

## Leadership identities

*Whose construction?*

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**Leadership identities: Whose construction?**

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**Abstract:** Questioning the assumption that identities can be controlled through a shared organisational culture, the article explores the dispersion of a discourse of diversity into leadership identities in a Danish bank and building society. Underlying this focus is the question of whether a number of local and global influences may interact and lead to the adoption of a shared organisational and leadership identity, identifiable in managers' constructions of leadership identities. To study these issues, a critical discourse analysis is carried out of interviews with two middle managers in the bank, which involves close analysis of the language used by the respondents to construct their leadership identities. While the respondents present comparable identities to the interviewer, the analysis reveals that they draw on different discourses and sources of inspiration as well as employ a number of different discursive means to present their respective identities. This, the article argues, may be the result of a number of influences emerging from the individual style of the respondent, the context of the interview and the discourses present both within and outside the organisation. 10 15 20

**Keywords:** leadership, identity, diversity, critical discourse analysis, bank, semi-structured interviews 25

## 1 Introduction

Leadership is enacted in many different organizational contexts, each providing a set of norms that function as guidelines with which the leader will have to negotiate his/her own understanding of the concept (Fairhurst 2009; Schnurr 2009). In many cases, organisations will be strategically committed to fostering a particular organisational identity or culture, involving the regulation and shaping of members' identities, including those of leaders and managers, to ensure the achievement of organisational goals (Deal and Kennedy 1982; Peters and Watermann 1982). However, recent studies suggest that controlling social identities through the construction and implementation of a shared culture is a highly questionable endeavour, and that identity construction is a much more 30 35

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complex process than this understanding argues for (Alvesson and Willmott 1 2002; Bardon et al. 2012; Fairhurst 2009; Ford 2006; Holmgreen 2009).

Focusing on identity construction, this article examines the discourse of diversity, which has formed part of Danish labour market policies for the past twenty years,<sup>1</sup> and how it has become part of leadership identities in the 5 Danish financial sector.<sup>2</sup> Being influential in labour market policymaking, the discourse has, among other things, been dispersed into private sector companies through various voluntary initiatives (Rennison 2009). As such, it is believed to be an important feature of leaders' identities, and in turn, of their leadership. 10

The article explores the dispersion of the discourse of diversity into leaders' identities in a Danish bank and building society. Underlying this focus is the question of whether a number of local and global influences may interact and lead to the adoption of shared organisational and leadership norms, identifiable in managers' constructions of leadership identities. 15 Thus, underlying the exploration is a more general interest in studying the complex processes and sources that contribute to identity construction in organisations.

The article is organised in the following way: Section 2 provides an overview of the concepts of identity and discourse, followed by a discussion in Section 3 20 of the data corpus, the method used to analyse the data, that of critical discourse analysis (CDA), and a presentation of the case study organisation, a Danish bank and building society. This provides the empirical input for the analysis of interviews with two middle managers in the fourth section. In conclusion, the article illustrates how leaders' discursive construction of identities is determined by a 25 complex set of factors.

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<sup>1</sup> In Denmark, the discourse of diversity is, among other things, the outcome of a number of legislative reforms. Of these, reforms introduced in the mid 1990s on the integration of ethnic minorities into the Danish labour market and the Consolidation Act on Gender Equality, passed in 2000, make up some of the more important recent contributions (Rennison 2009). Both have meant the introduction of various initiatives to ensure the equal rights for ethnic minorities and 35 women both in private and public sector organisations.

<sup>2</sup> When defining leadership, a key feature is its elusiveness. Thus, leadership is usually defined according to researchers' individual perspectives, leaving very little commonality across definitions (Rennison 2011). However, it appears that a common feature of definitions is that it involves 'a process whereby intentional influence is exerted over other people to guide, structure, and facilitate activities and relationships in a group or organization' (Yukl 2013: 18). 40

## 2 Literature review: Identity and discourse

1

Following the post-structuralist turn in organisational studies, it is now generally acknowledged that identity is not a fixed and enduring concept, but a temporary and processual construction (Alvesson et al. 2008; Svenningsson and Larsson 2006). This understanding entails that identities are continuously “constituted, negotiated and reproduced in various social interactions” (Svenningsson and Larsson 2006: 206), which allows individuals to take up subject positions that are either temporary or long term (Ford 2006). According to Alvesson et al. (2008), identity refers to the efforts we continuously make to address the questions of who we are and how we should act, and so, it involves subjective meanings and experiences. For organisational members, e. g. leaders, part of this experience is gained in workplace settings, where they will construct and negotiate their professional identities with (dominant) norms and expectations, while also contributing to the establishment of these very norms themselves (Ford 2010; Schnurr 2009).

The construction of identity may involve the interplay of three inter-related concepts and processes, i. e. self-identity, identity work, and identity regulation (Alvesson and Willmott 2002). Self-identity is the image the individual holds of her-/himself; identity work is the active construction of a self-identity; and identity regulation refers to the organisational and social processes that may regulate behaviour through discursive, symbolic and material means (Svenningsson and Larsson 2006).

As indicated in the Introduction, organisational control has been a debated issue in recent years, not least due to the recognition that control is rarely accomplished solely through the implementation of organisational structures and designs, which serve as regulators of members’ behaviour, but also through e. g. employees’ self-positioning and identification with (dominant) discourses in the organisation and the workplace, i. e. through identity regulation. Here, identity work and self-positioning are seen to be a significant, active and contributory process where organisational members are co-constructors of their professional identities (Alvesson and Willmott 2002).

In a post-structuralist perspective, identity work and identity regulation are believed to take place through discourse. The underlying premise is that discourse partly constructs the social world and not merely reflects it (Ashcraft 2007; Ford 2006, Ford 2010). Thus, language offers subject positions to individuals, through which identities are constituted or performatively enacted. However, the power to establish an identity is not only an outcome of the subject position that organisational members can take up, but is also the result

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of the combined influences of context and discourse on these subject positions, 1  
 making identities inherently fragmented, fractured, and constantly in a state of  
 flux. Thus, different organisational settings, e. g. work groups, and/or other sites  
 of activity external to the organisation may provide input to and exert influence  
 on the construction of identity (Ashcraft 2007; Bardon et al. 2012; Schnurr 2009). 5  
 For instance, instead of being a uniform and durable group of organisational  
 members who interact with subordinates uni-directionally, leaders are fre-  
 quently subordinates themselves, answering to leaders above them (Ford  
 2010). Examples like this challenge the idea that the norms and values of  
 leadership can be uniformly defined and constructed by organisational manage- 10  
 ment and subsequently taken up by leaders in the organisation, who will then  
 “collaborate in this discursive production of themselves by adopting the very  
 behaviours and skills that are being promulgated” (Ford 2010: 50).

Recent critical studies of identity construction (e. g. Bardon et al. 2012) argue  
 for a combined perspective on the identity construction of the ideal organisa- 15  
 tional member. Thus, it is argued that while identity work and regulation are  
 subject to a number of discursive and contextual artefacts, these processes are  
 also influenced by management’s efforts to regulate behaviour.

Critical Discourse Analysis, CDA, offers such a perspective (Benwell and  
 Stokoe 2006; Fairclough 2003, Fairclough 2010, Fairclough 2012) by reflecting 20  
 more general post-structuralist notions that situations, social identities and  
 relationships between people can be maintained, reproduced and challenged  
 through discourse (Fairclough and Wodak 1997). Thus, CDA is concerned with  
 uncovering the ideological underpinnings of what we take for granted, and  
 which restrict our possibilities of social action (Wodak 2011). Specifically, this 25  
 means a CDA perspective may help us see that “organizational members are not  
 reducible to passive consumers of managerially designed and designated iden-  
 tities” (Alvesson and Willmott 2002: 621), but may, in fact, either confirm or  
 resist dominant organisational discourses and achieve agency and power in  
 shaping their identities. CDA as a method for doing analysis of interview data 30  
 will be dealt with more extensively in Section 3.2.

### 3 Methodology and analytical framework

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#### 3.1 Background and data of the study

The data for the analysis consist of excerpts from interviews with two middle  
 managers in a Danish bank and building society. The bank and building society 40

is one of the largest creditors in the Danish housing market and employs around 1  
3,600 staff. This means that the organisation is dispersed across the country  
with a large number of branches in Danish cities and regions. Besides, the  
organisation is also known for its policy of diversity, which is rare in the  
financial sector, and its dedication to improving the gender balance in manage- 5  
ment in a sector where management positions are overwhelmingly occupied by  
men. Thus, over the past many years, efforts have been made both to attract a  
diverse group of people and make it attractive for employees of different origins  
and sexes to choose a management career.

The interviews were carried out as part of a four-year research project from 10  
2010 to 2014, whose aim was to investigate organisational discourses of leader-  
ship and their dispersion into the organisation, including their implications for  
employees who would like to follow a leadership path. Altogether seventeen  
managers were interviewed by means of a semi-structured interview guide. Of  
these, seven were managers at the junior or lowest management level, e.g. 15  
managers of a particular line of business in one of the local branches or in the  
headquarters, and ten were middle managers in charge of e.g. a local or  
regional branch of the bank or a section in its headquarters.

The interviews were all conducted at the workplace of the individual  
respondent.<sup>3</sup> This served two primary aims: One was to create a reassuring 20  
situation and experience for the respondent, and another was to create a  
sense of equality between the respondent and the interviewer, intending to  
level out any uneven distribution of power between the two. Thus, instead of  
inviting the respondent to the university for the interview, the scene would  
remain a familiar one in which (s)he would be able to assert his/her position 25  
as a leader and manager.

Before the interview, the respondent was introduced to the purpose and  
format of the interview, initially by the researchers emailing a short description  
of the project, on the basis of which the respondent could choose to participate  
in the interview or decline. If the respondent agreed to participate, the descrip- 30  
tion was followed up with a short introduction at the interview session. Here, the  
respondent would be told that the interview formed part of a research project  
looking into the construction of leadership in the organisation and its framing of  
actors and career paths, including the framing of career paths for male and  
female managers. While the latter was a point of general interest, this did not 35

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<sup>3</sup> All interviews were conducted in Danish and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Excerpts  
used for analysis (see Section 4) have been translated verbatim from Danish into English. While  
this allows for the closest possible translation of the original wording and word order, it may  
also strike the reader as being occasionally unidiomatic.

Procedurally, this requires a number of steps to be taken, including ana- 1  
lysing the relation between discourse and other elements of social practices,  
selecting texts (here relevant transcribed interviews) and the focal linguistic  
categories of the analysis in light of the object of research, and finally carrying  
out the analysis (Fairclough 2016). This will be the focus of the following 5  
sections.

### 3.3 Methodology for analysing identity constructions

In CDA, textual analysis must be framed within the broader frame of discourse  
analysis, which includes focus on the dialogue between social practices and  
events that are discursively constructed and those which are not, i. e. between  
discourse and context.<sup>4</sup> For the analysis of identity constructions, this means  
that I will loosely follow the format suggested by Benwell and Stokoe (2006), 15  
which builds on the work of Halliday (1994) and Van Leeuwen (1996), as well as  
more generally on CDA. By ‘loosely’, I mean that my analysis will include the  
study of categories that are relevant for the purpose of identifying how respond-  
ents construct their leadership identities, and the degree to which this conforms  
or conflicts with the organisational discourse of diversity. Some of these have 20  
their origin in Systemic Functional Linguistics and reflect Halliday’s (1994) three  
metafunctions of language. They include e. g. transitivity (the relationships  
between participants, processes and circumstances in a clause), modality, and  
theme (the foregrounding of information) and may all contribute to the realisa-  
tion of identity constructions in text. Other categories typical of a CDA approach 25  
have a more generally linguistic background and include, inter alia, vocabulary,  
metaphor, and pronouns as important instances of identity work (Benwell and  
Stokoe 2006). The extent to which these categories are relevant to the construc-  
tion of respondents’ identities will be detailed below in the analysis of the  
selected interview excerpts. 30

Furthermore, when looking at how respondents do identity work in the  
semi-structured research interview, this involves the analysis of the context  
and the roles discursively assigned to its participants. This requires consider-  
ations on the interview situation. As a social event, the qualitative research 35

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<sup>4</sup> I adhere to the understanding of context as partly separate from discourse. Thus, we may talk  
of context as discursively defined as well as a purely social phenomenon (Wodak and Meyer  
2016). This means that when discussing the possible implications of the social setting (see  
Section 3.1) for the interviewer’s and the respondents’ constructions, it is the latter, non-  
discursive understanding I refer to. 40

interview is, from a constructionist perspective, a site for the joint construction 1  
of meaning. This entails that the interaction between the interviewer and the  
respondent impinges on the type of knowledge that can be accessed. Interviews  
are, in other words, co-constructed accounts that are part of the world they  
describe (Silverman 2011). It also entails that the semi-structured interview 5  
invites considered and elaborate responses, in this case, through inviting the  
respondent to reflect on his/her leadership, how this was formed and where his/  
her inspiration came from. Furthermore, by being co-constructed the content  
and meaning of these responses are dependent on a number of variables such as  
the relationship between the interviewer and the respondent, as well as the 10  
degree of trust and rapport established in the situation (Silverman 2011).  
According to Rapley (2001), this means that to readers the content and meaning  
of the interview can only be reliably assessed if extracts are presented with the  
context in which they appeared as well as with the co-text, i. e. the questions  
and talk ‘surrounding’ the extracts. 15

Below, the analysis will focus on interviews with the two respondents who  
are placed in different regional offices in Denmark, and who are not in daily  
contact with one another. Hence, the likelihood that the respondents would  
have inspired each other to think along similar lines is small. Excerpts from the  
two interviews have been selected for close analysis, representing salient con- 20  
structions of leader identities in the organisation. The respondents are both  
middle managers (male and female), but with different portfolios; however,  
they both share the task of managing a complex and highly specialised profes-  
sional field as well as being daily managers of a number of staff. 25

## 4 Data analysis: Constructions of leadership 30 identities

In the following, the analysis will take its starting point in the definition of  
diversity and how it is constructed by the bank in its strategic communication.  
This forms the basis of analysing leader identity constructions in the two inter-  
views and respondents’ uptake of an organisational diversity discourse.

Within the leadership literature, diversity is seen as a natural outcome of a 35  
number of socio-economic factors, such as more women entering traditionally  
male jobs, the increasing number of older workers, and more people with  
different ethnic, religious, and racial backgrounds. Furthermore, joint ventures,  
mergers and strategic alliances contribute to people from different backgrounds 40



Q2 being brought together (Yukl 2003). Although a much discussed concept, con- 1  
sensus seems to exist that diversity is socially constructed and is two dimen-  
sional, i. e. it has a visibility dimension and a job-related dimension. These refer  
to the social aspects of the concept, such as age, gender and ethnicity, and the  
information aspects, such as educational level, social class and religion (Gotsis 5  
and Kortezi 2015; Qin et al. 2014). In a workplace context, diversity may be  
further defined to reflect the variation in social and cultural identities that  
exist among employees of the workplace (Cox 2001).

For the organisation which embraces diversity and strives to make it an  
asset, there are a number of challenges and opportunities that its leaders must 10  
address. These include, on the one hand, to foster appreciation, (cultural)  
understanding, inclusion and tolerance and, on the other, to challenge stereo-  
typing, discrimination and intolerance (Cox and Blake 1991; Yukl 2013).

In the case of the organisation under study, we can make similar observa-  
tions. Thus, in their 2016 Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) report, they state: 15

- (1) *In XX, we believe that having a diverse staff strengthens the business and  
creates a knowledgeable and broad-based working environment – profession-  
ally and socially. It is important to us that everybody feels welcome and  
comfortable in XX regardless of their age, gender, sexual orientation, eth- 20  
nicity or disabilities.*

In this excerpt, the most important part in terms of diversity is the statement in  
lines 4–6, *It is important to us that everybody feels welcome and comfortable*,  
whose overall purpose is to signal inclusiveness. Not only is the desirability of 25  
this position foregrounded through the placing of the evaluative adjective  
*important* in the beginning of the sentence, the statement is also realised as a  
mental process in the subclause, cf. *everybody feels welcome and comfortable*  
(Fairclough 2003; Halliday 1994), which indicates that not only is the bank  
concerned with its employees *being* welcome, etc., it is also important that this 30  
is sensed. The dedication to diversity and inclusion is also evident in the use of  
the pronoun *everybody*, whose semantic scope is emphasised through the spe-  
cific mention of various social identity categories (gender, age, etc.), which are  
frequently considered to lead to exclusion, rather than inclusion.

The excerpt is reflective of a long-term effort to construct a consistent and 35  
unitary leadership and organisational culture, and the fact that this is stated in a  
highly profiled document such as the CSR report suggests that diversity is given  
high priority in the organisation. However, the question is whether this is also  
prioritised by its managers in their leader identity constructions.

## 4.1 Peter

1

Peter is a middle manager who has been with the organization since 2007, when he was hired as a financial adviser to large businesses. In this capacity, he was focused on developing his professional skills and knowledge as a specialist, and so, he did not have any leadership experience when, a year later, he was first asked to become a low-level manager in the bank. When we met him, he had been a middle manager for three years with seven employees under his management. In the following excerpt, Peter is asked what, in his view, characterises the competent and ideal leader.<sup>5</sup>

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(2) Interviewer:

*So, now we've been much around what you've said, but if you were to summarise what you think defines the good or competent leader, what would that be then?*

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Peter:

*Well, then it's empathy, I'd say. And then, of course, understanding the business. And I don't mean at the level of a specialist, but understanding the business, the area of responsibility or the managerial responsibility you have. And, of course, an interest in acquainting oneself with matters at the level required so that my staff also know that I'm not entirely lost when making decisions. But I think that for me, this about empathy is decisive. This is what I think, you know. And then business knowledge and empathy, of course. Because I don't think - well, I actually think the two go hand in hand, at least for me.*

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It is worth noting that the interview has been going on for some time, and Peter is feeling at ease with the situation. So, when prompted to summarise his view on the competent leader, he uses active sentences (with *I* as the subject) in numerous places to demonstrate commitment to his statement about important leader characteristics being empathy and business knowledge, cf. line 14. The construction of the two characteristics will, however, foreground empathy for a number of reasons: This is what Peter mentions first, just as he continues to stress its importance in several places, e. g. in line 5 where it is foregrounded (the theme), *Well, then it is empathy, I'd say*, and again in line 12, where he is talking about business knowledge followed by a reiteration of his commitment to empathy through a contrastive

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<sup>5</sup> To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, all respondents have been given 'new' names. All original Danish transcripts are provided in the Appendix.

'but', cf. *But I think that for me, this about empathy is decisive. This is what I think.* 1  
 This part of the response is also where the cognitive aspect to his claim is repeated  
 through the mental process verb *think*. As a subjectively marked modality (cf.  
 Fairclough 2003), 'think' generally suggests weak commitment to a statement.  
 However, rather than being a matter of committing or not, the use of 'think' is 5  
 here prompted by the interviewer (l. 2) and becomes intrinsic to the reflective  
 process Peter goes through before coming to a conclusion. Thus, he goes through  
 a process of weighing the characteristics, ending up with empathy being the most  
 important of the two (cf. the evaluative adjective *decisive* in line 13).

So, what does this tell us about Peter's leader identity and whether it is a 10  
 result of identity work or identity regulation (Alvesson and Willmott 2002)? To  
 answer this question, we must consider the earlier parts of the interview.  
 Elsewhere, Peter points to *human qualities* and the ability *to develop people* as  
 essential leadership traits, which reflects the overall organisational concern of  
 providing a welcoming and inclusive work environment with a high tolerance 15  
 for differences, cf. excerpt (1) above.

Furthermore, in the initial talk about his career path, the interviewer asks Peter  
 about his formal qualifications for being a leader, and whether he previously  
 attended any courses that would have provided him with knowledge in the area.  
 To this he responds that he did indeed attend some of the in-house leadership 20  
 courses for potential leaders as well as courses for newly appointed leaders when  
 he was first made a low-level manager. These courses are compulsory for employees  
 who either aspire to be leaders or who have recently become one, and so, they  
 constitute an important resource for regulating leader identities. During these  
 courses, it is very likely that a discourse of diversity would have been foregrounded 25  
 as part of a leader identity – something the study of the course contents seems to  
 confirm. The analysis so far suggests that Peter's leader identity is the result of both  
 identity work, i. e. the active construction of his self-identity, and identity regula-  
 tion, i. e. the organisational regulation of behaviour, cf. Section 2.

At a slightly later point in the interview Peter is being asked whether in the 30  
 pursuit of his leadership he has been inspired by other people, i. e. role models,  
 and if so, what these people did to inspire him. Consider the following extract.

(3) Interviewer:

*But what is it these people have done, or who have encouraged you or not 35  
 encouraged ...*

Peter:

*Well, it's something to do with [the role models] making very high demands.  
 That is, making high demands on yourself and your surroundings and*

*therefore also your employees [...] It is a substantial degree of freedom with 1  
responsibility. Not controlling [...] And then it is something about creating  
trust and security of employment. This is very important to me. And then  
being honest. That is, being honest with each other when things don't go that  
well and when they do. And then I've always - to me it's important - well, I 5  
always try to see the positive side of my employees. That is, if they don't do  
what I would like them to do, then I don't think they do it to irritate me  
personally. Maybe it's because they haven't understood what I said, or I  
haven't been good enough at explaining it. And this I try at least, to be so  
close to them that this trust and confidentiality is present. 10*

In excerpt (3), the predominant linguistic feature Peter uses to define good leadership is that of vocabulary. He uses an expressive and highly evaluative language to point out the characteristics he has observed in other leaders which he finds essential for good leadership, reflecting what he himself identifies with. 15 This includes primarily the use of a number of nouns and adjectives which are positively associated with the type of leader he claims to be, viz. a leader who develops people and the business (and in this order). Thus, in order to achieve this goal of *development*, he sees *high demands* (line 3), *freedom* (line 6), *not controlling* (line 6), *trust* (line 7), *security* (line 8), being *honest* (line 9) and 20 *confidentiality* (line 18) as important characteristics. Fairclough (2003) argues that some words are evaluative relative to the discourse, whereas others are inherently positive or negative, and consequently desirable or undesirable. While not being evaluative as such, the above words generally form part of statements of desirability – perhaps because of their reference to basic cultural 25 values – and so, when used together in the discursive construction of leadership, they accentuate and foreground the positive traits of the type of leadership described.

At this point, it is evident that Peter identifies himself as a leader who is concerned with his employees and who sees his leadership as crucial for 30 achieving good business results. At a later point in the interview, he puts this quite aptly, by acknowledging what he calls 'the human aspect' (line 2).

(4) Peter:

*[... ] so I've actually accepted that it is the human aspect. I develop people 35  
and develop the business.*

From the analysis of excerpts (2) to (4), it appears that Peter's identity work is partly the result of external influences and partly of the regulatory efforts of the organisation he works for. Thus, following Ford (2010), he collaborates in the 40

discursive production of behaviours and skills that are being promulgated, i. e. 1  
 being tolerant and welcoming, while also adopting a style of his own, which is  
 shaped by impressions and experiences he has been exposed to during his  
 working life. Altogether, the above excerpts suggest that he identifies himself  
 as a leader who is concerned with his employees' well-being, and that this self- 5  
 identification is very much the result of what he has seen other leaders do as  
 well and what he has experienced himself. At the same time, he acknowledges  
 the need to conform to a dual organisational focus of diversity and business  
 results, and he feels that he has to stay true to this focus. This he expresses in a  
 passage where the interviewer asks him about the characteristics he is looking 10  
 for when spotting new leadership talents.

(5) Interviewer:

*What is it you're looking for, then? [...] what is decisive for you, then, to  
 motivate them to move on?* 15

Peter:

*Well, what'll be decisive, is, of course, - I'll look at what XX thinks is a good  
 leader. We're employed with XX, after all. And I have to be true to this, of  
 course. But it's not a secret either that, of course, I'll include my own view on  
 this, as well. And where does this view come from? Well, it comes from what 20  
 I've learned, as we talked about earlier, that is, what I've seen as role  
 models. This may not be the right way, but if I add this to what XX wants,  
 and to the fact that in focus assessments and feedback XX thinks I'm doing  
 well, then I think, well, this is the most valid [view] I can contribute. So, this 25  
 is what I try to look [at] - I'm very true to concepts. As long as I'm true to  
 what we've decided in the Group [...]*

What characterises excerpt (5) is not only that this is where Peter clearly  
 identifies both external and internal influences as sources of his identity work 30  
 (and as a consequence, characteristics he will look for in others), but it also  
 shows us that identity is not only discursively constructed but is also derived  
 from our embodied and practical engagement with the world, cf. line 8 *what I've  
 learned* (Fairclough 2003). Thus, reflecting on what he looks for in others, Peter  
 reveals his personality and how it engages with his social identity as a leader. 35  
 He does so by continuously stressing his commitment to staying *true* (line 15) to  
 organisational objectives, e. g. through the use of the adverbial phrases *of course*  
 and *after all* (lines 3 and 5), thus indicating that he is a person of great integrity,  
 while also referring to his own personal views in line 6, cf. *I'll include my own  
 view on this, as well*, and how they neatly integrate with organisational views. 40

In sum, the analysis of the interview with Peter renders a number of 1  
interesting observations. His social identity as a leader appears to be the result  
of two primary factors, viz. the organisational focus on diversity management,  
which is discursively constructed as identities, for instance through in-house  
leadership courses, and his experience with other leaders, both in his working 5  
life and as a general observation. Incidentally, the two influences share many  
common features, leading to Peter's leadership style reflecting the overall  
organisational goal of diversity management.

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## 4.2 Anne

Like Peter, Anne is also a middle manager, but whereas Peter is located in a  
branch geographically distant from the headquarters, Anne is employed with the  
Copenhagen main office. When we met her, Anne had been with the bank and 15  
building society for eleven years (eight years as a manager), and at the time of  
the interview she was one and a half years into her most recent management  
position, being the manager of six employees. Like Peter, her first job with the  
organisation was as a specialist (in risk management), but she quickly devel-  
oped an interest in leadership and management. Therefore, the analysis will 20  
take its starting point in the first part of the interview, where the interviewer asks  
her about her motivation for becoming a leader.

(6) Interviewer:

*What was it, then, that motivated you to follow a leadership path? Well, you 25  
were apparently working in a field which was very interesting for a common  
employee, right?*

Anne:

*Yes, this was when I was in risk management. Back then I was a senior 30  
analyst, and I think already when I was employed with XX, I already  
mentioned to my manager [...] that I'd like to follow a leadership path. [...] So, it was a dialogue we'd had that it was this direction I wanted.*

Interviewer:

*But why? That is, can you tell me what it was that triggered you? 35*

Anne:

*Yes, I can, it was a lot of prestige [...] especially when you're an academic, then I don't think, then it's about this that if I am to do something and have influence, then I have to be a manager.*

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In juxtaposition to Peter, Anne was deliberately pursuing a management and leadership career already in the early years of her employment, and the determination to fulfil this ambition is clear from the above. Thus, when asked what it was that triggered her, she foregrounds the attractiveness of the position by assigning it a positive attribute, i. e. it was *a lot of prestige* (line 17), followed by material processes which foreground the goal of her ambitions, i. e. *to do something and have influence* (line 19). These processes are constructed as active (with *I* as the subject) and transitivity granting Anne a high degree of agency in shaping her career path. And while the fulfilment of her goal is made conditional on her ability to become a manager, the whole excerpt is constructed to leave the impression of a respondent in charge of and highly focused in her professional career. Moreover, this is not least due to her initial description of the actions that she had taken to make her ambitions known to relevant people, when she was first hired, cf. *I already mentioned to my manager [...] that I'd like to follow a leadership path* (lines 7–8).

The fact that Anne sees her leader identity as being in part intrinsically motivated is prevalent throughout the interview. Thus, when she is encouraged to talk about who or what has inspired her leadership, she mentions a number of sources outside the organisation that have contributed to the development of her identity, almost as a matter of self-realisation, rather than just inspiring her to follow a particular path.

(7) Interviewer:

*Is there anyone in XX, or perhaps elsewhere, who has sort of inspired you to be the leader you are? Well, considering [you're] dealing with people, how do you make this work, right? Are there any role models in your leadership career that you can say ... ?*

Anne:

*Yes, loads! I think I've been inspired by many different [role models], well, you know, I read very much of this leadership literature and fling myself into all kinds of courses, and you name it; well, I think it's a lot of fun, right? I attend open university classes at night, because they have leadership courses, or I can spend a whole Saturday in some coaching course for my own sake, and which I pay for myself, because I think it's a lot of fun. So, I have a lot of role models, I do! I think much about them as heroes. In fact, it's a lot of different contexts that inspire me.*

A striking feature of excerpt (7) is the enthusiasm with which Anne talks about what has inspired her, and what she has done to keep abreast with developments in the field. She uses phrases such as *fling myself into* (line 8) and *a lot of fun* (line 9) to

describe her dedication, which takes on an almost physical form. The metaphorical 1  
 expression ‘to fling oneself into’ derives from the bodily experience of physical  
 motion (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 2003 [1980]), rendering a dynamic feel to Anne’s  
 experience. This is followed by the listing of activities she has been engaged in,  
 which adds to the energetic impression you gain as a hearer. Furthermore, her 5  
 emphasis on the activities being an active, personal choice and the positive evalua-  
 tion made through e. g. *fun* (lines 9 and 14) make Anne stand out as a leader whose  
 personal inclinations form an inherent part of her leadership profile. While this  
 indicates that much of her inspiration both comes from within herself and from  
 outside sources, it does not tell us much about her leadership identity. 10

Further on in the interview, this becomes clearer when the interviewer asks  
 her about what it is she is looking for when encouraging members of her staff to  
 follow a leadership path.

(8) Interviewer: 15  
*What is it then you’re looking for, or what is it you see in the persons who you  
 might talk to, because you can see there’s something about them?*

Anne:

*Well, to me it is something about seeing the big picture, some energy, being 20  
 diplomatic, and being able to communicate with other people, and being  
 able to implement things. Not just by putting his or her foot down, but in a  
 good way, a constructive way. Persons who listen. I think there’s a lot to it,  
 but also someone who will hold his/her head high, and I know will cut a fine  
 figure in other sections in XX, who, I know, will make an impact and who 25  
 other people will respect.*

While Anne is not saying this explicitly, her definition of a capable leader is  
 someone who can work with different people and yet stay focused on the  
 goals. To convey this message, she makes use of non-finite relational, attrib- 30  
 utive clauses, i. e. the Carrier is implicit, cf. *being diplomatic* and *being able to  
 communicate with people* (lines 5 and 6), which foregrounds the attributes and  
 not the person (Halliday 1994). Furthermore, Anne uses clauses describing  
 mental processes, cf. *seeing the big picture* (line 4) and *persons who listen*  
 (line 9), yielding constructions that combine to convey the understanding of 35  
 a leader who is attentive to other people’s needs and as such is competent to  
 manage a diverse group of employees, cf. also the organisational goals of  
 embracing and welcoming staff of different backgrounds and ethnicities  
 (excerpt 1). As for the goal orientation, this is laid out as transitive, material  
 processes (again with the Actor being implicitly there), which leaves the 40



impression of a dynamic leader who has a material effect on his/her surroundings, cf. *implement things* (line 7) and *will make an impact* (line 12). This impression is further underlined by Anne's initial description of the competent leader as *[having] some energy* (line 5).

At this point, it is clear that to Anne a competent leader must display traits that both allow him/her to engage successfully with (different) employees and to be focused on the business. Thus, her constructions resemble Peter's in many ways, reflecting, at least partly, a diversity discourse, in which tolerance is a key attribute. This is further underlined when later in the interview she is asked to provide two words that would define her as a leader.

(9) Anne:

*Well, ... I have three strategic values which are the ones I use to assess myself by all the time. And it is responsibility, it is presence and it is respect. And they are values that are important to me.*

In excerpt (9), Anne mentions *responsibility*, *presence* and *respect* (line 3) as key leadership values, reflecting her description in (8). These values are *important* to her (line 4) and therefore desirable (Fairclough 2003). However, the question remains if this is a result of the regulatory work of the organisation, or whether the influences derive from elsewhere, as suggested above. The following excerpt may help us get closer to answering this question.

(10) Interviewer

*Now, you've sort of defined who you see as a good leader, it's a person with whom you can share your thoughts, but also someone you can, who must develop his/her employees to get the best out of them both in terms of human and professional qualities and the like, eerh. Is it your impression that this is the general idea of what a good leader is in the organisation? Or?*

Anne:

*I honestly don't know. Well, yes, we have these leadership values, but I can't repeat them. There are far too many, so I can't remember them [...] I think my problem is that it isn't so detailed and fine grained that I can translate it [...]*

In excerpt (10), it becomes quite evident that Anne is not aware of the details of the organisational leadership values. She knows they exist, but they have not made an impression on her to the extent that she can name them. For her, they are *too many* (cf. line 11) to remember. Thus, although her perception of the ideal manager resembles that of the organisation, she does not recognise this

resemblance as arising from the dispersion of an organisational identity, but 1  
 considers it integral to her personality, as in excerpt (9), i. e. as part of her self-  
 image (cf. Alvesson and Willmott 2002). In (9), she underlines this by stating  
 that the values are something that she *has* (line 1) and not something that has  
 been brought to her. However, discourse may work in subtle ways and when 5  
 naturalised and taken for granted, it may influence organisational member  
 identities and even constrain their thoughts and actions without them noticing  
 it (Ford 2010: 50). Thus, in Anne's case it may well be that what she takes to be  
 intrinsic to her leadership identity has partly emerged through her self-posi-  
 tioning within the dominant discourse of diversity. Anne's identity as a leader 10  
 may, in other words, reflect a mix of identity work and identity regulation, cf.  
 Section 2.

## 5 Discussion and conclusion

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The article set out to study the emergence of leadership identities in organisa-  
 tions and their origin, exemplifying the complex process of identity construction  
 through the analysis of interviews with two respondents from a Danish financial 20  
 institution. As such, the article confirms a predominant assumption in post-  
 structuralist identity research that identities cannot simply be dictated or con-  
 trolled through the implementation of organisational structures and designs, but  
 are the result of on-going negotiation and (re)construction with different influ-  
 ences and inspirations. The close linguistic analysis of interview data from 25  
 within the same organisation provides unique insight into how this may unfold,  
 suggesting that a number of individual and contextual factors are important for  
 the way respondents choose to present who they are and how they identify  
 themselves as leaders. Thus, although members of the same organisation and  
 largely adhering to the same leadership values, the respondents' identities are 30  
 constituted through the unique combination of individual style (reflected in the  
 linguistic choices they make), the context and genre of the interview situation  
 and (dominant) discourses (both organisational and societal). Of these factors,  
 the interview deserves special attention, as this is where our respondents may  
 have taken deliberate steps to present a certain 'type of person' to us. As 35  
 interviewers we would be the knowledgeable initiators of the process, but the  
 questions would have been asked in negotiation with the respondent's talk, and  
 for various reasons our respondents may also have chosen to keep the floor,  
 omit information or construct it in ways that would present him/her in a  
 favourable light (Briggs 1986; Kvale and Brinkman 2009; Rapley 2001). 40

This means that while the two respondents are asked similar questions 1 within comparable settings, their constructions of a leader identity will differ and yet converge. In Peter's case, the construction of a leader identity appears less informed by his individual style and more by what he has experienced within and outside the organisation, whereas Anne's construction of a leader 5 identity is carried extensively by her individual, personal style and less by other influences. This makes us question, of course, whether the organisational regulation of identities can be exerted through the introduction of master discourses and structures. However, it also invariably leads to the question of why the two respondents, in part, adhere to leadership values 10 that, incidentally, reflect the organisational focus on diversity. We see that Peter is quite conscious of organisational values and discourses and that he feels compelled to honour this focus whereas Anne appears to be ignorant of these values. It may be that the two respondents just happen to share outlooks, but it may also suggest that discourse works both at the conscious and the 15 subconscious levels, cf. the naturalisation of discourses in which certain worldviews are taken for granted (Wodak and Meyer 2016). Thus, it may still be argued that control is not exerted directly, but is obtained through the managers' self-positioning vis-à-vis a managerially inspired discourse (cf. Alvesson and Willmott 2002: 622) that is key to the organisational image and 20 identity of the institution.

## Appendix: Original transcripts of excerpts

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### Interview with Peter

(2) Interviewer:

*Ja. Nu har vi jo sådan set nok været meget inde omkring det, du har sagt, 30 men hvis du sådan skulle opsummere, hvad du synes, det er, der definerer den gode eller den dygtige leder, hvad vil det så være?*

Peter:

*Jamen det er empati, vil jeg sige. Og så selvfølgelig en forretningsmæssig 35 forståelse. Og det er ikke på specialistniveau, men forretningsmæssig forståelse, det ansvarsområde eller ledelsesmæssigt ansvar som du har. Og selvfølgelig en interesse i at sætte sig ind i på det niveau det nu kræves, således at dine medarbejdere jo også har en fornemmelse af, at man ikke er helt ved siden af i forhold til de beslutninger, man træffer. Men jeg synes jo sådan noget som empati er for mig altafgørende. Det tænker jeg, altså. Så 40*

*selvfølgelig forretningsmæssig forståelse og så empati. For jeg tror ikke at – 1*  
*og jeg synes jo egentlig, at de to ting går, hvert fald for mig, går jo hånd i*  
*hånd jo.*

- (3) Interviewer: 5  
*Men hvad er det så for nogle ting de personer har gjort, eller som har*  
*ansporet dig eller ikke ansporet ...*

Peter:

*Ja, men det er noget med meget store kravstættelse. Altså stille store krav til 10*  
*sig selv og til sine omgivelser og dermed også sine medarbejdere [...]. Det er*  
*store frihedsgrader under ansvar. Ikke kontrollerende. [...]. Og så er der*  
*noget med at skabe noget tillid og noget tryghed i ansættelsen. Det ligger*  
*meget mig på sinde. Og så vær ærlig. Altså være ærlige over for hinanden,*  
*når det ikke går godt, og når det går godt. Altså, det er begge sider af 15*  
*medaljen. Og så har jeg i hvert fald – for mig er det meget vigtigt ... Altså jeg*  
*forsøger altid at se det positive i medarbejdere. Altså, hvis de nu ikke gør det*  
*som jeg godt kunne tænke mig, så tror jeg ikke de gør det personligt for at*  
*drille mig. Så er det måske fordi de ikke har forstået hvad jeg har sagt, eller*  
*at jeg ikke har været dygtig nok til at forklare det. Og det forsøger jeg i hvert 20*  
*fald, at være så tæt på dem, at den tillid og fortrolighed, den er til stede.*

- (4) Peter: 25  
*[...] så jeg har egentlig accepteret at det er det menneskelige. Jeg udvikler*  
*mennesker og udvikler forretningen.*

- (5) Interviewer:  
*Hvad er det så for dig, der er afgørende for, om du vil motivere dem til at*  
*komme videre?*

Peter:

*Jamen, det der vil være det afgørende, det vil jo selvfølgelig være – jeg vil jo 30*  
*kigge ind på, hvad XX synes er en god leder. Nu er vi jo ansat i XX jo. Og det*  
*er jeg selvfølgelig nødt til at være tro mod. Men det er jo heller nogen*  
*hemmelighed, at jeg vil jo også lægge mit eget syn ned på det. Og hvor*  
*kommer det syn fra? Jamen, det kommer jo fra det, som jeg har tillært mig, 35*  
*som vi snakkede om tidligere, altså hvad er det, jeg har set som rollemod-*  
*eller. Det er jo ikke sikkert at det er det rigtige, men hvis jeg lægger det*  
*sammen med det XX gerne vil, og med at XX også synes, at jeg gør det godt i*  
*fokusmålinger og tilbagemeldinger, så tænker jeg, at jamen, det er vel det*  
*bedste valide, jeg kan bibringe, tænker jeg. Så det er det jeg forsøger at kigge 40*

– jeg er meget koncepttro. Bare jeg er tro mod det, vi har besluttet i 1  
koncernen [...]

## Interview with Anne

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(6) Interviewer:

*Hvad var det så, der i sin tid sådan motiverede dig til at gå ledelsesvejen?  
Altså du sad jo øjensynligt i et område, som også var meget spændende  
sådan som menig medarbejder, kan man sige, ikke?*

10

Anne:

*Jo, det var dengang jeg sad i risikostyring. Der var jeg senioranalytiker, og  
jeg tror allerede, da jeg kom til XX, der havde jeg en snak med min chef  
om [...] at jeg kunne godt tænke mig at gå ledervejen. [...] Så det var jo en  
dialog, vi havde haft omkring, at det var den udvikling jeg gerne ville.*

15

Interviewer:

*Men hvorfor det? Altså kan du sætte ord på, hvad det er der ansporede  
dig?*

Anne:

20

*Ja, det kan jeg godt, det var enorm meget prestige. [...] Specielt når man  
er akademiker, synes jeg ikke, så handler det om, at hvis jeg skal gøre  
noget, og være noget ved musikken, så bliver jeg nødt til at være chef.*

(7) Interviewer:

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*Er det nogen i XX, eller måske andre steder, der sådan har inspireret dig til  
at være den leder, du er? Altså nu for eksempel med tanken på også at have  
noget med mennesker at gøre, hvordan får man det her til at fungere, ikke?  
Er der nogle rollemodeller, du sådan i din ledelseskariere kan sige ... ?*

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Anne:

*Ja, masser! Jeg synes, jeg er blevet inspireret af mange forskellige [roll-  
emodeller], altså jeg, jeg læser rigtig meget sådan noget ledelseslitteratur  
og kaster mig ud i alle mulige kurser, og alt muligt, altså jeg synes det, jeg  
synes det er sjovt, ikke? Jeg går på Folkeuniversitetet om aftenen, fordi der er  
lederkurser eller kan bruge en hel lørdag på et eller andet coachingkursus for  
min egen skyld, og som jeg selv betaler, fordi jeg synes det er skide sjovt. Så  
jeg har masser af sådan nogle rollemodeller. Det har jeg. Jeg tænker meget  
på dem som helte. Det er mange forskellige sammenhænge, som jeg egentlig  
bliver inspireret af.*

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- (8) Interviewer: 1  
*Hvad er det så du ser efter, eller hvad er det, du ser hos de mennesker, som du eventuelt godt kunne gå hen og tale med, fordi du kan se, der er noget i dem?*
- Anne: 5  
*Altså, det, for mig handler det noget om noget overblik, noget overskud, noget at være diplomatisk, og kunne formulere sig i forhold til andre mennesker, og kunne få gennemført nogle ting. Ikke bare ved at stå og slå i bordet, men på en god måde, en konstruktiv måde. Folk der lytter. Jeg synes, der er mange ting i det, men også nogen som har rank ryg, og jeg ved, der kunne gøre sig andre steder i XX, så, som jeg ved ville kunne slå igennem, og som andre ville have respekt for.* 10
- (9) Anne: 15  
*Jamen [...] jeg har tre strategiske værdier, som er dem, jeg bruger til at måle mig selv på hele tiden. Og det er ansvar, det er tilstedeværelse og det er respekt. Og det er værdier, som betyder noget for mig.*
- (10) Interviewer: 20  
*Nu har du sådan defineret, hvordan du opfatter en god leder, det er en sparringspartner, men også en, som du kan, som skal udvikle sine medarbejdere, få det bedst mulige frem både menneskeligt og fagligt og sådan noget, æhm. Har du noget indtryk af, om det sådan er den gængse opfattelse af hvad en god leder er i organisationen generelt? Eller?*
- Anne: 25  
*Det ved jeg faktisk ikke. Jo, vi har sådan nogle ledelsesværdier, men jeg kan ikke referere dem. Der er alt for mange, så jeg kan ikke huske dem.[...] Jeg synes, mit problem er, at det er så detaljeret og så granuleret, så jeg kan ikke omsætte det [...]* 30

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## Bionote

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