine how accumulations of eponymous figures shape the accomplishment and contestation of authority.

Method

Scene of study and data generation

Fieldwork took place within the United Kingdom (UK) sales and education department of a global cosmetics firm. Ella May is an appropriate firm for exploring the role eponyms play in authoring authority (Taylor & Van Every, 2014). At the time of the study, the eponymous founder remained the firm's head makeup artist and chief creative officer but did not visit the UK during the fieldwork period. These circumstances offered a novel opportunity to probe how uttering the eponyms 'Ella' or 'Ella May' within interactions regularly evoked a blend of agencies that made a difference to their unfolding.

That Ella May is an eponymous firm is not uncommon in the cosmetics sector. Companies like Estée Lauder, Tom Ford, Mary Kay, Victoria Beckham, Chanel, and Dior are also named after their founder. What distinguishes Ella May is that every artist receives training in—and must follow—the founder's beauty 'philosophy', which involves advising

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clients about and applying the brand's core offering of makeup and skincare products in her preferred way. So, wherever the location of an Ella May retail store or cosmetic concession, its business model dictates that clients can expect the same type and level of service.

Cosmetic consultations between makeup artists (artists hereafter) and clients are key to this business model. 'Clients' refers to members of the public who attend pre-booked consultations (unlike 'customers', who arrive unannounced in store to browse) with designated artists. Consultations can last for 60 minutes, providing artists with opportunities to 'teach' Ella May's cosmetic 'philosophy', demonstrate the techniques needed to effectuate it and, of course, secure repeat bookings and sell products. Consultations provided the fieldworker with daily (sometimes hourly) brackets of time to immerse himself in the varied ways in which eponymous utterances evoked an amalgam of agencies that shape their trajectory. During nine months of fieldwork, 640 hours were spent in the field shadowing (Czarniawska, 2007; Vásquez, Brummans, & Groleau, 2012) makeup artists across 22 of Ella May's London-based retail stores and cosmetic concessions. The fieldworker's remaining time was spent attending meetings (85 hours) and training events (65 hours), which were useful for situating consultations within the firm's wider business operations (e.g. whether stores and concessions were meeting consultation booking and sales targets). Access was facilitated by a relative who had previously worked for the firm. Ethical clearance was granted by the first author's academic institution before fieldwork commenced and all names within the findings section are pseudonyms.

Like recent CCO-led investigations of authority, our study blended multiple data collection techniques (e.g. Bourgoin et al., 2020; Porter, Kuhn, & Nerlich, 2018; Slager et al., 2023; Vásquez et al., 2018). Alongside shadowing, the fieldworker conducted 65 one-to-one interviews with artists and managers of varying seniority and experience. Interviews provided opportunities for artists and the fieldworker to make sense of the consultations they had

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experienced together, and for interviewees to situate these alongside those he had not been able to observe. Artists' social media posts from the firm's internal Facebook group, which often detailed the cosmetic effects produced on clients, were also collected as an additional source of empirical material.

The fieldworker's position, as a 30-year-old cisgendered male researcher in an almost exclusively female environment where his presence clearly 'stood out', required ongoing reflexive scrutiny. Many of his reflexive notes revolved around impressions of how, from artists' and clients' (re)actions, his 'unusual' presence in consultations may have affected their unfolding. For instance, in an early field note, he puzzled over the extent to which an artist's reference to Ella ('Ella likes…', 'Ella believes…', 'Ella wants…') when applying eye concealer was primarily for his or the client's benefit. During his nine months of field work he became assured that the client was the primary audience, but a manager cautioned that sometimes artists could be 'hamming it up' due to his presence.

Shadowing

Shadowing is understood as 'following and recording organizational actors during their everyday activities and interactions by using video/audio recording and/or taking fieldnotes' (Vásquez et al., 2012, p. 145) and was the primary ethnographic approach deployed. The first author shadowed a core group of makeup artists from two London regions as they went about their daily work. Continuing a shadowing tradition within CCO (Bencherki & Trolle Elmholdt, 2022; Cooren, Brummans, & Charrieras, 2008; Nadegger, 2023; Vásquez et al., 2012), he followed artists to get close to and to make sense of the fine-grained ways in which relations orient their day-to-day activities. Drawing from recent CCO-inspired explorations of authority (Bourgoin et al., 2020; Porter et al., 2018; Slager et al., 2023; Vásquez et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2023), he paid particular attention to how claims on action became

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conversationally constituted and consequential. Consultations offered a fertile space to explore this interest, as the countless cosmetic effects that product and application combinations occasion meant they hold the potential to traverse along many possible paths. How authoring attempts were expressed, received, and made a difference within consultations became focal points of shadowing activity.

During consultations, the fieldworker stood beside artists or sat next to their seated clients (a pragmatic decision that was largely dictated by stores' layouts). He made headnotes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011), registering the ways in which action claims emerged and (re)directed consultations along artists' preferred terms. Post-consultation, he shared emerging interpretations with shadowed artists and listened to their reflections concerning how the consultations unfolded. During lunch and comfort breaks, field notes were made into a pocket-sized journal to try and 'capture' his and artists' impressions before being worked into more fulsome prose.

Alongside on-counter shadowing, the first author regularly accompanied artists to head office training events and meetings. During training, artists were observed being instructed on how, why, and when they should author action and, on a handful of occasions, experienced these directions' effects first hand after being invited to roleplay a client within a mock consultation. Meetings emplaced consultations within the firm's broader commercial climate, with their importance to its bottom-line repeatedly stressed. Field notes were taken during head office visits and, unlike consultations with members of the public, audio recordings were permitted in these spaces.

Interviews

Echoing recent CCO studies (Bencherki & Trolle Elmholdt, 2022; Cnossen & Bencherki, 2019, 2023) interviews were carried out as an accompaniment to observations. Sixty-five

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one-to-one interviews were conducted to offer further interpretative depth to shadowing activities. Held away from cosmetic counters in staff rooms or nearby cafes, interviews allowed artists to converse at length (interviews lasted up to 90 minutes), free from on-counter distractions. Interviews helped to situate the observed consultations alongside others the artists had conducted and within the wider contexts in which they had taken place (e.g. rival firms' activities and the rise of social media makeup tutorials). Interviews also meant artists could talk through claims the fieldworker had noted them making, both in terms of their content and consequentiality. Reminiscent of Spradley's (1979) advice to relay participants' observed expressions back to them during ethnographic interviews, the fieldworker would reintroduce oft-cited claims such as 'Ella says…' or 'Ella believes…' to artists and ask them to reflect on which Ella (the person, the firm, or both) they were referring to and what difference they felt evoking her, they, and/or it made to consultations' unfolding. All the interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed shortly after they took place. This transcription approach allowed the first author to oscillate between field notes and transcripts, with interpretations from interviews often providing an additional complexion on consultations.

Social media material

Social media photographs from Ella May's internal UK Facebook staff group were also collected. These mainly contained artist-produced images of the cosmetic effects they had affected on clients taken mid- and post-consultation. Images were useful for tracing the ways in which claims' authoritative effects traversed space and time (e.g. from the scene of their uttering into the wider organizational realm; Niemimaa, Schultze, & Van Den Heuvel, 2023).

Analysis

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Providing a 'relational viewpoint on discourse analysis' (Nathues et al., 2021, p. 1458), ventriloquism aids researchers in detecting when distant others are being invoked to authorize an intended conversational trajectory (Wright et al., 2023). For us, this is how eponyms evoke the ethereal presence of one or more actors in ways that affect consultations' direction.

Slager and associates' (2023) CCO-influenced analysis of authority is instructive for our purposes. Their attention to professionals' ventriloquial invocations of abstract actors (e.g. 'institutional investors' and 'government regulation') provides a useful steer for exploring how actors that are not readily apparent within interactions come to have a 'voice' and make a difference to their unfolding. Like Slager et al. (2023), we followed Nathues and colleagues' (2021) ventriloquial framework, which systematically moves from raw data to analysis in a series of four steps.

The first step involves imposing some sort of order on field materials by making sense of what and/or who are the ventriloquist(s) ('vent(s)') and who or what are they making 'speak' or 'act' as their ventriloquial 'figure' or, as figures are sometimes referred to, 'dummies' or 'puppets' (Nathues et al., 2021, pp. 1458 & 1460). Fieldnotes were read for occasions when an actor invoked (an)other actor(s) (as their vent(s)) in front of, and for the benefit of, a third actor (audience). For instance, Cooren's (2010a) illustration of an everyday ventriloquial invocation sees a clerk responding to a customer by uttering; 'I am sorry, but according to our policy, I cannot provide you with this information' (Cooren, 2010a, p. 137). Here, a distant nonhuman other (a policy) is invoked as a vent that helps a human actor (the clerk) to deny a second human actor's (the customer/audience) request by 'lending weight' (2010a, p. 138) to what (s)he is saying. Cooren's example helpfully exemplifies a sole vent in action. However, our data pointed to how one or more vents were typically invoked in a single utterance (the conception of 'weight' introduced above).

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Our data abound with artists' explicit eponymic invocations ('direct reference[s]'; Nathues et al., 2021, p. 1461) of 'Ella' in their conversations with clients and colleagues, which were usually accompanied by verbs (e.g. 'Ella likes…', 'Ella believes …', 'Ella thinks…'). Attaching a verb to an eponymic invocation suggests that the eponym is intended to be affecting, moving its target in some way. What we discern is that invoking an eponym is intended to affect the audience to the extent that they agree with the authoritative source, so that they 'like', 'believe', 'think' etc. after having been told that Ella 'likes', 'believes' and 'thinks'.

Nathues and colleagues' (2021) advice to attend to varieties of nouns was also useful for identifying when the eponym 'Ella' was prefixed or suffixed by, for instance, 'she', 'her', 'our' and 'we' in field notes and interview transcriptions. As pronouns are stand-ins for proper nouns, attending to them allows us to examine when eponyms were likely invoking 'Ella' as the person, the firm, or both. Interview data were particularly useful at this juncture. Artists' accounts of the eponyms the first author had observed and recorded revealed how the eponym 'Ella' often functioned as a plural pronoun, with artists using it to not only refer to the founder but also to the collective consensus of the firm and to themselves as her/its representatives. The eponym 'Ella' therefore served as an implicit type of plural invocation as well as an explicit one, with the founder's, the firm's, and artists' agencies 'wrapped up […], enveloped within an utterance' (Nathues et al., 2021, p. 1461). Implicit invocations were also apparent in artists' eponymous utterances and clients' responses. For instance, references to facial features like 'freckles' and 'wrinkles' were regarded as implicitly invoking the norms of 'beauty' and 'age' into interactions.

While the first step is concerned with deciding *who* and/or *what* are acting as vents and figures, step two concentrated on *how* vents made figures speak and act. In this second step, invocations were grouped into 'activities' (Nathues et al., 2021, p. 1461), and were

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clustered and assigned labels, which were largely directive (Cooren, 2004) in nature. Those from artists, for example, were labelled as instructing, recommending, and advising clients. Client invocations were often, but not always, subtler and were assembled into reactions such as acknowledging, accepting, countering, resisting, or refusing.

The objective of the penultimate step is to gain an 'integrated idea of the figures, vents, and authors constituting a construct' (Nathues et al., 2021, p. 1465). It is here where we began collating 'the greatest possible inventory of ventriloquial effects' (Nathues et al., 2021, p. 1465), with these assigned to the type of authoritative difference that invocations made. The main effects revolved around how artists (as figures) routinely invoke the eponym Ella May as a weight-lending authoritative vent to steer activity. These eponymic claims—assertions and propositions of the necessity of a particular action underwritten by the weight of (an) eponymous figure(s)—led artists to recommend certain (company-promoted) cosmetic applications that, in turn, often triggered clients to invoke vents (e.g. 'freckles') of their own. The final step, 'showing' (Nathues et al., 2021, p. 1459), involves selecting vignettes for presentation and elaboration, which we do in the next section.

Findings

What follows is a range of ethnographic field materials that show something of the varied ways in which eponymic claims evoke configurations of human and other-than-human actors that often *lend weight* to situated authority bids, but also carry a *weight of organizational expectation* on actors that can *weigh them down.* Weaving together field notes, meeting and interview transcripts, and social media images, we analyse how such claims (re)direct consultations by configuring agencies that include the founder, the consensus of the firm, and its artists to form a collective viewpoint that clients often agree to. Claims' force weakens, however, when clients begin to question, resist, doubt, and even mock eponymous actors'

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configurations. Such a dismantling disrupts consultations and sends aftershocks that reverberate long after clients have left the cosmetic counters, with artefacts transporting the residues of voiced eponyms' authoritative and disorienting effects beyond the scene of their initial uttering and into client, social, and organizational spheres.

Table one outlines the eponymic force of ventriloquial declarations, mapping the ways in which human and other-than-human configurations exercise authority across time and space, disorienting consultations and the firm's coordination and control efforts (Cooren et al., 2011).

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Table one: Eponymic claims' authoritative weight

Extract/Figure	Claims lend weight to authority moves	Claims carry an organizational weight of expectation across time and space	Claims weigh down on actors and disorient present or prospective consultations
Extract one: '*Ella says it's the secret to the universe'*	Outweigh a client's request.		
Extract two: *'I always talk about Ella'*	The blend of agencies evoked through eponymic claims lend weight.	An artefact (face chart) carries sociomaterial remnants of authoritative conversations into clients' homes.	
Figure one: The face chart		Publicizing an artefact (Facebook photograph of a face chart) leaves firm-wide residue of authoritative conversations, and records that artists have followed the prescribed cosmetic routine that eponymic claims seek to engender.	
Figure two: Making the eyes 'pop'		Artefacts' publicization (Facebook photograph of a face and the effusive comments it attracts), display claims' cosmetic effects and serve as an instruction for colleagues to copy.	
Extract three: *'Ella believes skin should look like skin'*	Outweigh a beauty norm's pull.		
Figure three: *Skin looking like 'skin'*		An artefact's publicization (a Facebook photograph of a face) demonstrates claims' cosmetic effects and provides a 'template' for colleagues to follow.	

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Extract four: *'Ella doesn't believe in contouring'*	Outweigh a cosmetic trend's allure.		
Figure four: Strobing		Artefacts' publicization (Facebook photographs of a face, a face chart, products used, and the poster's praise) show claims' cosmetic effects, and reinforce firm-wide expectations that claims should be uttered.	
Extract five: '*I don't care what Ella thinks'*			Evoke an imbalance of agencies, with the founder's agency disruptively outweighing that of the artist in the moment. The organizational requirement to utter claims acts as a deadweight on artists.
Extract six: '*I'll say in Ella May we believe'*	Adjustment of claims' wording seeks to balance the weight of agencies evoked.		
Extract seven: '*Have you met Ella?'*			In addition to extract five's effects, the organizational requirement that artists utter claims becomes clear(er) to clients. Claims also negatively impact an artist who experiences a lingering sense of embarrassment.
Extract eight: '*I hate it when artists talk about Ella like they know her!'*			Claims' effects travel into social media spheres the firm cannot control. Previous clients' social media posts about negative experiences affect claims' authoritative weight in subsequent consultations.
Extract nine: '*Ella-bots'*			Evoke an imbalance of agencies. Clients perceive the firm's agency as outweighing

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			that of the artist, deterring them from arranging future consultations.

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Our first material is a field note penned following a 30-minute consultation between an artist and a client (in her mid-forties[2]). This extract is lifted from about midway through the consultation—post-skin cleansing—and begins with the artist, April, testing which of the three foundation shades most closely resemble the client's skin tone. Shortly after, the first of three eponymic claims are launched that orient the remainder of the consultation along a particular path.

Extract one: 'Ella says it's the secret to the universe'

> April (the artist) swatched the client's skin using three shades and asked her to say which she thought looked most natural and 'you'. The client went for the darker one, but April suggested a lighter one as 'Ella likes the eyes darker and to pop'. The lighter of the shades was applied under and around the eye and April exclaimed, 'Ella says it's the secret to the universe'. April continued, 'Ella makes all of her products with yellow undertones to even out the pinks and blues in the skin'. The client said how 'transformed' she felt she looked. (Consultation fieldnote)

April's question seems rhetorical. Irrespective of the client's response, she already knows the answer, which is to evoke the founder's preference for a lighter hued foundation to be stroked ('swatched') onto the client's face, setting a more dramatic contrast when black eyeliner and mascara are applied later. What is launched, therefore, is an eponymic claim that redirects the consultation by blending the agencies of a physically present artist, an absent Ella and, by implication, the collective consensus of the eponymously titled firm. The consultation is now traversing along these actors' (artist, Ella, Ella May) preferred trajectory rather than the one stated by the client. April proceeds to administer the lighter shade and makes another eponymic claim, which doubles down on the previous one (that this particular shade is

[2] We refer to the approximate ages of informants when it is relevant to the exchange witnessed to ensure clarity.

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euphemistically referred to as 'the secret to the universe'). The third eponymic claim adds a quasi-scientific precision to those previously uttered as, this time, it is not only Ella who is evoked but also her dermatological knowledge, with a rationale for why the colour was selected ('Ella makes all of her products with yellow undertones to even out the pinks and blues in the skin'). Eponymous claims therefore bookend this interaction, triggering a course of action and then justifying it. Shortly after the consultation, April reflected on the weighted eponymic effects delivered.

Extract two: 'I always talk about Ella'

> Yes, I always talk about Ella and her philosophy and the way she would do things and why she's doing things. So, that's the main thing clients don't get, if they just put it on. They don't know why they're putting it on. So, telling them why Ella thinks it and why we think it and why I'm choosing this colour, and why Ella made foundation more yellow-based. So, it's good to be able to say something and back it up with what Ella said, so clients understand why it's the 'Ella way' at the end of the consultation. Step by step. Which is why you have the face chart, essentially. (Artist interview – April)

For April, evoking Ella and her cosmetic 'philosophy' form part of her daily practice; an eponymic claim that encourages clients to opt for the yellow-based foundation and often directs consultations along a specific trajectory. From April's reflections, the utterance 'Ella thinks' is a heavy eponym because it is not solely Ella (the person) who is being evoked, but also the collective consensus of the firm ('what we think') and her own opinion as one of her/its artists ('why I'm choosing this colour'). Conversing with artists like April therefore helps to explicate eponyms' nested agencies, with Ella and her 'philosophy', Ella May, and her own agency *conjoining* to author a proposed course of action accepted by the client.

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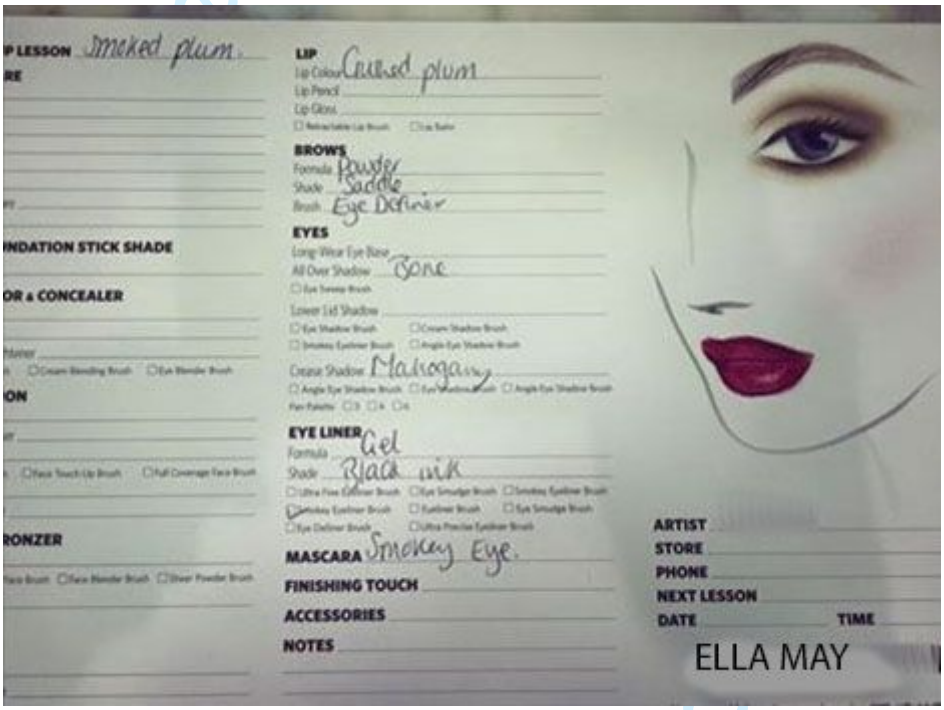
April's remark about her completion of a 'face chart' at the end of the field note (Figure one) marks another way in which eponymic claims find material expression. A face chart is an A4 paper template that lists the sequential order of product application that artists must follow during a consultation (e.g. first skincare, next corrector and concealer, then foundation, etc.), should be populated at each 'step' of product application, and issued to clients at the consultation's close.

Figure one: The face chart



(Facebook photograph)

Via the face chart, eponymic claims can sociomaterially traverse space and time, with the written products and shaded facial diagram carrying traces of an authoritative conversation into clients' homes. April's reference to the 'Ella way' of applying makeup in the face chart's 'step by step' order suggests that the claims she was observed making were not solely improvised acts to boost her situated epistemic and/or deontic authority. Rather, they form part of a wider organizational effort to steer consultations along the firm's preferred course.

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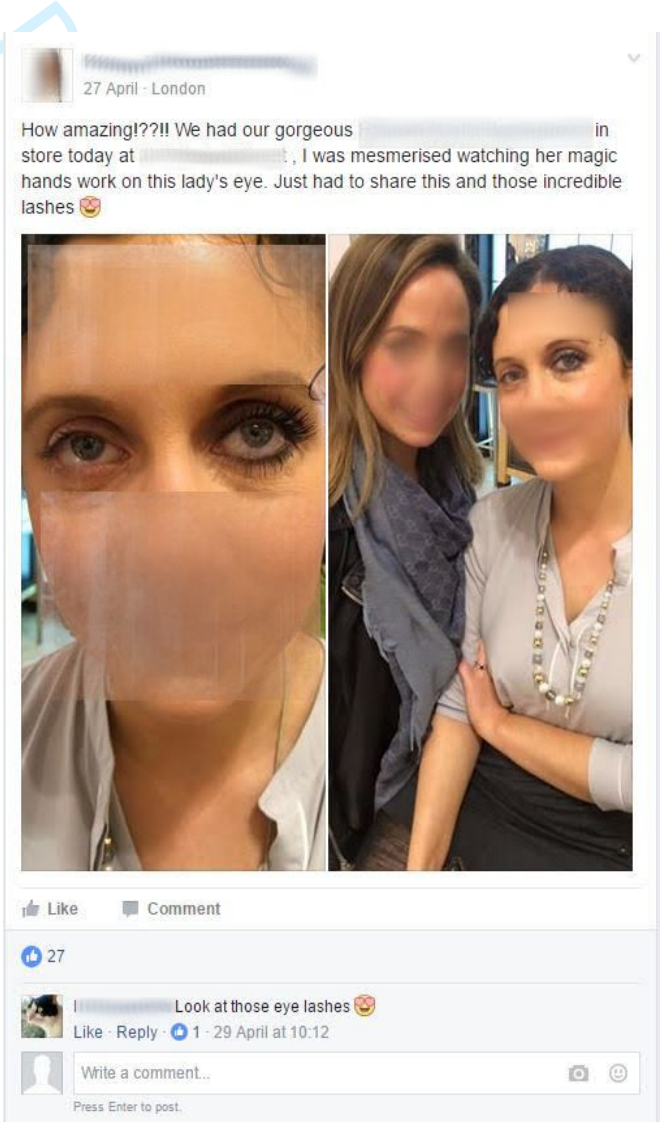
The face chart is not the only way in which eponymic claims materialize beyond the spoken word. Mid- and post-consultation, artists and managers regularly took photographs of the cosmetic effects produced on clients and posted them to the firm's staff-only Facebook group. Figure two is April's manager posted comment about the consultation where she made the client's eyes 'darker' and 'pop' in the 'Ella way'.

Figure two: Making the eyes 'pop'



(Facebook photograph)

The audience for this manager's Facebook post is artist colleagues (recall that this was an internal group) who are presented with evidence of the 'Ella way' having been fashioned onto

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a client. The 27 'likes' accompany the lavish praise offered by the manager, 'How amazing!??!!', the statement that she was 'mesmerised watching [April's] hands' and felt she 'just had to share'. Varying configurations of authoritative weight can be discerned from the opening eponymic claims and the artefacts they produce (a made-up face, a face chart, a social media post). Ella May appears to be exercising an organizational and/or individual heft that aids authority's momentary accomplishment *and* bears down upon artists. The next field note details how the agency or agencies eponymic claims ventriloquially evoke counter-beauty norms too.

Extract three: 'Ella believes skin should look like skin'

> The client began by saying she wanted to cover up the freckles on her cheeks. Adele (an artist) said 'Ella believes skin should look like skin and makeup should enhance what you've got'... She asked if the lady would like to go 'half heavy and half natural' and see which she'd prefer. The lady said she'd 'go with' what the artist recommends. (Consultation fieldnote)

This consultation opened with the client (a woman in her twenties) clearly expressing how she wants the next 30 minutes to proceed: for the artist to apply a foundation shade that will conceal what (for her) are unsightly skin pigments. We can therefore reason that the client is being ventriloquized by, and is ventriloquizing (Cooren, 2010b), a normative cosmetic ideal whereby faces should be uniformly even in complexion if they are to be deemed 'beautiful'. What follows is an eponymous action claim that counters this conventional request. The evocation of a rival beauty norm—whereby pigmentation is 'natural' and should not be hidden—momentarily throws the consultation into a state of flux, with Ella's and the client's opposing views pitted against one another. Building on vignette two, 'wrapped up' (Nathues et al., 2021, p. 1461) in the eponymic claim is not only the founder's belief, but that of the

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collective consensus of the firm and the claim maker (Adele). These conjoining agencies seem to outweigh the 'perfect' beauty norm's pull, as, when asked, the client relents and opts for what these agencies 'believe'. Adele's photograph, which she added to a Facebook group chat mid-consultation, circulates this eponymic claim's visual effects beyond the interaction. As can be seen, the middle two swatches soften, but do not completely mask, the freckles that are more visible towards the client's nose and around her under-eye area.

Figure three: Skin looking like 'skin'

(Facebook photograph)

Artists' invoking of Ella May ('her' and/or 'it') were also witnessed repelling cosmetic trends that did not align with the Ella May 'way', as a third field note details.

Extract four: 'Ella doesn't believe in contouring'

> A client came in asking for a contoured look. Cathy [the artist] said 'Ella doesn't believe in contouring' and that the client had 'high cheekbones so didn't really need contouring'. Cathy said, 'Ella does a softer contour and prefers to highlight through

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> strobing' and asked if it was 'okay?'. Cathy instructed, 'you want a bronzed and dewy look'. Cathy pressed a clear lotion on the client's cheeks and forehead and used two different cream types on her face and eyes with her hands. (Consultation fieldnote)

Contouring, a makeup trend whereby a combination of bright and dark-hued products is used to sculpt features such as 'high cheekbones' on the face, resembles both a vent and a figure within this interaction, which are respectively 'animating' and 'being animated by' the client (Cooren, 2010b). The invocation of Ella rejects the request outright, paving the way for Cathy to deliver a second eponymic claim ('Ella does…'), which introduces 'strobing' as a 'softer' alternative to contouring. Ella's and the artist's opinions outweigh that of the client and Cathy proceeds to apply the products ('clear lotion' and 'cream[s]') needed to effectuate strobing's 'bronzed and dewy look'. The next figure is a Facebook post Cathy sent shortly after the consultation, which marks her fidelity to Ella's preference for strobing.

Figure four: Strobing

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(Facebook photograph)

The combination of Cathy's reference to '#strobing! […] The Ella way!', and 'perfect beautiful [d]ewy skin!' (a close approximation of her eponymic claim witnessed during the consultation), her photo montage of the client's 'strobed' skin, the completed face chart, and the products used while strobing demonstrates her commitment to the firm's stance. Her photograph of the products and accoutrements used within the consultation (all of which are eponymously branded) is telling, as it visually demonstrates another way in which eponymic claims coordinate artists' actions by narrowing down the choice of cosmetic products available (Cooren et al., 2011).

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The data presented so far show how eponymic claims conjoin the agencies of Ella (the person and the firm) with that of a physically present artist to lend weight to authority's momentary accomplishment. Claims are not improvised but deeply rehearsed organizational achievements, as they instigate enduring patterns of coordination, which, via the face chart and Facebook, travel from the consultation where they were uttered to client and firm spaces.

We would be remiss, however, to claim that the added weight of eponyms *always* aided artists' authority (Cooren, 2010a). What follows is an artist (Jess) recalling how a similar eponymic claim to the one April (Extracts one & two) was observed making ('Ella likes the eyes darker and to 'pop') brought about a markedly different outcome.

Extract five: 'I don't care what Ella thinks'

> Not every client wants to hear [the artist mention Ella]. I had a client say, 'I don't care what Ella wants, it's what I want!' […] I think artists have to be a tiny bit careful about, you know, 'Ella really likes the black mascara, so we don't sell brown mascara'. Like, some clients are like oh, 'I can't wear black'. 'Well, Ella thinks you should wear black', 'well I don't care what Ella thinks because I don't want the black!' (Artist interview – Jess)

In Jess's experience, some clients remain unconvinced by the authoritative claims such as 'Ella wants…likes…thinks,' with attempts to lend weight to the interaction to steer the conversation down the route desired by Ella, Ella May and its business model ultimately failing. The client's annoyance with what 'Ella thinks' suggests the plenum of agencies invoked by eponymic claims, as witnessed in the opening fieldnotes, have become imbalanced in this case. The audience rejection of an eponymic claim places Jess as a ventriloquial dummy or puppet of the founder (Hollis & Wright, 2024; Nathues, et al., 2021). Melissa, a colleague of Jess's, shared a different approach to eponymic claim-making. She

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recalls spreading the weight of claims so that the agencies they aim to evoke include—but are not limited to—Ella.

Extract six: 'I'll say in Ella we believe'

> I don't say 'Ella says'. I'll say, 'in Ella we believe' [...] I don't want to say, 'Ella says', because I don't really know her [Ella], you know, so I always say, 'we believe', or I talk about 'our philosophy'. I say [for instance] 'our philosophy at Ella May is about real women and being yourself'. (Artist interview – Melissa)

Although subtle, Melissa's recollection of integrating 'we' and 'our' into eponymic claims is significant insofar it shifts the emphasis away from Ella toward Ella May. These collective pronouns position Ella as a deity-like figure. The 'philosophy' that she and 'disciples' like Melissa espouse focusing on 'real women and being yourself' is one that—by implication—the client is invited to follow too. Another artist (Rhiannon) describes the risks of placing too much weight on the founder's opinion.

Extract seven: 'Have you met Ella?'

> Some clients are like, 'So, have you met Ella?' And you're like, 'no', then they're a bit like ... Now you feel like an idiot because you're like, 'I've not met her, so I don't really know her' but, you're just like, 'well you'll just have to take my word for it, won't you?' And then you end up looking like a bit of an idiot. (Artist interview – Rhiannon)

That Ella lives in New York is not lost on some clients, as Rhiannon recalls. Such clients doubt whether artists like her, who work on a sales floor in a London borough, have ever met the founder, let alone 'know[s]' her and can speak on her behalf. Once the client's suspicions are confirmed, it becomes clear that it is the organization and its business model that is

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'animating' the artist to 'say' such things (Cooren, 2010b). Rhiannon's account is revelatory, for it shows something of how the weight of the firm not only bears down on the artist but on the interaction too. Questioning relations' sincerity disrupts the course of action eponymic claims aim to engender and exercise effects that live on, and leave an enduring sense of embarrassment. Such scepticism is not limited to Rhiannon's client, but, as Chloe reports, is widespread and growing in notoriety across social media.

Extract eight: 'I hate it!'

> I've seen feedback on Twitter, and I've spoken to clients and they're like 'oh, God, I hate it when I have a consultation and they're [artists] talking about Ella like they know her!' Like people are quite cynical... And obviously on social media they're not afraid of showing that. (Artist interview – Chloe)

Eponymic claims' effects, we learn from Chloe, are not confined to consultations, they also traverse space and time by exercising an afterlife that seeps into social media spheres. Considering the coverage of social media platforms like Twitter (now X), it is reasonable to assert that such a publicly conveyed 'hate' would likely prime prospective clients that eponymic claim(s) are coming their way. It is also plausible that this forewarning impacts a claim's authoritative weight, as the illusion of improvision and customization is shattered and their organizational origin exposed. From a commercial perspective, such declarations may also deter clients from booking consultations. Dale, a manager, relays his experience of when this has been the case.

Extract nine: 'Ella-bots'

> I think that it becomes almost too much, the fact that artists are like, 'Oh, Ella says this', 'Ella does that', and it just turns us into kind of like a bit of a robot. We've got a

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> client who actually phones the girls [artists] on the counter, and won't [physically] go to the counter, because she calls them 'Ella-bots' (Manager interview – Dale)

Dale tells of occasions when person/firm agencies fail to conjoin with that of an artist. Rather, what he is told is that Ella's agency (the person and the firm) outweighs that of the artist to such an extent that clients substitute his artistry colleagues' names for derogatory labels such as 'Ella-bots' ('dummies' or 'puppets' in ventriloquial language). In cases like these, however, it is only the voice of Ella May the corporation that registers with clients (cf. Hollis & Wright, 2024). Alongside reputational damage, the financial consequences of inappropriate weight-adding across ventriloquial resources are severe, with some clients preferring to log product requests remotely ('phone the girls on the counter') rather than sit through on-counter ventriloquial performances. Instead of advancing organizational efforts to coordinate and control, eponymic claims can ironically achieve the opposite, as clients forego the opportunity to experience the firm's signature makeup routine.

Our discussion section considers how these findings contribute to both relational authority and ventriloquism literatures and can motivate OMS inquiries into eponyms' role in daily organizational life.

Discussion

Our motivation was to produce insights into the everyday *doing* of organizing in eponymous organizations, with specific attention given to the ways in which eponymy makes a difference in routine coordination and control dynamics (i.e. organizing; Cooren et al., 2011). Interactions in which authority is at stake became our focus and we attended, specifically, to eponyms' role in communicatively constituting relational authority. In addressing this curiosity, we began by picking up the thread left over a century ago by Follett to frame authority as a (communicative) practice. This allowed us to investigate the *doing* of authority,

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and the nuance of the approach developed here showed those 'doings' to be full of significantly more interactive nuance than a stance on authority employing only roles, expertise, charisma, or context could have grasped.

Consequently, building on the findings generated by this practice-oriented stance, we claim three contributions to OMS. First, through developing the ventriloquial metaphor of weight, we challenge binary conceptions of relational authority succeeding *or* failing by showing the construct to be simultaneously fleeting *and* enduring. The human and other-than-human actors that eponymic claims configure can lend weight to situated authority bids, but they can also carry a weight of expectation that weighs down upon actors. Extending the ventriloquial metaphor therefore nuances conceptions of weight as a generally productive organizing force. The vents evoked in utterances may disorient as much as they order. In this contribution, we also connect with recent CCO-inspired conversations about property in OMS, where we highlight proper and improper ventriloquial performances. Second, we turn to our findings' broader implications by discussing eponyms' weight in shaping organizational stability and change across practice. Here, we discuss how ventriloquial invocations participate in routines that contribute to an organizational identity associated with a brand. Branding routines, in turn, have the potential to control employees and create continuity across practices. Finally, through developing the concept of eponymic claims, we seek to catalyze enquiry into eponyms, which, although a ubiquitous feature of daily organizational life, have (puzzlingly) barely been explored within OMS.

Ventriloquial Invocations' Authoritative Weight

Developing ventriloquial understandings of weight helps to enhance constitutive understandings of relational authority's momentary absence *or* presence, success *or* failure, accomplishment *or* non-accomplishment (Bourgoin et al., 2020; Slager et al., 2023) to a new-

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found appreciation about the construct's fleeting *and* enduring nature. Eponymic claims evoke human and other-than-human configurations of actors that often *lend weight* to situated authority bids, but can also *weigh heavy* on actors, and sometimes resemble a *deadweight* from which actors cannot extricate themselves. Claims carry weight when the agencies of the founder and firm blend with that of the physically present actor, but these same figures can outweigh physically present actors' agency, leaving clients with a perception that artists are mere mouthpieces of a distant someone and/or something (Hollis & Wright, 2024).

Relational authority's constitution is therefore both momentary *and* deeply organizational. Artefacts such as the face chart, Facebook posts, and the face itself carry sociomaterial tracings of the authoritative or disorientating conversations that eponymic claims provoked into multiple spheres. They also convey an organizational weight of expectation, whereby actors must repeat claims during their next client interaction to ensure they stay within its prescribed customer service routine. The eponymic figures enfolded within claims can also weigh heavy on actors, challenging their sense of professionalism and staining their reputation. The success/failure binary in relational authority studies is therefore an unhelpful simplification (Bourgoin et al., 2020; Slager et al., 2023), as eponyms' weight is always materializing across sites to varying degrees in ways that are simultaneously more and less visible (e.g. through both a painted face *and* an organizational expectation).

The ventriloquial metaphor of weight therefore nuances communicative understandings of the 'micro processes' (Bourgoin et al., 2020, p. 1135) involved in constituting relational authority. The variable and shifting weight(s) of (a) ventriloquial figure(s) engendered by eponymic claims make it problematic for actors to try and leverage, downplay, or switch between relations within interactions (Bourgoin et al., 2020; Slager et al., 2023). Rather, once unleashed, claims' configuration of agencies evades actors' control (cf. Vásquez, Schoeneborn, & Sergi, 2016) and cannot be readily adjusted to (Bourgoin et al.,

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2020). Which agencies eponymic claims invoke, how they combine, and with what effects are all unknown until they are uttered and received, which makes them interesting processes to explore relational authority's power *and* fragility.

Our empirical information counters claims of ventriloquial weight as a generally productive organizing force, where increasing numbers of vents result in added weight that directs conversations along desired trajectories (e.g. Cooren, 2010a; Fauré, Cooren, & Matte, 2019; Sorsa, Pälli, & Mikkola, 2014). Instead, we demonstrate the complexity of the metaphor: more weight does not necessarily mean authoring is likely to occur, audience counterweights can challenge and negate attempts to add authority. Showing the varied—and often simultaneously occurring—manifestations of weight (lending, carrying, bearing etc) encourages scholars to explore how ventriloquial figures (e.g. a firm) can both propel and weigh down upon actors at the same time.

We also highlight the potential for ventriloquial weight to shed light on how emerging notions of property (Bencherki & Cooren, 2011; Bencherki & Bourgoin, 2019) can shape how authority acts and is understood. Through ventriloquial utterances, audiences get a sense of the links between the actual person speaking (figure) and the vent invoked (Bencherki & Bourgoin, 2019). When a perceived alignment exists between the vent and figure, proprietal weight is added to the claim and is accepted as 'proper': a rightful or befitting course of action. Conversely, when audiences perceive an improper ventriloquial move, they can reject the initiative due to their failure to recognize the link between vent and figure as legitimate—extracts five, six and seven detail artists' responses to such improprieties. As Bencherki and Bourgoin (2019, p. 504) argue, all property involves *im*property, a reminder that all ventriloquial remarks involve both the self (figure) *and* other (vent) combining in the moment of voice and that take on new meanings when shared in interactions.

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Ventriloquial Invocations' Organizational Weight

Until now, we have referred to *weighing down* in the lay sense of placing a burdensome requirement. Framing the term through the previously introduced metaphor of gravity (Kuhn, 2024), *weighing down* refers to a force that pulls beings and things to the *terra firma* of communicative practice (Cooren et al., 2011), which is a useful way of appreciating how, as they are lending, carrying, and bearing weight within and between interactions, eponyms are simultaneously exercising gravitational pulls that are grounding—and attracting attention to—the firm's signature brand identity. The notion of weight, therefore, provides a route to shift understanding of the accomplishment of stability and change across practice.

Key to making such a shift is to foreground communication's *transactional* character. As Taylor (2011; Taylor & Van Every, 2014) argued, communication is comprised of interaction and transaction: both the doing of conversation and the making of relations and obligations. Were we to examine only the in-the-moment outcomes (e.g. sales) of eponyms, we would miss what participants were making as they were doing and sacrifice understanding the conceptual objects created in communication that act back upon subsequent interactions to guide practice (i.e. produce authority). For CCO scholars, these conceptual objects are the 'textual' resources (even if these texts are often figurative) that make transactions' relations and obligations matter.

Here, the Ella May brand, made palpable in the company's distinctive approaches to both makeup application and customer service—both of which were associated with the company's namesake—served as the textual resource guiding interactive moves at the service counter. The notion of eponymic weight enabled the brand's authority by appearing in other media (e.g. artefacts, Facebook photos, and comments) while also creating obligations for artists who were expected to speak the brand into existence in consultations. Because a brand

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identity is a device for performing organizational identity and strategy (Balogun et al., 2015), it also offers a vehicle for continuity and propagation. Although we did not examine the threads woven through the fabric of all the firm's practices across time and space, understanding the linking of practices is a key concern within practice theorizing generally (see Nicolini, 2016). Organizational propagation requires that the re-enactment of identifiable transactions become routinized (Wright, 2016); the brand is thus a useful condensation of 'the' organization in the creation of such routines. Eponyms, consequently, are crucial in the materialization and (re)production of the organization via its brand identity.

What our analysis adds to this conversation is the likelihood of contestation in the authoring of that brand identity. The search for threads running through the fabric of practice carries the risk that analysts will notice only the managerially prescribed conception of a brand that employees are expected to perform. Indeed, literature on organizational routines recognizes the presence of contestation and conflict, but often excises them from analysis: '[r]outines freeze conflict and represent tacit agreements about how to subsume conflicting goals and interests in the routine's tasks' (Howard-Grenville & Rerup, 2016, p. 324). Such omissions, we argue, present a sanitized conception of organizing by missing the complications and contingencies characterizing complex communication.

Above, we displayed the ways in which artists' invocations of Ella were rejected by clients (see extracts 5-9). These episodes not only required artists' adaptation, they demonstrated brand identity to be a textual resource not fully controlled by a firm's employees: It is, as marketing scholars have long known, an ongoing *co-creation* of meaning (cf. Hansen, 2021) produced as much by conflict and contestation as it is by smooth coordination.

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This recognition of co-creation in the authoring of brand identity (and, concomitantly, organizational authority) is meaningful for OMS theory because it suggests that the collective is ongoingly (re)animated by communicative performances of an organizational self via transactional relations and obligations (Christensen & Christensen, 2022). Importantly, as we show, performances always involve potential competition to author a firm's identity and trajectory. The upshot is that textual resources, as the threads connecting practices and as the grounds for authority, are not simply the products of managerial structuring, but are the ongoing product of contestation and conflict regarding ventriloquial claims on activity. By analytically centering the potential for contestation and conflict regarding the transactions that define the firm's self, our study contributes to theory that portrays practices, including the aforementioned routines, as disorderly sites (Vásquez, Kuhn, & Plotnikof, 2022). The relations and obligations of Taylor's transactional register are, in other words, contested terrain. The search for threads connecting the fabric of practice thus need not sacrifice an attention to communication's complex dynamics, as in the routines literature; the notion of eponymic weight offers a vehicle to understand transactions' textual resources as sites for potential struggles over authority.

Eponymy

Introducing the concept of eponymic claims to OMS highlights eponymic agency's fragility, as eponyms' equivocality means their reception by audiences is never certain. Eponymy therefore not only affects consumers' loyalty to, and purchasing habits from, eponymous brands (cf. Clarke & Holt, 2016; Smith, 2014); nor is it merely a form of historical rhetoric that refreshes organizational identity efforts long after an eponymous founder has deceased (Basque & Langley, 2018; Kurie, 2018). Instead, eponymy is integral to how artists' and clients' daily interactions (and firms' control and coordination efforts) evolve.

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We therefore call for further studies that are attuned to communicative interrelating to advance our preliminary findings around eponymy. As well as calling for richer conceptual and theoretical discussions of the construct, we offer the following questions to catalyze empirical enquiry: Principally, (how) do eponyms participate in colleague interactions? (How) does eponymy organize eponymous firms' daily activities in other sectors (e.g. within non-service-oriented organizations)? And finally, (how) does eponymy affect organizational change efforts once the eponymous founder has left their self-titled firm? Post-departure, founder legacy can paradoxically resemble an asset and a liability for firms (cf. Radu-Lefebvre, Davis, & Gartner, 2024), and we imagine this paradox may be especially pronounced within eponymous firms where founder-firm identity becomes tightly bound. We hope that these initial questions motivate further exploration.

Conclusion

The concept of relationality is deeply rooted within OMS handlings of authority (Follett, 1924/1995) and is (again) experiencing something of a relational turn. Through developing the metaphor of ventriloquial weight, our work nuances a century-old (and recently revived) conversation around relational authority by showing something novel of how the construct is replete with contradictions; being both authoritative *and* disorienting, fleeting *and* enduring, situated *and* organizational, often all at the same time. Rather than trying to (re)solve such contradictions, we encourage scholars to embrace them and be open to the varying grades and variations that viewing authority as a matter of weight can add to OMS.

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Biographies

David Hollis is Lecturer in Organisation Studies at Sheffield University Management School, UK. His research primarily explores how themes of organisational power, authority, and leadership come to exist, persist and become transformed through relations of human/non-human actors and their material-discursive practices.

Alex Wright is Professor of Strategy & Organization at Audencia, Nantes, France. His research interests centre on the communicative constitution of organization, strategy work, judgment and future making. He is part of the coordinating team for the EGOS Standing Working Group, Communication, Performativity and Organization (cpo-network.org).

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Timothy Kuhn (tim.kuhn@colorado.edu) is professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Colorado Boulder. His research addresses how authority, agency, and ethics emerge in sociomaterial, power-laden, and (dis)orderly communication practices. He earned an MA at the University of Minnesota and his PhD from Arizona State University.

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