

# Trust and Self-trust in Leadership Identity Constructions

## A Qualitative Exploration of Narrative Ecology in the Discursive Aftermath of Heroic Discourse

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TRUST AND SELF-TRUST IN LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTIONS - A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION  
OF NARRATIVE ECOLOGY IN THE DISCURSIVE AFTERMATH OF HEROIC DISCOURSE

PhD Series 20-2019

Maria Lundberg

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Doctoral School of Organisation and Management Studies

PhD Series 20.2019

**CBS** COPENHAGEN BUSINESS SCHOOL  
HANDELSHØJSKOLEN

# Trust and self-trust in leadership identity constructions

## A qualitative exploration of narrative ecology in the discursive aftermath of heroic discourse

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Oslo, June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019

Maria Lundberg

# Abstract

The phenomenology of trust and self-trust in narrative leadership identity constructions is a field less explored within leadership studies. With a critical lens, this study approaches the construction of leadership identity, offering a broadened perspective on post-heroic leadership identity constructions. The investigation builds on an empirical inquiry based on qualitative interviews with 20 leaders. The thesis examines aspects of the narrative ecology of trust and self-trust related to leadership identity constructions in a post-heroic leadership context.

The investigation concentrates on how a dyadic coexistence of trust and self-trust in leadership language can be understood to operate as an underlying potency in leadership identity constructions. The discussion focuses on four main findings related to trust and self-trust in the leaders' stories. Based on an interpretative framework and building on a phenomenological and ethnomethodological perspective, I show how Ladkin's idea of the leadership moment, together with Lührmann and Eberl's identity theory as a model for leadership identity construction, correspond to the theory of narrative ecology, wherein the leaders operate as creative bricoleurs constructing their narrative identities by drawing upon resources in a narrative ecosystem.

The discussion attempts to elucidate how trust and self-trust provide agency for post-heroic leadership mastery, replacing leadership agency associated with formal power and authority that links to traditional leadership ideas. As part of this, the text examines how the heroic and post-heroic leadership paradigms operate as competing big "D" Discourses, occurring side by side in the little "d" discursive leadership-as-talk identity context. My main argument is that the tension-filled contradiction between heroic and post-heroic leadership Discourse is resolved by metaphors fuelled by notions of trust and self-trust in discursive leadership practices, which function as narrative rescue remedies, providing the leader with identity resources that validate and stabilise the identity construct.

In addition, a potential eclipse in the literature on trust in leadership research is examined, wherein I point to the absence of risk in the empirical material of this project, and ask how this nonappearance can be understood in a post-heroic leadership-identity context. Lastly, I look to how the leadership identity construction project materialised in this study can be understood in the light of a self-realisation, anti-establishment fashion in popular management.



# Sammendrag

Det fenomenologiske aspektet knyttet til tillit og selvtillit i narrative konstruksjoner av lederidentitet er et lite utforsket tema i ledelsesstudier. Basert på en kritisk tilnærming til ledelse og med utgangspunkt i en empirisk undersøkelse bygget på kvalitative intervjuer med 20 ledere, er denne studien et bidrag til et bredere perspektiv på konstruksjonen av post-heroisk lederidentitet. Teksten tar for seg aspekter ved den narrative økologien i tillit og selvtillit relatert til konstruksjonen av lederidentitet i en post-heroisk kontekst. Studien fokuserer på hvordan en dyadisk sameksistens mellom tillit og selvtillit i lederskapsspråk kan forstås som en underliggende kraft i narrative konstruksjoner av lederidentitet.

Diskusjonen går i dybden på fire hovedfunn knyttet til tillit og selvtillit i lederens fortellinger. Med utgangspunkt i et fortolkende rammeverk og med basis i et fenomenologisk og etnometodologisk perspektiv, viser jeg hvordan Ladkins teori om the leadership moment, sammen med Lührmann og Eberls teori om identitet som en modell for konstruksjon av lederidentitet, korresponderer med teorien om en narrativ økologi, hvor lederne opererer som kreative brikolører i konstruksjonen av sine narrative identiteter ved å trekke på ressurser i et narrativt økosystem.

Diskusjonen ønsker å belyse hvordan tillit og selvtillit gir handlingsrom for post-heroisk mestring og erstatter handlingsrom i ledelse forbundet med formell makt og autoritet knyttet til tradisjonelle ideer om ledelse. Som en del av dette tar jeg for meg hvordan det heroiske og post-heroiske ledelsesparadigmet opererer som konkurrerende stor «D»-diskurser, side om side i den lokale, lille «d» -ledelse-som-snakke diskursive konteksten.

Hovedargumentet er at den motsetningsfylte spenningen mellom den heroiske og post-heroiske ledelsesdiskursen løses av metaforer, drevet av forestillinger om tillit og selvtillit i diskursive ledelsespraksiser som fungerer som narrative redningsplanker, og som gir lederen tilgang på ressurser som validerer og stabiliserer identitetskonstruksjonen.

Jeg ser også nærmere på en potensiell eklipse i ledelseslitteraturen, hvor jeg peker på fraværet av risiko i avhandlingens empiriske materiale, og spør hvordan dette fraværet kan forstås i en post-heroisk kontekst for lederidentitet. Til sist ser jeg på hvordan prosjektene knyttet til konstruksjonen av lederidentitet i dette studiet kan forstås i lys av en selvrealiserings- og anti-establishmenttrend i populærvitenskapelig ledelse.

On a cosmic scale, our life is insignificant, yet this brief period when we appear in the world is the time in which all meaningful questions arise.  
(Ricoeur 1985, p. 263)

# Content

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>SAMMENDRAG .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>CONTENT .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>11</b>
1.1 Background of the study .....	12
1.2 Some reflections on the methodology .....	16
1.3 Organisation of the thesis .....	18
<b>CHAPTER 2. THE CONSTRUCT OF LEADERSHIP .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>2.1 Taking flight on the leadership map.....</b>	<b>21</b>
2.1.1 The slipperiness of leadership as a concept .....	21
2.1.2 The era of the lonely hero.....	22
2.1.3 From lonely heroes to shared leadership.....	26
2.1.4 Leadership as a social and reciprocal co-construct of meaning .....	29
2.1.5 The critical take on leadership: a power perspective .....	30
2.1.6 Challenging ontological and epistemological blind spots .....	31
2.1.7 Leadership approached from a phenomenological point of view .....	32
2.1.8 The lifeworld of the leader: subtle pieces of indefinite wholes.....	35
<b>2.2 The construction of leadership identity .....</b>	<b>36</b>
2.2.1 What is identity in a leadership context? .....	37
2.2.2 Identity as meaning attached to the self .....	38
2.2.3 Phenomenological approaches to leadership identity .....	40
2.2.4 Leadership identity as a narrative construct.....	41
2.2.5 The narrative as formula for felt and lived human experience.....	42
2.2.6 Leadership identity viewed with a linguistic lens .....	44
2.2.7 Leadership language as ideological practice.....	46
2.2.8 Big ‘D’ Discourse and little ‘d’ discursive practice .....	48
2.2.9 Leadership language as agency .....	50
2.2.10 Leadership language as identity work and performativity .....	53

Concluding notes.....	55
-----------------------	----

## CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY: PATH OF INQUIRY..... 57

<b>3.1 Ontological and epistemological positioning.....</b>	<b>58</b>
3.1.1 Ontological stance .....	58
3.1.2 Epistemological stance .....	61
<b>3.2 The qualitative interview as research method .....</b>	<b>64</b>
3.2.1 Establishing the empirical ground: the qualitative interview as a field.....	64
3.2.2 Reliability and validity in the qualitative context.....	65
3.2.3 The qualitative investigation as a mystery method.....	66
3.2.4 Sliding interfaces between the researcher and the researched.....	68
3.2.5 The ethnomethodological lens .....	68
3.2.6 The researcher's point of departure .....	71
<b>3.3 The interview as context: a co-creative encounter .....</b>	<b>72</b>
3.3.1 The researcher-interviewee relationship and the role of the researcher .....	73
3.3.2 Tacit knowledge as a source of data .....	75
3.3.3 The process approach.....	78
3.3.4 Bracketing as analytic approach and tool .....	80
<b>3.4 Research design and procedures.....</b>	<b>84</b>
3.4.1 Rationale and assumptions for the research design .....	85
3.4.2 Selecting the interviewees.....	87
3.4.3 Establishing contact with the interviewees .....	89
3.4.4 Designing the interview guide .....	91
3.4.5 Context for interviewing.....	93
3.4.6 Establishing rapport.....	94
3.4.7 Ethics in the interview setting.....	95
3.4.8 Facilitating insight gathering: conducting the interviews.....	96
<b>3.5 Insight work: processing and analysis of the interview material .....</b>	<b>99</b>
3.5.1 The qualitative interview as a vessel of topics for interpretative practice .....	99
3.5.2 Transcribing the interviews .....	100
3.5.3 Coding the interviews: Labelling the narrative luggage .....	101
3.5.4 The process of translating data .....	105
3.5.5 Making sense: Analysing data .....	107
3.5.6 Stories on leadership as language at work .....	109
3.5.7 From interview transcripts to empirical material.....	112
Concluding notes.....	113

## CHAPTER 4. TRUST AND SELF-TRUST IN STORIES ON LEADERSHIP IDENTITY 116

4.1.1 They need to have trust.....	117
4.1.2 Trust and self-trust as strategic means .....	119
<b>4.2 Trust and self-trust as a provider for leadership autonomy.....</b>	<b>121</b>
4.2.1 Trust, self-trust and the tactics of hierarchical control.....	122
4.2.2 We are family .....	123
4.2.3 Daring to take critique.....	125
<b>4.3 Trust and self-trust as capacity for going close.....</b>	<b>128</b>
4.3.1 Deploying trust: to dare intimacy and embrace discomfort.....	128

4.3.2 Love as a prerequisite for trust .....	131
4.3.3 Trust and self-trust as active compassion .....	132
<b>4.4 Trust and self-trust in leadership as game mastering.....</b>	<b>135</b>
4.4.1 Lubricant, facilitator and game master .....	137
4.4.2 Informal intermissions .....	138
4.4.3 A tribe where one's voice must be heard.....	139
<b>4.5 The power of presence in leadership identity constructions .....</b>	<b>143</b>
4.5.1 Orchestrating people .....	144
4.5.2 Far away from command and control.....	145
4.5.3 A lot of practicing and hullabaloo .....	146
<b>4.6 Trust and self-trust as instruments for keeping control.....</b>	<b>146</b>
4.6.1 A lovely blend .....	149
4.6.2 Identity contradictions .....	150
4.6.3 A complex interface.....	152
<b>4.7 Trust and self-trust as built-in method .....</b>	<b>153</b>
4.7.1 First and foremost a co-worker.....	155
4.7.2 Locus of control.....	155
<b>Concluding notes.....</b>	<b>156</b>
 <b>CHAPTER 5. TRUST AND SELF-TRUST IN LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTIONS.....</b>	 <b>162</b>
<b>5.1 A narrative ecology of trust and self-trust in leadership identity constructions.....</b>	<b>163</b>
5.1.1 Leadership language in the narrative ecology of trust and self-trust.....	165
5.1.2 The request for a qualitative exploration of trust and self-trust in leadership research .....	166
5.1.3 Narrative ecology as a conceptual monitor for leadership identity constructions .....	172
5.1.4 Vital elements in a narrative ecology of leadership identity .....	173
5.1.5 A narrative ecology as a diverse pool of identity resources .....	174
<b>5.2 The role of metaphors in a narrative ecology of leadership identity construction.....</b>	<b>176</b>
5.2.1 Metaphors as vehicles for meaning—getting around in the leadership world .....	176
5.2.2 The leader as a liable caretaker.....	180
5.2.3. Metaphors relating to authentic leadership.....	182
5.2.4 The significance of the nonspoken metaphors.....	184
<b>5.3 The presence of leadership Discourses in discursive leadership identity construction.....</b>	<b>184</b>
5.3.1 What trust and self-trust <i>are</i> and what trust and self-trust <i>do</i> .....	185
5.3.2 Seven recurring elements in the narrative ecology of trust and self-trust.....	186
5.3.3 The seven elements and the 5P framework.....	192
5.3.4 Trust and self-trust as primary assets in the perception of leadership agency.....	193
5.3.5 The quest for equality: 'The leadership has decided' .....	194
5.3.6 Self-trust, self-belief and self-confidence .....	195
<b>5.4 The significance of downplaying formal power .....</b>	<b>199</b>
5.4.1 A latent contradiction .....	199
5.4.2 Trust, self-trust and notions about relational symmetry .....	200
5.4.3 Downplaying formal power and the quest for unique leadership.....	201
<b>5.5 Stories on trust, self-trust and the peculiar absence of risk.....</b>	<b>204</b>

5.5.1 A puzzle concerning the absence of risk in the leaders' stories.....	205
5.5.2 Rival Discourses' influence on discursive practice.....	207
5.5.3 An eclipsed discourse on trust in the leadership literature.....	208
5.5.4 A negative presence in leadership language .....	208
<b>5.6 Leadership identity construction and the quest for stability .....</b>	<b>210</b>
5.6.1 A constant working consensus .....	211
5.6.2 The need for convincing identity proposals.....	212
5.6.3 Ambiguity as a productive identity asset.....	213
5.6.4 The hows and whats of the critical tipping point in leadership identity constructions .....	214
5.6.5 The leader as a narrative identity bricoleur.....	216
5.6.6 Leadership identity as a consumptive phenomenon.....	218
5.6.7 Post-heroic leadership identity as a vulnerable construct .....	220
<b>Concluding notes.....</b>	<b>221</b>
 <b>CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION, RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH .....</b>	 <b>223</b>
<b>6.1 Summary of the study .....</b>	<b>223</b>
6.1.1 Methodological approach .....	223
6.1.2 Limitations of the study.....	224
<b>Research contributions .....</b>	<b>231</b>
<b>Recommendations for future research.....</b>	<b>232</b>
 <b>LIST OF REFERENCES .....</b>	 <b>237</b>
 <b>APPENDIX .....</b>	 <b>264</b>
 <b>LIST OF FIGURES</b>	
Figure 1: The research process: Decision Tree for mystery-focused research.....	67
 <b>LIST OF TABLES</b>	
Table 1: Final list of interviewees .....	91

# Chapter 1. Introduction

What beauty and ugliness can we discover in the existence, practice and consequence of leadership? We interpret the place of leadership in life. That interpretation often distinguishes two important kinds of features of leadership. On the one hand, leadership has an instrumental role. It is implicit in the most common technology of organizing—the hierarchy. At the same time, leadership has a symbolic role. It is an important element in our interpretations of history and experience. It is tied to ancient mythic stories that frame modern understandings. (March & Weil, 2009, p. 7)

In this thesis, the context for the undertaken investigation of leadership identity is how the construction of leadership identity in a post-heroic context materialises in stories told by leaders. The investigation builds on an empirical inquiry based on qualitative interviews with 20 leaders. In particular, the occurrence of trust and self-trust in stories on leadership are investigated as narrative constituents of leadership identity constructions in a discourse context. Hence, the construction of leadership identity is approached as ‘inherently laced with discourses and narratives’ (Sun, 2016, p. 581).

In particular, I examine four main findings related to trust and self-trust in leaders’ stories: the downplaying of hierarchy and formal power, the absence of risk, the accentuation of individuality in leadership, and metaphors for trust and self-trust playing into the narratives on leadership identity. I present stories that to my understanding illuminate dimensions of understanding of leadership identity, conveyed from leaders’ point of view. In taking leaders’ tales as a source, the aim is to distil the conceptualisations of leadership identity that appear throughout the tales. The investigative lens is directed towards leaders’ self-perception of leadership identity to understand the occurrences of core topics, as I approach my main research question: What are leaders really talking about when they talk about their identity as leaders?

In a theoretical research context, this departure point positions this project with leadership identity studies, where my aim is to reach a deeper understanding of leadership identity based on how leaders “create meaning and achieve a balanced existence in a world in which it is often difficult to manoeuvre”, to paraphrase Sveningsson and Alvesson work on leadership identity (2016, p. 279).

Rooted in the tradition within critical leadership studies, this study departs from a phenomenological and ethnomethodological perspective, wherein I pair my interpretation of the findings with a model for leadership identity constructions. More specifically, I apply an interpretative framework through which I investigate the findings, where I use the leadership moment model proposed by Ladkin (2010) and an identity theory for leadership identity constructions presented by Lührmann and Eberl (2007), combined with the concept of a narrative ecology.

## 1.1 Background of the study

Throughout history, leadership as a phenomenon can be said to represent a formidable and idealised romanticism for societies around the world, leading to both noble and wicked results. There are many indications that the grand romantic notion of leaders and leadership is both dangerous and deceptive (Blom & Alvesson, 2015; Grint, 2005; Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985). Leadership is a domain in which constant clashes of interests and morals occur, and where history serves as an explanation for why leaders continue to make bad decisions (Grint, 2005; Sinclair, 2007).

Consequently, researchers should not avoid the ambiguity associated with leadership as a concept by rejecting engagement with leadership as a topic, but rather be aware of false assumptions and challenge naïve biases (Meindl, 1995). Accordingly, leadership research must address how leadership romanticism bears phenomenological significance for people's experience with leadership in organisations. It is on the background of this perspective that I deem it interesting to engage with narratives on leadership told from a leader's point of view.

Leadership as a fashion has occupied a role as a contemporary, predominating myth in social life (Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson, 2016; Nyberg & Sveningsson, 2014; Sørensen & Villadsen, 2017). Social life organised around notions of this 'thing' we call leadership gains as much attention from scholars as it does from practitioners. The idealisation of leaders and leadership is fuelled by practitioners, mass-popular media and leadership scholars, and the idea that leaders represent an all-inclusive recipe for 'a range of good things in life' seems to be more embraced than ever (Blom & Alvesson, 2015, p. 480). Whatever the problem is, leadership seems to be advocated as the 'catch-all' solution. Leadership is often presented as a certain type of alchemy that is potent in transforming organisations into gold (Sims, 2010).

However, in spite of what we think of as leadership's great influence, there is 'no clear or simple explanation of its workings, nor its effects' (Fairhurst, 2011, p. 108). There is hardly a research



text on leadership from the last four decades that does not start out by stating that leadership, both as a theoretical concept and practice phenomenon, is gravely suffering from a lack of clear definition, understanding and application in general. The same can be said of leadership identity as a phenomenon. When pursued as a practice, leadership seems to dissolve into mundane managerial activities (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a, 2003b), yet in the stories that are presented in this thesis, the notion of leadership as a tangible phenomenon is strong among leaders in terms of how they talk about their leadership identity.

Viewing leadership identity as a social construct, the particular context and its content play significant roles for how leadership and leadership identity can be understood. Leadership must be thought of in the light of historical, cultural and ideological contexts (Blom & Alvesson, 2015). Hence, to grasp the meaning of leadership as identity, it must be approached in the light of the specific environment in which the leadership identity is constructed, communicated and negotiated. Furthermore, because leadership identity as a social construct is not possible to observe as an isolated phenomenon, it must be viewed through the lens of the main social tool for constructing meaning, which in this setting means language, or more specifically, leadership language.

The linguistic approach in leadership research is based on the idea that language is vital in social life (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a; Fairhurst, 2007, 2009). We live in a 'storytelling society' (Benwell & Stokoe, 2010). As Kearney (2002) stated, 'stories are what makes our lives worth living. They are what make our condition human' (Kearney, 2002, p. 3). This is because we are constantly in the process of making sense of our lives through the meaningful arrangement of characters and events (Czarniawska, 1998, 2004; Kelly, Iszatt-White, & Rouncefield, 2005; Ricoeur, 1988). Narrative scholars maintain that 'it is through storytelling that people's lives are experienced and made meaningful, and their identities constructed' (Stokoe & Edwards, 2006, p. 56). From a narrative perspective, identities are moulded and fashioned through the local narratives that people tell about themselves, as well as through broader cultural narratives, referred to as 'master narratives' (Somers, 1994). To take this one step further, some theorists have even suggested that narratives are identities because 'we become who we are through telling stories about our lives and living the stories we tell' (Bruner, 1994, p. 53).

The purpose of this specific study was to gain greater insights into the self-perception of leaders concerning their leadership identity construct. My idea was that gaining these insights into how leaders themselves express their ideas about their leadership identity might generate a deeper understanding of what it is that leadership does or does not do to organisational life, and what

effects—or lack of effects—that leadership may engender. This is based on the notion that leadership is a central phenomenon in all aspects of organisational life, and therefore, in all aspects of human society.

In contemporary studies on leadership identity, much has been written on the interactional dynamics between leaders and followers, to investigate how leaders and followers construct, apply and interpret meaning in a mutual and dialectic process. In this project, I explored leaders' own points of view by investigating the use of leadership language in stories on leadership identity. A novel feature of this thesis is that it addresses the roles of trust *and* self-trust in narrative leadership identity constructions, in an attempt to grasp how notions about trust and self-trust play a role in the narrative fashioning of leadership identity through the use of leadership language. By applying the linguistic perspective in a leadership identity context approached from a social constructionist stance, this project diverges from much other research that addresses trust in leadership from a trait-based, quantitative outlook (Bryman, 2004). More specifically, it is trust and self-trust as empirical phenomena in stories about leaders' lifeworlds that is the core focus for this investigation, not trust as theoretical concept in itself.

Consulting existing literature on trust in leadership for this project, I found that little if any research has been conducted relating to the main research question of this investigation. Extensively searching to discover literature that treats trust as an empirical category derived from a leader's point of view in a qualitative setting has proven close to futile. When I added the concept of self-trust, the terrain of existing research literature with a qualitative basis is even more barren. This is in spite of the fact that trust in leadership studies is an emerging research field. This investigation confirms that although trust has attracted increasing attention during the last decade, it can still be said to be a highly underexplored topic.

In social sciences in general, trust in theory is established as a significant research domain. Scholars from a range of social sciences have contributed to substantial research on trust, as well as within organisation studies (Kramer & Taylor, 1996). Prominent scholars within political science, institutional theory, psychology, sociology and economics have gained interest in trust as a research topic (Rousseau et al., 1998; Bryman, 2011; Mishra & Mishra, 2013). However, little of the existing research on trust in social sciences has been considered and applied to leadership studies, particularly in the qualitative field (Bryman, 2011). Thus, this clearly presents an open challenge for leadership scholars to aim for greater empirical knowledge about trust as a phenomenon in leadership, as well as to discover more about how trust is lived, felt and made

sense of; in other words, how trust is understood, fostered, maintained and developed among leaders. In this sense, this project is a contribution to such knowledge.

The social and cultural canon that influences the ideas about leadership identity represents a magnitude of perspectives, yet the main distinction remains the one between the heroic and post-heroic leadership paradigms. By addressing the narrative construction of leadership identity in a post-heroic context, this thesis draws upon an eclectic conjunction of theories relating to leadership identity, in which leadership identity is viewed from a social constructionist stance. Bringing together leadership identity theories from phenomenology and Ladkin's model of the leadership moment, anthropology and identity psychology, this thesis offers a different perspective on leadership identity constructions.

Throughout the stories presented herein, a range of phenomena in leadership as a constructed identity emerge. My primary aim is to show how these phenomena can be said to be constituents of leaders' perceptions of their own identity as leaders. Through these designated cases, it is my ambition to present 'rich' stories on leader's identities, as told from the leader's point of view. Specifically, my objective is to illuminate how trust and self-trust materialise as core components in a narrative ecology in these stories.

As March and Weil write, the place of leadership in life is constant and constantly interpreted; it is the primary tool for organising social life and its symbolic influence is undeniable, as is the ambivalence and ambiguity associated with leadership—both as concept and as practice. In leadership studies, more space has traditionally been allocated for the scholar's interpretation than that of the practitioners themselves. Hence, the conceptual confusion concerning leadership as theory is apparent for anyone entering the field, as put by DeVries (1994):

When we plunge into the organizational literature on leadership we quickly become lost in a labyrinth: there are endless definitions, countless articles and never-ending polemics. As far as leadership studies go, it seems that more and more has been studied about less and less, to end up ironically with a group of researchers studying everything about nothing. It prompted one wit to say recently that reading the current world literature on leadership is rather like going through the Parisian telephone directory while trying to read it in Chinese! (De Vries, 1994, p. 73).

Although the amount of quantitative research on leadership as theory and practice seems abundant, much less qualitative research has investigated the subject. In particular, there appear

to be limited empirical data on the ‘lifeworld’ of leaders. Concerning the leader’s personal experience with identity construction related to the leadership role, not many empirical investigations exist (Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006). Thus, this project aimed to contribute to knowledge about the lived experience of leaders and their lived, felt and interpreted lifeworld (Nyberg & Sveningsson, 2014; Caza & Jackson, 2011; Cunliffe, 2009).

The undertaken project builds on three main dimensions. In the first dimension, I present leaders’ own stories about their leadership identities. In the second, I pursue the roles of trust and self-trust as crucial elements in these identity constructions; I frame this investigation on the grounds of an idea wherein I approach the empirical data as a form of narrative ecology of trust and self-trust in leadership identity constructions. Finally, in the third dimension, I examine how these stories can be understood as leadership identity constructions in a post-heroic context.

## 1.2 Some reflections on the methodology

The initial motivation for conducting this research project was three-fold. Having worked with leadership development for many years in various contexts both as a leadership consultant and coach, as well as an action-based researcher, I saw a unique opportunity with this project to tap into the lifeworld of leaders through the tales of various leaders. This was to be in a much more profound manner than what is feasible in traditional leadership development- or action-based research contexts. The dominant motivation was my curiosity for how leaders themselves conceptualise their leadership identity, combined with a desire to go beneath the superficial and the obvious, or what Sveningsson and Alvesson referred to as ‘formulae for success and juicy hero narratives’ (2016, p. 279).

Another motivation method-wise was the chance to conduct in-depth qualitative interviews with executive leaders to an extent that previously (to my knowledge) had not been done in a Norwegian context. Whereas the majority of leadership studies continue to be based on quantitative accounts, the qualitative volume that has been growing since the 1990s mostly offers conventional qualitative investigations based on case studies and most often with middle managers in focus. The majority of these qualitative studies have taken a leader-follower perspective as their point of departure, through which the follower’s perspective is the main premise for the investigative venture. In sum, I eyed the chance to perform a qualitative study on leadership that would stand out from the mainstream.

Because I selected a qualitative approach for this explorative project, the romantic notion of being able to reveal the ‘one and only truth’ about leaders’ innermost opinions and emotions concerning

their identities as leader has not been an objective. Likewise, the empirical data pertaining to this study only account for tales about leadership identity and my interpretation of these tales, not for leadership as practice.

Yet, from the polyphony of leaders' voices that constitutes my data, one aspiration has been to extract some findings that may have some impact on how we as researchers might understand and conceptualise leadership identity in a post-heroic context. One such impact may emerge from a further inquiry into the grounds on which theories of leadership identity are developed in leadership studies. Another influence may arise from an auxiliary exploration of how concepts of leadership identity relate critically to leadership as institutionalised power in organisational life.

The construct of leadership identity implies fostering a sense of the leadership 'personality'. This activity is related to human sensemaking, sensegiving and meaning-making. As a vital part of this sensemaking, the use of narratives that carry notions of both coherence and ambiguity is central (Hoyer & Stayaert, 2015). When pointing the investigative lens towards leadership as narrative identity constructions, a sensemaking approach seems particularly relevant because the concept of leadership today is greatly challenged by global alterations in how organisations and businesses are established, managed, distributed, and not the least, financially operated. When conceptual paradigms for organisational life are challenged and altered, it appears reasonable to be curious about the consequences this has for how researchers understand and address the concept of leadership. Thus, concerning leadership, sensemaking applies to both the great cosmic themes and tiny local issues (Ancona, 2012).

Concerning the choice of methodology for this project, the intertwined dynamics of the great cosmic and the tiny local phenomena that have influenced my sensemaking of narratives on leadership identity correspond closely to the phenomenological outlook of this work. With its hermeneutical foundation and continuous interpretative processing of data, the method of analytic bracketing (Gearing, 2004; Holstein & Gubrium, 2011; Van Manen, 2014) that I have applied as a means to develop my constructionist research from start to end has been vital for how I have manoeuvred along the axes of great discourses-in-practice and the local discursive practice in leadership-as-talk, and for how I have approached the manufacturing of raw interview data and the translation of them into meaningful concepts for discussion. Taking phenomenology's curiosity imperative as my starting point for this project, the choice of method along with the theoretical framing has allowed me to 'surrendering to a state of wonder' (Van Manen, 2014; p. 27), exploring the particularities of leadership narratives and aiming at understand them and the phenomenon of leadership identity as a social construct, in the light of a larger social context.

To rephrase Van Manen (2014), my wonder with what leadership identity as a narrative construct gives itself and how it gives itself relates to a curiosity about contemporary leaders' own understanding of their leadership project and their experiences as leaders. Moreover, the passion for understanding how identity as a leader comes to life and what it actually means is about an urge for new knowledge on leaders and leadership as part of organisations, which are forms of organic systems, driven by the human capacity to add and subtract meaning through intentions and interpretations. In this fabric woven by constant sensemaking, leadership identity is a red thread. To grasp more of how leaders themselves understand their own role in their local ecosystem is to gain more insight into organisational and human life.

For leadership researchers, because of the relational character of leadership identities, the qualitative approach is a prerequisite for grasping the significance of the particular context that influences a particular identity as a construct. In this regard, this project is an attempt to contribute to such particular knowledge about leadership identity constructions.

On a more personal note, the point regarding the urge to understand leadership from a more holistic perspective seems to be no less relevant as the world is about to enter a new year, leaving behind 2018, which has been a disheartening reinforcement of dictatorial leadership in various parts of the world. Simultaneously, 2018 has been a revealing milestone concerning the discovery of how ancient hegemonies of dominance associated with leadership can be altered when people begin to participate in a public discourse about the destructive work of power dynamics attached to leaders' leadership and the heroic appeal surrounding it (#metoo).

### 1.3 Organisation of the thesis

This thesis consists of seven chapters. As a starting point for addressing the research question, Chapter 2 reviews the most relevant theoretical ideas about leadership as a construct. Here, concepts and corresponding literature in the field of leadership research are examined to establish a vocabulary and theoretical framing that serves the purpose of this study. Along with this review, I present critical views and new, emerging understandings of leadership; for example, the phenomenological perspective that views leadership identity as a compilation of defining moments occurring in the leader's lifeworld, leadership as a narrative construct, and leadership language as performance and agency. Chapter 2 draws on a miscellaneous combination of theoretical concepts that serve as lenses through which to investigate the narrative construct of leadership identity.

Chapter 3 presents the methodological path of investigation for this study. Here, I declare my ontological and epistemological stance, explain how the research was designed, and describe how the research process was shepherded. Furthermore, I present how the interviewing and insight gathering of leaders' stories were conducted.

Chapter 4 offers a rich presentation and analysis of the empirical material of this study. In addition, I examine the various ways that leaders apply leadership language to describe their leadership identity.

Chapter 5 is a discussion of the main findings from the analysis, wherein I pursue how the findings can be understood as significant for the stated research question. The discussion centres around four main themes that are elaborated upon, emphasising how formal power in leadership is downplayed while individual leadership is accentuated. The core discussion treats the rivalry between two different Discourses in the discursive leadership setting, pointing at paradoxes in the construction of leadership identities in a post-heroic context. Furthermore, other related themes are discussed to enhance the understanding of the findings.

Chapter 6 sets forth the main conclusions drawn from this research, bridging the perspectives brought forward in the discussion with reflections concerning possible consequences and effects of contemporary leadership identity.

Finally, Chapter 7 provides a complete list of references for the study.

## Chapter 2. The construct of leadership

The difficulties associated with studying leadership should not deter the persistent inquirer. However, those researching it need to be very transparent about the angle from which they approach it and be clear about the purposes informing the question they pose. They need to be mindful of the nature of the phenomenon being investigated and recognize the limitations of any method used to examine it. (Ladkin, 2010, p.189)

This thesis engages with the construct of leadership identity as it emerges in discursive leadership, examining leadership language and the agency created in the interface between heroic and post-heroic leadership discourse. Therefore, the objective of this chapter is to contextualise the phenomenon of leadership identity as construct in light of the current contributions within leadership theory that I consider to hold a relevance to my research topic. As indicated by Ladkin, complications arise when undertaking an investigation concerning leadership. This chapter demonstrates why this is so as well as how the framework is prepared for the current project to be able to deal with the difficulties surrounding leadership as an object of academic interest.

This chapter is divided into two parts. First, I provide a conceptual overview of the multifaceted landscape of leadership studies. Here, I particularly aim to demonstrate how the heroic and post-heroic leadership paradigms represent two major ontological stances in leadership theory, as well as how this ontological divide has challenged and informed the epistemological approach in leadership studies. A presentation of this theoretical discourse is of particular relevance, not only for positioning my own work within the existing literature of leadership research but also because the treatise of heroic and post-heroic leadership as discourse is highly central to the forthcoming discussion in this thesis.

Consequently, as an element of the first part of this chapter, I examine the growing body of critical stances that has materialised during the last couple of decades, which opposes established leadership theories and challenges the mainstream notions of what leadership is and what it is not, and hence, how it could be approached by researchers.

In the second part, I aim my lens at the field of theories on leadership identity construction, wherein I pay particular attention to introducing the linguistic approach in leadership identity



studies and engage with theories on leadership identity as a narrative construct. Through this, my aim is to establish a theoretical framework that can provide a conceptual foundation for how the empirical material of this thesis is to be analysed and addressed. In particular, concepts of leadership Discourse, discursive leadership and leadership language as agency are focused upon, wherein leadership language as agency and as performative in the discursive construction of leadership identity is a central theme.

As the title of this chapter implies, this study is positioned within the social constructionist and phenomenological stance, approaching leadership as a construct. More specifically, the study relates to the environment of critical leadership studies (CLS) (Collinson, 2011). Thus, another main objective of this literature review is to show not only how this project relates to established theories in the field but also reveal how it points to domains in leadership identity studies that remain to be explored.

## 2.1 Taking flight on the leadership map

Leadership as an object of scholarly interest dates back to ancient Greece and China (Bryman, 2011); in other words, it has long attracted the interest of both Eastern and Western philosophers. However, leadership only emerged as a domain in Western academia as a consequence of scientific management attracting academic interest in the early 1900s. With the era of enlightenment and industrialisation in the Western world, the study of modern organisations was set on the research agenda, and so was leadership. A brief revisit of leadership theory's major attempts to define what leadership is reveals an intricate terrain.

### 2.1.1 The slipperiness of leadership as a concept

Decades of scholarly efforts to conceptualise leadership as both idea and practice have resulted in a large map with no clear destination. DuBrin (2012) indicated a total of 35 000 different definitions of leadership in academic literature. In a similar exercise, Rost (1993) examined written materials on leadership from a range of scientific domains, and identified 200 distinct definitions. Moreover, out of 587 publications reviewed by Rost, a total of 386 did not apply a definition of leadership at all. Similarly, Dinh and colleagues identified no less than 66 different domains of leadership theory in their review across 10 top-tier academic journals (Dinh et al., 2014).

In other words, the term 'leadership' continues to bewilder, despite numerous efforts to clarify the concept. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a) indicated why this might be, showing how it has proven difficult to point to exactly when leadership happens in a constant flow of mundane and

ordinary activities. Their empirical study illustrated the difficult task of presenting leadership as having a universally measurable size. Furthermore, almost every single publication on leadership reviewed for this particular work starts with a disclaimer about the entangled myriad of conceptual definitions, which indicates the problematic aspect of engaging with leadership as a research field. Consequently, Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a) diagnosed a limping leg in leadership research, stating that:

Leadership is a topic—or rather a label for a variety of more or less related issues—that has received attention in thousands of empirical studies, theoretical work, and popular writings offering more or less well-grounded recipes for successful managerial work. Still, there is considerable discontent with what has been accomplished, and it can be argued that we still do not understand leadership particularly well. (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a, p. 359)

Ideas of leadership as concept applied in leadership studies do not follow a neat chronological order (Northouse, 2012; Bryman, 2011). They blend, overlap, diffuse and run in parallel. Moreover, they compete for attention and recognition and operate concurrently (Peck & Dickinson, 2009). Each of these terrains can be seen as representing their particular topography on the historical map of leadership in a somewhat stochastic order. Within each, various scholars over generations have contributed to a magnitude of ideas, details, nuances, criticisms and appraisals.

Because this project engages with the friction between two main contrasting understandings of leadership, the heroic and post-heroic perspectives, I dwell in the following subsections on the central aspects related to them that bear particular relevance to the discussion of this thesis.

### 2.1.2 The era of the lonely hero

For a long time, leadership studies were largely dominated by North American scholars, mainly from the field of quantitative psychology and primarily engaging with leadership as a transactional, predictable instrument for enhancing organisations' performance (Bryman, 2011; Crevani, Lindgren, & Packendorf, 2007; Sinclair 2007). The paradigm of heroic leadership in Western leadership studies has been founded in a belief that builds on an essentialist notion, where leadership is understood as the work of great, heroic men with unique personal attributes. In addition, the point of departure for the first era of leadership research was that leadership is a moral undertaking (Burns, 2004) motivated by a strong will to save the world with leaders, or at

least, to make it a better place. This assumption has added to the image of the leader as a heroic character (Sinclair, 2007).

Furthermore, the understanding of leadership as mainly trait-based and predictable, as advocated within the quantitative paradigm, is often based on military ideals and values. Leadership has been associated with the need for economic growth and efficient operation of large-scale organisations in industrial environments, linking leadership to behaviour signalling authority and hierarchy. Military leadership ideals, embedded in the robust white male and his obedient followers and representing the archetype of the heroic leader, have influenced leadership thinking massively and still do (Sinclair, 2007). The military ideal of what it means to be a leader has been adopted by scholars throughout generations of academics, defining leadership as being about one great man leading the way for the masses, drawing on some form of formal authority and control (Bryman, 2011; Sinclair 2007).

As a consequence of the emergence of scientific management and leadership approached as an instrument for organisational efficiency, trait-based leadership theories soon gained interest among leadership scholars, indicating intrinsic personal qualities in their explanations for why some leaders successfully complete their mission of directing people, giving orders, and getting people to follow (Jackson & Parry, 2011). Burns was an academic pioneer who was often referred to as the father of modern leadership studies; his trait-based tradition forecasts leadership as being strongly related to predictable, static, essentialist characteristics or idealised, stylised 'entity' templates for idealised leadership behaviour. With the leader-centric, trait-based perspective, the heroic notion about the great 'natural born' leader was fostered and embraced in the hemisphere of modern organisations, both by scholars and practitioners (Sinclair, 2007).

During a long epoch, departing from the leader-centric perspective, leadership researchers were largely occupied by searching for methods of measuring the cause and effect of heroic leadership traits, applying sophisticated forms of psychometric calculations to large-scale quantitative data (Bryman, 2011; Sinclair, 2007). The scientific, quantitative paradigm has generated and continues to generate the majority of recognised publications on leadership, and still dominates the peer-reviewed literature.

The widespread, romanticised image of heroic leadership based on personal features, which continues to dominate discourse in mainstream literature and media, is still strongly rooted in business and organisational life, influencing the recruitment of leaders, as well as to a great extent informing the curricula in international business schools educating new leaders (Sinclair, 2007).

As Yukl observed,

There is a mystical, romantic quality associated with leadership, similar to that for other stereotyped heroes in our culture, such as the lone cowboy who single-handedly vanquishes the bad guys and the secret agent who acts alone to save the world from nuclear destruction. (Yukl, 1989, p. 276)

While the quantitative paradigm can still be said to dominate leadership studies, it has developed from being focused on individual traits and a predictable, one-way influence from leader to followers, to recognising the social complexity intrinsic to leadership. The romantic notion about leadership, manifest in the idea of the idealised leader as hero, has increasingly become an object for critique (Meindl, 1995; Sinclair, 2007). The study of leadership has gradually developed from focusing on the merit of the leader as one individual influencing the organisation from a top-down perspective, to accentuating social interplay and process, recognising that a bottom-up dimension also exists in the dynamics of leadership (Dihn et al., 2013). Moreover, with this change, there has been a shift in the ontology of leadership, wherein the post-modern viewpoint has challenged the notion of heroic leadership, introducing post-heroic leadership as an alternative to the heroic leadership style of one man standing alone (Crevani, Lindgren & Packendorf, 2007; Fletcher, 2004).

Today, a common understanding among contemporary leadership researchers is that leadership occurs in a cultural, social and relational context. As part of this recognition, the nonpsychological, multidisciplinary environment of researchers engaging with leadership studies continues to grow steadily. Even if the gap that divides the quantitative and qualitative stance within leadership research continues to be manifest, leadership scholars from both the quantitative and qualitative stand seem to align with at least one common recognition: leadership is the outcome of a complex mosaic of circumstantial factors and must be explored accordingly. However, even if leadership scholars from various traditions now broadly recognise the complexity escorting leadership as a social phenomenon in society, the number of connotations applied to the term leadership as concept is as abundant as it is inconclusive (see Bryman, 2011; Fairhurst, 2007; Northouse, 2012; Western, 2008). This is still the case, even after more than a century of leadership research being recognised as an established domain for academic inquiry, wherein the elusiveness tied to the term ‘leadership’ has been addressed for more than four decades.

The multiple labels for leadership that have emerged throughout the last four decades of leadership research (Bryman, 2011) demonstrate the inherent complexity of leadership as a social phenomenon. This has gradually become manifest as the multitude of definitions has materialised. As part of the clarification project concerning how to define leadership and what it is, how it works and why, attempts have been made to distinguish between the two theoretical concepts of management and leadership (Mintzberg, 2001, 2009). Many scholars have suggested that one method of defining leadership is to separate it from management, stating that a main difference between leaders and managers is that managers aim to do things right, whereas leaders aim to do the right things (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Kotter, 1990, 1998; Rost, 1998). Here, leadership is seen as being about creating a vision and igniting followers' passion to be led, whereas management's mission is to maintain stability and order; alternatively, leadership concerns magic and mystery, whereas management concerns the mundane and nonextraordinary. The intent to separate the two concepts appears to have generated both vague answers and critique (Mintzberg, 2009), but furthermore, it has opened the way for new academic perspectives to challenge the dichotomy. Yukl (1989) claimed that a distinction between leaders and managers is futile, insisting on applying the two terms interchangeably. His argument was supported by the empirical work on Alvesson and Sveningsson on manager and leadership identity talk in an R&D company (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a). The pair also argued that whether leadership talk is an attempt to cover up and mystify the humdrum of managerial work should be questioned (2003b, 2011).

Another major distinction in leadership theory is between transactional and transformational leadership, as presented by Burns (1988). Whereas transactional leadership views leadership as a purely transactional business, the relational aspect is more accentuated in transformational leadership (Bass, 1999). Principal transactional theories of leadership include path-goal theory (House, 1971) and leader-member exchange (LMX) theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), as well as form the basis for charismatic, efficient and visionary leadership as concepts (Wood, 2005). Moreover, the transactional dimension appears in some approaches to followership (Riggio, Chaleff, & Lipman-Blumen, 2008). A significant body of leadership research concentrates on the role of the transformational leadership ideal, in which personal attributes of the leader are believed to empower him or her to make groups and organisations follow and change (Avolio & Yammarino, 2003; Bono & Judge, 2003). Furthermore, transformational leadership is closely associated with charismatic leadership, in which the leader applies charm and charisma to make his or her followers align and comply with leadership directions (Gardner & Avolio, 1998). Consequently, charismatic leadership has been criticised for being dangerously seductive and misleading (Howell & Avolio, 1992). Grounded in the heroic ideal, both the transactional and

transformational approaches promote an essentialist understanding of leadership, placing importance in the leader's traits and characteristics.

As Wood (2005) and others have indicated, the binary notion of the leader–follower dichotomy that comes with both the transactional and transformational ideas have long overshadowed other perspectives in leadership research. A binary lens places too much weight on the leader's significance as an individual, resulting in an instrumental reification of leadership at the cost of understanding leadership as a social co-construct. Following Wood and his critique of what he identified as the fallacy of misplaced leadership, 'leadership cannot be reduced to an individual social actor or discrete relations among social actors. Rather, it is the unlocalizable 'in' of the 'between' of each, a freely interpenetrating process, whose 'identity' is consistently self-differing' (Wood, 2005, p. 1105).

### 2.1.3 From lonely heroes to shared leadership

Since the mid-1980s, the multi- and interdisciplinary takes on the field have resulted in a magnitude of nuanced views challenging the essentialist idea of the lonely hero. Typical for these different contributions is that they are promoted by scholars who come from the social constructionist tradition, representing a strong qualitative inheritance and focusing on the importance of context and culture (Fairhurst, 2009), challenging the idea that leadership is a predictable static phenomenon (Bryman, 2011; Couto, 2007; Ladkin, 2010, 2013; Northouse, 2013; Western, 2008). Among them is Burns, who stated that 'leadership is the reciprocal process of mobilizing, by persons with certain motives and values, various economic, political, and other resources, in a context of competition and conflict, in order to realize goals independently or mutually held by both leaders and followers' (Burns, 1978, p. 425).

Other established leadership scholars have taken a more influence-oriented view, such as Yukl, who defines leadership as 'the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives' (Yukl, 2006, p. 8), whereas DuBrin defines leadership as 'the ability to inspire confidence in and support among the people who are needed to achieve organizational goals' (DuBrin, 2012; p. 28). Northouse performed a review of how leadership theories depict leadership and found that they have at least four factors in common: 'a) Leadership is a process, b) Leadership involves influence, c) Leadership occurs in a group context and d) Leadership involves common goals' (Northouse, 2012, p. 5). Based on his findings, he offered a definition of leadership, simply stating that 'leadership is a process whereby one individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal' (Northouse, 2012, p. 3).

Nevertheless, even if Burns, Yukl, DuBrin and Northouse have explicitly embraced the idea of leadership as a social and relational phenomenon generated through collective, social interaction, their views persist in placing the leader on a heroic pedestal—no longer as a lonely hero but rather as a form of superhero. This new superhero performs in the relational setting with a particular capacity or competency concerning his or her ability to ‘inspire confidence’, ‘influence others’ and ‘facilitate individual and collective efforts’ as means to accomplish results on behalf of an organisation. In other words, the idea of leadership as a phenomenon largely focuses on the leader’s individual capabilities being maintained even if the lonely hero is abandoned for the recognition of relational mastery.

In contemporary leadership research, the glamorised idea of the solitary hero has been conquered and mostly dismissed for approaches that increasingly recognise leadership as a relational process (Foldy & Ospina, 2012), and replaced with the idea of post-heroic leadership (Ford, 2005). Viewing leadership as the management of meaning rather than by influence, promoting ideas about leadership as relational, processual and shared, the post-heroic paradigm is considered a major shift in leadership literature (Bryman, 2011). The post-heroic is also often referred to as ‘the new leadership paradigm’ as opposed to the heroic, ‘traditional leadership paradigm’ (Bryman, 2011). The need for leaving behind the great, charismatic and resilient hero as the ideal leader has been identified by many contemporary leadership scholars (Blom & Alvesson, 2015; Crevani, Lindgren, & Packendorf, 2007; Fairhurst, 2007; Sinclair, 2007). Yukl stated that the expectations on the leader to be more knowledgeable, wiser and courageous than anyone else in the organisation is a misleading idea. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a) stressed the same belief, aligning with Kelly (2014) when they suggested that a negative ontology of leadership (i.e. *what is not* recognised leadership?) might be considered as a method of coming to terms with the muddled meaning of leadership.

As a response to the long-standing leader-centric notion of leadership, Gronn (2002) set forth his idea about distributed leadership, defining leadership as relations of ‘reciprocal influence’ and seeing distributed leadership as a ‘concerted action’ that sees leaders and followers constituting leadership as joint action, rather than just an aggregation of individual actions as a result of an influential leader. In short, this view can be said to summarise the definitive ideas of post-heroic leadership as being opposite to heroic leadership. Leadership is not the master piece of one man alone, but a reciprocal, relational phenomenon, characterised by shared, distributed power, resulting in positive affects and effects in organisational life (Fletcher, 2004).

Today, the idea about post-heroic, distributed leadership as opposed to heroic leadership has gained recognition in research and among leadership practitioners, and is a central reference when addressing leadership identity constructions in this project.

The advocated need for replacing the idea of the heroic leader with other models to understand leadership was summed up by Crevani and peers, when they approached post-heroic leadership as an alternative perspective and stated that ‘If we want to take leadership research beyond the leader-centred tradition, we must also challenge our deeply rooted tendency to make the abstract notion of ‘leadership’ concrete in the guise of individual managers’ (Crevani, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2010, p. 78). Even if this claim might be a recognised notion among contemporary leadership scholars, particularly for those with a critical stance, stressing the importance of post-heroic leadership as a new alternative, it could be debated whether this perspective is perceived as relevant among leadership practitioners (Sinclair, 2011). The question about the relevance of theoretical definitions of leadership in a practitioner context is inspected more closely in Chapter 5 of this thesis.

Along with distributed leadership, the concept of authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Caza & Jackson, 2011; Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005; Shamir & Eilam, 2005) as a contemporary topic in leadership studies, as well as among practitioners, is relevant for this project. Authentic leadership as a concept can be traced back to ancient Greece, and is associated with knowing one’s true self and acting in accordance with it (Caza & Jackson, 2011, p. 353). Leadership authenticity is measured on the three following levels, and all three levels of authenticity must comply with the criteria: the personal authenticity of an individual, an individual’s authenticity as a leader, and leadership authenticity (Caza & Jackson, 2011; Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Thus, authentic leadership is about knowing oneself as a leader and acting in alignment with this knowledge. Avolio et al. (2004) stated that authentic leadership should be understood as the root construct of all progressive, efficient forms of leadership (Avolio et al., 2004).

The popular mainstream in leadership literature as well as leadership practitioners have embraced the concept, yet little empirical evidence exists that supports the many theoretical contributions (Caza & Jackson, 2011). One obvious challenge with authentic leadership as theory is that although authenticity is claimed to be a deeply individually felt state (I feel authentic; therefore, I am authentic), most empirical research stems from asking followers about their perceptions of their leader as authentic or nonauthentic. Attributed authenticity and felt authenticity do not necessarily correspond. As with the concept of leadership, authenticity as a term can be applied



as the same word, connoting many different meanings. Furthermore, the power dimension must be considered concerning the complexity of the context that influences whether authenticity can be accomplished or not.

Therefore, one fundamental critique raised against authentic leadership as a concept is that authenticity must be treated as a contextual, situational and relational phenomenon (Gardiner, 2011) and not as a constant characteristic or trait attached to the individual leader. As Guthey and Jackson (2005) argued, authentic leadership as a concept can be understood as a contradiction in terms. If defined as intentional and authentic behaviour that a leader must strive to achieve, authentic leadership implies a manifest contradiction: the intention of 'being authentic' sabotages the authentic. Because notions of authentic leadership appear in the empirical data of this project, the concept will be an object for further examination in the discussion chapter (Chapter 5).

#### 2.1.4 Leadership as a social and reciprocal co-construct of meaning

Today, scholars from both the quantitative and qualitative traditions agree that leadership must be viewed as a social co-construct, based on a relational, interpersonal process where the leader influences his or her environment and is likewise influenced by the same environment (Northouse, 2012; Bryman, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

In 2010, Fairhurst and Grant drew on the social constructionist tradition when they concluded that 'leadership is co-constructed, a product of sociohistorical and collective meaning-making, and negotiated on an ongoing basis through a complex interplay among leadership actors, be they designated or emergent leaders, managers, and/or followers' (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; p. 172). For this current project, I adopt the understanding of Fairhurst and Grant when it comes to leadership as a social construct, placing weight on the meaning-making that occurs through the constant negotiation among leadership actors.

Contemporary views acknowledge the dialectic mechanisms between the individual and society, considering leadership an intrapersonal phenomenon; both leaders and their followers engage in a constant, internal subjective process of interpretation, meaning-making and sensemaking in the dialectic interactions between leader and subordinate (Day, 2001; Pye, 2005; Uhl-Bien, 2006). In this regard, the link to the social constructionist paradigm is strong. The possibility of seeing leadership as a highly relational, dynamic phenomenon, based on dialogue and co-construction represents a significant shift in how scholars can explore leadership. When we as researchers put on the glasses through which we understand leadership as a relational phenomenon, it means that we look for mutual affects and effects, reciprocal dynamics, participative sensemaking and the

co-construction of identities in the leadership context, as we ask the following question: How, where, by whom and with what consequences on social structures and dynamics is leadership manufactured?

When leadership is no longer viewed as a predictable, static product but as a dynamic, elastic and shared process fuelled by reciprocal dynamics between people operating in relational contexts with a magnitude of purposes, the researcher's investigative coordinates are challenged. Because this thesis builds on a purely qualitative basis of data and a matching qualitative methodology concerning the interpretation of data, I provide a condensed presentation in the following sections of the most influential and relevant theoretical contributions that reign in the terrain in which leadership is thought of as a social, discursive co-construct. Here, leadership is recognised as a product of a reciprocal process where contexts and relations are vital for how the formatting of leadership identity is understood.

#### 2.1.5 The critical take on leadership: a power perspective

The tradition of CLS, approaching leadership as critique, pays attention to the many concepts of leadership and their underlying, mute notions taken for granted as 'truths' about leadership, as well as questions them. Along with the growing interest in leadership as a popular topic among both researchers and practitioners, a critical stance on leadership has developed among scholars, promoting perspectives that aim to challenge conventional understandings of leadership to advocate the importance of considering dimensions that are often left out when leadership is examined as a social phenomenon.

In recent years, researchers within the field of CLS have addressed the numerous problems arising from the ambiguous and elusive terms applied to define leadership (Collinson, 2011), scrutinising theoretical leadership constructs for their relevance and validity. CLS scholars address the necessity of being willing to see leadership as a rebellious and anarchistic phenomenon that cannot be merged into a fixed form or applied as a stencil. The power perspective is a fundamental departure point in CLS (Alvesson & Jonsson, 2016). Dimensions such as culture, religion, personality, identity, economics, politics and history are among the core elements that influence any context (Bryman, 2004; Sinclair, 2007). Similarly, power structures involving gender, class, ethnicity, sexual identity, socioeconomic backgrounds, cultural notions and religious understandings are crucial components in a leadership context (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a, b; Clegg & Haugaard, 2009). This implies that the introduction of particular elements that constitute and affect contexts must be considered when attempting to understand leadership as a phenomenon.

As a consequence of the particular power perspective, a central idea held by CLS scholars and much informed by ethnographic theory and cultural studies is that instead of aiming at finding the single grand conceptualisation of leadership that applies universally as a general truth, we should instead be looking for the particular and the local, or what Hosking termed ‘multiple local-relational realities’ (Hosking, 2006, p. 5). Here, I see Ladkin’s phenomenological approach to leadership and the purpose aspect strongly aligning with CLS: the power dimension is a consequence of seeing leadership as driven by individually perceived purposes achieved in a socially co-constructed context. This further implies that different individual purposes, or multiple local-relational purposes, can compete within what Ladkin identifies as a leadership moment.

In this sense, this project also aligns with the CLS objective and a phenomenological understanding of leadership, engaging with local particularities in leader’ stories with the aim of contributing to more nuances in the understanding of leadership as a social and contextual phenomenon, wherein competing understandings of leadership emerge rather than promote one universal understanding of what leadership genuinely means.

#### 2.1.6 Challenging ontological and epistemological blind spots

The majority of researchers still tend not to pay sufficient attention to the emotional, embodied dimension of leadership. Such epistemological blind spots left unexplored mean that leadership as a conceptual domain remains unchallenged and the ontology of leadership remains false. This indicates the potential for leadership research in uncovering ‘the hidden discourse of leadership to get beneath the surface of what is really going on’ (Western, 2008, p. 5).

Consequently, critical perspectives on leadership place weight on the language applied in leadership studies and how this language functions to construct ontological ‘truths’ and epistemological ‘realities’ concerning leadership. As part of this, and as claimed by many critical leadership scholars, it is also of great importance to search for discrepancies between what leaders say about what they do and what they actually do in practice (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a, 2003b). Yet, as Collinson stated, ‘leadership power relations and identities are increasingly recognized as being blurred, multiple, ambiguous and contradictory’ (Collinson, 2005, p. 1436).

Alvesson and Spicer picked up on Collinson when they suggested that researchers apply a critical lens to the studies of leadership (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012) to help us refrain from taking current accounts of leadership for granted. Their critique attends to both the particular dialectics of control

and resistance in leadership (Collinson, 2005) and the ideological aspect of leadership (Alvesson & Blom, 2015; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011). Leadership ontology and leadership language is a major component of the ideological aspect of leadership. In this regard, Alvesson and Sveningsson stated that it is crucial to question the epistemology and ontology of the leadership discourse, including ‘the paradigmatic assumptions, methodological preferences, and ideological commitments’ (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a, p.359-360) that dominate mainstream leadership research. They suggested that the particularities of local context and cultural aspects of leadership have more attention paid to them, along with the importance of language and narrative. This corresponds to the critique set forth by Alvesson and Deetz (2000), which proposed that implicit mute notions about the ‘realness’ and assumed ‘robustness’ inherent in much language applied to leadership should likewise be questioned.

Related to the questioning of taken-for-granted truths about leadership and leadership power dynamics, Raelin (2016) suggested that when we approach leadership, we should shift from seeing leadership as passively received and ‘being done to others’ to understand leadership as both practice and process, comprised of participative, interpretative co-creation. Whether people are seen as passive receivers and servers of leadership or as active co-constructors and agents of leadership is a crucial difference in how researchers can approach leadership as a field for investigation.

The present project resides within the critical stance of leadership studies, challenging notions about contemporary leadership identity by inquiring into leadership language and discursive leadership practices and approaching leaders as active constructors of their leadership identity. Therefore, academic arguments such as the aforementioned ones addressing the validity of the leadership concept gain relevance as a framework for how I proceed with the analysis and discussion chapters of this thesis.

### 2.1.7 Leadership approached from a phenomenological point of view

As I have shown, the relational and contextual aspect places weight on how leadership is not executed in a lonely vacuum but is an outcome of cultural, social and relational dynamics. The form and meaning of leadership vary with those involved in the making of it. Thus, leadership is ‘a collective product that is real only at that moment in time and in the view of those involved in it’ (Schedlitzki & Edwards, 2014, p. 7). This is the core of the phenomenological understanding of leadership.

Aligned with Raelin's view of leadership as interpretative action, from the phenomenological domain, Ladkin (2010) argued that the dimension of purpose, which is a central concept in phenomenology, must also be considered when speaking of the leadership context; different individuals will have different purposes for participating in different contexts, and these different purposes will mobilise different personal interpretations and understandings of the context. Thus, if we strive to grasp what leadership is, we must look for what purpose people see in the particular context (Ladkin, 2010). The purpose aspect is relevant to mention here because it surfaces in the empirical material of this thesis as a discursive practice, and thus, will be an object for further investigation.

Ladkin further developed the idea of leadership as a fluctuating and dynamic phenomenon, co-created yet individually experienced, when she invited us to examine leadership with a phenomenological lens by asking “‘what kind of phenomenon is leadership?’ instead of ‘what is leadership?’” (Ladkin, 2010, p. 3). Where the first question indicates that leadership is an objective entity, the phenomenological turn implies that we must take relation, context and purpose into account when studying leadership.

According to the phenomenological perspective set forth by Ladkin, any leader will be affected by the particular context and purpose. For leadership scholars, there is much to be gained by attempting to understand what effects affect the leader and how, as well as what the consequences are, both for a deeper understanding of leadership as a phenomenon and for leadership as an occurrence in the context of a wider ecosystem of organisations.

This perspective relates closely to the idea that discursive leadership and leadership as Discourse must be distinguished (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b; Fairhurst, 2009; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012), which is central to the discussion of leadership identity construction in this thesis. The distinction between discursive leadership and leadership as Discourse is pursued more closely later in this chapter, concerning leadership identity as a narrative construct.

The debate concerning leadership as phenomena and theoretical construct has significant aspects in common with the discourse on culture as concept. As with any abstract conceptualisation of culture, conceptualisations of leadership are just as tricky to match with reality as the concepts of culture. As stated by the semantic scholar Korzybski (1933) and adapted as an important note to self by many contributors in the social sciences, not the least among ethnographers, the map is not the territory. To discuss a phenomenon as an abstraction is something entirely different from living it.

Again, Ladkin indicated the essence of this problematic aspect when conceptualising leadership when she compared leadership with love. We recognise love when we feel it, but talking about love or analysing is not the same as feeling love or being in love. Love as a concept is not the same phenomenon as love in real life. In this setting, the same applies to leadership as an experienced phenomenon (Ladkin, 2010). Here, Ladkin aligned with Alvesson and Kärreman (2000b) in rejecting the quest for ‘the one’ conceptual idea of leadership, seeing the chase for an exclusive and coherent ideology of leadership as futile.

A phenomenological approach seems more fruitful to approach leadership as a myriad of ideological micropractices that build on some common ideas and beliefs, wherein the content of these beliefs and the way they are acted out will always be distinct and unique. Thus, there will be as many forms and understandings of leadership as there are people engaging in the co-creation of what Raelin (2011) termed leaderful practices, or what Ladkin (2010) saw as leadership moments.

Even if this project does not engage with leadership practice as concept according to Raelin’s idea, it addresses stories on leadership and how leaders understand themselves in the light of how they depict their experience with leadership practice. Thus, it becomes of interest to understand how leaders describe their part-taking in the participative, interpretative process of co-creation that Raelin mentions, whether they understand leadership as something that is done to others, as well as how language is an element in that understanding.

If we understand leadership as a product of a reciprocal process and social practice, this means that we must shift from approaching leadership as the instigator to focusing on social practices that produce leadership. Leadership can no longer be thought of as a static entity separated from the people it acts on or from the people who act under it. Instead, we must approach leadership in an opposite fashion: lived leadership first and leadership theory thereafter.

Ladkin developed this stance in her model of the leadership moment. She provided her model as an attempt to explain ‘the plethora’ of leadership theories and definitions as well as a new method of conceptualising the essence of leadership as an object for investigation (Ladkin, 2010). Aligned with other critical leadership scholars such as Alvesson and Kärreman, Ladkin accentuated the importance of recognising that as with leadership in theory, leadership as experience is not a static entity or status. Leadership is a social phenomenon constituted by people of flesh and blood, body and mind, operating in shifting circumstances. One can be a leader in one context and a follower

in another, or both simultaneously (as is the case for middle managers, indicated by Sveningsson and Alvesson [2003] and Thomas and Linstead [2002]).

This indicates that leadership as a phenomenon and identity emerges in particular contexts. The total particularities at any given time influence how that specific leadership is experienced and interpreted there and then by the people involved. Leadership cannot be approached as a phenomenon that exists outside of time, space and place or bodies, because leadership is constituted by and among people who act and interact at a particular time, in a particular space and in a particular place.

#### 2.1.8 The lifeworld of the leader: subtle pieces of indefinite wholes

This perspective on leadership is closely associated with what the father of phenomenology Husserl conceptualised as the ‘lifeworld’ (Husserl, 1970; Ladkin, 2010). Whatever the nature of the particularities concerning leadership brought forward, set in motion and generated through this interaction, they are somehow shipped by, through and with the institutionalised role carried by the people holding the title of leader.

Therefore, when approached with a phenomenological lens, investigating leadership always concerns grasping how the individuals who participate in the co-creative process experience the particular process where leadership is generated at any given time, in a context where power and ideology are also influencing elements. This provides room for the diversity, contrasts, and diverging aspects and experiences tied to leadership that challenge the validity of traditional static concepts of leadership. As Ladkin claimed, ‘there could be as many descriptions of leadership as there are situations in which it arises because it will always be subtly different depending on the “pieces” and “wholes” from which it emerges’ (Ladkin, 2010, p. 26).

Concerning the differentiation between wholes, pieces and moments, Ladkin built on the phenomenological ideas of Sokolowski (2000) when she emphasised how we can only see one side of leadership as a phenomenon at one time. According to this perspective, the various leadership concepts and theories can be seen to address different aspects of leadership, depending on from which side it is examined from. Each contribution is ‘a piece of the leadership puzzle’ (Ladkin, 2010).

Following on from the phenomenological lens, one way to grasp what leadership is about is to examine how leaders perceive their leadership lifeworld as the leaders themselves understand it. Where leadership as a theoretical, abstract concept strives to capture a fixed, applicable ‘one size

fits all' ideal, the phenomenological approach directing attention towards the lived experience of leadership allows us to look behind the general and into the specific. Instead of asking what leadership is, we can ask what leading (or being led) and the co-creation of leadership feels like. As Ladkin indicated, applying the lifeworld perspective demands that we investigate leadership 'in the particular worlds in which it operates' (p. 27).

In this respect, the ideas of both Ladkin and Sokolowski are relevant for this project, its engagement with leaders' stories on leadership, and its exploration of what these stories convey. Even if the interviews that comprise the data for this project are only brief snippets from a leader's lifeworld, they still represent value as one aspect of the leader's lifeworld; they still constitute a piece of the leadership puzzle.

Even if it is possible to argue that Ladkin's idea and model is too indefinite to answer the practical consequences of the philosophical question she raised about leadership as an object for investigations, I believe that it still provides the possibility of capturing the unique phenomenological particularities of what is genuinely happening during her 'leadership moment'. I have found Ladkin's model to be a helpful frame for this thesis' empirical data interpretation, where the leaders lived experience with the phenomenon called leadership—their lifeworld as leaders—is explored through the analysis of their leadership stories.

As a consequence of the phenomenological approach, Ladkin suggested that instead of examining leadership as one whole fixed entity, we attempt to understand it through the phenomenological eye as 'a moment of social relations' (Ladkin, 2010, p. 26). Her model offers an investigative space that can potentially contain the many co-existing experiences and definitions of leadership. From this open-ended space allowing for concurrent understandings of leadership, I move on to the identity aspect of leadership as a social construct. This means shifting focus from leadership as a theoretical concept to leadership identity as an individually understood phenomenon.

## 2.2 The construction of leadership identity

As a subject for philosophical inquiry, identity and the quest for the self represents an ancient tradition (Bryman, 2011). In leadership research, the investigation of leadership identity is a much more recent and developing field. Even though scholars and paradigms from the psychological domain have dominated the field of leadership studies and that identity as a topic is allocated a central space in psychology, the subject of identity in leadership studies has until recently been underexplored (Alvesson, 2010; Lührmann & Eberl, 2007).



Contributions signed by the qualitative and cross-disciplinary research environment engaging with leadership studies are thus much fewer when it comes to leadership identity research, even if they are steadily growing alongside other streams inside the domain of leadership research. Since the late 1960s when researchers in the domain of social science began to engage with identity as a subject of interest, ideas of the development of the social-self have emerged. The first ideas were set forth by Mead, along with those of scholars of sociology and social psychology such as Berger and Luckman and Goffman and Giddens; their ideas are still cited as being influential across various disciplines.

Throughout this project, as stories on leadership identity emerged, leadership identity construction crystalised as a central topic for exploration. Thus, I dwell on some main theoretical concepts concerning identity in a leadership context. Because this project engages with leadership identity constructions based on leadership narratives, the choice of theoretical foundation will reflect this. Therefore, I will provide a brief introduction to the landscape of leadership identity theory in general before proceeding to concentrate on the theoretical domain in which leadership identity is treated as a phenomenon related to communicative practice and leadership language.

### 2.2.1 What is identity in a leadership context?

Today, identity as a phenomenon is approached from a broad spectrum of academic perspectives, as well as within leadership studies. As noted by Alvesson (2010), Western perspectives relating to identity have traditionally leaned towards a binary conceptualisation of identity, either based on notions about essentialism (the traditionalist view) focusing on the individual aspect of identity, or on approaches informed by social constructionism (the post-modernist view) that view identity as a social phenomenon.

While these two sides can be seen to represent opposing views, Alvesson reminded us that the available range of conceptual options is actually much more extensive, referring to Dunne (1995) when he claimed that ‘we don’t have to choose between a mainly fixed and a predominantly fluid view, nor between a sovereign self and a decentered one’ (Alvesson, 2010, p. 195). Alvesson promoted scholarly curiosity concerning alternative ways of approaching identity, encouraging ‘thinking about, and doing, empirical research on identity’ (p.195).

For this project, I adopt Giddens’ definition of identity, which is rooted in the social constructionist tradition; he stated that ‘self-identity is continuity (across time and space) as interpreted reflexively by the agent’ (1991, p. 53). The active agency that is inherent in Giddens aligns with a social constructionist stance, implying that identity is a highly social, contextual

construct created through active, reflexive interpretation by an active individual with agency. This also means that identity as a social phenomenon is a state of constant invention (Pearce, 1995), meaning that individuals strive to define who they are through engaging with others in a social context, as part of a larger setting where their identity is subject to social monitoring and confirmation (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). In other words, when I refer to the concept of self-identity here, I refer to identity as both social context and process.

Thus, this project is an attempt to follow up on Alvesson's proposal, as I examine leaders' life stories through an ethnomethodological lens as a means of conceptualising how leadership identity constructions are both informed and formed in a social context. Therefore, the qualitative and empirical outlook founded in the social constructionist tradition will be the departing point for this investigation.

I read Alvesson's critique not as a complete devaluation of previous leadership research within the post-modern era, but as a pinpointing of both the advanced development of leadership as a domain for scholarly inquiry that has emerged during the last two decades along with the school of critical leadership studies, along with the growing multidisciplinary practice. I also read it as a request for this development to be taken further. This does not mean throwing all previous ideas about leadership overboard; on the contrary, it means challenging them and making progress in terms of understanding how they add value in contemporary contexts.

### 2.2.2 Identity as meaning attached to the self

Traditionally, theoretical outlines regarding leadership identity within the qualitative heritage built on established concepts of identity and the self from social science, approach identity as a social and relational phenomenon. We understand who we are and relate to our self through the interaction with others and the world. The interaction is based on 'the social forms of human language' (Gecas, 1982, p. 3). Identity involves the meaning attached to the self (Gecas, 1982). Our experience with our social self develops through social exchanges in the social interplay with others, wherein we respond to others' judgements of us and constantly internalise their opinions and internal feelings about ourselves (Mead, 1962).

Thus, identity is seen as a reflexive relation, continuously emerging in the social interface (Caws, 1994). Similarly, West and Fenstermaker (1993) engaged with identity from a feminist-theory perspective, suggested that identity should be understood not as an individual attribute or role but as an emergent feature of social interactions. Identity as a social construct is continuously negotiated and under construction: 'Identities, or subjectivities, are caught up in contradictions

and struggles, tension, fragmentation and discord' (Watson, 2008, p. 124). This perspective means that we should see identity as a form of work in constant advancement, or what Spencer and Taylor (2004) called 'a negotiated space between ourselves and others; constantly being reappraised and very much linked to the circulation of cultural meaning in a society' (p. 4).

The negotiation aspect here implies that the quest for meaning is unambiguously related to the concept of identity as a social phenomenon, both on an individual level and a collective level. Thus, manufacturing a sense of one's self is concerns the manufacturing of meaning attached to one's experiences on both on individual and collective levels. The circulation of cultural meaning implies collective and predominant forces at work in the cultural discourse. This view addresses the current project in that the constant dynamic between the local and collective discourse on leadership identity is relevant for understanding what leadership identity construction is about.

Therefore, Geertz's famous quote on the manufacturing-of-meaning aspect in human and social life, claiming that 'man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun' (Geertz, 1973), gains relevance for leadership identity in this context. To apply Geertz's perspective in this specific project implies that the leaders' stories can be seen as these webs of significance. This implication is discussed more closely in later chapters. Regarding leadership as the management of meaning (Smircich & Morgan, 1982), leadership identity can almost be seen as having a double denotation of meaning, as demonstrated in the following question: If leadership as a term does not offer any definite meaning, how can leadership identity as a term be distinctly meaningful?

Furthermore, leadership is a highly involving role in that the role and the self are relatively undifferentiated. In other words, leaders are people for whom the identity of a leader is a central and essential part of their self-concepts (Gardner & Avolio, 1998), as well as for whom exercising the leadership role is a form of self-expression (Bennis, 1989).

Contemporary theories on leadership identity now tend to approach the phenomenon as a process of meaning-making in a social, contextual and relational context (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Various contemporary theories exist on identity that could apply to an investigation of the construction of leadership identities. In the following sections, I will mainly concentrate on the phenomenological, discursive and narrative implications for the construction of leadership identity. These perspectives will be the main theoretical references for this thesis' further discussion on leadership identity construction.

### 2.2.3 Phenomenological approaches to leadership identity

Giddens defined identity as a highly social and relational phenomenon, and in this, the parallel to contemporary concepts of leadership is obvious. Hence, leadership identity as a concept can be said to be just as relative in its relational and contextual dynamics as both the concepts of leadership and identity are, respectively. This corresponds with phenomenological approaches to leadership identity, wherein Ladkin's model of the leadership moment offers a depiction of what leadership identity approached with a phenomenological lens implicates.

Because of the phenomenological perspective, the totality of an individual's lifeworld or identity can never be fully grasped from outside. Only one aspect can be understood from one side at a time, and the definitive identity of something or someone can never be known. Therefore, in a constructionist context, leadership identity research also strongly concerns the method of analytic tools applied to select among the bits and pieces that constitute leaders' lifeworlds as they emerge in the leaders' stories, and decide which elements are of greatest interest for the particular research project. Thus, to understand leadership identity means that we must consider that the 'whole' of a leader's identity is comprised of many pieces, and none of them can be grasped at the same time; only pieces of the whole can be seen at one time. Thus, the question of 'who am I as a leader' has numerous potential answers depending on the context in which the question of identity is raised, as well as by whom it is raised and which pieces are being examined.

Because this current project examines only a tiny fragment of the entity known as leadership identity construction, a phenomenological view that recognises the importance of the local and the particular seems appropriate as a framing for the specific whats and hows of leadership identity construction addressed herein. Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005) claimed that for the comprehension of organisational life, it is vital to pay attention to 'the subtle, the small, the relational, the oral, the particular, and the momentary' as much as to 'the conspicuous, the large, the substantive, the written, the general and the sustained' to understand how organisational order emerges and is managed (Weick et al., 2005, p. 410). I find that the same counts for leadership as an academic domain of interest. As for the oral dimension mentioned by Weick and colleagues, in the following subsection, I will peer closer into the theoretical lens that allows for taking a linguistic turn concerning leadership identity constructions.

## 2.2.4 Leadership identity as a narrative construct

Telling stories is as basic to human being as eating. More so, in fact, for while food makes us live, stories are what make our lives worth living. They are what make our condition human. (Kearney, 2002, p. 3)

By engaging with leadership identity as a narrative construct, I have positioned this work within the constructionist discursive leadership research tradition. As Fairhurst (2009) indicated, when addressing leadership identity as a complex co-construct, discursive leadership researchers engage with aspects of leadership language as a fundamental element of leadership and leadership identity (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a; Fairhurst, 2009). The constructionist stance in narrative analysis engages with the broader social and cultural context of the stories being told, promoting a social orientation and takes interest in narratives as socially produced phenomena (Esim, Fahti & Squire; 2014; p. 203)

As the French semiologist and literary critic Barthes stated, ‘narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative’ (Barthes, 1977, p. 79). Human beings are essentially ‘homo narrans’ (Fisher, 1984), which implies that storytelling is fundamental for all human activity. The social constructionist perspective approaches social identities as emerging through the use of human communication and language (Pearce, 1995). If leadership identity can be understood as a self-construct that emerges through social interactions and in which communication and storytelling are essential, as Kearney writes, it follows that storytelling must be a vital part of those interactions, and thus, of leadership identity constructions.

This view implies that leadership identity as constituted by social actions and appearances entails the use of language and narratives (Fairhurst, 2009; Ladkin, 2010). With this understanding as a departure point, I will engage more closely with what the linguistic perspective means for an investigation of leadership identities.

Paying attention to language as more than a simple transmitter of communication marks a relatively new era within both organisation studies and leadership research (Westwood & Linstead, 2001). Recently, a growing number of leadership scholars, in a departure from the social constructionist heritage, have begun to explore the ontological and epistemological roles of language in leadership (Grint, 2005; Sinclear, 2007). This approach departs from the view of

reality as being ‘constructed through language and, in turn, since language is a social phenomenon, the account of reality which prevails is often both a temporary and a collective phenomenon’ (Grint, 2005, p. 1471).

The emergence of a discursive approach to leadership is in part due to what has been called the ‘linguistic turn’ in leadership studies (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a; Fairhurst, 2009), in which discursive practice and discourse are pursued as vital constituents of leadership identity as a social phenomenon, promoting the view that ‘human communication is also more than a simple act of transmission; it is about the construction and negotiation of meaning’ (Fairhurst, 2009, p.1608). In this sense, related to Ladkin’s leadership moment, leadership is seen as materialising through the interplay of organisational actors, and ‘has a contested, fluid meaning for all of them, in a given social situation for a determinate amount of time. It is fundamentally an ongoing process rather than a finished accomplishment’ (Tourish, 2014, p. 84). In other words, the discursive approach in leadership studies views language as essential in the social construction of reality, and thus also views leadership as fundamentally comprised of language. It departs from an understanding where language is not an exact representation of reality but a medium for negotiating meaning.

Aligned with the aforementioned ideas of Raelin and Ladkin, the linguistic perspective implies that leadership identity is not a pre-cut entity that is passively received by the leader; by contrast, it is an actively co-created state, fashioned by and through the leader’s own partaking in contexts, wherein the meaning of leadership is both created and negotiated. Taken from the discursive leadership domain, the main instrument for this creative identity work is language, which is instigated by both context and purpose (Fairhurst, 2009). The intertwined bond between identity construction and language as well as the role of self-narratives in identity processes means that language is also imperative in leadership identity constructions. Therefore, determining how leadership identities are constructed, negotiated, perceived and renegotiated through language is essential for understanding the phenomenon of leadership as a social phenomenon. Borrowing from Westwood and Linstead (2001), this perspective in the present study means that language is approached not as a product but as productivity. This makes studying language in leadership identity research of interest.

### 2.2.5 The narrative as formula for felt and lived human experience

Narratives represent a suitable formula to convey felt and lived human experiences. They are building blocks that constitute and communicate the individual’s comprehension of the world (Leyshon & Bull, 2011; Ricoeur, 1986, 1992). Kuhn (2006) embraced both the social co-

construction and the narrative aspect when he defined identity as ‘the conception of the self reflexively and discursively understood’. His notion builds on Mead and classic symbolic interactionism theory, where the development of the self is seen as dependent upon self-reflective thoughts, which is again constituted by language (Gollwitzer, 1986). Stories can be understood as depositories of meaning, providing individuals with the means to construct, convey and negotiate identity in a cultural and relational context. Sparrowe (2005) drew on Ricoeur when he suggested that the quest for identity must be understood as a narrative project, because it is through storytelling that human beings have the capacity to weave together their numerous different fragments of lived experience, thereby creating a meaningful whole.

Approaching narratives as a type of self-reflexive, discursive construction means that through examining stories on leadership identity, access can be gained to tacit notions and meaning systems comprising the leader’s lifeworld (Tietze, Cohen, & Musson, 2003). This means that leadership stories can provide what Tietze et al. described as ‘a window into the symbolic realities as experienced and constructed by organizational members’ (p. 52). In the context of the present study, I view leaders as such ‘members’. From this, I understand that the intertwined bond between identity construction and language as well as the role of self-narratives in identity processes means that language is also in leadership identity constructions. If narratives are suitable formulas for conveying human experiences, and experience of leadership counts as such an experience, it follows that looking into narratives as a method for conceptualising leadership as a social phenomenon is of relevance when addressing the construction of leadership identity from a social constructionist stance. Thus, in the following subsection, I examine theories related to leadership identity as a narrative construct.

The following concepts are vital for examining leadership identity as a narrative construct, and therefore they are central to how leadership identity constructions are approached in this thesis: narrative and story, discourse and the discursive, agency, and performance and performativity. Therefore, in the following subsection, I provide a brief overview of these concepts and how they are meaningful as theoretical hooks for this particular project.

In addition, drawing on the critical lens applied by CLS, the power perspective must be considered when pursuing leadership as being constituted by language. As Walker and Aritz noted, ‘our understanding of reality is already filtered through a lens laden with the values of our culture’ (Walker & Aritz, 2015, p. 8). Human language and storytelling embody tacit knowledge and beliefs (Tietze, Cohen, & Musson, 2003). Thus, when CLS scholars underline the importance of questioning ontological ‘truths’ and blind spots in leadership research, this indicates the language

surrounding leadership as a social phenomenon, implying that researchers should be looking for how language constitutes value-laden notions and norms that influence the shaping of leaders' lifeworlds.

## 2.2.6 Leadership identity viewed with a linguistic lens

We cannot escape words, we cannot but communicate. Language and communication are essential to what makes us human. How we talk, which language we use, and how we can express ourselves is intrinsically tied in with our concepts of identity and our sense of self. (Tietze, Cohen, & Musson, 2003, p.12)

The linguistic stance of leadership research leaves behind the notion that the perception of leadership identity is so deeply rooted in language that leadership cannot be understood without investigating the languages that influence leadership identity. As demonstrated by scholars such as Alvesson and Kärreman (2000a) and Fairhurst (2009), from a communication perspective, the linguistic turn in leadership research represents an assemblage of outlooks united by the idea that reality is not mirrored by language but constituted by it. Hence, in an identity setting, communication and language are not about one-way transmission but a mutual co-construct and the negotiation of meaning between individuals (Jian et al., 2008; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a; Deetz, 1992). Furthermore, in LMX theory, scholars conducting relational and processual leadership studies have adopted the linguistic aspect (Fairhurst, 2011). Hosking (1988, 2007) identified leadership identity as a mutually relational construct, and a process in which a constant self-other differentiation occurs as a reciprocal creation of identities with the leader and the follower, thereby highlighting dialogue as an essential means of establishing relationships through which leadership identities evolve. Therefore, according to Hosking, language should be viewed as 'no longer the means for representing reality - but a key process in which relating 'goes on' and in so doing, constructs people-world realities and relations' (Hosking, 2007, p. 9).

The relational aspect as a prerequisite for understanding language as social and co-created was addressed early on by Watzlawick, Bevelas and Jackson (1967), who stated that 'every communication has a content and a relationship aspect such that the latter classifies the former and is, therefore, a metacommunication' (p. 54). In other words, all language in social life refers back to the actual context in which it is being used or is about. From a discursive position, I see this as also being valid when it comes to leadership language; all use of leadership language refers back to a particular context, indicating leadership moments in which particular purposes are present as part of the context.



Consequently, following theories on identity and the role of language in the construction of identity, it becomes vital for any investigation into leadership identity to listen for the language surrounding leadership and what that language is laden with. From a linguistic viewpoint, it becomes important to grasp how leadership identities are constructed, negotiated, perceived and renegotiated through language to understand the existence of leadership as a social phenomenon. Similarly, both from a phenomenological and CLS perspective, the particular context concerning power and ideology in which leadership language emerges becomes of interest, because language as context, Discourse and discursive practice is laden with purposes.

Stories, storytelling, narratives and narration are central concepts when approaching leadership identity construction from a linguistic angle. Narrative theory defines a narrative as the process of meaning-making, wherein people organise their experiences into a meaningful whole through the use of language. Atkinson claimed, 'We think in story form, speak in story form, and bring meaning to our lives through stories' (2007, p. 224). Thus, storytelling is understood as a fundamental element in human life—it is a humanising phenomenon where time is transformed 'from an impersonal passing of fragmented moments into a pattern, a plot' (Kearney, 2002, p. 4), or what the German philosopher Dilthey identified as 'the-coming-together-of-a-life' (in German: *zusammenhang der lebens*; as cited in Kearney, 2002, p. 4).

In this project, story and narrative as terms are viewed as social action (Chase, 2011), where the narrative is the result of narration as practice; it is the human activity of 'constructing meaningful selves, identities and realities' in a social context (Chase, 2011, p. 422). With story, I refer to the actual content of what is being narrated. According to Czarniawska (2004), a story is characterised by a distinct plot in which events are presented in a sequential order. Accordingly, in this project, I see the leader as an active narrator, telling stories with 'plots' to portray his or her experiences as meaningful, thereby constructing his or her identity as a leader. As a narrator, the leader draws upon a 'stock of knowledge that is simultaneously substantive, reflexive, and emergent' (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Schütz, 1967) to narrate stories that relate to how they make sense of their leadership experiences, and thus, make these experiences appear meaningful.

Therefore, leadership narratives can be seen as a form of 'casting and recasting of our "selves" through discursive practice' (Musson & Duberley, 2007). The stories that the leaders I interview in this project tell are thus about constructing reality and making meaning in their lifeworlds, and hence it is a matter of leadership identity. Drawing upon the phenomenological view, where the purpose is always at stake as a crucial element in the leadership moment, the purpose of the plot

in the leaders' stories becomes of interest. This points to the relevance of seeing leadership language and narrative plots as systems carrying power ideologies in particular leadership contexts.

### 2.2.7 Leadership language as ideological practice

Concerning leadership language, Alvesson and Kärreman (2000a, 2000b,) indicated this as central when they stated that leadership research should examine the particulars of how leadership is discussed as a local phenomenon, rather than as something that entails universal truths. Here, the contextual particularities of leadership language become a vital dimension for investigation.

Kelly (2014) followed up by claiming that leadership should be approached as ideological practices rather than ontological unambiguous schemes. According to Kelly, such a view opens up the power perspective and our understanding of the contradictions, irregularities, ambiguities and peculiar practices in leadership contexts:

This is the power of leadership – not its ontological reality as personality, relation, practice or process – but its ideological function to organize, direct, deflect, categorize, centralize, marginalize, inspire, control, liberate, improve, stimulate, seduce, transform, stabilize, threaten, protect and reassure. There is no tension or contradiction in leadership's ability to speak to any and all of these aspirations since it has no content of its own that might cause such antagonism. (Kelly, 2014, p.912)

Storytelling then is not only the coming-together-of-a-life but also a social phenomenon that constitutes communities and institutions. Stories mobilise, create, maintain and repair collectives and societies. Through language, storytelling generates agency for the collective (Polletta, 2006). Stories connect people and create shared sources for identity. Stories weave communities, societies and nations together. As asserted by Riessmann (2012), storytelling is also a relational activity because it makes people listen and mobilises sympathy; it is 'a collaborative practice that requires attentive listening and questioning' (2012, p. 367). Thus, storytelling is both an affect and an effect. Kearney described storytelling as a 'creative redescription of the world such that hidden patterns and hitherto unexplored meanings can unfold' (Kearney, 2002, p. 12). Therefore, to study leadership with a linguistic lens is not to disclose final answers but to search for meanings.

In a leadership identity context, this perspective gains relevance in several ways. Leadership language applied in storytelling not only concerns the construction of the leader's identity as an individual leader per se but must be interpreted in a wider context, including the power

perspective. This raises the following questions: By who are the stories told, for whom, with what purpose, and to what effect? What are the potential power constraints or ideological drivers? Again, the phenomenological perspective is also apparent. The leader's storytelling function is to weave together and attribute meaning to leadership moments, in which the complete 'truth' or the 'one and only true version' of a leader's life story will not be found. Instead, there are various stories and versions with different plots, depending on the purpose of and in the actual moment of the particular story being told.

This means that narratives of leadership identity can occur in as many settings as the leader engages in, where leadership identity is experienced as relevant. As an extension of this idea, leadership identity is not lodged in the individual leader as a separate entity. It is not something leaders can take off or put on as they could a clothing item—the identity as a leader is always present but is played out and experienced as more or less relevant depending on the situation. Melina (2013, p. XV) argued 'that leadership is not something 'housed' in an individual (a person with a body) but is a discourse that is performed by a person... in relationship with others ... that both reveals and constitutes identity'.

Leaders tell life stories about themselves to communicate their 'identities, traits, values, and beliefs', through which the storytelling also functions as an attempt to attribute legitimacy to 'their leadership of the group and their right to represent the group and its values' (Shamir, Dayan-Horesh & Adler, 2005, p. 15). Thus, leadership biographies and storytelling are viewed in this thesis as a crucial leadership tool for making followers follow. When observing leaders' storytelling as a means to claim leadership legitimacy and make organisational members follow, the ideological power aspect inherent in a narrative leadership approach becomes explicit.

Regarding the role of narratives in authentic leadership development, as pinpointed by Shamir and Eilam (2005), leaders' self-narratives provide supports and legitimacy to the role because the narrative 'not only recounts but also justifies'. Life stories are not only 'who am I' but also 'why am I here' stories (Simmons, 2002). This aligns with the leadership identity project which is about finding answers to "who am I" in the role as a leader (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). In other words, storytelling as a leadership device can be understood as something that provides leaders with the legitimacy and justification they need to perceive themselves as a qualified and adequate lodger of the leadership position (Shamir et al., 2005, p. 15).

Hence, storytelling in a leadership identity construction context is not only about building an external image to persuade followers but also about leaders persuading themselves. This

perspective will be central in the proceeding discussions of this thesis, also necessitating the examination of the aspects of Discourse and discursive practices.

### 2.2.8 Big 'D' Discourse and little 'd' discursive practice

In leadership studies, the discursive approach sees leadership as essentially manufactured by language and communication. Language and communication are seen as 'doings' in the construction of leadership (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a, Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014).

If leadership language is a crucial element in leadership identity as a social co-construct, we must view language as agency when we discuss leadership. Thus, language is also the enactment of leadership; it is a meaning-making performance, displaying values and beliefs and perceived and interpreted 'through the lens of our worldview and our experiences' (Walker & Aritz, 2015, p. 8).

Here, the distinction between the big 'D' discourse and the little 'd' discursive leadership-as-talk perspectives becomes relevant to mention. Building on Alvesson and Kärreman (2000a) and Fairhurst (2009), big 'D' Discourse is applied as a Foucauldian term, meaning 'systems of thought' as an influential source in the language applied by and about leaders and leadership. By contrast, little 'd' discourse represents local discursive leadership practice that occurs in social interactions in a local leadership context (Fairhurst, 2009, 2011).

This distinction between big Discourse and little local discursive practice becomes particularly critical for the current project because it addresses both the discursive and the Discourse dimensions in leadership identity constructions, which it does by inquiring into the possible dialectic between the two and what I have identified as a tension between a heroic and a post-heroic leadership Discourse in the local, little discursive talk about leadership identity.

To rephrase Fairhurst and Putnam (2004), who described discursive leadership practice in local interaction as the 'doing' of leadership, leadership Discourse 'refers to general and enduring systems for the formation and articulation of ideas in a historically situated time' (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004, p. 8). In the Discourse, 'constellations of talk, ideas, logics, and assumptions' are constituting objects and subject through 'established power/knowledge relations' (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004, p. 8). A consequence of seeing language in Discourse and discursive practice as vital for the construction of leadership identity is that asking what 'discourse is doing as opposed to representing' becomes crucial (Fairhurst, 2009, p.1609).

It follows from the abovementioned discussion that when leadership identity is approached as a linguistic process, the power aspect and competition between rivalling Discourses in the

discursive context becomes essential. As indicated by Fairhurst (2009), big Discourse functions both as an enabler and limitation to leadership actors and how they understand their potential for agency. This view gains relevance for the current project, where I see the leaders' stories as overt depictions of the dynamic between what can be seen as the Discourse dimension and the perception of leadership agency, expressed through local discursive leadership practice.

In addition, a crucial topic in the leadership debate is the power dimension related to Discourse, discursive practice and agency in the linguistic leadership approach (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a; Fairhurst 2009; Tourish, 2014). One major, relevant question is whether scholars' theoretical treatment of leadership agency favours conceptualising the potential for agency among leaders at the cost of followers, and if so, whether the agency perspective can therefore be seen as eclipsed by epistemological blind spots (Tourish, 2014). Another element is the possibility that different actors within an organisation ascribe different meaning to leadership (i.e, same word, different meaning). This would imply that the meaning of leadership not only most likely varies from one organisation or leader to another but also that competing, dissenting comprehensions of the same organisation and the same leader and leadership coexist simultaneously within the same room (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014).

This view implies that a leader's own conceptualisation and understanding of leadership must be contextualised and investigated as part of a larger ecosystem. Furthermore, the interface between individually driven agency and the agency prohibited or promoted by external structures is another vital aspect in this context (Alvesson, 2010). Moreover, this aspect marks a line between the more conventional and critical leadership stances, arguing that the power aspect concerning control versus autonomy must always be questioned in leadership contexts.

The discursive leadership perspective sees the use of leadership language as a sensemaking activity wherein leaders act as brokers of meaning in an attempt to make sense of their experiences and create justifications for their role as leaders. Here, leaders are seen as active creators with a purpose; they attribute meanings and construct accounts of their experiences to manoeuvre in a social context when their legitimacy is at stake. When viewed from Ladkin's phenomenological perspective, leadership language forms part of what becomes a leadership moment—a defining moment for the identity of a leader.

Through the use of leadership language, leaders negotiate meanings and rework justifications to support the legitimacy of their leadership. Through leadership language influenced by Discourse and materialising in discursive leadership, old ideas of what it means to be a leader are replaced

with new understandings. This implies that leadership language is loaded with local, contextual particularities, or as Bakhtin stated, ‘all words have the ‘taste’ of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life’. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293).

Again, this refers back to the phenomenological perspective and the idea that we can never fully grasp the whole of a leadership identity, only pieces at a time. Because this thesis does not engage with the follower perspective per se, this specific element will not be pursued at length here. Nevertheless, because the current project is positioned within the CLS tradition, it follows that the power dimension is seen as inherent in any leadership context, and therefore is imperative to consider.

Regarding power-related leadership language, I examine the topic more closely in the Chapter 5, pursuing it as it emerges in the leaders’ stories. As indicated by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003a) as well as Kuhn (2006), more qualitative investigations regarding Discourse and identity are required, not to add to depictive statistics but to enrich insights into leadership. In this sense, the project is a contribution to the empirical domain of research targeting leadership identity construction and language. According to Fairhurst, the mission of leadership researchers is to ‘understand what counts as leadership as well as how the situated availability of one or more Discourses-cum-repertoires both enable and constrain leadership actors in discourse’ (Fairhurst, 2009, p. 1619). The discursive and social constructionist perspective aims at embracing the complex multitude of layers in leadership identity as a social, co-created and profoundly contextually related phenomenon, examining how Discourse influences and thus facilitates agency on multiple levels, as well as which Discourse becomes relevant in which instant.

Therefore, this allows for discursive leadership identity to be contextually understood in relation to the discourse dimension, influenced by one Discourse in one discursive instance and by another Discourse in another. Thus, this particular aspect is relevant for the current project.

### 2.2.9 Leadership language as agency

According to the social constructionist stance, leadership is not about situations but situating (Grint, 2006). Leaders are proactive, social actors who situate situations, and leadership language is a means of achieving this. As Grint (2006) stressed, this perspective does not mean that leaders are omnipotent masters who manipulate the world at will, but that leaders act within a context that is not independent of human agency.

From a discursive perspective where language is approached as something that affects us and as a tool for situating, leadership language as agency becomes crucial to examine. When Fairhurst indicates that Discourse engenders a repertoire that promotes and restricts actions, I understand this as being about Discourse and discursive practices as agency. Therefore, I examine leadership language in an identity context here more closely because the agency element will be central to the discussion in Chapter 5.

The rhetorical aspect is essential in all human life (Billig, 1987; Harré, 1982), signifying that all meaning-making in human life involves discursive activity (Musson & Duberley, 2007). Building on Alvesson (1993) and his theory about organisational rhetoric, I consider rhetoric applied in a leadership context as a strategic device for ‘providing convincing accounts, regulating impressions and images’ (Alvesson, 1993, p. 1007), which facilitates leadership agency. Thus, I consider leadership language deployed in the identity context as a tool with the particular purpose of building leadership legitimacy.

Here, I adapt the definition of agency to ‘the capacity to take action’ (Tourish, 2014, p.80). Furthermore, building on Raelin’s definition (2016), I consider agency a phenomenon that materialises through dialogic-based interpersonal interactions and sociality (2016, p. 132). When considering rhetoric in a leadership context, what I understand as leadership language is viewed as an active tool for identity construction, which means that leadership language can be seen as agency or as a constituent of *the capacity to take action*—facilitated by and constituted through the use of leadership language.

Departing from the idea that language constitutes leadership identity in an ongoing, socially bounded, self-reflecting negotiation of meaning attached to the leadership self, the act of communication executed by leaders negotiating their leadership identity can be understood as a certain type of agency creation, where the leader (and followers in an organisational setting) are actors and creators. As indicated by discursive scholars, discursive approaches place particular weight on the reflexive agency of leadership performers through their accounts and attributions (Fairhurst, 2008; Garfinkel, 1967; Giddens, 1984). From an agency perspective, leaders’ life stories function as a fundamental provider of leadership vigour, wherein the purpose of leadership language is to supply the leader with legitimacy to promote leadership agency.

In this setting, the dialogic negotiation aspect suggests that identity is neither fixed nor certain but changing and ambiguous, which was indicated by Alvesson and Wilmott (2002) and Sveningsson

and Larsson (2006). Hence, leadership language as agency can be understood as a distinct type of work demanding the capacity to take action, where the maintenance of the leadership identity is at stake and language is the main tool for accomplishing the work in question. Leaders act through the use of language, which implies that in the leadership context, leadership language is a type of action that depends on leaders as actors acting with agency through discursive activity. Building on the social constructionist perspective, discursive activity provides the means through which co-constructive practices on identity are brought into existence.

From a CLS viewpoint, agency implies the power to take action. Thus, power in an agency context encompasses the possibility of mobilising for action. As noted by Tourish (2014), who was building on Clegg, Courpasson, and Phillips (2006), agency ‘is a reflection of a deeper power that is embedded in the identities to which organizational actors subscribe’ (Tourish, 2014, p. 80). This means that leadership agency depends on the type of power to take action constituted by the particular leadership identity in question. This again points to leadership language in leadership identity construction as being vital for understanding leadership agency.

Alvesson and Kärreman (2000a) addressed language use as something that produces agency when they claimed that rather than paying interest to the reification of words in relation to things, we should direct our investigative curiosity towards what the particular use of language does or actually accomplishes (2000a, p. 137). This perspective targets the multiple layers of meaning that language represents in human life as a constituent of constant creative sensemaking. In the context of leadership identity, this idea becomes relevant when examining leadership language and the type of specific agency that is being proposed or produced by the specific use of language, as well as what it accomplishes in a leadership agency context. Language is not a neutral component or a plain medium for transporting unambiguous messages from A to B; it is tricky and dubious, loaded with the capacity of multiple layers and nuances of meaning. Hence, in a leadership identity construction context, leadership language approached as agency should be expected to encompass the possibility for contradictions, a lack of congruence and paradoxes (Tourish, 2014; Collinson, 2014).

As noted by Kärreman (2000), this also implies that when we approach the use of language as empirical data, ambiguities and contradictions can be expected, not because the method applied was wrong or incomplete but because it is futile to expect language to be consistent and unambiguous. If language mirrors social life, it is per se a mirroring of ambiguities and contradictions. We should not expect language to do something that it cannot (2000, p. 147). This view implies that when working with language in the form of interview data with an aim to gain



new knowledge about a phenomenon, as is the case for this project, there is always an interpretivist aspect at work. To work with narrative data implies creative sensemaking from the researcher's side. As Alvesson (2011) pointed out, all interview data needs interpretation in order to make sense as data in a research context and at the same time, all data is loaded with theory. So is data interpretation. Therefore, the researcher's ontological and epistemological standpoint needs to be clear in regard to be able to claim validity when it comes to findings and conclusions. The interpretivist aspect makes it even more important to be clear about the analytical tools applied in order to accomplish with the undertaking of creative sensemaking that working with narrative data is, a point that will be object for further clarification in the method chapter.

Viewing leadership identity as emerging through discursive practices—wherein meaning is constantly negotiated and language is tricky—implies that agency facilitated by leadership language is also tricky and fluid. As articulated by Tourish (2014), leadership constituted by language 'therefore emerges through the interaction of organizational actors and has a contested, fluid meaning for all of them, in a given social situation for a determinate amount of time. It is fundamentally an ongoing process rather than a finished accomplishment' (p. 84). Viewed from the Discourse perspective, it follows that Discourses continually challenge the formation of leadership identities as well as what type of agency is engendered through the use of leadership language.

Regarding the current project, the agency aspect in leadership language becomes of interest because the leaders I interview depict the power to take action that they possess in their roles. I consider their accounts as closely related to how they portray their identity as a leader, where the tension between the heroic and post-heroic leadership Discourse generates ambiguity in their identity, and therefore, ambiguity concerning their leadership agency.

#### 2.2.10 Leadership language as identity work and performativity

The concept of identity work and language as performativity becomes relevant when observing leaders to be actors with the capacity for agency empowered by leadership language, and by recognising that language and communication are crucial for the construction of identity.

According to influential social interactionists (e.g., Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959; Snow & Anderson, 1987), identity work as a conceptual term refers to 'people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising' their identities (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165). In this project, I adopt this perspective, approaching leadership stories as a certain type of leadership identity construction where identity work is seen as an element of the construction.

Hence, I here apply identity work as a theory to target the creation, presentation, and maintenance of particular leadership identities through leadership language (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) emerging in the leaders' stories.

The performativity aspect in leadership language follows on from seeing language as agency, where communication and language are a constituent part of social actions. The term 'performativity' draws on the notion that 'words are not just words, they do things' (Cunliffe, 2009, p. 10). As scholars such as Alvesson and Kärreman (2000), Crevani et al. (2010), Fairhurst (2009), Sinclair (2011), and Tourish (2014) have argued, leadership is highly discursive and performative. Leaders mobilise agency through their use of language, and furthermore, the capacity for taking action that this agency represents can be understood as performative capacity; thus, taking leadership action is to perform (Westley & Mintzberg, 1989).

Thus, language is both action and performance, and moreover, it is performative. Again, the question about the influencing forces that operate in the interface between the individual leader and external structures is relevant. If identity work in a leadership language context is to project coherent selves that 'aspire to look like leadership' (Sinclair, 2011, p. 509), where Discourse is a part of the resources the leaders draw upon in this work, it follows that the leader as the author of leadership language is also subject to the influence of Discourse. Thus, the production of self is never an isolated phenomenon, and therefore, identity work is always crafted and performed in a context.

As indicated by Alvesson and Kärreman (2000a), researchers pursuing the discursive aspect should do so mindfully and always with a reflective and sceptical lens, questioning how and to which extent the language applied in the discursive context should be treated as indications of the social phenomena accounted for. Similarly, researchers should be particular about explaining why an account is being treated in a certain way, as well as mind the speculative aspect involved in how the account is treated (p. 149). Here, leadership is approached as a subjective undertaking where leaders themselves attempt to legitimise their role and existence within a certain discursive context; furthermore, leadership language becomes a tool for creating agency for igniting and shaping action as a means to build the leader's sense of subjective purpose. Thus, from a narrative perspective, the leadership project also concerns making sense of leadership identity as a subjective experience, wherein identity work is conducted to provide meaning and direction for the leader through the use of language.

Therefore, leadership as social reality is a social construct in many senses, where multiple realities or perceptions can compete for truth and legitimacy (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). The leader's lifeworld is thus 'created through social processes in which meanings are negotiated, consensus formed, and contestation is possible' (p. 172). According to this view, the meanings attached to leadership as a social phenomenon are continually constructed and reconstructed. This process of constant negotiation creates structures for meaning that are stable but simultaneously adaptive to change as interactions and interpretations evolve over time (Giddens, 1979, 1984).

## Concluding notes

In this chapter, I have aimed to establish the theoretical framework for how I approach the current research topic, treating leadership identity as a narrative construct. This chapter has offered a condensed review of the main theoretical takes on leadership viewed as a socially constructed phenomenon. I have presented what I understand to be the core aspects differentiating the two paradigms of heroic and post-heroic leadership discourse, dwelling in particular on leadership identity as discursive leadership, where leadership language and the agency created by it are central.

Although this thesis addresses leadership and the construction of leadership identity as a social co-construct in a narrative framing, I should stress that many acknowledged contributions in organisation studies have examined leadership from a different point of view, wherein leadership and leaders are approached not as the navel in organisational life but as part of a larger scheme. Political and administrative science and its domain of institutional theory represent one obvious example; however, even if leadership is not traditionally seen as the locus point in institutional science, it must be accentuated that this does not mean that leadership is totally ignored in institutional research.

Moreover, voices exist within the community of institutional scholars who have long since underlined the importance of the relational and contextual aspects of the people involved in leadership, as well as their 'individual performance abilities' (e.g., Biggart & Hamilton, 1987). Here, I will not dwell at length on the theories and theorists observing leadership as less central in their explorations of organisations, but I find it appropriate to indicate their existence and relevance in the pursuit of new knowledge on organisational life, which I believe all scholars within organisations and leadership studies have in common.

The challenge concerning a clear conceptualisation of leadership seems to correspond with the challenge of advocating a phenomenon that cannot be known. Leadership as a concept appears to

have a strong performative power and has come to represent itself as manifest (Blom & Alvesson, 2015), even if in practice it is not so easy to pinpoint what leadership exactly is. A retrospective review of the etymology of leadership and the historical context in which leadership studies and theories have been produced clearly reveals that different concepts of leadership and leadership technologies run parallel with shifting ideas about organisations and the demand for understanding what can contribute to their efficiency.

Voices of the contemporary critical field within leadership studies urge leadership scholars to account for this context when engaging with leadership as an object of investigation. Listening to leaders' stories about their leadership experiences represents one such gateway for engaging with context as a means to gain new insight into the phenomenon labelled leadership.

In addition, the context aspect is why it makes sense to position this project within the critical stance of leadership scholars, even if it implies a tension. The aim of this chapter was to provide proper theoretical framing for a project that treats the construction of leadership identity as a tangible phenomenon. To establish such a frame, I adopt a critical outlook within leadership research, rejecting the validity of a general notion of leadership as objective truth. In the following chapter, I show how this seeming incongruity comes to make sense through the adoption of an ethnomethodological approach, where I address leadership identity as a social phenomenon because of how it emerges as a social reality in leadership narratives.

# Chapter 3. Methodology: Path of inquiry

If we wish to understand the deepest and most universal of human experiences, if we wish our work to be faithful to the lived experience of people, if we wish for a union between poetics and science, or if we wish to use our privileges and skills to empower the people we study, then we should value the narrative. (Richardson, 1990, p. 134)

Arguments for the development and use of narrative inquiry come out of a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477)

Based on 20 in-depth qualitative interviews with various leaders, the objective of this project was to distil the particular conceptualisations of leadership identity that transpire throughout the leaders' stories. I directed the investigative lens towards stories on lived leadership to detect occurrences concerning leadership identity constructions in the leaders' stories. I was driven by asking the following research question: What are leaders really talking about, when they talk about how they understand their identity as leaders? How do they make their experience as leaders meaningful through their stories?

In this chapter, I will demonstrate how current philosophical paradigms in leadership research correspond to my research question and my chosen methodological approach, as well as how this correspondence informed my research design. Furthermore, I will show how my methodological approach informed my choice of theory. I start with the epistemological and ontological stance, move on to some fundamental aspects concerning the qualitative approach in leadership studies, and then present the specific design and procedure of this project.

To provide a fullest possible transparency regarding the research process and the methods applied, I will clarify the specifics of the research process by presenting how I proceeded from

starting out from an inductive departure point with an exploratory research question, to concluding with the current findings and the present discussion. I will provide a description of the interview process, the nature of the materials collected and how I worked in order to manufacture the results from raw data to findings. As part of this, I will also present the mechanics and specifics of the interpretive process of analytic bracketing and the coding process that led to the final results.

### 3.1 Ontological and epistemological positioning

In this project, my ontological stance builds on social constructionism, emphasising human communication as social practice; hence, I see leadership and leadership identity essentially as social constructs through humans engaging in communicative practices (Pearce, 1994; Pye, 2005; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). I approach leadership and leadership identity as a highly relative, contextual, subjective, social, and processually assembled matter. Consequently, my outlook is that truths about leadership and leadership identities are as multitudinous as there are people who hold perceptions of leadership and leadership identity. In other words, what is perceived as ‘truth’ when we talk about leadership and leadership identities is not independently projected but highly relative, and a product of the constant dialectic dynamics driving social interactions within a contextual, situational and relational perspective (Alvesson, 1996; Charmaz, 2006).

Employing a social constructionist lens when examining the communicative capabilities in social life allows for a deeper comprehension of what it is that enables and mobilises leadership as both action and agency. Moreover, it allows for an investigation of what it is that fuels social interaction within a leadership context so that it appears meaningful to the people involved in the making of real leadership. This project aims at understanding how the meaningfulness in real leadership projects is portrayed by real leaders themselves by looking into what it is that fuels their leadership narrative.

#### 3.1.1 Ontological stance

The tradition of social constructionism represents a deep-rooted ontological stance in social science, building on symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1962) and social phenomenology (Schütz, 1967). The work of Berger and Luckmann (1966) and their theory of the social construction of reality eventually placed the social constructionist stance on the research map as a significant domain within the social sciences (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Holstein & Gubrium, 2011). Lately, the social constructionist stance has attracted renewed interest among leadership scholars, but this has not been without ambiguity (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Within the tradition of social constructionism, there exist various theoretical strains (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Pearce, 1995) in

which a main distinction can be drawn between those who pay attention to the construction of social reality; the process of construction itself is the primary concern, and scholars who take interest in the outcome of the process (also referred to as the social construction of reality) in ‘the locally distinctive symbols, the symbolic forms, and meanings, that participants themselves consider significant and important’ (Carbaugh & Hastings, 1992, p. 157). This thesis engages with the construction of leadership identity as a social construction of the leaders’ reality.

As I assert in Chapter 2, I have positioned the current project using the social constructionism stance, meaning that I approach leadership as a socially constructed phenomenon. This does not mean that I do not recognise the ambivalence resting in the many theoretical nuances in the social constructionist discourse; however, I will not go into further detail concerning the conceptual divides that exist within social constructionism (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Pearce, 1995).

While I approach leadership from a social constructionist stance, leadership is also a structural phenomenon in organisational life, materialised as a reified, hierarchical reality in maps of organisational structure, formal power, and influence, as well as materialised in how leadership is given significance and recognised in social systems, both in terms of money and other resource-based privileges. This means that while leadership as a social phenomenon can be approached as a linguistic phenomenon in flux, manoeuvred by social interactions, it is also structural reality.

In this sense, I understand leadership to illustrate the conflict within the social constructionist domain, between what can be said to be objectively true and what is subjectively perceived as truth. Consequently, investigations of leadership within a social constructionist domain can be conducted from many perspectives and levels, but here, I focus on local meanings of leadership as conveyed through stories on leadership.

A central idea in social constructionism is that human beings engage in a constant meaning-making and sensemaking process through ongoing communication and interpersonal exchange. This process is what constitutes social life (Pearce, 1995). Introduced by Weick (1995) and proceeding from the ideas of Mead on meaning-making, sensemaking theory perceives the constant human activity we engage in through structuring our knowledge about the world as a means to be able to function in it (Ancona, 2012).

Thus, the social constructionist lens applied to the leadership project means that understanding leadership is concerned with grasping how leaders make sense of why things are done the way they are. This includes how leadership is conceptualised and conveyed by the leaders themselves.

Hence, the stories on leadership in this project depend on how leaders themselves apply meaning to the phenomenon of leadership, as seen from their point of view. In other words, I approach stories on leadership identity constructions as a matter of meaning-making.

In contemporary leadership research, there is a shared understanding of leadership as a socially fabricated phenomenon, crafted through collective interactions between those leading and those being led—between the leader and the follower (Smircich & Morgan, 1982, Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Following the social constructionist paradigm, in what is acknowledged as a socially constructed world, competing versions of reality will exist, and thus, so will competing ideas of what are perceived as valid beliefs and actions. Leadership concerns navigating these rivalling ideas to provide a shared direction for an organisation.

Leadership is much more than ‘a process of acting and behaving’. It is ‘a process of power-based reality construction and needs to be understood in these terms’ (1982, p. 270). On the basis of understanding leadership as a socially constructed phenomenon, it follows that the sensemaking approach applies in any contemporary research project engaging with leadership identity constructions (see Fairhurst & Grant, 2010).

Thus, I relate this project on the construction of leadership identities to the concept of leadership identity as a socially constructed phenomenon in constant flux, driven by perpetual meaning-making and sensemaking. Within the social constructionist frame, people’s perception of reality is viewed as constituted by this ongoing construction activity, wherein they constantly negotiate meanings and truths as well as what they think of as being valid and sound and what they do not. Equally, in this context, the constructionist stance applied to leadership and leadership identities implies that they too are phenomena constantly being negotiated in an ongoing sensemaking process.

Here, the aspect of the interchange between what Holstein and Gubrium (2011) label the Foucauldian discourses-in-practice and ethnomethodology’s discursive practice becomes central, seeing the Discourse dimension as influential for local discursive practice. Hence, the negotiation process is not only on the local discursive level but also on a Discourse level, where the constant dialectic dynamics in the interchange between the Discourse and discursive levels must be recognised. This bears relevance to the present project because it engages with the tension between the two levels of discourse.



As stated in the Chapter 2, I apply the concept of Husserl's lifeworld to this project (Husserl, 1970). Accordingly, my approach is explorative and qualitative. As Schütz (1970) stated, the lifeworld concept is an invitation to investigate how people make meaning out of their experiences; how they take a stand in regard to social and cultural circumstances in their lives; and how they embrace fundamental assumptions about these circumstances and experiences as 'real'.

Therefore, I use the lifeworld concept to facilitate a framing of the leaders' stories, how they themselves organise and ascribe meaning to their experiences, and how they validate and their own legitimacy as well as explain their ability to 'act upon the world and within the world' (in German: *vermöglichkeit*) (Schütz, 1970, p.116) as leaders based on their own sensemaking. Moreover, I take an interest in how leaders make sense of their own leadership projects.

Here, the focus is not on the actual lives of leaders but on the stories told by them to portray their experiences of leadership. This perspective means that I do not approach the leaders' stories as 'windows to the leaders' actual lives or history, but as texts that operate at the time of their telling' (Shamir, Dayan-Horesh, & Adler, 2005, p.16). Aligning with Shamir and peers, I do not intend to postulate on whether the experiences conveyed in the leaders' stories are true, even if they could be. Instead, my point of interest is the selected content performing in the leaders' life stories and 'how this content reflects the leaders' self- concepts and their concept of leadership, and allow or enable them to enact their leadership role' (Shamir et al., 2005, p. 16).

### 3.1.2 Epistemological stance

The epistemological positioning of this project corresponds closely to the social constructionist outlook. As Barge (2010) stressed, 'the grammatical abilities associated with leadership are much more than simply thinking about situations and systems' (Tourish & Barge, 2010, p. 328); it involves engaging with real actors in the in-situ moment of the creation of leadership. The qualitative approach and a close, face-to-face interaction with my research subjects constitute the foundation for the manufacturing of knowledge.

Hence, a social constructionist approach to leadership implies that emphasis will be on the communicative practice of individuals and the manufacturing of social activities (Tourish & Barge, 2010). In this sense, both the ontological and epistemological positions align with a notable trend in qualitative leadership studies, even if this qualitative legacy continues to represent a minority tributary within leadership studies as a research field (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Klenke, 2008; Parry, Mumford, Bower, & Watts, 2014).

The choice of methodological lens for my project seems to be a counterpart for the contemporary call for a more broadened application of qualitative methods in leadership research (Bryman, 2004; Klenke, 2008; Parry et al., 2014). Even if the use of qualitative approaches is increasingly being applied within leadership studies, a widespread notion has been that scientific virtue cannot be well-served by qualitative instruments (Klenke, 2008). Furthermore, the particular origin of leadership as a research field has clearly influenced this notion. In their review of the presence of qualitative studies in the *Journal of Leadership Quarterly*'s first 25 years, Perry et al. (2014) pointed to the tradition of North American scholars within social science as one of the leading causes of the dominance of quantitative approaches within the domain of leadership studies.

Since the 1990s, the qualitative volume on leadership research has been growing, emerging with The New Leadership School and the recognition of leadership as a relational phenomenon (Ospina, 2004). Still, it is only recently that leadership studies have taken on a qualitative perspective, been recognised as rigorous research, and accepted in top-rated peer-reviewed management journals (Klenke, 2008; Parry et al., 2014). With her background from anthropology, Klenke described the qualitative approach using the analogy of a cave explorer, seeing qualitative methods in leadership research as a possibility for examining 'phenomena at deeper and unexplored levels', as well as to 'experience first-hand' what we 'are examining' (Klenke, 2008, p. 109).

As Wengraf (2006) indicated, the particular nearness that comes with first-hand experience is dense with emotions and notions, confronting researchers with their own prejudices, biases and tacit knowledge:

You do not leave behind your anxieties, your hopes, your blindspots, your prejudices, your class, race or gender, your location in global social structure, your age, and historical positions, your emotions, your past and your sense of possible futures when you set up an interview, and nor does your interviewee when he or she agrees to an interview and you both come nervously into the same room. Nor do you so when you sit down to analyse the material you have produced. (Wengraf, 2006, p. 4)

As much as a qualitative approach provides researchers with lavish possibilities to explore experience, meaning, and motif in the lived world of others, it is also an impending trap because of the contextual complexity residing in the qualitative encounter. This aligns with Alvesson and

Kärreman when they stated, ‘Our approach to, perceptions of, and interpretations of what we experience are filtered through a web of assumptions, expectations and vocabularies that will then guide entire projects and be crucial for the results we arrive at’ (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011, p. 5).

For this project, the data multiplicity generated by a qualitative approach facilitates a richness in detail and sensitivity concerning nuances of how leaders act as active makers of meaning, as well as for the cultural and contextual dimension of this meaning-making, which quantitative approaches cannot provide (Alvesson, 1996). Consequently, the investigative journey came to take on a genuinely inductive character; I did not set out to falsify or confirm a distinct hypothesis. Rather, I articulated a research question based on my existing knowledge of leaders and leadership as concept and practice from the point of view of an experienced ethnographer, action researcher, and leadership consultant. I believed that I had clear ideas about which leadership areas I specifically wanted to examine and how this examination could best be made feasible. Hence, my choice of qualitative interviews as a tool was obvious.

In this sense, the abductive point of departure was initially a dominating view from the onset of this project. The inductive dimension grew as it became clear to me that what emerged as insights out of the interviews was something very different from what I had expected when I set out. I had neither anticipated nor articulated finding trust and self-trust rising to be the main theme in my qualitative exploration. Similarly, the idea of a narrative ecology also emerged as a result of the analytical process. When I eventually chose trust and self-trust and a narrative ecology as my main concepts for further discussion, this choice was a result of the processing of my data and the analytic tools I applied in the process. I will attend to that particular choice of tool in more detail later in this chapter. However, the choice of analytic instrument was informed both by my phenomenological and constructionist outlook, and the theoretical knowledge I had at the onset of this project. That is why I see the final results of this research as a product of what began as an abductive curiosity and turned into a truly inductive voyage. If the methodological tool I chose as transportation for my journey was a classic vehicle in the qualitative leadership research terrain, the road I ended up travelling must be said to be one less travelled topic-wise.

The phenomenologist Van Manen claimed that ‘meaningfulness happens when meaning speaks to our existence in such a way that it makes “contact” and touches us”’ (Van Manen, 2014, p. 373). The insights that have emerged on the ontological and epistemological grounds of this project appear meaningful to me for two reasons; first, they provide me with a new conceptual skyline for grasping the potential meaning of trust and self-trust in the leaders’ stories, and second,

according to my understanding, they connect with other existing theories and notions about leadership identity constructions that I consider significant.

### 3.2 The qualitative interview as research method

The qualitative interview, particularly the semi-structured type, is a popular tool in qualitative leadership research (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011; Bryman et al, 2011). Several reasons exist for its widespread popularity. It is a grateful instrument for the qualitative researcher because of its plasticity, meaning that it can easily be adapted to a broad range of different research subjects and settings, and it can also be tailored to fit different research circumstances, scopes and designs. Moreover, as raw material data for insight gathering, the qualitative interview is a grateful source for further investigative processing, allowing the researcher to be flexible in terms of analytical approaches. Because of this flexibility, the generativity potential embedded in the qualitative interview data is extensive, and thus, attractive.

Nevertheless, as Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) indicated, as much as the idea-generative power is a great asset, there are also problematic aspects with the qualitative interview as a method that must be addressed. In the following subsection, I attempt to follow up on these aspects.

#### 3.2.1 Establishing the empirical ground: the qualitative interview as a field

Affiliated with the social constructionist tradition, I do not believe that any researcher should take the interview as an objective or ‘pure’ account of the truth. We must consider the complexity of the many contextual factors that influence the interview setting. I understand interviews as staged occurrences for social performances, ‘involving participants, contexts, times and places’ (Warren, 2012, p. 130).

The many layers of impacting factors that characterise the interactional encounter between the researcher and the interviewee constitute a methodological dilemma. The dilemma lies in the fact that as the qualitative interaction potentially adds more richness to the data, it also adds a higher risk. The consequence is that you cannot have richness without also having riskiness.

I side with Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) in how they see the empirical source not as one to be tested against a data-theory fit construct, but as a cradle for scholarly novelty and creativity. At the same time, richness without any rigour very quickly leaves the researcher with more messiness than valuable insights. The contextual particularity of the qualitative interview sets a tricky table for the researcher. Wengraf’s notion corresponds well with Alvesson and Kärreman when they claimed that working with empirical data in qualitative research ‘make a variety of readings

possible and may also make different knowledge results possible' (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011, p. 5).

### 3.2.2 Reliability and validity in the qualitative context

Within the quantitative paradigm, strict rules apply for how to control and measure reliability and validity (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011), whereas in a stringent understanding of the terms, the concept of reliability appears to be futile in a qualitative research context when validity is applied by highly different criteria (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001; Uwe, 2007). Thus, as much as this project aims to contribute credible research findings, my object of study is clearly not a static controllable entity, nor can my findings by any means be replicated through steady scientific repetitions. Reliability and validity in this context are therefore not about procedural rigidity in a conventional sense, but about reflexivity and transparency (Alvesson, 1996; Huberman & Miles, 2002).

The social constructionist stance implies that there is no such thing as 'pure' or objective data waiting to be 'harvested' by me as a researcher. Instead, the interview setting is loaded with elements brought to the situation by both the researcher and interviewee, shaping and influencing the moment and what is said, done and perceived; data is co-created through interactions between the researcher and research object. Engaging with social science is engaging with interpretation as a profession (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011, p. 28).

Thus, when Steier (1991) and Scott (2005) claimed that social science is co-constructed, they pinpointed why the concepts of reliability and validity in social science must—especially when a qualitative lens is applied—be handled with great care and never overlooked. This is because of their immediate incongruity with the apparent ambiguity concerning what knowledge can be derived from the qualitative posture and how. To serve qualitative research with professional integrity and legitimacy, reliability and validity should be treated with attentive scrutiny from the researcher's side rather than dismissed and ignored. As Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) and Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) have stated, reflexive practice by the researcher is the only reliable instrument to secure such an enquiring attentiveness. To add to the reflexive layers, I hesitate to use the term 'data collecting' because it represents a notion that I find rather instrumental, implying that objective data exist out there in the field, awaiting only a thresher. Therefore, I have chosen to apply the expression 'insight gathering' (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992) because it refers to a more processual exploration wherein experiences, perceptions, intuitions and ideas are welcomed, explored and blended for new understandings to make ground. Moreover, it has been

a highly profound experience of mine that insights and fresh ideas develop in the course of the doing–thinking–writing–reading–revising process that the research journey is built upon.

### 3.2.3 The qualitative investigation as a mystery method

Because I selected a qualitative approach for this explorative project, the romantic notion about being able to reveal the one and only truth about leader's innermost 'true' emotions or present a pure 'native point' of the leader's view has not been an objective of mine (see Alvesson, 2003; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011, p. 99). Furthermore, I do not relate to the findings with a neopositivist belief in a 1:1 relationship between data and the interpreter. By contrast, I align with Alvesson and Kärreman when inspired by Asplund (1970) and Abbott (2004), they encouraged researchers to approach the qualitative investigation as a mystery method where the researcher operates as a creative detective (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011).

In the course of dealing with interview material as sources to insights, I have been searching for mysteries and wading through ambiguities. Along the way, I unearthed some of my own imbedded notions and prejudices about leadership and leadership identity constructions. I was surprised to discover how naïve the accounts of experienced leaders sometimes appear, as well as how massively the romanticism of leadership perforates leadership language. For me, this led to a strengthened understanding of how important resisting the seduction that dwells in leadership language is, and how crucial it is to take a critical approach.

When I started out, the research question centred around leaders' own understanding of their role as a leader and what it meant to them to be one. I was curious about their own identity tales. As I gathered insights through conversations with the leaders, I slowly discovered that they applied highly similar language in their stories. This opened up a mystery. Why was it that all the leaders were talking so extensively about trust and self-trust, and how could it be that this linguistic dyad of trust and self-trust was not correspondingly present in any leadership literature? I pursued the mystery, and through analysis and a comprehensive engagement with research literature on trust in leadership and self-trust in psychology and philosophy, I eventually solved the mystery. Or alternatively it could be said that at last, I was able to present one possible solution to the mystery, because others might exist. The discovery of trust and self-trust as what I understand as a dyadic phenomenon in the leaders' stories led me to engage with research literature corresponding to these two topics as they transpired in leadership language. Applying a different theoretical frame would probably have generated a different solution. To illustrate how I experienced the particular mystery tour of this specific project, I will present a modified version of the model of the research-

process-as-mystery offered by Alvesson and Kärreman (2011). My modifications are marked in red:

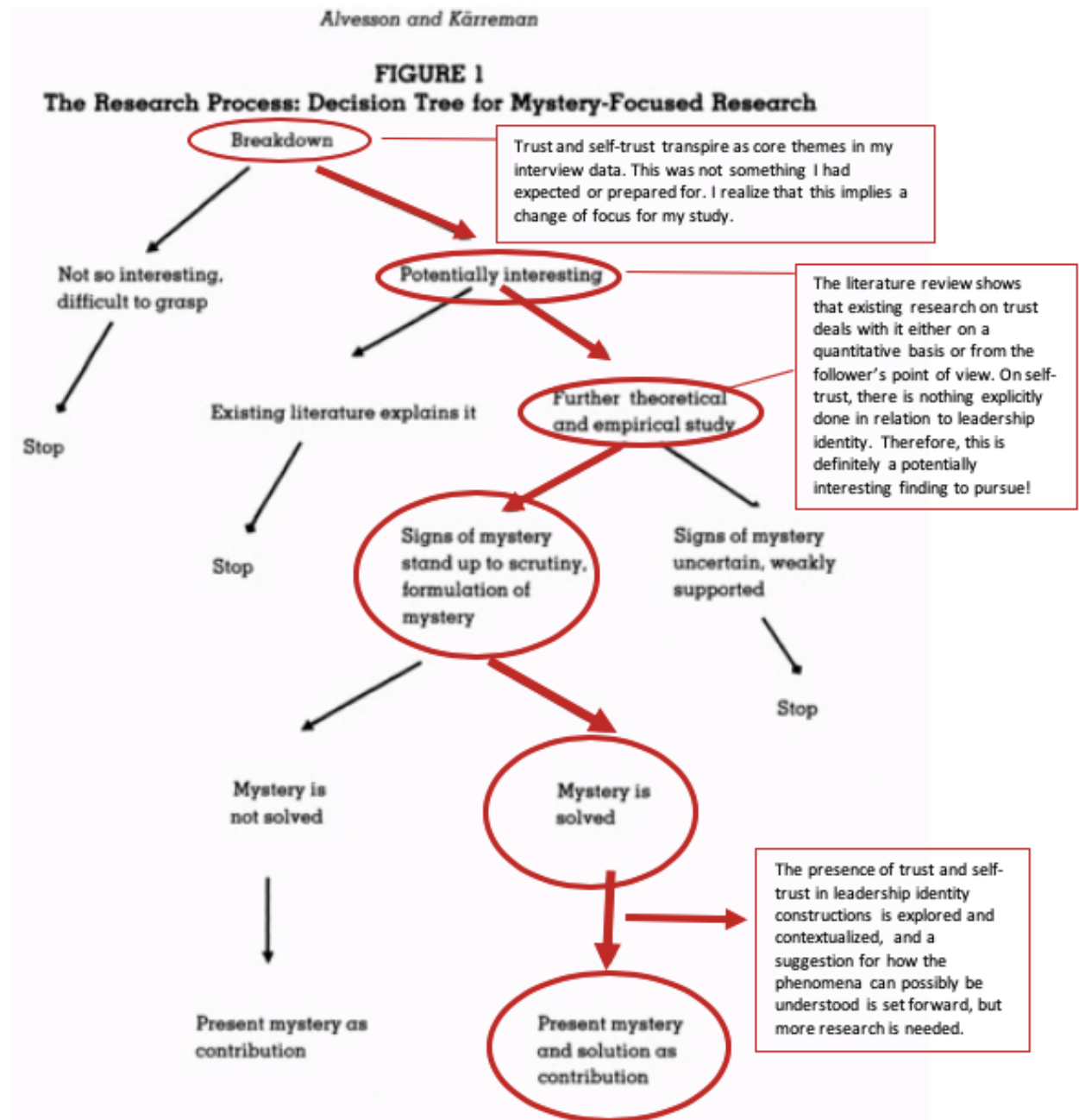


Figure 1. The research process: Decision Tree for mystery-focused research. Taken from Alvesson, M., & Kärreman, D. (2011). *Qualitative research and theory development: Mystery as method*. Sage Publications.

### 3.2.4 Sliding interfaces between the researcher and the researched

Aligning with the social constructionist stance and the meaning-making perspective, where there is a researcher in the field there will always be a matter of sliding interfaces between the researcher and the researched. Thus, the qualitative researcher will always be in a double-bind position as both observer, participant and interpreter. Furthermore, following Tedlock (1991), I believe that the intent to engage with your research objects to ‘grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world’ (Malinowski, 1922) must be authentic from the researcher’s side, thereby serving as validity assurance.

This intent is what I understand to be the driving force behind the conversations I had with the 20 leaders who contributed to this project. I recognise the interview as a co-created happening wherein intersubjective dynamics are at work. Similarly, the presented interpretations are my understanding of how the leaders see themselves, meaning they are my representations of what I perceived as crucial in the conversations we had. I still engaged in the conversations as a means of grasping the leaders’ points of view, with the intention of grasping how they understood their lifeworld as leaders.

However, to avoid being corrupted by the double-bind in the qualitative engagement that Tedlock (1991) depicted, as well as to continuously strive for validity, I sought to apply a reflexive lens throughout the research journey, relating to the criteria of Altheide and Johnson (2011) for validity. I constantly questioned the relationship between the leaders’ stories and the larger contexts within which they were told. Moreover, I cross-examined the relationship between myself and the leaders as well as the setting we were in and how the context might have influenced the outcome of the conversation and my interpretation. Furthermore, I endeavoured to be critical concerning the perspectives I apply that lay grounds for the core substance of this thesis. I have done my best to present the empirical material in a manner that allows for my audience to validate my findings, and lastly, I have aspired to apply a tone and language in the written text that serve my claims with consistency and transparency.

### 3.2.5 The ethnomethodological lens

By approaching the qualitative interview through an ethnomethodological lens, one can relate to the interview as an ethnographic encounter (Baker, 2002). With the ethnomethodological approach, the interview material is treated as a matter of storytelling, not as a factual report. Historically, ethnomethodology and ethnography have many overlapping aspects (Atkinson, 2007; Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland & Lofland, 2001). Ethnomethodology and



ethnography engage with the lifeworld of the social actor from an interpretative view, and challenge the quantitative outlook. The main difference between the two concepts is that ethnomethodology is understood as insisting on pursuing the ‘native’ perspective, meaning the ‘lived order’ of the social actors studied.

With an ethnomethodological lens, analysis of interview material makes it possible to ‘go well beyond the conventional “content” or “thematic” explications, where interviewee talk is seen as information about interior or exterior realities’ (Baker, 2002, p. 2). In this project, this specific approach has facilitated an analysis and discussion that I believe encompass the dimension of the interactive, co-creative dynamics between myself as a researcher and the leaders as interviewees in our conversations.

The ethnomethodological approach as a means to understand the qualitative interview allows for recognising the interview moment as just as ‘real’ as any other moment, and thus, makes it possible to understand it as a real ‘field moment’. This becomes particularly relevant in this case considering the fact that the words ‘trust’ and ‘self-trust’ were never present in my initial project proposal or in my interview guide. If it was not for the ethnomethodological lens as an interpretative alternative, I am not sure if I would have been able to grasp the trust and self-trust dimension as I eventually ended up doing.

As in any other field context, in the qualitative interview, both I and the interviewees draw upon ‘resources recruited from their memberships in other settings’ (Baker, 2002, p. 2). Applying the ethnomethodological lens to the qualitative interview implies that the interview is understood to be an arena for negotiating identities and mutual sensemaking, wherein there is a reciprocal attempt to establish intersubjective appreciation. Thus, the interview itself is not treated as a technique but as content in which identities are situated and accounted for.

In this sense, rephrasing Baker (2002), an ethnomethodological investigation applied to the qualitative interview setting builds on ‘a sense of fascination with how’ leaders ‘accomplish their identities, their activities, their settings, and their sense of social order’ (p. 3). The ethnomethodological outlook matches the social constructionist stance, recognising the interactional dynamics in the conversational questioning and answering process and how the participants—both the researcher and the interviewee—make sense of each other, how they negotiate identities, and how they depict and associate with the realms they talk about.

Simultaneously, considering the ethnomethodological viewpoint and Alvesson and Kärreman's eight categories for the qualitative encounter, there is an aspect of interaction in the interview material that ought to be recognised as potentially vital for the identity narrative. The interview setting and the communication between the researcher and the interviewee is also a relational happenstance where identity is accounted for and negotiated.

To build further on this aspect of ethnographic intersubjectivity and the ethnomethodological approach, broadening the methodological perspective concerning the qualitative interview as the basis of my work, I find value in referring to the emic-etic distinction in ethnographic theory (Berry, 1999; Harris, 1976; Morris, Leung, Ames, & Lickel, 1999; Olive, 2014; Pike, 1967). Recognising that the debate concerning the origin and use of the emic-etic distinction in ethnographic studies has a long history with many opposing views (Harris, 1967), the concept still provides a useful tool to distinguish between the local language used by informants and the researcher's interpretation and conceptualisation of that language. Here, I apply the emic – etic distinction referring to the emic as the actual, local language used by the leaders to tell their stories, while referring to the etic as abstractions and interpretations of local language, made by the researcher for analytical purposes (Olive, 2014). Emic is local meaning and knowledge in use, etic is the researcher's language of abstracted interpretation used to create new knowledge (Berry, 1999).

I see the concept of emic-etic as a useful distinction of viewpoints to describe how I have attempted to apply both the emic and the etic perspective in organising the process of data coding and interpretation. In the interactive interface between the leaders' stories and the actual language they apply, and my interpretations of that language, my understanding of what is going on in the leaders' stories is informed both by the emic and the etic. During the interviews with the leaders, I often found myself being highly attentive to, intrigued by, and sometimes fascinated by the leaders' representations of their lives as leaders and how we through dialogue engaged in their stories. The conversational flow was how Janesick (2000) described it—an improvised dance emerging in the moment. In the interview moment, I many times had what I recognised as an 'emic' connection with the story being told, meaning that I perceived the experience of being granted a real, authentic glimpse and feeling of the leaders' universe—an instant and brief insight into their lifeworlds.

During later stages, when processing the interview data in several rounds, this perspective was replaced with what I experienced as a much more detached moment and analytical view, where I shifted my viewpoint from a more emic (in context) to a more analytic, etic (outside context) point

of view. However, I cannot say that at any point during the project have I been able to fully distinguish between the empiric and analytic influences. I believe that the two dimensions continuously co-influenced my interpretation and understanding, simply because they continue to coexist as analytical sizes in my mind as well as in my language. Yet, for the sake of clarity and validity when it comes to the origin of my findings and the concepts for exploration in the forthcoming analysis and discussion, I find it relevant to try and distinguish between concepts with an emic origin and concepts that have been developed from etic categories. In particular this concerns the two main concepts of trust and self-trust being a core for attention in this project, but also other related concepts that I see playing a role in the stories on leadership identity as they are presented here.

### 3.2.6 The researcher's point of departure

Having presented the epistemological and ontological positioning of this project, my personal backlog as a researcher is of relevance as part of the interpretivist perspective applied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). The interpretivist viewpoint implies that a reflexive understanding of the context in which the researcher finds herself and a sensitivity to how her research is being influenced by her own social background, is vital. Within a social constructionist frame, the reflexivity and sensitivity are crucial aspects of the criteria associated with research validity (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Thus, in accordance with Wengraf (2006), being clear about my own bias is a prerequisite for claiming legitimacy in a qualitative context.

Consequently, I will provide a brief background to my personal interest in undertaking this study. I am a white woman, born and raised in the north of Norway in a middleclass family. I graduated with a master's degree in Social Anthropology from the University of Oslo in 1998, and conducted my master thesis on post-revolutionary identity among Cuban youths. After university, I started working as a change management consultant, engaging with change management, leadership development and organisational culture development projects. My curiosity concerning leadership as a distinct research field was further ignited when I became part of a research team with a research environment in Norway, focusing on leadership and co-created innovation in an action-based research project.

What sparked my interest in the following questions was what I have observed in my roles as a leadership consultant and an action researcher in leadership contexts: How do leaders see themselves and their leadership project? What notions do they have about their own identity as leaders, and consequently, their influence and agency as leaders? How and why do they think they make a difference? Overall, how do they understand and conceptualise their own identity as

leaders? Elaborating on these questions for my PhD project, I found myself asking: How can a deeper qualitative knowledge about leaders' own understanding of their leadership identity and of what they do and how they do it provide us with more insight into the contemporary ecology concerning leadership as part of organisational life?

At the onset of my PhD work, these questions were puzzles that triggered my investigative interest. Influenced by the action-based research project I was part of, I initially imagined that my work would focus on leaders and perspectives on leadership identity in the context of collaborative creativity and innovation. As the project developed throughout the actual conversations with the 20 leaders, I found my academic curiosity gradually shifting from leaders' understanding of leading for creativity and innovation to a different angle of inquiry: How do leaders in their own terms conceptualise their identity as leaders in today's landscape of leadership?

Even if the investigative interest of inquiry shifted as I started to gather insights through interviews, a phenomenological perspective (Van Manen, 2014) continued to be applied to my work. All the time, what I have been listening for are the experiences of leaders as they themselves conceptualise them in our conversations, formatted in the shape of the leader's life story.

### 3.3 The interview as context: a co-creative encounter

At one point in time, I was there, conversing with 20 Norwegian leaders in a research-framed dialogue, or what Kvale terms *InterViews* (Kvale, 1996). Now, years later, I find myself in a different context, presenting what I have found through transcribing, analysing and interpreting those same conversations, investigating layers of potential meanings and implications. In this context, it feels both a relief and a restraint to admit to the paragraph by Geertz where he states that:

Finding somewhere to stand in a text that is at one and the same time supposed to be an intimate view and a cool assessment is almost as much of a challenge as gaining the view and making the assessment in the first place. (Geertz, 1988, p. 10)

I have found myself striving to maintain the point of equilibrium in this interface between the intimate and the cool. The fusion of what Geertz (1988) referred to as the pilgrim and the cartographer in his text (p. 10) has felt like both a thrill and a threat; it has thrilled my academic passion to indulge in the analytical possibilities dwelling in my qualitative catch, while simultaneously I have been aware of the fact that such an engagement also represents a risk concerning the validity of the assertions I am about to set forward in this text (see Morse, 2012; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

### 3.3.1 The researcher–interviewee relationship and the role of the researcher

The particular intimacy between the researcher and the interviewee facilitated by qualitative interviews comes with clear implications for the relationship facets between the two parties. These facets entail a potential additional layer to the conceptualisation of what is occurring in the interview setting, and hence how the interview should be interpreted.

As Baker (2002) stated, the interview setting represents a real source for identifying identity work materialising through narrative production (Baker, 2002, p. 6). The active participation of the interviewer contributes to the narratives emerging as a result of the interaction (see Holstein & Gubrium, 1997). Baker described this as ‘sense-making work through which participants engage in explaining, attributing, justifying, describing, and otherwise finding possible sense or orderliness in the various events, people, places, and courses of action they talk about’ (Baker, 2002, p. 7).

Klenke also pinpointed how ‘interviews are replete with evidence of how relevant identities and memberships are assembled as part of the talk about the topic and of how the topic can accountably be talked about’ (Klenke, 2008, p. 22). The interview will always comprise situated identities as well as stories speaking up to those identities. In this sense, the qualitative interview cannot be perceived as cut-off from the social universe that the interviewee is talking about. Instead, as Klenke (2008) claimed, the interview should be approached as a reflexive depiction of the interviewee’s experienced reality.

These perspectives align well with how Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) attempted to sketch out the various dimensions that can potentially be at work in the qualitative interview situation, working within the interactive intersubjectivity. They proposed eight metaphors to address the dilemma concerning the ‘truth’ of the interview content that the researcher is faced with (p. 102). I find all eight metaphors to be relevant for this particular project and for the research process of how I have attempted to treat the interview raw material throughout the research process:

- 1) The social problem of coping with an interpersonal relation and complex interaction in a nonroutine situation – interview accounts then are a situation-specific response in a conversation with a specific interviewer. This is the key point of localism. Here an interview is a *local accomplishment*.

- 2) The cognitive problem of finding out what it is all about (beyond the level of the espoused) – interview responses reflect the interviewee’s more or less accurate assumptions about what the project’s purpose and researcher’s intentions are. The interview is then about the interviewee *finding a story-line*.
- 3) The identity problem of adapting a self-position which is contextually relevant (and/or comfortable for the interviewee) – here the interviewee may wish to use the interview situation to express a specific self-image. The interview is then a site for *identity work*.
- 4) The “institutional” problem of adapting to normative pressure and cognitive uncertainty through mimicking standards forms of expression – interviewees are politically correct or guided by conventions for how one should speak. What follows is an *application of scripts* for how to talk about phenomena (leadership, diversity, ethics) that dominate the situation.
- 5) The problem (or option) of maintaining and increasing self-esteem that emerges in any situation involving examination and calling for performance (or allowing esteem-enhancement to flourish in the situation) – the interviewee then talks very positively about him/herself to provide a favourable view. The interview is then *impression management*.
- 6) The motivation problem of developing an interest or rationale for active participation in the interview – the interviewee may have hidden motives for the talk produced, perhaps serving his/her interest (possibly for the benefit of the unit or organisation). This means that the interview is viewed as *political action*.
- 7) The representation /construction problem of how to account for complex phenomena through language – accounts then reflect problems in crafting coherent response rather than providing a rich picture of the world “out there”. The interview as a *crafting exercise* then illuminates what may go on.
- 8) The “autonomy/determinism problem” of a powerful macro-discourse operating behind and on the interview subject – the interviewee may come across in a particular way as the theme of the interview means that they adapt to and subordinate themselves to the norms for how one should be (as an ecologically conscious consumer, professional woman, etc). The interview setting then expresses the *powers of discourse* that are operating on the subject.

In particular, I find that categories 3, 4, 5 and 8 apply to the interview context of this project, and to such an extent that they turned out to be vital aspects in the analysis and discussion. Furthermore, these categories correspond to the ethnomethodological lens, where identities are viewed as situated and a moral work of accounting is anticipated (Baker, 2002). The fact that the leaders knew that their stories would be subjected to further analysis and juxtaposed with other

leaders' stories in a PhD research context made it reasonable to believe that there would be a certain degree of impression management occurring in the interview situation.

Therefore, when I was approaching the leaders with invitations to share their leadership experiences for the cause of my research project, I was assuming that there would be some identity work and impression management occurring in the interactional encounter between myself as researcher and the leader as interviewee. I expected the leaders to want to present their leadership in a positive light and give a good impression.

I have also considered the probability of a certain normative script impacting how the leaders would choose to frame and portray their experiences in their conversations with me. As part of this impression management, both the crafting exercise aspect and the political action aspect could be part of the interviewee agenda. I will return to these metaphorical aspects in subsequent chapters to investigate more closely how they can be said to form a part of the constitutional premises for the findings and the discussion.

### 3.3.2 Tacit knowledge as a source of data

The embodied encounters between myself as researcher and the leaders who were my interviewees have made it possible for me to grasp much more than just syntax nuances. Altheide and Johnson (2011) referred to tacit knowledge and an ecology of understanding as vital considerations for cultivating trustworthiness in the qualitative project. I read this as part of the richness implied in the qualitative method. I argue that the embodied encounter facilitates this knowledge and understanding in a unique way, yet the embodied encounters with the leaders in this particular context also facilitated a certain type of binary mess composed of richness and riskiness (see Alvesson, 1996).

The tacit knowledge dimension is apparent, yet also adds to the risk dimension of the qualitative interview as a method. I have strived to extract rich meanings while remaining faithful to academic accuracy. I have carried not only taped words but unique voices, pauses, breathing, accentuations and hesitations with me from the interviews. Furthermore, I have carried gestures, looks, scents, sounds, as well as emotional and tactile sensations back to my desk and laptop. All this has been fed into my translations from the raw interview material to the analysis.

I emphasise that the empirical data pertaining to this work only counts for tales about leading, not for the actual practice of leading. From the polyphony of leaders' voices that constitutes the raw data for this project, an aspiration of mine has been to extract some findings that contribute to

existing theoretical concepts of leadership identity. However, what I present in this work as the basis for analysis and discussion are excerpts of lengthy conversations. Borrowing from the French philosopher Bergson (1968), I am the first to admit that one cannot shorten the length of a melody without altering its nature. These excerpts will remain precisely what they are; tiny fragments of a much bigger whole. As Alvesson and Kärreman asserted, 'In qualitative research, researchers present selected portions to prove their case' (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000, p. 138).

Subsequently, the distillation of meaning is always about a deliberate gathering of insights to manufacture a case. This implies that for this project, I have left out interview material that I considered irrelevant in regard to my main research question, or of low quality. One example of the latter is when technical issues with my recording equipment resulted in poor sound quality for the first half of one of the earlier interviews that I conducted. The sound was partly completely disrupted in some of the passages, partly of a very bad quality in others, making it difficult to recognise the full meaning of what was being said. As a consequence, the transcript of the interview reflected how I struggled to understand what was being said and to connect one sentence to another. This meant that for a large part of that particular interview, I had to rely mainly on my handwritten notes that I took under the interview and my handwritten memo in the hours after. In earlier versions of my thesis, I wrote up an analysis of that specific interview to include what I understood as being the core content of relevance for my research question, in that conversation. After I had transcribed, coded, axial coded, interpreted and strived for an exhaustive analysis of all the twenty interviews, I eventually decided to not include any data from that one particular interview after all. In the light of the total interview data, I found the conversation to be too distracted and a little too 'all over the place' topic wise, demanding much editing to make sense in the context of this thesis, and without adding to any further value for the totality, insight wise.

This experience illustrates what I understand as part of the 'data-condensation' process that characterizes the use of qualitative interview as data source (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2018). Like Miles, Huberman and Saldaña carefully pointed out in their book, the term condensation is here applied to stress that data condensation is not the same as data reduction. On the contrary, data condensation is to add value to the totality of the research data and the research process through 'the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and/or transforming the data that appear in the full corpus (body) of written-up field notes, interview transcripts, documents, and other empirical materials' (p. xxxi). According to Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2018), in any qualitative project the condensation of data is a part of the research process' lifecycle from start to end. The selection aspect is at work from the very first moment the researcher starts to shape a qualitative project, and goes on continuously from start to end. Condensation happens



from before data is gathered, to the final written report, as the researcher makes decisions concerning the inclusion and exclusion of elements that contributes to shape, organize and sharpen research work. Data condensation is therefore a part of the analysis and also the discussion part. The process of data-condensation is what makes it possible that ‘final’ conclusions can be drawn and verified (p. xxxi).

If the final version of a research report contains as little as somewhere between ten and one percent or less of the original raw data, the condensation of the data must be done with great concern for the complexity of the original material (Wengraf, 2006). Condensed data in terms of a selected word count should not lead to a reduced meaning in terms of lost data complexity. Likewise, with summaries comes a great danger of losing significant details that potentially carries big mysteries. Subsequently, I experienced the selection of interview data to include in the text as sometimes an overwhelming challenge, but also as a very essential part of the research process, distilling relevant research essence and killing my darlings as part of that distillation process.

I also left out one other interview from my final data material because the interviewee passed away from illness while I was in the midst of doing the analysis work. The sudden death of the interviewee implied that she would not be able to read my final work nor voice her opinion about how I had used the content of our conversation in my thesis as it would eventually be presented. For ethical reasons, I thus decided that in spite of having transcribed and analysed the interview I made with her at the time she passed away, I would not include any data from the interview in this thesis. This was also due to a thorough consideration that leaving out this one interview would not significantly weaken nor strengthen what I considered to be the validity of the findings or the arguments presented in the discussion.

The process of distilling and refining data through condensation work has been a demanding and continuous process, where I have been applying analytic bracketing as a means for such condensation work (Holstein & Gubrium) when analysing my data. Later in this chapter, I will return to analytic bracketing and how I specifically worked to apply this method in my research. What should be stressed here is that the findings that are eventually presented here, being the result of the methodological approach taken, represent a tiny selection from stories that in their full-length versions invite much further and wider explorations than what I am able to dwell upon here. As Lévi-Strauss (1970) noted concerning ethnographic research- and data interpretation, what we can regard as reality on a basis of the present is constantly shifting in the light of the past and the future. For every attempt to represent reality as a written record, what we claim to be reality has already changed. Hence, there will always be realities unknown to us, because we can

only grasp what Lévi-Strauss refers to as ‘samples and scraps at our disposal’ (p.3). The researcher is always encountering only the subtle pieces of indefinite wholes.

What I have selected as my chosen samples and scraps in an attempt to make sense of the leaders’ stories does not exclude the possibility of another sample of scraps originating from the same stories being made just as relevant by another researcher. Nor does it imply that the same sample could not have provided for a different understanding of meaningfulness if framed by a different theoretical and methodological setup. In other words, the phenomenological outlook where one cannot grasp the ‘whole’ of a phenomenon because this ‘whole’ is comprised of many pieces, and none of them can be grasped at the same time, means that in this particular case the samples and scraps I selected from the leaders’ stories remain only pieces of the whole.

Still, I will claim that what I have ended up with as the final extracts bears at least some value and significance in terms of relevance, both in regard to my research question and in regard to this thesis being a contribution to leadership identity studies.

### 3.3.3 The process approach

As a furtherance of the tacit dimension, having already mentioned the French philosopher Bergson, the process dimension of this research project as a mystery tour must be mentioned. As stated by Pettigrew (1997) in paraphrasing Sztompka (1991), ‘the driving assumption behind process thinking is that social reality is not a steady state. It is a dynamic process. It occurs rather than merely exists’ (Pettigrew, 1997, p. 338). Aligned with an epistemological outlook where leadership as a social phenomenon is approached as a process rather than a thing (Wood, 2005), my own research journey has also been highly shaped by such a processual understanding.

The generativity embedded in the dialogical process that comes with the qualitative interview as research method has in itself been a journey in the name of a processual and reflexive methodology. In all phases of the insight processing, from the initial research project idea to designing an interview guide, contacting the interviewees, conducting the interviews, writing up and distilling empirical material from the conversations with leaders, identifying themes for analysis and exploration, to writing the actual thesis, unexpected themes have surfaced that have generated surprise and caused me to ponder.

This experience resonates greatly with how Janesick (2000) depicted the process of a qualitative study, comparing it with artistic improvisation rather than a fixed composition, constituted by various emerging phases that together make a whole. In her latest book, Janesick (2015) continued

to apply the dance metaphor to describe the qualitative research approach as a contemplative exercise, stressing that to the qualitative mind, a critical lens is vital when attempting to make sense of observations through documenting and writing. According to how I read Janesick, this is about shifting perspectives, about zooming in and out, and also about challenging the interface between the emic and the etic outlooks. Moreover, a process view corresponds with the ethnomethodological angle and the mystery-as-method approach because of the acknowledgement of insights as something that emerges in a process and unfolds as a consequence of interaction and movement, not as a static harvesting of pre-existing truths.

From an initially abductive onset, when my research interest was greatly informed by various factors colouring my preunderstanding of what I thought my project would be about, the explorative experience has been truly inductive. In my early project proposal, neither trust nor self-trust in leadership identity constructions were subjects for my investigative ambition. Thus, I understand both trust and self-trust as having emerged as the core essence in my data material as a result of the investigative mystery-as-method approach. Furthermore, nowhere in my semi-structured interview guide were trust or self-trust mentioned. They emerged as both explicit terms and more subtle notions that crystallised from the conversations as I started to interact with the interview material emerging in my study, analysing it as I asked myself the following question: What is really going on in these stories about leadership?

In their account for process as research, Helin, Hernes, Hjorth, and Holt (2014) identified five aspects that constitute the processual outlook in research: temporality, wholeness, openness, force and potentiality. These five aspects are what makes it possible for the researcher to merge fragments of vision, moments of intuition and brackets of insights, not by searching for one first thing but by letting the nuanced details of a situation emerge as we allow for our focus to shift, tilt, zoom in and zoom out. I strongly identify with this type of processual view, where the subtlety of comprehension is perceived as evolving and emerging, not as a fixed size or eternal truth but as a dynamic conception of how things might be understood. It is about seeing the world and phenomena in it as a shifting and highly relative multiplicity.

The underlying assumption in process as research is that human behaviour is constantly in a process of becoming, and thus, the principal objective of the researcher engaging with a process approach is to 'catch this reality in flight' (Pettigrew, 1997). My personal experience with the actual writing of the text has been a vital part of this course. Through the processes of writing, reading, reflecting, discussing and rewriting, my perspectives have shifted and swayed. This is

aligned with how Van Manen (2014) depicted the research process, stating that the research is the writing, and that the textual reflective practice is crucial to the research process.

For this particular project, my own experience corresponds with this idea, stressing the importance of continuous reflexivity as a key ingredient throughout the research process. At the onset of this work, I had no clue that it would lead to a dissertation on the narrative ecology of trust and self-trust in leadership identity constructions, materialised as a result of the research process. To me, that fact is in itself an answer to the question of whether the qualitative approach bears potential for adding value to the knowledge production in leadership studies. As I began to apply the metaphor of a narrative ecology to my empirical material with the intent of grasping its content and significance, new horizons emerged for how leadership identity constructions as a phenomenon can be understood. It is my firm belief that no other methodological approach could have replaced qualitative in-depth interviews in terms of being able to bring these particular stories to life.

### 3.3.4 Bracketing as analytic approach and tool

The process perspective resonates with the method for analysis that I have applied as part of the method to make sense of my data in this project. As Fairhurst and Grant (2010) and Holstein and Gubrium (2011) have indicated, within the social constructionist tradition there exist various contributions that can best be defined as a mosaic of approaches. I see the positioning of this project in particular pertaining to what Holstein and Gubrium identified as a 'constructionist analytics of interpretative practice' (p. 341). The interpretative practice draws on various sources and can best be summed as an eclectic selection of analytical approaches within the constructionist school. The main aim of interpretative practice is to capture both the whats and hows 'by which social reality is constructed, managed and sustained' (p. 342). Advocating eclectic flexibility based on a reflective consciousness concerning the researcher's ontological stance, the interpretative practice as investigative approach is a remedy replacing rigid models and mechanical schemes that force us to choose between either what or how. Interpretative practice is thus to be understood as 'more like a skilled juggling act, alternately concentrating on the hows and whats of everyday life' (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011, p. 347).

While analytic bracketing in particular is first and foremost associated with the constructionist analytics of interpretative practice (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011), the idea of bracketing in general in regard to interpretative practice was first pronounced by Husserl in an attempt to provide phenomenology with a methodological approach that could allow the researcher to define

foreground and background for the many whats and hows in the myriad of everyday realities (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2012; Van Manen, 2014).

In spite of some differences concerning philosophical ideas, in research the term bracketing is often used interchangeable with the concepts of reduction and epoche (Gearing, 2004). While recognising that there exist nuances in the philosophical underpinnings of these terms (Gearing, 2004), for all practical reasons I will in the following use the term bracketing.

The idea about the researcher always being influenced by his fore-conceptions, meaning his prior experiences, assumptions and preconceptions, led Husserl to suggest that bracketing as method would help the researcher to set aside the taken-for granted-world, in order to be able to concentrate on the perception of that world (p. 13). Husserl's idea about bracketing relates to the placing of mathematical formulas in brackets, implying that the researcher should set his own pre-suppositions about the world aside by placing his pre-suppositions in brackets and leaving his objects of investigation outside, when doing interpretivist work. Wengraf's notion (as cited on p. 61) that no researcher leaves behind his own perceptions of and experiences with the world when he enters the research field, points to the idea that the researcher can never operate as a 'tabula rasa' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and illustrates the intention behind the concept of bracketing; to help the researcher to distinguish between his own pre-suppositions and the lifeworld of the other. The researcher's fore-conceptions must thus always be an object for the reflexivity implied when doing qualitative research, and to engage with bracketing as method can be understood as a tool for that.

Likewise, the researcher needs to understand how fore-concepts could influence the interpretative lens and hinder interpretation, because as Heidegger (1996; p. 141) stated, viewing phenomenology as an explicitly interpretative pursuit, interpretation can never be a pre-suppositionless act. From a phenomenological perspective, bracketing can thus be understood as part of the reflexive process that the researcher engages in to secure validity when doing interpretivist mystery work. However, as homogenously stressed by qualitative researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), it would be naïve to think that the researcher can completely isolate his preconceptions about the world when engaging with interpretation of data.

In qualitative research, bracketing as concept in general has been object for much critique and discussion for adding to 'confusion, inconsistency, and misunderstanding' due to superficial use and lack of both theoretical and methodological accuracy (Gearing, 2004; p. 1429). While I recognise the debate, I will not dwell further with the particularities of bracketing as concept or

method here, but concentrate more specifically on the concept of *analytic bracketing* as it was introduced by Holstein and Gubrium (Gearing 2004; Holstein & Gubrium, 2011). I will do that with an intent to provide transparency regarding how I have worked with the data for this project from start to end, so that the reader can decide for himself whether my findings and the following discussion of the findings appear to be justified. Method-wise, the interpretative posture bears clear implications for how I approached the original raw data in this project, and not the least how one should read the analytical interpretations I now set forth. Postulating ongoing, constant meaning-making as the core of social life and human interactions, social constructionism as an ontological frame for this project implies that the layers and levels of interpretative efforts are numerous, complex, and in constant fluctuation.

Hence, analytic bracketing can be understood as a flexible approach that allows for an elastic analytical stretch, encompassing the multitudes of the whats and hows in social life, taking into account the interchange between the larger systems and structures of institutionalised beliefs and values that influence the perception of social reality (what Holstein and Gubrium identified as a Foucauldian discourses-in-practice), as well as the play of social interactions in everyday life (what Holstein and Gubrium identified as ethnomethodology's discursive practice).

What makes analytic bracketing appear as particularly opted for this current research is its' engagement with precisely the language aspect in the lifeworld construct, paying attention to contextually constitutions in everyday language that emerge in the interplay between Discourse and the discursive (Gearing, 2004; Holstein & Gubrium, 2011). Through language in discursive practices, reality is 'talked into being', drawing upon Discourse as a discursive resource (Broad & Joos, 2004). Hence, analytic bracketing makes it possible to approach the leaders' stories with a focus on how they relate to and how they could be informed by the constant and mutual interplay between Discourse and discursive practices. Analytic bracketing as a tool implies that while the researcher may focus on one aspect of a phenomenon – a resource, a restraint or a concern - in one moment, the other aspects of potential interest are not forgotten, and can in turn be the next object for investigation. This is how the researcher by applying analytic bracketing is able to 'move back and forth between discursive practices and discourses-in-practice' and "making informative references to the other in the process" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011, p. 347). As 'discursive practices and discourses-in-practice are mutually constitutive' (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011, p. 348), it is difficult to argue that 'analysis should begin or end with either one' (p.348). Instead, the researcher moves between the two dimensions, implying a continuous 'stepping in and out of the bracketing process while comparing the developing data to the larger institutional and cultural context' (Gearing, 2004; p. 1442).

Analytic bracketing is a procedure that allows the researcher to move between and zoom in and out of the various whats and hows of interpretative practice, in order to make sense of social phenomena investigated and put together a more integrated picture of them. Analytic bracketing thus resides with the ontological outlook of this project, viewing knowledge about the world and lifeworlds as a socially situated, co-constructed phenomenon. Furthermore, there are two obvious reasons for why I have chosen analytic bracketing as a main tool for analysis of the present data: One reason is that analytic bracketing specifically addresses the interplay of Discourse and discursive practices (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011) which is a central topic for the present discussion. Consequently, analytic bracketing seems to be a relevant approach for my investigation of the leader's stories and what leaders are talking about when they talk about their experiences as leaders. The other reason is related to how analytic bracketing as method is applied through the entire research process, not only at the beginning, something that also matches how the investigative journey of this project took shape, starting out from an abductive departure point where leadership both as a social institution and as an individual undertaking ignited my research interest.

Hence, drawing on the concept of interpretative practice and analytical bracketing appears to be a good fit with my research question, because the findings and the discussion of this project correspond in my view to both the hows and whats concerning leadership identity constructions. The way I understand the core of this project's contribution is that it addresses both the concept of discourses-in-practice and of discursive practice in leadership and leadership identity constructions (Fairhurst, 2009), which I examine more closely in the following chapters.

As I understand it, the crucial element of attending to the interaction between the researched phenomenon and institutional and cultural conditions in analytic bracketing aligns with Ladkins notion about the lifeworld perspective which requires that we investigate leadership 'in the particular worlds in which it operates' (p. 36). Hence, for this particular project I recognise analytic bracketing as a corresponding method to approach my data with an investigative lens, applicable with both the phenomenological and the social constructionist stance, and allowing me to approach my data with an analytical flexibility that encompasses an investigation of both the discursive practices and discourses-in-practice and the interplay of the two, and how this interplay possibly inform narrative leadership identity constructions.

Concerning bracketing as method for analysis in general and the use of analytic bracketing in this project in particular, it should be stressed that I don't see analytic bracketing as opposed to

acknowledging the interview situation as a co-created instant or as indifferent to the narrative encounter. Even if qualitative researchers argue that instead of talking about ‘bracketing out’ one’s own understanding of the world, the researcher should strive to be ‘bracketing in’ to the inquiry, because engaging with narrative research is to engage with an inquiry into the life of the other (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006, p. 480). This also points to the three dimensions of narrative inquiry space; temporality, sociality, and place that will always influence any narrative setting, and which the researcher cannot detach himself from but must engage with (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006). Hence, in this context, I understand analytic bracketing namely as a means for the researcher to be able to ‘bracket in’ to inquire about aspects of relevance for the research question on both a discourses-in-practice and on a discursive level.

### 3. 4 Research design and procedures

To show how I have framed my study methodologically, I will now unfold the research design and explain the methodological adaption in detail. First, I present how I decided the methodological framing of the project and how the interviewees were identified in the first place. Next, I account for the procedure of selecting them and contacting them, and go on to provide a description of the interviewees as individuals and the criteria I used for inclusion. I follow up with a description of the process I used to design the interview guide.

In addition, in this section, I clarify how I went about conducting the interviews and how the interview guide was used as a necessary and complementary (but not solely ruling) data-gathering tool in the interview setting. I proceed to showing how the data (the recorded interviews) were subsequently managed and processed. The procedure for the data analysis is outlined. Furthermore, I reflect upon the participant role of the researcher as part of the process converting data from raw material, to analyse empirical substance and the process of distilling the empirical essence, thereby extracting meaning from my findings.

For this particular research project, the choice of a qualitative research approach seems to fit the addressed research question well. To gain access to the leaders’ lifeworlds and delve under the apparent surface of my research subjects, I chose the qualitative interview as a tool to provide the required closeness. Through collecting leaders’ life stories, a richness of data articulated from the leaders’ points of view has developed. Still, no matter the richness and numerous layers of interpretative work that were embedded, what is examined here represents a limited dimension of the construction of leadership identity because it is based on the leader as an exclusive source. In this specific encapsulated universe, the follower and the larger organisation is presented only through the stories of the leaders.



### 3.4.1 Rationale and assumptions for the research design

The choice of research design inevitably depends on purpose, approach and process (Thomas, 2011b). The case-study design is a well-known format in qualitative studies, wherein interviews are a widely applied tool for collecting data, and the selection of respondents is deliberate and not randomly chosen (Yin, 2002; Aaltio & Heilmann, 2010).

Because my ambition was to obtain insights into the lifeworld of various leaders, ‘seeking to understand their perspectives and positions’ (Thomas, 2011a, p. 95) to observe how the leaders themselves applied meaning to their leadership projects, it seemed reasonable that I should speak to several leaders (i.e., conduct interviews with a sample of leaders). Based on a phenomenological, explorative point of departure, I knew that I would be conducting an interpretative analysis of the interviews. Being the only researcher conducting the interviews, it followed that I would be conducting them in a sequential order. Consequently, it appeared sound to format the research project as a collective case-study design (Yin, 2002; Thomas, 2011a; Stake 2015).

Furthermore, I recognised that the interviews would be snapshots (Thomas, 2011) from the leaders’ lifeworld, even if the framing of the interview used the life-story approach where the account given by each leader would be retrospective in angle. This influenced the decision of how many interviews or cases I should include in the project. I found the collective case study to be a well opted design format for the mystery-as-method-approach that I chose, where the ‘analysis is inductive by nature, in other words, a researcher's objective is to reveal unexpected issue’ (Aaltio & Heilmann, 2010, p. 3).

I have treated each interview as a unique case in a sequential order, seeking to move from the general to the specific with a holistic approach, starting from one individual case and then applying what Aaltio and Heilmann (2010) referred to as a winding approach, moving from one case to another in search of new perspectives, and developing insights and elaborating on questions to deepen the understanding of the investigated phenomenon (Aaltio & Heilmann, 2010; Chmiliar, 2010). I consider this approach to correspond with the processual view, allowing for the continuous mining of insights, opening the way for new curiosities and looking for new ways of understanding leadership identity constructions.

The point of departure for my dialogues with the leaders built on an appreciative lens. According to Schall, Ospina, Godsoe, and Dodge (2004), appreciative inquiry ‘is best known as an intervention strategy, but it can also be thought of as a stance for inquiry, a way of joining with

others to explore the world' (2004, p. 148). I applied an appreciative lens as my main explorative viewpoint. Departing from an ontological and epistemological outlook claiming that social reality is a social co-construct best captured through a qualitative approach, the appreciative lens appeared to be an appropriate methodological framework for establishing trust in the interview setting and gaining access to the leaders' stories.

From the first point of contact with the leaders, I was careful to frame my research project by applying an appreciative tone of voice and matching wording, in order to present my research project as a nonthreatening undertaking to the leaders. As an introduction to the actual interview, I was thorough in accentuating that my aim was not to identify flaws, faults or mistakes concerning their ideas about leadership or concerning their accounts of leadership experiences. I wanted them to trust that my intention was not to make them look like less qualified leaders. On the contrary, I aimed to focus on their known merits to make those the point of departure for a common investigation into their lifeworld as leaders.

As Schall et al. (2004) stated, in a constructionist context, it is crucial that the inquiry into the meaning of leadership is conducted as a joint venture. In this particular case, this means that the leaders who were engaged in leadership work were invited to join me as researcher for a common investigation, 'studying the work of leadership from the inside out' (p. 148). Because all the leaders who I invited to participate in my project were publicly recognised as merited leaders in a Norwegian context at the time, it appeared reasonable to make their achievements the main frame for our conversation. The idea was to appeal to their self-reflections on their merits and explore new magnitudes of meaning based upon them from an appreciative point of departure.

Furthermore, Schall et al. (2004) argued that in a participative and appreciative approach, narrative inquiry represents an exceptional possibility 'to join with leaders as co-researchers to reflect on and learn from their experiences with leadership, thus revealing how they make sense of that experience' (p. 149). This depiction matches the experience I had when sitting with the leaders for the interviews. The conversation emerged very much as a co-created instance of exchanging ideas and meanings related to leadership and leadership identity.

During the whole research process, what I had in mind was awareness related to seeing the interview as a setting for co-created stories. As Crapanzano (2013) indicated, a life history is a response to a demand from the Other; in the present case, the Other was me as researcher. Here, Crapanzano's point refers back to the eight metaphors of Alvesson and Kärreman (2011), again related to the ethnomethodological perspective and corresponding to how the researcher's

presence influences the responses from the interviewees and vice versa. Thus, the notions about the expectations on the leaders' stories that I as researcher may have contributed to in the interview setting must be considered when the stories are interpreted and presented. I will engage closer with this dimension in the forthcoming discussion chapter (Chapter 5).

### 3.4.2 Selecting the interviewees

I wanted the interviewees to represent the optimal range of leadership experience and backgrounds from both the private and public sectors. The idea was to put together a list of interviewees that represented experiences with leadership that I thought would be of relevance for my research question. Therefore, I invested in carefully 'profiling' the interviewees for my project and did a purposeful sampling with the intent to secure variety, depth and richness of the data in order to shed light on the research question (Creswell, 2007; McCracken, 1988). Hence, the 20 leaders that I eventually ended up interviewing varied in age, sex, geographical origin, experience, personal background and formal education. Within the defined limits of criteria, my aim was to obtain as many heterogeneous representations of leaders' lifeworlds as possible within the limited time scope of the project. I therefore decided to approach leaders from different parts of the country and from different organisations, conducting qualitative in-depth interviews with each leader.

I deliberately decided to choose leaders with a known reputation for being merited leaders within their industry. This choice was based on the idea that leaders recognised for having succeeded in their leadership would be less hesitant to share their experiences in a qualitative research setting than leaders who were not as renowned. I also anticipated that leaders recognised for their accomplishments would have a certain vocalised basis for reflecting upon their leadership due to experience with media exposure and publicity. Moreover, on a personal level I felt curious about connecting with these leaders' lifeworlds and getting a chance to explore their cosmos underneath the immediate surface of their public image.

Furthermore, the selection of interviewees was based on the following three criteria: i) the leader should be a Norwegian citizen and the company should be a Norway-based enterprise (to diminish the complexity that would come with a multicultural selection, not because I did not recognise the value of a multicultural selection for this project but to limit the layers of complexity in my data); ii) the leader should have experience in a company known for significant leadership merits; and iii) at least one employee of the leader or someone in my network with a professional knowledge of the leader should be able to recommend the leader to me as an interviewee candidate for my project.

I identified a total of 25 distinguished CEOs or equivalent senior leaders with executive positions that complied with my selection criteria, based both on official listings in media and governmental institutions as well as from social media leads (i.e., LinkedIn and Facebook). From these 25 leaders, I contacted the first 20 leaders in the list. The selected sample of 20 leaders was based on my own idea concerning what would be a realistic number of interviews to conduct with leaders within the time frame of a calendar year.

For a qualitative research project, a sample of 15–20 in-depth interviews are often recognised as a sufficient number for achieving data richness and knowledge saturation (Bertaux, 1981; Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006; Hennink, Kaiser, & Marcon, 2017). In this particular project, approximately eight months into the interview process and after the first 10 interviews, I started recognise a distinct pattern of common themes across the conversations. It became clear that trust and self-trust reappeared as topics in the leader's stories to such an extent that I could see them as conceptual categories for further investigation. Hence, I experienced what Glaser and Strauss (1967) defined as category saturation. I observed that in addition to category density, the aspect of meaning density appeared to be sufficiently fulfilled for me to believe that the work would qualify as a contribution in the field of qualitative leadership studies (Hennink, Kaiser & Marcon, 2017).

In line with Charmaz (2006), I had a clear sensation that proceeding with the 20 interviews I had planned for would not reveal 'new properties of' my 'core theoretical categories' (p. 113). This was because of the fact that neither trust nor self-trust were terms that I had initially introduced anywhere in the interview guide or in my project proposal, rather they surfaced as both explicit empirical categories and more subtle notions. Hence, I found what I understood as sufficiently similar and rich depictions of trust and self-trust in the leaders' stories, which led me to judge the amount of interview material as being substantial. For each interview, I did a preliminary analysis of the emerging themes that I could see were of particular interest and relevance for my research question, and then paid attention to follow up and fill in emerging questions in the next interview.

The remaining 10 interviews strengthened my perception of trust and self-trust standing out as important concepts to pursue. When I had completed the 20 interviews as planned, I could see that I had an interesting theme and my material was more than dense with relevant information regarding trust and self-trust, but also adjacent material. Thus, I decided that the 20 interviews had sufficient substance to begin a further processing of the interview material.

Considering the diversity pursued when selecting interviewees, I was surprised to discover the strong similarities in how the leaders depicted their understanding of their leadership identity and how they characterised their leadership project. Particularly in regard to the fact that the leaders represented a broad variety in age, geographic origin, political, sexual and religious orientation, and also personal and educational backgrounds (political, sexual and religious orientation were not object for inquiry from my side but several of the leaders referred to these aspects as part of their narrative). When the diversity in the interviewee group was not correspondingly reflected in the data material, this is in itself an interesting finding for this particular project.

One could have expected less homogenous data pointing to more divergent facets in the leaders' stories, revealing more differences in their notions about their leadership identity. When the opposite emerged as a predominant finding, this led me to further wondering about the interplay between the Discourse-in-practice and discursive practices, also taking into account the Norwegian context as part of the leaders' lifeworlds and their narrative identity constructions. How much more and broadened variety in background and size should my selection of interviewees have had to potentially reveal a less homogenous picture? Could a part of the answer be that all the leaders were executive leaders, and that this influenced their depiction of their leadership identity? These are rhetoric questions with so far only hypothetic answers. However, they advance a point concerning the validity of my findings that I will return to in more details in the discussion chapter.

### 3.4.3 Establishing contact with the interviewees

As first contact, I sent each individual leader an e-mail in which I briefly introduced myself and my research project, inviting the leader to meet me for an interview. To each leader who accepted my invitation to participate, I then e-mailed a single PDF page with information about my project and some keywords concerning my research interest, in which I also suggested various interesting research topics for our conversation but without defining any of them more specifically. My aim was to trigger attention, curiosity and a desire to participate, but not to give any leads pointing to specific questions or hint at what could be understood as a 'correct' answer. This was also because the semi-structured interview guide was meant to work as my guide for an interactive dialogue and not as a rigid template for the interviewee.

Amon the first 20 leaders I approached by e-mail, only two turned down my invitation, explaining that they did not have the time for an in-depth interview of the type I had outlined. When the two rejections came, I immediately followed up by inviting the two next leaders on my list. When they

both responded positively, I had the complete selection of 20 interviewees. The first stage of researching, selecting and contacting the leaders took a couple of months all together, whereas the process of booking interviews and meeting with the leaders to conduct the actual interviews took much longer.

Some of the appointments were rescheduled several times because of conflicting occurrences in the leaders' calendars. Altogether, the stretch of time spanned over 11 months from when I conducted the first interview until I had completed the last one. Furthermore, 17 of the 20 interviews were conducted at the main office of the leaders' companies. For practical and logistic reasons, three of the interviews were performed in public cafés in Oslo.

The final list of interviewees was as follows:

Table 1: Final list of interviewees

	Role /position	Sex	Sector	Industry	Location
1	Founder and CEO (couple)	M 68 F 65	Private	Fashion & art	West coast of Norway / global
2	CEO	F 52	Government	Culture	Oslo, Norway
3	CEO	F 57	Government	Public health authority	Oslo, Norway
4	Director	F 62	Public	Medical research	South central Norway
5	CEO	M 53	Public	Culture	West coast of Norway
6	Director	M 53	NGO	Welfare	South-west coast of Norway
7	Founder and CEO	M 41	Private	Fashion	Oslo, Norway / global
8	CEO	M 59	Public	Education	Oslo, Norway
9	CEO	F 47	Private	Media industry	Oslo, Norway
10	Director	M 53	Government	Safety authority	West coast, Norway
11	CEO	M 58	Private	Innovation and research	South-west coast, Norway
12	CEO	F 70	Government	NGO Culture	Oslo, Norway / global
13	Secretary general	M 57	NGO	NGO Lifestyle	Oslo, Norway
14	CEO	M 51	Private	Hospital	Oslo, Norway
15	CEO	F 42	Public	Culture	Oslo, Norway
16	CEO	M 47	Private	Arts & education	South-west coast, Norway
17	Director	F 39	Private	Finance and banking	Oslo, Norway / Global
18	Director	M 48	Private	Healthcare	Oslo, Norway
19	Director	M 53	Public	Food industry & research	Oslo, Norway
20	Director	M 68	Public	Medical services	North of Norway / Global

#### 3.4.4 Designing the interview guide

From the onset, it was clear to me that I would work with a process-oriented research design. For the design of the interview guide, I thus decided on a methodological tactic that would allow for

the research question to be distilled through the processing of data, led by a research topic with some pertaining issues that I wanted to explore in-depth. Consequently, I designed a semi-structured interview guide, which was thereafter continually adjusted and moderated along the way as the conversations with the leaders unfolded. I did not follow the guide in a chronological order, but always made sure that every question and topic was covered. I wanted to design for an interview that could provide detailed accounts from the leaders, encouraging them to talk freely and at length (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2012). The semi-structured guide was carved out with the intent of facilitating a flexible, associatively rich dialogue wherein 'elements of ordinary conversation that are crucial for establishing the relevance and meaning of question' would not be prohibited (Suchman & Jordan, 1990), with as open and expansive questions as possible (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2012).

My main aim was to get the leaders to tell me what their lifeworld as a leader looked like from their point of view, and not be concerned about what were my views of their lifeworlds as leaders. I aimed at starting with a few questions that allowed the leaders to disclose descriptive experiences, and then open up for more analytical perspectives when the leaders seemed to be comfortable with the interview setting and has started talking (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2012; p. 59). I mindfully organized the questions in a sequence that I thought would provide both me and the interviewee with an appropriate flow and logic. When I had drafted a first version of the semi-structured interview guide, I tested it for my first interview, and then did a redraft where I limited the amount of questions by removing those which seemed to overlap, and instead prepared for more prompts (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2012). For the remaining interviews I kept the redrafted interview guide, but used it as a supporting guide to make sure I covered everything that I wanted to ask the interviewee, not as a rigid template to be followed chronologically.

Aligned with the case study as a flexible research design (Yin, 2002; Aaltio & Heilmann, 2010), when I returned to my desk to transcribe the interview after each encounter, I discovered which questions worked well and which ones did not. I also recognised which topics continually came up with new depths and perspectives in every conversation, as well as which ones spurred my fascination and curiosity and which ones did not. This informed my moderation of how I applied the use of the interview guide. When I understood that a topic pertaining to a question in my guide was already covered by the interviewee as part of something that had already been talked about, I did not ask that particular question, so as to avoid repetition and a monotonous conversation. Instead I would move to the next question that seemed appropriate and relevant in that particular setting and sequence. This meant that each interview ended up transcribing



slightly different from the others in regard to the sequence of the questions and different topics, even if as a total, the main thematic progress is similar for all the interviews.

#### 3.4.5 Context for interviewing

Seventeen of the 20 interviews were conducted at the leader's office and workplace. For practical reasons, the remaining three interviews were carried out in public cafés in Oslo. These were with leaders based in other parts of Norway who themselves suggested to do the interview in Oslo on a suitable occasion. Conducting the interviews at the leader's workplace provided me with more contextual information than did the café encounters as well as it added a qualitatively different 'feel' with the leader's everyday life, because I could see, smell, touch and hear the physical environment and pick up on the atmosphere in the building.

Nevertheless, concerning the content of the interviews and the topics evolving as the experiences were conveyed, it did not appear to me that there was any qualitative difference in content in the interviews in the office compared with those in cafés. In both locations, the interviewees spoke at length and in detail about their personal experiences of being a leader.

Herzog (2012) wrote about the interview location as a site for making meaning and constructing reality, representing a broader cultural and political context. As much as I align with Herzog on this and recognise the importance of approaching the interview context and interaction as something that greatly influences the production of knowledge (Kvale, 1996), for the sake of available resources and time, I allowed the leaders to choose the location for the interview as part of my flexible research design. This was a deliberate choice made to facilitate the feasibility of the data-collection process.

Of course, what makes an obvious difference is that for the interviews in the offices, the context for the embodied encounter was distinct from the three interviews in public cafés. Whether this difference in location had a significant effect on the actual content outcome of the interviews, or for my following interpretation, is difficult to determine. Concerning the themes that ended up being the attention of my findings and successive discussion, I found no significant difference in what was conveyed in the interviews in offices compared with that in the interviews in cafés.

Because the themes that eventually caught my investigative attention turned out to transpire in all the interviews, I did not pursue interrogating potential other thematic differences concerning what emerged or did not emerge from topics in the interviews. That does of course not imply that there

are no such differences to be found related to interview location, but if there are, I did not make them the subject of exploration in the current context.

### 3.4.6 Establishing rapport

With their eight metaphors likening qualitative interviews to an arena for agency, Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) addressed the equally important and problematic aspects concerning establishing rapport with interviewees. By seeing qualitative interviews as co-constructed instances, I must accept that as much as I attempted to tap into the reality of each leader, each one most probably also attempted to tap into mine. In other words, establishing rapport in the interview setting goes both ways, and moreover, the mutual dynamics in the crafting of connections was very much present in my encounters with the leaders.

I knew none of the leaders personally, although I had earlier briefly met a few of them in various settings. Therefore, establishing rapport in the actual encounter was critical. I aimed to break the ice and generate mutual trust in the situation by setting an amicable, easy-going and relaxed tone of voice from the first point of contact. This was already an intent from the very beginning, which I had employed in the initial e-mail sent to each leader.

As for the actual interview encounter, I noted that from the first handshake, the leaders took active responsibility for creating connections as much as I did myself. With all of the leaders, I discovered that we had acquaintances, friends or networks in common, which gave us topics for small talk that could be used to break the ice. In this sense, creating rapport in the initial interview setting felt easy and uncomplicated. Because these leaders were all experienced and publicly profiled executives, I assumed that they were trained in creating rapport as a skill pertaining to their role. They appeared as competent and confident practitioners in the rapport exercise. To me, this implied that they had a good understanding of what breaking the ice means for a fruitful exchange with a stranger who is also a researcher.

The issue of rapport in the qualitative encounter has been debated and proven counterproductive in terms of data validity (e.g., Singleton & Straits, 2002). Thus, the risk of influencing the conversation and the respondent performance with my own style was a concern in the interview setting. The leaders seemed skilled in the initial small talk as part of their professional role. Due to my experience as a consultant and coach, I perceive myself as skilled in performing with professional friendliness and formal politeness. Thus, I was careful not to be perceived as distanced or aloof but also cautious about not being too intimate topic-wise. I also paid attention to how I framed the presentation of myself and my project, as well as how I formulated my

questions during the conversations to avoid being perceived as an ‘expert’ adviser or consultant. Still, I cannot know how much my other professional identity as a leadership consultant affected the leaders’ talk. This means that when interpreting and analysing the content of the conversations, I considered the interview as performative. I had to account for the possibility that the leaders were actively using the interview setting to promote and validate their identity as leaders; hence, I understood the interview as a setting for identity work (Alvesson, 2011).

#### 3.4.7 Ethics in the interview setting

The ethical dimension is a constant concern when conducting a narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Concerning the ethical aspect of this research project, the preparation for the actual interview was an important criterion for fundamental ethical guidelines that are necessary to secure a proper professional standard (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012). To me, this meant that I paid much attention to ensuring the leaders’ knowledge about my research intentions, accentuating the appreciative perspective.

From the very first point of contact, they were informed that the interview would be taped for further analysis. As an introduction to the interview before we started the actual conversation, I always pointed out that they could have the recorded interview file if they wanted to, and also that they could have the interview transcript. I assured them that everyone participating in the project would be anonymised, as well as confirmed that if at any point in the future I would like to use the interview material for a different purpose other than for my PhD research, the leaders would be asked permission for such use and also be given the opportunity to revisit the interview and make additional comments to modify or add to the account if desired.

Regarding passages disclosing sensitive personal information, I thoroughly considered whether this information was of significant value to my research topic before deciding whether the information should be included in the analysis. I was highly aware of the need for protecting the leaders from potentially harming effects engendered from participating in my project. Being high-profile people in a national media and social media context, it was a matter of concern for me to secure the leaders’ integrity, reputation and well-being, both as professionals and private individuals.

I believe that because I applied an appreciative perspective to the interviews, this had an impact on the type of personal information that was offered by the interviewees. None disclosed matters on behalf of themselves, their workplace or employees that could harm them in their role as a leader or jeopardise any of their employees in terms of legal and ethical matters. Where some of

them revealed personal information of a particularly sensitive nature, it was always in an appreciative context, securing a positive and therefore safe framing of the information. I was also careful not to probe or challenge elements in the leaders' stories that were of the more private or personal variety if it was not related or of particular interest to the main focus of my research.

The ethical aspect is present in every step of a research process (Guillemin & Gilliam, 2004). The ethical dimension is present both in a procedural sense and an interactional sense, manifesting in what Guillemin and Gilliam (2004) labelled micro-ethics. The most important tool that the qualitative researcher can make use of to assure proper application of ethics is reflective practice. This includes a mindful approach to what questions are raised, how they are worded and framed, as well as the timing of the questions. Based on this, I have sought to apply an ethical awareness throughout this research project, from beginning to end, taking into consideration the various aspects of ethical conduct applicable to the particular research context.

#### 3.4.8 Facilitating insight gathering: conducting the interviews

For the interview, I asked the leaders to allocate a time slot for a total of 2 hours. Based on my interview guide and the number of questions to be covered, and with consideration for how much time I found it reasonable to ask for in terms of both the leaders' availability and their endurance in the interview setting, I estimated that each interview would last for a maximum of ninety min. A total of 2 hours allowed for an additional thirty minutes for initial small-talk and getting settled in the interview situation, establishing rapport and introducing the interview before conducting the interview. I also considered that a time span of 2 hours in total would allow for a proper wrap-up and closure of the interview setting, giving both me and the interviewee the chance to make sure that the leader felt comfortable with the procedure and had a clear idea about the proceedings (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2012).

After initial small-talk and settling in the chair with a cup of coffee or tea, every interview had a warm-up phase where I expressed my gratitude for the leader's positive response to my request about an interview, and also provided the interviewee with a repetition of the information I had already provided each recipient with in the first e-mail when I first contacted them; a brief summary regarding the practical circumstances of my PhD project, my affiliation with CBS as research institution, and the time scope for my PhD studies as a total. This was to facilitate for a comfortable interaction with the interviewee, and to prepare for a 'funnelling', starting out more generally, to gradually narrow and direct focus for the conversation (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2012; p. 61).

I also explained how the actual interview would be carried out, that I would use a voice recorder and also take handwritten notes in addition, and that I had estimated for a maximum of 90 minutes for the interview. A repetition of this information and the leader's response to it was for me a way to better understand whether the leader already had a clear idea about who I was and why I had asked for an interview, and to make sure that the leader was familiar with the context for and the purpose with the interview. As far as I could know from the written and read communication, only one of the twenty leaders communicated with me and managed the booking of the interview appointment via her secretary. From what I could determine, the remaining 19 leaders communicated directly with me, using singular first-person pronouns in their correspondence with me. Still, considering the busy life of a leader and how many e-mails with meetings- and interview requests these twenty leaders would potentially have received in addition to the one from me, I regarded it as a prerequisite to ensure that the interview context and my research agenda- and role was explicitly communicated to each interviewee also in the actual interview setting. While providing this information and paying attention to the interviewee's response, I was careful with keeping eye-contact and demonstrating active listening. Only when the leader confirmed that he or she was clear about and comfortable with the interview context and purpose and ready to proceed with the interview, did I put on the voice recorder and take out my interview guide and pen.

I started each interview session with explaining that I would conduct a semi-structured interview with an exploratory and also appreciative point of departure, not looking for faults, flaws or the 'right' as opposed to the 'wrong' kind of leadership, but paying attention to the leader's own experiences with and perceptions of what it means to her/him to be a leader. I was careful with stressing that the semi-structured interview guide was meant to support, but not rigidly direct, our conversation, and that I wanted the leader to resonate and speak as freely as possible about whatever came to her or his mind as I introduced the different topics I wanted to ask about.

For the interviews, I used a professional voice recorder, notebook and printout of the interview guide for my own note-taking. As noted by Johnson and Rowlands (2012), the use of a voice recorder for in-depth interviews is crucial for the validity of the interview data. I focused on using notes to efficiently underline certain aspects and passages in the interviews, indicate and make cross-references between different topics and interviewee's responses, and draw a map for my own interpretative use as the conversation unfolded (see appendix 2).

Beforehand, I did not send the interview guide to the interviewees, and neither did they receive a printed copy during the interview. This way, I allowed myself to adjust and modify the order and

framing of each topic throughout the interview, and facilitated a setting where both I and the leaders could go with the flow, follow our intuition and spontaneity, follow the rhythm of the conversation, and not feel restricted by a certain scheme (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012, p. 107).

I deliberately chose this strategy to obtain the most intuitive and spontaneous responses possible in the actual meeting, to minimise premade answers, evoke a mindful attention and incite honest and reflective dialogue on the various lines of inquiry. I believed this would allow me to go with the flow with each leader in the moment of the interview, and it also made an in-depth pursuit of topics possible as well as of details that appeared to me as particularly interesting, independent of where in the conversation they were raised. The idea was to be able to be both flexible and intuitive in the role as an interviewer and facilitate natural conversation with each leader, while I could simultaneously manage the interview aligned with the confines provided by my research interest, rather than to play to a forced 'scientific' setting.

As is often the case in semi-structured interviews (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Wengraf, 2006), I experienced how the conversations developed and unfolded in unexpected directions. One topic led to another, digressions and thematic connotations continually interfered with the main topics, and these interferences frequently led to interesting details of the leaders' experiences, dwelling on particularities I had not expected. Even if the leaders were well-informed about the aim of our conversations and how the interview was being taped for further analysis, they appeared highly out-spoken, frank and easy-going in the interview situation.

A continuous course of questioning in the qualitative interview is central to grasping the unfolding lives and perspectives of others (Agee, 2009). Effective research questions can never guarantee equivalent high research quality; however, poor questions are likely to create equality issues and dilemmas in every subsequent step of the research process. Because I angled the interview from the phenomenological side, inviting the interviewees to share their life stories as leaders, I paid careful attention to phrasing the questions as open-ended and exploratory. This meant that I viewed the interview as a way to explore dimensions of meanings with the interviewees rather than confirm or verify a certain perspective (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin 2009; Johnson & Rowlands, 2012).

I paid attention to be fully present in the interview situation so that I could take full advantage of the semi-structured design and go with the flow together with the interviewee, and to improvise by prompting to follow up on something the leader said. I also was careful with trying not to distract myself from engaging in active listening during the interview. This meant paying attention

to not doing things like comparing, rehearsing, filtering, judging, advising, sparring, being right or derailing (Wengraf, 2006; p. 203).

I wrapped up each interview when I considered all the elements in my interview guide to be covered as thoroughly as possible and I found all the relevant topics to be “emptied”. When I recognised this to be the situation, I told the interviewee that we had completed with the questions I had prepared for and the relevant topics that I had a particular interest in. I then invited the interviewee to add to the conversation by adding, adjusting or elaborating to what had already been said. Initially allowing for 90 minutes for each interview, the actual length of the interviews varied from 45 minutes to approximately 90 minutes (see appendix 1). The majority of the interviews had a length around 60 minutes. Considering the amount of interview questions, the actual length of the interviews corresponded to established practice for qualitative interview (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin 2009).

### 3.5 Insight work: processing and analysis of the interview material

As I have stated, I believe that the intimacy facilitated by the semi-structured, qualitative in-depth interviews generated some unique sources of information for potential insights. Simultaneously, it implied that the process of distilling and making meaning out of the data turned out to be demanding because of the amount of details along with the many intertwined anecdotes and digressions in the conversations.

As Klenke stated, a ‘principal advantage of qualitative methods is its ability to generate very rich data. As a necessary by-product, it also generates large quantities of data’ (Klenke, 2008, p. 108). Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) addressed the same dilemma: How to separate fat from flesh, to identify the essential from the superfluous and distinguish the novel from the obvious? For this project, this challenge has been constant from the point of designing the first draft of an interview guide to deciding the final scope and problem statement of this thesis. Along the way, I have worked back and forth between the interview raw material, interpretations and ideas. It has not been possible to draw a distinct line between the analysis of the raw material and the activity of meaning-making based on the analysis. In this project, these two activities have constantly interfered.

#### 3.5.1 The qualitative interview as a vessel of topics for interpretative practice

Warren claimed that the qualitative interview is both an instant of social interaction and a vessel of topics (Warren, 2012, p. 130). This means that interview data can be mined for meaning by the researcher and approached as a promising vessel with potential insights; however, this mining

must consider the premises for the social interaction that has produced the interview content. Aligned with the ethnomethodological perspective and as Riessman stated, 'storytelling is a relational activity that gathers others to listen and empathize. It is a collaborative practice that requires attentive listening and questioning' (Riessman, 2012). Thus, every story is a product of that collaborative happening. There is no 'neutral' story to be extracted. There are only tales told in an interactional context that 'shaped the particular version of it' (p. 368). For me as researcher, this implies that I attempted to read my own presence and participation as researcher in the interviews as being part of the interactional influence shaping the content of the interview.

After each interview, I immediately wrote a memo by hand where I allowed for my thoughts, ideas and spontaneous sensations in regard to the interview encounter to flow freely on the paper. Like the interviews, the memos were manufactured in Norwegian. These memos contained both observations of the interviewee and myself, our body language and tone of voice with each other, the setting and the atmosphere in the room, and more personal feelings and thoughts that came to my mind, as well as reflections concerning the content of the conversation, particular statements made or choice of words that puzzled me, and possible ways to understand these. Because I wanted the memos to be as freshly recorded as possible after each interview, in accordance with practice recommendations for memo writing (Wengraf, 2006) I would find the nearest available spot to sit and jot down my notes within an hour after having ended the interview. One time the memo was produced while I was on the airport waiting for a flight back to Oslo, while two of the memos were written in a hotel room in another city. The rest of the memos were written either in a café nearby the place where I met the leader, in my Oslo office or in my home.

### 3.5.2 Transcribing the interviews

I transcribed every interview sequentially and as soon as possible after having conducted it. I transcribed the interviews in the original language (Norwegian). I uploaded the sound file as an mp3 file from the voice recorder to my computer (MacBook Air) and also made a copy of the file to a cloud storage service (DropBox). For the transcribing I used the research version of the software HyperTranscribe, which allowed me to lower the speed of the recording if necessary, and also to systematically transcribe only a few seconds of the interview at the time. In my case I found that a length of 8 -10 seconds was the most efficient length of each sound sequence to be played in order for me to be able to write down the speech as precisely as possible in a verbatim version (Wengraf, 2006). In order to create as exact a reproduction of the full interview, I used the seven principles by Mergenthaler and Stinson (1992:129–30) as a guide for the transcription work, striving to preserve the authenticity of the transcript structure. I transcribed every interview in its' full length, paying attention to semantic accuracy to not miss anything valuable



for later analysis of the transcript. I transcribed all the words of both me and the interviewee, and also made annotations about laughter, hesitation, mumbling and other verbal para-linguistic phenomena (like laughing or pauses) and suprasegmental characteristics (particular intonation, quality of voice) (Kowall & O'Connell, 2014, p. 64).

The first two interviews took me almost two weeks to transcribe from start to end. I was anxious not to get the exact wording and miss out on words and semantics, which made me go over and repeat listening to the same sequences in the interview again and again. As I got more practice, I spent a day or so for each interview I transcribed. I also had to experiment to find the adequate length that each sequence I played for the transcription work should have in order to get the right kind of flow in my transcription work. I soon found out that a length between 8-10 seconds gave a good balance between being able to remember the exact wording as I typed the text and at the same time gave the transcription work a certain progression without having to go back again and again to listen to each sequence.

### 3.5.3 Coding the interviews: Labelling the narrative luggage

After the transcribing process, I started coding the content of the conversations. I approached the coding process as a way to organize my data and generate a foundation for working with interpretative analysis (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). I applied coding as a tool to identify in which passages in the interviews the leaders were talking about something that seemed to be a core theme that caught my interest in relation to the research question. What were they talking about, when they talked about their experiences as leaders? I thought of this work as having a more abstracted meta-conversation with the data after having had the actual conversations with the leaders: 'How can I understand the use of this particular word or this specific sentence? How does this particular utterance possibly relate to how the leader is making sense out of his/her experiences as a leader?'. In this manner, I applied coding as a way to generate organising principles for the processing of my data, relating to the codes I generated as 'tools to think with' (1996, p. 32). Aligned with what Van Nes et al suggest (2010), I chose to do the coding in the original language (Norwegian) to secure as much quality and accuracy as possible in terms of validity, meaning wise. Hence, I coded the interviews to get an overview of main themes occurring in the data, thinking of the different segments of texts as pieces of 'luggage' that I labelled with thematic tags in order to be able to identify each segment and retrieve it among the others (Wengraf, 2006). As my research question and the interview questions were abductive and open-ended, I did not test the interviewees answers to my questions against a defined hypothesis or particular theory. Because of the semi-structured format, I found that many themes would not occur linearly but be found in various and different passages in the interviews.

The coding process was done in four steps. I did the coding of the interviews manually, where each transcribed interview was coded in one separate word document. After I had transcribed the interviews, I inserted the transcribed text in a two columned table. I structured the interview by speaker's turns and marking my turns in blue and the leader's turns in black. Similar to the samples of coding offered by Coffey & Atkinson (1996), in the left column I put specific content (what was said), and then wrote verbatim 'in vivo' codes (Saldaña, 2013) in the form of key themes and words occurring in the stories, in the right column. Verbatim coding aims at identifying words and expressions used by the interviewees themselves, that can be found in the actual raw data (2013). For this project, the first step of verbatim coding was important for how I was able to identify the emic categories that I used for the further analysis and discussion, particularly concerning the categories of trust and self-trust. Next to the second column, I started to write down my 'meta conversation' with immediate associations, ideas for interpretation, and annotations to the emic categories, themes and key words. In this way I was able to map emic categories and themes that had something in common across the twenty interviews, and could identify similarities and differences in the kind of luggage that each interview contained, while at the same time starting to work on the etic codes.

While some qualitative researchers will claim that coding your data is not the same as analysing it (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), others argue that coding of data is a deep engagement with the data's meanings and therefore should be thought of as a vital part of the analyzing (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2018). For this project, the process of coding was vital for how I was able to make sense of the large amount of interview data and generate insights that related to my research question. However, coding is always an important procedure to prepare for further data analysis, because coding is an analytic approach to break down data in manageable parts to identify further relevant questions about the data. How data is coded is vital for how one can do the analysis of it. For this project, I aimed at generating codes at a general level to be able to work with data as chunks of conceptually related content. In accordance with Seidel and Kelle (1995), I applied coding at this level to (a) noticing relevant phenomena, (b) collecting examples of those phenomena, and (c) analysing those phenomena in order to find commonalities, differences, patterns, and structures (p. 55-56). As Coffey and Atkinson stressed, coding of data as conceptually related chunks of content can be thought of as data complication (1996, p. 29) because it can function as a means to develop and reinvent ideas about what the data signify, facilitating for new perspectives and insights.

I carried out the coding work in four steps or cycles. After I had done a first cycle (Saldaña, 2013) of verbatim coding of each interview, I did a second cycle of coding as a within-case analysis (Creswell, 2007) to look for correspondence and connections between main categories within each interview. As a third step, I then coded each interview axially (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) in order to identify if there were subcategories that could be linked to any of the main categories within each interview (Charmaz, 2010). I looked for connections, patterns, idiosyncrasies, mysteries, overlaps, redundancies and other characteristics in the leaders' language. For the axial coding I sketched a matrix showing all the interviewees and main categories mapped against the most frequent themes and key words what I thought of as subcategories and relevant attributes that appeared interesting and of relevance in a leadership identity context. Aligned with how Schreier described the process of coding qualitative data and how it is concerned with describing meaning in context, for the axial coding I tried to go beyond the specifics of any particular passage as I worked with identifying codes of relevance, and aimed at levelling the abstraction of the meaning of the passage. I did this in order to identify categories that applied 'to a number of concrete, slightly different passages' (p. 170). I then used the matrix overview to perform the fourth step of coding, doing what Creswell (2007) described as a cross-case analysis, mapping all the interviews with each other, looking for corresponding categories and phenomena across the twenty stories. How I worked with the coding of data in these four steps to generate main categories first and then looked for subcategories corresponds to what I understand as a strategy of subsumption (Schreier, 2014), working systematically to examining one passage after another, going through the content step by step and mapping main categories with subcategories, subsuming overlapping subcategories or creating new subcategories (2014, p. 8).

The result of the four steps of coding made it visually very clear to me that the specific word 'trust' stood out as an emic category, occurring repeatedly in the interviews in form of the Norwegian word 'tillit'<sup>1</sup>. The word "self-trust" also emerged as an empirical category, occurring in the form of the word 'selvtillit'<sup>2</sup> and in phrases referring to having trust or faith in one self. I recognised trust as a predominating term occurring as an empirical category in all the interviews. From having a first impression that trust was something that several of the leaders talked about, after the coding of the data, I could point to the actual occurrences of the word 'trust' and conclude that trust was in fact a vital theme in the leaders' stories. I also recognised that self-trust transpired as a central theme, often in the form of the word self-trust (selvtillit), but also in other forms that

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<sup>1</sup> In Norwegian language, 'tillit' means trust

<sup>2</sup> In Norwegian language, 'selvtillit' means to have trust, faith, in one self. The Norwegian word 'selvtillit' is what I understand as the concept of self-trust in a Lehrian term (see discussion chapter).

in the Norwegian language equal the meaning of the term self-trust. I then started to look for other words co-existing with the words trust and self-trust in sequences, and found some commonalities regarding the leaders' choice of words and expressions to describe their leadership experiences.

The point I would like to stress here is that I did not censor variety in the leaders' vocabulary to manufacture simplicity in the place of complexity, or lump together empirical diversity to produce an unambiguous concept of trust. On the contrary, in the leader's stories, the concept of trust and self-trust stand out as core themes in how they describe their understanding of their leadership project. They all have slightly different ways of depicting how trust and self-trust become important and defining phenomena in their lifeworld as leaders, but they all relate to trust and self-trust as core elements in their leadership identity, and their descriptions have much in common when it comes to depict what I understand as the essence of how they understand their leadership identity. Hence, I experienced that the coding process led to an empirically generated and saturated set of data which I could proceed with for further analysis.

Therefore, I argue that trust and self-trust in this case are primarily emic categories. This is an important thing to underline in order to prepare the reader for the analysis where trust and self-trust as concepts occur in many variations, but still with what I understand to be in a very homogenous meaning. The homogeneity concerning trust as it emerged in the data material as I transcribed and coded the interviews is precisely the reason why I became curious about the concept in the first place, and why I started to note how trust and expressions for self-trust so often occurred in the same context. Regarding self-trust, the concept is also an emic occurrence in my interview data, but I also understand self-trust as a concept that I developed further as an etic category. While it is possible to claim that the word and concept of "trust" ('tillit') emerged as a purely empirical category, I understand self-trust as an emic category because the term is used by the leaders themselves in the interviews. However, I *also* understand self-trust as an etic category, the latter resulting from my interpretation of how the word self-trust ('selvtillit') or utterances referring to the act of trusting one self, was used in the leaders' narratives and how the use related to the specific context the word was used in. Hence, the coding process for this project can be understood partially as a process to identify emic categories emerging from the interviews, but also partially as a qualitative content analysis in order to 'go beyond the specifics of any particular passage' (Schreier, 2014, p. 170).

I will be returning to the performative aspect of trust and self-trust in the discussion chapter and also dwell more in detail with the possible explanations for how trust can be found to be such a vital concept in the leaders' narratives, relating back to Discourses-in-practice and discursive

practices. However, at this point I find it worthwhile to highlight that the occurrence of trust and self-trust in the leader's stories is not something I deliberately forced in order to present a certain image or interpretation that I wanted to make. Trust and self-trust emerged as empirical phenomena in the leaders' stories. Having said this, I am well aware that qualitative data can never speak for themselves. Language is neither transparent nor value-neutral (Eisenhart, 2008). Its' meaning is constantly decoded through interpretation, which is again context dependent. This illustrates how reflexivity in regard to the interpretation of narratives is the qualitative researcher's best tool.

I therefore went over each interview several times looking for potential phenomena in the leaders' stories that could shed light on how they understood their leadership identity. For the translation and analysis, I did a first selection of sequences and passages from each interview for the various categories and themes I had identified as a result of the coding process. After I had done this, I proceeded with translation and analysis.

#### 3.5.4 The process of translating data

Concerning the case of trust and self-trust and the distinction between emic and etic categories, it relates to another crucial element of the research process for this project, namely the translation of my data from Norwegian to English. When data is collected in one language and is then translated to be presented in another, the translation aspect implies that the researcher must take decisions in the translation process that represent a significant impact on the validity of the research result (Birbili, 2000). As pointed out by many qualitative researchers, the translation of data from one language to another requires great sensitivity concerning the maintenance of data authenticity (Nurjannah, Park & Usher, 2014).

In accordance with Suh et al. (2009), I translated the selected passages from Norwegian to English as I simultaneously did the first round of interpretation of the selected sequences and passages. As Norwegian culture is my native home territory and Norwegian language is my first language, I considered my knowledge and competency concerning the interpretation of narratives told in the Norwegian language to be adequate in terms of having profound knowledge of the cultural context as a basis for translating the Norwegian meanings to English. In addition, the field of leadership language being part of my professional field since years, and the act of interviewing also being something I was experienced in, I considered my coding of the raw data in Norwegian to be valid. This is of course a vital element regarding the evaluation of the validity of the translation and interpretation of the data (Birbili, 2000). The translation from the original language to a second language (English) represented a crucial challenge for this

project. For the qualitative research project, the interpretation of meaning is a core element and therefore crucial for validity, because translation is also about interpretation. Consequently, there is a risk that meaning can get lost in translation (Van Nes, Abma, Jonsson, & Deeg, 2010). I therefore paid particular attention to the process of translation the data from Norwegian to English<sup>3</sup>, to ensure that meaning was not altered or lost. I translated the data word by word and aimed at keeping the semantic as close to the Norwegian original as possible. Also, to demonstrate the various ways in which the emic categories occurred in the data, and to make it comprehensible to the reader how I through processing of data developed concepts for the theoretical discussion, I chose to include a large amount of interview data for the translation.

I did the translation and first round of interpretation in a systematic order, continuing the systematic order I applied in the thematic cross-case coding. I first translated all the selected passages from each interview, one by one, while looking for further categories and meanings within each narrative. By doing the translation from Norwegian to English in this way, I could start to map out all the related themes within each story in more details, and generate an even more detailed overview of how leadership identity was talked about in different passages within the same interview. At the same time, I gradually generated a more in-depth analysis of how the leaders' stories corresponded across the twenty depicted lifeworlds and how they connected in terms of both similarities and differences.

In the translation work, I paid careful attention to maintain subtle nuances and expressions that pointed to emotions and values related to the leaders' depictions of their leadership experiences. My aim was to secure an adequate attention to translation issues to avoid ending up with amputated meanings. A main concern of mine was therefore to ensure that as much of the original meaning as possible in the leaders' accounts was conveyed in the translated version. The cultural and contextual aspect that comes with the qualitative interview as method implied that as part of the translation process, I continuously had to pay attention to selection of English

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<sup>3</sup> Having passed an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) language test with an overall band score of 8,5 (with 9 being the maximum possible score = expert level) to qualify for a PhD position with The University of Technology, Sydney, Australia, I considered my English proficiency to be good enough to do the translation of the data myself. In addition, in Norway, English is second language in the public school system and taught from 4<sup>th</sup> grade, and in the university system the curricula are predominated by literature in English. Hence, I consider English as my 2<sup>nd</sup> language.

words and terms that represented an appropriate match to the Norwegian original. I used the online version of Oxford English Dictionary as well as the software 'Grammarly' for Mac as translation tools. The translated version of the data was then proofread in two turns by a native English professional proofreader trained in philosophy and social psychology to ensure that the translation was adequate.

### 3.5.5 Making sense: Analysing data

When doing interpretivist analysis, it is crucial to keep in mind that the interview is both a site for interaction and for narrative production (Alvesson, 2011; Czarniawska, 2004; Warren, 2012). With Warren's idea of the interview as a vessel of topics that can be mined for meaning, created by the social interaction in the interview situation, the narrative production is what fuels the vessel with potential meaningful topics. Following Czarniawska's theory on narratives in social science research (2004), the writing and interpretation of an interview is again a distinct type of narrative production. Thus, I am creating a representation of other's stories presented to me.

For the interpretation of the qualitative interview, there is no template for a 'right or wrong' interpretation that can be applied as a rule of thumb for the researcher (Roulston, 2014). How meaning is derived from qualitative data as basis for analysis and discussion is always a matter of co-constructed, social iteration. For the sake of validity, the researcher's reflexive consciousness and methodological transparency is therefore vital. I experienced how working with the process of translating data, analysing and writing together my findings became an intertwined undertaking (Hunter, 2010). The process of writing up my findings in order to give voice to the leaders and their stories in a meaningful way – to make sense of their accounts – brought new insights and discoveries as I was writing. The concept of a narrative ecology that I have applied in this project is an illustration of how my ideas for understanding the leaders' narrative identity projects emerged as a result of the writing process. I started to see the occurrence of trust and self-trust as emic phenomena and as a dyad that operated together in the leaders' stories. I started to experiment with the idea that these two concepts could be understood as breathing through each other, giving each other life, as in an organic ecology. This is how my idea of the concept of a narrative ecology first started to take shape.

I spent eight months from start to end with the translation and first round of analysis of the data, producing a first draft of approximately 120 pages with a thorough first analysis of the full selection of data. I systematically developed the analysis, passage by passage for each interviewee, paying attention to flesh out all aspects I found of relevance for the research question that I wanted to explore with an interpretivist lens. I did this in order to gain a deeper understanding of the

phenomena occurring in the leaders' stories. Based on the coding I had done, I aimed at binding together the analysis of phenomena across the different narratives to see how they corresponded and how they diverged. During this work, I decided to test if it made sense to organize the analysis either by either case / interviewee or by the categories and themes I had identified during the coding. During this work, I also found it particularly helpful to apply analytic bracketing as it allowed me to zoom in and out from the data and analysis, constantly working at distilling meanings as they emerged in the discursive format, and my own interpretations of what was in the data informed by a Discourse perspective. However, even if I consulted theory during my interpretation, I decided to not bring any theoretical references into the analysis but instead aimed at letting the data stand out with as little interference from theoretical bias as possible.

After having discussed the first complete draft of analysis with my supervisor, we agreed that the amount of data was much more than I would be able to manage within the limits of one thesis. Consequently, I started the process with condensing data, starting with selecting the most interesting aspects of my findings, those that surprised me the most and attracted my attention as mysteries. After a second round, I had approximately 60 pages with analysis. At this stage I had to decide how I should organize the findings and present my analysis. I continued to condense and edit to distill data to allow for the findings of most relevance for my research question to be elaborated upon. Eventually, I decided that I would organize my findings by presenting a handful of main voices among the leaders, and let these main voices constitute the core story line, accompanied by the other voices. I chose this presentation strategy in order to allow for a richest possible representation of data and share as much of the 20 accounts as possible where relevant, to provide transparency for the reader concerning the reasoning behind the analysis and the findings presented.

At the same time, I also aimed at keeping a dramaturgical feeling of flow that made it possible for the reader to follow my interpretivist work as a coherent whole. This illustrates how important the representation aspect is in choosing how to do the written presentation of data: Writing the results in order to present them to the reader has been a procedure of creative manufacturing within a complex craft where there is no "one truth" to be found. Yet, hopefully new insights on how the leadership project make sense to leaders can be derived. I have aimed at doing this with great concern for both validity and methodological transparency, which is why the final result in the chapter of analysis presented here counts 40 pages in total. This implies that the process from transcribing to coding to analyzing data, then to writing up and finally presenting the data, has been an extensive and as thorough and methodologically meticulous as I found it possible.



To build on Clandinin (2006) and Conelly and Clandinin (2000), the transition from participating in the interview interactions through 20 distinct encounters to producing a narrative whole, in an attempt to identify some kind of coherent meaning, has been a journey through which I constantly struggled to negotiate between the roles of pilgrim and cartographer. It has been a wholehearted attempt to merge qualitative data, ethnomethodology and academic ethics with scholarly intuition. To paraphrase Alvesson and Sköldbberg (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000), I have done my best to offer transparency and clarity concerning what is what and distinguish between what I offer of interpretations and what I present as insights. It is my hope that what I present as findings in the following sections will do justice to this.

### 3.5.6 Stories on leadership as language at work

Considering the fact that ‘saying’ leadership diverges from ‘doing’ leadership, it is my view that sayings should by no means be dismissed as actions of no importance. This point pertains to another aspect of the saying-versus-doing discourse that bears particular relevance in the context of this project; sayings can of course be approached as a certain practice. Verbal action is a distinct type of action. As Watzlawick (1967) and peers stated, language is a property of behaviour and ‘activity or inactivity, words or silence all have message value: they influence others and these others, in turn, cannot *not* respond to these communications and are themselves communicating’ (p. 30). This implies that sayings as an act of speech can be doings, which is also true in leadership contexts.

Ladkin (2008) demonstrated how language can be interpreted as an element of leadership enactment. In adopting Bauman’s theory on language as identity performance (Bauman, 2000) in this project, I consider language a part of the leadership identity construction project. I therefore take as a point of departure that the language the leaders use in their stories can be viewed as a dimension of performative leadership: language does something to us, and therefore, language applied in a leadership context does something to the context as well as to the understanding of leadership.

Boje, Oswick and Ford (2004) addressed how in this way language can be viewed as a tool for construction when they state, ‘We do not just report and describe with language; we also create with it. And what we create in language “uses us” in that it provides a point of view (a context) within which we “know” reality and orient our actions’ (p. 571). This links directly back to the well-established social constructionist ideas of Berger and Luckman (1966), who claimed that language is a tool for the ongoing ‘craftsmanship’ of internalisation and externalisation that creates our sense of an objective reality.

In addition, Boje, Oswick and Ford advocated that examining organisations and understanding what happens in and to them should be viewed as ‘a phenomenon in and of language’ (2004, p. 571). I likewise suggest that leadership identity can be investigated as a similar phenomenon: as a phenomenon created by and through language. Yet, as Alvesson and Kärreman (2000a) emphasised, language should not be seen as an easy instrument for assessing reality. Language as an object for research must be approached with great reflexivity and a critical concern for the complexity it represents.

In line with the idea of Boje et al., Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) indicated how language as part of a cultural resource is an important building block in job-related identity work. This implies that language is an element in the construction of leadership identity. Thus, stories on leadership can also be a part of leadership performance in practice. In the stories of this project, what is described as experiences of leadership is something I understand as being closely connected to the construction of leadership identity and how leaders see themselves. It is my understanding that in this way, the leaders performed a piece of leadership identity construction in their conversations with me. Because language can be viewed as performative in the sense that words do something in the context they are uttered in, language is thus a crucial part of leadership constructions. In the leaders’ act of telling their stories, in which they reflect upon their leadership experiences and practices, they were simultaneously performing construction work on their leadership identity.

This corresponds with how I have applied the ethnomethodological perspective, because it encourages the researcher to find the production of identities in what is being accounted for and find ‘versions of worlds talked about’ (Baker, 2002, p.3) in the narrated story. When I started mining for meaning in the material, what I found was versions of a world circling around the construction of leadership identity as a crucial matter. To paraphrase Warren, eventually the interview setting as a social interaction turned out to become vessels of topics, loaded with stories that all dealt with leadership identity construction.

An example I found to illustrate what the abovementioned scholars were arguing is from a memo I made after an interview with one of the leaders, Nils. The following is an excerpt from this memo; it illustrates how construction work is ongoing and how language is an interactional identity tool:

*After we have ended the formal part of our conversation, the CEO of the innovation incubator company remains seated in silence. I have asked him if there is anything more he wants to add and he has answered no, but to me it looks like he is obviously*

*pondering about something and I am hesitant whether I should interfere or not; we have had a long talk. There is a flight to catch. I should be going. I have turned the voice recorder off and I slowly start to pack my things together when he looks at me and tells me that this conversation has made him recognise something profound: As a leader he is not at all the attentive listener that he likes to think of himself as being:*

It just dawned on me, right now as we are ending this dialogue. I need to work on my listening skills. I want to believe that I am a good listener, but I just realize that I am not. I ought to change that. I am not practicing what I preach. This is a great weakness in my way of leading. Right now, I am baffled, I just don't know why I have not realised this before, it is so banal and I have been a leader for so many years.

*He looks bewildered. He then gets up and asks me to wait while he is getting something he would like to show me. He returns with a little box with cards meant to facilitate conversations among employees in the office. It's a toolkit for professional dialogues among colleagues in the workplace. He goes on:*

I have sponsored the start-up of this concept. I believe it's a great tool; in fact, I have been giving this as a present for Christmas to all my employees because I want to encourage this kind of opinion exchange and free, honest speak. I even gave my wife one of these boxes. But you know what? None of them seemed to be any enthusiastic about it, that puzzled me because the concept behind is so great, and now I just suddenly realise why. If I am a bad listener, how can expect them to be motivated to verbalize their thoughts to me? I mean, I need to start with myself, right? It's just that I don't do this very often, I don't sit down to spend two hours reflecting on my leadership. Perhaps I should do that more often.

*I myself feel baffled right now. I should perhaps have pursued what he just said, but the recorder was shut off, I had packed my stuff and I am not sure if I would be crossing the line from being a researcher to being a coach if I had proceeded with asking him what is was about our conversation that he believes made him get this sudden insight. Maybe it's okay that I didn't. But I am just wondering if this episode might actually have an effect and will lead to a change in how he understands his leadership, whether his story tomorrow will be a different story”.*

(Excerpt, post-interview field memo from interview with Nils, 04.12.15)

In my reading, what floats to the surface in this memo is that language as a construction tool is at work in leadership identity contexts. Here, Nils explicitly expresses how our conversation and his own story about his leadership experience feed into his perception of himself as a leader. Whether his insight bears a true-life correctness is not so much of interest here. I am not evaluating whether what he claims holds truth. To me, the interesting part lies in the ‘doing’ of what he says about himself as a leader and the context he says it in: what does it possibly *do* to his and my understanding of the context—and his leadership identity? My point here is that this memo exemplifies how leadership language creates agency, as well as how sayings can be performative in leadership identity constructions, and thus, how they hold significance as leadership agency even if they are not compared with actual doings.

### 3.5.7 From interview transcripts to empirical material

For practical reasons and with an aim to make this text as reader-friendly as possible, the next chapter presents each leader’s story with a short introduction disclosing his or her experience and background. The selected passages from the transcribed interviews are presented as originally and authentically as I found possible. To stay as true to the original meaning as I could, I have aimed to stay as close as possible to the original grammar in terms of syntax and semiotics in the passages, as they were uttered, in the translation from Norwegian to English.

As explained, I have presented a refined selection of interview material. Consequently, in what I present as empirical material in the analysis, much of the original conversation is not shown in the text. I have done my best to be consistent and true to the interviewees and their stories, and have edited the text with a great concern for not altering meanings. Therefore, I have removed linguistic elements such as conjunctions, loose ‘in between’ talk, mumbling, and incomplete sentences and distractions that I do not consider to add to or subtracting from the original meaning. To indicate where in the text I have edited the content in the original paragraph from the interview transcript, I insert a ‘(..)’ to mark where I have removed content at the start, in the middle of, or at the end of a paragraph. To indicate actual pauses made by the interviewee, I have added ‘..’, as in the example below taken from an interview with one of the leaders (from Chapter 4):

(..) After a while, I realised that I had to decide myself, or.. that I had to define some directions on my own. And we were – he and I we rather disagreed concerning style of leadership. He was a very hierarchical leader; he was very strong and only told to those he recognized needed to know, and I was the complete opposite. I believed that to get people on board with me, everyone needs to know everything, or at least

nothing must be kept secret to no one, they need to know (..) then they are part of it and they help pull, while..he thought of it as only distracting, so there we really disagreed, and then I realized (..) that if I am to build a research group (..) if I am to develop my own research (..) I need people with me, and if I can't manage them the way I want to and the way I believe is right in order to promote this research, then I can't.

## Concluding notes

The overall purpose of this chapter has been to make my positionality and standpoint as a researcher clear to the reader in order provide transparency concerning my methodological approach and how I have worked to produce the results I present in this thesis. As Miles and Huberman (2018) stated in their classic textbook on qualitative data analysis, 'to know how a researcher construes the shape of the social world and aims to give us a credible account of it is to know our conversational partner' (p. xxviii). With the positioning of this project within the social constructionist tradition, it follows that my own role as researcher is also a part of the ongoing construction of knowledge. Having argued in this chapter that reflexivity is the most important tool for the qualitative researcher regarding validity, providing transparency for the reader to understand exactly how data was co-created through iterative interactions between myself as researcher and my research data is therefore of importance for this project's legitimacy.

Although I have placed this project within the social constructionist tradition and explained how a social constructionist stance aligns with the epistemological departure point and a linguistic take, this does not imply that other ontological stances are without importance for researchers who are curious to understand more in terms of leadership as a contemporary phenomenon in social life. The social constructionist perspective deepens our understanding of leadership and lets us explore what vital experiences mean to those involved (Tourish & Barge, 2010), yet as Tourish and Barge underlined, 'the world of leadership is too complex to avail of a single explanation, and no one theoretical orientation can exhaust all its complexities' (2010, p.325). By applying analytic bracketing as my method for analysis, I worked with both the Discourse-in-practice and the discursive practice dimension and tried to map emic categories against both with the academic Discourse in leadership theory and the public Discourse on leadership. This kind of analytic bracketing also made the emic-etic distinction make sense as a perspective to add to my analysis, in order to be able to clarify what was the local leadership language being used, and what was my abstracted interpretation of that language.

After I analysed and interpreted the 20 conversations with leaders and attempted to make sense of the stories told, the result is a map showing a terrain in which the two types of analytical dimensions intertwine and mutually inform each other. This project suggests one way that the interplay between Discourse-in-practice and discursive practices in leadership narratives can be understood. However, this does not imply that this interplay could not be interpreted differently. Consequently, the choice of theoretical and methodological approaches, as well as the ontological and epistemological stances that constitutes the bases for this project, do not represent a sole answer to the question of what leadership is *really* about. However, based in the emic data that constitutes the foundation for the next chapter's presentation of analysis and findings, I believe that in that which is explored, there are novel insights concerning the narrative construction of leadership identity, and perhaps a contribution on terms of adding nuances to an eclipsed leadership Discourse in leadership studies.

Considering that this project was founded on narrative data, it is clear that just as how theoretical conceptualisations on leadership could be misleading in regard to leaders' 'doings', their stories on leadership could of course also diverge from what is genuinely going on in their practice. Alvesson and Jonsson identified this when they stated, 'At least one cannot determine a straightforward relationship between talk and practice' (Alvesson & Jonsson, 2016, p.2). This implies that an eclipsed discourse concerning the conceptualisation of leadership could therefore appear both in academic theory and in the leader narrative. Saying versus doing remains a binary distinction that calls for an investigation of all leadership contexts.

What this thesis presents is a snapshot of what I understand to be the phenomenon called leadership identity constructions. The conveyed stories on leadership reveal a brief glimpse of how the leaders themselves understand their own identities as leaders. I have no material showing the relationships between what leaders say they do and what they actually do. Nevertheless, I do not take for granted that the gap between saying and doing is an empty space, even if the word 'gap' might generate that image. A mindful approach to this gap is a facet of what I understand when Alvesson and Spicer referred to *circumspect care* (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). In this project, I align with Fairhurst (2009) when I 'attempt to care for the views of how people actually doing leadership understand and engage in the process rather than imposing the researcher views' (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012, p. 376). The choice of method for this project was made for the purpose of 'taking respondents seriously'. Adopting a CLS perspective, this simultaneously implies that I will be 'challenging their views' (2012).

By paying attention to how things were being said and the context they were being said in, I aim to engage with the leaders' stories with a professional and care-driven commitment to listening to what the leaders themselves said. However, I also commit to taking a critical stand and not just accepting what was being said, but to rather challenge the views that were being conveyed. I will retain this circumspect care throughout this thesis as I proceed to a closer inspection of what is going on in the leaders' stories. In this chapter I have positioned my methodological approach within an ontological and epistemological tradition, and also clarified the specifics of the data collection, the mechanics and specifics of the interpretive process with coding and analysis that facilitated for the discoveries and mystery tour of this particular project. In the next chapter the result of this interpretative process of work is presented. As Clandinin and Connelly (2006) stated, stories are means for making one's experience of the world meaningful. In the next chapter my main aim is to demonstrate how leaders talk about their experiences in ways that are meaningful to them.

## Chapter 4. Trust and self-trust in stories on leadership identity

You must trust people, or life becomes impossible. (Helena in *Uncle Vanya*, Chekhov, 1896)

In this chapter, I present stories on leadership conveyed from the perspective of different leaders' lifeworlds. The intent of this chapter, based on qualitative interviews with the 20 leaders who contributed to this project, is to demonstrate how trust and self-trust bear significance as empirical categories in the context of leadership identity construction. I do this by showing how leaders talk about their leadership and how through this talk they convey their understanding of their own role as leaders. By examining how they talk about these matters closely, my aim is to show how leaders construct their identity as leaders through narratives that share distinct features. These features are related to aspects of trust and self-trust.

In the leaders' tales, I find articulated perceptions of trust and self-trust related to leadership identity coming to life. For this chapter, I selected five voices as the main characters because I believe their complementary characters illustrate thoroughly how different yet closely related trust and self-trust formulas emerge as fundamental, empirical bricks in how these leaders understand their role and identity as leaders. Furthermore, the five stories illuminate the complexity of trust and self-trust as phenomena as they unfold in the stories.

However, alongside these five main voices, I introduce a supportive choir in which several of the other leaders' tales blend into different sections. This is to highlight findings on identity construction related to trust and self-trust that I recognise in the material. In other words, this chapter will be like going to a concert and listening to a few soloists accompanied by a larger choir that adds dynamic to the music.

This chapter will build on a blended structure to offer the richest possible illumination of how leaders account for and interpret their own role as leaders. By interweaving the leaders' voices in such a manner, the complete chorus will hopefully allow for a more detailed inspection of the various forms in which trust and self-trust occur in leadership identity constructions.

The detailed topography of trust and self-trust as it progresses in the conversations with the leaders surfaces as encounters that encompass similarities, contrasts and contradictions. I have chosen to



gather these topographic appearances centring on some key systematising ideas related to trust and self-trust, namely hierarchy, intimacy, individuality and collectivity.

## 4.1 Trust comes first

I begin this exploration of dimensions in leadership identity constructions by showing how trust and self-trust are accounted for in the leaders' stories. First, I ask the following questions: What do the leaders talk about when they talk about trust and self-trust? How do they portray trust and self-trust as elements in their leadership identity project? Second, I ask: What function do trust and self-trust have in the leadership identity project?

This investigation of trust and self-trust begins with Louise and her story. I have chosen to let Louise's story be the entrance point to the analytical exploration of this research project because she articulates several interesting dimensions tied up with trust and self-trust, which I understand as constituting building bricks in her leadership identity construction. Because her story is highly explicit concerning the role of trust and self-trust in the construction of her leadership, I find it serves well as an introductory case to the key findings of this project.

### 4.1.1 They need to have trust

When we meet for our conversation, Louise is leading one of Norway's highest acclaimed medical research institutions. Her retirement is planned to take place in a couple of years. She thus reflects on her life as a leader looking back on decades of experience. As her starting point, she begins with describing trust as a process of creation. Trust is not only something that she as a leader creates in relation to her environment but also something that she as a leader is ascribed as a result of the creation she engages in. Louise states that trust is the first and foremost ingredient when it comes to her life as a leader. In her view, trust is the core component in her leadership:

What comes first is trust, that you create trust, that you are a leader that creates trust, and then you get trust in return. So that is really important.

Then, she goes on to add:

Then it is tolerance – and then it is wellbeing and safety, and then it is patience, and the last... the last one is headroom. The last one is related to tolerance. Well, people must be allowed to come by... and people must be allowed to come by...who might be saying something negative, and you need to be able to tolerate to hear that, and if you have trust, then you do. So that is a philosophy of mine, that they need to have

trust, an underlying trust, and that you are a source of inspiration that let your knowledge drizzle (..).

Here, Louise describes herself as a creator of trust as well as positions self-trust as a premise for that creation. From the onset of our conversation she highlights trust as the core premise for how she understands her own role as a leader. She also portrays trust and self-trust as something that builds tolerance: *headroom*. The tolerance represents a space provider for her agency as a leader. Trust matters because it facilitates tolerance with her employees, and through that tolerance, Louise creates agency for herself as a leader. This agency relates to her function as an inspirational source of knowledge. Thus, I understand Louise's depiction as revealing a strong notion about her leadership identity, how she sees herself as a leader and what ideas she leads by.

In a paragraph where she elaborates on her relationship with her former mentor and boss, Louise promotes how trust and self-trust have evolved as key principles in her understanding of her own role as a leader, again relating to how these facets provide her with agency in her leadership:

(..) After a while, I realised that I had to decide myself, or.. that I had to define some directions on my own. And we were – he and I we rather disagreed concerning style of leadership. He was a very hierarchical leader; he was very strong and only told to those he recognised needed to know, and I was the complete opposite. I believed that to get people on board with me, everyone needs to know everything, or at least nothing must be kept secret to no one, they need to know (..) then they are part of it and they help pull, while..he thought of it as only distracting, so there we really disagreed, and then I realised (..) that if I am to build a research group (..) if I am to develop my own research (..) I need people with me, and if I can't manage them the way I want to and the way I believe is right in order to promote this research, then I can't.

Here, Louise overtly articulates her interpretation of her identity as a leader as *something different*. This difference is also related to how she sees herself as a leader who possesses a certain type of agency. She expresses a strong faith in the type of leadership she herself has founded, where her main goal is to get people to follow her. In this expression of faith, her distinguished self-trust is on display. She further articulates her own trust in transparency and inclusion as two major confirmations of what she sees as the core of her leadership. Transparency and inclusion relate back to headspace and tolerance, and together these four elements are conveyed as constituting a strong backbone in how Louise sees her identity as a leader.

#### 4.1.2 Trust and self-trust as strategic means

Louise describes how she deliberately builds trust. One factor she underlines in this construct is her strategy of appreciation as a way to get people to follow her. When Louise tells me about her approach, appreciation crystallises as a key component in how she sees herself building trust as a leader through deploying a positive outlook in her leadership:

Like my father always said, there is always something positive with everybody, you just have to find it and nourish it, that which is positive, which fits with that particular setting, and make use of it... Everybody has some trait or another that is possible to draw upon. There was a former colleague of mine who had a mother who was like that. She had a teacher who was completely hopeless. There was absolutely nothing positive about him, and she just could not find anything flattering about him. But then she found out one thing; he had a really nice tie! And I have that as a...that no matter, if you don't find anything, then at least you might be able to appreciate a nice tie! And it has sort of... you have to identify which are the positive traits that work in that setting, and then you have to foster it – that is what I have tried to look for (...).

Here, Louise presents another clear notion about the relationship between trust, self-trust and the interplay between these two aspects in her leadership role. Her appreciative work is a premise for her to foster trust. Moreover, she conveys a high degree of self-trust; she portrays herself as a leader who is always able to find something positive about others and make use of it.

By this I understand that she sees herself as a leader who has the stamina to take on the type of emotion work that must be required to always look for positive attributes in people. Her self-confidence in her ability to endure the hard work of being a leader is present throughout her whole tale about her life as a leader. As she talks, distinct notions related to the identity aspect of her leadership become apparent:

Some might find that I am too positive, too little a bitch, because I don't like to find something that is wrong and criticise it in plenum. Then you cut people off and you can watch them become cautious, and then they lose security. They are here to learn, and then they need that security. And then it is about finding and fostering the good... and then you can rather take the negative one to one. So obviously, some are criticizing me for being too positive and like (...) because that is what I want to promote, and when they come to me and are exhausted and all that, then it is my

task not to add to any burden of theirs, but actually to pinpoint; “is there something positive in this?” and make them smile when they leave the office.

Here, Louise again displays how she sees herself catering for trust and self-trust in her leadership. She depicts herself as a leader utterly committed to searching for that which can be praised in her employees, even when it is difficult and demands that she invests in emotion work. She observes it to be her task to ‘not to add to any burden of theirs’.

Implicitly, this idea encompasses taking on a burden to make life easier for her employees. I understand this notion to be anchored in a strong sense of self-trust in her leadership. As she sees it, her strategy is explicitly aimed at fostering trust between leader and employee, as well as to foster self-trust in her employees. Her belief in this strategy is presented as rooted in what I understand as a self-trust-driven agency for acting as a type of all-encompassing caretaker in her role as a leader.

The trust and self-trust aspect progress as Louise elaborates upon how she sees her identity as a leader, connecting the dots she perceives between trust and openness as well as how she deliberately seeks influence and legitimacy:

(...) My philosophy is again, that... Openness... If you have trust, then you are completely open, you don't hide anything and it is not negative to share negative opinions. I have experienced really negative things myself, and should I tell about it or not? And yes, I tell about it, “that is how it was”, and then (..) there is not so much talk about it. And again, it is like this, if you are open, then of course people can read you better, for better and for worse, but I believe that it is a.... that it is important in the role of a leader, to be open.

In this case, displaying her vulnerability as a leader is depicted as something that Louise believes is crucial to her leadership. I read that as concerning a notion of her legitimacy as leader; she believes that she gains influence by showing vulnerability. Thus, to expose herself as weak to her employees is for Louise simultaneously to demonstrate strength, as well as show her employees that she trusts them and that she can be trusted too. I understand this as a clear statement of self-trust. The leader displaying vulnerability can be a risky business in terms of jeopardising one's legitimacy. According to Louise, the return on investment when she as a leader offers her vulnerability is increased trust.

The idea is clearly present of how a certain type of relational intimacy with her employees is required for her to gain legitimacy in her identity as a leader. Showing vulnerability is an invitation to obtain further intimacy and trust in the relationship. Again, the idea of the leader as a daring pilot manoeuvring through bold relational moves with trust and self-trust as compass comes to the surface.

Thus far, I have shown how Louise sets forth a clear depiction of how trust and self-trust are core pillars in her leadership identity construction, how trust and self-trust can be understood to play a role in her leadership identity construction, and what trust and self-trust mean to her leadership identity construction; they provide her with agency in her leadership, in which she sees herself as an unorthodox leader, and this unorthodoxy caters for her accomplishments as a leader.

## 4.2 Trust and self-trust as a provider for leadership autonomy

In Louise's tale, she fundamentally relates to trust and self-trust. She depicts inclusion and openness as the fundamental elements for establishing trust. I understand trust and self-trust as phenomena that provide her with autonomy in her leadership.

This is illustrated when Louise presents trust as something that legitimises what she recognises as her unorthodox decisions as a leader. She discusses how she sometimes takes actions that counter the formal department structure, thereby going against what she believes are her employees' expectations. She challenges the formalities and is well aware of the potential distress it might generate among her employees, but claims that if they recognise her trust they should be able to understand why she does things the way she does: as a pure act of trust. In other words, when she acts against the established rules and hierarchies, her employees should take that as a sign of trust. Her actions should be considered trustworthy and legitimate because her leadership in its essence represents trust:

We have team leaders and project managers, and things are supposed to go through this one and that one, but when I see something that can be taken advantage of like that or like that, then I just do it and I connect the parts, without asking this one and that one if it is okay, so in that sense I am...Well, that they need to see, and again, if they understand my trust, then it is not because someone has been bypassing someone else...So.. it is about openness.

Here, Louise expresses how she believes that her leadership is infused with trust and how her employees need to understand that. This expression also becomes a particularly strong statement

for how she sees herself working as a leader, empowered by her self-trust that gives her particular agency—the agency of autonomy—in her leadership.

Furthermore, she reveals a strong notion of her capacity to navigate the established hierarchy in her own individual manner as well as overrule its formal procedures, precisely because of the formal power she possesses as a leader. In addition, when she talks about how she connects resources by acting on the side of formal rules and regulations in her institution, she describes how trust based on her nonhierarchical ideal makes it possible to specifically execute leadership, namely because of her position in a formal hierarchy, where she holds the privilege of being the leader. The formal authority or legitimacy is what makes her able to override formalities and oppose established hierarchical structures. Thus, her nonhierarchical ideal can only gain legitimacy within an acknowledged hierarchy, endowing her with a certain mandate, power and possibilities. Louise's idea of a nonhierarchical leadership is in its foundation built on a recognition of an existing hierarchy, and thus a contradiction, yet according to her own account it is a contradiction that provides her leadership with profound legitimacy.

#### 4.2.1 Trust, self-trust and the tactics of hierarchical control

Presenting her leadership as opposing hierarchy and secrets, Louise reveals a subtle notion of the hierarchy she is a part of as well as the tactics of control that her particular position as a leader in this hierarchy allows for. Louise reveals that to her, trust as a leadership project is also about fostering trust in relationships through the tactical use of status and hierarchy.

Louise accounts for how she does this specifically because of her position to build legitimacy and trust. According to how she portrays her identity as a leader, as one that chooses her own way, building her leadership on trust and self-trust and challenging the hierarchical norms, her legitimacy to do this is simultaneously constituted by a recognition of an established hierarchy through which she is attributed with a profound legitimacy. Again, trust and self-trust as concepts crystallise as components in her leadership identity construction.

The identity aspect tied to notions about her supremacy unfolds again when Louise describes herself as a carrier of wisdom, as a leading guide and a source for her followers to tap into. This locus is emphasised when she says:

“(..) I shall give them my wisdom and I can lead them to the threshold, but then they must use their own wisdom to cross over it. I must lead them to... “your own wisdom”.

She further describes her work as being an ant and a gardener, facilitating what she defines as jazz jamming and an upward spiral:

(..) because the most important thing for me as a leader is sort of... they are my scientific children – is that they have a ground where they can bloom. I have felt like a kind of an ant, a working ant who facilitates a platform (..) I have a talent for get people to associate, and then we are back to that jazz jamming. And if you are to get people to ...when they are safe and they thrive, then that jamming happens, then that spiral goes upwards, and if I can be a part of and arrange for that, and that I can have someone who speeds up afterwards, then it is incredibly exciting. What I get feedback on is that I am very inspiring. It catches me and then it catches them. It is something in that jazz jamming again (..)

In this paragraph, many identity aspects of Louise's leadership construct are apparent. In the use of the term 'scientific children' resides a notion about a certain relational intimacy and compassion between herself as a leader and her employees. Louise describes herself as a working ant, aiming to create a safe ground for her scientific children to blossom in. Trust once more lingers as a fundamental constituent for her identity as leader. She sees herself as a working ant in a trust factory, working to generate safety for her scientific children. In this I read a strong sense of self-trust; as a leader Louise sees herself as a competent safeguard to her employees. Again, trust and self-trust surface as core building blocks of how Louise understands her identity as a leader.

#### 4.2.2 We are family

As I have shown, Louise refers to her employees as family. In this family, she depicts herself as the mother whose most important task is to enable her children's well-being and professional development. Several times, Louise refers to her personality, specifically to who she is and who she wants to be as a leader, which I read as clearly overt ideas of leadership identity. The core of her story can be read as follows: Through trust governed by her self-trust, she both builds her identity as a leader and states her legitimacy as one. Trust and self-trust are catered for through inclusion, openness, tolerance, patience and appreciation. According to Louise's story, all of these qualities are drivers for her employees' safety and well-being, encouraging their loyalty and will to follow her. Thus, the manner in which trust and self-trust are at work in Louise's story can be interpreted as a distinct sort of roadmap for how she accounts for navigating in the terrain she sees herself presiding over.

Within these metaphors, along with the distinct notion of her supremacy as ‘mother’ and the intimacy aspect, there dwells a strong dedication and commitment to how she sees her role as a leader. She does not leave it to others to pave the way and point out directions. She expresses great awareness of her own capability in this; she trusts herself and she trusts her people. The family metaphor in relation to trust and how Louise perceives her position as a leader materialises when Louise describes the relationship she has with her scientific children. This is illustrated in her payday beer anecdote:

(..) It is this thing, that we are family and that I feel that they have trust in me, that I don’t feel like a boss, but I feel like one of them, but on one hand... one thing that I don’t do... They really would like to, they have this payday beer when the team goes out, and there I am not participating, and I am a little aware of that, because I feel like, there I should not interfere with them....but they tremendously much want me to join them, but they also need to have their free spaces without me present, but on the other hand, we pull things together, I feel. But sometimes I wonder if I am too dominating (..).

In this passage, Louise once more accentuates the value she sees in focusing on equality and not on hierarchy. In the idea of ‘being one of them’ is the notion of herself and employees sharing a certain relational intimacy. This idea is confirmed by her claim of how she is ‘not feeling like a boss’, but ‘like one of them’. In addition, she conveys utter consciousness about her position as a superior when she talks about how she deliberately avoids payday beer events to avoid inhibiting her employees in a setting she believes they should be free to act without her dominance.

This indicates that alongside the notion of being one of them and being family, she has a notion of being *not* like one of them. Here, the oxymoron concerning her identity as a leader being defined on the notion of opposing the established hierarchy is again revealed; a nonhierarchical leadership can only make sense if her actions are legitimised by precisely that same hierarchy. Louise’s notion of feeling like ‘being one of them’ is accentuated because she is actually *not* ‘like one of them’. She depicts equality and nonhierarchical relations as the basis for her identity as a leader; however, the payday beer anecdote reveals an idea about her leadership identity built on hierarchical concerns.

The example of the payday beer events can also be understood as an act of *strategic trust construction* to create agency in her leadership; to show that she recognises her influence as a leader on the group, Louise chooses to not be present in an arena in which she believes the



employees should feel free to act without her imposing her presence on them. Through this, she conveys that she very much recognises the difference in roles and hierarchy, as well as that there are different arenas where these are played out differently. In other words, after work, the mother withdraws so that her scientific children can exchange, play and bond without her presence as a dominating element.

In addition, Louise describes how in many contexts she actively downplays her authority as a means to foster trust, and moreover, she sees trust as the factor that makes this downplay possible. I understand this as a fundamental contradiction in her leadership construction project. Because of her self-trust, she sees herself as renouncing her formal authority and still maintaining control. She can challenge formal hierarchies without challenging her own legitimacy as leader. In fact, she sees challenging formal boundaries as part of what constitutes and fosters her particular legitimacy as a leader. I read this as a play with status and hierarchy related to her identity construction as a leader, in which her notions about trust and self-trust are bearing pillars.

I find Louise's story to be a rich case of trust and self-trust in leadership identity constructions. Her account is full of details and nuances that add to the complexity of how she sees her own leadership as manifest and legitimate, catered by trust and self-trust as key components in her leadership identity construction. Trust and self-trust provide her with the agency she sees as essential in her leadership, even when it is founded on overt contradictions.

In the following subsections, I present more stories from other leaders to elucidate Louise's testimonial concerning what trust and self-trust are in leadership identity constructions.

#### 4.2.3 Daring to take critique

Kari is the youngest and least experienced leader participating in my project. Kari highlights a similar perspective to that of Louise's concerning the capability to contain criticism and feedback, based on a belief in the value of showing trust and self-trust. Where Louise holds decades of experience as a leader when she talks about taking feedback and accept criticism, Kari is just a few months into her role as a leader when we have our conversation. Still, the essence in the expressed experience of what trust and self-trust are is similar to that of Louise:

(..) First of all, one sees in a room if what one is saying goes through, that you can see, one feels that physical sensation in giving a presentation and then one feels, how many are with you and how many are not getting anything of this (..) And then of course, it is this about asking people; "What do you think about that, how does it sound, what do you think, is this going to work?" Simply this, to ask people, and to

always have people to provide feedback, and of course to have the stomach to take that feedback. Because it is obvious; if you ask people what they think, they often will say things that you don't want to hear.

Here, Kari accounts for a leadership style in which her capacity for containing criticism is crucial. I understand this reference to the importance of tolerating negative feedback as an expression of her self-trust; her notion of self-trust works as a resource for the project she as a leader has undertaken.

Kari elaborates further on her ideas about what I interpret as layers of self-trust related to notions about identity in her role as a leader when she describes boldness as a quality in her leadership:

I think that we must dare to stand for the choices and then we must dare to take critique and then we must dare to say “sorry, I was wrong about that”. (..) I have often said things before I have been thinking, because I have been feeling. So I don't follow a recipe, I don't follow any template, but I feel. “This is right, this is how we need to do it!”

In this quote, Kari highlights how she sees herself representing individuality in her style of leadership: ‘I don't follow a recipe’. She clearly understands herself as an unorthodox leader driven by her self-trust as a capability. This is similar to Louise who describes her leadership as *something different*. Like Louise, Kari presents herself as an unorthodox leader who opposes the established norms of how a leader is expected to act. Trust and self-trust crystallise as influential aspects in her identity as a leader: they are the drivers that facilitate her individual agency in her role as a leader. I here read self-trust and daring as two sides of the same coin, as two mutually crucial components in her identity as a leader that are deployed as pillars in the construction of her leadership identity. Kari talks about daring to take choices as well as daring to receive critique for her choices as a leader. In her statement, a strong idea about trust and self-trust lingers as the basis for how she understands her role and work as a leader.

Another nuance of self-trust in Kari's leadership identity evolves when she describes a highly explicit and strong physical sensation concerning her ‘feel of trust’ in the room with her employees. Kari refers to her state of *feeling* as a capability to interpret the atmosphere in a room, as a way of judging if she as a leader is reaching others. As she explains it, this type of felt trust helps her navigate her environment with a strong belief in doing the right thing. The way I read this, her self-trust is the facilitating driver for the trust she sees as at stake and that she strives to

foster in her leadership. In this case, the agency that trust gives her is strongly connected to her individual embodied capacity to read the atmosphere in a room of people.

In the stories of Louise and Kari, I find that to them trust and self-trust represent the capacity to be a different type of leader; trust and self-trust endow them with the agency to act according to what they perceive as a distinct style of leadership. They reveal strong notions about their identity as leaders by presenting themselves as leaders who are different in their leadership. I understand this difference as something they see as their primary asset in their leadership role.

As it emerges in both the stories of Louise and Kari, their descriptions of being courageous leaders who expose their own viewpoints to be challenged and critiqued by others build on a notion of vigorous self-trust. It signals a strong belief in their own sense of self as leaders. Thus, I see both Louise and Kari as displaying what they portray as a high degree of self-trust. They both implicitly reveal a notion of having strong faith in themselves and also convey a strong sense of self-trust in how they see themselves as leaders. In their roles as creators of trust, the capabilities they see themselves possessing in terms of building trust with their employees is to a great extent generated by their self-trust. In this manner, trust and self-trust are core pillars in their identity as leaders and provide them with the agency to perform the style of leadership they wish to promote.

The dimension of recognising the individual as a means for building the collective becomes apparent when Kari talks about how she sees herself *leading through stars*:

(..) What I have tried to do is to lead through stars (..) Because it is a risk with this job, that I end up standing alone in the wind (..) I am a leader for 250 people and my success dwells in getting them to follow me, simply, we need to own this together. And then I have a belief that individuals in this organisation will be able to join in and pull it. These stars, - and they can be high and low in the organisation - they will be part of leading through examples (..). And it is this organism, that an organisation is, that needs to be facilitated (..) The mistake many do, is that one is managing everything alone or in that small group who is named the management team. They are like islands operating for themselves, and then the organization is here somewhere (..).

In this statement, Kari accentuates the image of herself as an unorthodox leader who leads differently. In contrast to leaders who mistakenly attempt to handle everything alone, she like Louise sees herself as a leader who works genuinely and with great concern to get the organisation

to follow her. According to her own account, trust and self-trust are what provide her with agency in her leadership in order to get her employees to follow her.

### 4.3 Trust and self-trust as capacity for going close

At this point, I will allow the voice of Tiril to blend in. Like Louise, Tiril holds decades of experience as a leader both from parliamentary positions and civilian jobs. Like both Louise and Kari, Tiril refers to trust and self-trust as fundamental aspects in how she understands her leadership. She explicitly relates the capacity of *intimacy* to trust and self-trust when she states the following about her own role as a leader:

To be a good leader, you must be so close that you have an intimacy even if you need to say uncomfortable things to people (...). I think one needs to be pretty self-assured. To be self-assured and feel that you get the right inputs in order to take the decision you need to take.

Here, the aspect of confronting critique is central. Tiril highlights her belief in self-trust (which she terms self-assurance) as a key asset for her capacity to build relationships with her employees. She believes in getting close even if it means addressing an uncomfortable issue. Regarding trust and self-trust, she is prepared to get as close as it takes.

I read this as being a highly similar account to those of Louise and Kari concerning the fostering of trust, not in the least when it implies ideas about being daring and enduring. All three leaders describe the need for tolerating discomfort in the relational encounter with their followers as being a fundamental quality in building trust through their leadership. Tiril's statement underlines how she sees trust as crucial. She accounts for it as a rescue remedy for the potential cracks that may result from interpersonal distress; she says, 'So there must be closeness, there must be intimacy and there must be trust in that intimacy, so that it also encompasses potential discomfort'.

#### 4.3.1 Deploying trust: to dare intimacy and embrace discomfort

Self-trust, expressed as self-assurance in Tiril's tale, is also depicted as a critical ingredient in Tiril's perception of how she sees herself in the role of leader. To dare the intimacy that she believes she requires to govern as a leader, as well as to assure what she defines as the required type of feedback, self-trust is a necessity. Thus, Tiril's account of how she understands her role becomes one that points to trust and self-trust as crucial in the construction of her leadership identity.

Tiril's understanding of trust and self-trust in her leadership identity as a leader who dares the uncomfortable is supported by another leader's voice, that of Peter.

Peter has something interesting to say about his belief in the value of tolerating discomfort in the role as a leader. He discusses what he sees as a foundation for trust and intimacy in his role as a leader. When Peter speaks of sorting matters out with love and clarity, I read his testimony as a parallel to Louise, Kari and Tiril's notions of the role of trust and self-trust in their identities as leaders:

This about saying things with love and at the same time be clear and speak it out loud...(.) I am not afraid of conflicts and those things that in a way.. It is not always that I have the answer but I like to... or I don't necessarily like it.. but I like to sort things out, I don't like things to be left to smoulder.

I recognise this as a depiction of the same type of intimacy as a leadership asset that Louise, Kari and Tiril also talk about; trust and self-trust in their leadership manifest through the desire to seek honesty and frank speech in confident relationships with their employees. Peter's statement and what he with his words identifies as 'saying things with love' in my understanding closely correspond to how trust and self-trust are present in the stories of Louise, Kari and Tiril.

Tiril expresses the same vision about her leadership, where she is a leader who recognises her individual employees—her 'grass root':

(..) I stand with my values (..) and one of them is to have a good feeling with the grass root (..) I believe that I a manage to see people where they are (..) A good leader is a leader who sees her employees and who takes the time to talk to both those on the level directly below, who are often middle managers or department managers, but who is also able to be there for those further down or further out in the system (..).

In depicting what she sees as the characteristics of a good leader, Tiril simultaneously presents herself as a leader who complies with those characteristics. Again, the identity aspect in her narrative is apparent when she highlights her notion about the relational intimacy with 'the grass root', clearly indicating a notion of hierarchy through which she manoeuvres as a leader. She clearly sees herself as a leader capable of working through closeness and intimacy to close the formal gap, reaching out across formal boundaries to be there for 'those further down or further

out in the system'. Thus, the aspect of self-trust in the construction of her leadership identity is vibrant in this passage, as is her notion of hierarchical layers, her own position in that structure, and how she sees trust and self-trust as related to that hierarchy and role.

In the various accounts of leadership that I have presented thus far, I find a distinct notion about trust related to relational intimacy with the individual employee. Furthermore, there exists an underlying notion of a greater organisational intimacy, enabled by the trust-driven leadership and rooted in the bilateral bonds between the leader and the employee. To build trust with the organisation as a whole, individual intimacy is portrayed as crucial. The act of daring relational nearness with the individual is depicted as something that builds trust also at an organisational level, where self-trust unfolds as an enabler for the deployment and realisation of that trust.

Thus far, all of the leaders I have introduced apply various terms to describe the same phenomenon concerning trust and self-trust as constituents of the capacity to dare the uncomfortable. To build trust in the role as a leader and thus gain legitimacy for their leadership, they depict themselves as showing off a distinct type of self-trust, confronting distress if they must to maintain trust. This elucidates another notion concerning trust and self-trust in the construction of leadership identities: to be bold in the relational intimacy is conveyed as an important asset for the leader to build trust. In this context, I understand the leaders' self-trust as the main tool that enables the daring force in pursuing relational intimacy. The legitimacy that the leaders claim in confronting this type of discomfort that is both trust-driven and trust-based, along with the capability to encompass the potential distress this generates, can be understood as founded in a particularly strong belief in self-trust. In other words, because they are leaders who believe in themselves, they can be bold, daring and courageous, and capable of undertaking the demanding tasks of emotion work and relational anguish. This aspect is present in all the stories told in this project.

Hanne, a magazine editor, depicts the asset of being courageous as a key ingredient in how she deploys trust in her organisation. She portrays her determination to challenge discontent and conflict as an act of *cleaning the cupboard*:

(..) Generally I go to people to talk to them (..) "Guys, is there any discontent here?". I invite for a conversation about it (..) When (..) I have seen that something is cooking, that something is developing into a conflict, I am like that, that I have an incredible need for the cards to be put on the table, I clean the cupboard, and we have a dialogue.

Again, the image portrayed is of a bold leader with self-trust to confront the uncomfortable as central in how she presents herself; she portrays herself as a leader who pushes for relational intimacy and deploys trust to foster more trust through what is described as honesty, openness and frankness. This depiction of the courageous leader seems to be a parallel in the tales presented up to this point. Moreover, in this paragraph, the identity aspect is overt; with 'I am like that', Hanne sets forth a very distinct identity reference concerning her leadership identity.

A recognition of how the leader should foster trust by daring intimacy in direct feedback is also put forth by Nico, the CEO for a national NGO association:

Actually, I would say that that this about creating such a mutual relationship of trust is pretty high up on the list, yes. That people dare to tell if there is something...that one avoids these.. that it goes a long time without people daring to give feedback and that is... that goes both ways...whether it is positive or negative..(..).

The importance of being a bold leader is accentuated in all these accounts. Building trust is described as an effort that takes boldness concerning how the leader navigates relationally. Boldness is thus a display of self-trust. Louise, Kari, Peter, Tiril, Hanne and Nico all express how they recognise the ability to foster employee intimacy as a pillar in their identity as leaders. In this dynamic, where they portray themselves as bold leaders daring the relational intimacy, trust can grow. The boldness can be seen as stemming from a strong notion about how crucial trust is in the construction of their leadership identities, as well as how they draw on a rich perception of self-trust to comply with the demanding greenhousing of trust.

#### 4.3.2 Love as a prerequisite for trust

As I interpret the leader's stories, it seems that they all circle around trust and self-trust as main concepts concerning how they themselves understand the influencing dynamics of legitimacy in their roles as leaders. Throughout their stories, this becomes apparent in many different as well as similar ways.

As part of the challenge of cultivating trust, many of the leaders talk about *love* as a distinct feature of their leadership. When Louise tells me she is always looking for something to love about her employees, she accentuates the importance of showing a compassionate attitude towards her employees. This notion about love for her employees as a cornerstone of her leadership identity is something that Louise shares with several other leaders, as well as when it implies emotion work. As Hanne the editor-in-chief says, 'You must find the gold. You have to love your

employees. And that is a really tough job'. The leaders clearly view the task of fostering trust as a demanding one, even if the degree of self-trust is depicted as high with the leader.

Carl, the head of a national emergency medicine unit, articulates his idea about the importance of love in the role as a leader in the following manner:

I always try to convey love, because I believe love and solidarity is to sides of the same light, the same source and if those that I am to lead really are to see themselves as energy of change, as capacities who can save lives, defend lives, protects lives, then they reach out far beyond their own imagined border, and you get this metamorphosis of a group that becomes a group that can manage the most incredible things, really. And it is obvious, that to be in all these situations and see people unfold in all their glory, in all their courage, in all their resilience in spite of being confronted with the most brutal happenings of life, that gives me so much courage, that gives me so much respect for people (..) that it becomes an eternal source to the flame that drives me as a leader.

Peter, the CEO of a religious NGO, expresses a similar view when he states the following:

(..) I think it is important to care about one's employees, and not in a superficial way but in a real way, where you care for both their job during daytime and the family, that you support them if difficulties.

#### 4.3.3 Trust and self-trust as active compassion

The idea expressed by Peter of the leader as a loving figure who cares extensively for his or her employees, not in a superficial but in a *real way*, represents another building block in the leadership identity constructions. Peter underlines how to foster trust, the leader must be able to demonstrate 'real love', even if it is 'a tough job'. The notion of the leader as one who is capable of performing such demanding emotion work as part of the leadership role reflects back to the idea of a leader with a distinct degree of self-trust. Thus, in this case as in the case of Louise, trust and self-trust facilitate successful emotion work.

Moreover, demonstrating a certain leadership capability through investing in the relational aspect is mentioned by another leader. Jen, a hospital CEO, refers to a practice he terms *active compassion* when he talks about his leadership and how he sees himself as a leader:



I can say that I am quite good with the relational, - I am good at seeing people, I look people in the eye, I remember names (..) so I believe that this, to motivate through letting the co-workers experience that I not only have an instrumental relation to them as co-workers but that I as a leader also have an active compassion for them, which I actually believe is very motivating here.

Peter talks about caring for his employees in a *real way*, whereas Jens phrases this aspect as concerning active compassion. Both leaders refer to how they see themselves representing a real, authentic and sincere form of caring leadership.

Hanne the chef editor sees herself caring for her employees as scanning for potential dangers as the lantern of a light house would:

Maybe that's not a very sustainable form of leading, but I feel that this is like when you have the light from the lighthouse, when it scans over the water, "where are the reefs, where are the reefs?". I have been concerned with whether people are okay, "are people okay?" That; to wish that people are doing okay, and if they are not okay, then... To wish, that people will thrive at work. If they thrive at work, I believe they perform a hundred times better.

Runar, CEO for the R&D division of one of Norway's largest food cooperatives, describes how he invests in emotion work to maintain the legitimacy of his leadership:

(..) It has a lot of power but there is also a critical take. I am not a too big fan of the term primadonnas, but there are a few primadonna factors sometimes (..) You must relate to such stuff.

When asked how he specifically relates to 'such stuff', Runar elaborates:

I am just being myself. I listen and challenge and (..) we use quite a lot of time on reaching solutions, but then we avoid rematches, and in that, I rule...(..).

Here, a notion of his personal attributes as a primary asset in the constitution of his leadership is explicit: he is just being himself. Then, he elaborates on how he sees the emotion work that follows with his leadership role:

(..) In the sense that I don't overrule unless I have to, if people can be allowed to join and develop together, then it is a lot more power, but sometimes one clearly has to overrule, though I have experienced that we and the most of the others use way too little time on let's say a mandate or the prework of something, it's just to get started, right, and then you start to work and then it becomes start and stop and frustration and misery, and then you need to spend a lot of time on repairing, so my ambition is to do the complete contrary, spend a lot of time initially and in that way save time to quickly get out on the market. It is like small ski jumps, what you do wrong in the in-run over run you can't compensate for afterwards, then you land on the take-off hill or you fall or touches with the hand, so it is very important with pre-work, and in a way assure buy-in, then we avoid rematches but maybe we with our procedure also contributes to re-battles in other places..(..).

(..) In R&D it is extremely important to work like that in order to avoid re-battles. Again – the academic environment is marked by re-battling, a lot of energy is spent on cross-working (..) – you lose your energy and muscle (..)

I ask Runar what he does specifically to navigate the process to avoid re-battles, to which he responds:

I am in a process with succeeding with what I am saying now, but we have for example meetings for leaders, then we have a presentation, - of course you have received some input first, then we try to use the group of leaders to check out what we think, build the argument and we talk a lot about greenhousing – what I say you can build on, instead of... (..) and then in the end the ambition is to make something with an increased value, and then take a decision. But then it is of course, theory and practice are not the same, so in reality you may have difficult cases where you don't make it. And if it is particularly difficult incidents I use more of my authority and is not so much coaching, but even if it's not too clear for everyone, I still direct it. Or you have to direct and instruct, - you must in a way choose style of leading after the situation and fora and tasks and such.

I challenge Runar on his point of just being himself and at the same time disclosing how he also chooses his style of leading:

(..) Yes, I absolutely feel like that, and it is...I feel that it stands over time, even if it can be challenging to be yourself too, because sometimes I also yearn to take off

sometimes but then it is all about holding back, to not be the one who in a way takes off into the wild because you have that kind of nature, - it is all about being conscious. But the only way to succeed is that people know a little of whom you are. At least in a kind of environment where people are so competent, then it is a request that you are open on some things (..).

(..) To be honest I feel like it has been going really well, but of course, with a hundred people everyone will not experience that it has gone well, but I think it has gone well.

Here, Runar displays self-trust in his strategy concerning 'just being himself', placing confidence in his own notion of what this means as well as what effect it has for the process and for his legitimacy as leader. Being himself is actually a highly deliberate tactic involving investment of efforts. In this paragraph, Runar also reveals a notable awareness of the play of power that he as a leader must handle. Furthermore, he displays how he evaluates his own success, also displaying self-trust in this matter.

As I have aimed to demonstrate thus far, the leaders' notions of trust and self-trust are strongly present in their stories. According to the leaders, trust and self-trust seem to be two mutual key building blocks in the construction of their leadership identity. Operating together as a binary in the identity construct, the dimensions of trust and self-trust are bearing narrative pillars in the leader's stories.

#### 4.4 Trust and self-trust in leadership as game mastering

In the story of Ola, leader of a government safety control authority, more nuances are added to the palette of trust and self-trust in the construction of leadership identity.

As with Louise, I am presented with a leader who ties the role of trust strongly to his identity as a leader. Again as with Louise, Ola expresses how he deliberately manoeuvres in different contexts to maintain trust and legitimacy in his employee relationships, demonstrating a great concern regarding his own engagement and how he believes he is perceived as a leader. Where Louise describe herself as fostering her scientific children, Ola talks about being a facilitator in a situation he sees himself and his employees as being in one boat together:

And then I think that I need to facilitate for them (..) and perhaps contribute, facilitate, so that people can become good and master things and do a good job and be visible so that the surroundings recognizes them. So that is why I have been

thinking with my own way of leading, that I need to be really very generous with people to let them develop and people must get the opportunity to become good (..) But I have seen that people will perform more if one is a little generous (..). I see that some of the leaders are pretty navel watching, “we will become great within our bubble, but we can’t spend time on what’s outside because it goes on the cost of our own production”. Some look mostly at themselves and theirs, while I am thinking that, no way, when we have capable people they must be allowed to use time and energy on something that strengthens us in total. We are kind of in one boat together.

In this statement, Ola identifies his leadership as distinct from that of other leaders. Again, the urge to present an identity as an unorthodox leader emerges. In contrast to other leaders who tend to navel gazing, he perceives himself as a generous leader who facilitates his people showing themselves to be capable. To have his employees master things is to build the collective *gemeinschaft* (Tönnies, 1957)

Ola goes on to accentuate how he sees himself as a facilitator who is good with people. Here, he describes himself as a strong communicator and the identity aspect is apparent. Ola has extremely clear ideas about his identity and how he sees himself as a leader when he describes his characteristics:

I am good at listening and I think I am really good at reading people and am very communicative with people. And I was about to say something that perhaps doesn’t sound all good, but I am rather good at getting things like I want them, but in a way that makes the employees very happy. But that sounds very manipulating, and that is not quite what I put into it, but I believe that I am pretty good at discussing also and to get the employee to see what is the most reasonable and what will benefit both the institution and you for the best.

As part of his identity as a leader, Ola clearly recognises the manipulative aspect as a feature to his leadership in terms of gaining influence. The way I understand this, he considers himself as materialising trust in the relationship with his employees because he is able to influence them without being perceived as manipulative. Here, the aspect of self-trust transpires in his story. He conveys particularly strong trust in his own capability to manage the interface between positive influence and negative manipulation. This reveals a very careful tactic with trust based on self-trust.

#### 4.4.1 Lubricant, facilitator and game master

In his description of his identity as a leader, Ola applies rich metaphors to illustrate his style of leadership.

It is part of this, of good leading, that I need to be a lubricant, I must facilitate so that those who work here find it an attractive place to work, and through that we get our societal mission completed. And I have some power and mandate which makes me able to do quite a lot (..), to create the good place to work and get this to function. So, a lot of responsibility is resting on me as a leader. So, good leading to me is to get the employees to work well together, and that they get the job done in a good way and with pleasure.

This excerpt marks the only time during the interviews that the existence of formal power and mandate is explicitly mentioned, wherein the formal power that follows with the leadership title is recognised as something that provides the leader with legitimacy and influence. In the next paragraph, Ola makes a point of diminishing the importance of his formal mandate by accentuating the lack of hierarchy and the level of self-management in his organisation. Again, trust is mentioned:

Then it is obvious, here at this work place we have a flat structure, as I said, and I am doing what is called self-management, I mostly have highly educated people, I am dependent on them to function and do their job, I can't sit on their backs and control details at all. I have to trust that they are doing their job, and that is why I mentioned that earlier, that I need to be able to delegate responsibility to them and be sure that they are doing the job. And in a way that is framework management, to facilitate. And to me that represents good leading at this work place, that I become a kind of...a kind of game master that sits and pulls the strings, but.. I am more in the background.

I find this sequence interesting because it clearly reveals how Ola highlights trust as the core essence in his identity as a leader, richly depicted by the use of metaphors, as well as showing how self-trust plays into his image of himself as a leader: He understands himself as an almighty game master reigning in the background, one that pulls the strings to get his way but who still manages to keep his employees happy. The fact that he chooses the term 'game maker' to describe himself implies a strong notion about self-trust in his role as a leader; he perceives himself as a leader executing supreme power, managing things according to his will, yet this happens almost without his employees noticing they are being led.

#### 4.4.2 Informal intermissions

The manifestation of trust and self-trust in his construction of a leadership identity becomes particularly overt when Ola talks about a table in the corridor of his office building:

We have a table and a few chairs out in the corridor, and sometimes I have thought, now what the heck, let's get rid of it, because there it can occur intermissions. But then I have observed (...) that this is such an important spot for time-outs to discuss professional subjects, - there they discuss professional issues. This is out in the corridor and of course it can suddenly glide over into something else. But there is a possibility to air ideas totally informally, it is an unofficial arena where you can hear about things and where you can give some signals and where you can hear how the ambience is before you need to bring that up in a formal setting. It gets informal, where I too can... where what I say is interpreted informally, and then you may hear someone responding with negativity regarding something, yes, okay, maybe that was a point. This; to have an informal arena where you can bring up topics without it necessarily ending up on the table at the union's representant... But this I think is quite essential because it has to do with the social, the creation of relations, that the boss is not so distanced and self-serious (...).

Like Louise, Ola depicts himself as building a great part of his leadership legitimacy through informal interactions. With his employees, Ola portrays himself as a leader who manoeuvres with great care in what he identifies as an informal zone of trust. Ola talks about the table in the corridor as a zone of trust that builds his legitimacy as a leader.

According to his story, the table represents an informal spot that makes it possible for Ola to foster relations with his employees in a setting where he too can show his doubt, as well as where he can pick up people's responses to ideas and validate considerations before formalising a decision as the leader. This gives him an opportunity to socialise with his employees and also tap into their concerns and opinions in casually without stressing his authority; on the contrary, he is downplaying it.

Furthermore, the above quotation is interesting in regard to Ola's depiction of himself as a boss who is 'not so distanced and self-serious'. Thus, the informal table in the corridor can be understood as a deliberately chosen scene that supports his aspiration to play out an identity as an amicable and easy-going leader.

Whereas the table anecdote presents Ola as a leader who encourages informal methods for building intimacy with employees, it is also a strong statement concerning Ola's self-trust as a leader. In that particular spot, a less self-trusting leader could have decided to have the table removed, thereby controlling the amount of informal exchange and gossip. Ola could have ruled according to efficiency norms, promoting efficient work hours and a reduced risk of futile breaks, potentially delaying work and losing money and time. Instead, he portrays the informal intermission spot as a vital arena for stating what his leadership is all about: self-trust deployed in relational competency and trust-based intimacy. Again, he demonstrates how he does not need to lean on institutionalised hierarchy to manifest his legitimacy as a leader, allowing for the informal interaction at the table to be a condensed image of how he as a leader sees himself facilitating trust with self-trust.

#### 4.4.3 A tribe where one's voice must be heard

Thus far, I have shown how trust and self-trust surface as multifaceted phenomena in the leaders' stories about their leadership identity.

What I have aimed to demonstrate is how the leaders believe in relational intimacy with individual employees as a means of building collective trust. The way they reason it, they see a recognition of the potential of the individual as something that empowers the cooperative. Both Louise and Ola are highly explicit about the value of this dynamic between the individual and the collective, as well as how they as leaders—highly deliberately and with great concern—believe they invest in fostering a collective level of trust through recognising employees on an individual level. The importance of the collective 'we' is stressed by the leaders in different ways. Hanne the chief editor underlines how she deliberately uses language to stress the collective aspect:

I apply an extended use of 'we-rethorics'. (..)

Lars also refers to a highly conscious construction of a 'we-feeling' through deliberate use of language:

(..)Feel safe, yes (..) But to make people feel important, then other mechanism are needed. Because it is an organisation divided in traditionally three groups, - the artistic, the technical and the administrative group. So one contest I have been concerned with from the first moment I was here...I came into an organisation I felt struggled with some challenges where it was very divided, it was about melting people together and create a 'we-feeling', so we created a vision and values (..)

Nico too accentuates how he ties his identity as a leader to the capability of paying attention to the individual employee and investing relationally as means to foster trust and leadership legitimacy:

That is important, right. If I know about someone who have done something good or, I spend a lot of time on being up to date with what is going on, I read a lot about what particular people do and contribute with and stuff like that. That you can comment positively if someone has done something (..) I spend a lot of time on giving positive feedback (..). I have trained actively to learn everyone's names (..).

(..) Many make a split in how formal they are in a role as a leader. I am probably.. I will not say that I am a friend with all those I work with, but I am pretty close in many contexts, so well, that about seeing the whole person and see what worries people, I have always been, the fact that people have difficulties at certain times in their lives...Everyone has that in some phases of their life. To know about it does that you get a good relationship of trust to those you work together with, and that I am extremely concerned with, that we can trust each other.

Steven, a fashion company founder, also describes how he places much weight on the appreciation of his employees' contributions:

(..) That everyone gets to contribute with ideas, that everyone gets listened to, that I believe is really important. That one feels included. For every little business is like a tribe, where one's voice must be heard.

(..) One should pay compliment (..). One should be good at appreciating people who are making an effort in one way or another. It could be from the tiniest little thing, to incentive arrangements. But that people feel appreciated, is important.

In this passage, it emerges that Steven observes himself as fostering trust with his employees through being an inclusive, attentive leader who appreciates the individual members of his tribe. Similar to when Louise talks about her scientific children, the tribe metaphor here refers to a certain intimacy and a notion of a strong community that Steven as a leader represents and is responsible for.

Ingeborg, a financial CEO, also underlines the importance of demonstrating confidence with individual employee relations for making her employees follow her. She too accentuates the



importance of recognising the individual as part of building the trust that fuels the will to follow. In her tale, many of the same characteristics used by the other leaders to describe their leadership reappear:

To get people to follow me (...). The qualities that are important is that I am close, and I am very concerned with people understanding why – I spend a lot of time on that. I spend a lot of time on common meetings and that people shall feel that I am close and that it is easy to talk to me (...) It must be fair, it must be decent, I don't hide information, and I am extremely concerned with being honest, that my leadership is built on being honest. And not elbows or alliances – I am much more concerned with having a direct dialogue. No hidden agendas, never hidden agendas. That is a major concern of mine (...).

(...) As a leader, I am very communicative (...) We need to take care of each other; that we dare to spell out those things (...) I spend much time on my leaders to talk about the complicated relations they have. (...) I spend much more time with my leaders on organizational development than I do on following up numbers. We work a lot to get an optimal organization, coaching them and get them to grow and contribute where they are (...) That I never gets ignorant about seeing my organization (...) And if someone is having a sad time; that I in a way show that I see that. That is something I am concerned with (...) I don't act like a counselor. But that I know each one, I know their names, I try to be good at highlighting single performances with employees, be good at seeing them. I believe that seeing the employees is the most important (...).

This paragraph features numerous and explicit notions of her identity as a leader. Like Louise, Ingeborg explicitly expresses her identity as a leader who emphasises openness, transparency, inclusion, compassion, fairness, decency and no hidden agendas. She describes herself as a leader who can never allow herself to be ignorant about observing her organisation. In this depiction dwells a particularly strong notion of self-trust as she sees herself as having the capacity to fulfil all these criteria in her leadership. This capacity, founded on trust and self-trust, provides her with a distinct agency in her leadership.

The criteria depicted by Ingeborg are also aligned with the food industry director Runar's description of how he sees himself as a leader:

I believe it is a lot of honesty and safety. Honesty and safety, and that of being clear about direction, and then it is a lot of other things you must be capable of doing, you must take the crucial conversations, and you are to do all that technical, but the first things are the really important ones. And then it is coaching, that is, to make others become good (..) Because the role is perhaps only to be a midwife then, to challenge them or give an eye opener (..).

Like the rest of his peers, Carl expresses a very strong idea about the importance of being a leader who recognises his employees on an individual level. Furthermore, his description of the qualities that he believes characterise his leadership bears numerous references to his identity construct:

(..) I have an enormous responsibility to give young people just that feeling of being seen. When you really care about seeing who the individual is, and what wings the individual have, and give air under those wings, then you get a phenomenal group of people to work with, but not only that, you are also contributing to that aesthetic that lies in seeing people's soul, see what they are capable of, if they get the conditions for growth that all people deserve. And I believe that my responsibility is to provide people with the conditions for growth that they need and deserve (..).

(..) To see the people, and to give space for the individual, (..) be so curious that you figure out who each one is, that you are so attentive that you will sit with that tiny seashell to your ear and try and listen to the murmur from the invisible ones (..) It is incredibly easy to crush it, for example diminish people in the public sphere, make an inconsiderate comment or try and be funny on the cost of other people, a young professional, a doctor on internship, an ambulance worker, a public health worker, a trainee, a patient, a reliant – all the time I am thinking that I am responsible for people, not for employees (..) This, to lead, is first and foremost about seeing people with love with a loving eye, with a curious eye for the aesthetic that lies in us all having an inherit solidarity, that often displays the strongest when it looks the darkest.

Moreover, in this paragraph, notions of hierarchy as something that must be downplayed seep through when Carl mentions the different groups of people he encounters in his job. He too emphasises the aspect of love, putting forth the effort he invests in deploying a leader's love into his organisation.

Jonas, an art academy leader, aligns with the perspective set forth by Carl when he talks about the power dynamics he observes in his role as a leader. In his statement he conveys a highly distinct awareness of how he sees his own identity and role as a leader in a power perspective. Furthermore, he joins the testimonials from the other leaders concerning the importance of seeing his employees. He stresses the significance of how he as a leader must make sure that he can make trust materialise in his leadership to gain legitimacy. He also highlights trust as something that serves his leadership with agency:

(..) At the moment you step into a role as a leader, you also step into a situation where you create powerlessness with someone else, per se, you can never avoid it (..) you should be conscious about what's happening when you exercise power and conscious about the purpose of it and what happens (..) But at the moment you step in and take the role as the leader, then you have to have trust (..) I need to get out as much fundamental trust as possible (..).

#### 4.5 The power of presence in leadership identity constructions

In Charlotte's story, I again find that trust and self-trust are at the core of how she presents her identity as a leader. In addition, I find that the idea of downplaying power, together with a notion about presence, is a central element in how she sees herself building legitimacy as leader.

Charlotte describes how she, like the others, is highly concerned with notions of hierarchy in her role as a leader. She talks about how she intends to foster both collective and individual trust by refraining from acting with formal authority. She states how she is particularly careful to not be perceived as an authoritarian. I understand Charlotte's story as another example of how downplaying authority is depicted as the optimal tactic for facilitating trust in leadership:

(..) And I think that when one has the authority, that is the best way, not to use the formal authority but to get others with you (..) And it probably also comes easier to me than to use the formal influence. It is not so often that one has to, luckily, but that one must also be able to do, as a leader (..).

(..) Then the role as leader has really many other aspects, but the presence one needs to have in order to make that happen, that is totally defining for me (..) And that is probably what I think that I am good at, and maybe better than others (..).

This is yet another story about a leader who defines herself as one who manages relational intimacy with her employees. Again, there is a notion about representing a leadership that is different from that of other leaders. Charlotte here explicitly displays a belief that applying formal authority is counterproductive when it comes to fostering legitimacy in her role as a leader.

She recognises that acting with authority is something a leader must be able to do but describes it as something she praises herself as lucky not to have to do very often. In other words, to foster trust, Charlotte sees it as best to avoid a display of her formal authority; she does not believe that a formal use of authority will foster trust with her employees. Instead she sees herself mobilising other mechanisms in the organisation to make her employees follow her, trust her and ‘get them with’ her. Showing presence without displaying formal authority is her prescription.

Charlotte clearly trusts her ability to mobilise these other mechanisms that can operate in the place of formal authority. By describing how she under-communicates her formal power and instead seeking how to practice influence in other ways, she presents herself as a leader who embeds a great deal of trust in building her legitimacy through these other means. In that way, she exhibits a great belief in her self-trust. I understand this as a very distinct demonstration of how both self-trust and trust appear as vital elements in her leadership identity construction.

#### 4.5.1 Orchestrating people

Where the other leaders apply metaphors such as scientific mother, midwife, game master, lubricant for trust and facilitator, Charlotte adds to the use of metaphors relating to the leader as a supreme yet nonhierarchical leader. She identifies her leadership as being about orchestrating people to make their talents blossom:

(..) And I think that to a large extent, leading is like orchestrating something, right, both in finding – if you think of yourself as a conductor (..) to find the people who can take on the roles, contribute to them playing out their talents (..) I could not have been doing their job, but I can make sure that they get into a role in a position where they get the possibility to act out, and that they can test out different roles, and maybe even more important than to find the role for each individual is it to find how people can co-operate with each other, and that is more complex and less precise and I think about that all the time, and I also think that it is those two things, that of experiencing meaning and that of explaining meaning and let others experience meaning with me, and that of finding those people and pull them into the roles that I want them to come

into in order to really obtain flow both for themselves and in co-operation with others, that is probably what I think of as the most important I can contribute with.

Here, Charlotte accounts for the same ideas as the other leaders have put forth when she accentuates the value of recognising the individual employee. What she describes her employees and how she through her leadership orchestrates their blossoming, it aligns with the stories we have previously heard from Louise, Carl, Nico, Ingeborg and Runar.

When she refers to the aspect of meaning and how vital that facet is for her in her leadership, she points overtly to the fact that providing her employees with a perception of meaningfulness is an aspect of building her own identity and legitimacy as a leader.

#### 4.5.2 Far away from command and control

Nico shares a similar perspective to Charlotte regarding the role that the leader plays in orchestrating human resources to gain legitimacy. Nico describes his mission as a leader as a creator of a thriving work environment, wherein he sees himself more as a coach than a hierarchical leader:

I believe it is to create an environment where everyone is allowed to contribute with the competency they have, where you create a combination of creativity and a good work environment, the basis (..) It has come to this now, that in most places people work really a lot, and that they are thriving and feel like going to work, that they are getting the best out in themselves is in a way... really, it is much more like a coaching role than a hierarchic.. I am probably as far away from a command and control form of leading as possible. I have really never been much concerned with hierarchies. I am concerned with those who have professional competencies, and of course, those who show interest in contributing are also getting room for contributions, independent on where they are found.

Here, Nico describes how he understands his identity as a leader as more like a coach than a leader with formal authority; the notion of downplaying the formal leadership mandate is declared as vital in this leader's strategy to build legitimacy.

Together, the stories we have heard represent highly similar beliefs of how mindfully downplaying hierarchy and authority is viewed as the most sustainable strategy for building trust.

The strong belief that a leader best builds trust by bypassing the formal hierarchy and downplaying authority to gain legitimacy is also the tale of a very self-confident leader. Thus, trust and self-trust again unfold as building bricks in the leadership identity construction.

#### 4.5.3 A lot of practicing and hullabaloo

As shown in Charlotte's depiction below, her trust project in orchestrating the collective where everyone's talent is boosted as a foundation for trust can be a tedious task:

I have been talking about, that it is a big orchestra, but there are only a few performances and the rest of the time it is a lot of practicing and hullabaloo, and it is a lot of noise and not everybody knows they are in an orchestra or that the others can hear them, so it is never any total harmony as that term implies to me, but it could be I am misunderstanding, but it is clear that when I look back and think; now I have been the director for two and a half year and look at what we have achieved, that feeling I can have and it can be an immense uplift, but it is never clean or a glossy die-cut, there are always a lot of shadows and cuts and it never stops being exciting.

The orchestra metaphor clearly points towards the ambivalent dynamics that Charlotte identifies with as a leader. Orchestrating talents and recognising everyone's contribution are portrayed as a demanding project. According to her account, she has replaced the use of formal authority with investment in individual employee intimacy. This is how she sees herself building trust and legitimacy in her role as a leader. Because she is a leader with self-trust, she has the capacity to manage what she describes as a leadership style different from that of other leaders. Charlotte describes how she sees the trust investment as worthwhile; the return of investment on trust that she believes she gains in her leadership triumphs over the hullabaloo.

#### 4.6 Trust and self-trust as instruments for keeping control

According to Alex's own depiction, he is a leader who manoeuvres highly deliberately by hierarchical means to foster trust with his employees and build his leadership legitimacy. He reveals a resilient notion about the importance of recognising hierarchical dynamics to accomplish his leadership ideals. He portrays trust and self-trust as something he deliberately deploys as a tool for organising and keeping control. I find his testimony to be strikingly explicit in terms of the great paradox that escorts the story of his leadership experience, addressing his own ambivalence to his leadership project concerning hierarchy and legitimacy in the role as leader.

The references to identity markers are numerous in Alex' story. When he talks about his life as a leader, there are many parallels to the previous leaders' stories related to how trust and self-trust seem to be crucial elements in the construction of his leadership identity.

I established a very flat structure very quickly, and that is my type. I am of course a very... I know that I have this authoritarian inside of me, and the will to instruct. All details are important, and I must often struggle a bit to let go and such, but that to perhaps get everybody on board, that to talk with.... For example, I experienced that the cleaning personnel who has the lowest status in our organization, had almost never been addressed by the former boss of the institution. (..) And I begun very early to have lunch with them, totally with intention, and to talk with them when others were watching, and set a standard, that this was new way at the nursing home, get rid of the layered hierarchy that had been built up.

This sequence elucidates how Alex sees himself as a leader who alters existing hierarchical structures to gain trust and legitimacy as a leader. His story is yet another in this project where I observe a leader who opposes leading by what he portrays as the traditional hierarchy, and instead focuses on relational investments with his employees. Moreover, his statement of being a leader who challenges established ideas about leadership hierarchies points to self-trust as a corner pillar in his identity as a leader, and correlates to how the other leaders present their leadership as representing something different. Furthermore, trust and self-trust manifest as fundamental pillars in Alex's narrative about his leadership identity construction.

The identity aspect is overt when Alex depicts his life as a leader and shows that he is highly alert concerning his own position and 'the kind of type' that he thinks he is; he is the type of leader who considers it critical to maintain leadership legitimacy by demonstrating trust and self-trust. He repeatedly refers to how he deliberately works to establish his legitimacy as a leader by challenging ideas about distance, influence and hierarchy in the organisation:

This about role models... (..). I am of the old school that prefer to be the first here in the morning and the last one to go home, without it leading to any pressure on my middle managers to follow the same pattern (..). If I am to be at a meeting at nine o'clock in the morning somewhere, I always pop by the office first. I might come at seven just to lock up the door and turn on the light, and then I am perhaps not coming back until seven hours later, but there I have been really aware. And when people talk about presence and visibility, that is something all leaders talk about, then that

is one of my tricks, I always take a round in the morning, up and see and say hello, I come at different times so I see the night shifters, if I am not there as early, then I meet the day shifters, often it goes quickly because everyone is busy with theirs, one round in the middle of the day and one round before I go home. Always, no matter what time it is. And there I feel, that people tell me where I have been previously, that this about visibility they have really felt. I am a master at getting totally disconnected and space out and get distracted (..) but still I am rated as visible.

Throughout his tale, Alex demonstrates how he believes in the importance of his physical presence and interaction with employees as tools for building legitimacy in his leadership. Here, his depiction is equivalent to Charlotte's when she talks about the defining presence in her leadership. At the same time, the strategic facet related to showing physical attendance is overt in his story when he explicitly ponders the identity aspect, questioning his own motivation:

(..) I remember that at my first Christmas party, I was very aware of dancing with the oldest women, - I don't know if that was instinctively or intentionally, it was an overlap, and I always wonder about that, why I do things, if it is simply smartness and slickness, or if it is more like emotional (..).

Another incident occurs when Alex reflects on his identity as a leader, describing how he specifically sees himself engaging with the role on a conceptual level:

But I think that I very quickly, without glorifying myself, that I have always been searching for justice, and in many ways the anti-authoritarian, but then I see those driving forces in me, I really want to contribute with ideas and get things in my way, I never quite get that.... To where does the leader go? Does he go in front or by the side, or is he pulling people or does he go behind and push? I never quite get the grip of it, but I believe I had a really good effect on the nursing home, that people got on board, and that I would stand with the smokers and those who had the lowest position. I really quickly became a buddy and one you could come to and talk to. I didn't appear dangerous to talk to, and then I also got immensely much information about how the organization worked and about what did not work, and I had seen that previously as well, that if they are not on board, it does not work if they aren't.

In this passage, it becomes clear that Alex has a meta-perspective on his own leadership and how he manoeuvres as a strategic leader.



#### 4.6.1 A lovely blend

Alex began by stating that he has established a flat structure in his organisation. In this paragraph, when he reflects on his superior role and responsibility as a leader, he nonetheless describes how he is highly aware of his supreme position and his own performance in a hierarchy where some have low ranks. He accounts for how he makes deliberate use of his position to manifest and deploy trust, acting with self-trust in his leadership. He reveals great concern with being a tactical leader when he portrays how he works to foster trust with his employees across hierarchy:

Yes, when I first came here I heard that there was a maintenance manager who was bloody difficult. And it wasn't difficult at all! It was an easy thing, he just needed to be heard and seen a little. When I make changes to the structure, instead of just having leaders in on the meeting for leaders, then I take in all those who represent a domain, and they get the same representation in that leader's meeting as the leaders. That means, those who are responsible for cleaning, occupational therapists, culture, physiotherapy, the doctors, and that I believe is important in such organizations like ours that are so small, you must bring in those who also lead their own profession. And then a lot is done. That maintenance manager, he almost had tears in his eyes and said, it is the first time in thirty years that I have been allowed to join a leader's meeting! He was a very authoritarian, powerful guy who performed a lot of power even if he was a maintenance manager and defined his work hours and domains, but as soon as he joined in on the leader's meeting, then the day after I could say that now we are going to have a great Christmas tree, now you must put up the Christmas lights, or now you have to get out to help the farmer make holes for the sheep's fence and it must happen now, not on Monday, now, but because he in a way had been seen and because I understood his domains of responsibility and because I understood that he had domains that no one else had the chance to take, technical stuff related to fire protection technical solutions, I had to show him that I understood that. So, it is such a lovely blend of understanding other people's domains of responsibility, understand their profession, but that they in a way are in... Anyway, the effect was superb. Suddenly the maintenance manager was Mr Nice Guy, and also perceived as that by the others.

Here, Alex describes specifically how he sees himself as a leader who works on a strategic micro level to bond with individuals among the employees to gain trust, and thus, to build trust with the larger employee community. Opposing traditional hierarchical boundaries is viewed as a crucial tactic in this. Thus, Alex displays a great self-belief in his own capability to manage beyond the

established norms and still maintain legitimacy. Again, as in previous stories, the tactic of downplaying formal authority as a method of establishing legitimacy, demonstrating self-trust and building trust is distinct.

In Alex's story, much circles around the management of his identity as a leader. When I ask him about what he believes his strengths are as a leader, he answers:

Engagement! (..) I notice I get a little touchy; I'd rather not be perceived as a clown, but rather that it is deep engagement and real sincerity that drives me. And I believe that people perceive me not really as an entertainer, but I am very loose concerning my co-workers, no matter who it is, I try to be very loose. It's my niche, that engagement of mine, and many have asked me about it, "could you have been other places"? (..) Sometimes I think that I have the answer to a couple of things, so then it is simply like that, that I want power to carry through with it (..).

So, that about leading is quite like – there is no doubt that leaders are a gang of narcissist too, you do have the biggest egos among leaders, and that I find a little embarrassing, and it is not only coquetry, I find it a little not so okay, so I struggle a little with... But.. I have deliberately sought power to be able to drive through engagement, about that I am not in doubt.

This paragraph shows that there is a great deal of identity work going on in Alex story. He describes how he struggles with aspects of narcissism, the sense of his ego and his lust for power. Simultaneously, he recognises these facets as a part of the role he has actively sought. The way he reflects upon his practice, he portrays clear ambivalence to his role but also communicates a strong kind of self-trust; he admits to the ambivalence but is still dedicated to his engagement.

#### 4.6.2 Identity contradictions

In a passage in which Alex and I discuss personal strengths and virtues in his leadership, Alex makes explicit the contradictions he experiences in his role as a leader concerning his core identity values. His identity work as a leader is once more explicit. As with the other leaders, honesty is a core idea:

I am very concerned with justice. And honesty. That perhaps is the most difficult as a leader – to be totally honest all the time. But at the same time, you care for those around you, so it is obvious that you are not honest, you spare people, you are careful with people, you vary the push (..) And concerning that I have had a lot of bad role models... people who pull the wool over one's eye... I am a kind of guy that would

like to problematize things. But I think that good leadership is about complete honesty (..).

The way I interpret Alex here, he is displaying a highly explicit notion about what it means to him to be a leader. He identifies himself with an ideal about complete honesty, a notion he shares with the other stories presented in this project. In addition, he reveals experience with value contradictions. He portrays himself as concerned with 'varying the push' to spare people and to show consideration; he also wants to problematise things. At the same time, he also seeks complete honesty and justice. The sum of these aspirations clearly represents a demanding number of concerns. Again, the identity dimension in his story about his leadership is explicit and very strong. He is particularly clear on the conflicting aspect he sees concerning his identity as a leader. He questions the legitimacy of the leader as an institutionalised role and his own representation of that institution:

It must have meaning, that which I am doing. Engagement is very much connected to meaning. It must be meaningful. It must be something that is important, and preferably for the community (..) But the construction I find really stupid. Can one lead everything, that is? Can one really lead anything? Can one jump from one place to another that is diametrically different? Sometimes in organizational life it is embarrassing – one can be a leader in big unions, and then just jump over to the employer's side. Is that possible? What is this? Is it just a roleplay?

This passage illustrates how Alex clearly recognises the leadership role as something that is actively created and constructed, where legitimacy is at stake all the time and something that can be questioned. The validity as a leader is not at all given. On the one hand, he finds the construct stupid, whereas on the other hand, because of his ability to engage with the role, the meaning aspect is fulfilled.

Again I find a paradox. Alex does not believe in leadership as a construct per se, yet he believes fully in his own leadership construction project. He expresses a great belief in his mandate as a leader as well as utters a strong sense of self-trust in his skills to accomplish that mandate. While he is fully aware that the position as a leader is an institutionalised and constructed role, he is also highly mindful about how he manages that position, personalising it, marking ownership to it, and placing much effort into how he works with the construct to make it seem authentic and gain legitimacy.

### 4.6.3 A complex interface

As a construction worker of trust in this context, my reading is that Alex accounts for trust as his most critical building material to gain legitimacy. Trust is derived from honesty and justice, from opposing and altering established hierarchies. Alex articulates a great trust in his project, where he communicates a profound self-trust in his ability to manage his leadership as an unorthodox kind.

However, he keeps questioning his own role, and throughout his tale he demonstrates an ambivalent idea about his legitimacy. This doubt is particularly highlighted in a passage where he refers to the process of acquiring rabbits for therapeutic means on behalf of a nursing home. Here, the conflict he sees between leadership as a concept and his own identity and rightfulness as a leader transpires:

But in our business, it is always like this, that if you say that you will have rabbits... If I had said in front of a hundred employees at a nursing home, that “what do you say, should we have rabbits”?, then you can swear that the first that comes to the surface is, “who shall take care of them, who will feed them, how are we going to manage that”? It is always problem-focused. It is very seldom, if you ask openly, that you get a “wow, imagine those wonderful encounters and imagine the tactile stimuli and imagine the ones with dementia who sit with these in their lap, and this we have read a lot of research about, and this works!” It is very seldom like that. Then you shall persuade people to do something, which is professionally the right thing. This I have been giving a lot of thinking: Should you use a lot of pedagogy and a lot of... energy on it, or should you just use raw power? I use such a lovely blend. “The leadership has decided”.

Here, Alex openly expresses the incongruence lingering in his identity project as a leader; his leadership is a result of balancing between a very clear political ideology and that which he sees as reality. Reality and ideology do not always fit, and when the mismatch becomes too demanding, Alex distances himself from the leadership project as a personal undertaking, and instead refers to institutionalised ‘leadership’.

Towards the end of our conversation, Alex returns to contemplative thoughts on how he sees his role as a leader, in which he reveals a great apprehension regarding how he is perceived, and thus, again expresses how his leadership identity construction is at constant work:

(..) But I am very concerned with how I am being perceived. I might be less concerned with how I am perceived now, than before. But I am less concerned that everyone should think that I am the world's coolest now than before. And this about having so close chemistry with people you lead, is not necessarily... You still lead and they do their job, they can perform their job totally brilliant even if... In the beginning, I misunderstood and believed I needed chemistry with everybody. But you do not get your job done if you are not fair. If you are disliked then you do not get your job done, but you don't need to be loved, you don't need that.

I read this paragraph as an underpinning of how Alex is concerned with his identity as a leader, and how his concern links back to trust and self-trust. Alex's identity as a leader is constituted by what he describes as a complex interface, where many potentially conflicting notions about his legitimacy as a leader reign. According to Alex's story, when it comes to mistakes, misunderstandings and disputes, margins are clearly experienced as a fluctuant landscape. As Alex depicts his navigation in this landscape, he outlines how a prosperous mastering of this complex interface demands a constant greenhousing of trust, driven by his self-trust.

#### 4.7 Trust and self-trust as built-in method

In his opening passage, Lars displays how a notion of self-trust is the foundation for him in his leadership. From the onset of the story about his life as leader, self-trust is a bearing point.

(..) I definitely had the administrative and organizational part and leadership and experience in all ways, but then I did not have the artistic side of that, which is really the most important task for a theatre boss, so there I have had to use other strategies to fill that role and learn on my own along the way (..).

Lars elaborates on how he as a leader is dependent upon trust, and how 'solid trust' as a 'built-in method' is a core asset in how he is practicing as a leader:

But I need to have trust, one needs to have solid trust. Experience of course plays a part, - "it has worked before" (..) That you believe in the project, after many conversations through which you trust that the project will turn out good, both artistically and sales wise (..) So, that faith, to trust that you yourself know more about this than the others, hopefully it turns out like that. (..) So that is that, and then we moderate. So, it is a built-in-method to it, then.

In this quotation, Lars again identifies self-trust as a critical capability in his role as a leader. He accounts for his self-trust as a tool for generating collective trust with employees. His reference to the 'built-in method' also points to a very strong notion about a certain kind of trust-based ecology at work in his organisation.

In our conversation, Lars tells about one particular episode, which he depicts as a defining moment both in his life and in his career as a leader. I find that this episode illustrates Lars' faith in his self-trust, and how that self-trust is held up as a key ingredient in his leadership identity:

The event that I almost feel defined me as a human being and as a leader(..) It was a turning point in life (..). at the same time as I started (..) there were replacements in the board apart from one, while the chief of marketing and the chief of finances were new. It was like coming to a summer camp and "*now we are going to do everything allover again*", and that did not go well. To make a long story short, we ended up with 2,5 millions NOK in minus (..). It was a total crisis. "And what do we do now?" (..) Suddenly we did not have funds. And it culminated with a meeting with the ministry of culture, which is the most awkward experience I have had, in May 2005. It was on May 20<sup>th</sup>, I still remember the date. Me, the chair of the board, and the one who at that time was contracted to fix the finances - I got so scorned and felt like a little school boy that had broken windows in the old school building and now had to stand with the headmaster in her office to defend myself. But the chair of the board defended me with tooth and nail, quite amazing to think back of, that he did so. (..) But then – almost as naive as I was and am, - I am a little naive as person and I believe that is a good trait, to be a little naive. So I sat on the plane back home (..) and thought: "Now something has to happen. Something just has to happen now". Then I arrived home, then I put on my running shoes and I went for a 3 km walk. (..) So I walked to a lake and towards a camping table and hit it, like this "knock knock," twice (*Lars knocks the wooden desk in front of him*), and then I walked home and then I said to myself that "now, everything will be better" (..) After two years we had 1,6 million NOK in funds, and a good number of visitors (..).

Listening to Lars' story in the context of the other stories in this project, where he describes the shift from being scolded at the ministry's office in one moment, to mobilizing his self-trust and envisioning a future success the next, points to the experience of trust and self-trust as vital for his leadership identity.

#### 4.7.1 First and foremost a co-worker

In the following paragraph, Lars depicts how he sees himself not first and foremost as a leader but as a member of a collective. The co-worker identity is held up as the most critical role, which really infuses his legitimacy in the organisation:

(..) And that is a fundamental view of mine today, in being in a role as a leader, that one is also – one is first and foremost a co-worker, it is a collective, that is an essential basis (..).

Again, there is a clear parallel to the other stories in this project. Lars also talks about how he downplays his authority and promotes himself as ‘first and foremost a co-worker’ to build trust and gain legitimacy with his employees.

Although Lars highlights how he is first and foremost a co-worker, he also conveys a clear idea about his personal attributes being unique in his industry, which makes his leadership be perceived as legitimate:

(..) So it is something about – what do others see in me as a leader? (..) And well, I think that if it is a quality I have then it has got something to do with something personal, something about personality in some sense, - I believe I am very sociable and easy going and a little like diplomatic and calm, and I in no way threaten nobody’s position, at least not in this industry. And that I believe is perceived as very positive, it is a distinct quality that I have thought that I am the only one to have, among my colleagues.

What surfaces here is the notion about the leader’s personal qualities as defining for the perceived legitimacy of his leadership. Here, the aspect of self-trust is explicit in what Lars sees as a core component in his leadership identity.

#### 4.7.2 Locus of control

Lars describes how trust and a certain form of stubbornness are essential ingredients in what motivates him to be a leader. I understand this stubbornness as self-trust that drives the perseverance:

We are often exposed to critics (..) I guess the motivation is (..) probably mostly connected to the production of good pieces (..). “Why invest so much in pieces that have their stories and origins from here? Why not play Ibsen and Strindberg”? (..)

And then we have insisted on it, I have had faith in it, and I have actually been quite sure of it inside my self (..) and then I have hoped for recognition and gotten that (..).

In this passage, Lars refers to a perception that his self-trust has proven to legitimise his rightful identity as a leader. Insisting on carrying through with his ideas in spite of critique has brought him and his institution success. In this sense, Lars's notion about his self-trust and his 'in-built method' is proven to be trustworthy.

When Lars describes what it is that inspires his ideas about his leadership, much of what he says resonates strongly with what we have heard from the other leaders. Lars sees his leadership as concerning the creation of safety and justice. In a passage in which he talks about his role models for how he has shaped his own leadership style, he mentions the importance of providing people with a perception of safety:

(..) Feel safe, yes (..) Well (..) Create safety (..) and then there is one principle that is totally crucial (..) it is about responsibility, and about taking responsibility. And then be clear and concise about you taking responsibility for that which goes well, too. Taking responsibility for success, and then you take responsibility for fiasco (..) To totally place the control for everything that happens, with yourself, and that creates a safety also with the co-workers. If a mistake happens, then it is my responsibility. (..) Take responsibility for success, take responsibility for fiasco, and dare to do it.

Lars's idea about the locus of control that must characterise a leader for him or her to gain legitimacy and trust is clearly related to the idea of a leader with an identity built on a great deal of self-trust. Taking full responsibility as a leader is a project that implies courage. He has a distinct opinion about how he must act willfully to foster trust and safety with his employees. He links the idea of always taking responsibility for the creation of his identity as a leader. By depicting himself as the one bearing the main control, with his narrative he positions himself as a capable and highly distinct leader, even if he also describes himself as first and foremost a co-worker.

## Concluding notes

If stories are portals to the creation of meaningful experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006), then the stories presented here can be viewed as portal to understand how leaders create



meaningfulness in their leadership lifeworld. The analysis has aimed to show how certain emic phenomena in leadership language are frequently used to describe essential dimensions when leaders talk about their experiences with leadership. The predominant themes that emerge here are trust and self-trust.

Trust occurs frequently throughout the stories as an emic term used to depict experience with leadership in the leaders' lifeworld. Trust is displayed as a phenomenon that the leader deliberately intends to construct and invest effort in building. Expressions of self-trust is repeatedly conveyed as the means to accomplish this building of trust. In the leaders' stories, the two concepts are applied to depict notions of what I understand as core dimensions in the leadership identity construct being portrayed, namely ideas about hierarchy, intimacy, individuality and collectivity. The way these leaders talk about their leadership project, they convey a great belief in their own ability to manage the leadership role, even if they also express some doubt about leadership as institution and reflect about their own role and the lust for power and influence.

Throughout the analysis, I have aimed at showing how the two concepts of trust and self-trust are closely connected to each other as they occur in the leaders' stories. I understand their co-existence as a narrative dyad, by which they facilitate for leadership agency through their concurrence. I have also aimed to show how trust and self-trust are linked to ideas about formal power and hierarchy in notions about leadership identity. Based on what emerges in the analysis, it seems as downplaying formal authority by undercommunicating it and transcending traditional hierarchies are experienced as ways to accentuate and manifest leadership identity.

In the stories I have presented on leadership, trust and self-trust are described as multifaceted phenomena. In the leaders' tales, my understanding is that the occurrences of trust and self-trust are depicted not only as qualities but as *the* intrinsic qualities in leading. Repeatedly, trust and self-trust are represented as types of intangible modes of being or states of being a leader.

The leaders' tales illustrate how trust and self-trust crystallise as bearing pillars in leadership identity construction. What I observe in the accounts of the leaders is a highly deliberate deployment of trust and self-trust as leadership identity assets. To build their legitimacy as leaders, the leaders comprehensively describe how they invest in creating trust, and the currency with which they invest in this undertaking is first and foremost self-trust.

Trust and self-trust transpire in the stories of leadership identity to such an extent that if we were to take the two components out of the accounts, little substance would remain. A critical aim of this project is thus to investigate how we can understand the role that trust and self-trust play in the leadership identity constructions of contemporary leaders.

As I have been working to carve out the analytical panorama from the conveyed experiences of the leaders who contributed to this project, I have come to understand the leaders' images of themselves as pilots and pathfinders in a post-heroic leadership landscape. In their everyday topography, as pioneering vanguards, they hold up trust and self-trust as the core navigational elements and the principal midpoint for gravity for their manoeuvring.

In the following chapter, I direct my investigative curiosity towards the meaning of the conveyed ideas of trust and self-trust in the leaders' stories, as I ask the following question: What significance do the notions of trust and self-trust represent for the construction of leadership identities?

Through the tales on leadership, it has been my intent to show how trust and self-trust lie at the heart of how leaders understand themselves in their role as a leader and work on the construction of their leadership identity. Trust and self-trust emerge as multidimensional identity factors in these constructions.

Whereas self-trust of the leader is often accounted for as an intrinsic state of being, trust is accounted for as something that must be nourished and cultivated by the leader. To help with this cultivation, the leaders describe certain qualities in their leadership that are important for their experience of trust. They frequently apply metaphors to depict these qualities. As I have aimed to show, the leaders often apply metaphors when they talk about their experience with leadership and what they depict as the creation of trust. To a great extent, the use of metaphors in these stories seems to correspond with the ideas of metaphors in leadership practices conveyed by Alvesson and Spicer (2010) and Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016). The leaders understand themselves as working ants, guides, facilitators, lubricants and midwives—they talk about themselves as orchestrators, caregivers and gardeners. Moreover, they mention how they raise their scientific children and understand their leadership as tribe herding. They describe how they strive to make their employee's talents blossom and they perceive themselves as leading through stars.

These leaders do not portray themselves as distant strategists behind closed doors. They tell stories about how they go close, how they deliberately seek intimacy to bond with the individual

employee. They describe how they work on a micro level to build the macro organisation and their leadership; they exercise care for the individual employee to form the collective *gemeinschaft*. They account for how they foster passion for their mission as leaders and they see it as a prerequisite to love their employees.

In their accounts, the leaders describe how they manoeuvre carefully along notions of hierarchy and power. From their stories, the idea about the value of downplaying and under-communicating their executive authority as a means to foster trust and demonstrate self-trust seem to be a common trait. As part of this, they also share a highly conscious awareness of this downplay of power. Thus, I understand the power dimension in their leadership identity construction as strongly present because of how it is repeatedly downplayed in their stories. The point I have aimed at illustrating is how trust and self-trust are highlighted throughout the stories while display of what I understand as formal leadership power is simultaneously portrayed as less significant for their leadership identity. This is one big puzzle in my findings, and thus something I will be looking closer into in the discussion chapter, where I will depart from the emic language in the leaders' tales and look at them from an etic abstracted point of view: In a research context, how can we understand the leadership identity construction that is going on in these stories about leadership?

In sum, all the tales illuminate how trust and self-trust transpire in how the leaders present their leadership and identities as leaders. The leaders portray their experience with the leadership lifeworld from a personal angle and within a personal context. However, the language they choose to describe their understanding of their leadership project has many similarities in terms of local language categories that emerge in their stories. Representing a core substance in the analysis of the leaders' stories, this finding is what eventually led me to articulate a notion about the narrative ecology of trust and self-trust in leadership identity construction as a way of conceptualising my findings. Through engaging with the stories to discover and explore dimensions of meaning, I have encountered trust and self-trust as a constant variable in their stories. Trust seems to be a crucial feature, existing independently from the leaders' industry experience, age, gender, background and sector. Trust and self-trust as phenomena are accounted for as essential, interwoven factors in the leadership identity across the many stories.

At the onset of this thesis, I raised the following question: How can we grasp the mechanisms that nurture and foster sustainable life in a leader's environment? At this point, I will claim that concerning the quest for more insight into leaders in organisations and how leadership can be understood as a living, dynamic phenomenon in each leader's unique environment, we can benefit from examining further into the effects and implications of this idea of trust and self-trust as

crucial for post-heroic leadership, in what we might term the leader's local ecosystem. To rephrase Helena in Chekhov's play 'Uncle Vanya', from these leader's point of view as it emerges from their stories, it becomes urgent for their leadership identity to validate self-trust in themselves as well as express trust that their employees will trust them, or the life as a leader becomes impossible. In other words, their identity as leaders are closely connected to their emic depiction of the significance of trust and self-trust in their experience with leadership.

Aiming at understanding these different experiences with leadership as a socially constructed phenomenon, I find the emic – etic distinction (Pike, 1967) useful to apply because it points to how we from a social constructionist perspective can understand how language or culture is constructed (Berry, 1999) 'not as a series of miscellaneous parts, but as a working whole' (Pike, 1967, p. 41). Local knowledge conveyed via local language can provide us with keys for understanding how local people create meaning in their local lives, it can help us 'understand individuals in their daily lives, including their attitudes, motives, interests and personality' (Berry, 1999, p. 167).

Then, in relation to the construction of leadership identities, how can we understand this idea about trust and self-trust in the leaders' stories, and what implications does the local language as it emerges here have for leadership and organisations? In light of the post-heroic leadership paradigm, I see the leaders replacing the legitimacy of leadership as an institutionalised hierarchy with an ideal that concerns making leadership a personal project, wherein their influence and power as leaders is built with trust and self-trust as assets as a substitute for the use of formal power.

As a note on the post-heroic paradigm, the ideas that transpire from the leaders' accounts are corresponding to the post-heroic ideal in leadership Discourse; they depict themselves as leaders that are concerned with compassion for their employees, they highlight inclusion and participation and declare themselves as ambassadors for humanism (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). However, as noted by Sveningsson and Blom, the post-heroic attitude could also be interpreted as being more about the leaders' own self-validation of identity and comfort, than a genuine concern for the employees' wellbeing (2011). Such a perspective suggests that the post-heroic leadership language is a camouflage for something else going on.

As Fletcher (2004) and Ford (2005) have argued, leadership scholars should not be naïve with the post-heroic leadership paradigm and ignore the risk that the it could be as much an ideological

rhetoric legitimising asymmetrical power relations as is heroic language. In the next chapter, I will delve deeper into this ideological aspect of leadership language.

# Chapter 5. Trust and self-trust in leadership identity constructions

In the previous chapter, I provided a presentation and analysis of the interview data extracted as an empirical foundation for further discussion. The findings were derived from applying an interpretative analytic bracketing lens with an ethnomethodological and phenomenological approach. In this chapter, I contemplate the outlines of the findings presented in Chapter 4, and discuss their possible significance in light of existing research on leadership identity construction.

The overruling theme centres around the main research subject, targeting narrative leadership identity constructions in a post-heroic leadership context, where I approach leadership language as an asset used to fashion leadership identity. I investigate what I understand as a dyadic coexistence of trust and self-trust in the local language used in the presented stories. An important note here is that both trust and self-trust occur as emic categories in the leaders' stories. Hence, the actual occurrence of trust and self-trust in the local leadership language is not my invention or interpretation – it is there in the stories as they are told. From an etic point of view, I try to make sense of these local terms in a research setting, implying that I apply an analytic lens to both trust and self-trust in order to be able to develop an understanding of what these phenomena signify in the local leadership context they are being applied. My aim is to explore what I understand as the dyadic play of trust and self-trust can be understood to operate as an underlying potency in the leadership identity constructions. I examine how the two concepts facilitate leadership agency through the space they occupy in leadership language.

In particular, I examine four main findings related to trust and self-trust in the leaders' stories: the downplaying of hierarchy and formal power, the absence of risk, the accentuation of individuality in leadership, and metaphors for trust and self-trust playing into the narratives on leadership identity. The discussion departs from a phenomenological and ethnomethodological perspective, where I pair my interpretation of the findings with a model for leadership identity constructions. More specifically, for the purpose of this study I have applied an interpretative framework where I investigate the findings by using the leadership moment model set forth by Ladkin (2011) and an identity theory for leadership identity constructions presented by Lührmann and Eberl (2007), combined with a concept of a narrative ecology.

The aim is to elaborate upon the phenomena in the leader's stories related to trust and self-trust that were identified in the analysis in an effort to provide a broadened understanding of their possible influence on leadership identity construction. In addition, the goal is to add perspectives to the conceptualisation of leadership identity, in particular addressing the narrative proposal of leadership identities within a post-heroic leadership paradigm.

Lastly, I offer a synthesising statement to sum up the core and scope of what has been the goal of this research project.

## 5.1 A narrative ecology of trust and self-trust in leadership identity constructions.

In this chapter, based on the findings from the analysis, I show how the idea of *a narrative ecology of trust and self-trust in leadership identity constructions* gains relevance as a conceptual monitor for the discussion of the findings. This is because the findings indicate that local language about trust and self-trust play an important role in the narrative construction of contemporary leadership identities occurring in the leaders' stories. Their notions about what I understand as trust-based leadership are predominating in their accounts. Thus, the following questions emerge for investigation: How can we understand the depicted significance of trust and self-trust in the leaders' identity constructions? What roles do trust and self-trust play in the leaders' understanding of who they are and what their leadership represents? How is it possible to understand the space that the two phenomena are allocated in the leaders' narratives? What function do trust and self-trust have in the contemporary leadership identity construct? Is it possible to develop some conceptual insights about leadership identity construction in a post-heroic context based on the emic representations of leadership in the leaders' accounts?

The term 'narrative ecology' as I apply it here is adapted from Mclean and Breen (2015) and their concept of the narrative ecology of the self, used to describe 'the self as a co-construction of the individual and his or her social-cultural context via the construction and communication of stories' (Mclean & Breen, 2015, p. 386). The term 'ecology' is not a new concept as such in leadership research. It has previously been applied in leadership research contexts to describe structural and organisational aspects of what is described as sustainable leadership practices in a social reality with increasing demands for organisations to be adaptive to change (e.g., Allen, Stelzner, & Wielkiewicz, 1999; Senge, 1999). The core aspects pertaining to ecology as concept that I present in the following are thus not entirely new in a leadership context. However, to my knowledge, the adoption of a narrative context wherein leadership language is the main focus has not previously been presented.

In Louise's story, she explicitly conveys how trust and self-trust come first and foremost in her identity as a leader (p.92). Throughout Louise's tale, both trust and self-trust are accentuated as fundamental ingredients. As I have aimed to illustrate in the analysis, according to her story her leadership identity encompasses many different aspects of trust and self-trust, and thus serves to introduce the nuanced palette of trust and self-trust in the ecology of her identity narrative. Both trust and self-trust are possible to understand as bearing identity pillars in Louise's world as a leader. In her narrative, she also organises trust and self-trust in a prioritised order. Reading the other leaders' stories, in their various ways they all refer to trust and self-trust as emic terms constituting core components in their leadership identity construction. This finding is what points to the idea of a narrative ecology of trust and self-trust in leadership identity constructions as the basis for this discussion.

It should be stressed that when I use the term 'dyad' about trust and self-trust in this context, it is due to how I understand the two phenomena's concurrence in the leaders' stories: As mutually informing each other, fuelling the narrative leadership identity construct. I here apply the concept of dyad as my abstracted interpretation of how I understand the concurrence of trust and self-trust in the leaders' stories, appearing as 'two units treated as one', which is the etymological origin of the term dyad. This is not to say that trust and self-trust necessarily always must mean the same thing or operate in the same context. Rather, the term dyad as applied here is my conceptualisation of how the two terms appear in the local leadership language that is focus of investigation in this particular project. The idea of trust and self-trust as a dyad also relates to how I apply the concept of narrative ecology, where I understand trust and self-trust to be vital and mutually dependant constituents in the leaders' narrative self-construct.

My aim is to further explore what the key findings concerning trust and self-trust in leadership identity construction might mean for how we can understand contemporary leadership identity as a social phenomenon, and why these two categories appear to have such a prominent position in the leaders' stories. A key concern throughout the discussion is to demonstrate how a narrative ecology can be claimed to be at work in leadership identity constructions, and what such a concept of narrative ecology potentially means for how we can understand what is at stake in the leadership identity project.

I will proceed to look at this narrative ecology in a post-heroic context. My aspiration is to investigate how the findings from this project relate to the predominant leadership identity discourse and dominant claims within the field of leadership identity research. The in-depth discussion will build on my interpretations and understanding of the present findings, and how



these in my view correspond to existing research on the construction of leadership identity. Here, trust and self-trust as key identity components in contemporary leadership language emerge as a dominant theme.

#### 5.1.1 Leadership language in the narrative ecology of trust and self-trust

Having established the discursive approach as the main theoretical foundation for the framing of the current discussion, leadership language (Fairhurst, 2009) is a central concern for the discussion of the findings. In the following paragraphs, I discuss the role of trust and self-trust in leadership identity construction departing from the discursive outlook, where the leaders' stories are investigated as constituents of leadership identity (Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Georgakopoulou, 2002).

As demonstrated in the analysis chapter, I find that the references to trust and self-trust are strong and repeatedly recur in the stories on leadership. The occurrence is both in the form of the emic expression trust ('tillit') and the emic expression of self-trust ('selvtillit'), as well as in ways of how the leaders are talking about trust and self-trust as experienced phenomena being allocated much space in the leaders' narratives. When the leaders describe what they experience as their leadership identity, strong notions on trust and self-trust are constantly being accentuated. This is stated explicitly several times in the various stories, such as when Louise begins her story by claiming that 'trust comes first' (p.97) and Lars states that 'one needs to have solid trust' (p.134.). Moreover, from an etic interpretivist point of view, I find that trust and self-trust are present as implicit, underlying potencies in the leader' stories. Hence, for this particular project, both trust and self-trust are investigated as narrative constituents of leadership identity (Georgakopoulou, 2002).

As I have attempted to show, trust and self-trust represent crucial potencies in the leaders' understanding of themselves related to their leadership endeavours. Trust and self-trust appear as both explicit and implicit forces in the leaders' stories. Aligning with Fairhurst (2009), this means that I will investigate the use of leadership language and the particular role of trust and self-trust in that language, to understand what leadership is in the context of how the leaders describe themselves as leaders, as well as how they make use of leadership language to validate that what they say they are is actually what they are.

When I attend to what I depict as the narrative ecology of trust and self-trust in this context, it is not to undermine that both terms can encompass ambiguous meanings and bear significance in different ways in different settings, both inside and outside a narrative leadership identity context.

Likewise, the fact that I treat these two terms as a dyad in this project does not imply that I find them to constitute a universally applicable formula for leadership identity construction, nor that they must be seen as two units treated as one. When I refer to the narrative ecology of trust and self-trust in this context, it is a conceptual representation of how I as a researcher have come to understand the phenomena as depicted through the use of local leadership language in these particular stories.

However, when I present my ideas about the role of trust and self-trust as a narrative asset, it is based on the use of analytic bracketing as a method to interpret interview data, to come to grips with the emic representations of the leadership project as they emerge in the leaders' stories. The analytic bracketing perspective that aims to establish a dialogue between the little d local discursive practices and the big D discourse-in-practice have been an important tool in my manufacturing of an etic representation of what is going on in the leaders' stories. As a result of the zooming in and out between the little d's in local leadership language and the big D's in leadership Discourse, addressing heroic and post-heroic leadership Discourse, I have been able to generate a conceptual frame that provides me with a way of treating the narrative construct of leadership identity in a meaningful way for this particular project.

Hence, when I treat trust and self-trust as a narrative asset operating as a dyad in leadership identity constructions, it is because I find it meaningful and relevant as an answer to this project's research question: What are leaders really talking about, when they talk about their experience with leadership? From a social constructionist and phenomenological outlook, I am well aware that my suggestion for an answer does not imply that there exist no other relevant or meaningful answers. It simply implies that this is my interpretation, and by being specific about the methodological procedures that helped me generate that interpretation, and by offering a rich glimpse of the empirical data in the analysis chapter, I can only hope that my claims are being recognised as valid in terms of offering a new perspective in the leadership identity construction Discourse. In regard to that, to situate my findings in a wider research context I will in the following take a closer look on how trust and self-trust is represented in leadership research.

### 5.1.2 The request for a qualitative exploration of trust and self-trust in leadership research

Trust in leadership studies is an emerging research field and has attracted increasing attention during the last decade; however, it can still be said to be a highly underexplored topic, particularly within the qualitative field. Surprisingly little of the existing research on trust in social sciences is applied in leadership studies (Bryman, 2011). When it comes to trust research in general, scholars

from a range of social sciences have contributed, as well as within organisation studies (Kramer & Taylor, 1996). Furthermore, prominent scholars within political science, institutional theory, psychology, sociology and economics have gained interest in trust as a research topic (Bryman, 2011; Mishra & Mishra, 2013; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998).

Within leadership studies, LMX is the one theoretical domain that can be said to have engaged most extensively with trust. Much of the research on trust in LMX has been conducted through an extensive use of quantitative surveys to map the correlation between high quality LMX relations and trust (Maslyn & Uhl-Bien, 2001; Häkkinen, 2012). This implies an understanding of trust in leadership as first and foremost an individually trait-related and leader-centric phenomenon, a view that has been widely applied in research on trust, particularly in LMX leadership (Scandura & Pelligrini, 2008). The quantitative engagement with trust has led to a point where the frequency and correspondence of trust within an LMX context is extensively covered in the literature. In that regard, my qualitatively derived findings diverge from the quantitative, trait-based approach in the leadership research context. My findings point toward trust as first and foremost a social construct. Trust is something that can be manufactured through leadership activities. Trust-based leadership as I understand it here is not so much related to who you are as what you do, as a leader. Hence, trust-based leadership ideas differ from trait-based ideas about leadership, presented in other empirical leadership studies (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). This is highlighted by the fact that among the 20 leaders I interviewed, only Jens referred to leadership as an essential trait-related quality, when he stated that he believed that leadership cannot be taught, meaning either you are born to be a leader or you are not. However, also he paid much attention to describing how he acted in order to foster trust in his leadership in order to gain legitimacy, like learning all the employees' names so that he could greet them by their first name whenever he met one of them. This implies that even if Jens understands the capacity to perform leadership as trait-related, he described how he invested much effort in being perceived as a legitimate leader through his actions. In other words, even if the leaders believe that the ability to trust is also related to innate qualities, trust must materialize through observable leadership action. Hence, the heroic in this context is not so much about whether one is born to be a leader in terms of innate, personal qualities, but about the idea of and belief in the leader as a supreme figure. As depicted in the leaders' stories, post-heroic legitimacy demands much effort in terms of invested work from the leader's side, it does not transpire from personality but from hard work.

Compared with the quantitative outlook concerning trust, much less is known about the qualitative experience of trust in leadership contexts. Although trust literature portrays the individual characteristics associated with a leader's ability to be attributed with trustworthiness, such as

openness, social competency and loyalty (Gabarro, 1978; Butler, 1991; Elsbach, 2004), it mentions little about how these qualities are expressed, experienced and interpreted in leadership. This clearly indicates the potential for digging deeper and listening to richer stories concerning trust as a socially experienced phenomenon in the leader's lifeworld.

The lack of literature treating trust and self-trust as empirical phenomena in leadership studies indicates the potential of digging deeper to give way to new understandings about the qualitative dimensions of trust. As indicated by Flores and Solomon, trust is emotional, relational and comprised of social practice: 'Trust is first of all an attitude, a feeling, an emotion, an affect' (Flores & Solomon, 1998, p. 208). Their observation stresses the potential value in gaining more empirical knowledge about trust in a leadership context, and furthermore, supports the phenomenological and ethnomethodological approach applied in the current project.

Adding the concept of self-trust, the terrain of existing research literature with a qualitative basis appears to be even more barren, despite trust in leadership studies being an emerging research field. This investigation confirms that although trust has attracted increasing attention during the last decade, it can still be said to be a highly underexplored topic. Therefore, it seems to be an open challenge for leadership scholars to aim for more empirical knowledge about trust as a phenomenon in leadership, and to find out more about how trust is understood and made sense of in a leadership context.

In that sense, this project is a contribution to a less explored domain within leadership studies. Here, I underline that as I engage with trust and self-trust as empirical categories and not as theoretical concept, it appears more relevant to look to other empirical studies addressing leadership identity than to theoretical concepts dealing treating trust and self-trust. In an attempt to make sense of what trust and self-trust signify in the particular narrative ecology that is the object of this investigation, I depart from how trust and self-trust are depicted by the leaders through their stories, not from how trust and self-trust are conceptualised in theory. That being said, there seems to be little knowledge concerning the qualitative experience of trust in leadership contexts, and equally so with self-trust. On self-trust and leadership identity matters in leadership research, next to nothing is found originating in data from a leader's point of view. In the few cases I have found of where self-trust is mentioned in a trust context, the concept is applied mainly as a trait phenomenon without any further elaboration of its social and cultural bound.

Concerning the phenomenon of self-trust, it has been granted little attention in qualitative leadership research. In psychological research, self-trust is often operationalised as a checklist

with inborn characteristics that describe how a person will respond to particular circumstances. Self-trust is associated with personal attributes, portrayed as a psychological state and seen as an innate disposition. Furthermore, when addressed, self-trust is often referred to as or overlapping with self-esteem, self-confidence and self-efficacy as terms, with no precise definition offered. While I recognise that both self-esteem and self-confidence are applied as equivalent terms for self-trust, in this particular context I take interest in self-trust as first and foremost an empirical category emerging in stories on leadership, and as an emic phenomenon depicted in the leaders' stories, and frequently concurring with reference to trust.

When I approach self-trust as an empirical category, this aligns with Mazo (2014) and his assessment of the correspondence between generalised self-efficacy (GSE) and self-trust. He concludes that while GSE is understood as a 'stable and trait-like belief that one can manage challenging situations or tasks one is faced with', self-trust 'focuses less on performance outcomes or successes, but instead emphasizes the self-validating acceptance of one's experiences, feelings, and thoughts' (Mazo, 2014, p. ii). Mazo's finding indicates that the distinction between self-trust and the seemingly equivalent (and often applied as such) term of self-efficacy is both important and meaningful. I understand the self-validating aspect in Mazo's distinction particularly useful for this current project, because it points to a processual understanding of self-trust as a constantly emerging experience, wherein self-validation occurs through ongoing meaning-making and sensemaking. In my data, self-trust is both explicitly referred to as self-trust (*selvtillit*), but it is also referred to as having faith in one self (*stole på seg selv*), believe in one self and to be self-assured ('*ha tro på seg selv*'). In light of the particular context where these terms were applied, I understand these variations of describing self-trust as depicting the same phenomenon: self-validation as ongoing meaning-making. More specifically, this meaning-making to confirm self-validation takes place in the shape of leadership language applied to construct leadership identities.

Consequently, within a social constructionist and phenomenological framework, language and communicative interaction can be seen as a core element in self-trust seen as narrative self-validation. Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014) indicated how leaders use leadership language to persuade themselves and others of their leadership, as well as how this implies the possibility of discursive struggle. Approaching self-trust as an ongoing validation of the subjectively experienced lifeworld corresponds to how I understand self-trust to materialise as an empirical category in the leaders' stories. Hence, for this particular context, I find that Mazo's definition of self-trust corresponds with how self-trust can be understood to play a role in the leaders' stories.

My findings support an interpretation of self-trust as representing the leaders' self-validation of their leadership and their understanding of their leadership identity.

Another definition of self-trust that appears meaningful to apply to this project is the work of the psychologist Brothers, who offered a definition of self-trust as 'the representation of the self as able to cope with the world and itself' (Brothers as cited in Govier, 1993, p. 101). I understand this definition to correspond with the one offered by Mazo. In addition, I find Brother's definition useful because the representation aspect allows for a constructionist take on self-trust in a narrative setting. Self-trust in this context is also referred to as self-confidence and self-acceptance, and furthermore, it is associated with a lack of self-trust, where a lack of self-trust is seen as a learnt, perceptive submissiveness (Borgwald, 2012; Govier, 1993; Nelson, 1996).

A third conceptualisation is by the philosopher Lehrer, who defined self-trust as 'I trust myself in what I accept and prefer, and I consider myself worthy of my trust concerning what I accept and prefer' (Lehrer, 1997, p.5). The underlying trust in the fundamental ability to trust one's trust itself and the state of trust conveyed as an embodied sensation correspond to how I read the leaders' stories on trust and self-trust in this project as being associated with physical perceptions, such as when Kari talks about how she 'feels' if the people in the room are with her. (p.105) According to Lehrer, self-trust gives way to what he terms trustworthiness in one self, that one perceives oneself as capable. This idea of Lehrer corresponds to both Mazo's and Brother's definition of self-trust.

Seeing self-trust as something that can be learnt relates strongly to the social constructionist and phenomenological perspective, and hence, is a useful idea to draw upon for this project. It follows that if a lack of self-trust can be seen as learnt, it appears reasonable to claim that self-trust can also be learnt. Within a social constructionist and phenomenological framework, this signifies that self-trust can be understood as a socially and relationally founded phenomenon, corresponding to the given context.

With the relational aspect as a foundation for understanding self-trust, the connection to the Foucauldian Discourse-discursive practice approach is strong because it implies that self-trust can be understood as a discursive occurrence defined by social context, and where the discursive validation of the leader's experiences is always influenced by the Discourse dimension as an overarching master narrative. For this particular project it implies that self-trust as a learnt phenomenon in a leadership context becomes possible to investigate both in terms of Discourse and discursive practices that facilitates that learning. Self-trust as a learnt phenomenon also gives

way to a further inquiry about the potentially narcissistic aspect in leadership in general (Blom & Alvesson, 2015; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016) and in the post-heroic paradigm as it emerges in the leaders' stories, in particular: If self-trust is a prerequisite in order to live up to the post-heroic ideal, it also implies a potential contradiction in that the leader will perhaps be more motivated to focus on the confirmation of his own merits in order to excel in self-trust as an exercise, than to pay attention to the wellbeing of his employees. Consequently, if self-trust is understood as a critical curriculum in the post-heroic leadership identity, the risk for narcissism can be viewed as inbuilt in the post-heroic leadership identity project. This would imply a jeopardy for the leadership legitimacy in the post-heroic paradigm.

Approaching self-trust and trust as empirical categories frees us from the individual trait-bound meaning of the concepts and opens up a discussion about their function in leadership identity constructions. According to how the leaders talk about their experiences as leaders as well as how I have interpreted their depictions, the senses of trust and self-trust stand out as vital elements in the construction of their identity as leaders, facilitating the sense of their 'true self', thereby validating them as leaders with real legitimacy. Simultaneously, their stories contain contradictions that invite a closer inspection of how trust and self-trust are at work in their leadership identity constructions, as well as what function these two aspects have in the construct.

According to this project's data, my claim is that trust and self-trust appear as a dyadic phenomenon penetrating the leaders' stories, in such a manner that it seems plausible to approach the dyad as a core premise in how the leaders fashion their identity, rationalise around their leadership and through that, create leadership agency. The idea of the dyad emerges through the way the leaders depict how they work to materialise trust and make trust real, by deploying and demonstrating a great sense of self-trust. Hence, my interpretation is that they relate to trust and self-trust as two mutually related phenomena, as a dyad, an interrelated organism. Or to paraphrase Empson, Cleaver and Allen (2013), this study demonstrates how the dyadic relationship that develops between trust and self-trust becomes a key mechanism for narrative leadership identity construction.

What led to the conceptual declaration set forth in this thesis is that the idea of *a narrative ecology of trust and self-trust in leadership identity constructions* can apply as a conceptual monitor for the discussion of the current findings.

As a premise for the subsequent discussion of this project's core findings, I introduce in the following subsection the theoretical origin for the concept I have termed a narrative ecology of trust and self-trust in leadership identity constructions.

### 5.1.3 Narrative ecology as a conceptual monitor for leadership identity constructions

The term narrative ecology of self as I apply it here, adopted from Mclean and Breen (2015), conceptualises identity construction via personal stories emerging through a narrative ecology. In this ecology, the identity is constantly moulded by the multifaceted cosmos of stories encountered by an individual through exchanges with the surroundings in his or her social and cultural context, as well as the stories that the individual self-manufactures on the basis of these exchanges. The ecology aspect refers to the multifaceted environment in both the social and cultural complexity that an individual engages with, in which every element has its function and influences the manufacturing of identities through storytelling practices. Furthermore, the ecology concept in a development context encompasses notions, emotions and perception of time. In the individual ecosystem, these components are nested together into a meaningful whole.

Viewing the leaders' stories on leadership identity as a particular type of ecology, my claim is that trust and self-trust play a particular role in this ecology. I find the application of the term particularly meaningful in the context of this current project because it embraces the constructionist and phenomenological standpoint, allowing me to approach the stories on leadership as a phenomenon addressing leadership identity in a sociocultural context, both as a highly individual, constructed occurrence and as a communicated, identity-related, shifting and contextual phenomenon.

In adopting the term *a narrative ecology of the self*, I have replaced the expression '*the self*' from Mclean and Breen's definition with '*leadership identity construction*', and added '*trust and self-trust*' to highlight the particular type of narrative ecology that this project focuses on, namely the identity that relates to being a leader and to the sensemaking aspect of that particular identity. Thus, the adapted version of the term applied here is presented as *the narrative ecology of trust and self-trust in leadership identity constructions*. The concept addresses the idea of trust and self-trust as core components in the narrative ecology comprising leadership identity.

The idea to apply a narrative ecology as a conceptual monitor for this project draws upon several aspects of ecology as referring to an ecosystem. In organisation studies, ecology and ecosystem as metaphors have been applied since the late 1970s to describe the complexity of organised human systems, comprising the entanglement of business organisations in a global



context (Trist, 1977). Furthermore, it is used as conceptual reference for the growing awareness concerning the sustainability of organisational life, corporate responsibility and ethics in a sustainability context. The sustainability aspect often stresses how organisations cope with change (Amburgey & Rao; 1996; Baum 1999; Hansen & Christensen, 1995).

#### 5.1.4 Vital elements in a narrative ecology of leadership identity

In this project, I see certain specific aspects relating to a narrative ecology of leadership identity construction gain extra relevance. One aspect is that of viewing the identity narrative as a self-sufficient system where things add up (Hansen & Christensen, 1995) and where sustainability is concerned with maintaining the ecosystem of the narrative universe. The dots between the various narrative elements are organised to shape the leader's story into a meaningful whole. This implies the leader's creative use of language. Thus, narrative ecology refers to sustaining vigour in the leader's story of 'who I am as a leader' by drawing upon available resources in the narrative ecosystem. This conceptual idea links to the phenomenological theory set forth by Ladkin (2010) in her model of the leadership moment presented in Chapter 2, and provides a perspective for understanding how the narrative logic works, even when it appears irrational.

In a narrative ecology in a leadership identity context, the leader is seen as being able to make use of selected experiences and perceptions from different leadership moments to create a meaningful story that maintains vigour in the leadership identity in question. This understanding of leadership identity as a selection of experiences correlates to Lürhmann and Eberl (2007), who in their attempt to link the concept of leadership identity to a generic identity model suggested that eventually leaders' success in establishing and maintaining their identity equilibrium rests on how they manage to draw upon the total sum of their available identity resources. Such identity resources vary from dramaturgical and impression management competencies to the official leadership role, individual biography, social and cultural capital, prior accomplishment in leadership positions, to backing from other collaborative partners. In this context, I view leadership language as an identity resource.

Another aspect is that of the elements in an ecology being *kindred and interrelated* (Hansen & Christensen, 1995). In a narrative setting, this means that the elements in the leaders' stories stem from their lifeworlds where they represent meaningful assets. This bears relevance for the sensemaking project that the construction of a leadership identity represents. A third aspect concerns the *feedback* that any ecosystem depends on to regulate for maintaining equilibrium. In this regard, the adaption draws upon the theory of an ecology of mind by Bateson (1972). In the

human ecosystem of perception, the feedback mechanism is complex and sophisticated and is a prerequisite to maintain a meaningful equilibrium.

Furthermore, this gains relevance for how leaders can be seen to work on their leadership identity through their storytelling where they communicate with a particular purpose, as well as where they depend upon feedback from their surroundings to fashion and adapt their story to accomplish it with a purpose. A crucial part of this purpose is to confirm the desired identity. Therefore, feedback is vital as a mirroring monitor for that confirmation.

A fourth characteristic pertaining to well-functioning ecosystems is the diversity they represent (Hansen & Christensen, 1995). In a narrative leadership identity context, I translate this to a matter of diversity in terms of the many elements that comprise the leaders' narrative, as notions, emotions and perception of time, along with the possible contradictions and inconsistencies that occur in the stories as a result of the variety of elements at work, but also to the elasticity in terms of the multiple layers and nuances of identity that a narrative can encompass throughout a leader's life story. Diversity in a narrative ecology stems from the resources that leaders draw upon to create a meaningful whole of their story, corresponding to the purpose of the respective leadership moment.

#### 5.1.5 A narrative ecology as a diverse pool of identity resources

As part of the abovementioned claim set forth by Lürhmann and Eberl regarding identity equilibrium, they also argue that as with any other identity, the construction of leadership identity as an interactional construct is comprised of four phases: validation, stabilisation, crisis and perception. This aligns with other theories on leadership identity as a processual social construct (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) and implies that a constant working consensus exists, wherein the feedback aspect is crucial to validate and maintain identity stability. Hence, viewing leadership construction as a narrative ecology again gains relevance. Here, I find it relevant to assert that I consider the validation aspect in Lürhmann and Eberl's theory to point back to the previously presented definition of self-trust in this chapter. In my view, this underlines how self-trust can be understood as a validation of identity, being processual and linked to the constant negotiation of meaning in a leadership identity context.

In sum, a narrative ecology in a leadership identity context can be understood as a highly sophisticated, cybernetic information phenomenon (Bateson, 1972) that interacts in a complex fashion, wherein pieces of information, notions, ideas and perceptions comprise a narrative ecosystem with unique ecological principles. Interaction with the environment will generate

feedback that feeds into this narrative system, providing the leader with the possibility for adapting and altering his or her narrative to accomplish the purpose of the leadership moment, and thus maintain a form of stability.

Concerning the feedback aspect in a narrative ecology context as well as the interpretative lens and analytic bracketing that I have chosen for this project, I find that the term narrative ecology applied as a conceptual monitor for the discussion corresponds well to the distinction made by Holstein and Gubrium (2011) concerning the inclusion of the multitudes of the whats and hows in a leader's story as it is conveyed.

In Chapter 2, I presented the 'big D' Discourse/'little d' discursive practice perspective and the interchange between the two dimensions (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004; Holstein & Gubrium, 2011). For this project in particular, this distinction and the interplay between Discourse and discursive practice becomes relevant as the discussion of what trust and self-trust do and what it accomplishes in the leaders' stories must address the individual discursive practice. This means that the local narrative and individual sensemaking practice in the actual leadership moment, as well as the cultural Discourse dimension as an overarching master narrative, must be considered as influencing the accomplishment of leadership language as agency.

Building on Fairhurst and Putnam (2004), I apply the big D Discourse/little d discursive practice perspective to identify what is being highlighted and what is being obscured in the narrative ecology of trust and self-trust in leadership identity constructions. I ask the following questions: How is it possible to understand the importance that trust and self-trust represent, in the leader's stories? Furthermore, to rephrase Fairhurst and Putnam, how do orientations coexist and interrelate in the production and reproduction of leadership?

As I proceed, I will delve deeper into how metaphors represent a part of the narrative ecology with its pool, providing the leader with identity resources. In particular, I show interest in how metaphors can be seen to function as a type of rescue remedy in the leaders' identity construction, providing relief for the rivalling tension between the heroic and the post-heroic Discourse dimension. Here, I anticipate a problem that will emerge from the current discussion: if there is an identity crisis lingering in the tension between the heroic and post-heroic Discourse dimension, the metaphors at work in the leaders' stories can be seen as narrative identity assets that function to validate and stabilise the leader's identity, which bring relief to the ambiguity in the leader's identity project.

## 5.2 The role of metaphors in a narrative ecology of leadership identity construction

Metaphor is a means of representing one aspect of experience in terms of another, and is by no means restricted to the sort of discourse it tends to be stereotypically associated with—poetry and literary discourse. But any aspect of experience can be represented in terms of any number of metaphors, and it is the relationship between alternative metaphors that is of particular interest here, for different metaphors have different ideological attachments. (Fairclough, 2001, p.100)

Metaphors are continually used throughout the tales on leadership identity in this project. I understand these metaphors to be closely connected to the roles that trust and self-trust play in the stories. The metaphors appear as vital elements when the leaders describe their leadership identity, accentuating their perception of trust and self-trust as a key component in the construction of their identity.

Aligning with Fairclough (2001), of particular interest for this project are the particular relationships between metaphors and the context they appear in. Concerning the possible ideological attachments that the metaphors carry, in the following subsection I examine the function of metaphors and how they support the notion of a post-heroic leadership identity, while simultaneously promoting notions about the heroic leader, thereby adding to what I have indicated to be rivalling Discourses. Moreover, I discuss how the metaphors can be seen as facilitating the leadership agency that is depicted in the leaders' stories.

### 5.2.1 Metaphors as vehicles for meaning—getting around in the leadership world

I find metaphors to be vital in the leader's stories, which resonates with the classic work on metaphors by Lakoff and Johnson (2008), who claimed that metaphors are fundamental in social life as well as in how people navigate through their thoughts and actions. In thought and language, metaphors represent our tactile experience of the world. Our perception of the world and how we attribute meaning to our experiences therein are shaped by our conceptual system, where metaphors are a profound constituent. As Goatly (2005) indicated, in our contemporary world, metaphors represent an essential foundation for language and thought. Language is an evident source for understanding the conceptual system we use, which Lakoff and Johnson described as being 'to get around in the world' and to relate to others (2008, p. 3).

Because metaphorical lingo is closely connected to metaphorical concepts in what Lakoff and Johnson claim is a systematic way, we can gain insight into our understanding of the world, ourselves and others by studying metaphorical use in language. Metaphors are instruments for modelling viewpoints and they are crucial constituents in the construction of meaning. They help us organise information so that the world makes sense to us; hence, they are also fundamental elements in the construction of identity. In language, metaphors are vehicles for communication in social life, and can also be understood as vehicles for imaginative understandings, connecting one phenomenon to another. As Oberlechner and Mayer-Schönberger (2002) argued, metaphors often help us provide abstract concepts with tangible meaning.

Regarding how I have chosen to approach the occurrence of metaphors in the leaders' stories, I find it worthwhile to refer to Goatly (2002) who stresses that metaphorical deciphering relies 'on the processes and principles involved in the interplay' between 'knowledge of the language, the surrounding text, and the physical and social situation in which the text is produced' (p. 135). When we read and interpret metaphors, we do so on the basis of all relevant background knowledge about the world, and the society of our language community in which the metaphors appear, as Mills, Molla, Gale, Cross, Parker and Smith suggested, 'metaphors can also be seen as windows to look into one's actions' (Mills et al., 2017, p. 857). If it is true that 'we speak our identities' (Mishler, 1999, p.19), then metaphors are a vital part of that identity speech. As indicated by Parry (2008), investigations of metaphors have pertained mainly to the field organisational studies and not to leadership studies as such. In this particular literature within organisation studies, it is well demonstrated that metaphors can be viewed as an inbuilt aspect also in organisational life (Cornelissen et al., 2008; Grant et al., 2004; Vaara, 2005).

Consequently, metaphors can be understood as an inherent facet of leadership and leadership identity construction. In the leadership identity context, Alvesson and Spicer approached metaphors as instruments that allow for a creative exploration of 'the ambiguous phenomenon of leadership' (Alvesson & Spicer, 2010; 33). As Alvesson and Spicer demonstrated, metaphors are used both by leaders and are also about leaders. In terms of the latter and as an example, Senge suggested that leaders can be seen as designers, teachers and stewards (Senge, 1994), whereas Perrault conceptualised leadership and the leader–follower relationship as one of battleships and friendships (Perrault, 1996). Furthermore, Hatch, Kostera and Kozminski (2009) portrayed the leader as manager, artist and priest, whereas Western suggested that leaders could be understood as messiahs, therapists and controllers (Western, 2008).

In their book on metaphors in leadership, Alvesson and Spicer (2010) explored different paradigms for leadership practice, approaching leadership identities through various metaphorical categories: saints, gardeners, buddies, commanders, cyborgs and bullies. As Fairhurst (2011) indicated, it is namely because of the power that comes with the use of metaphors for leaders that makes metaphors so useful for scholars too. Metaphors not only help leaders organise and shape their world but also help researchers organise and identify meaning in the world of leadership.

The predominant literature on metaphors in leadership studies has concentrated on metaphors in leadership speech as an (figurative) act of leadership, often related to the study of leadership styles, and particularly in regard to charismatic or transformational leadership (e.g., Conger, 1991). For this particular project, I did not find much literature concerning how metaphors play a role in the context of trust and self-trust in leadership identity constructions. Based on my findings and the previous discussion of my findings, there seems to be a connection between the use of metaphors and the narrative ecology of trust and self-trust in leadership identity constructions. In that respect, this project can be understood as a contribution, and also aligns well with Oberlechner and Meyer-Schönberger (2002) when they stated that:

Rather than understanding leadership as an objective phenomenon, we suggest that the metaphors used by leaders and those who describe leadership are essential for understanding leadership itself. Metaphors are not linguistic decoration or verbal artistry; instead, metaphors are indicative of leaders' thinking and form a basis of their actions. Leadership metaphors create leadership reality by defining such important aspects as the leader's role and the context in which leadership takes place. (Oberlechner & Meyer-Schönberger, 2002, p. 7)

Concerning the role of metaphors in the leaders' stories, I am too 'interested in the open, situational and discursive sensitive nature of human subjectivity rather than depth- psychological issues contingent upon early identification' (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1168). Aligned with Fairhurst (2011), the context of this project does not only concern which metaphors are being applied but also how they are applied and in which context, as well as what functions they serve. I will draw upon a few examples from the analysis to illustrate this. When Runar refers to his role and practice as a midwife (p. 122), the midwife metaphor appears in a context in which he also talks about his belief in honesty and safety as vital for his practice to foster trust. It is about making 'others become good', which in other words means helping them excel professionally. As we already have seen, the honesty and safety aspects are present among the eight identity elements.

Runar also mentions his role as one of challenging his employees, when he refers to giving them an 'eye opener' (p.122).

The midwife example, together with Louise's depiction of herself as a scientific mother, illustrate well how the use of metaphors supports the notion about trust and self-trust that I find to be so predominant in the leaders' stories. As a metaphor, the term 'midwife' suggests a role where the level of trust is both substantial and highly critical. In a hospital context, a midwife works in a setting where the life and health of others are at risk; thus, a midwife has much responsibility, professional authority and sometimes risk. Therefore, I understand the use of the midwife metaphor as being loaded with notions of trust and self-trust.

Moreover, this metaphor implies a high level of intimacy with others. In addition, it plays along the lines of close collaboration with the other(s) where the relational capability with the capacity of establishing trust with the other is critical. The midwife oversees the situation and takes full professional responsibility for its outcome; she secures the delivery process and is a lead collaborator. As for self-trust, it is hard to imagine how anyone can take on the role of a midwife without a substantial perception of self-trust.

I see the metaphor applied here to correspond to my understanding of how self-trust bears meaning in the leader's identity project; the midwife must continuously survey the situation and take decisions. It appears to be a role for which one must be able to rely on one's capability to judge and reason. In the hospital setting, the midwife's role is associated with caregiving, compassion and very much being present in time. Thus, Runar's use of the metaphor in his story reveals a great deal about his notions concerning his role as a leader. It conveys an identity as a leader that is anything but distanced and detached from the intimate life of his organisation.

When Charlotte applies the metaphors of an orchestrator and conductor to describe her leadership identity (p. 124), this too bears a strong connotation with a kind of organisational intimacy, as well as with trust and self-trust. An orchestrator must know her orchestra; she must know each of the performers and what they are capable of with their instruments. She must trust the ability to perform together held by the collective, and she must also execute a distinct kind of self-trust; her ability to judge, evaluate and decide how to put together and lead her players is the basis for her orchestration. The metaphor speaks of a skill implying a fine-tuned sensibility for tiny details and awareness of any possible disharmony. It also resonates with the conductor reading and interpreting her scores with the expertise of a connoisseur; the leader must know where she is headed and demonstrate trust in her capability of getting the collective there.

According to my reading, Louise's reference to jazz jamming (p.103) is related to both the midwife and the orchestrator metaphors. In music, jazz jamming is a method requiring a certain level of skill and expertise. Each of the performers must have a certain knowledge of the basic rhythm, tune and progression of chords. There must be a shared sensitivity wherein everyone must listen to each other to determine what and who is next and how. This requires a certain shared intimacy in the moment of performance; to 'feel' the collective groove, people must connect with each other. For Louise to trust her scientific family to not only engage in what she terms jazz jamming but also to excel through the collective performance indicates that she has a great level of trust in her employees and their expertise. When she pursues the state of jazz jamming with her organisation as a method to achieve performance, this indicates a great level of self-trust; she is willing to let go of control for the sake of the collective experience of skilled flow. As a leader, she sees herself as carefully facilitating the others' contribution of new ideas, similar to a midwife securing the arrival of the newborn.

The leaders imagine themselves as important people for the professional and social performance of the collective. Through the metaphors they apply to describe their leadership identity, they reveal strong notions about their own identity as one building on trust and self-trust.

### 5.2.2 The leader as a liable caretaker

When the leaders apply metaphors, the recurrent images represent the leader as a liable, trustworthy caretaker. As the metaphors emerge in the stories, they are dense with notions of a great responsibility for the collective 'we', such as midwife, conductor, orchestrator, children, mother, family, sailing master (i.e., scanning for reefs) and facilitator. In addition to these nine main metaphors, two others frequently appear in Louise's story, where she keeps referring to jazz jamming and the positive spiral she experiences when her scientific family performs at its best. Jazz jamming and the positive spiral are described as collective modes that occur as a result of trust and self-trust.

All the recurring metaphors are strongly associated with the collective and shared communities, where the leader is serving the collective 'we'. As shown in the analysis, the leaders clearly rely on trust and self-trust as innate assets—these are the assets that nurture safety, concern, compassion and accountability. Even if there is no explicit mention of the leader seeing him/herself as general, commander or 'great leader', my claim is that this notion is still apparent in the way the leaders talk about their leadership as unique and resting on their individual capacity for mastering the leadership mandate. Given the fact that all the leaders represent established



organisations with rather complex structures and de facto hierarchical layers (in terms of roles, responsibilities and formal competencies), I claim that the absence of the more hierarchical metaphors for being a leader along with the constant downplaying of formal power must be understood as significant.

Different to what Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) found when they examined managerial identities and the use of metaphors, the use of metaphors in my project does not seem to convey much diversity in terms of role identification. As they depict their leadership identities, the dominating notion is one of coherence. This could be because they as leaders experience what they perceive as a more conceptual and less fragmented world than do middle-level managers and low-level participants, yet the ambivalence and the contradictions in how the leaders portray their leadership identity are numerous.

Such an understanding is aligned with Sveningsson and Alvesson's (2003) claim concerning the difference between top-level managers and low-level participants (p. 1169), yet in this project, the leaders' descriptions of how they engage with mundane operational activities in their organisations does not correspond with a reality where they experience themselves as more detached or distanced from the daily, detailed procedure of the workplace. By contrast, in their stories they accentuate how they invest in engaging in such everyday activities as a way to accentuate the collective 'we' and equality. As Lars says, he is first and foremost a co-worker (p.134). Alex talks about how he takes part in maintenance work with the maintenance manager to demonstrate how he sees his role as a facilitator and equal person (p.130). Ola seeks the informal intermission at the coffee table in the corridor (p.118).

In this project, the leaders depict themselves as closely engaged with all levels of the operational everyday life of the organisation. Charlotte underlines how she aims to push her employees forward as spokespeople on behalf of the organisation instead of taking on the role herself, something I see as a way of showing how she is everything but detached from the operational level and her subordinates; if she was distanced from the operational level, she would not have been able to assign specific spokesperson tasks to specific people. She needs to know the details of the work and the competency of her subordinates to be able to have them represent her; in other words, she needs to have trust.

The way I understand this, the investment that they depict in terms of taking part in the organisational routine world is an investment in trust. It is my understanding that self-trust is present as a requirement in this setting; a leader that experiences self-trust can engage in activities

‘below’ her formal level of leadership without jeopardising her legitimacy or status as a leader. She displays self-trust in her own reasoning for downplaying hierarchy and trusting her own legitimacy. Without this type of self-trust, it would perhaps seem more appealing for leaders to comply with established rules of order and avoid challenging hierarchy, or even make a deliberate effort to act according to hierarchy instead of against it to not jeopardise their own legitimacy as a leader.

What also emerges in the use of metaphors is a narrative ecology of trust and self-trust that constitutes leadership identities based on a certain type of intimacy between the employees and the organisation. Here, the leaders make a point of how they cross hierarchical borders and engage with the operational everyday life as a way to demonstrate leadership and gain legitimacy. This too can be understood as a way of downplaying formal authority.

### 5.2.3. Metaphors relating to authentic leadership

The metaphors occurring in the leaders’ stories accentuate the close connection with the idea of authentic leadership that the leaders communicate. As Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, and Dickens demonstrated in their review on authentic leadership research (2011), definitions on authentic leadership focus on characteristics that are strongly affiliated with how the leaders in this project depict their leadership practices and the metaphors they apply to convey this.

The leaders express a high degree of sensitivity concerning the safety and well-being of their employees; this becomes visible when they talk about how they see themselves as mothers providing for their family, how they operate as sailing masters scanning for reefs and as midwives fostering the development of their children. They express great concern for how their own practice as leaders makes a difference in this respect. They convey a strong notion about the value of being reliable and trustworthy, open, honest and involving leaders. They express concern with fostering their employee’s experience of safety as well as see themselves as investing great effort in nurturing the professional growth of their employees. They talk about how they aim at ‘leading through stars’, promoting employees taking the lead and being given the opportunity to represent the voice of the organisation on behalf of the executive leader in the media and at other external events. They tell of how they seek to distribute and encourage a shared responsibility for the collective’s professional and social prosperity. They communicate how they encourage professional development with their employees and deliberately seek to enhance a positive organisation culture.

In leadership literature, all these facets of how the leaders portray their own identity correspond with established characteristics of authentic leadership. When Louise talks about the positive upward spiral, the metaphor holds a strong affiliation with the positive form of leadership being associated with authentic leadership in particular (Avolio & Gardner 2005, Beddoes-Jones & Swailes, 2015). Above all, I find that the strong highlighting of trust and self-trust corresponds profoundly with predominant definitions of authentic leadership in the literature (Gardner et al., 2011; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Luthans, Norman, & Hughes, 2006; Avolio, Gardner, Walumba, Luthans, & May, 2004).

Shamir and Eilam (2005) argued that authentic leadership is based in ‘self-relevant meanings the leader attaches to his or her life experiences, and these meanings are captured in the leader's life-story’ (p.395). This resonates with how I find the leaders describe their leadership experiences and what they point to in these experiences as having earned them legitimacy as leaders. I thus understand the idea of an authentic leader as being strongly present in their narrative leadership identity construction. Even if this dimension of the authentic is referred to explicitly only once in Runar’s story when he makes a point of ‘just being myself’ (p.113), I read the leaders’ stories as being absorbed with the idea that their leadership bears legitimacy not because they comply with a formal role, with formal expectations and a mandate related to that role, but because they are who they are. In other words, I see an essentialist notion pertaining to the heroic leadership paradigm transpiring throughout their tales. At the same time, I see a contradiction in how the leaders on one hand invests much effort in depicting how they act very consciously in order to create trust and legitimacy, while on the other hand, they at the same time expresses how these acts are a natural thing to do. Again, this is a downplaying of the formal legitimacy of leadership – the formal position is not sufficient in order to gain legitimacy and have agency, it must be claimed through observable leadership behaviour, while the legitimacy based in the individual leadership identity is emphasised.

Concerning the idea of authentic leadership and the metaphors that the leaders apply in this regard, another contradiction emerges from the analysis of the interviews. This concerns what I see as a pervasive lack of interest from the leaders’ side in terms of how their followers perceive them as leaders from the followers’ point of view. Even if there are passages when the leaders ponder their own status and legitimacy and displays an aspect of identity struggle in their stories, such as when Alex questions whether the leader as a formal figure really makes a difference (p. 133), or when Runar admits that his idea of ‘just being myself’ (p.113) is actually a matter of deliberate tactics, they still present their leadership identity as solid and sovereign and based in their own self-trust. In their stories as told here, they never question their own understanding of how they believe their

followers perceive them as leaders. I understand this as another finding that points to the rivalling Discourses in their stories. Even if the leadership language applied addresses leadership qualities associated with authentic and post-heroic leadership, it is in what is *not* articulated in the leaders' stories that the heroic leadership ideal lingers, in the leadership language presented here.

#### 5.2.4 The significance of the nonspoken metaphors

Investigating the use of metaphoric expressions is interesting, not only regarding what the metaphors exclude or dismiss as unimportant but also in terms of what they encompass. A main argument in Lakoff and Johnsons' work on metaphors is the twofold effect they see in metaphors: metaphors work as an eclipse—what is elucidated through the use of metaphors at the same time overshadows other aspects (Fairhurst, 2011). Hence, it is also important to notice which metaphors are absent in the leaders' stories; in other words, to better grasp what the applied metaphors mean, it is helpful to observe what is left out of the picture. Furthermore, we should look for metaphors representing counter-images (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). In this project, I find a surprisingly homogeneous use of metaphors across the stories. Some of the leaders elaborate more explicitly on the metaphors than others, but again, considering the fact that the conversations took place completely independently from one another, the consistent use of metaphors is a puzzle to me considering the variety of backgrounds that the leaders represent.

From the metaphors identified by Alvesson and Spicer (2010), in the findings of this current project, I recognise the leader as a gardener, a buddy and perhaps partially a saint when the leaders talk about their own leadership identity. The commander, the cyborg and the bully are absent in terms of verbal images, yet can be seen to linger beneath the language applied to describe other leaders, such as when Kari talks about how other leaders often operate as self-sufficient islands (p.107); when Louise expresses concern about being perceived as too intrusive (p.104); or when Alex (p. 130) and Nils (p. 91) reflect critically upon the ambiguity concerning their leadership identity. The way that counter-images are absent or referred to in this project—implicitly or explicitly—signifies that there is a great awareness tied to how the leaders portray themselves and what resources in their narrative ecology they draw upon in our conversations.

### 5.3 The presence of leadership Discourses in discursive leadership identity construction

Having stated that trust and self-trust in a leadership context should be treated as highly socially and relationally constructed phenomena, along with the concept of a narrative ecology, it becomes central to understand what role the phenomena play in leadership identity constructions, both as discursive practice and Discourse. Both dimensions relate to language as vital in identity

construction and to leadership identity as discursive practice. Thus, regarding the research question, it appears relevant to investigate how the two dimensions are possibly entwined and mutually inform each other.

As indicated in Chapter 2, leadership identity is seen as being constituted by actions and appearances that also entail the use of language (Alvesson & Kärremana, 2000; Shamir, Dayan-Horesh, & Adler, 2005; Fairhurst, 2010; Ladkin, 2010; Shamir & Eilam, 2005). From a discursive scholarship perspective, leadership language is a crucial element in leadership practice. This implies that when we talk about leadership, we must also view language as agency. If language is agency and action, this implies that leadership language is also enactment of leadership. As an example, this perspective is very much present in Ladkin's work on leading beautifully and the enactment of leadership (Ladkin, 2010, 2012). Furthermore, viewing leadership language as agency makes it relevant to explore what kind of agency leadership language entailing trust and self-trust is represented in the leaders' identity projects.

### 5.3.1 What trust and self-trust *are* and what trust and self-trust *do*

Trust and self-trust are repeating themes in the leaders' stories. I understand these themes as vital constituents in narrative leadership identity constructions. In the following paragraphs, I closely inspect how this dyadic phenomenon can be understood in a leadership identity construction context. This inspection involves several aspects.

One aspect is that of trust and self-trust appearing explicitly in the leader' stories, implying that these two concepts bear significance in the leadership language used by the leaders. A second aspect is that of other concepts related to trust and self-trust that appear in the stories, which seem to correlate strongly with notions about trust and self-trust as crucial in leadership identity constructions in this particular setting. A third aspect is how these two main themes with the additional elements can be interpreted with a Discourse/discursive lens applied.

Approaching this constellation with narrative ecology as a conceptual monitor, it becomes pertinent to pursue the following questions, which I examine in the following subsection: What are trust and self-trust and what do they accomplish in this particular narrative ecology? If leadership language provides the leader with agency, then what kind of agency is manufactured through the application of trust and self-trust?

### 5.3.2 Seven recurring elements in the narrative ecology of trust and self-trust

Regarding the second abovementioned aspect, I have found that along with the two main themes of trust and self-trust, there are an additional seven recurring elements that appear in the stories, operating alongside the key dyad of trust and self-trust. I understand these seven elements as narrative carriers of trust and self-trust in the leaders' stories, exhibiting notions about both what trust and self-trust *are* and what trust and self-trust *do*. They also point towards an understanding of what it is that *leaders have to do* in order to gain legitimacy and create leadership agency.

Furthermore, I understand these seven elements to be illustrative of the leadership Discourse at work in the leaders' discursive practice. Hence, it follows that I see these seven elements as contributors to the agency facilitated by the leadership language in use. In the following paragraphs, I discuss each of these elements and how they can be understood as vital in the narrative ecology of leadership identity in terms of what they accomplish in a narrative leadership identity setting.

It should be accentuated that the appearing air of naivety concerning the virtues of leadership that surrounds the seven elements as they emerge in the stories should be interpreted as part of the Discourse/discursive dialectic. Hence, when I describe these elements and their inherent naivety as characteristic for the features of leadership identity, it is according to how leadership is being portrayed by the leaders themselves with their use of leadership language. I have identified the seven elements on the grounds of how the leaders portray their leadership efforts to gain legitimacy, in their stories. Hence, the elements as they are presented here are of what I understand as an emic origin, but the representation I offer is an etic interpretation of what purpose they possibly serve in leadership identity constructions.

#### **Relationships**

The first element I attend to is the continual mentioning of *relationships* in the leaders' stories. All the leaders depict a great concern for how they manage their relationships with their employees. With reference to the extensive leadership literature on leadership as first and foremost constituted by relationships between leaders and followers, at first glance this finding appears quite conventional. The opposite discovery, suggesting that relationships do not play a crucial role in this setting, would definitely raise several questions. In particular, regarding the context of trust, the relationship aspect is established as perhaps the ruling indicator of perceived trust in a leadership setting. Hence, referring to the academic discourse on trust and leadership, the strong presence of the relationship aspect is expected in the discursive setting, yet I view a further interrogation into the seemingly obvious as relevant here, by asking the following questions:

Exactly what meaning is attached to relationships as an identity element in this specific leadership context? How does the relationship aspect relate to other aspects in a narrative ecology of trust and self-trust?

As is explicitly demonstrated in the case of the theatre CEO Lars (p.134), his relationship concern implies a major sensitivity regarding how he talks about his employees; they are all first and foremost depicted as co-workers and colleagues not as followers or subordinates. In the stories conveyed, all the leaders invest great effort in depicting how they constantly invest in fostering positive, trustful relationships. Nico (p.120) and Jens (p.112) talk about how they learn the names of their employees to be able to address them because they believe it builds relationships. Hanne (p.113) talks about how she is constantly on the alert for potential trouble, asking for the cards to be put on the table and avoiding leaving problems to smoulder. Tiril (p.108) expresses how she invests in daring the uncomfortable through building intimacy in her employee relationships. Louise (p.104) explains at length how she considers whether to participate in social events after office hours, hesitant as she is about doing anything that could jeopardise the balance in relationships to maintain legitimacy in her leadership.

Louise, Runar, Ola, Charlotte, Alex, Ingeborg and Carl described in various instances during our conversations how they invest extra time in mentoring and supporting individuals to ensure that everyone feels cared for. They disclose how they encourage employees to qualify themselves further by insisting on educational development. Jens (p. 112), Nico (p.111) and Peter (p. 112) demonstrate how they invest in learning how their employees are doing in their personal lives because they see demonstrating care for the employees as crucial to their leadership. Furthermore, Louise uses the term scientific children (p.103), which indicates that she perceives herself as having very close relationships with her employees.

Carl, the head of an emergency medicine unit (p.122), talks about love for his employees as a prerequisite. The magazine editor-in-chief Hanne (p. 111) talks about the difficult but necessary task of loving her employees and finding gold, which is similar to how Louise (p.99) describes always looking for something to love about every employee. Steven (p.120) depicts his relationship with his employees by talking about them as a tribe. As the youngest and least experienced among the 20 leaders, Kari (p. 107) describes how she works to get everybody onboard, always looking for stars through whom she can extend her leadership.

As I have demonstrated in this analysis, all of these stories, portraying the leaders as dedicated managers and masters of employee relationship, build on strong notions of trust and self-trust.

Furthermore, the relationship dimension includes the following elements in common: the collective ‘we’, equality, love and compassion, inclusion, openness, honesty and safety. Notably, these elements seem to operate as interdependent in the narrative ecology in a leadership identity context.

The notion of relational boldness being crucial for cultivating trust from the leader’s viewpoint clearly transpires in the stories in this project. From this, I find that the leaders invest much effort into portraying themselves as strong and dedicated, compassionate and daring relationship builders, displaying a belief in investing in their employee relationships. This investment is something they do to foster trust. Moreover, it creates agency for the display of self-trust as a leader.

### **The collective ‘we’**

This element is identified on the basis of the constant references to the importance of the collective in the leaders’ stories, in which the notion of the community that the organisation represents is strongly accentuated. The leaders convey great concern for recognising both the greater collective and individual employees simultaneously. The link between the individual and the collective appears in parallel in the leaders’ stories: they interrelate. Caring for the collective is related to care for the individual employee and vice versa. The strong notion about the collective is expressed with explicit reference through the use of the terms ‘we’, ‘tribe’, ‘family’, ‘community’ and ‘the collective’, as well as through the use of other metaphors. Hanne accentuates how she deliberately widely applies ‘we-rhetoric’ and aims to love her employees (p. 119). Steven refers to his tribe (p.120). Louise talks about her scientific family with her scientific children (p.103). Runar talks about being in one boat together (p.116). Charlotte is with her orchestra (p.124). Carl (p. 112) and Peter (p.109) talk about addressing people with love. Lars stresses that he sees himself first and foremost as one among others in the collective (p. 134).

With regard to the collective, this aspect is depicted as a means to generate trust. When the leaders describe how they deliberately foster the collective, they do so by promoting their self-trust.

### **Equality**

The constant emphasis on equality is another element that I have identified as underpinning the leaders’ stories. In the analysis, I have identified this as a mindful accentuation of hierarchy that is consequently downplayed. The equality aspect is strongly related to the other aspects mentioned



here as it transpires as a central notion when the leaders talk about their fostering of relationships and of the collective.

Equality as a value becomes explicit in many paragraphs, such as when the theatre CEO Lars talks about how he views himself as one of the co-workers (p.134), or when Louise refers to feeling like ‘one of them’ (p.104). It also materialises when the leaders depict how they aspire to delegate responsibility and allow employees to represent them in various settings, such as in Charlotte’s case when she explains how she thoughtfully refrains from showing formal power (p.124) and how she aims for her employees to become potential spokespersons on behalf of her organisation and herself. Furthermore, it becomes apparent when Alex talks about how with great concern he demonstrates care and respect for those on the lowest level of the ladder, for example, the cleaning personnel and the maintenance person (p.127). Alex’s story exhibits a very strong degree of self-reflection concerning the maintenance of equality as a constituent of trust in his leadership, and therefore also in his leadership identity construction.

The notion of the importance of equality in the leader–employee relationship is predominant in the analysis, as is the tendency to diminish the leader’s formal authority as a means to foster trust. As I have argued, I understand the persistent urge to diminish formal power as a particularly strong accentuation of self-trust. Hence, I also argue that self-trust understood as ‘the representation of the self as able to cope with the world and itself’ gains relevance here. What the leaders explicitly display is a highly firm belief in their ability to cope with their leadership world on what they define as their own terms. Whether this belief of mastery is true is not a concern of this current discussion; however, my claim is that the narrative ecology appears to be constructed so that the included elements all seem to support this image of this type of mastery.

### **Love and compassion**

Compassion in terms of expressing care, empathy and support for individual employees is another dominant element in the stories, pointing to an idea about leadership identity being funded on an undertaking of emotion work. This is an aspect that becomes apparent in several of the following passages in the leader’ stories when the leaders talk about love and about loving their employees.

The highlighted concern for individual employees appears to be a genuine essence of how the leaders see themselves demonstrating their leadership skills. The compassion aspect obviously relates to the relationship focus. In several passages, the leaders talk explicitly about love and emotion work as an essential ingredient in their leadership.

Hanne has a strong notion about the need to love her employees (p.111) and comments on how much hard work it can be to realise such love. Carl points to love and compassion as some of his primary drivers (p.122). Peter accentuates the importance of showing care for his employees, and even explicitly comments on the authenticity of this care when he says that it must ‘not be superficial but in a real way’ (p.112). Louise has her vision about always finding something to love about every employee, even if it is only the colour of a tie (p.99). Ingeborg highlights how she perceives helping her employees at a personal level is the most meaningful (p.121). Similarly, Nico stresses that his ambition is to know what is going on in his employees lives on a personal level to be able to offer timely support (p. 120)

In all the passages concerning love and compassion, trust and self-trust transpire as facilitators for leadership agency. If it was not for trust and self-trust in their leadership equipping them with the required capacity to act, as they portray it, the leaders could not have accomplished their leadership mission.

### **Inclusion**

According to my reading, inclusion occurs as a consequence of a strong notion of the importance of fostering the collective ‘we’, as well as a result of the strong focus on recognising and including the individual and emphasising equality. According to the leaders’ stories, inclusion is vital to foster the collective. The analysis shows that throughout the stories, inclusion is a key element in how the leaders see their mission being accomplished as leaders.

Working for the inclusion of every employee into the collective ‘we’ is a corner stone in each of the leader’s tales. To succeed as a leader is portrayed as establishing and maintaining an inclusive experience of a shared ‘we’. Again, trust and self-trust transpire as underlying potencies, creating agency for the leader to act for inclusion to maintain the collective as well as the recognition of individual employees.

Another aspect of the inclusion promoted by the leaders concerns distributed leadership, signifying that inclusion works in two ways. It is not only about the leader viewing him/herself as ‘being one of them’ or being ‘first and foremost a co-worker’, conveying how his or her leadership is directed at fostering the collective experience. It also works the other way around when the leader invests in promoting individuals and encourages them to be his or her representative, such as in the stories of Louise, Charlotte, Runar and Kari. This is what I understand when Kari refers to ‘leading through stars’ (p.107). Stressing recognition of the individual employee and

encouraging him or her to operate as a spokesperson on behalf of the leader or take on leadership responsibility and duties can also be viewed as a way to include the employees in the leadership sphere. This notion works as an oxymoron: when leaders stress the importance of being first and foremost a co-worker but also explicitly convey the effort involved in selecting who should be granted leadership responsibilities, there is a highly distinct notion of supremacy being present in their stories.

### **Openness**

Openness is mentioned several times as a primary quality for fostering trust. Self-trust in the leader lingers as a driver for this to be accomplished. An example is when Louise talks about showing her vulnerability by openly sharing her negative experiences with employees, which clearly displays her self-trust (p.101). Other demonstrations of the importance of openness are when Peter (p. 112) and Jens (p.112) describe how they engage with their employees concerning their personal issues, and when Hanne talks about how she strives for 'the closet to be clean' (p.110).

Openness is mentioned together with honesty in several of the leaders' stories. Louise mentions honesty and openness as two of the major qualities in her leadership, as does the financial CEO Ingeborg, who declares that there should be no hidden agenda in her leadership (p. 121). Similarly, Peter does when he talks about how things should not be left to smoulder (p.109).

### **Honesty**

Alex expresses that 'good leadership is about complete honesty' (p.131). In the stories, honesty or frankness is mentioned together with openness on various occasions. This indicates that like openness, honesty is a quality associated with a certain type of trust-related intimacy in this context. For example, Tiril (p.108) describes how she believes she needs to foster trust to facilitate honesty, even when it concerns uneasy matters. She explicitly links honesty and intimacy in the employee relationship. Peter (p. 109, 112) talks about honesty as showing compassion, an expression I also find to indicate a strong notion of a type of compassionate intimacy. Furthermore, Hanne stresses how she strives for honesty (p.107), appealing for the cards to always be laid on the table. Ingeborg talks about honesty when she highlights how she sees herself as a leader working with no hidden agendas (p.121). Moreover, Jens (p.113) talks about showing active compassion and not in an instrumental way.

### **Safety**

Runar, CEO of a food R&D department, highlights honesty and safety as vital components in his leadership (p.122). Louise refers to safety directly after having introduced trust as the primary

asset in her leadership (p. 97). Lars likewise stresses the value of safety as a perceived quality in his leadership, particularly concerning the responsibility of always answering to the consequences of his leadership (p.136). Implicitly, I also see safety as a strong reference in many of the stories when the leaders talk about the importance of their employees' well-being, how they are mindful of the employee's perception of being valued and recognised by the leader, and the effort they say they invest in making employees feel acknowledged and supported.

### 5.3.3 The seven elements and the 5P framework.

Concerning the systematic work deployed by leaders in order to gain legitimacy and create leadership agency described in this project, the seven abovementioned elements in the leaders' narratives correspond to the leadership 5P framework set forth by Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2016). The 5P framework is a metaphorical summary that conceptualises leadership efforts to create leadership legitimacy. The 5 Ps stand for 'prophesying through visions; preaching about morals and values; making psychotherapeutic interventions by targeting emotions; party-hosting in trying to create positive working climate; and acting pedagogically by trying to increase learning' (p. 108). Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson developed their 5P framework based on a variety of empirical research cases investigating leadership as social phenomena in action. Hence, their abstracted framework addresses real leaders and real leaders' actions, and provides a conceptual guideline to understand what 'doing leadership' is about.

The 5 Ps that are described in the 5P framework match the seven elements that I identified in my data. While the 5Ps describe leadership as a set of practices, the seven elements in my data is the leaders' own portrayal of their deployment of leadership. When I see a correspondence in the 5 Ps and the seven elements, it is an interesting observation because while the 5Ps are derived from much empirical study, my data only relates to saying about leadership, not to actual doings. This is of course no guarantee that there is an actual correspondence in what the interviewees for this project do and what they say they do (saying versus doing). However, it may be an indication that the leaders invest much effort in deploying a vocabulary that matches the identity they intend to create, using leadership language as a form of practice, in a performative sense.

While there seem to be a substantial match between the five metaphorical descriptions of leadership as a set of practice and the seven elements identified in my project, there is a difference in that trust and self-trust are not particularly mentioned as assets in the 5P framework. In this project, my understanding is that trust and self-trust concur as central for how

the leaders affiliate with the seven elements. When trust and self-trust was not explicitly mentioned by Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2016) even if the set of practices they depict clearly relate to leadership behavior associated with leadership legitimacy (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2016, Bryman, 2011; Mishra & Mishra, 2013;), this could point towards a local context where the Norwegian leadership Discourse is particularly concerned with trust as a leadership asset. I will return to the significance of the local for the etic interpretation of narrative leadership identity construction later in this chapter. First, I will attend more closely to the performative aspect of leadership language and leadership agency in a narrative ecology context.

#### 5.3.4 Trust and self-trust as primary assets in the perception of leadership agency

When applying the concept of narrative ecology as a monitor to attempting to understand the significance of the abovementioned seven elements in a leadership identity setting, it becomes evident that the elements are closely related to trust and self-trust in leadership language. I understand the seven elements as primary assets in the perception of leadership agency as it is portrayed here. This means that the seven elements *do something* to the leader's notion of how they perceive their capability to take leadership action. Here, the Discourse dimension gains relevance; facilitated through and catered for by the agency that breeds from trust and self-trust, all seven elements materialise post-heroic agency in the leadership language applied. The seven elements comprise a complete portrait of the ideal post-heroic leader. In this particular context, the elements are therefore what I understand as vital constituents of agency as Raelin (2016) described it.

Seen in the light of a narrative ecology, it appears to be a reasonable interpretation that each of these elements has a distinct function in terms of providing the leadership narrative with sustainable life. Without these elements, it does not seem far-fetched to assume that the cycle of trust and self-trust in the narratives would lack the significance they currently represent, meaning that the stories would bear a different meaning than they do in this current project.

From here, the question remaining to pursue is why these specific elements were selected in the first place. Furthermore, how do they relate to the narrative ecology of trust and self-trust in these particular leadership identity constructions? This refers back to theories on the performative power of language and what type of agency leadership language creates (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a). Moreover, why do the leaders use the language they do in the first place, and what does that particular use of language achieve?

The performative project in these stories rests upon trust and self-trust in how the leaders represent themselves as being able to cope with the world and themselves. This becomes apparent in various paragraphs, such as when Lars (p.134) talks about his defining moment, when he is corrected by the culture minister and then sets off into the woods with his walking shoes on, knocks a picnic table and tells himself that from now on, everything is going to change.

Dwelling on the abovementioned elements, this of course does not imply that there could be no other factors impacting the construction of leadership identity, or that no other aspects are playing into the leaders' identity projects. I do not claim that these elements comprise exclusive building blocks in the leaders' identities; on the contrary, I believe that this particular finding must be read in the context of the particular research setting and initial approach. It does not seem far-fetched to suggest that if the thematic approach had been different from my side, the essence of the leaders' stories could have sounded different.

#### 5.3.5 The quest for equality: 'The leadership has decided'

Concerning equality, the portrayal of authority as a facet in leadership language is of particular interest. This is because of the lack of authoritarian preferences and the similar presence of the explicit stressing of downplaying authority as strikingly coherent in the stories. The only time a leader is close to anything that I understand as relating to a preference for applying explicit authority is when Alex (p.133) talks about how he sometimes refers to the phrase 'the leadership has decided' to end or avoid what he considers futile discussions about the legitimacy or relevance of decisions he takes on behalf of the organisation.

What becomes apparent in this regard is the existence of ambiguity in Alex's perception of his role and legitimacy as a leader. Furthermore, it illustrates the point made by critical leadership scholars concerning leadership identity as a highly contradictory phenomenon, encompassing conflicting notions and struggles related to leadership identity (Alvesson & Johnsson, 2016; Nyberg & Sveningsson, 2014; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Furthermore, when Alex refers to 'the leadership' as institutionalised authority, it pinpoints how leadership language can create agency, and thus how leadership language can be seen as performative in a leadership identity setting.

The agency lens allows for the seemingly clashing notions of equality and formal authority to be united in a narrative ecology in leadership identity constructions. When agency is required to act to accomplish aims that Alex sees as beneficial for the greater good on behalf of the organisation, and which fulfilment he understands to be vital for his leadership, he makes use of a language that

provides him with that agency, even if the particular choice of language is in conflict with other linguistic particularities of his in a leadership context. Thus, the application of leadership language materialises as a strategic leadership device by catering for leadership performance.

The multiple significances of how Alex applies ‘the leadership has decided’ dwells with the performative power in leadership language as well as how Alex demonstrates how he in one self-reflexive instance detaches himself from the leadership narrative and the leadership role he himself is spinning, before in the next instant again aligning with it. This underlines the pragmatic elasticity of the narrative ecology and becomes a demonstration of how leadership language functions as a self-organising, self-sufficient ecosystem wherein every element has a function in sustaining the leadership identity ecology, also encompassing striking incongruence as part of this ecology.

When Alex points to the abstract leadership authority as something that dwells outside himself, this signifies that he recognises an interface between the traditional leadership identity, marked by command, control and the execution of hierarchical power, and the new leadership identity. This can be understood as a conflict between competing notions: heroic leadership versus the post-heroic leadership ideal.

What I see surfacing here are two competing leadership Discourses that work as influencing forces in the discursive setting. One has its origin in the traditional understanding of leadership, conveying formal authority and hierarchy and legitimate use of decisive power, whereas the other is rooted in the new leadership paradigm, built on the idea of equality, distributed power and employee democracy. Thus, applying the Foucauldian discourse lens to the discursive setting here allows for an understanding of the apparent incongruency in Alex’s story.

#### 5.3.6 Self-trust, self-belief and self-confidence

Based on my interpretations of this project’s findings, I view self-trust as an empirical category meaning something other than self-confidence. This distinction between two seemingly related phenomena occurs both implicitly and explicitly in the narratives. It becomes accentuated in the passage in which Lars (p. 134), the theatre CEO, talks about confidence versus trust and self-trust as a built-in-method. Lars differentiates between trust and confidence when he states that even if experience gives confidence because one learns ‘it has worked before’, the type of self-trust that he sees as crucial for his success is conveyed as a different type of phenomenon. It is not self-confidence but about self-trust. Even if experience provides lessons in what works and what does

not, the trust that Lars relies on does not concern being an expert, or as he claims during the interview, ‘experts are wrong more often than monkeys’.

The distinction that Lars draws between confidence and what I understand as self-trust is aligned with how Congram differentiated between self-belief and self-confidence (Congram, 2013). Moreover, the differentiation between self-confidence and self-trust corresponds to how I interpret the findings of this project. The expertise that Lars refers to represents the type of professional expertise that comes with experience; a self-confidence that Lars recognises as valuable for his leadership identity but not as determining it. Self-trust on the other hand is depicted as crucial; it is the fundamental on which he builds his leadership as practice and his identity as leader.

When Louise she talks about tolerance (p.97), self-trust is very much present along with trust. In her story and what she describes as ‘good leadership’, she depicts self-trust as an enabler for trust. When she describes what it takes to create what she recognises as headspace to embrace and contain feedback and critique from her employees, self-trust is the enabler; trust among the employees and Louise enables tolerance, and trust is again enabled by self-trust with Louise. Another example of the dyadic between trust and self-trust is where Louise talks about how she defined her own way of being a leader and performing leadership based on doing the opposite of her former boss (p. 98). Her distinguished notion of the type of leader she wants to be emerges from a sense of self-trust. My understanding is that her experience aligns with the definition of self-trust applied here; only due to a sense of self-trust can she reason her own preferred manner of conducting leadership.

Furthermore, Louise’s experience of self-trust as a kernel resource in her leadership identity is apparent when she talks about how she always attempts to see something positive in everyone (p. 99); for example, she states that if nothing else, then at least you can appreciate someone’s nice tie. Moreover, in this context, I understand self-trust to work in the narrative ecology as a ‘first step of reason’ as Lehrer (2008) describes it. Here, self-trust is what creates agency for Louise’s chosen strategy.

An embodied, felt experience of self-trust is accounted for by Kari the library CEO when she talks about how she senses if she has everybody in a room with her (p. 106) and if she is taking the right decision. This is a case where self-trust is apparent and conveyed as a pure phenomenological state. Kari’s preference for her practice is explicitly linked to a physical sensation. Here, I understand her agency as a leader as grounded in her portrayal of her self-trust.



Self-trust is also explicit when Tiril talks about trust-based intimacy with her employees, which she sees as vital in her leadership. The intimacy that Tiril denotes is what she sees as a crucial quality to be able to be honest with her employees and herself. The honesty she wants demands trust. She must be sure that there is a capability to contain honesty. Thus, she must be sure that there is trust as the capability for honesty is driven by it. The trust is again driven by self-trust; she needs self-trust to be able to dare her preference for intimacy. Like Kari, Tiril (p. 108) depicts a kind of embodied, sensory self-trust when she talks about feeling she is getting the right input to make the right decisions. As the analysis of this project demonstrates, the concurrence of trust and self-trust is a continuous red thread throughout the leaders' stories.

A main claim based on the findings from the analysis is that there are two apparent Discourses at work in the leaders' stories. What I see surfacing here are two competing leadership Discourses, and both are influencing forces in the discursive setting. One Discourse has its origin in the traditional understanding of leadership, conveying formal authority as institutionalised in the leadership role, leadership hierarchy and legitimate use of decisive power. The other is rooted in the post-heroic leadership paradigm, built on the idea of the leader as an ambassador for equality, employee well-being, inclusive democracy, transparency and distributed leadership.

Alex's statement 'the leadership has decided' is a strong illustration of how I find the two competing Discourses to materialise in the leader's stories. Viewing the leaders' stories as influenced by the two competing Discourses allows for an understanding of the apparent incongruency in Alex's story when he suddenly detaches himself from the ideal leadership image he has conveyed, admitting how he sometimes still says 'the leadership has decided' to his employees. This overt contradiction can be understood when it is examined through a Discourse lens.

I find that rivalling between the two Discourses surfaces throughout the tales. What becomes evident is that even if the leaders all promote the new leadership image as the foundation for their leadership identity, the traditional ideal still seems to linger beneath. For example, this becomes distinct when Louise describes how she mindfully selects which social occasions she should participate in to maintain legitimacy and trust. According to the traditional leadership image, my claim is that it would be perfectly legitimate for a leader to refrain from mingling in a social setting with his or her employees. Such a choice would harmonise with a perception of the leader as hierarchically distinguished from employees.

Thus, refraining from socialising with employees would be a sign of hierarchical supremacy and manifest leadership legitimacy. According to the post-heroic leadership ideal which promotes equality, it would probably not be necessary to consider the risk of jeopardising leadership legitimacy by engaging in social participation with employees from the leader's side if this ideal was reigning alone. On the contrary, such participation could just as well be expected to confirm leadership legitimacy and perceived as a strengthening of a post-heroic leadership, not as a threat.

Another illustration of this rivalry is when Louise (p.102) talks about bypassing formal rules when sees something that can be taken advantage of is she connects the parts; on one hand, she clearly uses her exclusive power to accomplish her will, whereas on the other hand she simultaneously stresses how she deploys her leadership along the lines of inclusion, equality and transparency. In that particular paragraph, she refers to her agency of trust (the post-heroic Discourse) to explain and justify how that action of demonstrating sovereign power (the heroic Discourse) is legitimate in her leadership.

I see this as an illustration of how the aspect of the formal authority that influences Louise's legitimacy, is strongly under-communicated when she accounts for her leadership identity. I understand this as a very strong demonstration of how the traditional notion about the leader's hierarchical supremacy still exists and influences the leader's narrative identity construction, even if it is the post-heroic leadership image relying on trust and openness that is explicitly promoted in Louise's story. Moreover, this implies that in viewing the identity construction as a narrative ecology, the narrative ecosystem encompasses the contest between the two Discourses. In the case of Louise, the two Discourses even operate as a synergy in the discursive context, even if it represents a complete contradiction in terms.

Thus, I wish to stress that the rivalling between the heroic leadership Discourse and post-heroic leadership Discourse is evident in the leaders' stories every time there is a notion about hierarchical difference being significant for leadership legitimacy. The leaders use double language to convey their perceptions of what it is they see as important for constituting their legitimate identity as leaders. On one hand they embrace the post-heroic leadership paradigm and portray themselves as masters of this new era, whereas on the other hand, their discursive practice reveals a tension between the rivalling Discourses, where the notion about the heroic leader is still highly present.

## 5.4 The significance of downplaying formal power

As I have indicated in the analysis, the leaders' constant accentuation of downplaying formal power reveals a perpetual consciousness about the formal authority that the leader is in the position of. The choice not to apply that power explicitly is a deliberate choice made by the leader. This choice simultaneously manifests in the leader's supreme power. In this, I see a dormant inconsistency that is worthy of examination.

### 5.4.1 A latent contradiction

As indicated in the analysis, only a leader can make a decision because of the sovereignty that comes with the role of leader. Hence, as Guthey and Jackson (2005) argued in regard to authentic leadership, the authenticity of the leaders' portrayal of their authentic leadership identity implies a latent contradiction: if they were not concerned with their formal authority, why would they pay so much attention to downplaying it in their stories? Because of the way this hierarchical issue is discussed, I see it indicating the downplaying of formal power as a significant issue for the leaders in their leadership identity construction. They express an identity that corresponds with the new leadership ideal, but to accomplish such a construct of identity represents a paradoxical struggle (Nyberg & Sveningsson, 2014). Furthermore, according to my understanding, it represents a conflict caused by the fact that such a downplaying of formal power can only be legitimate in the leadership ecology if the leader's authoritative supremacy is unambiguous.

Applying the idea of a narrative ecology as a conceptual monitor, trust and self-trust can be seen as a substitute for formal power in such an ecosystem. With the help of trust and self-trust depicted as main pillars in their leadership narrative, the leaders portray themselves as capable of managing the leadership role in spite of downplaying their official authority. Trust and self-trust replace formal power and are overcommunicated, whereas formal power is under-communicated. This constellation accentuates the rivalry between the two Discourses. Here, leadership language as it is applied in the leaders' stories can be argued to facilitate the agency of the new leadership identity, yet the notion of their official supremacy biased in the traditional leadership Discourse is still very much present.

An equitable understanding of the findings related to trust, self-trust and power is that leadership practice, based on a paradoxical belief that trust, self-trust and displaying power and authority are managed as a 'less is more' logic. The less formal authority the leader demonstrates and the less formal hierarchy the leader plays by, the greater the trust effect is assumed to be by the leader. To downplay formal power represents an overt demonstration of self-trust and uniqueness in their leadership, and thus becomes a highly explicit identity proposal.

This phenomenon is apparent in various places in the analysis. One example is when Charlotte (p.123) talks about how she does not believe in formal authority being particularly productive for her practice as a leader. She acknowledges that authority is something a leader must be able to exhibit but she praises herself as being lucky not to have to lean on such a display of power to manage as a leader. Thus, to foster trust, Charlotte prefers to avoid executing formal authority. I understand the predominant preference for under-communicating formal power in the leaders' stories as an illustration of the ideological restoration of the leader as hero (Caza & Jackson, 2011; Nyberg & Sveningsson, 2014).

#### 5.4.2 Trust, self-trust and notions about relational symmetry

In the leaders' stories, there seems to be very strong and implicit notions about trust, self-trust and the idea of relational symmetry between the leader and employees. Thus, it appears that there a strong idea exists that fostering of trust in leadership requires symmetry and equality. The leaders all stress the importance of nearness and intimacy with their employees, which they accentuate by telling me how they learn names by heart, support their employees in personal matters, foster their scientific children or invest effort in loving their personnel. I understand this all as pursuing a certain intimacy.

This again opens the way for speculation about why this aspect is accentuated in the leaders' stories. I read it as pointing in the direction of the post-heroic leadership ideal. I wish to address the following question: Why is the relational nearness aspect so present in the narrative ecology of leadership identity construction? One obvious explanation is that in LMX theories that are closely associated with trust, the relational aspect is highlighted. In popular leadership literature, the concept of 'relational leadership' is also a popular technology, promoting leadership effectiveness through fostering relationships with employees and valuing trust and trustworthiness. As a critique of this fashion, Grint (2010) commented that the post-heroic era seems to have inflated the function of leadership to such an extent that leadership as a notion has become even more illusory, 'we will all be leaders so that none are'. I find his critique to be relevant in the discussion concerning the constant downplaying of formal power in the leaders' stories as well as what downplaying with language actually signifies.

When the leaders stress intimacy, this aligns with popular ideas about post-heroic leadership. I have already suggested that displays of trust and self-trust can be understood as a substitute for displays of formal power, yet what makes the intimacy aspect a mystery in this context is this: the weight on the capacity to acquire intimacy by stressing relational symmetry can also be viewed

as referring back to the notion about a leader's *individual* capacity to master the role as a leader. Fostering intimacy with employees in the place of using formal power becomes a demonstration of personal mastery. Thus, a notion stemming from the idea of traditional heroic essentialist, trait-based leadership emerges, and again, I see clashing Discourses at work in the narrative ecology, where heroic, trait-based notions about leadership are drivers of what is perceived as post-heroic performance. Hence, one possible interpretation of the presentation of post-heroic, trust-based leadership is that it is in fact trait-based, heroic leadership in rhetoric disguise. This is also the case for the next element I discuss.

#### 5.4.3 Downplaying formal power and the quest for unique leadership

Regarding the downplaying of formal power that I consider a key finding in my empirical material, I find another dimension in the findings interesting in the Discourse context. This has to do with how all the leaders accentuate their particular individuality in their leadership, highlighting how their leadership stands out because of their capability to foster trust. The leaders talk lengthily about how they identify with what they see as their highly distinct and unique style of leadership. They portray themselves as gaining trust and legitimacy almost in spite of, not on the premises of, their formal legitimacy in the role as leaders. However, it does not seem unreasonable to speculate that probably none of them would have had the power to act on this notion about individuality was it not for the formal power they represent.

I see the leaders' depiction of how they oppose formal power and instead execute their own style of leadership as being related to what Sørensen and Villadsen (2017) described as norm-transgressive management. In this particular case, the data do not reveal whether this transgression actually occurs in practice or not, because they do not include the employees' perspectives. What is of interest here is the place that this aspect is allocated in the leaders' stories. Even if the context and case in this project is differs greatly from Sørensen and Villadsen's case about abusive and bullying leadership practice, I see both the notion of a rebel identity and the idea of an anti-establishment management emerging in the stories here.

This paradox addresses the identity aspect and how the leaders make sense of their leadership by under-communicating their formal power, portraying themselves as nontraditional leaders who work by opposing established norms, while they simultaneously invest much effort into highlighting their capability as leaders who make their followers follow them. In other words, they downplay the importance of demonstrating formal authority, which is traditionally associated with the heroic leadership ideal, while they simultaneously apply characteristics that build on a post-heroic notion of leadership identity to accentuate the supremacy of their leadership. As an

organisational construct, the formal function of a leader is to represent the order of a hierarchical structure of one kind or another. Thus, to maintain power and secure influence in the role of leader, leaders depend on the legitimacy that is constituted by the formal hierarchy appointing their leadership. Therefore, to identify with the role of leader is in my view unavoidably related to the recognition of leadership as a hierarchical institution in some way or another. Thus, for a leader to reject the notion of hierarchy becomes a contradiction in terms.

It appears to be a lack of logic that a leader should want to under-communicate or not acknowledge this formal power, which is a core premise of leadership. It seems an even greater oxymoron that any leader would genuinely *believe* that formal hierarchy does not matter for the legitimacy of their leadership. Consequently, when the leaders invest narrative identity assets to diminish the importance of formal power for their leadership identity, I understand this as an illustration of how the two competing leadership Discourses are at play in the discursive leadership, placing the leader's identity project under tough stress by infusing a double-bind (Bateson, 1972). The leaders invest assets from their narrative ecology of trust and self-trust to construct an identity that corresponds to the post-heroic leadership ideal; thus, they can validate their identity as post-heroic leaders. Simultaneously, they must uphold the image of a heroic sovereignty where they are entitled to power because that is what eventually characterises and gives legitimacy to the leadership project as a structural institution. This double-bind dilemma represents a conflicting state in which the identity is constantly put under pressure. As a resolving remedy to release tension, metaphors that encompass both the heroic and post-heroic virtues of leadership are applied in the leadership narrative.

This ideological rivalry between leadership Discourses becomes even more accentuated because none of the leaders in this project advocate anarchy as opposed to the traditional notion of hierarchy in leadership. By contrast, they describe thoroughly how they see the virtues of their leadership working to create structure and control on behalf of a collective that must be managed. In how they talk about this, they demonstrate great awareness concerning their supreme positions and how they navigate in their role based on this supremacy. They reveal various aspects of their tactical play with power dynamics to gain influence and legitimacy, which shows that power and influence are clearly at stake.

Representing supremacy and power, leadership as a structural institution and construct is by default built on a heroic idea. Thus, a prerequisite for being able to see the undertaking of the leadership identity project as meaningful is the recognition of the type of hierarchy that leadership as an institution implies. To believe in the leadership project and experience an identity as leader

as valid thus implies that one must have a notion about what it is that legitimises leadership at its core, meaning supremacy in one way or another. According to Westwood and Linstead (2001), the idea of hierarchy implies the idea of the opposite of hierarchy, namely anarchy. In the stories we have heard, the following dialectic is clearly visible: the leaders' legitimacy is depicted as depending on the leader's capability to demonstrate a certain supremacy. The supremacy is demonstrated through virtues that foster a neatly organised, well-functioning collective that recognises the leaders' sovereignty, facilitated by leadership agency. Implicit if one takes away leadership, the neatly organised, well-functioning collective also dissolves into the opposite, that is, into anarchy.

My understanding of this finding is that it does not necessarily mean that the leaders do not relate to the leadership role as a hierarchical function. By contrast, I understand the idea of hierarchy to be very much present when the leaders depict themselves as attributed with extraordinary capabilities to master the leadership project. Such a portrayal refers back to a heroic, essentialist understanding of the leader. However, the expression of the leader's power is different in this context; it does not concern executing power in terms of demonstrating hierarchical supremacy. Instead, the demonstration of leadership agency here is about the supreme mastery of trust and employee intimacy, where self-trust is displayed through daring this intimacy. Here, the heroic notion is converted into risk-taking agency related to reigning through intimacy, as opposed to the heroic leader's traditional seclusive command, yet the heroic boldness remains a core virtue in the leadership identity.

Thus, I again find the two competing Discourses in the local discursive leadership identity construction. The discursive paradox highlights the inbuilt aspect of alienation in leadership as a hierarchical institution (Sørensen & Villadsen, 2017), where successful management of the relational balance in distance between the leader and the follower is crucial. In the leader–follower relationship, a certain degree of distance must be maintained for the leader to be able to execute leadership agency, and the leader also depends on a certain degree of intimacy to be able to influence followers through his or her agency.

I see a key discussion point emerge here. Discourse can be seen to function both as an enabler and a limitation to leadership actors and how they understand their potential for agency (Fairhurst, 2009). Here, this view gains particular relevance for my understanding of the leaders' portrayal of themselves. The post-heroic leadership identity paradigm rejects the notion of the leader as a supreme hero, and instead proposes leadership as distributed power, relational capability, intimacy, democracy and equality (Bryman, 2011; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). In addition,

the leaders' legitimacy as I understand it is dependent on the recognition of their supreme qualities as leader to comply with the post-heroic ideal. Here, the supremacy that comes with formal power in the leadership role as a hierarchical institution is downplayed, whereas the individual aspect that focuses on the leader's individual qualities is accentuated.

Concerning the focus on the leader's individual qualities, the way the leaders in this project were stressing the aspect of individual and personal mastery in the leadership role as a key to obtain legitimacy aligns with what Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016) found when looking into managerial identity constructions. They discovered that managers invest much effort in presenting themselves as different from others. Yet, as previously argued, the fact that only one leader among the 20 who contributed to this project referred explicitly to essentialist notions about leadership, indicates that even if essentialist ideas about leadership were present in the leaders' notions, they were talked about by applying a particular leadership language; the one accentuating trust and self-trust. Again, I understand this as heroic leadership in rhetoric disguise, performing by the means of post-heroic Discourse.

For the sake of clarity, I would like to stress that when referring to the importance of the individual aspect in this context, it is not to be confused with the term individualised leadership which refers to how leadership agency is created through the building of individual dyads between the leader and each individual employee (Bass, Avolio & Berson, 2003). In leadership theory, the term individual leadership perspective is also used about shared leadership (Crevani et al., 2007), referring to how the leader will distribute tasks and responsibility in his own interest to be less burdened with work. my application of the term individual here refers to the emic representations in the leaders' stories and to how the leaders themselves portray their individual assets and efforts as leaders.

### 5.5 Stories on trust, self-trust and the peculiar absence of risk

Whereas dominant theories on trust advocate a strong relationship between trust, risk and vulnerability (Flores & Solomon, 1998), the findings of this project clearly diverge from such a claim. While trust and self-trust together with a certain type of vulnerability are repeatedly referred to as vital in the leaders' stories, there is very little mention of the sensation of risk traditionally associated with trust in theory. I therefore find it relevant to pursue what I observe as a peculiar absence of risk in the empirical material.

The issue of vulnerability is mentioned explicitly only once in the interviews and occurs when Louise (p.101) refers to her mindful choice to be open with her employees about her own negative



experiences as a way to foster trust. In this particular instance, Louise mentions her own vulnerability and points to it as a sign of strength, as something she deliberately chooses to display as a means to foster trust. Openness as an element feeding into the ecology of trust and self-trust is apparent. Her vulnerability is reframed as strength to show that what she talks about as being open about one's negative experiences is no threat to the professional community or to her legitimacy as a leader. In this specific context, Louise's display of vulnerability and the associated risk she runs are denoted as leadership vigour. In other words, showing vulnerability creates agency for the capacity to manifest trust and self-trust. In some of the other stories, vulnerability is more implicit, lingering in how the leaders talk about downplaying formal authority and trusting their employees.

#### 5.5.1 A puzzle concerning the absence of risk in the leaders' stories

In theory, literature on trust thoroughly explains how trust implies exposure to risk along with vulnerability (Sheppard & Sherman, 2016). From this, it seems sensible to expect the leaders to be particularly sensitive to the risk aspect of their identity narrative because of the extensive responsibility that comes with the title of leader. There is potentially much at risk if trust fails, not only concerning the career of an individual or individuals but that of a whole company and its partners; when trust fails, the systemic effects can range widely. Regarding the particular risk associated with a leader's position, it is even more surprising that the risk aspect is close to absent in the empirical material of this project. I relate this absence of risk in the leaders' stories to the significance of the nonspoken aspect in leadership language (previously mentioned on p.185), and aligned with the idea of circumspect care (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012), encouraging the researcher to pursue also that which is not uttered or manifest in the data. I therefore find it worthwhile to ask what this absence of risk in my data possibly signifies. Even if risk is not highlighted as an important matter in the leaders' stories, this does not necessarily mean that risk is not present – it could also mean that risk is muted.

Here, I find it important to stress that when I pay attention to the absence of risk as a vital finding in this project, this is a result of my interpretive work with data. Absence of risk is not something the leaders' themselves articulate, but an observation articulated by me. Because the aspect of risk is so closely associated with trust in leadership research, I understand the absence of risk in this context to be a mystery, and hence, I will look for ways to understand that mystery.

One way to understand this absence is that even if risk is not present in the leaders' stories, it does not mean that this particular experience is not a part of their lifeworld as leaders. One explanation could be that this subject is under-reported in my data. If that is the case, there could be several

justifications. One obvious reason is the need for controlling one's impression management; as a leader, displaying concern for risk in an interview setting could be thought of as compromising for your credibility as a leader. It is a possibility that revealing risk concern is perceived as something that could harm the leaders' impression management.

This understanding seems reasonable considering how the contemporary leader in popular leadership literature is portrayed as bold and fearless for whatever challenge that may come, particularly in stories about successful entrepreneurs taking risks and succeeding against all odds. If this interpretation should be the case, disclosing susceptibility in terms of risk rejection would potentially add to the degree of vulnerability. Again, contrary to this perspective is the fact that when vulnerability is mentioned explicitly once, it is referred to with the exact opposite prefix; it is not perceived as jeopardising the leader's legitimacy but on the contrary as strengthening it.

Another possible way to understand the absence of risk in the empirical data is that I have not been able to decode and discover it. Although this could of course be the case, I found that the leaders did disclose other aspects from their experiences of leadership that could potentially be interpreted as going against their preferred image, one example of which is Nils (p. 92), who seemed to spontaneously reflect upon his lack of communication skills.

Then again, this episode is part of what is described as a defining leadership moment and a definitive turning point in his career as leader, and therefore it could be read as an overture to a tale that concludes with a happy ending, something that confirms his success as a leader. According to this perspective, disclosing vulnerability or negative experiences could also be understood as reinforcing the point made above; that is, the image of the leader as successful because he made it against all odds.

Yet another puzzle exists concerning the absence of risk in the stories on trust. Considering a possibility linked to the fact that the leaders contributing to this project were high-profiled and recognised as proficient leaders, they could be expected to be more than averagely informed by popular ideas on successful leadership and what it means to be a great leader, as well as to have engaged in various leadership development training, thereby being familiar with popular Discourse about what characterises a good leader. In such a case, highlighting the importance of trust in their leadership in their stories would make sense and fit with the hypothesis of impression management; pointing to trust as essential for their leadership corresponds well with applied theories and models on relational and authentic leadership. It would demonstrate a contemporary, well-informed, up-to-date and competent view on leadership.

However, the puzzle I see reside in the following point. If the reference to trust was stressed because of a notion about it being a favourable thing to say in the interview setting in regard to a strategic impression management, then I would have expected the leaders to also explicitly mention vulnerability together with risk, because vulnerability and risk are strongly paired with trust in popular leadership theories on trust. Therefore, why would the leaders accentuate trust and self-trust, reframing vulnerability as a proof on post-heroic leadership virtues, but leave out the risk aspect?

To follow up on this puzzle, I believe another perspective should be considered when discussing the absence of risk. When the leaders contributed their stories, all of them could point to successful merits as executive leaders. Thus, there were no reasons for any of them to indicate risk as a means of explaining why their leadership had not succeeded or how trust had failed them. If the situation had been different, for example, a leader had experienced failure in leadership, there could have been a different motivation for revealing experiences with risk as a way to explain or justify why things had gone wrong. No such accounts were given.

#### 5.5.2 Rival Discourses' influence on discursive practice

In addition, the leaders could share the phenomenon that Zand described in his essay on trust (Zand, 2016); they could sense both vulnerability and risk but do not talk about risk. It is unlikely that in a sample of 20 acknowledged leaders, none have experienced risk. The position as a leader implies that they take decisions and act upon them every day, complying with what Luhmann (2000) stated as a condition for risk (and thus, vulnerability): 'if you refrain from action you run no risk' (p. 100).

Thus, I am not arguing that experiences of risk are de facto absent in the leadership of the leaders in this project. My point is that as long as this facet in the particular interview context is not pinpointed as a vital element in the stories being told, I understand this as a matter of rivalling Discourses influencing the discursive practice. Risk sensation could still very possibly be a constituent part of the leaders' lifeworlds, despite not being visible in their stories.

One possible understanding is that when risk is absent in the leaders' stories, it could be because the traditional Discourse carrying the notion of the leader as a sovereign hero is still at work in the narrative ecology of their leadership identity. Risk being left out of the stories and trust and self-trust being promoted caters for a type of heroic leadership agency that maintains traditional ideas about leadership supremacy. This is yet another unexpected paradox.

### 5.5.3 An eclipsed discourse on trust in the leadership literature

There exists another mystery related to the absence of risk along with the presence of self-trust in the empirical body of this project. In trust theory related to leadership studies, there are few if any references to self-trust as the concept is applied here. Moreover, there are strong claims set forth about the connection between trust, risk and vulnerability. In this project, the findings indicate a more contrasting understanding of trust in leadership than what I have found in the predominant literature.

For this particular case, I find that risk is out of focus whereas self-trust is very much in focus. I believe that this discrepancy between existing theory and the findings of this project implies at least two things. First, it indicates that we might have an eclipsed Discourse on trust in the leadership literature where the aspect of risk (and vulnerability) overshadows the role of self-trust. Second, I see this finding as an invitation to investigate more closely the potential role of self-trust in leadership identity constructions.

Concerning an eclipsed leadership Discourse (Congram, 2013), important elements in research on leadership identity construction may be overshadowed by the biased lens. We risk ignoring important aspects of the process of leadership identity construction because we ignore looking for expressions of leadership identity in other places, at other times, in other settings or in other ways. Thus, vital practices concerning the construction of leadership identity could go unnoticed. My point here is that this concerns leadership language as a fundamental component of leadership identity as well. This idea is aligned with the findings of Fletcher (1999), who applied the term ‘disappearing acts’ to describe how ‘phenomena that fail to fit the (..) ideal get disappeared and devalued’ (p. 117).

As indicated by Congram, Fletcher’s point is that leadership phenomena can remain invisible, and therefore appear as nonexistent, not because they are not active in practice but because leadership descriptions are eclipsed by a predominant leadership Discourse. For this discussion, this implies that even if risks are not present or explicitly active in the leaders’ stories, this does not necessarily mean that risk is not perceived or present in the leaders’ lifeworld. The question that remains to be investigated is why risk is not expressed more explicitly in the empirical body of this project.

### 5.5.4 A negative presence in leadership language

Concerning present aspects in leadership language, I see another point as relevant in this context. While the qualities associated with post-heroic leadership are numerous in the leaders’ stories, demonstrations of other phenomena that are traditionally closely associated with leadership, such

as giving direction and instruction and taking decisions and actions are much fewer. The stories accentuate rather distinct features of leadership identity, portraying the leader as more of a caretaker than a commander, more a midwife than a general, more a collaborator than a director, and more a conductor than an instructor. However, plenty of notions stem from the heroic leadership paradigm.

Only a few times were the more traditional aspects of leadership mentioned in my conversations with the leaders. Alex tells of how he invests all his attention in building the democratic collective, but also how once in a while he applies the refrain ‘the leadership has decided’ when he finds that there has been enough debate and a case must be settled. Charlotte and Runar refer to how they do not like to demonstrate formal authority, but also how they need to know themselves that they are able to do so.

This illustrates a present consciousness concerning traditional methods of executing authoritative leadership in leadership language at work, as well as that the leaders actively and carefully choose their narrative means. The meagre presence of language traditionally associated with leadership in the stories does not imply that these phenomena are absent in the experiences of leadership; it just means that they are left out of or under-communicated in the identity narrative.

On an ontological note, I see this as relating to the concept of negative presence in leadership ontology (Kelly, 2014). There might be aspects and notions related to the experience of leadership identity that are deliberately under-communicated in leadership language. Similarly, there could be leadership moments, or elements of such moments, that contribute to the construction of leadership identity, which the researcher does not identify in the data, recognise or bear in mind. This type of absence could represent significance. If we take for granted that all we observe and detect is all there is to observe and detect, then we find ourselves in the trap of an eclipse. This observation concerning an eclipsed discourse on leadership identity is supported by Ladkin when as part of her notion on the study of leadership she pinpoints how ‘no one viewpoint can appreciate the totality of leadership, each contributes to a distinct facet of leadership’s identity’ (Ladkin, 2010, p. 31).

Furthermore, as Alvesson and Jonsson commented, studies on leadership practice are scant compared with the abundance of theory that reigns in the field (2016). In this matter, this project aligns with Alvesson and Jonsson when they questioned ‘the usefulness of the concept of leadership’. Alvesson and Jonsson along with Alvesson and Spicer (2012) have not explicitly used the term ‘eclipsed’ to address the blind spots generated by dominant strains in leadership theory;

However, in my understanding, the phenomenon that the authors describe and criticise in their articles points to an eclipsed approach to leadership. Thus, part of the contribution of this project is elucidate some of the overshadowed facets in contemporary leadership Discourse.

## 5.6 Leadership identity construction and the quest for stability

In the leaders' stories, there are several passages where the quest for harmony is formulated. This is explicitly expressed as well as conveyed in what I read as implicit references to how the leader is sensitive to disequilibrium in their identity proposal. One illustration is when Louise (p. 104) refers to her awareness in regard to her dominance, or when Nils after we finish our conversation dwells on his doubt concerning what he recognises as his own lack of listening skills as a leader (p.92)

As part of the claim they made when they approached leadership identity construction, Lührmann and Eberl (2007) argued that as with any other identity, the construction of leadership identity as an interactional construct is comprised of the four phases of validation, stabilisation, crisis and perception. To maintain identity equilibrium implies the existence of a constantly working consensus, where the feedback aspect is crucial to validate and maintain identity stability. Hence, viewing leadership construction as a narrative ecology again gains relevance.

In their conceptual investigation of the dynamics of validation, stabilisation, crisis and perception, Lührmann and Eberl (2007) postulated the quest for a stabile identity to be imperative in all identity construction processes; stability is the main aim in any identity construction process. Thus, the need for negotiation if a conflict hinders such equilibrium is critical. No room exists for a major dissonance concerning the leaders' identity legitimacy in relation to their followers. In establishing and maintaining stability, a validation of identity perception is of constant and continuous importance.

This validation is what I in this context understand as the feedback that constantly monitors the narrative ecology in the leaders' stories. If the validation fails (i.e., if the feedback does not confirm the leaders' desired identity), an identity crisis occurs. Lührmann and Eberl (2007) focused on feedback from followers; for the leadership moment, feedback from a variety of actors in the leader's environment could be influential as well as the precepted feedback from the interviewer in the interview context.

From a phenomenological stance, it is reasonable to argue that the elements drawn upon in the leaders' narrative ecosystem for the construction of their identity will vary with each leader. Two

leaders can experience the seemingly same setting and context, express the same purpose and encounter the same followers, yet there is a great chance that the two will interpret their moments differently. What becomes a defining leadership moment for one leader might not be a moment of significance for the other. Therefore, it is impossible to predict which moments will become defining for the construction of leadership identity for which leader, or which occurrences will generate an identity crisis.

This further highlights the importance of examining leadership identity constructions as local affairs with a qualitative lens, paying attention to the particular and the momentary (Weick Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). To paraphrase Eriksen (2001), in this way the inquiry into little leadership stories could give way to a larger universe of leadership knowledge.

#### 5.6.1 A constant working consensus

The ongoing construction project in a string of instantaneous leadership moments where leadership identity is all the time becoming what is identified as the identity negotiation process, in which identity is the result of a self-reflexive and social process (McCall & Simmons, 1966; Oyserman & Packer, 1996; Schlenker, 1984). When the leaders reflect upon their experience of leadership, I see it as a dimension of what Goffman and others have termed the working consensus (Goffman, 1959; McCall & Simmons, 1966).

Thus, the leadership moment that Ladkin described includes a multifaceted range of moments—a continuous string of instances—where context, purpose and participants are influencing factors in the perpetual creation of leadership identity. This range of moments will generate a particular intercontextuality in which there will be a working consensus. Some moments can be more defining and represent a greater paradigmatic alteration of how a leader's identity is expressed and experienced than others, yet as a collection of available building material for leadership identity, every moment matters.

According to Alvesson (2010), for the individual an element of self-doubt is inherent in the identity project, whether consciously or 'lurking beneath the surface'. Alvesson further argued that with self-doubt comes anxiety and insecurity. Consequently, I understand the process in which leaders construct their identity as rich with ambivalent experiences. As the degree of uncertainty in all social interactions is more or less constant, the interactional identity dynamic demands a constantly working consensus. Hence, following this perspective, in a leadership identity context a leader must work constantly on a consensus concerning his or her identity performance to maintain legitimacy.

Accordingly, according to Lührmann and Eberl's idea, what Ladkin identified as a leadership moment is an ongoing process wherein leadership identity is constantly evaluated, negotiated, calibrated and redefined. Every moment will represent a leadership moment in which the legitimacy of the leadership identity is at stake. Some moments will be more defining and critical than others depending on the particular context. To identify what makes some leadership moments more important and defining than others, a phenomenological lens is required. If we consider Ladkin's ideas, it can be expected that the critical balance point in regard to leaders' identity narrative and validation would be the choice of resources that they choose to draw upon from a narrative ecology to construct their identity narrative.

### 5.6.2 The need for convincing identity proposals

A conceptualisation of identity processes that aligns with the idea of a narrative ecology in this regard was proposed by Alvesson and Willmott (2002). They suggested that the formation of identity can be understood as an interchange between self-identity as the individual's image of him or herself and the monitoring and feedback from the surroundings. The active construction of a self-identity is based on relentless identity work as a continuous regulation of the identity in a social and organisational context. This interchange is crucial to maintain self-identity.

The concept of a narrative ecology embodies the variety of resources that are deployed in identity construction. As an ecosystem with narrative identity assets, it can also be seen as a constituent for the feedback elements that are at work in identity regulation. The continuous identity construction work is constantly being regulated by feedback. Hence, the narrative ecosystem works both as a construction site and regulative site. The identity questions concerning 'who am I, what do I stand for and how should I act?' (Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006, p. 206) are answered and moderated by such a narrative ecology.

As accentuated by Lührmann and Eberl (2007), identity proposals must be convincing to all parties involved in the identity trade (p.122). Pursuing this in terms of Ladkin's phenomenological notion about the importance of context and purpose in the leadership moment, this means that for the identity process to maintain its equilibrium, the understanding of the contexts and purpose must appear as genuine and credible for leaders and their environment. This again goes back to the leader's capacity for framing, conveying and acting according to a proper understanding of the context he or she is leading in, and hence using leadership language in performative means. Here, my main point is that in this project, this identity framing capacity is tangible through the narrative ecology of trust and self-trust in the leaders' stories. The narrative ecology centring on



trust and self-trust works as a constituent of such a framing capacity. On the basis of trust and self-trust, the other incorporated elements in the narrative ecology gain meaning and support the identity proposal.

Concerning the narcissistic aspect previously mentioned in regard to the post-heroic ideal and self-trust as a critical curriculum of mastery for leadership legitimacy in the post-heroic construction, this dynamic can be understood as a potential threat to a convincing leadership identity: The leader needs to exercise self-trust in order to create agency and legitimacy, but at the same time, self-trust must be exhibited in a way that instigates trust. In other words; the leader's self-trust must be perceived sufficiently convincing for his identity proposal as a post-heroic leader, but the leader must not be perceived as too bold in a narcissistic meaning, as narcissistic leadership is considered to be negative for the leader's legitimacy (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006).

### 5.6.3 Ambiguity as a productive identity asset

Another annotation I wish to point to regarding the idea of Lührmann and Eberl is how it relates to the ambiguity in leadership identity narratives. As research on leadership narratives demonstrated (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), considerable degrees of divergence and ambiguity exist leadership narratives. Stories are told not only to construct coherence and maintain balance but also to encompass conflicts and identity struggles. As I understand it, this must imply that for every leader, a potential identity crisis is always loitering in the skyline. Identity work is both vulnerable to and dependent upon shifting relations, contexts and situations. As with any identity process on an individual level, stability and balance in the leadership identity construction process is thus both a highly relative and volatile state, comprising struggle, ambiguity and self-doubt (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

Therefore, based on the empirical findings and building on the idea of identity work, I argue that what Lührmann and Eberl depicted as stability does not necessarily mean a leadership-language void of ambiguity. It could be the opposite; what are perceived as balanced identity constructions are those narrative creations that encompass ambiguity and incongruence so as to be sufficiently elastic and adaptive to shifting contexts and feedback.

Viewing language as a significant asset in the construction of leadership identity, interpreting stability here implies that the narrative ecology of the leadership identity construction could be just as ambivalent and self-contradictory as in these stories presented here. This means that conflicting Discourses should be expected to coexist in the discursive practice related to leadership identity constructions, viewed as a phenomenon potentially contributing to stability

instead of being approached as a destabilising factor. As Chia argued, identity as a language phenomenon will always be a partial and temporary accomplishment (Chia, 1995). Because language as a signifying practice in social life will always be a provider for the potential of new meaning (Westwood & Linstead, 2001), we can only expect that identity constituted by language will likewise always encompass an unexploited potential for making new orders that again make new sense.

#### 5.6.4 The hows and whats of the critical tipping point in leadership identity constructions

In the leaders' stories, snippets of doubt exist that are related to the leaders' perception of their identities. Louise mentions that she sometimes wonders if she is being too dominating (p.103), and Alex discloses doubt concerning the balance in what he refers to as 'a lovely blend' in his leadership (p.39). However, doubt related to their identity's stability does not frequently occur in the stories. This makes it relevant to argue for stability in identity processes as it is presented in the model of Lührmann and Eberl (2007). It leads to critical questions concerning the sustainability of the leaders' narrative ecology: How can the hows and whats of the critical tipping point for the precepted stability of a leader's identity be identified? What determines whether the leadership identity is perceived as balanced? What components contribute to an identity crisis? In particular, I find that these question gains relevance for the post-heroic leadership identity context and the way the leaders draw upon trust and self-trust as narrative resources in the identity construct. How robust or fragile is the post-heroic leadership identity construct as it emerges in the stories told here?

Furthermore, if the coexistence of rivalling Discourses and apparent inconsistency between other elements in the narrative ecology of the leadership identity construction do not necessarily generate such a crisis, then what does? This pondering points back to the qualitative and phenomenological approach as being pertinent to understanding how identity crises in a leadership context emerge, namely as a contextual and relational construct. What influences the relative tolerance for ambiguity and ambivalence in leadership identity constructions? Moreover, what defines whether a leadership identity proposal is perceived as convincing or not? Or, as Raelin (2016) challenged the concept of leadership by asking, what is required of an individual to persist in leadership?

As Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016) stated, leadership identity is an urgent issue in modern organisations. While their focus is on managers, their approach is aligned with Lührmann and Eberl's identity theory (2007) when they claim that identity is about 'seeking to build a self-view

that is consistent and coherent and can provide a relatively stable platform for orienting oneself in life and organizations' (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016, p. 33). Even if this project is addressing leaders and not managers, the need for a stable and coherent identity in order to claim legitimacy is comparable. However, as Sveningsson and Alvesson pinpointed, there is probably a difference in how managers and leaders perceive their identity, because leaders are exposed to other internal and external expectations and forces considering their leadership role than managers are. Hence, there is probably also a difference in how leaders and managers work to build their identities. It is outside the scope of this project to do a comparative analysis of identity work among leaders versus among managers. However, the important point I would like to stress here is that like leaders, managers also make use of Discourse resources in order to construct their identity in discursive practices (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016) and to create agency, and hence, like demonstrated by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016), also managers are exposed to the variety of alternative identity assets to draw upon, in a narrative context.

Related to the quest for a convincing identity proposal in a leadership identity context, Lürhmann and Eberl (2007) identified four essential elements in the leadership identity construction process: motivation, conformity and authenticity, power, and relationships. Motivation is what drives leaders and followers to 'act in ways consistent with their identities' in the pursuit of conformity and authenticity to maintain identity balance. The power aspect is inherent in and 'an internalized part of individual identity'. As already argued, in every leadership identity construction process the potential exists for multiple Discourses to coexist, promoting different models for leadership that operate as resources in the identity process. As I have shown, the present stories on leadership identity centre around awareness of the relational aspect and how this must be managed to maintain the leader's legitimacy. Likewise, what concerns motivation, conformity, authenticity and power, these categories can also be distinguished as being vital for the leadership identity in the leaders' stories.

In my understanding, in this project, the four dimensions are primarily driven by a quest for trust, based on trust and self-trust, through which the categories gain relevance. Notions concerning motivation, conformity and authenticity, power, and relationships, materialise through the use of trust and self-trust in the leaders' stories. It is the language of trust and self-trust that fuels these categories with local meaning, and thus makes them significant in the leadership identity context.

Furthermore, concerning the conformity and authenticity aspect, this category links directly to the leaders' perception of trust and self-trust. One illustration of this is how the power aspect is conveyed in the leaders' stories. Throughout the tales on leadership identity, demonstrations of

leadership power are conveyed as a matter of downplaying formal hierarchy, performing for perceived sameness and equality, meaning that the leader strives to be perceived as an equal member of the collective.

Regarding conformity, this project shows that it does not necessarily concern conforming to formal rules and regulation but opposing such official guidelines. On the contrary, to demonstrate autonomy by practicing against the established norms for what are considered traditional conventions seem to be a common theme here. Hence, if we point our looking glass towards the leadership identity construction process based on an unchallenged (or conventional) understanding of the power concept, we might not find any power struggle in the material of this current project, because power in terms of an accentuated hierarchy is consequently downplayed. Likewise, if we look for conformity in the conventional meaning of the word, we might see rebels instead of traditionally conforming leaders who manage to generate a great sense of a collective 'we' by going against the rules. This claim of course instantly generates another question worthy of investigation concerning the differentiation of rules and which ones the leader can question, challenge and conquer in the name of leadership legitimacy and which ones she cannot. Again, this leads back to the need for an empirical lens.

In this regard, it should be mentioned that Lührmann and Eberl also advocated the necessity for an empirical approach, claiming that 'qualitative research focusing on narratives of leaders and followers seems to be needed' (2007, p.123), which stresses the value of rich data and what I read as a quest for thick description, going beneath the obvious and engaging with context (Geertz, 1973; Ponterotto, 2006) as a research strategy. Thus, their model aligns with both the ethnomethodological and phenomenological perspective applied in this project.

#### 5.6.5 The leader as a narrative identity bricoleur

As pointed out by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016), 'people create stories about themselves which form a meaningful context and which integrate the past, pre- sent and future in a time context' (p. 40). Following Mead's notion about identity (Mead, 1934) and how we ascribe meaning to our experiences retrospectively, and Garfinkel (1967), who talked about the sensemaking process as a retrospective-prospective sense of occurrence, it is implied that we travel in our minds, recollect experiences from our memory and organise them to make sense of the present. This perspective allows for understanding the leadership moments as occurring not linearly but across a linear perception of time.

Thus, a comprehensive collection of leadership moments is gradually generated, constituting a catalogue of moments available for the process of leadership identity construction. The leader is able to travel through the collection of experienced moments and pick elements from each moment and feed into the present. In this way, meaning can be ascribed to the identity of the leader both retrospectively and presently; through a present moment, the leader may ascribe a different set of meanings to a moment from the past, and vice versa. Thus, the many leadership moments with their different contexts and purposes can be ascribed new meanings and significance in regard to leadership identity retrospectively, as well as the present leadership moment can be understood in the light of the past. Ladkin identified this constant patchworking of meaning across time in the leadership project as ‘a hub of meaning-making’ (Ladkin, 2010, p. 181). This collection of leadership moments provides a leader with a broad palette of multiple experiences that can feed into the sensemaking of the present, where this sensemaking again feeds back to the leader’s past experiences. Here, I see the idea of the leader as bricoleur (Levi-Strauss, 1962) being an apt conceptualisation for the constant process where the leader, as part of constructing his or her identity, constantly and intuitively interprets and ascribes meaning to the present leadership moment through drawing on past leadership moment experiences.

In this context, the leader as bricoleur will be able to choose from different leadership moments and their different elements in the past, drawing upon a pool of resources in his or her narrative ecosystem constituted to make sense of him/herself as leader in the present moment. Thus, the narrative construction of leadership identity can be understood as a phenomenon that evolves through a stream of leadership moments, where the leader composes his or her identity palette based on many instantaneous acts that add meaning to his or her experiences, and where the past and the present conjoin as components in the identity construction.

I here see the leader as an active agent, constructing identity as leader, and improvising and composing identity as he or she continuously experiences new leadership moments. Leadership identity is understood as an ongoing constructive process where there are multiple identity resources to draw upon, transcending linear time and space, in which leadership language creates agency. Here, the leaders’ tales can be understood as an identity space where the leader can actively test and experiment with different types of stories, and thus, try out alternative identities or fragments of identities.

Such a view on leadership identity makes it possible to understand how leaders’ narratives on identity can encompass incongruence and dissonance, because the identity is not constructed out of one set of experiences or one leadership moment, but many across time, space and places, as

well as reflecting the feedback mechanism in the narrative ecology responding to feedback. The leader's identity proposal will be validated or dismissed, whereupon the creative ecosystem of narrative resources will be informed and engaged to calibrate and remodel the identity proposal.

Furthermore, as Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003, 2016) noted, fragmented identity work does not automatically imply the perception of a fragmented identity. On the contrary, as is also my point here, successful identity work can be successful namely because of its capacity to construct coherence out of fragments. As I understand it, this is because of the narrative ecology working through its resources to create a source for making sense. The stories on leadership identity in this project are a demonstration of such a narrative ecology. This is also because of the idea that ecosystems are able to develop in nonlinear and unpredictable manners, adapting to new circumstances (Hansen & Christensen, 1995). In the same manner, narrative leadership identities can be seen as able to adapt to shifting conditions.

In this regard, language can be viewed as a creative provider of agency in a leadership identity context. Such a perspective approaches the leader as an active constructor, or as Carroll and Levy (2010) suggested, 'as conscious subjects with the capacity to exercise choice' (p. 212). This allows for a perspective seeing the leaders as constructors of identities that resonate with the leaders' need to justify to themselves and to their environment their social rank, 'but also their sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy, and knowing better than others where to go or what to do' (Shamir, Dayan-Horesh, & Adler, 2005, p. 21).

#### 5.6.6 Leadership identity as a consumptive phenomenon

When we interpret metaphors, we must consider both the sociocultural and historical contexts of the speakers and how they apply metaphors in their use of language (Charteris-Black, 2004.) Accordingly, we must also examine 'the contexts in which metaphors occur, and the evidence that these contexts provide of speakers' intentions in using metaphors' (p.13). When examining the use of metaphors in this leadership context, it means that the phenomenon can also be approached as representing a particular lingo—as a jargon of leadership fashion. Einstein's famous quote 'Man tries to make for himself in the fashion that suits him best' (Einstein, 1954, p.2) fits well with a contemporary view of how metaphors can be deliberately used as artefacts in constructing leadership identity and in conducting leadership impression management (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Oberlechner & Meyer-Schönberger, 2002; Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006; Sørensen & Villadsen, 2017).

In this context, approaching leadership identity as Discourse and discursive practice implies an aspect that sees leadership identity as a popular fashion, in which the use of leadership metaphors can also be approached as a consumptive phenomenon. Metaphors are used in leadership language to fashion an attractive leadership image that can be utilised in impression management. In this particular project, the metaphors comply with how trust and self-trust are depicted as core components in the leaders' leadership identity. The metaphors match and strengthen the image of the leader as a master of trust and self-trust, creating leadership agency that offers a convincing identity proposal.

I see this aspect of the role of metaphors in a narrative ecology aligning with what Fleming and Sturdy (2009) identified as a fashionable management discourse in leadership. As a resource in the narrative ecosystem, the metaphor offers great potential for synthesising fragments and creative constructions of seemingly contradictory elements. Simultaneously, it creates a space for the leader to promote her leadership as a realisation of her own individuality. This latter aspect refers to the anti-establishment ideals from the 1968 youth rebellion that Sørensen and Villadsen (2017) connected to a fashionable management discourse.

In this current context where I tend to the identity aspect, I understand the influence of the 1968 rebellion Discourse to materialise particularly through the trust and self-trust dimension. In the leaders' stories, trust and self-trust do not only create agency that complies with the mastery of post-heroic leadership but also allow the leaders to realise themselves as an individual, aligning the emancipatory ideals of 1968, opposing formal power and hierarchical structures. Here, the leader can be seen as seeking to promote his or her independent and individual leadership identity 'by attending to the self and by discovering and expressing' her 'unique inner attributes' (Markus & Kitamaya, 1991, p.224). In this context, I see the leadership agency created by trust and self-trust as contributing to the creation of a leader's individual path that allows him or her to stand out from the crowd and be something special, representing something different than the 'leadership establishment'. In this regard, it seems reasonable to understand trust and self-trust as core components of leaders' self-realisation identity project.

In this way, leaders' self-realisation project and their post-heroic leadership project can be seen to mutually inform and fertilise each other. Again, the two Discourses clash, but at the same time they also re-energise. A great paradox loiters in the possible fact that in the post-heroic context, the more formal power a leader obtains through an institutionalised leadership position, and the more on top of the established hierarchy a leader is located, the greater the potential leadership

legitimacy becomes that rests in rejecting that same power and claiming emancipation from the hierarchy her or she reigns.

When this rebellious act simultaneously endorses the image of the sovereign heroic leader, the contradiction that constitutes the contemporary leadership identity construction becomes a highly convincing demonstration of how much of a social construction leadership is, and likewise, how ambiguous the significance of leadership is.

Concerning metaphors at work in local discursive practice, as well as the ambiguity in leadership as a concept, identity and social phenomenon, it is possible to understand this as relating the distinction between the etic versus the emic understanding of leadership as a concept, as emphasised by Blom and Alvesson (2015). Whereas the etic understanding of leadership departs from theoretical conceptualisations, the emic perspective addresses the empirical dimension of leadership as it is understood and conceptualised in local little d discursive practice. In this context, this implies that the metaphors in the leaders' stories can be understood to represent the emic view, stressing a local, post-heroic identity, whereas the big D Discourse provides the etic perspective, here promoting a heroic leadership ideal imposed by the predominant view on leadership in society.

Yet, there is no guarantee that the emic approach reveals a more truthful accuracy about leadership than the etic approach will, because emic discourse must be seen as potentially permeated by the etic; this is the constant dilemma that reigns when approaching from a social constructionist stance. The mutual effect from the dialectic between society's larger Discourse and the local discursive level is in perpetual motion—it is a never-ending story.

#### 5.6.7 Post-heroic leadership identity as a vulnerable construct

Another interesting and apparent dilemma that evolves from the foregoing discussion is how trust-based leadership relates to theories about authentic leadership. In leadership research concerned with leadership affiliated with the post-heroic leadership paradigm, the perception of trust appears as strongly related to the perception of authenticity (Clapp-Smith, Vogelgesang & Avey, 2009; Hassan & Ahmed, 2011; Walumbwa, Christensen & Hailey, 2011). The seven elements extracted from the leaders' stories in this project and the focus on the collective aspect and the downplaying of hierarchy and formal power and the accentuation of the individual leadership project all relate to the characteristics associated with authentic leadership (Guthey & Jackson, 2005; Luthans, Norman & Hughes, 2006), corresponding with the post-heroic ideal of leadership. However, as previously pointed out in this thesis, authenticity as it is applied in a leadership context can be



understood as a contradiction in terms, because it implies a forced self-awareness and much strategic effort in order to build authenticity (Gordon & Gilley, 2012; Guthey & Jackson, 2005). Hence, authenticity cannot be authentic but is an artificial construct (as opposed to 'natural' or not forced). This also implies that if trust depends on the perception of a leaders' authenticity, and authenticity is a risk laden concept in terms of trustworthiness, then trust-based leadership as it is accounted for here emerges as a very vulnerable identity project. Is trust-based leadership to be trusted as something else or different from other forms of leadership, or is it first and foremost performative rhetoric that aims at seduction rather than honesty and openness?

## Concluding notes

I have discussed aspects of the narrative ecology of trust and self-trust related to leadership identity constructions in a post-heroic leadership context. The aim has been to investigate how the dyadic coexistence of trust and self-trust in the leaders' stories can be understood to operate as an underlying potency in the leadership identity constructions.

The core discussion has focused on four main findings related to trust and self-trust in the leaders' stories. These are the downplaying of hierarchy and formal power, the absence of risk, the accentuation of individuality in leadership, and metaphors for trust and self-trust playing into the narratives on leadership identity. Based on an interpretative framework and building on a phenomenological and ethnomethodological perspective, I have expanded upon the phenomena in the leaders' stories related to trust and self-trust in an effort to provide a broadened understanding of their possible influence on leadership identity construction from a post-heroic perspective.

Applying a concept where I approach the leaders' stories as a narrative ecology of trust and self-trust in leadership identity constructions, I have shown how the idea of the phenomenological idea of the leadership moment as a model for leadership identity construction corresponds to such a narrative ecology, where the leaders operate as creative bricoleurs constructing their narrative identities by drawing upon resources in their narrative ecosystem. In this ecosystem, a compilation of leadership moments is available for the leader's identity work, where the leader aims to create a convincing, valid leadership identity proposal.

The discussion has attempted to elucidate what trust and self-trust represent in the leaders' stories, and what this dyad does to the identity constructions. My proposal is that they provide agency for post-heroic leadership mastery, replacing the agency associated with formal power and authority that links to traditional leadership ideas. At the same time, the discussion has dwelled on how the

heroic and post-heroic leadership paradigms operate as competing 'big D' Discourses, occurring side by side with the 'little d' discursive leadership identity context.

My main argument is that the agency facilitated by trust and self-trust can be understood as driven by notions upholding the ideal of the heroic leader. At the same time, metaphors at work in the local discursive practice underpin a post-heroic leadership ideal, wherein the leadership language applied in the leaders' stories can be seen as providing relief to the ambiguity in the leaders' identity project. The tension-filled contradiction between the heroic and post-heroic leadership 'big D' Discourse is resolved by metaphors in 'little d' discursive leadership practices that function as narrative rescue remedies, providing the leaders with identity resources that validate and stabilise their identity construct.

A potential eclipse in the literature on trust in leadership research was examined, wherein I pointed to the absence of risk in the empirical material in this project and asked how this nonappearance can be understood in a leadership identity context. I also examined how metaphors applied in the leadership language in the leaders' stories feed into this ambiguity. Lastly, I examined how the leadership identity construction project that materialises in this project can be understood in the light of a self-realisation, anti-establishment fashion in popular management.

# Chapter 6. Conclusion, research contribution and recommendations for future research

In the previous chapter, I discussed the main findings from the analysis in an attempt to explore the possible significance they represent. Consequently, I have approached leadership identity construction as a narrative phenomenon, dwelling particularly on the role that I see trust and self-trust play in the narrative ecology of leadership identity constructions. In this chapter, I will conclude upon the findings and the discussion.

This chapter begins with a summary of the study and its limitations, followed by a conclusion pointing to research contributions and recommendations for further research.

## 6.1 Summary of the study

The purpose of this research project was to explore operating dimensions in the construction of leadership identities. The project departed from an investigative lens directed towards leaders and how they depict their experiences with leadership, as well as from how they express their identity as leaders and ascribe meaning to their leadership experiences through life stories on leadership. The investigation related to theories on leadership identity construction and leadership agency, narrative identity and leadership language.

### 6.1.1 Methodological approach

The research built on qualitative data from a multiple case-study cast of 20 life-story interviews with leaders. The interviewees were selected based on a set of criteria to manage the scope and complexity of the study. The interviews were conducted over a time span of 9 months. The research was framed with an inductive, explorative design, and a phenomenological lens was applied. The interviews were guided by an appreciative inquiry approach using a semi-structured interview guide. After I transcribed, coded and axial-coded each theme within each case, the coding was followed up by a thematic cross-case analysis (Creswell, 2007). I then applied analytic bracketing as method to identify of the ‘whats and hows’ in the data to grasp the Discourse dimension in the discursive context.

The final analysis of the interview material was framed and presented as thematic interpretations in an attempt to condense and develop a blend of rich configurations relating to trust and self-trust

in leadership identity constructions. For the analysis, I applied narrative theory as a conceptual framing for how I approached the interpretation of data. As explained in Chapter 2, I took as a premise that narrative practices are vital in the construction of leadership identities, whereas ethnomethodology and phenomenology comprised the methodological basis for the interpretation. This means that the focus was not on the actual lives of the leaders but on the stories told by the leaders depicting their perception of their leadership identity, where I treated these stories as scripts at work at the time of their telling.

### 6.1.2 Limitations of the study

In this project, I focused on the role of trust and self-trust in narrative leadership identity constructions based on interviews with leaders. Considerable differences existed between all 20 of the leaders concerning both their personal background, formal education, the industry in which they are leaders and their experience as leaders seniority-wise. They contributed their stories at different times and places, in different contexts and in different stages of their career. These differences must be considered when interpreting the content. Likewise, the ontological and epistemological stance of the interpreter must also be an object for reflexive concern.

Concerning the selection of interviewees for this project, it should also be stressed that there could be many other relevant dimensions in these leaders' experience with leadership and their ideas about leadership identity than the ones that this project has discussed. My open-ended appreciative approach, inviting the leaders to tell me about their lifeworlds as leaders by raising the question 'what are leaders really talking about, when they talk about their experiences with leadership' was followed by a semi-structured interview guide with some topics that I wanted the leaders to respond to. A different set of questions with a different research question would probably have generated a different set of data. Most likely would the interview material also have ended up as different if I had chosen a more problematising approach or if inquiring into more particular aspects of leadership as phenomenon. Hence, the data that constitutes the basis for the present representation of leadership identity is just a very tiny snippet of a magnitude of potential stories about what it is that leaders talk about when they talk about their experiences with leadership. The ambivalence and inbuilt uncertainty of this project's is thus corresponding to the phenomenological and also social constructionist bias: There is no final answer to what leadership identity is. We can only grasp subtle snippets of an indefinite whole.

As a consequence of the interpretative nature of the current analysis and discussion, it follows that if read with a different lens and from a different angle, a different understanding of the present material would be probable. Other topics than those selected here could be identified and appear

as more crucial, leading to a different discussion generating other insights, and thus concluding with a different contribution to the field than what is the case of the present project. One such example of a topic that I recognised as clearly present in the empirical material of this thesis, but which I choose not to pursue further, is the dimension concerning emotion work in leadership language. When I have not elaborated on aspects like gender, class or other potential factors informing and influencing the leaders' lifeworld, it is justified by the fact that these aspects are not present in the leaders' stories as they were told to me. This does of course not imply that such factors are not present as part of the leaders' experience. However, they were not part of the dominating elements emerging as crucial dimensions as I worked with the data. I could of course have applied a circumspect care to the absence of elements like gender and class and elaborated on the significance of the lack of attention concerning these factors, in the leaders' stories. However, this would have altered my research question, from what leaders are talking about when they talk about their identity as leaders, to what leaders *are not* talking about, when they talk about their identity as leaders. To explore more knowledge about the muted aspects of the leaders' lifeworld could obviously bring new perspectives and insights concerning leadership identity construction as a narrative and also performative project. However, such an inquiry has not been the aim of this project.

The cultural aspect related to the Norwegian context is another important dimension that also relates to the whats and hows in the leadership stories conveyed in this project. When trust is evolving as a dominating dimension in the narratives, this could be understood in the light of the Norwegian leadership Discourse both in the popular and public domain, and in academia. The concept of trust-based leadership as a particular niche within leadership technology has emerged as a concept that is being promoted, embraced and adapted, seemingly without much critical inquiry. As an illustration, the municipality of Oslo Norway's capital, has introduced trust-based leadership as the municipality's official leadership foundation<sup>4</sup>.

The explanations for why trust-based is gaining such popularity and attention in a Norwegian leadership context could be multifaceted and many. It is not within the scope of this thesis to investigate the reason for popularity concerning trust-based leadership in a Norwegian leadership context, but when trust is emerging as predominant in the leaders' stories, one influencing factor could be that leadership in a Norwegian context historically is strongly linked to the term trust, as Norway is known for its' unique trust-based model of cooperation between worker's unions,

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.oslo.kommune.no/dok/Byr/2017/BR2/2017023100-1711490.pdf>

employers' unions and the government<sup>5</sup> (Hernes, Grimsrud & Hippe, 2006). In light of the Norwegian, historical context, trust as term can thus be understood as representing a notion about trust as institutionalised in leadership language and also as an attractive quality in leadership. However, this remains a speculation, though it can perhaps shed some light on the question regarding why trust is so heavily accentuated in the stories presented here, while trust is not as predominating in other empirical studies on leadership identity (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016).

Furthermore, as the data that makes the foundation for this project is based on the leaders' point of view only, the scope of the empirical material represents a clear limitation in terms of how the findings can be generalised upon the behalf of the follower's stance. Furthermore, it does not allow for any conclusions concerning trust and self-trust in leadership practice. A mixed method approach with participant observation and interviews with followers would clearly have constituted a different basis for interpretation.

As indicated by Shamir, Dayan-Horesh and Adler (2005), a latent danger with story-based research is the biased selection of narratives used to magnify the researcher's own notions about the matter in question. Even if this project was highly inductive throughout its progress, wherein the themes of trust and self-trust emerged as crucial to examine as the stories accumulated, and even if I aimed at being aware of my own preconceived ideas about leadership, I cannot eliminate the risk that the selected topics still represent a biased choice.

Concerning a biased selection, there is also an aspect of seduction intrinsic to the narrative inquiry as method (Riessman, 2012), meaning the experience of being drawn to the captivating, enthralling encounter. Stories attract us because of their charming, seductive effect. Riessman described how the sensations of desire, seduction and pleasure operate as agentic forces in the qualitative interview setting (2012, p. 555). Building on this idea, the selection of stories made for this project can probably also partially be seen as a consequence of such a seduction; I have engaged with that which has attracted my interest, fascination and curiosity in the leaders' narratives, not only based on topics emerging in the stories that I discovered to be less explored in leadership literature but also on how I responded to the particular wording and talent for appealing storytelling demonstrated by the leaders. Recognising that language does something to us, bringing on both affect and effect, it would appear naïve not to think that the leaders' language did something to me. Yet, I have aimed to treat the transcribed stories with an academic eye,

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<sup>5</sup>The Norwegian term for this collaborative model between the parties is 'trepartssamarbeidet', also often referred to as 'the Norwegian model' ('den norske modellen').

paying attention to what I found to be of particular research interest. This means that there are passages in the conversations that have been left out, even if they did represent seductive linguistics.

Additionally, to rephrase Shamir and colleagues (2005), even if I have strived to present an accurate account of the themes as they emerged in the leaders' stories, there is hardly any instrument to effectively rule out the possibility that this project is also about scholarly self-justification and self-presentation. In that regard, to validate the findings and claims of this thesis, the data material would benefit from further analysis.

## 6.2 Conclusion

I started this thesis by invoking March and Weil: What beauty and ugliness can we discover in the existence, practice and consequence of leadership? Pursuing leadership language applied in stories told by leaders, this journey has led to the discovery of two crucial types of feature in leadership identity constructions: trust and self-trust.

This project aims to show how leadership language as a constituent of leadership identity builds on strong notions about trust and self-trust as vital assets in the construction of a post-heroic leadership identity. Throughout the foregoing analysis and discussion, I have aimed to demonstrate how trust and self-trust are crucial resources in the leaders' identity construction project, showing how the concepts occupy a primary space in the leadership language applied. I have indicated how the leaders draw upon a pool of resources in their narrative ecology, to fashion what I understand as a leadership identity that answers to the post-heroic leadership paradigm. I have demonstrated how the leaders see themselves implementing trust and self-trust in their leadership by downplaying formal hierarchical power in their role.

The discussion highlights the great paradox that I see in the discursive leadership context, where the heroic and post-heroic Discourse perform as competing partners in the discursive leadership, both at play in the leaders' stories simultaneously. My main point is that in spite of a leadership language promoting the image of the post-heroic leader in discursive leadership contexts, the notion of the leader as hero continues to penetrate the narrative ecology as it emerges in these stories. Rephrasing March and Weil, trust and self-trust can be understood as an ambivalent work of both the beauty and the beast in leadership; the seductive power in the metaphors applied to describe the post-heroic leadership identity in this current project convey a certain kind of beauty. In addition, this attractiveness builds on notions about relational symmetry, equality and compassion for the collective, meaning that power and supremacy representing asymmetrical

power relations are camouflaged through the use of leadership language, rather than being challenged.

On the basis of this claim, on a more speculative note it could be questioned whether this could indicate that the post-heroic leadership paradigm is more a matter of a fashion management jargon, wherein a new leadership language fashion is camouflaging and revitalising the old heroic leadership ideal rather than replacing it. As Sinclair argued, leadership is still frequently built on ‘collusive seduction’ (2007; p. 5). In that regard, the discussion addressed the potential allurements in the post-heroic leadership language as it materialised here. Grint (2010) pinpointed how leadership scholars now appear to be seduced by the post-heroic paradigm as binary to the heroic.

Another apparent aspect developing on the grounds of the discussion is related to how the leaders in their narrative ecology of trust and self-trust convey ideas that could be interpreted as a sustained colonisation of the employee as the Other (Westwood & Linstead, 2001), thereby speaking against the authenticity of a post-heroic leadership identity as it is being expressed in the stories presented here. The colonisation aspect lingers in how the leaders never question whether they are entitled to the power they execute and how they execute it with their employees. By contrast, they highlight their individual capabilities as a prerequisite for the mastery of the leadership role. Therefore, the way this is accounted for in the stories, I understand the underlying premise for how the leaders portray their leadership identity as one that takes the leaders’ sovereignty for granted. As part of this, they also refer to essentialist notions about their leadership capabilities. When March and Weil (2007) write about how ideas about leadership are ‘tied to ancient mythic stories that frame modern understandings’, I find the narratives on leadership identity presented here to be illustrations of how such ancient myths about the heroic leader persist to influence contemporary post-heroic leadership language and how post-heroic leadership agency is depicted. The mythical bonds surrounding leadership as a social phenomenon are still strong.

Following a power perspective, another key issue emerges; it seems relevant to speculate about the consequence of the notion of trust and self-trust as prerequisite for leadership agency in post-heroic leadership. If trust and self-trust are perceived as vital leadership virtues that provide for leadership agency, and this agency can only materialise through relational employee intimacy, it follows that formal power associated with leadership agency as well as leadership bureaucracy could be under pressure. The quest for a post-heroic leadership could jeopardise the official power structures that regulate organisational life and provide prediction and structure. In contemporary organisations with a workplace culture built on ideas about inclusion, equality, transparency and



democracy, it does not seem far-fetched to suggest that such an intimacy-based leadership ideal could end up generating lesser trust in the leadership at an institutional level, instigate nepotism and accentuate the degree of alienation with followers. In other words, it would be contraproductive and destructive for society. Hence, in the light of the post-heroic leadership paradigm, the dominant role of trust and self-trust in the leadership identity construction as demonstrated here, promoted as always doing good, carries both ambiguity and risk.

To further this point, and as Sørensen and Villadsen (2017) pinpointed, the contemporary management fashion promoting antiauthoritarian leadership and nonhierarchical structures in modern work life organisations can be a facilitator for leadership bullying and abuse of power. This implies that the more the formal aspect of hierarchy and power is downplayed by the leader, as we see in this project, the greater the need for ethical awareness and self-reflection by the leader. In a leadership context, power does not lose significance as a social phenomenon that affects people and society simply because it is being renamed or wrapped in a new leadership language.

Romantic notions about the expectations of the leaders as a superstar place the leader on a rhetoric pedestal, set in a constant ‘mission impossible’ position. On the one hand, the leader is expected to direct and execute with decisive efficiency in an all the while more complex reality with new constraints and volatile circumstances, putting the leadership mandate under pressure. The expectations on what a leader should accomplish on behalf of the organisation are abundant. In this regard, the heroic ideal is still living strong. On the other hand, the post-heroic leadership ideal expects the leader to continuously facilitate trust and foster a distribution of leadership with convincing authenticity, translucent in power, to empower his or her employees. The stories presented here work as an illustration of this, showing how the leaders’ primary mandate is thought of as providing rich seeds for the employees; thus, they can greenhouse meaningful senses in a compassionate work environment, in which the leader is a mother, a midwife, an orchestrator and a facilitator.

From this pedestal, we see leaders tumble. Leaders become involved in corruption and fraud, they make fatal mistakes and fail to meet the expectations for being attentive towards their employees’ well-being. Leaders burn out and disappear. On the leadership skyline, superstars turn into supernovas, yet the romantic notion continues to perforate leadership language on big D and little d levels. This is why, from a research outlook, it makes sense to ask what language does to the construction of leadership identities—in the realms of leadership’s reality.

Furthermore, as Levay (2018) has stressed, building on Sørensen and Villadsen (2017), a contemporary management fashion that encourages unconventional, antihierarchical leadership provides the leader with the opportunity to cherry-pick, claiming legitimacy in harvesting from both the heroic and the post-heroic paradigm. On one side, the leader can rebel against established norms for leadership in a belief that this builds legitimacy as leader. In this project, this is illustrated by how Louise, who leads an acclaimed national research institution, talks about how she ignores formal hierarchy and procedures, pointing to this aspect as proof of both trust and self-trust in her leadership. On the other side, the leader can simultaneously show her formal mandate as a justification of her rebellious act.

Concerning the downplaying of formal power interpreted as a rebellious act, where this is understood as opposing institutionalised hierarchy, along with the accentuation of the leader's individual genuineness, this perspective links to Discourses on modern work life and identity; here it is possible to understand leadership identity as a quest for validation of one's worth and belonging in society. In contemporary knowledge-driven economies (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2003), where status is based on work and income and no longer ascribed but achieved, the accomplishment of a leadership role can be understood as the ultimate proof of social legitimacy and success. Thus, the leadership identity project becomes a quest for validating one's genuine worth and importance as an individual.

At the same time, within the post-heroic leadership paradigm there exists a grand paradox jeopardising this legitimacy: the leadership identity as a status achievement carries significance, namely because it communicates hierarchical supremacy. If this supremacy is downplayed to too great of an extent, the significance of the achievement is reduced. Applying such a perspective, the post-heroic leadership identity can be understood as a construct reigned by a double-bind ambiguity, leaving the leader in a liminal position where the final validation of identity becomes impossible. The overarching big D Discourse, imposing a heroic leadership ideal, is thus all the time challenging the little d discursive practice, making the promotion and validation of a post-heroic leadership identity in discursive leadership a fragile project.

Concerning the leaders' quest for validating their individual uniqueness as a premise for their leadership identity construction, there is another point I would like to make: the leaders in this project all have the urge to have their genuine capabilities as leaders validated, in common. At the same time, this quest for uniqueness is what unites them and make them alike.

In this regard, Foucault's distinction between Discourse and discursive practices pinpoints how leaders, in their effort to construct a convincing identity proposal, are exposed to the possibility of 'becoming passive receptors of meaning as much as they are its managers and transformative agents' (Fairhurst 2008, p. 510). It is a dilemma that the leader is challenged to comply with what seems like a mission impossible, if one looks to what Blom and Alvesson have termed 'pop-management writings' (2015, p. 483), where the identity construct in the heroic and post-heroic interface continues to be a liminal topography.

## Research contributions

This project represents a contribution both empirically and theoretically within the field of leadership research.

Building on qualitative life-story interviews with 20 executive leaders, this project represents an empirical contribution within qualitative leadership studies. Previous research within the qualitative domain has addressed leadership identity construction, departing from a similar data material as empirical foundation (e.g. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a; Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). However, the investigation of trust and self-trust in a leadership identity construction context represents a thematic novelty, and I have attempted to elucidate how these two phenomena play a role in the post-heroic leadership identity context.

The theoretical contribution of this project addresses a gap in the leadership literature on the experience with trust and self-trust as an emic phenomenon in leadership research, disclosing what I see as an eclipsed Discourse on trust in a leadership identity context, where self-trust as an empirical phenomenon occurring in leadership identity construction is absent, as well as in theory. The findings as they are presented and treated in the discussion, point way towards a potential for exploring trust and self-trust in leadership identity context as empirical phenomena, to gain more knowledge about how trust and self-trust perform as narrative building material in the post-heroic leadership landscape. Hence, the present theoretical contribution is not positioned with research trust or self-trust as such, but rather, leadership identity construction is the core focus for investigative attention, while trust and self-trust are to be understood as phenomenological findings that help to make sense of the identity construction work being explored.

Furthermore, I have developed the concept of a narrative ecology of trust and self-trust in leadership identity constructions as a way to add perspectives to leadership identity as a narrative construct. With an eclectic approach, this concept is merged with a phenomenological model of leadership identity and identity theory from social psychology. Through the use of this conceptual

constellation, I have suggested that in the narrative leadership identity project, the leader can be understood as a creative bricoleur, and that the narrative ecology makes it possible for the leader to select from leadership moments across time and place in the construction of a valid leadership identity.

The concept of a narrative ecology allows for an understanding of how contradictions and competing Discourses are moderated and calibrated within a narrative ecosystem that is self-regulating on the basis of an advanced feedback mechanism, where the constant moulding of identity is an ongoing process because of this feedback, and where identity is a contextual and relational phenomenon.

## Recommendations for future research

Upon completing this work, questions arose from the discussion that remained unanswered, promoting further research. I see this project is an embryonic beginning of the investigation of the role of trust and self-trust in leadership identity constructions in a post-heroic context. As argued in this thesis, within the field of leadership studies I have found the research literature concerning the dyad of trust and self-trust in leadership identity constructions in a post-heroic context to be scarce.

Yet, as the references for this work demonstrate, there is a notable list of literature examining the post-heroic identity discourse in leadership, also signed by the qualitative stance. As Fletcher (2004) pinpointed, notions about asymmetrical power relations often tend to be masked in the post-heroic discourse. As part of this, the gender dimension is often disguised. This point is of particular relevance for this project, because I found gender to be a rarely mentioned topic in the leaders' stories. Consequently, having commented on the importance of that which is absent in leadership language, gender represents an aspect of leadership language and narrative constructions of leadership identity that could have been pursued.

The concept of trust-based leadership has emerged as a popular technology within the popular leadership consulting industry, along with international business schools now offering management- and leadership-development programmes and education advocating trust-based leadership (Kuvaas, 2017). Yet, scant research has addressed the significance of trust—or self-trust—in a leadership identity context, nor is there much empirical knowledge on the consequences of adapting a trust-based paradigm in leadership. This indicates the need for more research into the domains of trust and self-trust in a post-heroic leadership context, particularly with a qualitative lens.

Because this project does not consider the follower perspective, the data do not allow for the validation of whether the leaders' narrative identity proposals correspond to their leadership practice, neither does this project confirm whether the depictions of trust and self-trust in the leader's identity proposals match how this is perceived among their followers. Both researchers, lecturers and practitioners would benefit from knowing more about what trust and self-trust mean to leadership in an organisational context, as well as what implications for practice the post-heroic trust- and self-trust paradigms entail.

This domain calls for further investigations. In this regard, it would be relevant to investigate the potential sources that leaders draw upon in their quest for models that can provide them with guidance on how to build and manage leadership legitimacy through convincing identity proposals. In particular, it would be relevant to learn more about the influence that contemporary leadership development and training programmes may have in this context. In that regard, the dimension concerning emotion work in leadership language which is latent in the empirical material presented here, and which I see as closely related to the tension between the heroic and the post-heroic leadership identity Discourse, could also be an interesting research topic to pursue.

Throughout the analysis and discussion, various paragraphs related to trust and self-trust in leadership that point to the domain of aesthetic leadership (Hansen, Ropo, & Sauer, 2007), which here means aesthetics related to the felt, subjective experience rooted in sensory perception. Where the leaders depict their own aesthetic experience as a means to assess and confirm the validity of their proposed leadership identity, it would be of relevance to investigate this aspect both from the leaders' and followers' point of view. Here, Garfinkel's (1963) notion on trust, where he sees trust as a deeply phenomenological, aesthetic occurrence, could be empirically tested. For example, do followers perceive the trust and self-trust dimension in leadership as the leaders seem to trust that they do? If so, how do followers assess trust and self-trust in leadership? Following Ladkin (2010), a magnitude of contexts, purposes and followers will influence the leaders' identity construction. A further exploration of this magnitude bears the potential for greater insights into the particular experience that moulds contemporary leadership identities within the post-heroic paradigm.

An important note on the abovementioned argument is of course that the multiplicity of leadership moments and their potential for feeding into the construction of leadership identity are not perceived from the leaders' point of view only. If the leader is a creative bricoleur in the identity construction, so is the follower as interpreter and assessor of the identity proposal. For the

followers, what they with and among themselves define or understand as a defining leadership moment in terms of what adds legitimacy to the leadership identity can be completely different from the leaders' perception.

This leads us towards identity regulation dynamics between followers and leaders. Clearly, the perception of followers' identities arising from the multiplicity of what would be 'the follower's moment' can be diverging, incongruent and paradoxical, and just as comprehensive as it is for the leader. A continuation of this addendum pertains outside the scope of this project, yet I find it worthwhile to underline that even if this project concentrates on the leaders' perspective, it does not mean that other aspects tied to this practice are not relevant or without importance for understanding how leadership identity is constructed, performed, proposed and perceived.

## Implications for practice

This study has identified issues that could bear implications for practice, both for scholars within the leadership field, for leadership consultants and educators, and for leadership practitioners. One apparent implication is that leadership language applied in the post-heroic leadership identity context should be further examined with a critical eye. The leader as an institution and concept in society in many settings continues to be ascribed a status that places him or her on a pedestal. This is illustrated by the argument that is often used to justify why a leader's salary should be extraordinarily generous, which is that an extravagant salary is necessary to attract the best leaders (e.g., Bragelien, 2017).

This idea about the leader as a superhuman who deserves to be treated exclusively and differently from the ordinary employee seems to have solid roots in contemporary society. Recent cases with union workers' organisations that represent workers' rights illustrate that this notion is strongly embedded in contemporary society (Nrk, 2015). I see the notion of the heroic leader so rooted in the public leadership debate that it could be viewed as a Discourse in a wider context, if one considers the language used to describe the role and value of leadership as a socioeconomic establishment in society. Therefore, in a post-heroic leadership identity context, from a research perspective, it could be relevant to pursue what seems to be the myth of heroic leadership, often materialising as highly hierarchically justified privileges for the leader, and pay further attention to how this myth continues to influence leadership, leaders and followers, as well as organisational life.

As quoted at the beginning of Chapter 3, Richardson (1990) argued that with a narrative perspective, researchers' skills and privileges can be used to empower the people object for study.

In this particular context, one form of such empowerment could imply that leaders become more aware of how a particular leadership language create agency – but also, how that particular leadership language simultaneously also hinders agency. Consequently, the choice of leadership language that one chooses for his or her leadership will make a difference to what kind of agency he or she can create as a leader. For leadership consultant and educators, who in their role also contribute to the leadership Discourse as leadership fashionistas, this means that the self-reflexive and ethical aspect imbedded in the contemporary leadership role, and how leadership language fashion ideas about the leadership role, should be stressed and pursued. In particular, this awareness should concern the use of leadership language and how this kind of language represents the execution of power and hierarchical positioning, and potentially also works as collusive seduction on the cost of employee well-being and democracy.

As Nyberg and Sveningsson (2014) asserted, practitioner-oriented journals are often promoters of an ideological bias. The new leadership fashion can be understood as a result of this ideology, where the image of authentic leadership is branded as a recipe for successful leadership. As demonstrated in this project, the leaders draw comprehensively upon metaphors associated with authentic leadership as part of their narrative ecology. However, as argued in the discussion, the notion of authentic leadership is in itself a paradox. Therefore, leadership consultants and educators should aim to address this paradox with leaders to encourage ethical self-reflection concerning the leadership role in a wider context.

Ideas about the fostering of trust and self-trust in a post-heroic leadership that implicitly build the image of the sovereign leader context should likewise be investigated and questioned for their ideological bias (Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006). The leader's identity proposal often implies a narcissistic force, building on the ideological glorification of leaders in contemporary leadership discourse. Much evidence discloses how leadership and leaders continue to be recognised as 'the search for the (illusory) core set of heroic qualities, abilities or competencies that will enable the development of leaders to achieve levels of supreme leadership and organizational performance' (Ford, 2015, p. 26). The findings of the current project stress the importance of pursuing what post-heroic leadership language as an identity construct actually conveys as well as camouflages.

Furthermore, leadership practitioners should be encouraged to examine their own bias concerning the leadership role in general, in particular how they make use of leadership language, both as a means to justify their use of power in this role and disguise their struggles to comply with the dominant leadership ideal, be it implicitly or explicitly. As Gronn (2006) stated, narrowly convergent representations of leaders as super figures are a delusive simplification of a

complex reality. Thus, the term ‘superleadership’, originally launched as an alternative to the heroic paradigm (Manz & Sims, 1991) appear to be a rhetorical paradox built on romanticism more than reality concerning the realms of contemporary leadership identity discourse.

Hence, leadership practitioners should request reflexive tools to embrace complexity and not buy into leadership jargon that conceals intricacy instead of investigating it. Similarly, ideas about post-heroic leadership identity as well as impression management strategies used to promote this as an attractive ideal should be challenged and tested against motives that may stem from notions about the leader as hero. The rhetoric maelstrom of the heroic and post-heroic Discourse continues to glorify the ideal while simultaneously pushing the limits of what can be sustainable leadership in the long run. Much indicates that it is time to come down from the pedestals and seek solid ground.



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# Appendix

1 Interview guide

2 Overview of transcribed interviews

# Interview guide

## **Stories about being a leader – experiences with leadership**

Semi-structured interview guide

Maria Lundberg  
PhD project

This is an interview with ....

**Name:**

**Date:**

### **Introduction:**

First of all, I want to say thank you for wanting to contribute to my PhD research project. It is something I value a lot, and it means a lot to me that you specifically said yes to contribute because you in the capacity of your experience as a top leader from your industry / business will be able to add valuable reflections and perspectives.

This interview will be a so called semi-structured interview. This means that I have chosen some main topics that will be guiding my questions and our conversation, and that will be the same for all the interviews I will do with the leaders I meet with. The semi-structures interview will give you the chance to reflect and talk freely, and if you like, also dwell with subjects and points you yourself think are valuable for you to elaborate on in more depth.

I want to encourage you to feel free to follow the thematic associations you may have during the conversation in regard to topics and my guiding questions. The interview will last for approximately 60 minutes, more or less. I will take responsibility for managing the time and the direction of the interview, so that you fully can dedicate your attention to what is your contribution today; to share your experiences and reflections.

The interview will focus on your experience with leadership and that of being a leader, and what is meant by leadership and by being a leader, the way you see it.

Some practical details: The interview will be recorded as data for my PhD research project with CBS. The original interview file will be kept safe and only used for research purposes. You will be able to receive a copy of the recorded interview and the interview transcript if you like. If you at any time feel like cancelling the interview or you regret your contribution and want to withdraw from the project, that is of course completely okay. All personal data will be anonymized for the sake of personal information privacy. If I should wish to use the data from our conversation in a future context for any other purpose than for my PhD thesis, I will not do so without asking for your consent.

Do you have any questions before we start? You may also ask questions during the interview as we go along if there is anything you want to ask about.

1. Could you first start with telling me about your background and also about your educational background?
2. Could you tell me about your career as a leader – when and where was your first job as a leader, første lederjobb, and what has been your career as a leader since then and till' today?
3. Can you tell if there was a particular moment when you knew that you wanted to be a leader or when you decided that you wanted to become a leader?

(If yes, was there one or more specific experiences which contributed to your decision?)

4. Could you tell me about: What it is that motivates you to be a leader?

(Has there been one or more experiences that triggered this motivation?)

5. Could you tell me about: What it is that inspire your ideas about leadership?
6. Regarding leadership and your own way of exercising leadership, do you have any particular role models as a reference for your own leadership?
7. Could you tell me about: How do these ideas / role models influence you as a leader and your leadership in your everyday life as a leader?
8. Could you tell me about what you consider to be the most important qualities as a leader and in your leadership?

Could you tell me: Did you have any particular experiences that made you recognise these qualities as important in your leadership?

9. Could you tell me about: What would you say is efficient leadership to you?

10. Could you tell me about: What would you say is the biggest challenge with being a leader?
11. Could you tell me about: What would you say is the most important thing in order for you to be able to be an efficient leader?
12. Could you tell me about: How would you describe the importance of your employees for your way of being a leader? Would you say that the employees influence on you as a leader and your leadership? (If yes, how? If no, how?)
13. Could you tell me about, if you ever had an experience with being in the «flow zone» as a leader, an experience with having success as a leader? If yes, could you describe that experience?
14. Could you tell me about: If you ever have had an experience with being in the opposite zone of the «flow zone» as a leader, when you didn't have success as a leader? If yes, could you describe that experience? Did you do anything in order to cope with that experience?
15. Could you tell me about: How do you know that what you do as a leader, works?
16. Could you tell me about: In what way would you say that you as a leader and your leadership makes a difference?

## Overview of transcribed interviews / pages

	Role /position	Sex (M/F) &	Sector	Industry	Location	Lenght	Pages
1	Founder and CEO	M 68 F 65	Private	Fashion & art	West coast of Norway /	0:55:88	19
2	CEO	F 52	Government	Culture	Oslo, Norway	0:52:30	14
3	CEO	F 57	Government	Public health authority	Oslo, Norway	0:45:40	14
4	Director	F 62	Public	Medical research	South central Norway	01:13:40	22
5	CEO	M 53	Public	Culture	West coast of Norway	01:12:52	20
6	Director	M 53	NGO	Welfare	South-west coast of	01:24:17	25
7	Founder and CEO	M 41	Private	Fashion	Oslo, Norway /	0:50:07	15
8	CEO	M 59	Public	Education	Oslo, Norway	0:55:29	19
9	CEO	F 47	Private	Media industry	Oslo, Norway	0:45:23	10
10	Director	M 53	Government	Safety authority	West coast, Norway	01:02:32	18
11	CEO	M 58	Private	Innovation and research	South-west coast,	01:08:52	17
12	CEO	F 70	Government	NGO Culture	Oslo, Norway /	01:18:11	26
13	Secretary general	M 57	NGO	NGO Lifestyle	Oslo, Norway	0:58:09	19
14	CEO	M 51	Private	Hospital	Oslo, Norway	01:14:06	17
15	CEO	F 42	Public	Culture	Oslo, Norway	0:53:08	13
16	CEO	M 47	Private	Arts & education	South-west coast,	01:12:02	15
17	Director	F 39	Private	Finance and banking	Oslo, Norway /	0:47:52	13
18	Director	M 48	Private	Healthcare	Oslo, Norway	01.20.26	14
19	Director	M 53	Public	Food industry &	Oslo, Norway	01:13:77	21
20	Director	M 68	Public	Medical services	North of Norway /	01:18:22	15
Total number of transcribed pages A4							336



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An Exploration of first-mover advantages among Danish e-grocers through a resource perspective*
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A Critical Political Economy Perspective*
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23. Line Gry Knudsen  
*Collaborative R&D Capabilities*  
*In Search of Micro-Foundations*

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|--|---|
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| <p>1. Yen Tran<br/><i>Organizing Innovation in Turbulent Fashion Market<br/>Four papers on how fashion firms create and appropriate innovation value</i></p> <p>2. Anders Raastrup Kristensen<br/><i>Metaphysical Labour<br/>Flexibility, Performance and Commitment in Work-Life Management</i></p> <p>3. Margrét Sigrún Sigurdardóttir<br/><i>Dependently independent<br/>Co-existence of institutional logics in the recorded music industry</i></p> <p>4. Ásta Dis Óladóttir<br/><i>Internationalization from a small domestic base:<br/>An empirical analysis of Economics and Management</i></p> <p>5. Christine Secher<br/><i>E-deltagelse i praksis – politikernes og forvaltningens medkonstruktion og konsekvenserne heraf</i></p> <p>6. Marianne Stang Våland<br/><i>What we talk about when we talk about space:</i></p> | <p>10. Susanne Boch Waldorff<br/><i>Emerging Organizations: In between local translation, institutional logics and discourse</i></p> <p>11. Brian Kane<br/><i>Performance Talk<br/>Next Generation Management of Organizational Performance</i></p> <p>12. Lars Ohnemus<br/><i>Brand Thrust: Strategic Branding and Shareholder Value<br/>An Empirical Reconciliation of two Critical Concepts</i></p> <p>13. Jesper Schlamovitz<br/><i>Håndtering af usikkerhed i film- og byggeprojekter</i></p> <p>14. Tommy Moesby-Jensen<br/><i>Det faktiske livs forbindtlighed<br/>Førsokratisk informeret, ny-aristotelisk ήθος-tænkning hos Martin Heidegger</i></p> <p>15. Christian Fich<br/><i>Two Nations Divided by Common Values<br/>French National Habitus and the Rejection of American Power</i></p> |

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*Processer, sammenhængskraft og fleksibilitet*  
*Et empirisk casestudie af omstillingsforløb i fire virksomheder*
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*Markets of Good Intentions*  
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The Contingent Value of Networked Collaboration*
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An application to China*
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Et eksplorativt studie af bygningers rolle i virksomheders værdiskabelse*
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- A Complexity Approach*
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En undersøgelse af det intense arbejdsliv*
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in Accelerated Medical Relationships*

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Et casestudie om styring og menings-  
skabelse i relation til CSR ud fra en  
intern optik*
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finansieringsudgifter  
En skatteretlig analyse af SEL §§ 11,  
11B og 11C*
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Models  
Their Merits and Sophistication  
across Contexts*
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En analyse af dansk skatteret*
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Evidence from Danish Micro Data*
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covered, by the Public Sector Directive"*
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- patientfigurer i hospitalets strategiske  
kommunikation*
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Studied in the context of medical  
device activities at the pharmaceutical  
company Novo Nordisk A/S in the  
period 1980-2008*
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Corporate Branding?  
A study of corporate branding  
strategies at Novo Nordisk*
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Multinational Enterprise*
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Inclusive Schools*
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from Annual General Meetings*
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Responsibility Bureaucracy*
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Reporting decision and content of the  
report*
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- an understanding anchored  
in pragmatism*
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*Social Enterprises and the Poor  
Enhancing Social Entrepreneurship and  
Stakeholder Theory*



- |   |   |
|---|---|
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*Dansk CFC-beskatning*  
*I et internationalt og komparativt perspektiv*
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*En kortlægning af styringsmæssig kontekst, strategisk tilgang, samt anvendte redskaber og teknologier for udvalgte danske statslige styrelser*
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*EGENTLIG SELVLEDELSE*  
*En ledelsesfilosofisk afhandling om selvledelsens paradoksale dynamik og eksistentielle engagement*



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|--|---|
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|--|---|

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|---|---|
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Government Data  
Uncovering the Generative Mechanisms  
of Open Data through a Mixed  
Methods Approach*
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Digital-Technology Companies*
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Governance  
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of Public Managers' Struggles  
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lederskab af store byudviklingsprojekter*
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Contingencies for Value Creation*
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User Experience*
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Regime? A critical assessment of Fair  
Trade through the examination of the  
Argentinean wine industry*
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in Quality work*
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Business Model Innovation in the  
Global Context  
Entrepreneurship-Enabled Dynamic  
Capability of Medium-Sized  
Multinational Enterprises*
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Structure in Value Chain Configuration  
A Contribution to Strategic Cost  
Management*



**2016**

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En kvalifikation af ledelsesmuligheder for at forebygge sygefravær ved psykiske problemer.*
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juridisk konflikt om ejendomsretten*
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Finance for the Arts*
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directives: A semiotic approach to the  
sentence forms chosen by British,  
Danish and Russian speakers in native  
and ELF contexts*
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Markets for Power System Flexibility*
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Conditions, and Performance  
Implications*
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Intellectual Capital in Business  
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Southeast Asia in global perspective  
(1880s–1970s)*

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|--|--------------------|--|
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|-----|---|-------------|---|
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## 2019

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BASED ON ADMINISTRATIVE  
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