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# **Creating Future Leaders?**

## **An Analysis of the Sense-Making of Trainees**

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# Acknowledgements

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Lastly, we would like to say to all the readers of this Master's thesis that we hope that you find this study interesting and stimulating to read, both in highlighting a limitedly studied phenomenon and in illuminating this in a theoretically broad way.

Thank you!

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Johannes Bokesten

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# Abstract

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<b>TITLE</b>	Creating Future Leaders? - An Analysis of the Sense-Making of Trainees
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<b>DATE</b>	23 <sup>rd</sup> of May 2014
<b>PURPOSE</b>	The purpose of this thesis is to reach an increased understanding of the situation facing graduate trainees in a Swedish context by exploring their subjective experiences and how they link these to leadership.
<b>RELEVANCE</b>	The number and popularity of graduate trainee programmes has recently increased rapidly in Sweden, while few studies have been conducted on the participants, leading to an incomplete understanding of what implications the programmes have for trainees.
<b>METHODOLOGY</b>	We analysed the sense-making of trainees based on a qualitative research design from an interpretative tradition. Data was gathered through 15 semi-structured interviews, which were analysed using a hermeneutical approach.
<b>FINDINGS</b>	We found that the trainees experience their situation as being part of a unique and privileged group, while also expressing views of being under pressure. Moreover, the experiences of trainees strengthen their belief that they can become future leaders, however, the road taking them towards leadership is characterised by ambiguity.
<b>CONTRIBUTIONS</b>	We have contributed to the existing literature by illuminating the intersection between newcomer socialisation and leadership. Departing from an interpretivist standpoint, we offer a novel way of looking at the phenomenon of trainee programmes through the eyes of the trainees, adding understanding to functionalist studies within the field. Our study adds practical contributions for trainees and organisations by providing nuance to the overwhelmingly positive image around these programmes.
<b>KEYWORDS</b>	Leadership, trainee, newcomer socialisation, career-making

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- Figure 1: Working with data consisted of six main steps (p. 21).

# 1. Introduction

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*In the first chapter of this thesis we introduce the reader to the topic of trainee programmes. We describe the rationale of this research topic and subsequently we introduce trainee programmes as a concept and present our problem statement and research questions. Finally, we present a brief overview of our study.*

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Increasingly, graduates embarking on their professional careers are faced with the prospect to “become one of the leaders of the future”, “shoulder a leading role in the future” and become a “world-class leader”<sup>1</sup>. That is, if they can manage to attain a place in a trainee program, a feat itself as the spots are limited with hundreds, sometimes thousand applicants per spot. We noticed the great popularity in trainee programmes ourselves a couple of months ago, when the yearly career fair was held at our campus at Lund University School of Economics and Management. Walking around, talking to different company representatives and student friends, it became apparent that the concept of trainee programmes has earned a particular status among us graduates. It is a desirable first position and when people attain a spot they seem very pleased. Despite the limited number of open trainee positions in relation to the number of applicants, the trainee programmes were frequently highlighted in discussions among students and company representatives as well as in corporate marketing material. Even though companies had other positions to offer graduates, the trainee programmes were on display.

*"We are  
looking for new  
trainees. Old  
ones became  
CEOs"*

*(Placement ad for the  
trainee programme of a  
major, listed Swedish  
company)*

The number of graduate trainee programmes has increased rapidly among Swedish companies, actually quadrupling during the last 10 years (Brydolf, 2014, April 26). Some explain this development by arguing that trainee programmes are a way for companies to attract the best and the brightest and in the long run, to secure future leadership (Edenhall, 2012, November 1). However, what implications this phenomena has for the trainees and the companies introducing trainee programmes remains somewhat unclear, having received limited scholarly attention despite a surge in popular interest. Thus, we think that an increased understanding of the concept of trainee programmes is needed to more fully perceive the effects this type of employment has for different stakeholders. How might the increased popularity and visibility together with the strong leadership focus affect the trainees and their

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<sup>1</sup> All examples lifted from recent Swedish placement ads for graduate trainee programmes.

organisations? By exploring the subjective experiences of the trainees themselves we mean to contribute to scholarly discussion and increase understanding of the phenomenon.

## **1.1 Trainee Programmes and Their Theoretical Context**

Before focusing on the theoretical context of trainee programmes, we need to clarify what the concept entails. Being a trainee has different meanings in different countries and cultures (traineeguiden.se, 2014). In Sweden, a trainee is often a newly graduated student within business or engineering (Nationalencyklopedin, 2014) who is trained by a company to gain a leadership position in the future (Svenskaakademin, 2014). Many trainee programmes include both practical and theoretical elements, they span 1-3 years, and the programme structure often consists of rotations where the trainee works at different departments within the company to gain a general understanding of the business and to develop an extensive professional network (traineeguiden.se, 2014). The trainees participating in our study were enrolled in programmes offered by eleven well-known Scandinavian organisations within various industries at the time of the study.

In order to gain an increased understanding of these trainees' situations and to relate their experiences to broader managerial phenomena, we need to engage in scholarly discussion. This requires a deep understanding of how ideas of trainee positions are connected to newcomer socialisation, leadership discourses and the career environment in which the programmes are embedded. Due to the rhetoric in how trainee programmes are marketed, as exemplified by the quotes from placements ads earlier in the introduction, it is reasonable to assume that discourses of leadership will influence the way trainees frame their experiences. Leadership discourses are considered societal phenomena (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012), and leadership of different forms can be assumed to affect the environment in which it is practiced (and vice versa). Alvesson and Sveningsson (2012) stress the importance of unpacking leadership for increased understanding and they recognise the leader to be a product of his or her environment. Context, relations, power and social constructions all influence leadership, which makes the particular circumstances of trainee programmes important to highlight in our study.

Furthermore, the placement within a trainee programme is usually the first position within a company for the graduate, and therefore, it is reasonable to assume that issues of newcomer socialisation will affect trainees' experiences. Earlier studies show that trainees face an

uncertain situation when starting their programmes, stemming from different expectations from different layers of the organisation (Porsfelt, 2001). The trainees are both recently graduated newcomers and regarded as future leaders which makes us wonder: is there a contradiction in socialising trainees? Bowen, Ledford and Nathan (1991) point out that organisations need strong cultures, but at the same time, they need to build structures that are weak enough to allow the unique qualities of graduates to impact on the work situation. Such organisational paradox is accentuated by the leadership intention of trainee programmes, with popular notions of leadership requiring the ability to influence followers (Kotter, 1990). However, as trainees are newcomers in the process of being socialised, they are also followers. Coupland (2001) highlights that when trainees experience this paradox they actively partake in the socialisation process, drawing upon or denying certain aspects of the situation they enter into. Thus, the initial messages of future leadership possibilities sent to trainees are likely to influence how they socialise into the organisation. Through our study of graduate trainees' sense-making, an interesting theoretical intersection can be explored between discourses of leadership and issues of socialisation.

### **1.3 Problem Statement**

Our research problem can be condensed into one clear sentence:

*Nowadays, graduate trainee programmes and their popularity increase rapidly in Sweden, meanwhile, little research has been conducted on trainees' experiences, leading to an incomplete understanding of the meanings and implications that being a trainee has for participants.*

The relevance of studying trainee programmes is accentuated by the strong presence of allusions to leadership in their marketing. How do the trainees themselves experience this connection? Given the leadership-orientation of trainee programmes in general, studying trainees is of interest for illuminating what qualities are deemed important for advancement in modern organisations. In this way, studying trainees potentially can help give us insight into wider considerations into what is considered a successful career and into what characteristics of employment that are desirable for many graduates of today.

So what can a close scrutiny of trainees' subjective experiences reveal to the scholarly community, students interested in the programmes, the participants themselves and maybe even companies involved in developing programmes? We propose that a deepened



understanding of trainee programme participants sense-making of their experiences will shed light upon a timely theoretical intersection between leadership discourses, newcomer socialisation, and the broader issue of career-making as a young graduate in a modern context.

## **1.4 Research Questions**

Our aim is to reach an increased understanding of how participants in graduate trainee programmes make sense of their experiences, which leads us to the following research questions:

- *How do trainees make sense of their situation within trainee programmes?*
- *How do trainees relate their situation to leadership?*

## **1.5 Outline**

This master thesis is structured in five main chapters; introduction, theoretical background, methodology, analysis and finally, discussion and conclusion. After having introduced our study in chapter 1, we underpin the situation trainees face in chapter 2 by engaging in interesting scholarly discussions. We explore theoretical concepts related to trainee programmes, such as newcomer socialisation, leadership discourses and boundaryless careers, in order to provide a rich theoretical basis for our research project.

After having outlined consulted literature, we place our project in a research tradition in chapter 3. We describe how we conducted our study and why we adopted our chosen method. Subsequently, we discuss how and why reflexivity was an important part of our research project. Moving on, in chapter 4, we analyse our data and present our findings. The structure of this chapter corresponds to our research questions, where we transition from trainees' sense-making of their current situation to their future-oriented views in relating to leadership.

Finally in chapter 5, we summarize our research project and allow ourselves, more freely, to discuss the findings substantiated from our analysis. Subsequently, we reason about the theoretical and practical contributions that we have offered through this study. We highlight what our findings mean for the scholarly community, organisations offering trainee programmes and the trainees themselves by discussing possible implications of our findings. Finally, we discuss perceived limitations of this study and suggest directions for further research.

## 2. Theoretical Background

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*In this chapter we aim to illuminate the situation trainees face by engaging in interesting scholarly discussions. We will explore theoretical concepts related to trainee programmes, such as newcomer socialisation, leadership discourses and boundaryless careers, to provide a rich theoretical basis for our research project.*

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Today, trainee programmes are on the rise, offering much desired positions for young professionals (Brydolf, 2014, April 26). The trainees as a group face an interesting tension as they are both organisational newcomers, relating to theories of socialisation (Garavan & Morley, 1997), while also being leaders of the future, connecting to the prestigious label of being seen as the heroes of our time (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). However, there is limited qualitative research conducted on trainees' subjective experiences as research tends to foreground organisational aims. Thus, theories relating to the trainee situation will guide us in this review of literature. In order to illuminate our phenomena of study we intend to seek, if not answers to, a wider understanding regarding questions such as: What theories might be applicable for understanding the trainee situation? What happens when newcomers are socialised into leaders? And, how is the trainees' situation contextualised?

### 2.1 Trainee Programmes, an Increasingly Popular Concept

Today, the number of trainee programmes is rapidly on the rise in Sweden, leading to concerns about a potential fragmentation of the label 'trainee'. Therefore, Sveriges Ingenjörer and Civilekonomerna (major unions representing professionals in engineering and business) together with TraineeGuiden.se (a Swedish site for trainee placement-ads) have developed a certification for trainee programmes (traineeguiden.se, 2014). The purpose of the certificate is to make it easier for applicants to find well-structured programmes and also give the employers guidance in what a trainee programme should include. Many trainee programmes include both practical and theoretical elements and the programme structure consists of rotations where the trainee works at different departments of the company to gain a general understanding of the business and to develop an extensive professional network. Examples of famous Swedish business leaders who attended trainee programmes are Carl-Henric Svanberg, former CEO of Ericsson and current chairman of BP and Volvo, Annika Falkengren, CEO at SEB, and Leif Östling, CEO of Scania. Such examples suggest that

trainee programmes, per se, are good, as they have the ability to ‘construct’ successful leaders.

Several reasons for organisations to introduce structured trainee programmes has been proposed, such as developing capabilities, increasing commitment, and ensuring career progression within the organisation (McDermott, Mangan & O'Connor, 2006). Most scholars studying trainees are occupied with trying to identify the key to develop successful trainee programmes (Dysvik, Kuvaas & Buch, 2010; McDermott et al., 2006; Pfeffer, 1998). Pfeffer (1998) claims that the fulfillment of trainees’ developmental needs will lead to flexible, autonomous and empowered trainees that demonstrate self-regulated behaviour and commitment. This is strengthened by McDermott et al. (2006) who means that the most important factor for trainees to meet their role expectations is stimulating and challenging work. Moreover, when trainees experience certain levels of pleasure and satisfaction inherent in their work the programmes should positively influence trainee performance (Dysvik et al., 2010). However, apart from such functionalistic studies, the number of studies on trainee programmes is limited. In order to understand the phenomenon in a fuller way is thus to turn to alternative scholarly discussions in areas relating to the situation trainees face. One such area is newcomer socialisation, which is closely related to the situation that trainees face as the trainee position usually is an entry-level position.

## **2.2 The Dilemma in Socialising Trainees**

Since a trainee programme is the first position within an organisation for most graduates, several studies on trainees are related to the concept of newcomer socialisation (Coupland, 2001; Garavan & Morley, 1997). Feldman (1976) refers to organisational socialisation as the process of transforming a total outsider into an effectively participating employee. There are two major arguments in the literature on socialisation. Firstly, transferring into a new organisation creates anxiety, which will decrease newcomers’ ability to influence their organisations. Secondly, organisations can use certain tactics in order to generate rather uniform reactions among newcomers (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).

The first argument highlight that anxiety often comes from anticipatory socialisation, which is the learning that takes place before the graduate’s first day on the job (Garavan & Morley, 1997). Porter, Lawler and Hackman (1975) mean that individuals enter organisations with preconceptions bringing with them a set of earlier experiences and beliefs, which creates

expectations about job content, job context and career expectations. Such expectations are thus likely to be found in trainees' reasoning about their situation, as they are recent graduates. Garavan and Morley (1997) explain that the expectations will be expressed in the form of an initial psychological contract, which is neither explicitly negotiated, nor written down, but exists in the minds of employees. A psychological contract refers to the system of beliefs an individual holds regarding mutual obligations between the employee and the employer, and it is subjective by nature (Rousseau, 1995). One important feature of a well functioning psychological contract that has been emphasised in the literature is reciprocity, since that will result in greater contract fulfilment and performance. To facilitate that reciprocity is achieved is thus one example of how an organisation can use certain tactics to socialise newcomers, highlighting the second major argument within the socialisation literature presented above. Such reciprocity is enhanced if there is transparency and trust between the two parties, requiring consistency between contract-related signals across HR-practices, social networks and layers of management (Rousseau, 1995). In what ways can an understanding of this consistency be facilitated? One medium for this is through co-workers interactions. In helping each other make sense of the terms of the psychological contracts, Dabos and Rousseau (2013) note that employees are likely to use informal social networks. Moreover, they reason that people with prestigious positions in an organisation enjoy better opportunities and thus, develop more positive views of their contractual conditions. Walker, Smith and Kemmis (2012) argue in line with such claims in their study of mutual obligations between Australian trainees and their employers. Trainees are found to experience a generally positive employment relationship to their employer and vice versa, which becomes evident through a high level of agreement between the two parties. This is in contrast with findings by McDermott et al. (2006) that graduate trainees might be less satisfied than their counterparts in organisations without such programmes, as they have higher expectations than others. Such debate illuminates the second major argument presented above, and shows that organisations can impact socialisation among groups of employees in both positive and negative ways.

The dual view explored above of trainees' perceptions of experiences compared to other employees, make us want to further explore their sense-making of their situation. Adding ambiguity into the picture, Porsfelt (2001) states that trainees' early days in an organisation are filled with uncertainty. He did a study on trainee programme participants in a large Swedish company and found them to feel as if they are 'in between' different expectations from different levels of the organisation. This can develop into a base for irony about the

same organisation and its members, which according to Porsfelt (2001) results in a marginal culture that help trainees to handle the difference between being a manager, being seen as a manager and seeing oneself as a manager. Coupland's (2001) study of graduates' work experience related to newcomer socialisation further strengthens the claimed role ambiguity. She explores how trainees in a well-known, high street chain talk about adjustment. She found that the participants' constructions of similarity and difference related to other employees supported the notion of conflicting identities. What does the conflicting situation that emerges mean for our understanding of the trainees' situation? For instance, the identity work of the employees seem to occur in social contexts (Brown & Phua, 2011; Johnson, Venus, Lanaj, Mao & Chang, 2012), that are in themselves unstable and ambiguous (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Thus, other individuals at work, such as colleagues, clients and superiors take part in the identity work process (Brown & Phua, 2011). Such argumentation is an important assumption in the organisational socialisation literature as interaction between a newcomer and other organisational members, such as a supervisor, plays an important role in newcomers' understanding of their situation (Schein, 1978). The conflicting situation for trainees of being "in between" because of differing expectations from different layers of the organisation found by Porsfelt (2001) can in this way be explained as stemming from these differing expectations coming clear through interaction. Thus, as trainees face a situation where there is already a disconnection between being a manager and seeing oneself as a manager (Porsfelt, 2001), colleagues partaking in the individuals identity work can act to further fragment self-identity through adding the dimension of being seen as a manager by others.

The uncertainty in what the organisations want the trainee to be creates a contradiction for organisations socialising graduates into their cultures. Bowen et al. (1991) point out that organisations need strong cultures, but at the same time, organisations need to build structures that are weak enough to allow the unique qualities of graduates to impact on the work situation. Coupland (2001) highlights this paradox and notes that newcomers actively draw upon and denies aspects of the organisational culture they enter into, while relating it to its broader cultural context. As she assumes organisations to need innovative, challenging employees, it is perhaps undesirable for newcomers to want to 're-draw' themselves before joining the organisation in order to construct a 'perfect fit'. Instead, Cable, Gino and Staats (2013) argue that more effective relations between the employee and organisation are built if the initial socialisation process is encouraging the newcomers to accept their own strengths

and weaknesses, and thus focusing on increasing feelings of authenticity. Furthermore, an organisational tension between authentic self-expression and organisational control is highlighted in their study.

Studies of authenticity within newcomer socialisation are relevant to trainees both as they are in the beginning of their careers but also because of the salient leadership focus within the programmes. Are intentions to become leaders expressions of authenticity or are they a result of organisationally controlled socialisation efforts? It could be assumed that the trainees, expected to be leaders in the future, are influenced by dominant leadership discourses, highlighting transformational and authentic leadership (Sveningsson & Nyberg, 2014). In this way leadership literature can broaden our understanding of what happens when newcomers are socialised into leaders.

## **2.3 Dominant Leadership Discourses Shaping Identities**

The leader has become one of the dominant heroes of our time and as a consequence, many students graduating from business schools are eager to make a career as a leader (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). This desire accompanies the graduate when becoming a trainee (traineeguiden.se, 2014), and to understand how trainees make sense of their situation and how they relate it to leadership, it is of relevance to understand the dominant discourses around leadership, influencing contemporary society.

Today, the transformational and visionary approach to leadership dominates the discourses used by practitioners and scholars. Discourse is a way of reasoning anchored in particular vocabularies reflecting certain versions of the social world (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). The contemporary transformational discourse emphasise change and renewal and make a distinction between management and leadership (Mintzberg, 1998; Kotter, 1990). Managing involves controlling, coordinating and directing (Mintzberg, 1998) and leadership is about communicating an engaging vision, which will transform followers and achieve change (Kotter, 1990). Within this approach the leader is often portrayed as strong and persuasive, with abilities to engage followers (Barker, 1997). A more recent approach to leadership is the post-heroic approach, which instead stresses processes and relations, and implicates that leadership happens everywhere. One influential fashion within post-heroic theories is the emphasis on authentic leadership and scholars within this area argue that the best leaders are true to their authentic self (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Authentic leaders are characterised as

honest and transparent at the same time as they are aware of their skills and limitations and behave according to their own values (Yagin & Medler-Liraz, 2014). These functionalistic approaches aim at creating universal concepts and theories of how to execute good leadership, which influence mainstream discourses of leadership that suggests leadership to be the solution to many problems in organisations (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). Such views of leadership influence how trainees view their situation as the dominant discourses have such a big impact in society.

However, the dominant views of leadership are criticised by several scholars. Alvesson and Spicer (2011) suggest an ambiguity-centred approach that recognises the limits of leadership and views it as a contradictory phenomenon that is accomplished differently by different people. In the same fashion, Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) conceptualise leadership as the extra-ordinarisation of the mundane. Based on a case study of managers they argue that leaders make trivial acts, such as listening, significant, not because of the act itself but as the act is conducted by a manager. The contradicting views of leadership make it an everlasting discourse concerning what leadership really means (Pfeffer, 1977; Alvesson & Spicer, 2011; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012). Alvesson and Spicer (2011) claim that since leadership can be seen as almost everything, it can also be viewed as nothing. This leaves us with a difficulty in pinpointing exactly what leadership as a concept means, with numerous definitions available.

But how does this elusive concept of leadership, dominated by contemporary discourses, influence trainees' sense-making? Discourses do not only reflect certain versions of the social world (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000), they also shape the behaviour and views of those surrounded by them (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), and these discourse-influenced behaviours and views serve as inputs into identity construction (Sveningsson & Nyberg, 2014). One major scholar exploring how identity is inscribed into dominant discourses is Foucault (Kenny, Whittle & Willmott, 2011). His writings on power and subjectivity have had strong influence in organisational studies, and critically oriented studies of organisation have built on his work and increasingly discovered how identities can be shaped by dominant organisational discourses and practices, such as leadership (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Kenny et al., 2011; Gagnon & Collison, 2014). Discursive practices of leadership can thus be seen as foundations for identity work rather than images of what really happens in organisations (Sveningsson & Nyberg, 2014; Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006). The discourse is in this way used as a way to reduce uncertainties around the leadership role, portraying

leadership as a social construct that people create to make sense of themselves (Sveningsson & Nyberg, 2014). Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) strengthen such reasoning and claim that leadership as a concept might be closely related to identity construction of individual managers, securing a sense of well-being. Studies in this field are however mainly focusing on managers, and not employees in training to become managers, such as trainees. Despite this, we think that many of the findings can still be related to trainees as a group. In a study on middle managers, Sveningsson and Larsson (2006) explore the link between leadership and identity work, and support that talk of leadership act as symbols for more substantive work. They found that managers may talk about themselves as leaders, while at the same time pursuing contrasting activities. In situations like this, one can say that the individuals' perception of themselves have characteristics of fantasy. The identity work and fantasy formation can be related to specific leadership ideals within the organisation. The idea of leadership as identity work has also been built upon by, for instance, Warhust (2012), who states that leadership involves supporting a certain identity. Leadership can in this way be understood to be an attractive label with positive connotations that individuals draw upon in their identity work, and this is interesting to consider when studying trainees, having a special relationship towards leadership. Trainees enter a company affected by the leadership-oriented marketing connected to their programmes and thus, link leadership to future career-making.

## **2.4 Making a Career as a Trainee**

In order to understand the environment in which the proliferation of trainee programmes has taken place, and to delve deeper into the labour market situations facing young graduates of today we also need to contextualise our project. Within the career-literature the debate on the existence or non-existence of a major shift towards boundarylessness in the environment facing professionals offers one such contextualisation.

A major recent theme within the career-literature is the advent of “boundaryless” careers. The concept is borne out of the assertion that organisational realities are increasingly chaotic following increasing globalisation and the increased competitive pressures in its wake. Both organisationally driven activities such as increasing efficiency through downsizing, delayering and outsourcing (Feldman & Ng, 2007), as well as individual propensity to pursue international careers in a globalised environment (Baruch, 2006), are thought to lead to a breakdown of the psychological contract between workers and organisations (Sullivan, 1999).



Taking its place, it is claimed, is a new contract where the employee is expected to bring their whole self to work, complete with ambitions and learning capabilities, in exchange for opportunities to grow offered by the organisation (Hall, 1996). Thus, instead of offering secure work in exchange for loyalty, the organisation is expected to offer opportunities to increase employee employability, development of transferable skills and psychologically meaningful work while assigning responsibility for career development to the employee (Sullivan, 1999; King, 2004). What does this mean for graduates entering the labour market? It is theorised that these developments make the organisational and hierarchical boundaries defining traditional career-development increasingly permeable, introducing a boundaryless career-environment.

Navigating within this environment, employees are assumed to take on new attitudes toward careers, preferring to free oneself from organisational control (Forret & Dougherty, 2001) and premier self-actualisation through individualistic definition of career and life success (Baruch, 2006). These types of careers where the individuals are unhinged from specific organisations have been labelled ‘protean careers’<sup>2</sup> (Hall, 1996). Personal characteristics and competencies put forth as crucial for achieving success in pursuing protean careers accordingly revolve around self-knowledge in career-goals, personal strengths and weaknesses, being able and willing to seek out new experiences and being able to gather resources for reaching personal goals through networks and know-how (Eby, Butts & Lockwood, 2003). In this way, it can be said that such career concept emphasise individual agency and responsibility in career development.

Although boundarylessness and the protean career development associated with it provide ample opportunities for self-actualisation for assertive and ambitious careerists (DeFilippi & Arthur, 1994), not everyone is likely to enjoy such an environment. Instead of seeing the freeing of external boundaries as liberating, many people might instead experience anxiety due to the lack of external support inherent in this development (Hall, 1996). Reduced stability and non-linearity in career trajectories brings with it an increased number of transitions, and hence issues of stress for the protean careerist (Baruch, 2006). We wonder if this might be something that is evident when looking at trainees in their roles with a fairly high amount of transitions through rotations. In addition to handling new environmental conditions, the new career paradigm is thought to require certain qualities in individuals to thrive in this environment. The emphasis on ‘networking’ (here assumed to be a purposeful

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<sup>2</sup> After the Greek god Proteus being able to change shape at will.

career-activity rather than socialising), self-centeredness and proactive career-moves by the individual to ensure career-success inherent in the concept of boundaryless careers (Eby et al., 2003) could be argued to mirror an increasingly narcissistic mindset on a wider societal level (Alvesson, 2006). However, when looking at the empirical foundation for the concept, such pessimism might be unwarranted. Looking at data for average job tenure, expected to decrease in the new era of boundaryless careers (and the increasingly disloyal actors within it), Rodrigues and Guest (2010) conclude that the evidence does not show any significant changes in either job tenure or job stability during the decades in which the notion of boundaryless careers have been popular. Their findings cover both an American context as well as major European economies. The concept of boundaryless careers has also been criticised for being poorly defined (the concept itself being labelled as ‘boundaryless’ by Feldman & Ng (2007)), overestimation of individual agency and underestimating the still important influence of institutional boundaries and traditional organisational careers (Inkson et al., 2012). Trying to remedy the weaknesses of the term while building on its strengths as a useful metaphor, authors have argued for a perspective where greater organisational fluidity coexists with significant organisational influence in creating and managing boundaries for individual careers (Baruch, 2006; Inkson et al., 2012).

Despite weak empirical support, the boundaryless career has been characterised as a helpful metaphor leading to interesting theoretical discussion (Rodrigues & Guest, 2010). And we assume that the greater fluidity on the labour market that is inherent in this discourse influences sense-making of young graduates of today. Building on discourses on boundarylessness, authors have proposed views where complexity and subjectivity in career boundaries are acknowledged (Heracleous, 2004), while also recognising the significant influence social and organisational context has on what people perceive to define and limit their careers (King, 2004; Inkson et al., 2012). Career agency can in this way be seen in a more nuanced way where career formation is a result of individuals' interaction with institutions in interdependent ways (Tams & Arthur, 2010). The shift from looking at boundaries as rigid has instead opened up for perspectives that are more along the line of social constructionist thinking, where focus turns towards how meanings of career-making and the boundaries shaping the process are socially constructed, fluid in the sense that they are constantly re-negotiated by career-actors (Currie, Tempest & Starkey, 2006; Coupland, 2004). This is in line with the focus of our project, looking at how trainees make sense of their situations through their socially constructed realities.

## **2.5 Bringing Together Theoretical Frames**

Our aim in this project is consequently to explore trainees' sense-making of their situations, while also investigating in what way they link their experiences to leadership. Therefore, we have highlighted literature concerning newcomer socialisation as trainees experiences are affected by their status as entrants into an organisation. Also, given the salient leadership focus of these programmes, dominant leadership discourses have been linked to individuals identity work, inspired by critical-interpretivist thinking on leadership. These theoretical frames have been combined with contextualisation of the trainees' career environment. As the trainees are recent graduates, intended to become leaders, there is a tension in how organisations socialise such newcomers into a leadership role. We tend to explore this tension by investigating the trainees' subjective experiences of their situation, specifically: how do trainees make sense of their situation within trainee programmes? And, how do trainees relate their situation to leadership?

## 3. Methodology

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*In this section we describe our chosen methodology. We will start by explaining the meta-theoretical foundation that our research is based upon. Subsequently, we will describe how we gathered our data and how we conducted our data analysis. Finally, we discuss how and why reflexivity is an important part of our research project.*

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### 3.1 An Interpretative Standpoint

In order to explore how trainees make sense of their experiences in trainee programmes and how they relate to leadership, we need to take a step back and reflect upon how the design of our research project is affected by our meta-theoretical assumptions. These assumptions define that we operate within an interpretivist research paradigm. Paradigms can be represented as "...the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator..." (Guba & Lincoln, 1994: 105). People construct their own realities and this applies to us as researchers as well (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Our paradigm has a fundamental impact on our research when it comes to ontology and epistemology. Ontology can be defined as the "...form and nature of reality", whilst epistemology can be described as the "...nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known?" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994: 108). Embarking on this research project we work from the assumption that what constitutes social reality is socially constructed, and that individual realities are subjective. In the same manner we view knowledge as subjective and hence notions of true knowledge as misleading (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Thus, our research is within an interpretivist research tradition.

In our research we are interested in social understanding of meaning, as associated with Habermas concept of a historical-hermeneutic knowledge interest (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Thus, we wish to find knowledge about the social world, not through uncovering deep-level, structural, objective truths but through understanding the realities of the research objects as described by themselves through language. Studying how trainees understand their realities through looking at how they talk about their experiences and situations connects to the wider goal for social constructionists, namely to study how reality is socially constructed (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Consequently, as social reality is influenced by language, a

social constructivist approach turns our attention towards analysis of language (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000).

Even though our knowledge interest is interpretative we are attuned towards the possibility of finding certain relationships or discourses to be exploitive (but transmitted through language). However, we do not enter our research project with the primary purpose to combat pre-conceived notions of repression, but to understand how our participants make sense of their realities. Furthermore, we cannot rule out the possibility that insights gained from our study can be used to increase efficiency of, for instance, HRM-activities. However, a technical knowledge interest was not the driving force in how we designed and conducted our study.

### 3.2 Conducting Qualitative Research Through Interviews

In our study of how trainees make sense of their situation and how this situation relates to leadership, we used a qualitative, abductive approach, which has some characteristics of both induction and deduction (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). This was aligned with our hermeneutical point of departure since it allowed us to move between our pre-understanding of the phenomena and the understanding that came out of our empirical material (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).

In this section we present an overview of the process (Figure 1) of how we have worked with our data, throughout sampling, gathering and analysis. Inspired by a guide developed by Creswell (2003) we carried out six main steps in our data analysis process:

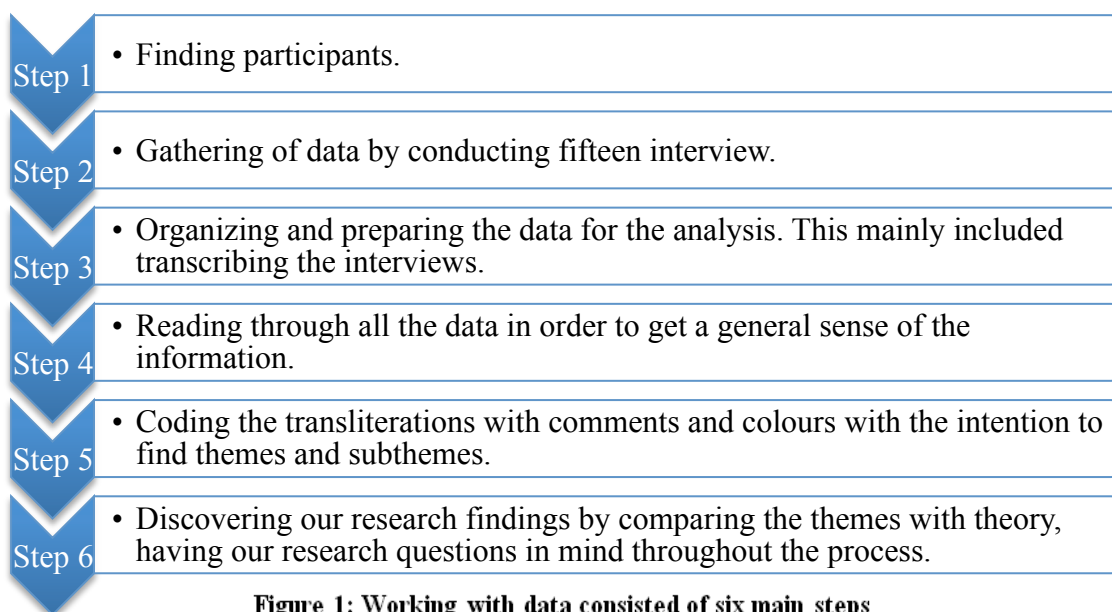


Figure 1: Working with data consisted of six main steps

Since this is a qualitative study, steps of data collection and analysis are not perfectly separated, but the steps above serve as a guide of the main focus at different points in time for us as researchers. In the following sections we will describe in detail how we sampled, gathered and analysed our data in order to reach a deeper understanding of the phenomenon we studied.

### **3.2.1 Finding Trainees (Step 1)**

We performed semi-structured interviews with 15 participants enrolled in trainee programmes at 11 different, well-known, Scandinavian companies, and these interviews served as the base for our analysis. This approach was best suited for our research because we wanted to learn more about the social context that the trainees were in and discover their experiences through their own words. In order to understand the meaning of the phenomenon that we studied in this research it was really important for us to find the right interviewees (Merriam, 2002). To answer our research question we needed to speak with trainees and therefore our study concerned a particular group of employees, making our sample focused in its purposefulness (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Creswell, 2003). At the onset of the project, we had to assume a certain degree of similarity between trainees. We conceptualised trainee programmes as a specific category of work experience, assuming trainees share similar roles across different programmes. One could argue that trainee programmes are dissimilar across companies and studying “trainees” as a distinct employee-category is misleading. We believe it is important to acknowledge the variety amongst trainees’ situations, but we also believe that meaningful insights into the phenomenon can be gained through studying trainees attending different programmes.

Guidelines were set up beforehand for what kind of interviewees we wanted to find. Factors that affected the selection of interviewees were for example the type and length of the trainee programme the participant was enrolled in. Based on these guidelines we found companies with trainee programmes that met our criteria. Subsequently, we contacted the HR departments at these organisations and asked for contact information to people that were currently involved in their trainee programme. However, we found ourselves struggling with slow response times and many companies were unwilling to help due to a lack of time. Therefore, we made announcements about our study through social media in an attempt to find trainees directly. This approach was successful and we found a great number of interviewees willing to be a part of our study. However, this also resulted in trainees being

recommended to us rather than us choosing them based purely on our criteria. As a result, we checked the trainee programmes of recommended trainees so that they fit our study. Finally, we interviewed 15 trainees, from 11 different companies and decided that they would stay anonymous during our whole research, in order to ensure participation and promote sincerity in responses. In line with this reasoning, the names of participants have been changed in our analysis chapter.

### **3.2.2 Data Collection (Step 2 and 3)**

We designed an interview guide (see exhibit 1) with open-ended questions supposed to elicit participants personal views and opinions regarding their experiences attending a trainee programme and how they relate to leadership. The interviews lasted between 35 to 60 minutes and they were performed via Skype and telephone, partly due to the fact that several of the participants were abroad and not able to attend face-to-face meetings. It also enabled us to gain wider access to trainees, as many preferred this medium. As Holt (2010) notes, the decision to hold interviews via a telephone medium should seriously be considered a worthy alternative to face-to-face interviews in certain research contexts. In the interviews conducted via Skype the video function was not utilised, mostly because we wanted to avoid technical glitches often experienced with this kind of software (Hanna, 2012). Two interviewers initially held interviews, but later in the process we held individual interviews as we became more comfortable in the role. The interviews were recorded (after permission by interviewees) and subsequently transcribed. Our strategy was to develop trust between the interviewees, and ourselves, which according to Alvesson (2003) is one of the dominant approaches to conducting interviews. It is questioned whether this method provides ‘true’ knowledge, but it enabled us to explore the inner worlds (meanings, ideas, feelings and intentions) of the participants. To make the trainees feel comfortable and share their experienced social reality, we started with some relatively easy questions about their personal background, such as education and work experience (see exhibit 1, interview guide). We continued with questions about their reasoning of the events and actions they took before they became a trainee. Subsequently, we asked questions about their particular trainee programme and questions about the role as a trainee. Finally, they discussed their view on the future and their relation to leadership.

### 3.2.3 Data Analysis (Step 4, 5 and 6)

We analysed our data in part continuously and simultaneously as it was collected since we unavoidably interpreted the data in every contact with it. Consequently, the steps between the collection and the analysis of the data are partly overlapping, a consequence of an iterative process which according to Merriam (2002) makes it easier to achieve reliable and valid data as opportunities to make adjustments during the process can be seized. This is also in line with our hermeneutical approach where our phenomenon of study is located in its context by alternately connecting empirical data to its environment. Thus, meaningful knowledge of parts of the data is discerned through exploration of their relation to the whole, and vice versa (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). After transcribing and reading through all our interviews we started to map out general themes and subthemes by inserting comments and colour coding. During this stage we looked for repetitions, similarities and differences, a common approach described by Ryan and Bernard (2003). The discovered themes came from our data but also from our prior theoretical understanding, as encouraged by our abductive approach. Thus, our starting point was an empirical basis, underpinned by theoretical preconceptions that helped us avoid being too naive in the interpretation of our data (Alvesson, 2003). Theories about leadership discourses, newcomer socialisation and career-making worked as a guide throughout our analysis. We aimed for theoretical broadness as this served as a guide to explore the social phenomena holistically (Creswell, 2003). Empirical material was successively developed and the theory was adjusted and refined during the process. Thereafter we linked the themes to our research questions and tried to discover broader findings. We asked ourselves: How did our themes relate to each other and what did they actually *mean*? By moving deeper towards an understanding of the data we finally succeeded to make an interpretation of the larger meaning of the material and answer our research questions. As has been presented above, our approach to working with data can be divided into six major steps, although some of these may overlap they can be understood as our narrative as researchers throughout the process.

When presenting our analysis (see chapter 4 “Analysis”), we use quotes from our interviews. These were translated from Swedish to English. Reasonable modifications have been made to make the extracts easier to read. All names and other references that could undermine the anonymity of respondents have been modified to ensure that our respondents are treated ethically.



### 3.4 Reflexivity

There are different ways to understand reflexivity in qualitative research. In this thesis we use Alvesson and Sköldbberg's (2009) take on the concept, which suggests reflexivity to be a process of careful interpretation and reflection. They mean that reflexivity *'starts from a sceptical approach to what appear at a first glance as unproblematic replicates of the way reality functions'* (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009: 9). The idea of reflexivity is thus to acknowledge the ambiguity in empirical materials and offer alternative lines of interpretation (Alvesson, 2003). Since our knowledge-interest concerns understanding meanings ascribed to a phenomena, and since the researcher has an active role in production and analysis of descriptive data (Merriam, 2002), issues of reflexivity become salient.

To study trainees' understandings of their situation is an issue around subjectivity, which is very difficult to describe and interpret (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). It was thus of great importance for us to stay reflexive in our data analysis as reflexivity can 'boost' an analysis and increase the possibility to come up with innovative results (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). When we began our research project we brought several assumptions and prior theoretical understandings to our study. As our interest in studying this phenomenon followed from personal interest in enrolling in trainee programmes we brought positive connotations with us into the study. Knowing some of the recruitment processes, we believe that the participants who join trainee programmes are often ambitious, high-talented people. This created the risk of confirmation bias. Since we could be trainees ourselves fairly soon, we may have 'wanted' to hear that the programmes open up opportunities within an organisation and that they are a great platform if you aim to become a future leader. The appeal to confirm the greatness of trainee programmes could have made it more difficult for us to be reflexive. Those biases influenced the way we interpreted and made sense of our research objective and we realised that this called for reflexivity.

Moreover, our interpretive repertoires (the different interpretations available to us) are relatively limited as inexperienced researchers. Without striving for reflexivity we believe we would be influenced mainly by conventional theories within the management field. Therefore, we made an attempt to become aware of our biases and assumptions, enabling us to actively look for signs that countered our assumptions when interpreting our interviews. To do this we needed to become familiar with alternative theories by conducting a thorough literature review. We read a lot and learned about powerful counter-views to traditional theories, which

we believe enhanced our interpretative repertoire and actually detached us (to some point) from prior understandings and improved our ability to reflect (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).

During our study we considered Alvesson and Sköldberg's (2009: 273) four levels of reflexivity, which are freely discussed below. In our interaction with the empirical material we reflected upon *what* questions we ask and *how* we asked those questions. By using different metaphors of how interviews can be understood (Alvesson, 2003) we aimed to challenge our interpretation of the underlying meanings of the material. Moreover, we used the strategy of peer debriefing (Creswell, 2003) to further question and confirm our interpretations. Hence, an external part critically assessed our findings in order to improve the accuracy of the results. We also remembered that our study is embedded in a social and political context that calls for a critical interpretation of power and social reproduction (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). We therefore used meta-theory, such as critical theory, to challenge dominant interpretative patterns. We asked ourselves questions such as: *Does the structure of the trainee programmes really allow for individual freedom or do the strong values and norms within the programmes make the trainees victims of dominant power structures? Is the aim of all the participants really to become leaders in the future? Are the participants really saying things in the interview that represent their talk in everyday life?* Such questions provided us with alternative ways to reason about leadership discourses and trainee programmes. We thus admitted that particular social and political interests are favoured by our interpretations. Finally, we did a reflection on text production and language (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). In this stage we carefully worked through our thesis several times and re-evaluated the language used. We also tried to present rich narratives as well as contrary information to enhance the accuracy of our findings (Creswell, 2003).

Consequently, by constantly challenging ourselves to enhance our interpretative repertoires and to explore our data from different angles, we aimed to enhance the credibility and validity in our study.

## 4. Analysis

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*In this chapter we analyse our data and present our findings. The structure of this chapter corresponds to our research questions, where we transition from trainees' sense-making of their current situation to their future-oriented views in relating to leadership.*

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In seeking understanding of the sense-making of trainees regarding their current situation and their relation to leadership, certain narratives have emerged as salient in our data, highlighting some potential tensions. We find that the trainees make sense of their current situation in relation to being part of a unique and privileged group, while also experiencing pressure and anxiety stemming from this same uniqueness. This uniqueness is channelled into future-oriented views on career-making, where leadership is seen as an attainable and desirable goal. However, the road leading up to this goal is found to be ambiguous, as the structure of the trainee programmes are temporary, not including promises of leadership positions. Thus, a tension between being unique but replaceable is salient as well as a tension between enacting a role of a leader while in fact being a trainee. Thus, trainees equate the concepts of being a good trainee and being a leader in order to decrease this ambiguity. Such co-creation reflects and maybe influences discourses of career-making for trainees, almost to the point where there is no other option for the trainees than to become leaders.

*"What are we, really? Are we trainees or are we leaders? What does the management trainee role really mean?" - Carrie*

### 4.1 The Double-Edged Narrative: Unique while Pressured

When analysing our data two main narratives were salient in trainees' sense-making of their situation, relating to our first research question: How do trainees make sense of their situation within trainee programmes? Trainees view themselves as unique and privileged while also expressing views of being an employee under pressure. In the following section, we argue that trainees experience their situation and themselves as unique and privileged in comparison to other employees and young professionals. Trainees see this privilege emanating from the recruitment process, the structure of the programme, the treatment they receive from managers and colleagues, and their visibility. Although trainees receive opportunities that make them feel special, we will also explore how being a trainee simultaneously creates

pressure and anxiety. In order to live up to the image of being part of a unique group, the trainees create requirements for themselves, resulting in needs to perform better than others.

#### **4.1.1 Trainees as Unique and Privileged**

##### ***Recruiting the 1 %***

The trainees' perceptions of being privileged and unique start to take form during recruitment. This process is captured by the concept of anticipatory socialisation, where learning about the organisation and one's role within it takes place in advance of actually entering the organisation as a member (Garavan & Morley, 1997). The trainees go through rigorous recruitment processes that contribute to their feeling of being selected amongst other applicants. The companies tell them how difficult it is to attain a position in the programme and many participants talk about this by highlighting the number of applicants to their programmes. A typical response among participants can be exemplified by Sara's comment:

“We were around 2000 applicants and you are told that you are one of the 1 % (when you get the position)” - Sara

Such statements imply that the trainee positions are desirable as there are many applicants. Hence, participants who manage to attain a spot have achieved something extraordinary. Identification with this select group is thus a process conducted in relation to other groups of regular employees as well as other applicants (Brown & Phua, 2011). They have mastered the competition and therefore we argue that trainees view themselves as special when starting the programmes. This is important, as it creates certain expectations about the position, for example how the trainees are to be treated once entering the company. These expectations are in part anticipatory (Garavan & Morley, 1997), and can act as input into the mutual obligations inherent in the relationship between the trainee and the organisation as it is created subjectively (Rousseau, 1995). By being one of the select few who manage to even get accepted to the recruitment process, the applicant already in this first step creates anticipations of what is required by them that is anticipatory to the actual role (Garavan & Morley, 1997). As socialisation commences in anticipation of actually starting working, we also think that the thorough process creates a feeling that the participants own personalities fit nicely in the company as well as in the trainee program. Many participants express a belief of this match between themselves and the company, as exemplified by Rebecca:

“(I believe I was accepted) because of my background, what I have studied and because I have other suitable knowledge. However, I think that the most important thing they considered is whether you are a suitable person for the company. That one can thrive and contribute, actually more on a personal level I really think.” - Rebecca

The perception of having a suitable personality and background for the company and the position you are offered is expressed by many participants. This makes the trainee’s particular personality and key strengths seem valuable for the company, making trainees feel that it is their authentic selves that are desired, not only their skills and backgrounds. Cable et al. (2013) mean that such perceptions can serve to increase feelings of self-actualisation which in turn leads to higher quality work and organisational commitment. Personalised socialisation programmes may lead to such things, but from a qualitative stance this remains an open question. Instead, we found that personalised socialisation leads to a feeling of specialness for trainees. This sense-making expressed by trainees is supported by the way their programmes are structured.

### ***Programme structures promote a generalist view of the business***

After being accepted to their trainee positions, participants get their experiences of being part of a unique and somewhat privileged group confirmed and facilitated by the structural layout of their programmes. By rotation on temporary placements, trainees perceive that they get a general overview of the business of the company in which they are employed, accentuating the uniqueness of the group. Although the actual layout of the rotations such as the length of the placement and the responsibilities put on the trainees during their placements differ among our sample, the possibility to rotate within the firm was consistently linked to getting a birds-eye view of the business which is seen as something enhancing trainees’ understanding of the companies’ activities. Relating to the possibility to switch placement relatively frequently, Simon discusses:

“It is quite powerful in itself, that you get a broader view of the organisation, yes, all business areas and get a good foundation for how it works, what it looks like.” - Simon

In this way Simon makes sense of shorter placements at different business units as a foundation for understanding how the company works as an integrated entity. Thus, the trainees can carry with them knowledge of the business transcending that of any specific roles they have during placements, or the roles they might take up directly after the end of their programmes. This broad knowledge of the business is often connected to the need for the

trainee to be ‘very much a generalist’ (Alf), to be able to extract knowledge from different parts of the business and connect them to a coherent whole. This creates opportunities for learning, which are highlighted in relation to the programme structure. These learning opportunities are accentuated by the will to explore what roles could be interesting to pursue after graduating. Frank explains:

“The benefits are that I get the chance to try out different jobs that I think I might be interested in, and that is quite unique. There is no regular company that you can get out and work at marketing in two months then switch to production and then engineering et cetera. Usually you get recruited to one place, but that is what is great with a trainee programme. And then you get a great oversight. (...) In a regular position you do not get the overall picture. In a regular position you see your department but then it is hard to know what everything else is about.” - Frank

The rotations give the trainee the opportunity to test if preconceived ideas of interesting jobs actually match up with experience. Consequently, the trainee can explore personal career alternatives without investing in a long-term commitment. One’s career can in this way be re-negotiated as the programme proceeds, breaking away from a fixed developmental path to be followed (Coupland, 2004). This ties into a career paradigm where the grounds for the psychological contract are that the organisation offers opportunities for the trainee to grow (Hall, 1996). This makes the trainee view their situation as beneficial, which can be related to their relative inexperience and thus, their lack of a clear agenda of the kind of position they want to have in the future. In addition to pointing out the benefits of being able to explore different roles as a personal career-feature of programme structure, this feature was also explored in relation to non-trainee colleagues. Another trainee (enrolled in a programme where the trainee is recruited to primarily one department that is regularly re-visited) said that:

“I get to meet people that I never would have gotten the opportunity to meet if I were not a trainee. I can compare with my department; sometimes I did a week there and when I got back my colleagues asked ‘what did you do, what did you do? well oh!’. Eventually they realised that I learnt more about [the company] in maybe two months than if you were to have worked in ten years, ‘Oh, did you see that, did you go there? Oh, that’s fun’.” - Simon

The opportunity to see the different parts of the organisation is thus related to responses of colleagues towards the trainee being offered such opportunities. By comparison and interaction with co-workers through informal means, the trainees make sense of their situation in relation to their colleagues and organisation (Dabos & Rousseau, 2013; Brown & Phua, 2011), a process that affect trainees' sense-making of being unique. The socially constructed uniqueness also has implications for how the trainees act within the programme. Trainees highlight flexibility as a very important characteristic to manage and they stress that they appreciate being flexible. This is exemplified by Stuart describing the flexible form of work as enjoyable:

“It's possible that others find it hard dashing around like that, doing it in parallel with different parts really. I flew to Madrid for a month and then immediately to India and now I'm in the finance department (in Sweden). So, there are quick turns and quite poor predictability in that way. (...) I enjoy the flexible work, but a person that needs structure and predictability would probably have a hard time.” - Stuart

This statement shows that Stuart sees himself as a person who has no problem being flexible. However, we question whether he would be as flexible in a position perceived of him as less special and unique. Perhaps the status embedded in trainee positions make Stuart adjust to his situation and the characteristics needed for the position. By being flexible and thus embracing the programme structure, including rotations and different placements, the trainees experience increased visibility within the organisation, resulting in a certain treatment from people in the trainees' surroundings.

### ***Special treatment for visible trainees***

Many trainees talk about themselves as a privileged group who get benefits that colleagues who are not trainees might not get, and we argue that this contribute to how they understand their situation. John reasons that trainees are even 'spoiled' in their positions:

“I was positively surprised when I started the programme, you are almost spoiled I would say. They really devote a lot of resources to make us understand the whole business and you go on educational trips and really get unique things, coming straight from university to working life. (...) We are spoiled in a good way.” - John

The fact that John feels spoiled as a trainee could mean that he had other expectations before entering the trainee programme or that the possibilities that he is given are rare. Perhaps other employees do not receive such possibilities, which would contribute to the feeling being

unique. One thing that enables the special treatment towards trainees is the fact that they are visible through their job rotations. Sara illustrates the benefit of having peoples' attention:

“The advantages are that you really have peoples' eye on you. People know right away when you say [the name of the trainee-program] what it is and immediately they have a huge understanding and respect for you, which is great. (...) And as far as I can understand you have this label even afterwards, you will always have it.” - Sara

This indicates that many colleagues have preconceptions of the trainees before they have even met them, implying that trainees are part of a particular group separate from regular employees. Brown and Phua (2011) argue that individuals shape their identity in relation to other individuals at work. Thus, the trainees' perception of being visible is partly formed in relation to co-workers. Altogether, we interpret the feeling of being unique as a positive experience for trainees. However, feelings of uniqueness also has downsides as it might also lead to pressure for the trainee.

#### **4.1.2 Trainees Under Pressure**

An alternative narrative is present in the way trainees talk about their situation. In this socially constructed perception of the trainee situation the uniqueness works to put pressure on the trainee to perform. Being seen as unique while at the same time being an organisational newcomer creates anxiety, which makes the trainee want to achieve great things in order to live up to the image of being part of a unique group. The sensation of pressure is illustrated by Tim who means that he works more than he needs to as a result of the pressure he puts on himself:

“As a graduate trainee you have so much pressure on yourself. The company obviously has expectations, but no one creates such great expectations and pressure as you do yourself. It often makes you take on a lot of tasks and you think that you need to perform better than others do, for example. Partly, you work more than you should in certain situations, and despite having performed well you do not feel truly satisfied.” - Tim

This quote shows that the perception of being unique and privileged is not only positive. As Tim feels selected he also feels that he needs to legitimise this uniqueness by taking on more tasks and by performing better than others. The fact that it is possible for Tim to influence his workload in this way makes us relate the trainee position to protean careers (King, 2004; Eby



et al., 2003; Baruch, 2006) The freeing of external boundaries within such careers is not only liberating, many people might also experience anxiety due to the lack of external support inherent in this development (Hall, 1996). The individual responsibilities embedded in trainee programmes might thus shape the trainees' feelings of pressure. Victoria reasons that trainees partly choose their workload themselves:

“I don't think that the organisation requires too much of me. It's more up to me how much effort I want to put into this (the trainee programme). I have chosen to have a quite busy schedule; I meet a lot of people, I travel around Sweden, I have been abroad. It becomes hectic and demanding at times, but it's more my own fault that I have chosen this setup. In hindsight, it's great, but obviously it's been tough this year.”  
- Victoria

The tough year that Victoria describes can both be a result of her being an ambitious person, always striving to perform. However, it can also be a result of the reduced stability and increased number of transitions that the trainee participants experience. According to Baruch (2006) this can lead to issues of stress for the protean careerist. Even though the trainees see this pressure as stemming from inside, we believe that external triggers affect this internal pressure.

### ***External conditions influencing pressure***

Other people's reactions can shape the trainee participants' sensations of pressure. Tim talks about the pressure he feels due to reactions he got when he was accepted to the trainee programme:

“You should be grateful that you got your trainee position, there were so many applicants. People say ‘Wow! How did you get this (position)?’ and ‘God that's great!’ and then you feel pressure. Gosh, I am selected and then I really have to perform.” - Tim

The comments that Tim received creates feelings of pressure for him and he really feel that he needs to perform. This could be because he wants to show himself worthy of the position he attained, given the responses to his new job from people around him. Sanna gives a wider picture of the pressured trainee. In line with Tim, she argues that the greatest pressure comes from herself, but she adds that the programme in itself, as well as her managers' expectations, intensifies the pressure:

“First and foremost, I believe I put the pressure on myself. To some extent, I am a competitive person and they hired people who are used to perform well and who want to succeed in what they do. But of course, pressure also comes from the programme. You hear about the good things former graduates have done. (...) And of course you want to be as good as them, who have had the job before. Then there's also some pressure from our bosses. They say that the graduate programme exists because they are satisfied with previous graduates, so we are somehow also ambassadors for it. If we do not perform well it's not just our problem, it affects the entire programme. So that way, you are of course very keen that it should go well.” - Sanna

Sanna views her own performance as critical for the future of the programme, leading to anxiety. It is difficult for us to say whether this pressure is reasonable, but clearly Sanna's surroundings affect her perceived pressure, not only herself. The structure of the programmes also contributes to the pressure the trainees put on themselves. As the trainee programmes are typically 1-3 years, they are temporary positions without promises of the future. Thus, it is rational that the trainees would want to work hard and prove that they have the potential and specialness that they were hired for. The feeling of pressure that the trainees say they experience could thus be initiated by the perceived need to make a good impression within the organisation. Victoria exemplifies this:

“It's exhausting to constantly meet new people every day, introduce yourself and constantly strive to make a good impression.” - Victoria

The many connections inherent in a trainee position is thus also draining energy and the extensive networking puts pressure on always making a good impression while out in the organisation. The emphasis on networking can be connected to decreased career stability in the wake of an individualistic career-mindset (Baruch, 2006), where networking as a purposeful career activity and proactive career action are inputs into flexible, and individualistic career trajectories (Eby et al., 2003). In this way, contemporary notions of career-making can affect the trainees' perceived situations. The extensive interactions also expose the trainees to comments from colleagues, which in themselves can reveal expectations from others on the trainees. Sara illustrates what her colleagues can say:

“I have noticed that they (the colleagues) make these comments 'Oh, so you are the super brain!' or 'You are going to be my future boss?'. It's funny but a bit double-

edged. It's not always fun, and then you have to deal with that. They expect you to be good and to do things well; they expect greatness, which is a bit ridiculous.” - Sara

The comments that Sara receives from colleagues imply that they have exaggerated expectations of her, and such comments could create pressure. Sara stresses that the expectations from colleagues are kind of ridiculous, which might mean that she does not view herself as a ‘super brain’. This sense-making does not illustrate the perception of being unique and privileged but it rather emphasises that the trainees also are organisational newcomers. Thus, it would be ridiculous of her colleagues to expect her to achieve extraordinary things. From this perspective the pressure and performance anxiety could actually be a sign of the trainees’ will to conform to organisational values and norms. According to Van Maanen and Schein (1979) anxiety is created when an organisational newcomer is transferred into a new organisation. As our participants are new in their organisations they might feel pressure from socialisation processes when trying to fit into the organisation and make their managers and fellow colleagues pleased, while at the same time having the expectations of being a unique and privileged group.

Consequently, while we argue that trainees view themselves as unique and privileged, we also argue that they view themselves as pressured newcomers who want to justify their prestigious label as trainees.

### **4.1.3 Summarizing the Two Narratives**

When taking both narratives into account a doubled-edged situation for the trainees reveals itself. The trainees view their situation as both unique and privileged while simultaneously expressing feelings of being under pressure. In presenting this fragmented view, we answer our first research question: *how do trainees make sense of their situation within trainee programmes?* Our argumentation relate to Porsfelt’s (2001) ambiguity-imbued view of trainees’ roles, where multiple and conflicting expectations accentuate trainees’ feelings of being ‘in between’. The trainees’ expectations are influenced by the organisational structures shaping the two socially constructed narratives highlighted in this chapter. The challenging recruitment process, the programme rotations, the visibility, and the expressed need to perform, all shape the narratives presented. They illuminate one way of structuring the sense-making of the trainees regarding their current situation. Moving further, trainees also relate their experiences to their situation in the future which partly is linked to the leadership focus

of these programmes. When adding the trainees' narratives to their thoughts of the future, an additional dimension appears that further mirrors the inherent ambiguity within the sense-making of the trainees' situation.

## **4.2 The Trainee-leaders' Ambiguous Path Towards Leadership**

In the following section we will elaborate on the connection between the trainees' current situation and leadership and in this way answer our second research question: *how do trainees relate their situation to leadership?* We found that the trainees' situation strengthen their belief that they can become leaders of the future, although they view the path to get there as ambiguous. The trainees enter into programmes marketed towards graduates aiming to become future leaders. As they go through such specialised programme, the trainees feel unique and privileged, as discussed in the previous section. Such sense-making, being shaped through the structure of the programme and the organisation's expressed intention that they should become leaders of the future, contributes to a belief that they can become a leader, making the trainees view their career possibilities positively. Trainees clearly express a link between their current situation (as trainees) and their final destination (as leaders), but the programmes hold no promises of future leadership positions. This is interesting as the responsibility for career progress is transferred from organisations to the trainees themselves, creating freedom and ownership but also anxiety and pressure. We found that the trainees generally relate to the ideology of being a leader, enabling career discourses for trainees that can act as constraints to alternative career paths. However, the trainees are not leaders yet, they are organisational newcomers, who are replaceable, leading to potential tensions.

### **4.2.1 The Trainee Programme - a Means to What End?**

The image of being unique and privileged that is formed by the trainees connects to a belief that they have good career opportunities in the future. More specifically the trainees think that the trainee programmes are beneficial for their future careers, since they help in attaining generalist competence, as they allow for personal development of the trainees, and because of learning opportunities that provide gains in the future. Already in advance of entering a programme, the trainees remembered their belief that attending a programme leads to future career possibilities as salient. This was part of the reasoning when they accepted their position. Stuart elaborates:

"When I accepted the position I did it with the expectation to get a really good job in the future. This trainee programme gives me the right qualifications to achieve that." - Stuart

Stuart thinks that by participating in his programme he will get good career opportunities in the future. This could indicate that the trainee programme is not a goal in itself, but a tool to reach the goal, 'a really good job'. The trainees' sense that they can achieve good career possibilities is strengthened during the trainee programme. For instance, many participants related the rotations within their programme to future career possibilities by building a wider knowledge base for the future. This is seen as an input for future career-making. Stuart explains that:

"Well, the advantage as I see it is that you get a broad overview of the company and get to learn many different things. You get a (...) broader knowledge-base for the future, and I expect that you need to know a bit about everything if you want a high position." - Stuart

By getting a broad overview of the business through rotations the trainee can ensure that learning that is beneficial for the future takes place. Being able to take these opportunities to grow is necessary within a boundaryless career-environment (Hall, 1996). Thus, the trainees' roles can help them in adapting to a modern career environment. In this way, increasing knowledge is seen as a future-oriented endeavour, serving to increase future employability (King, 2004). But where do these future career-ambitions of trainees lead?

The trainees' career progression is linked to ambitions of becoming future leaders. Today, many students graduating from business schools want to lead, not follow; the leader figure being one of the dominant heroes of our time (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). We have found such discourses to be salient in the talk of the trainees, as exemplified by Victoria:

"What is it with the leadership role? When you are young and hungry and still studying, everyone talks about their careers, how fast they are going to be a manager and so on. But when you are here, in this industry, most leaders are not very young. Now I think that you have to work a little bit and show what you can do, and then move on to be a manager, because I still think they (the company) want that." - Victoria

This quote indicates that there is a socially constructed prestige in being a leader, which is also what contemporary discourse around leadership implies. Whatever problem an

organisation might have, leadership is seen as the solution (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). There is also a certain glow around the leader figure, where fairly mundane activities are given extensive meaning as soon as they are talked about as leadership (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). Regarding dominant trends around leadership it is reasonable to see that the trainees want to link their career ambitions to leadership. Through enrolment in a trainee programme, the participants can play the part of being a leader. Enacting the role of a leader, while performing a following role, actually strengthen their belief that they can attain such prestigious leadership positions in the future. Sanna explains:

”The programme I attend seeks to create leaders in the organisation in the long run. It's not like you get a managerial position the first day after the trainee program, but personal development and leadership development are included in the trainee program, so most of us will be some kind of manager after a while.” - Sanna

By being given personal development and leadership development opportunities, the trainees create a belief that they can gain a management position in the future. They believe they have the tools necessary to take on such position, as the tasks at hand allow for the enactment of leadership. As there is no assurance of future leadership positions the enactment legitimises current activities and learning not seen as substantially useful in the immediate future. The learning gained is seen as an input into a future career rather than something of use in their current situation. Simon expands this reasoning:

“You can never get too much of it (knowledge), but I don't really see an immediate use of it in my forthcoming position. But in time I think it matters for a trainee, because I think that you find communication paths, you find ways for how you can reach the right person, that you might not be able to reach otherwise.” - Simon

A broad knowledge of the business posits a potential payoff in making the trainee more effective in navigating organisational contexts in the future. This supports the argument that the trainee role partly is seen as a means to reach an end, a leadership position. One aspect, contributing to the trainees' belief to be leaders in the future is the fact that they get to follow different leaders during their programmes. Victor elaborates on this and explains why it is valuable to get insight into different managers' work:

“You get four different bosses that you will have a very special relationship with. They've all made their careers in the company and therefore, all their tips are valuable. The exposure to their leadership, understanding how different leaders work, and what

you think is good and bad about it is really interesting. Then I might sit and reflect upon it with my mentor at the same time. I think this prepares me tremendously well for being a leader myself one day.” - Victor

The trainees mirror themselves in other leaders and create images of how they want to act as leaders in the future. Schein (1978) supports the importance of newcomers’ leader–member relations and means that this relationship can be a channel through which newcomers understand their roles in the organisation. Victor is thus socialised into his role, having future leadership expectations and by interacting with particular organisational role models. The ambitions of becoming leaders, which trainees perceive as promoted by the company, actually create a feeling of security for the trainees, partly countering the narrative of pressure described in section 4.1.2 “*Trainees Under Pressure*”. Tim explains:

“It is also comforting to know, if I were to have entered into a regular position I would not know what the plan was for me. I could have had to work my ass off in two years without knowing if I am on my way upwards, sideways or away from the company. Here I feel secure in that the agenda of the company is that I am actually to take on a high position in the future. So this provides assurance.” - Tim

It seems fairly clear to us that the trainee programme participants think that their experience will lead to something bigger in the future. In Tim’s case this creates a feeling of security, which could be important for him since his current position also involves pressure. By convincing himself that the company has an agenda for him it could be easier to accept the double-edged position he finds himself in at the moment. He counters the individual pressure inherent in having an individualistic career responsibility with the comfort of perceived structural organisational support (Inkson et al., 2012) in a career trajectory that builds on interdependence with the organisation (Tams & Arthur, 2010). Feelings of comfort in anticipating ones future career is further strengthened by trainees as they link their present roles to a leadership ideal through co-creation of the concepts trainee and leader. By equating the two, they make sense of themselves as trainee-leaders.

#### **4.2.2 Good Trainee = Good Leader**

As trainees conceptualise their current situation as something leading to leadership positions, they draw a link between their present and future roles. Oftentimes, trainees equate important characteristics to have for a trainee to the same characteristics leaders ought to have. Thereby,

being a good trainee is equated to being a good leader. When reasoning about what constitutes a good trainee, Simon says:

”I think you need to be humble, that’s what I should place as number one, two and three (of the most important characteristics for a good trainee), because, at some departments when you visit and say that you are a trainee, you get placed in a certain category, that you are this specific kind of person. Maybe that you are a careerist, that you applied for the trainee programme to get ahead and show that you want to become a manager within a couple of years. I think that is the wrong way to go about it. I think that you need to be humble and interested and have an open mind-set and try to learn as much as possible, avoid ’bossiness’.”

Stressing the importance of humbleness, he later expresses his views on good leadership:

“Well, then I get back to what I reflected on before (referencing the citation above). They (good leaders) are quite humble, you feel that you have a good dialogue with them. (...) It is not stilted in any way, it is more that they are like everyone else, and then it is the humbleness, to see the individual and show understanding.”

The same characteristics are thus brought forward as of importance for trainees and for successful leaders. By making this link explicitly, what the trainee is implying is that being a trainee and thriving in that role can serve as an indication that he can be a good future leader. This connection may also serve as a way for the trainee to legitimise the fact that others regard him as a leader of tomorrow. Even though Simon is a newcomer, he shows that he has the characteristics needed in becoming a future leader, thus, possessing the potential for what he is regarded to become. As there are no guarantees of actually becoming a leader, such links are necessary to avoid pressure connected to an uncertain future. In some instances this link is drawn in even more palpable ways. When reasoning about what distinguishes a good trainee, Victor transitions into talking about leadership:

“There are some parameters that are important to have. I think that you are analytic, and interested in becoming a leader for instance. But then again, of the two people that I have had here, and the leaders I met while interning at [the company], they are completely different leader-roles. So if I were to lead people now and have responsibility for people and call myself a leader or manager I would have been really different, probably, from many of my colleagues.” - Victor



Interest in becoming a leader is reasoned to be one of the basic traits required for a good trainee. Even though Victor acknowledges that several different leadership styles can be successful in their own right, he draws a clear link between being a trainee and becoming a leader in the future. Through not focusing on the specifics of leadership but rather future intention, the trainees make sense of themselves as trainee-leaders, merging present experiences and future expectations. Sveningsson and Larsson (2006) argue that leadership discourses can be used in identity work. We propose that the sense-making of trainees can be seen as an example of how this happens. Such sense-making, emphasising a link to leadership is visible through certain vocabulary expressed by the trainees. Using language that frequently stress such a leadership track, excludes other possible career paths for the trainees. Thus, there is no desirable alternative to being special and a leader. One way in which such discourses of success is conveyed is through descriptions of the great career progressions of predecessors. Emma explains:

“We (the trainees) have a head start, for sure. If you look at former trainees they have moved on to positions far ahead of them, career-wise. One of the girls who finished the trainee programme this fall became commercial product manager for [a brand], with a budget of 700 million (SEK) a year. It's not a position that a 25-year-old girl normally gets, regardless of her qualities. But we are trainees, and then it's almost like we have a quality-stamp.” - Emma

Such stories indicate that older trainees contribute to current trainees' perceptions of their career progress, making them believe that they can become leaders in the future, but also setting them up to fail if they don't. What would happen for Emma if she chooses not to become a leader? Should she take a 'regular job'? Such language is not visible in the trainees' talk, indicating that it is a non-option. By identifying with the attractive trainee-label the trainees are influenced by the discourses and social norms that come with the label. Emma link personal development as well as her own personality to leadership, making leadership very salient in her current role:

“If you say; *I have not learned a damn thing, but I have developed a lot*, your mentor will be incredibly happy with you. It's actually a very good metaphor for these years, as it's all about personal development. When our mentor says it he pulls it to the top, of course we all perform very well all the time. Or, we're trying to do our best, everyone fails sometimes, but it is the personal development that matters, and leadership is of course very closely linked to my personality and who I am here.” - Emma

By linking personal development to leadership Emma makes the connection between her current experiences and her future role stronger. Thus, the trainee-leader personally embraces expectations of becoming a future leader. By even linking her personality to aspirations to become a leader, failure to do so implicates a personal failure, as well as a career-wise failure. Such sense-making further enhances the picture of trainee' using leadership as an input in identity work, as supported by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003). Even if the trainees belong to a privileged group, future leadership expectations cannot be separated from the knowledge that the trainee positions are temporary and therefore, not safe positions. The expectations together with the uncertain position might therefore be a cause for the feelings of pressure expressed by the trainees. This is supported by Porsfelt (2001) who argues that the difference between being seen as a leader while actually being a recent graduate leads to an ambiguous situation for the trainees. The tension is accentuated by the uncertainty in when and how the contemplated leadership position is supposed to be attained. How trainees make sense of their situation today is quite clear, as well as what they want this situation to result in: leadership. How the trainee position is taking them towards the goal of becoming a leader is however unclear, making us wonder what happens on the path towards leadership?

#### **4.2.3 What Lies Beyond the Programme, Uncertainty?**

Even though a picture of confidence in attaining leadership positions emerges when trainees reason about their future, there is ambiguity present in how and when leadership will be practiced. The trainees view this uncertainty in varied ways. Despite having earlier expressed optimism regarding how the trainee programme promotes development of leadership, Simon has some doubts about how his near future will be cared for by the company:

“They have not said that they expect me to do anything in particular, I kind of miss them having a thought-out plan for me. (...) Now the new trainees have started and they (the company) are pre-occupied with them, we who are abroad have a concluding week and then it is back to our departments. Chop-chop, and that's that.” - Simon

Even though the goal of attaining a leadership position has been stated, there is uncertainty as to how this will be achieved, and what support can be expected from the company. However, wanting support could be seen as antithetical to what a leader would want. The contemporary discourses of transformational leadership highlight a leader who is strong and persuasive and who doesn't need support (Barker, 1997). However, Simon expresses wishes to become a leader by being managed, which clearly emphasise the tension between being a leader and

being a newcomer. Despite being part of a unique and privileged group and connecting one's current situation to becoming a future leader, the trainee finds himself wondering what will happen immediately after the programme. By having had a distinct label of being unique, and being set-up for leadership through being a participant within the program, uncertainty in how to reach a leadership position in practice is connected to losing cohesion, Sara reasons:

“I think that now when I am in the process of applying for positions (after the trainee programme) I think a lot about this: what happens when I get a regular job? You have walked around with this label for such a long time, is it going to feel weird to become like everybody else? I applied for the programme for a reason and I got accepted for a reason, I have the drive and the will. But I have almost been spoiled, and now I know that it is soon going to end. How do I handle that?” - Sara

Knowing that the previously accessed unique label will be lost results in uncertainty about the future. Despite having clear ideas about having both the capabilities and intentions for leadership, the ways in reaching there remains, to a large extent, ambiguous. As a trainee, Sara had access to an anticipatory ideal of being a future leader, but in the absence of the trainee programme the structural foundations for this ideal (such as job rotations, a mentor, specially devoted education etc.) are disappearing. The lack of structural support implies that the trainee leaves the comfort of an organisational career and now needs to persuade a protean career through individual initiative (Eby et al., 2003). The trainees will have to handle the pressure of being destined for leadership and (potentially not) living up to this goal. While the path towards leadership in this way can be characterised as ambiguous, several trainees express the view that they shape, and walk, this path on their own:

“It is up to you to use the tools you learn, to network, it is up to you to make demands, challenge and help yourself. It is up to you how far you can go, and how fast you can go there. The company gives you all the tools and as a trainee you have access to all the managers, everyone that is working. It is up to you how far you can go and what your goal is.” - Carrie

Even though the company offer resources for the trainees, it is up to them to take responsibility for their own development, adding to this tension of being both special and replaceable. As discussed above, one of the major developmental goals stated is the attainment of a leader position and it is up to the trainees themselves to get there. By acknowledging and building on one's own strengths and weaknesses, the trainees' career

development is guided by their pursuit of protean careers (Eby et al., 2003) and their ‘authentic selves’ (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011: 80). Thus, the trainee position promotes leadership-styles that stems from the trainees’ personal mindset and characteristics as their careers develop. The trainees themselves can in this way build on their personal strengths in their efforts to attain leadership positions. However, getting “there” is an uncertain and ambiguous journey, one that trainees will have to figure out largely by themselves when they have completed their programmes. The focus on this career development being personalised further accentuates that the responsibility for the trainees’ career rests on their own shoulders, because who else would know better where and how the trainees should develop? And even if such personalised developmental goal is clear in leadership, one can wonder whether the trainees can know when this goal is reached. Because what is leadership? Many scholars argue that leadership as a concept is surrounded by ambiguity (e.g. Alvesson & Spicer, 2011; Pfeffer, 1977; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012). In addition, the participants are sometimes unsure themselves about what it really means to be a leader. Tim serves as an example of this:

“So that one should become a leader is a bit ambiguous. Are you a leader if you are responsible for a certain brand? Maybe, but it is not certain. A leader should lead people.”

This statement show that the trainees, although aiming for leadership, thinks that this career goal is ambiguous. This is interesting as it might contribute to the uncertainty that may come with being a trainee. The trainees may experience a difference when comparing their future career to other employees’, which might emphasise this ambiguous role (Coupland, 2001). The road to leadership thus entails a clear intention of becoming a leader, but unclear paths towards this goal. Leadership as a concept is also ambiguous, leading the trainees to articulate worries of how one can know the achievement when actually reaching it. However, our empirical material indicate that the trainees already think of themselves as future leaders, drawing strong links between their current trainee roles and intended future leadership roles. This leaves us wondering if such enactment of leadership works as a way to counter this conflicting situation?

### **4.3 How Does This All Fit Together?**

In setting out to investigate how participants in trainee programmes make sense of their situations as trainees, and how they relate to leadership, this analysis chapter has provided us

with a coherent, but multifaceted narrative. The trainees experience their situations as being a unique and privileged group, while also experiencing pressure and uncertainty connected to this uniqueness. In addition, their present situations and experiences are forward-oriented and strengthen the trainees' belief that they can be future leaders. However, because they are trainees and oftentimes not promised a position, much less a management position, after ending their programmes, feelings of anxiety appear in the talk of the trainees. The forward-oriented focus of the trainee programmes, together with the temporary structures without promises, enhances feelings of being in an ambiguous situation. Nonetheless, trainees create clear links between their trainee roles and their perceived future leadership roles, almost to the point where they speak as if there are no other options than 'up'. When trainees equate being a trainee to being a future leader, we believe they try to respond to their own insecurities; *"What are we, really? Are we trainees or are we leaders? What does the management trainee role really mean?"* (Carrie), by making the two concepts merge into one.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

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*In this final chapter we summarize our research project and allow ourselves, more freely, to discuss the findings substantiated from our analysis. Subsequently, we reason about the theoretical and practical contributions that we have offered through this study. We highlight what our findings mean for the scholarly community, organisations offering trainee programmes and the trainees themselves by discussing possible implications of our findings. Finally, we discuss perceived limitations of this study and suggest directions for future research within this topic.*

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### 5.1 Summary of Research Project

This project was set up to reach an increased understanding of trainee programmes as a phenomenon, by studying participants currently enrolled in different programmes. More specifically, we have analysed trainees' subjective experiences by investigating their situation and how their situation relates to leadership. The study originated from increased popularity in trainee programmes among us students, soon to be graduating. At the annual career fair at Lund University School of Economics and Management, we delved into this phenomenon by talking to company representatives about future career possibilities within their organisations. We noted that the companies emphasised their trainee programmes and we became aware that the number of trainee programmes are increasing. After exploring previous research and theories around this topic we realised that few studies have been made on trainee programmes in general and on the meaning making of trainee participants in particular. Based on the topic of our research we placed ourselves within an interpretivist research tradition when conducting our study and we subsequently designed the following research questions:

**Research question 1:** *How do trainees make sense of their situation within trainee programmes?*

**Research question 2:** *How do trainees relate their situation to leadership?*

In order to realise this study we used a qualitative, abductive approach to find out how trainees perceive their situation as trainees, by studying how they talk about their experiences. As a base for our analysis we performed interviews with 15 trainees currently enrolled in 11 different trainee programmes and arrived at two main findings:

**Finding 1:** *Trainees experience their situation as being part of a unique and privileged group, while also expressing views of being under pressure.*

**Finding 2:** *The experiences of trainees strengthen their belief that they can become a future leader, however, the road taking them towards leadership is characterised by ambiguity.*

Generally, we found the trainees' sense-making as positive, with trainees perceiving tremendous opportunities related to the trainee situation. However, as the trainees understand their situation to be unique and privileged they also experience anxiety related to the same situation. Moreover, the trainees take a forward-oriented perspective on their current roles. They view themselves as leaders of tomorrow and we found that the structure of their programmes contribute to their belief in becoming future leaders. Despite such beliefs, some possible tensions appeared in our analysis. Firstly, they create narratives of being unique and special while also being replaceable. Secondly, they view themselves as leaders, while in fact being newcomers and followers, creating a certain language related to their future career-making. How do the described tensions influence the trainees' experiences? What does the concept of leadership enable and is it possible for trainees to be socialised to leaders? How does the context influence trainees' experiences and what are the alternatives to becoming a leader? In the next section we will discuss such questions by bringing up some implications of our findings and discuss how they can be valuable for the trainees, their organisations and the scholarly society.

## **5.2 Meaning of Findings**

### **5.2.1 Being Unique while Replaceable**

As has been discussed, the tension of being unique while replaceable creates pressure upon the trainee. Our finding that trainees experience anxiety can be related to Van Maanen & Schein's (1979) theories of socialisation, as it supports that trainees, being newcomers transitioning into a new organisation, feel pressured. Being part of a unique group in the organisation the trainees are socialised as such and thus feel the need to perform in line with such uniqueness. However, the pressure experienced by trainees also comes from structural conditions inherent in the programmes. As the programmes are temporary, there are no promises of where the trainee might end up. This particular context for socialising newcomers contributes to the existing socialisation literature. How do you socialise employees into a temporary structure? Clearly the tension of being unique and replaceable has implications for

the trainee. As anxiety emerges, the trainees might respond by taking ownership of their careers, embracing the freedom inherent in individualistic career-making. This supports scholars such as Hall (1996) and DeFilippi & Arthur (1994) arguing for the advent of protean careers. However, we can also see other meanings of this development. Feelings of pressure could make trainees require increased support from the organisation, which potentially could undermine the trainees' individualistic career-making.

### **5.2.2 Being a Future Leader while Being a Trainee**

By making sense of themselves as trainee-leaders, trainees enable an understanding of being special, equating the trainee role with a figure resembling a hero of today (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). The concept of leadership thus reduces 'ordinariness', almost making the trainees ignore that they are not leaders yet. However, entering an organisation with such expectations means that the trainees need to be socialised as leaders. We wonder if that is even possible? The trainees want to become leaders but they also express a need for the organisational support required by newcomers and followers, creating a dilemma for the organisation. This dilemma in how to socialise trainee-leaders can be linked to the paradox explored by socialisation scholars between allowing authentic self expression and keeping organisational control in the socialisation process (Cable et al., 2013; Coupland, 2001; Bowen et al., 1991). One could argue that newcomers need to adapt while learning the ropes in the organisation while leaders should stay authentic within such processes. Our study adds depth to the paradox as future ambitions and expectations of the trainees are shown to affect sense-making of participants within such paradox. Thus, the trainees' responses to organisational socialisation tactics are affected by their future intention of what they are to become.

The clear link trainees draw between the now and the future resembles enactment of leadership despite actually being a trainee. Sveningsson and Nyberg (2014) argue that managers often use leadership discourses for identity work. Our study confirms such links between leadership and individual sense-making and contributes to the leadership field as it is set in the context of trainee programmes, showing that newcomers, intended to become managers, also take part in such identity work. The tension created by the sense-making of trainees to be trainee-leaders has implications for the trainees' view of career-making, limiting the alternatives available to them.



### **5.2.3 What are the Alternatives to Becoming a Leader?**

The strong links made by the trainees between future goals of reaching a leadership position and success in a current trainee role suggests that anything less than a leadership position is seen as disappointing. We link this to writings within the literature on careers, where a boundaryless career environment enables a more individualistic definition on career and life success, in turn promoting self-actualisation through work (Baruch, 2006). However, we see a migration towards being a leader as a desirable ideal connected to the trainee label, which makes us wonder if such career ambition really is an individualistic pursuit? Success is measured according to the attainment of a societal ideal of becoming a leader (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). Hence, resulting from the strong connections drawn between being a trainee and being a leader, not attaining such role is seen as a failure.

We think that such narrow view of success could be one reason for some of the anxieties sensed among the trainees, accentuated by the ambiguous paths leading up to leadership. As discussed before, feelings of pressure might encourage trainees to take ownership of their careers. And as they already see themselves as future leaders, leadership being an ambiguous concept, they can conceptualise their situation as leadership wherever they might end up and thus, reach their goal. At the same time, as the trainees downplay alternative measures for life and career success, they also increase the risk for disappointment. Such a narrow path to success, together with the ambiguity embedded in the leadership concept could make the trainees uncertain as to when their career goal is reached, in opposition to the above narrative. Thus, we might find a group of employees, potentially never satisfied wherever they end up.

## **5.3 Theoretical Contributions**

In highlighting an increasingly influential empirical phenomenon through broad theoretical frameworks, we have contributed to the existing literature by illuminating the intersection between socialising newcomers while shaping the leaders of tomorrow. Departing from an interpretivist standpoint, we offer a novel way of looking at the phenomenon of trainee programmes through the eyes of the trainees themselves, which adds understanding that is not attained through the functionalist studies conducted within the field. Few projects have been made within this tradition, but the ones that we did have access to, such as Porsfelt (2001) and Coupland (2001), have highlighted that trainees' situations are imbued with some tension, related to their dual roles as both newcomers and leaders (although the aforementioned

studies focus on managerialism rather than leadership). Our study did not aim at finding ways to reduce such organisational tension, but by increasing the understanding of the trainees' subjective experiences we can confirm the already existing literature and highlight the trainees' situation within the paradox. This is an angle few scholars have taken before, why we believe our findings make a contribution to the intersection between newcomer socialisation and leadership. In this project, we contribute to the socialisation field by exploring the trainees' experience of being socialised into a leader. By examining and reflecting upon how trainees understand their situations wherein they are both organisational newcomers and future leaders, we tap into an interesting intersection between newcomer socialisation and leadership. In this vein, our findings can be used as a jumping off point for further scholarly inquiry, as they have primarily served the function of raising interesting questions, and potential ambiguities when a newcomer is (allegedly) socialised into a leader.

We also support existing leadership literature by confirming existing dominant discourses of leadership. We make a theoretical contribution by highlighting the particular talk of trainees related to leadership, a qualitative study never done before to our knowledge. In doing this, we can see that our findings mirror some of the key arguments within a critically oriented research tradition on leadership issues, where leadership is seen as a strong popular discourse used as input in identity work (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011; Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006), while being quite ambiguous in what it actually entails (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012). We have also linked this study to literature on career-making, trainee programmes working as a site for examining the concept of protean careers within a boundaryless career environment. In this, our findings also provide some nuance to the view of boundarylessness being the predominant mode in today's career-making efforts (Hall, 1996), by highlighting that career-paths are also negotiated in relation to organisations, in line with authors such as Inkson et al. (2012).

## **5.4 Practical Implications**

Our research induces practical implications for both organisations and trainees as practitioners, especially within a Swedish context, as the concept of being a trainee differs between cultures. This study is important for organisations as it can increase their understanding of a particular group of employees, in which they invest a lot of resources. The organisations need to understand that the tensions embedded in the trainee role affects the

sense-making of their employees. Such increased understanding of the trainees' situations could be beneficial for organisations when relating to issues such as employee retention and performance, how to structure the programmes, how to introduce new trainees into the programmes and how to follow upon current and previous participants.

Another thing that is important for organisations to be aware of is that co-workers play a fundamental part in the construction of trainees' identities and how they look upon themselves. Such interaction might affect the uniqueness and the pressure experienced by the trainees, possibly increasing the tensions identified in this study. It is also of value for the organisation to learn about the trainees understanding of their situation as the narratives expressed by the trainees give a more nuanced view of their situation. This is significant for the organisations to acknowledge, as giving such nuanced views to the trainees before entering could, perhaps, also reduce future pressure in the trainee role. Thus, increased organisational transparency could shed light upon some tensions stemming from the trainee situation. The views given to new trainees before entering the organisation shapes their expectations and a better understanding of the trainee role thus give trainees as well as the organisation greater possibilities of fulfilling the psychological contract between the employer and the employee (Rousseau, 2005).

Hence, it is also of important for the current and future trainees to learn about our findings. While the trainee positions are highly appreciated, they also come with a price. It could be of importance for the trainees to understand that their positions do not create leaders the first day on the job. Many trainees have the ambition to become leaders, but the actual goal and the road there is ambiguous. Simply earning a place in a trainee programme does not completely assure the participants future career, it is still up to the trainee to make career progression happen.

## **5.5 Limitations**

As our objective was to study how participants in graduate trainee programmes make sense of their experiences, we did not want to limit our research to only one particular trainee programme or organisation. By studying trainees enrolled in different programmes at different companies we achieved a broad interpretation of our findings, shedding light on proliferation of trainee programmes as a broad phenomenon. But the choice of this approach also means that we have been unable to provide the depth in data that would have been possible to

achieve if we had chosen to focus on one certain trainee programme at a specific company. The findings could also have been more specific if we would have studied people who already had accomplished trainee programmes and the managers leading the programmes. Due to a lack of time, access and resources we could only perform interviews as a base for our analysis. Observations could have made our data richer since it would have provided us with a better understanding of the contexts wherein the trainees make sense of their situations. This would have deepened our research because the trainees' experiences are not divorced from their contexts and since it would add understanding of trainees' practices in addition to their sense-making through language, as studied in this project.

## **5.6 Suggestion for Further Research**

As the studies of trainees' particular situations have received limited scholarly attention at the same time as it is an increasingly popular phenomenon, we expect that this area of interest will further develop over time. We encourage scholars within the leadership- and organisational literature to further study and perform research around this topic. During our research project we have had several reflections regarding possible directions for future research. Considering that we have studied how trainees make sense of their situation as trainees, one might argue that the trainees' experiences cannot be separated from the environments that they figure in. Thus, it would be interesting to make a deeper study of how the trainees' surroundings affect how they make sense of their situation. For example, further studies could focus on trainees at one particular company to be able to unravel this ambiguous phenomenon. The co-workers of trainees is another interesting area for further research, as they might perceive the phenomenon differently compared to the trainees themselves. We have found that the experiences that the trainees achieve during their enrolment in trainee programmes strengthen their belief that they can become leaders in the future. In order to gain a wider and deeper understanding of this finding it would be necessary and interesting to study how many of the trainees who actually become leaders at some point after their programme and how they get there. Lastly, since studies of trainees is a relatively unexplored research topic we believe that several kinds of evaluations could be made in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the trainees' situations, both theoretically and practically.

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# Appendix

## Appendix A. Interview Guide

Topic	Questions
<b>General instructions and guidelines</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Introduce ourselves and the study.</li> <li>➤ Point out that all the interviewees are anonymous.</li> <li>➤ Ask the interviewee if it is okay to record the interview.</li> </ul>
<b>Introduction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Tell us a little bit about yourself, what is your educational- and professional background?</li> </ul>
<b>Before the start of the trainee programme</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Why did you apply to this particular trainee-programme?</li> <li>➤ Did you simply want to become a trainee or were you more interested in the specific company?</li> <li>➤ How was the recruitment process?</li> <li>➤ Why do you think that you were offered the position?</li> <li>➤ How did you reason when you accepted the position?</li> <li>➤ What were your expectations before you started the programme?</li> <li>- Have your expectations changed during your enrolment in the programme? In that case, how?</li> </ul>
<b>The trainee programme</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Can you describe the structure of the trainee programme?</li> <li>➤ What have your main tasks been during the programme?</li> <li>➤ What kind of challenges and difficulties have you faced so far?</li> <li>➤ Are there any theoretical elements within the programme?</li> </ul>
<b>The role as a trainee</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ What are the pros and cons of being a trainee?</li> <li>➤ Who do you think makes a good trainee? (Characteristics, qualities and attributions)</li> <li>➤ What kind of person would not succeed as a trainee?</li> <li>➤ What kind of expectations do you perceive that the company has on you?</li> <li>➤ What do your colleagues expect of you?</li> <li>➤ What kind of expectations do you have on the company?</li> <li>➤ Do you think the fact that you are a trainee affects your expectations?</li> <li>➤ Would you say that there is a professional identity for trainees, and if so, what does it contain?</li> </ul>
<b>The participants future</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ What is your perception and expectations of your future after the trainee programme?</li> <li>➤ How do you perceive your career opportunities compared to your colleagues?</li> </ul>
<b>Leadership</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Is leadership an emphasized topic within your trainee programme? In that case, how do you notice that?</li> <li>➤ What does leadership mean to you?</li> <li>➤ Who do you think makes a good leader?</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Who would not do well as a leader?</li> <li>➤ In what way do you want to be seen as a leader in the future?</li> <li>➤ How do you develop/how do you practice of being a leader?</li> </ul>
<b>Finish</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Is there anything you would like to add regarding your experiences of being a trainee?</li> <li>➤ Ask the interviewee if it is okay to ask follow-up questions.</li> <li>➤ We will send the participant the thesis when we are done.</li> </ul>