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Constructing leadership identities through stories

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Abstract

This article analyzes the construction of leadership identities through stories found in four narrative interviews from a qualitative study and leadership development project based on social constructionism and action learning. We argue that leadership development and the construction of leadership identities in a postmodern paradigm are based on the negotiation and co-construction of meanings, relationships, and stories. The following questions are investigated: What happens when a group of leaders from different organizations construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct their identity as leaders through narrative interviews about their challenges as leaders? In addition, how do these discursive constructions restrict or enable new perspectives, other voices, and the possibilities for learning and change? Our analysis identified traces of both modern and postmodern leadership discourses. We suggest that the concept of coauthoring is useful in developing leadership and leadership identities through reflexive dialogs and emerging stories.

Introduction

Leadership has been transformed by globalization and postmodernity. Leadership is moreover part of an ever-changing social and historical discourse (Deetz, 2001). Classic bureaucratic managers, we claim, tend to overlook the opportunities offered by sense making, storytelling, and relational skills in solving organizational challenges in a complex globalized network society (Castells, 2009). The human and social conditions in today's organizations require a rethinking of leadership, away from hierarchical structures and toward social networks in which leaders and employees work together fluidly and interchangeably to find new ways of solving tasks. We consider social constructionism (Gergen, 1994, 2009) as an adequate theoretical framework for understanding and developing leadership. From this perspective, we argue that leadership and leadership identity are coauthored in social processes of meaning and story construing by using language and communication to interpret lived experience in the daily stream of ever-changing situations, processes, and relations in organizations. This means that leadership and leadership identity are complex and fluid, and are hard to get to grips with as

they emerge from situated dialogs. At the same time, the discursive constructions of leadership and leadership identity greatly impact relationships, work culture, collaboration, and outcomes when words, discourses, and stories are realized as actions in the dynamic processes of organizational life. These can broadly be characterized as possibilities to close down or open up (Gergen & Gergen, 2003, p. 143) to new discourses, perspectives, voices, and to learn and change in relationships, positions, and daily leader practice. Based on narrative interviews, we examine how leaders from different organizations in an action learning group discursively construct their challenges as leaders, as well as their leadership identities, and subsequently coauthor new stories and possibilities. Our aim was to establish an action learning group among leaders and researchers for collaboration on developing leadership. The means for this are reflection, deconstruction (Johnson, 1994; Derrida, 1997), learning and, subsequently, reconstruction of discourses, relationships, stories, and actions in the leaders' organizations. In the classic structuralist notion (Greimas, 1966; Levi-Strauss, 1969), narratives are organized around a central plot, conceived as a finished, coherent story representing time in a linear fashion. However, this structure, with its beginning, middle, and end, does not fit our research. Boje's concept of story (2001, 2008, 2014) presents an alternative to the traditional definition of narrative: "There is no whole story to tell, only fragments, which even with retrospective sensemaking cannot find a plot that will make the fragments cohere." (Boje, 2001, p. 5). Story is conceptualized as plural and emerging from dialog. As Jørgensen and Largacha-Martinez point out: "Stories become the emergent collective performance of everyday talk and actions. A story denotes a collective configuration in the here-and-now moment of becoming" (2014, p. 3). For our purposes of leadership development and identity construction, the notion that stories are fragmented is more adequate, as it emphasizes the collective, plural, emergent, and dialogical nature of storytelling. Below, we analyze and deconstruct the discursive construction of leadership identity through the stories told by the leaders and relate them to daily practice in the organizational contexts from which they originate and in which leaders relate, communicate, negotiate, and make decisions. We argue that communicative, relational, and storytelling skills are important for leaders in the construction and coauthoring of their identity (or identities) as leaders, as well as for the cocreation of nurturing relationships among actors inside and outside the organization. Finally, such skills are crucial for success in changing and developing organizations. At the same time, we warn against the tendency to tell stories that are too hegemonic and monologic, because they tend to marginalize other perspectives and other voices related to the organization.

Theoretical approach and research theme

We base our work on the paradigm of social constructionism (Gergen, 1994, 2009) as well as relational approaches to leadership, and we draw upon narratives and storytelling in organizations[1]. In analyzing the construction of leadership identities, we focus on narrative elements such as polyphony (Bakhtin, 1984, 1986), discourses, and metaphors in the overall processes of relating, communicating, and wayfinding as leaders in complex and ever-changing social and organizational contexts.

Before we move onto the description of our inquiry and the empirical data, let us delve into the theoretical background and look at two overall paradigms influencing leadership today. Our use of the term *discursive construction of identity* will also be explained.

Leadership paradigms

As each historical epoch has addressed issues of leadership and organizations, theories are constantly evolving. Due to globalization and other transformative trends, our society is changing and developing at an increasing speed, which requires immediate reflection regarding the ways in which we lead and manage our organizations and our society in general. A leader might ask herself: Are we on the right track? Are the ways that we practice leadership responsive to current needs, and are they generative for production, creativity, development, learning, working environment, and the environment in general? To what extent are we restrained by identifying ourselves with leaders who draw upon outdated paradigms and discourses that might blind us to important perspectives and possibilities? How do we understand and construct our identity (or identities) as leaders, and how do these constructions inhibit or enhance a generative development in the organization?

[1] We draw on the following theoretical and analytical approaches: (Bakhtin, 1981; Holquist, 1990), narratives and storytelling in organizations (Cunliffe, 2001; Shotter & Cunliffe, 2003; Auvinen, Aaltio, & Blomqvist, 2013; Czarniawska, 1997, 2004, 2008; Boje, 1995, 2003, 2008, 2014; Gabriel, 2000; Holman, Gold, & Thorpe 2003; Deetz 2003, 2003), and relational approaches to leadership (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012; Hersted & Gergen, 2013; Gergen & Hersted, 2015; Madsen, Michelsen, & Hersted, 2015).

Today's leaders are faced with divergent discourses and practices with respect to, for example, ideals of efficiency and control versus relationship, dialog, and motivation. The research literature on leadership (e.g., Northouse, 2012, p. 3; Stogdill, 1974, p. 7) shows a widespread consensus that definitions of leadership are extremely diverse. Stogdill's 1974 survey finds as many definitions as there are authors in the field. There is general agreement, however, that a division into a limited number of historical epochs is feasible, although periodization and naming of the epochs differ according to the author's theoretical perspective and the degree of detail. As an example, we can take Western (2008, p. 150), who distinguishes between four historical leadership waves with their associated discourses; 1) The *Leader as a controller* discourse; influenced by Scientific Management (1910), with its focus on leader personality, efficiency, rationality, and productivity. 2) The *Leader as a therapist* discourse, informed by the Human Relations School (1925), stressing motivation, interpersonal relationships, and self-actualization. 3) The *Leader as a Messiah* discourse, characterized by transformational leadership (1980), emphasizing vision and culture. The key goals of this approach were loyalty and commitment within teams, and the establishment of a link between personal success and the success of the company. 4) The Ecoleadership discourse, inspired by the idea of distributed leadership (2005), with its focus on ethics, connectivity, and interdependence. In this approach, leadership concentrates on building responsive networks that are adaptive to change. The organization is seen as a hub of interconnected ecosystems, central control of which is obsolete. Seeing them as crucial to success and growth, ecoleaders focus on the building of collaborative relationships between internal and external stakeholders. Moreover, a global perspective on the environment (both natural and working) is a key concern.

In contrast to Western's topography, we propose a different naming of leadership discourses to avoid the rather crude epochal division in waves. We do acknowledge Western's important point that, even if one epoch replaces another, this does not mean that past approaches to leadership and organization completely disappear. On the contrary, earlier leadership discourses coexist with new approaches in contemporary organizations, settling, as it were, like archaeological layers. Following this line of argument, Drath et al. (2008) formulated a new leadership ontology based on direction, alignment, and commitment (DAC).

Drath et al. attempt to encompass a variety of ways of understanding leadership. Wishing to avoid a priori definitions of the roles, structures, and processes involved in managing and leading, they allow that the classic leader–employee relationship continues to exist, but can be exercised in many other ways. There is not a necessary link to a person, but rather to a function in relation to specific tasks and goals in the organizational context. The DAC ontology rejects traditional understandings of leadership in favor of a situational and contextual view rooted in the community and aiming to create direction, coordination, and commitment. This implies that leadership is considered to be relational, and that it can be delegated to different people and tasks. Moreover, leadership in this sense can be seen as a social construction of meaning between parties to organizational processes. To simplify the issues, we have developed a table to illustrate important differences between two overall paradigms within leadership; the modern approach, deriving from the industrial society, and the postmodern approach, deriving from what is often called the information society.

	Modern view	**Postmodern view**
Type of society	**Industrial society**	**Information society**
Perspective	**Solid structures (Parmenides)** **Fixed structures and procedures, predictability** **'Aboutness' thinking (Shotter)**	**Constant movement (Heraclitus)** **Fluidity, 'flux', movement, unpredictability, improvisation** **'Withness' thinking (Shotter)**
Paradigms and knowledge	**Structuralism and realism** **Universal truth, meanings, and structures** **'Knowledge as transmission or import'**	**Social constructionism** **Multiple 'truths'** **Locally negotiated truths and meanings in social relations and situations** **'Knowledge as collaborative creation'**

Leadership	**Directive** **'Leader as controller'** **Trait, personality and behavioral approaches (extroversion, intelligence, knowledge, skills, etc.)** **Rationality, task-oriented and effect-oriented** **Taylorism, TQM, Lean, and New Public Management** **Tripod ontology: Leader–Followers–Goals** **Hierarchical, deductive, top-down** **Heroic**	**Relational** **'Leader as facilitator'** **Process, situational, and relational approaches** **Transformational, shared, and distributed leadership** **Participation, influence, feelings, motivation, appreciation, reflexivity** **DAC ontology: Direction–Alignment–Commitment** **Local, emergent, situational, bottom-up** **Postheroic**
Organization	**Organization as rules and manuals for system preservation** **Pyramid bureaucratic structure, market economy logic**	**Organization as organizing in confluence of relationships and dialog** **Flat structures, social ecology,** **network based collaboration**
Relations	**Clear division between 'private' and 'professional', clear hierarchy**	**Fluid relationships in movement, informal interactions and relationships**
Change	**Change from above, people in fixed positions**	**Change from within (intrinsic change), emerging in the social context, in relationships**
Communication	**Command and control, instruction, metanarratives, monolog**	**Interaction, negotiation, dialog, polyphony, local narratives (stories)**
Power	**Traditional externalized power Control, sanction, punishment, and reward** **Power over**	**Modern discursive norm-based power Governmentality: internalized, institutionalized, self-disciplinary, discursive** **Power to and power with**
Organizational Story Type	**Bureaucratic: linear, rational, control** **Quest: hero, compelling, call—journey—return**	**Chaos: lived, non-linear, incoherent** **Postmodern: lack of coherence, conscious, self-reflexive** **(see analysis section below)**

Figure1. Modern and postmodern leadership and organization paradigms

Although postmodernity, with the complexity and rapid changes in today's societies and organizations that accompany it, can be seen as a gradual and overlapping transition from modernity, some clarity is provided by the overall division between the modernist and postmodernist paradigms and approaches to management (Frimann et al., 2014). In our project data, we see traces of both paradigms in the stories told by the leaders. Their discursive construction of their identity as leaders draws on different discourses deriving from the two paradigms—a theme to which we will return later in this chapter.

Firstly, however, we wish to introduce the idea of discursive constructions of identity and explain its relevance for leadership and organizational development today.

Discursive identity constructions

Influenced by social constructionism, the contemporary concern with self-identity has taken a discursive turn. If the self is a social construction, the reasoning goes, it is largely shaped by language. For many scholars, this discursive emphasis is revealed in the study of narratives. As often proposed, the individual largely understands himself or herself in terms of the stories of which he or she forms a part (MacIntyre, 1984; Sarbin, 1986; Wetherell, 1998). It is claimed that story forms are handed down to us; our stories of the self are therefore not fully of our own authorship. Where narrative scholarship has suggested a strong structural basis for the self, inquiry into conversational processes has introduced a more situated view of the self. For example, Davies and Harré (1990) propose that individual identity is largely a byproduct of discursive positioning—i.e., the way in which the individual is defined or positioned in conversations with others. Social identity may therefore move subtly and continuously as the conversation unfolds. Emphasis on the discursive construction of identity has also stimulated inquiry into how the news media, the social media, and other textual representations shape our social identities. Our position is not that we are constructed solely by discourse—the person is embedded in many forms of life, such as actions, institutions, and culture (Hall, 1996). Identity is thus, in the words of Holman, Gold, and Thorpe (2003),

> (…) an ongoing social and practical accomplishment that is formed, managed and altered through interaction with others. This implies that identity is not "just there", is not given, is not pre-determined and that it is always open to reinterpretation and misinterpretation (p. 61).

We shall assume that leaders use narratives to define themselves both privately and in ongoing interactions (Auvinen, Aaltio, & Blomqvist, 2013; Czarniawska, 2008; Boje, 2008; Shotter & Cunliffe, 2003). Below, we examine *leaders' discursive identity work*, as Alvesson and Willmott (2002) term the ongoing process of identity construction. We examine their reflections on own practice as leaders. However, given the contrast between what we have earlier characterized as the modern versus the postmodern paradigms in leadership, we are especially interested in forms of discourse that reflect this distinction. There may be strong affinities between the rationally structured, hierarchical, command-and-control organization of the modern age and the conception of self-identity. The modern view of identity is based on the idea of an integrally coherent, substantial self, forming a stable inner nucleus or core identity (C. Taylor, 1989; Gergen, 2009). In the modern paradigm, the individual is seen as an independent and autonomous actor. The attributes of the ideal leader were rational coherence rooted in a firm and stable sense of identity. He (inevitably) initiated and took responsibility for action. As a dialogic resource, the leader would draw from a *management discourse*, constructing the self as one who distributes and controls the work (Alvesson & Svenningsson, 2012).

Our research raises the question: Do such constructions of the self-evident continue to be present in today's leader discourse? This idea of the independent, self-contained agent is being questioned by many scholars. There are two approaches to this: their questions serve as an intellectual and ideological critique of the modern age and its institutions; however, as theorists have deconstructed the implications of the critique, we begin to see the emergence of what might be called a postmodern conception of the self. For example, Gergen (1991) has described the breakdown of the coherent self, largely as a result of the technologies that increasingly immerse us in the global flow of information, ideas, and values. In his terms, we approach a state of *multiphrenia*. The idea of the dispersed self has affinities with Bakhtinian theory, which understands the self as entirely dialogical, a result of socialization, and something that is essentially *polyphonic* (multivoiced). Wertsch (1993) draws on Bakhtin when he argues that what we understand as self or identity is a conglomerate of the appropriated voices of others (parents, teachers, friends, colleagues, etc.). Similarly, Hermans writes of the dialogical self that it "is 'social', not in the sense that a self-contained individual enters into social interactions with other outside people, but in the sense that other people occupy positions in a multivoiced self" (2001, p. 250). In general, we may surmise that the postmodern construction of self is a multivoiced, multifaceted, fluid, and dynamic state—a state with little in the way of rational coherence or inner core. We find that this conception of self corresponds with the situation in the organizational world, where establishing a leader identity is becoming increasingly complex. Leadership is ambiguous, with many contradictory interests at stake in decision making. As Boje (1995) remarks, "Organizational life is more indeterminate, more differentiated, more chaotic, than it is simple, systematic, monological, and hierarchical" (p. 1001). The framework of our project is outlined in the following.

Research design and context

The project was designed as an action learning project based on the notion of a *dialog conference* (Goghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014; Frimann & Bager, 2012; Pålshaugen, 2001, 2004; Gustavsen & Engelstad, 1986). This essentially involves creating a temporary development space to facilitate reflection, learning, and development processes through storytelling and dialogical sharing in small groups, and for sharing experiences and reflections in plenary. Six leaders from different private and public sector organizations (finance, IT, military, municipal authorities, medicine, and higher education) participated with a group of researchers. Over 12 months, the dialog conferences convened three times for six-hour sessions at Aalborg University. The aim was to investigate and learn from the leaders' actual challenges, concerning everyday tasks such as communicating with staff and relation maintenance. For this article, we draw on the transcribed, analyzed field notes and video recordings from the first conference. This was the first time the leaders had met each other and the researchers. The leaders were asked to introduce themselves by telling a story about their role and challenges as leaders. As none of them were acquainted, they could, in Goffman's (1959) terms, be expected to give a coherent positive *front-stage* presentation, downplaying the vulnerable, challenging, and difficult *back-stage* aspects. Likewise, we anticipated that they would align their stories with each other's, and follow implicit norms for relevant themes in this context. At the first conference, we expected them to ponder questions such as, "How transparent can I be and how 'intellectual' should I appear in relation to the university academics? How will the other leaders react if I voice uncertainty and inconsistency in my role as a leader? What position do I wish to take in this specific context?" In planning the sessions, we had elicited their wishes. Their responses pointed to lectures on leadership and communication, dialogical work on their challenges as leaders, and exchanging feedback with the other leaders as well as with the researchers. The research team planned a lecture on different discourses and paradigms within leadership, organization and communication. A series of narrative interviews (White, 2007) was also planned for the first session. On the day, a researcher conducted 25-minute interviews with each leader, while the other participants listened and took notes. The interviews were based on a handful of open-ended questions about the leader's challenges. The interviewees were also encouraged to tell a story about their daily practice and views on leadership. A witness (another leader) was asked to observe and take notes, before giving a condensed reauthoring of the story while the teller listened. The teller was finally invited to elaborate on anything that had occurred to them while listening to their reauthored story. After the narrative interviews, including witnessing, were completed, the participants met in plenary to reflect on the themes that had been raised and their implications for changing leadership identities, stories, and future actions in their own organization. Reflecting on each other's challenges, leadership identities, and developmental possibilities, the leaders thus became coauthors by opening up new perspectives and helping each other to construct new discourses, metaphors, identities, and stories. Qualitative data were cocreated through storytelling combined with interviewing, and documented through video recordings, photographs, notes, and sticky notes. Following each conference, participants and researchers shared their written feedback and reflections. The project's use of mixed methods for the various types of data gave rich opportunities for spontaneous exchange.

Analysis of the stories

Let us now take a closer look at the stories told by four public sector leaders in the first dialog conference, two female and two male. In these extracts, we observed their discursive constructions of their identities as leaders. In particular, we noticed a series of metaphors and traces from different leadership discourses, which seem to function as guiding constructions for their understanding and identity work. We were interested in examining the following: What happens when a group of leaders from different organizations construct and reconstruct their identities as leaders through narrative interviews about their challenges as leaders? How do these discursive constructions close down or open up new perspectives, other voices, and what are the possibilities for change in their relationships, positions, and daily practices as leaders?

Barbara's story[2]

Barbara, who is in her early thirties, heads a department consisting of two interdisciplinary teams at a regional institute for vision and hearing. Her construction of her leader identity can be observed in the following extract. It is apparent that she co-constructs it with her employees and her current listeners. The excerpt is from the first part of the interview:

[2] Pseudonyms are used throughout.

I: What do you consider your personal challenges and difficulties as a leader?

B: Decoding other people. I need to have a certain sense of who I'm dealing with. I need to be aware that people are different and I need to have an idea of my employees—who they are, and at the same time avoid developing a personal relationship with them. A sense of what they like and don't like, in order to sustain them in the kind of work that makes them happy.

I: If we assume that you are successful in your decoding, what then is the challenge in relation to practice?

B: I may have insight into their thinking, but I still don't know how they will react. And I don't know how I myself will react in interaction with them.

I: If you were to tell me a short story, what do you do then in this respect?

B: Of course, I consider carefully who the people I'm going to work with are. For instance, I have two teams. If I need to transmit information to them, I reflect upon doing it in one way in one team and in another way in the other team. At the same time, there are different people in a team, which makes things even more complicated. Then I have to find a common denominator. Different types of employee experience this common denominator in different ways. Some of them find the information too sparse, while others find it appropriate. Somehow, I feel that I become "nothing". I don't think that I succeed very well. Sometimes I don't get anywhere. I'm caught in the middle. Alternatively, I can talk to the employees at an individual level, which I sometimes do instead.

Barbara explains that she is keenly aware of the challenges of leading an inhomogeneous group and, in particular, the task of "transmitting" information in different ways to different employees. Speaking of communication as "transmission" may indicate a monologic rather than dialogic paradigm. While she is aware of the necessity of adjusting and modifying how she provides information according to which people she is addressing, she meets challenges in communicating with the teams. In order to overcome the discrepancy between the multiple ways of interpretation, she tries to communicate at team meetings by using "common denominators", but worries about her employees' opinion of her and that they construct her as "nothing". Such situations make her identity construction vague and almost invisible, which seems to frustrate her. Later in the interview, she mentions the possibility of being more forceful in her communication in order to avoid this imagined impression. Torn between two different ideals of leadership, Barbara appears to be caught in the middle—on one hand, her ambition is to reach people in their diversity and engage them in a "happy" work life and "sustain them in the kind of work that makes them happy". On the other, she wishes to appear forceful and firm, and to be respected for this. She feels most successful in informal one-on-one meetings, as this allows her to adjust her communication to the person. At more formal meetings with an entire team, she needs to adapt her communication to a mixed group, who interpret and construct her messages in multiple ways. Barbara's story could be identified as an example of the *chaos story* (Boje, 2003, p. 45), which is characterized by the protagonist's lack of control. She complains that she is unable to find common denominators enabling her to connect with her team members. While she feels that her approach works neither for her nor for her team members, she seem to rely on the idea of communication as "transmission", although it appears to work better in individual conversations. We see traces of a modern-age discourse based on ideas of the leader as a controller or even a charismatic hero, when Barbara expresses the wish that her communication be more forceful in order for her to be "respected".

Jonas' story

Jonas is a project manager of research employees at a large IT company with over 3,000 employees. When asked what it is like "to be a leader according to you", he replies that his staff should "feel good because they are able to deliver". He constructs leadership as multifaceted with reference to different approaches, saying "you can be dictatorial or you can be containing, and you can combine crisscrossing". Elaborating on his view of leadership, Jonas said:

J: My approach to leadership is to invite and motivate people in order to make them realize what they are here for and what their own contribution is, rather than commanding and delegating tasks to them and later checking whether my requests were carried out.

In this short extract, Jonas constructs leadership identity as "inviting", "motivating", and "encouraging people to manage themselves", in contrast to "commanding" and "checking" their work, adding that, although he is the boss, he has neither expertise nor technical insight into his employees' tasks. His discourse offers a construction of himself as someone without insight into the technical aspects of his employees' tasks, and mentions that he is challenged by this. However, this leaves him in a position to focus on other aspects of leadership.

> *J: That's why I have to focus elsewhere from a place where I can create the framework for them to take action and deliver.*

Jonas speaks of this position as "creating a framework". The predominant focus is one of outcome, action, and delivery, as his lexical choices show. But Jonas views his role as more complex than simply creating a framework. He adds that he would like his employees to be able to say of him that:

> *J: "He is charismatic and we want to follow him"—and that is exactly the image I want to have (...) I've got this metaphor: I'd like it to give out a "clonk" when I sit down in the leader's chair, like the sound of a locomotive hitching on to carriages. Then I'll start pulling and everyone follows in the direction I believe we should take.*

Here Jonas presents the discursive construction *of the great man*—that is, a heroic and charismatic leader to whom the employees look up and follow. He uses the rich metaphor of a locomotive being hitched to the carriages, entailing among other things his wish to be seen as an active, powerful locomotive by his employees, who are like carriages, passively following him along the fixed rails to the predefined destination. This is the story of a rational, linear, and controlled bureaucratic leader and his organization (Boje, 2003, p. 45). The metaphor also constructs the employees as dependent and lacking a will of their own. The interviewer asks for clarification:

> *I: How do you make this happen?*
>
> *J: Well, I'm not as successful as I make it sound. This is really my challenge, I think—because it's about who I am as a leader and about my self-image and my integrity (...) there is too much messing around with details and too little time to take a bird's-eye view (...) it is managing the organization, not developing the organization, that tends to take the focus.*

The story of the charismatic leader seems to be disrupted here. In his answer, Jonas elaborates on the train metaphor, adding that this projects an ideal rather than the real picture of his situation as a leader. He goes on to focus on some of the challenges that the metaphor fails to describe—such as the difficulties in navigating between day-to-day tweaking of operational and organizational details and developing the organization and leadership from a broader metaperspective by taking a "bird's-eye view". In describing his dilemmas, he also uses a jockey metaphor, illustrated by a pulling gesture, asking "When should I loosen the reins and when should I tighten them?" He struggles with the two aspects of this construction of leadership identity; one is the human and relational aspect, semantically realized by words such as *framework, motivation, self-management, invitation,* and *teamwork*, typically derived from a postmodern paradigm; the other aspect is the *heroic, charismatic, linear*, and *controlling* ideal, derived from modern leadership conceptions. When asked about the employees' view of his role and position as leader, he tells us that they express a wish to see more of him in daily situations and that they expect him "to inspire" and set meaningful goals in accordance with their needs as employees. Taking a confrontational stance, the interviewer then asks:

> *I: Am I correct in saying that your expectations of yourself are not shared by your employees?*

Jonas confirms this by referring to the discrepancy between his self-image as a successful, charismatic leader and his staff's need for a more relational dialogic approach to leadership. Throughout the interview, Jonas seems conscious of his conflicting positions—*a quest story* of a heroic, do-and-dare leader and the more facilitating position of an accommodating leader who nurtures conditions and frameworks for the employees. In short, Jonas's story draws on both the modernist and postmodernist views of leadership (See the table above).

Benny's story

Benny heads a municipal property management department with 350 employees. We start from the very beginning of the interview:

> *I: Could you tell me a little about how you experience what it means to be a leader?*
>
> *B: Yes … I'm very inspired by the job of being a leader … that's what I want to be. In fact, I was not trained to be a leader. In the organization that I am part of, I'm the head of both leaders and employees, so I'm dealing with a complex, but interesting, role as a leader, which is challenging, both with respect to daily management and development. It takes a lot of energy, and a lot of hard work, so you have to thrive on that.*
>
> *I: Do you?*
>
> *B: Yes, I do. It is the urge … you need to feel the urge in order to be a leader. Otherwise, you can't be a leader (…). We talked about the different levels in management, of the cross-pressure. All the time, you have to navigate. I'm working in a political organization, and I need to reach out to users, clients, and colleagues at all levels, and the relationships between them. All this may turn out negatively or positively, which I find interesting. You have to tread carefully all the time. I first trained as a mechanical engineer. That's about motors, moving from A to B, and what I find interesting in particular is how we get there.*
>
> *I: How do you find out how to get there?*
>
> *B: Yes, well (…) we've talked about setting goals, formulating points of orientation—some things are already settled, and some things aren't in this kind of organization. Some things have already been decided at a political level. Where I can exercise power is by translating what the challenges are. My biggest task is to contribute to creating development in our local communities. This is the biggest challenge, I think. (…) We need to try to recognize and respect that we're part of something; we're not just a task-solving organization. We're here to serve others and we have to do it as successfully as possible, work with development, and change our municipality and region into an attractive place. In my way of doing this, I am … and I think I realize that right only now while talking … launching some very big ships into the ocean—supertankers—and it takes a hell of a long time to get them to change course.*

At first sight, it is noticeable that Benny begins his story by saying that he finds it inspiring to be a leader and that he has the ambition to be a leader—that he sees it as *an urge*. He expresses the view that he primarily leads through communication, through what he describes as "translating" (without explaining what this involves). In his story he uses a number of metaphors such as "fuel", "cross-pressure", "navigate", "motor", "points of orientation", etc.—many of which relate to transport, machinery, and action; in this way, he constructs himself as a dynamic, energetic leader who wants to move the organization "from A to B". Apart from the navigation metaphor, he uses other maritime terms, e.g., "launching some very big ships into the ocean" and "changing the course of supertankers". Many of his sentences provide descriptions of actions, and in this way he constructs an image of a very action-oriented leader who seeks to accomplish strategic goals (e.g., by "treading carefully"). We are told that he was originally trained as a mechanical engineer, and he seems to thrive in "the engine room". Using Boje's categories (2003), his story may be seen as a mix of a quest story and a bureaucratic story, and many of his metaphors draw on the image of the organization as a machine or a supertanker. From a constructionist perspective, his narrative seems gendered; in comparison to of Barbara's more suppliant identity construction, Benny constructs himself as a leader with a capital "L": a heroic leader who manages big change processes.

However, despite his casting of himself as a heroic leader, Benny does not construct himself as a lone rider. On the contrary, he emphasizes that he is aware of the significance of relationships and of the fact that all employees, leaders, and stakeholders with whom he deals share multiple relationships among themselves. There is an element of power in the relationships, which he knows should not be underestimated. As a consequence, he needs to constantly take these relationships in consideration. Otherwise, he will immediately receive negative feedback from his surroundings:

> When I talk about relationships … [people] all relate to each other. Many of them are newcomers, and they all share a relationship, not only to the customers and the clients, but also to the politicians—so I have to be pretty much aware of what I'm doing. One way or another, it's a tough business.

He acknowledges that he is moving in a web of multiple relationships; apparently, he is a skilled "navigator" who is "treading carefully all the time".

Despite Benny's attempts to take a relational perspective, his storytelling mode tends to be very hegemonic. Looking from the outside, we can ask what happened to the voices of the many employees, citizens, clients, and other stakeholders. He mentions that he has to navigate in a web of relationships, but what are the others' perspective on (for instance) his story of the "big ships", "development", "change", "reorganizing", and "moving money around"? How do they see these change processes influencing their work life? From an overall perspective, one may question how generative this dominance of a coherent quest story is. It may be effective in convincing him and others of his powerful image (e.g., in a job interview). In fact, at the time, Benny had applied for a new job at a higher strategic level of the municipality, which may explain the hegemonic traits of his story. Later in the narrative process, something happens—a tiny crack appears in Benny's story (omitted for space reasons). The crack offers a glimpse of Benny's figure as something other than the superhero. Saying that he sometimes doubts whether he can live up to this image and speaks of oscillating over and under the stress threshold, he talks of his dream of having time to work at a more strategic level as a leader, but that the daily running of the enterprise challenges this ambition: "It is my ambition to create some 'air' for myself, so I can be there." To a certain extent, Benny seems to be caught up between his own quest story and the image of the classic male heroic leader.

Mary's story

Mary is a team manager with the Danish Ministry of Defense. As her teams are located all over Denmark, she manages from a distance. Her several teams are tasked with environmental issues and projects in relation to the armed forces. She describes her staff as "highly individualistic personalities", "capable and self-propelled" academics working on very different and complex tasks "with all manner of things". She sees her organization as highly hierarchical, saying, "sometimes you have to take it (i.e., an issue or a proposal) up before it gets sent back to your desk" from the upper management levels, in order to get things done in the department. Mary constructed leadership using the metaphor of "paving the way", which prompted the interviewer to ask for elaboration.

> *M: This is my primary task in my function as a manager. (...) If I'm able to create the right framework and set up the right track for my employees, they will be FULLY capable of performing their tasks. (...) that's the best part of it, I think.*

Mary describes the ministry as a bureaucratic, hierarchical, top-down organization. By way of contrast, her formulations construct her own leadership identity role as supportive, when she stresses her role as a process facilitator. Her values also appear in her description of her tasks of "deal[ing] with employees on their terms (…) coupled with the ideas of teamwork (…)" and herself as being concerned with "openness about what's going on". Mary's discursive construction of her leader identity represents a different voice than that of the bureaucratic organization. She facilitates processes, attempts to create good working conditions, and organizes tasks in work teams while prioritizing positive contact, dialog, and openness between herself and the staff. In this part of her story, she seemed to draw on a postmodern discourse of leadership emphasizing the leader's facilitating task.

Later in the narrative interview, she identifies the physical distances as a challenge for her communication and overall contact with her staff. Communicating mainly by e-mail, she mentions the great care she needs to take with the wording to avoid misunderstandings and the job of sifting relevant information from "the huge amount of" irrelevant or unnecessary information "from above" before passing it on. To make up for her lack of proximity with her employees, she reserves a whole day each week for telephone calls.

> *M: This is obviously distance management. (...) I have made it a routine to pick up the phone and talk about how things are going (...) just to hear what's going on at the moment and if there is anything I can contribute.*

Mary's use of dialog to identify staff needs and to decide on task coordination is indicative of a relational view of organizational development. She apparently constructs leadership as relational in a *becoming perspective* (James, 1909) through the daily stream of process, change, and movement in tasks and interpersonal relations (Tsoukas & Chia 2002). After a lengthy discussion of her role, the interviewer asks Mary what she sees as her greatest challenge as a leader at the moment, to which she simply replies, "balance and communication." We have already covered the communicational aspects of this. To elaborate on the question of balance, Mary recounts a story of a busy situation involving "a complex and mixed set of tasks", in which she was forced to "jump between different elements" and to decide to delegate some tasks. To achieve balance in her workload, she needs, on one hand, to prioritize her own resources and, on the other, to take managerial decisions to define tasks for the teams. In discussing this issue, Mary's voice presents a different aspect of her leadership identity. In providing clarity for the staff about limits, decisions, and direction, her construction of leadership takes on a tone that is heroic, rather than dialogic and negotional, and is based on her own individual actions. The same traits appear as she elaborates on her relationship to high-ranking leaders from other departments.

> *M: I don't flinch when I stand in front of a bunch of departmental leaders, spell things out, and tell them to just get on with things.*

Mary here offers the story of a heroic leader speaking to upper-level managers for "one and a half hours" to get them to accept her proposals. She finds that not beating about the bush impresses her employees, who "respect [me] in relation to my leadership [stresses the word]", because it makes their work easier. Inspired by Boje (2003, p. 46), we claim that she is drawing on a (romantic) story of an individual leader who *heroically* creates results for her staff. As we showed above, Mary draws on at least two major voices and discursive repertoires: on one hand, hers is the voice of the humble process facilitator enabling dialog and negotiation; on the other, she is the challenger, or hero, taking important decisions on behalf of the team. However, her discourses, metaphors, and positions seem to tone down certain aspects of leadership functions. While positioning herself as an information gatekeeper and a mediator between upper-level management and staff, Mary represents the needs of her employees by words like "busy" and "complex'", thereby omitting possible discourses of stress and tension between management and development relating to her identity as a leader. Overall, she uses a hybrid mix of interpretative repertoires (Wetherell, 1998) to position herself as an experienced and competent leader in her ongoing construction of leadership identity in a meshwork coping with tasks, conflicts, dialog, and fluid changes to a becoming perspective in a bureaucratic organization. Drawing on Boje (2003), we regard Mary's narrative mainly as a postmodern story of leadership, mixed with traces of a modernist paradigm.

The reader is reminded that the interviewees' construction of leadership identity that we present here was created in a space with peers and researchers in a university setting. This may point to a front-stage presentation (Goffman, 1959) that omits back-stage information, concerning workplace pressure, dilemmas, paradoxes, related feelings, etc.

Moving from authoring to coauthoring stories?

On the surface, each of the four stories appears coherent and hegemonic. However, a closer look reveals that they are all ambiguous and bear traces of different leadership discourses drawing on both modern and postmodern paradigms—small fragments of alternative stories that the narrators may have deemed less legitimate and effective in the context. These "alternative stories" may unwittingly have been shared with the listeners. The video camera was a third party that probably had a significant impact on the process and the participants' willingness to display vulnerability as a leader. As this was the first time that the leaders had met each other and the researchers, there was no time for confidence building. As Pearce (2007) has pointed out, gaps will appear between *stories lived* and *stories told* because, in our storytelling, some aspects need to be foregrounded, while others are left in the background. The lived stories differ from the told stories according to the circumstances, relationships, and ways we find appropriate to construct ourselves in front of others. Goffman demonstrated the discrepancy between front stage and back stage, claiming that "when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does his behavior as a whole" (1959 p. 35).

In our analysis of these stories, it became increasingly clear to us that the four stories are situated and constructed for an audience. For example, the stories told by the male leaders in this project are constructed around metaphors concerning transport, movement, and physical action. The male leaders use metaphors such as "trains", "the locomotive pulling the wagons", "horse riding", "loosening and tightening the reins" (Jonas) and "launching big ships into the ocean", "supertankers", "moving from A to B" (Benny). In contrast, the female leaders' stories tended to revolve more around solicitude and taking care of the employees. Do these stories represent different leadership values, or is it a question rather

of the storytellers' being summoned to act a role as a male rather than female leader? Do male and female leaders draw on different, gender-specific interpretative repertoires? Do we expect male leaders to be proactive, dynamic, and action-oriented and female leaders to act as people who take care of others—i.e., to be more concerned about job satisfaction and the social welfare of the employees? A generalization based on the four stories would be premature, and our preliminary assumptions require further research. However, we venture the contention that, rather than representing daily practice, the stories told in this set-up are constructed and shaped within a space governed by culturally and relationally constructed preconceptions and expectations. This echoes James's words that "we do not show ourselves to our children as to our club companions, to our customers as to the laborers we employ, to our own masters and employers as to our intimate friends" (James 1892/1984, p. 162).

Working with storytelling requires us to be sensitive to context and relationships, as well as to historical and cultural influences. This being so, the leaders' stories doubtlessly remain open to multiple interpretations. These stories are, however, not innocent; all are constructions with implications for practice. Being the outcomes of social and relational processes, they also attempt to create an impact, legitimize the past and form the future. As analysis showed, most of them can be categorized as stories of *quest*, in which the narrator constructs himself or herself as a hero, and all stories draw on both modernist and postmodern views on leadership and organization. Furthermore, they all carry traces of bureaucratic discourse.

Boje suggests that the manager, as a practical author, is required to interpolate between different kinds of stories—between the grand and the local narratives—and create "interstories" across the overall story categories in participative dialog with others (2003, p. 51). He writes, "Indeed, managers as practical authors can decide if they are to be champions of official organization stories or whether they are able to listen to and respond to personal experience narratives of employees, customers and communities" (Boje 2003, p. 51). He aims to create an approach that contains more dialog-based ways of coauthoring, where employees, clients, citizens, and other stakeholders are invited to become coauthors. Bakhtin (1981) warned us against the dangers of monologic storytelling because, in monologues, various kinds of authoritarianism—be they political, literary, or scientific—tend to iron out tension and conflict.

Deetz also voices skepticism about the concept of the manager as author and argues that the term "authoring" may be misleading here, because "in many ways it evokes an image of the manager as a writer, singular and in control of the process, crafting words for an awaiting audience" (2003, p. 121). After all, as Deetz points out, authoring is deeply social and we are all authors without necessarily knowing it (Deetz, 2003, p. 122).

Conclusion

We may mourn of the loss of the simple unified self. On the other hand, the idea of a fluid identity and diversity opens up new nuances, insights, and possibilities for learning, innovation, and action in all aspects of social life. It may even offer pathways to the creation of more human and multifaceted organizations, communities, and other kinds of social universes.

It seems that the multiplicity of voices around an organization is often regarded as a potential leadership challenge, something that may lead to chaos and loss of control—calling for unison to be restored. Many attempts are made to smooth over the differences, while following the belief system of the modernist organization. For example, we have seen how Barbara struggled with the creation of hegemonic information and seemed to lose her own voice, as well as the voices of the participants. Alternatively, she might consider adopting a postmodern approach by embracing diversity and exploring the possibilities opened up by that approach. Our suggestion, then, would be that authoring is seen as a participatory process. If the leaders tell stories that include the diversity and polyphony of others and begin *coauthoring* from a more dialogical approach, we see the potential for the development of new sustainable, coauthored leadership stories rooted in each leader's specific relations and organizational context. We see a potential for development and learning throughout the whole organization if leaders are more willing to share their dilemmas, uncertainties, and doubts. If leaders involve employees, fellow leaders, and other stakeholders in their reflections and decision-making processes, it may lead to new, creative, and more generative understandings of leadership, relationships and organizational practices. We think it would be possible to use action learning groups as a frame for this kind of process in order to enable reflexivity and learning emerge by construing stories, making sense and searching for new ways of leading in organizations characterized by ongoing change and complexity. We furthermore believe that collaborative reflexivity and dialogic approaches to storytelling (coauthoring) would lead to improved working environments and results. The research design presented above had a strong impact on the participating leaders' utterances, stories, and identity constructions, and this article is based on a relatively small sample of cases. We are planning new larger-scale action learning projects that will allow analysis across a larger data corpus. We conclude that a research design built more consistently on the idea of coauthoring is a promising path for the creation of new possibilities for learning and organizational development from a multivoiced approach.

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