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# The impact of context on followers' constructions of leadership

An interpretative close-up study of two organisational contexts  
from a follower-centric perspective

by

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# Abstract

*This thesis contends that focus within the leadership research has often been either on leaders or followers instead of acknowledging both parties. Similarly, fragmentation and ambiguity among followers' constructions has often been ignored, underestimating the complexity of leadership as a social construction process. Additionally, even within more relational and social constructionist views, the level of social and cultural context has reached little attention in discussing followers' sensemaking of leadership. The objective of this dissertation is to investigate the relationship of two organisational contexts and their respective followers' interpretations and ideas of leadership. Further this research elaborates on the relation between followers' sensemaking of leadership and the organisational context by using an interpretative perspective. The qualitative empirical research unveils the ideas of followers in two different contexts, while different contextual aspects are uncovered. These are organisational and occupational culture, climate, organisational design and structure and leadership style. The main finding is that followers make sense of their leaders' actions differently depending on the contextual aspects. Most significantly, contexts differ in their level of autonomy, which suggests implications for the degree of leadership. As a result, future leadership research should, besides its interest in extreme contexts, further examine the role of mundane contexts. Ultimately, leaders should acknowledge the context-related followers' interpretations when engaging in management of meaning and seeking to create coherence and alignment of followers' sensemaking.*

**Keywords:** leadership, followership, context, culture, climate, structure, leadership style

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# 1 Introduction

“Organizational culture frames and guides leadership, the cultural context is crucial for what is viewed as ‘leadership’—how people in formal and informal capacities relate to this (or pay little attention to it), ideals and norms for its practices and receptions, and so forth”  
(Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012, p.209).

## 1.1 Background

In times of globalisation, competition becomes fiercer. For today’s organisations it is thus more crucial than ever to have people with the corresponding competencies and capabilities to meet the needs that fast changing and knowledge-intensive environments demand. In the past, many agreed upon the fact that leadership plays a crucial role for enabling organisations to utilise their human capital effectively (Shamir, 2007). Yet the role of leaders as a key drivers for organisational success has been commonly overestimated (Meindl & Ehrlich, 1987; Pfeffer, 1977). As a consequence, most traditional approaches to leadership are criticised for focusing almost exclusively on the leader (e.g. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2010; Gronn, 2002).

There have been some attempts to discuss followers’ attributions to leadership (Meindl, 1995; Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007). However, as work on leadership, research on followership so far has been rather one-sided, mostly defining the role of followers as passive or with limited influence (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012). Equally, traditional research literature has paid little attention to the complexity of leadership as a social construction process i.e. an outcome of people constructing and interpreting it rather than an objective phenomenon (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012). By contrast, more recent research defines relationships between leaders and followers as reflecting dynamic and complex interaction processes (Ospina & Sorensen, 2006; Shamir, 2007; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

One approach that acknowledges both parties in the leader-follower relationship is the view on the follower as a co-producer of leadership. As early stated by Pfeffer (1977), the nature of social reality is complex and contingent. Once followers are recognised as co-producers of leadership, one can regard leadership as a social and relational phenomenon that manifests itself in the interactions between people. Certainly, this co-producing perspective suggests a more balanced view. Nonetheless, there is still little known about how followers perceive and interpret leader’s actions (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2010). Arguably, this lack of knowledge on followers’ constructions of leadership is seen as reflecting a substantial gap in research.

Additionally, there is evidence of a second gap in the field, which consists in too little recognition that is given to other levels than the micro-level of relations. Generally, a follower-centric perspective on leadership suggests a more equal perspective by emphasising followers’ interpretation of leaders’ intentions and actions. However, business reality is often characterised by fragmentation as different people do sensemaking in different ways, a fact

often overlooked (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008). What research has uncovered so far is that followers' differing constructions of leadership are based on interpersonal relationships, including both the individual and interpersonal level, e.g. personality and interests (e.g. Gronn, 2002; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Schyns & Felfe, 2006), and small group level (e.g. Hogg, 2001, Howell & Shamir, 2005).

However, while relations are mostly seen as issues of micro-level relations, the broader level of the cultural context remains often overlooked (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012). This appears to reflect an additional gap in the research literature. As all relations and actions are embedded in and shaped by an organisational context, the latter provides a crucial key to understanding followers' interpretations and constructions. Consequently, ignoring the contextual level may complicate the creation of shared meaning and may lead to fragmented sensemaking both between leader and followers and amongst the group of followers. At an organisational level, it may eventually lead to misalignment of the political parties (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012). Following this reasoning, one might assume that the aim is to create one unique shared meaning, in short, the truth, as assumed within the entity perspective (Uhl-Bien, 2006). However, it is essential to remark that, from an interpretative perspective, there is no intention to suggest that there exists an objective truth (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Instead all interpretations and constructions are fictions carrying the truth, and leadership is defined as expressions of meaning (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012).

In conclusion, it is crucial to enhance knowledge of the followers' sensemaking processes in order to understand the common discrepancy between intended and received meanings in the leader-follower relationship. Simultaneously, by acknowledging the context-driven nature of leadership, the ways followers frame, think and relate to the norms and values in their work contexts may be enlightened. In brief, to enhance understanding of these, interpretative and cultural lenses can be treated as prerequisite for successful leader-follower-relations (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012).

## 1.2 Aim and Objectives

In light of the complexity and the leader-centrism within the field, the first aim is to illuminate leadership from a follower-centered perspective. Therefore a sensemaking approach is emphasised. Following the *structure theory*, which suggests that the social context shapes people's constructions of reality (see Giddens, 1984), this paper seeks to show that the context plays a crucial role in how followers construct leadership and make sense of their leaders' actions. This is accomplished by conducting interviews with employees within two departments of different Swedish companies. Thirdly, by studying the contexts of these two different organisations, it is investigated how the followers' constructions differ in relation to the context. Instead of being interested in the substance of the followers' constructions themselves, the purpose is to reveal followers' judgment criteria i.e. what is perceived as good and bad leadership. By studying their sensemaking, contextual variables are revealed that are proposed to affect the followers' constructions and thus have a significant impact on the leader-follower relationship. Further, it is examined how an

organisational context links to the extent to which leadership is executed, and its implications for leaders' behaviour are discussed.

## 1.3 Research Purpose

The aim of this study is to enhance understanding within the follower-centric approaches in the field of leadership. Namely, the purpose is to show how the context affects follower's responses and sensemaking of the leader's actions. Hence, this dissertation seeks to address the following main question:

- How are the followers' constructions of leadership affected by the two organisational contexts?

The second research question seeks to find contextual aspects that affect followers' constructions. The third research question aims at discussing implications for leader's actions that may connect to a certain context:

- Which contextual aspects can be identified in the two organisational contexts?
- In which way do the leaders' actions relate to the two organisational contexts?

By answering these questions, the thesis aims at enhancing understanding within follower-centric approaches to leadership. The objective is to shed light on the relation between followers' sensemaking and the organisational context in order to diminish the encountered research gap. Thereby conventional leadership theories that suggest an almost unchallenged presence of leadership are examined more critically.

## 1.4 Outline of the Thesis

The dissertation is divided into five main sections. The first chapter aims to introduce leadership as a broad and contradictory field of research history. Continuing to followership, the traditional perspective on followers as passive recipients to more modern views on followers as co-producers will be discussed. Some light will be shed on the work that has been done regarding the role of context in follower-centric approaches to leadership, while flaws within this research will be uncovered.

In the second chapter, the review of the literature presents a critical overview of the most significant theoretical concepts within the field of leadership and its subfield of followership. After leading over to a follower-centric approach towards leadership, the role of the context within followership will be discussed.

The third chapter presents the methodological approach of this research. It justifies the choice of conducting qualitative research and explains the background and design of this study.

Further, the interpretations and analysis of the data are discussed as well as the trustworthiness of the results.

The fourth chapter presents the empirical findings that were collected through interviews in two different Swedish companies. The findings within the two organisational contexts are successively analysed and discussed. Therefore both contexts are organised into four major themes that were identified. Finally, a short comparison of the two contexts discusses the most striking similarities and dissimilarities.

The last chapter seeks to discuss and summarise the main contributions of this thesis. Besides the theoretical contribution as the main importance, implications for practice and future research are presented.

## 2 Literature Review

*This chapter begins with a critical overview of the dominant approaches throughout history in the leadership research field. After leading over to the field of followership, traditional and new emergent perspectives on the roles of followers will be presented. We will then take the stand for a more balanced, follower-centric perspective towards leadership. Subsequently, with the context of an organisation being the main variable of this paper, the existing work on the level of context and its implications for research are critically examined.*

### 2.1 The role of the leader

Leadership has been a main topic in research for many decades and it continues to be a major area of controversy. As Harter (2006) stated somewhat provocative, “leadership is a fat subject, a land where everyone may safely graze” (p.2). Since there exist almost endless concepts and views of the role of the leader, it is essential to shed some light on and organise the dominant approaches within research history. This will also form the basis for understanding the role of followers in a larger perspective.

#### 2.1.1 Transactional leadership

Overall, transactional leaders achieve followers’ compliance by adopting certain behaviours (Landy & Conte, 2010). The *trait approach* and *great man theories* as the early approaches within transactional leadership suggest that a leader possesses certain characteristics that others do not. Often referred to as *trait spotting*, research at the time focused on detecting these traits such as self-confidence, ambition, and decisiveness (Stogdill, 1974). According to the trait approach, becoming a leader is then reserved to those who possess the inherent traits necessary, which entails a rather constraining perspective on leadership.

By contrast, the *style approach* that emerged after World War II presents a less constrained perspective on leadership. Rather than emphasising pre-existing traits, it defines various leadership styles which one can develop. Common examples are described by *task-* and *relationship-oriented leadership* which have reached high importance in research until today (Landy & Conte, 2010). While a leader’s task orientation involves planning and controlling within the relationship to the follower, the relationship orientation entails a supportive, considerate and person-centred leader’s behaviour towards the follower to gain his or her commitment (Landy & Conte, 2010). Yukl (2010) mentions the *University of Michigan studies* in which relation-oriented behaviour and task-oriented behaviour are depicted as the two main leadership style approaches. Prior to these distinctions were *The Ohio State University studies* that similarly distinguish between the leader’s choices to engage in consideration or initiating structure as the two extreme ends of the leadership spectrum (Yukl, 2010).

A third approach within transactional leadership studies, the *contingency approaches*, appeared in the 1960's. Until then, little focus had been paid to other variables than the leader's inherent traits and behaviour. The contingency approaches then first considered the situation as a dependent factor for the favorable leadership approach. Therefore, the best motivational strategy that a leader should pursue depends not only on the leader's personality and the relationship between leader and follower but also on the uniqueness and favorableness of situations (Fiedler, 1967).

### 2.1.2 Transformative leadership

When competition between US and Asian companies got fiercer, a more critical stance towards common assumptions on leadership was taken, trying to uncover both causes for stagnating developments and ways to improve performance to keep pace with newly emerging competitors (Conger, 1999). This eventually led to a *transformative view*.

Burns (1978) found that American organisations were overmanaged but underled, hence exercising good management but poor leadership. While traditional research had often labelled managers as leaders, implying strong ideological overtones in this reasoning (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012), this new clarification of the terms *leadership* and *management* led to the view that a manager is not necessarily a leader. As until today, the concept of management relates to stabilising activities and coping with complexity while leadership means initiating and promoting change work (Barker 1997; Carroll & Levy, 2008; Kotter, 1990). Moreover, while management is defined as targeting followers' acting and behaving, leadership targets their thinking and feeling (Sveningsson, Alvehus & Alvesson, 2012). In short, *manager* and *supervisor* describe job titles and "what is to be done" whereas a *leader* is engaged in how it is done, referring to a "social-psychological aspect of the role of supervisor or manager" (Landy & Conte, 2010, p.479). Accordingly, manager and subordinate is another sort of relation than leader and follower, and the latter may but do not necessarily follow management.

Further elements of transformative leadership are the emphasis on a leader's ability to create vision and strategies (*visionary leadership style*), and a *charismatic leadership style*. Consequently, focus lies on the leader as a moral, heroic exemplar and his or her personal ability of transforming—rather than negotiating with—followers (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012). Yet Bass & Steidlmeier (1999) argue that, contrasting transactional leadership models that are grounded in a worldview where leaders and followers rationally seek their self-interests, transformative leadership is based on a more realistic self-concept. They look at followers as "ends in themselves" rather than viewing them as "means to self-satisfying ends for the leader" (p.186). Besides, leadership includes non-coercive and visionary means instead of posing threat (Zaleznik, 1977).

Nevertheless, one can argue that the transformative attempt to emphasise the social relation between the parties is problematic. This is due to the fact that people generally have the need to see someone as responsible for the different outcomes (Meindl, Ehrlich & Dukerich, 1985). Alvesson & Sveningsson (2012) argue that thereby a manager's self-image is underpinned in a way that justifies claims for prestige and high wages. This heroic thinking complicates the

actual practice of leadership in organisations since leadership remains unspecified and often management rather than leadership is exercised (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012). Equally, Pfeffer (1977) criticises that this narrow and leader-centric view on leadership leads to exaggerated individualism in organisations.

Along with this leader-centric view comes a marginalisation in terms of acknowledging leadership as being affected by the cultural and social context. Alvesson (2010) draws attention to the fact that culture influences leadership more than leadership influences culture. Hence, by ignoring the contextual level, leaders' acts do not necessarily lead to the intended outcome, as often falsely assumed within research on transformative leadership (Yukl, 1999).

### 2.1.3 Post-heroic leadership

Contrasting the heroic luster in transformative leadership, the *post-heroic view* emerged strongly advocating to demystify this leader-centric view. By decoupling leadership from its transformative connotations, the post-heroic approach encourages more humanistic and democratic workplace relationships (Sveningsson et al., 2012). Similarly, Huey (1994) states that being a post-heroic leader means focusing less on a company's structure and hierarchy and more on how to gain followers involvement for a common goal:

It still requires many of the attributes that have always distinguished the best leaders—intelligence, commitment, energy, courage of conviction, integrity. But here's the big difference: It expects those qualities of just about everyone in the organization (Huey, 1994, p.50).

More specifically, the effect of information technology is mentioned as a reason for this development and for the fact that individuals consider themselves as self-contained businesses (Huey, 1944). Small talk and joking is a crucial part of leaders' behaviour who are ought to "spend their time doing what other people in the organization do" (p.72). However, the effects are considered much more meaningful (Sveningsson et al., 2012). This more contemporary leadership theory centres relational thinking that aims to leave the entity-based perspective on relations between leaders and followers and emphasises leadership as a social process (e.g. Ospina & Sorensen, 2006; Pearce & Conger, 2003; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Thus, in contrast to the entity perspective, the relational perspective views relationships rather than individuals as the basic unit of analysis (Uhl-Bien, 2006) and reality as a shared construction (Ospina & Sorensen, 2006).

Building upon the idea that leadership is an on-going process of shared sensemaking, there is often believed to be alignment amongst followers' interpretations of leadership. However, many argue that shared meanings are less frequently found than the body of leadership literature assumes, and that instead dualisms and ambiguity dominate reality (Alvesson, 2010; Carroll & Levy, 2008; Fairhurst, 2001). Alvesson & Sveningsson (2012) state that leadership is "a source of diverse constructions and incoherence of meaning as much as it is a key driver behind socially shared meanings" (p.219). Thus, social constructions draw upon ideas and norms that determine the environment, which, however, does not imply that individuals produce the same meaning of the same topic in the same situation. In contrast, ambiguities and fragmentations must be considered key elements that all actors, particularly the leader,

must pay careful attention to (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012). Consequently, they argue that post-heroic approaches portray “leadership in pink colors” (p.214) when emphasising harmony and collectivism.

Besides the little attention that is paid to the multitude of meanings, another critique that they highlight is the tendency of leadership research to neglect the cultural-driven nature of leadership (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012). Yet, since both leaders’ and followers’ activity is embedded in the organisational context, the latter is crucial to understand how they construct and interpret their own and others’ actions. It is certain that more current relational approaches acknowledge leadership as embedded in and inseparable from the social and cultural context (Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Ospina & Sorensen, 2006; Uhl-Bien 2006). For instance, Ospina & Sorensen (2006) explain that constructional thinking sees the leader-follower relationship as “grounded in wider systems of interdependence and constrained by social structure” (p.193). Likewise, Dachler (1992) describes relationships as subject to multi-meanings since both producing and receiving parties act within a variety of interdependent contexts and complex relations. Despite these attempts, some argue that research has failed to explore the contextual level in depth (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012).

Going beyond post-heroic approaches, some current approaches are occupied with identity work. Sveningsson et al. (2012) point out that, as both heroic and post-heroic approaches, relate to leader identity, the leadership discourse is mainly used as a resource for doing identity work when actually doing management. Contrasting traditional views, they suggest that good leadership means engaging in *mundane managerial work* with organisational culture as its key source. Hence, rather than seeing leadership as being beyond managerial work, it is defined as being part of managerial actions. However, as most leaders are occupied in administration work and micromanagement, they exercise leadership at a symbolic level rather than in practice (Sveningsson et al., 2012). This creates irritation and frustration where managers are engaged in doing things that are not really within what they were hoping to do. As a result, they find their managerial working life not meaningful enough, which offers little possibility to identify themselves with the organisation and its environments. Eventually, leadership, rather than countering fragmentation, can lead to misalignment within the political subsystems of the organisation (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003).

## 2.2 The role of the follower

After having critically discussed the main views on the role of the leader, the next paragraphs will explore the work that has been conducted regarding the role of the follower. Just as it is important to be familiar with the distinction between a leader and a manager, it is essential to be aware of the difference between a *follower* and a *subordinate*. As Meindl (1995) highlights, the latter typically refers to a formal position within an organisation whereas the former could refer to almost anyone since most people are following somebody at some point. Hence, most managers are not only leading but also following depending on how they construct leadership in a given situation and if they identify with the role of a follower.



After having identified the meaning of a follower, it becomes obvious that the *role* of a follower is an even more debated topic in the large body of leadership literature. Alvesson & Sveningsson (2010) argue that there is a mutual dependency between leadership and followership and that no leadership can occur without somebody following and vice versa. Even though it seems evident that followers as such are represented in the leadership process one way or another, there is a large dissent among researchers regarding the way and the extent to which followers are involved (Shamir, 2007). More specifically, the dividing line among the different viewpoints seems to derive from how *active* the follower is perceived to be involved in the leadership act and how much attention researchers and practitioners should pay to the follower in general. An overview of the main perspectives on the role of followers in the leadership field will be presented below.

### 2.2.1 The follower as a recipient

Traditionally, the leadership field has either completely left out the follower of the leadership process or depicted the follower as a passive recipient to leadership. Whether the focus has been on the leader's traits, skills, style or the situation, leadership has been addressed as a phenomenon owned by the leader instead of looking upon it as a reciprocal relationship between a leader and a follower (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2010). In a similar way, Shamir (2007) states that the dominant historical view of leadership has neglected the follower and portrayed the development of leadership as synonymous to the development of the leader. As a result, despite the obvious fact that it takes two parties to constitute a relationship, the traditional approach is entity-based and neglects the relational and contextual variables that surround the practice of leadership in a certain organisation (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012).

There are also modern perspectives that illustrate the follower as a passive recipient to a leader's different kinds of influence. Foldy, Goldman & Ospina (2008) suggest that an important aspect of leadership in organisations is about trying to influence the followers by evoking *cognitive shifts*, that is changes in the perception about different aspects of work and the leadership itself. The leaders are seen as the agents, or the *independent variables*, and the followers as the passive targets, or the *dependent variables*. Accordingly, this approach also implies that the notion of leadership is about leaders trying to influence followers but it does not highlight whether followers, conversely, might affect the relationship with the leader and the leader's behaviour.

### 2.2.2 The follower as a moderator

While still viewing followers as passive recipients, some approaches attempt to appraise how the characteristics of the follower moderate the leader's influence. The leader is still the active agent trying to affect the follower's abilities, attitudes and motivation, but the leader needs to adapt his or her behaviour to the needs of the follower (Shamir, 2007). According to the *path-goal theory* developed by House (1971), some followers need guidance and structure from their leaders and other followers need merely some support. Correspondingly, the leader should evaluate if a *structuring leadership style* or a *supportive leadership style* is suitable depending on the follower in a given context (House, 1971).

There are many different angles when it comes to evaluating how a follower can moderate a leader's actions and influence. As an alternative to highlighting the follower's needs for a certain leadership style, Bono & Judge (2004) hold that the follower's personality moderates his or her interpretations of leadership. Followers who have a high level of *extraversion* and *agreeableness* have a greater tendency to perceive these traits in their leaders as well. As these traits are considered to be closely connected to transformational leadership, extravert and agreeable followers attribute more transformational leadership to their leaders compared to followers who have other personality traits.

Meindl, Mayo & Pastor (1994) also acknowledge that individual factors among followers are crucial to consider, but they argue that situational elements play a certain role as well in order to determine the followers' interpretations of leadership. More specifically, they argue that the individual and situational factors influence the followers' levels of arousal, which in turn affects the extent to which they attribute transformational or charismatic leadership to their leaders (Meindl et al., 1994). However, they claim that the critical aspect for understanding how followers perceive leadership is the *individual* and *moderating arousal level* rather than the context. Thus, although the significance of the context is recognised to some extent in this approach, it is merely depicted as part of the background to the followers' emotions.

Regardless of the exact angle—whether the needs, personality or emotions of the follower are emphasised—these moderator perspectives still, alike the traditional approaches, perceive the follower as a passive recipient of leadership. According to these approaches, the leader designs leadership in a manner that is compatible with how the followers are, rather than with what the followers do as active co-producers of leadership.

### 2.2.3 The follower as a constructor

Akin to the perspectives above that examine the different characteristics of the follower, some theories go further and contend that the follower holds the most central role in the production of leadership. Whereas Bresnen (1995) argues that leaders construct their own roles, the advocates of this position claim that leadership is a phenomenon that is cognitively and socially constructed by followers (Shamir, 2007). When emphasis is given to the followers' behaviours and their roles are taken into account, as opposed to their perceptions of the leaders' styles, it seems more appropriate to call it followership rather than leadership as the followers suddenly become the centre of attention.

Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera & McGregor (2010) found that individuals construct different *followership schema* that influences their perceptions of their own roles at the workplace. Followers make sense of their roles in different ways and consider themselves as being everything from passive (e.g. *blindly obedient*) to proactive (e.g. *change agent*). In combination with contextual variables in terms of the leadership styles at the workplace, the social constructions of followership are affected in various degrees. In a resembling way, Meindl (1985) asserts that followers have a tendency to underestimate their own roles at the workplace and perceive ambiguous events in organisations as resulting from the leaders' efforts. He argues that even if there are many elements that potentially cause an event in an

organisation, followers get a sense of understanding and control over their environment when they attribute power and causality to conspicuous leader figures.

A similar view is held by Lipman-Blumen (2007) who has a psychodynamic view on the follower's role as constructor of leadership. Essentially, she claims that authority figures from people's childhood make imprints in their minds that make them accustomed to someone providing what they want and keeping them safe. Therefore, it is perceived to be convenient and safe to attribute events to managers and, at least implicitly, treat them as the equivalent authority figures in the adult life. However, these managers might not know or care about people's best interests. Accordingly, these constructions of leaders as authority figures might be misleading as they originate from the followers' cognitive mechanisms and needs.

#### 2.2.4 The follower as involved in shared leadership

As an alternative to the traditional leadership terminology that distinguishes leaders from followers, more radical perspectives have emerged that wish to erase the dividing line between these roles. Gronn (2002) holds that leadership is an activity rather than a fixed role and that everybody in the organisation should define oneself as both leader and follower. Although the relational aspect of leadership is acknowledged in this critical perspective and thus a more flexible orientation of the agency behind leadership is emphasised, the environment in which the leadership is constituted seems to be of minor interest.

Pearce, Wassenaar & Manz (2014) have a resembling approach to leadership and advocate a shared and responsible leadership. Yet, unlike the perspective above, they accentuate the importance of the context to a larger extent. Depending on the specific organisation and context, they suggest *rotated shared responsible leadership* as a pragmatic method to executing leadership as a process that is shared rather than practicing leadership within the boundaries that the formal roles set. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is presented as an example to demonstrate how everyone shares one's stories and takes the lead at different points in a rotating system. In a context consisting of many different operations and entities, cross-functional teams are argued to reflect a more suitable strategy for sharing the role of leadership.

Thus, shared leadership and distributed leadership seem to generate numerous possibilities for employees to engage in a more informal and situational leadership without any fixed formal roles that, in a way, limit the scope of leadership. Nevertheless, it might be challenging to motivate people to be leading occasionally, in some sort of altruistic spirit, without any recognition manifested in a formal role and status that dominates the traditional approach to leadership. Some might also find it confusing to act in a work environment without a clear and stable structure they are familiar with.

#### 2.2.5 The follower as a co-producer

In resemblance with advocates of shared leadership, the perspective depicting the follower as co-producer of leadership also regards leadership as a process and as a social and relational phenomenon that emerges from the interactions between leaders and followers (Shamir,

2007). Whereas shared leadership aims at erasing the roles and boundaries in an organisation by treating everyone as both leader and follower (e.g. Gronn, 2002), the co-producer perspective, on the other hand, maintains the distinction between these terms in a more conventional way (e.g. Dansereau, Graen & Haga, 1975). Even though leader and follower are clearly distinguished from each other, they are claimed to jointly produce the relationship. *Influence, authority* and *responsibility* are examples of elements that constitute the relationship and both parties are active in constructing and interpreting it (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2010).

In an attempt to understand the follower's role as a co-producer to leadership, Dansereau et al. (1975) present the *leader-member exchange (LMX) theory* that is regarded as one of the cornerstones of the co-producer perspective. In essence, the theory proposes that leaders develop different behaviours towards individual followers and that the quality of the leader-follower relationship highly affects the development of the leader's behaviour over time. As Alvesson & Sveningsson (2010) point out, the relationship is affected by both the leader's and the follower's personality, character and competencies. A relationship characterised by a high and successful exchange depends on the possibilities the leader has to supply the follower with responsibility, status, power, interesting work tasks, support for personal development and so forth. In exchange, the follower can supply the leader with a strong commitment, work ethics and loyalty (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2010).

Similarly, Howell & Shamir (2005) view the follower as a co-producer of leadership and refer to leadership as a relational phenomenon. However, unlike the LMX theory, the follower is seen as the primary constructor of the relationship. It is proposed that the self-concepts of the follower are critical for the quality of the relationship with the leader. In the event that the follower is disoriented and lacks a clear sense of self, he or she will identify with the leader on a personal level, resulting in a personalised relationship. If a follower, on the contrary, has a more clear identity and holds a distinct set of values, he or she will develop a socialised relationship with the leader which is based on the leader's message and values. Hence, this perspective is quite close to the follower as a moderator approach where the follower's characteristics are crucial to understand the concept of leadership. Nonetheless, while the moderator perspective solely refers to the follower's characteristics as a component affecting the *leader's influence*, the co-producer perspective ascribes an active role to the follower in *constructing the relationship* with the leader.

## 2.2.6 Interpretation and meaning making

When leadership is perceived as a relational phenomenon emerging from interactions between leaders and followers, it follows naturally that these relationships can be interpreted in different ways and that different meanings can be attributed to the same actions and knowledge. Dachler & Hosking (1995) put it like this:

Knowing is always a process of relating. In a relational perspective knowing is viewed as an ongoing process of meaning making. A claim to know is a claim to be able to construct the meaning of a running text. ... In this sense texts acquire meaning only to

the extent that they can be related, through narration and conversations, with ongoing stories in the social/cultural context  
(Dachler & Hosking, 1995, p.4).

It is thus essential to acknowledge that a leader-follower-relationship can be understood differently depending on how the two make sense of their interactions and relate to prior knowledge. Furthermore, as Sveningsson et al. (2012) emphasise, the social context in which the leadership occurs ought to be studied more carefully to get a deeper understanding on the aspects that affect the constructions of leadership. There are assumptions, values and norms on a societal, organisational and group level that influence the way leaders and followers construct leadership. Accordingly, it is simplistic to search for one universal concept of leadership since the latter is always closely connected to a unique context.

## 2.3 The role of the context

As highlighted, up until today many researchers within the leadership field have supported a leader-centric view that attributes to the idea of *agency theory* rather than *structure theory*. The essence of this continuing debate on agency versus structure theory is whether it is individuals or context that shape social reality (Giddens, 1984; Whittington, 1992). Relating this to leadership, Meindl (1995) criticises the lack in acknowledging the influence of social forces and context:

The behavior of followers is assumed to be much less under the control and influence of the leader, and more under the control and influence of forces that govern the social construction process itself  
(Meindl, 1995, p.330).

In spite of the important role of the context when defining how leadership is executed and constructed, research has made modest investigations about the relevance of the context. However, an exception to this are Kerr & Jermier (1978) who limit the importance of leadership in certain contexts. They claim that depending on the working environment in an organisation, leadership has little importance or becomes even unnecessary. The context in terms of task structuring, the follower's education and intrinsic motivation are examples of contextual variables that represent the overarching umbrella in which leadership takes place to a smaller or greater extent (Kerr & Jermier, 1978).

Many others (e.g. Alvesson & Sveningsson 2010; Fairhurst 2001; House & Aditya, 1997) recognise the importance of the context and question the way in which the leadership field has underestimated the significance of the organisational and societal context. Most research that has attempted to approach the context in some manner has been dominated by contextual variables such as periods of stress and turbulence (Conger, 1999). For instance, Meindl (1995) argues that perceptions of crisis among followers and *performance cues*—that is the degree of success that a particular organisation achieves in terms of accomplishing all the work—constitute the foundation of how followers construct leadership. In a resembling way, Sean, Uhl-Bien, Avolio & Cavarretta (2009) reason that when an organisation operates in an

extreme context, it is essential to acknowledge the context's impact on the constructions of leadership. In a hospital emergency, for instance, it is claimed that *vigilance*, *situational awareness* and *preparedness* are crucial qualities to demonstrate in order to execute a leadership that is anchored among the followers. In short, all these approaches seem to limit the role of context to certain specific and dramatic situations, which implies that there is a tendency to overlook the less spectacular contextual factors that most organisations deal with on a daily basis.

In addition to crisis and performance, Meindl (1995) suggests that social processes among groups of followers reflect an important contextual variable that depends on the density of an organisation's network (*the social contagion theory*). If a group of followers works in a high-density network, the constructions of leadership are expected to be more homogenous. As an alternative to the social network, Stephens & Campo (1996) argue that the *social ranking* within an organisation affects the way leadership is constructed. Interviewing the lower ranks of the police, they found that officers interpret leadership in terms of ensuring that followers know what to do, that they get the adequate resources and that leaders should be leading from the front. On the contrary, senior officers of the higher ranks constructed leadership in terms of intellectual stimulation, change orientation and visions for the followers. Although the social network and the social ranking are interesting contextual aspects that contribute to the relatively homogenous research field dominated by examining crisis and turbulence, there is still a tendency to focus on specific contexts that are merely relevant for some organisations.

One recent attempt has been made though to look closer at everyday contextual variables that prevail in most organisations. In Alvesson, Jonsson, Sveningsson & Wenglén's model (forthcoming), the organisational culture is depicted as critical to bear in mind in order to avoid a breakdown of the leadership process. More specifically, they argue that the cultural context should always be considered e.g. when analysing if a leader's intention will be successfully realised and if a follower's response to a leader's action will be as predicted. Nevertheless, the model implies that the leadership process is unidirectional. Thus, it pays less close attention to the context's role in affecting the follower's response which in turn may influence the leader's actions and leading style.

Finally, as Conger (1999) states, the overrepresentation of surveys and quantitative methods in the research field may have obstructed the possibilities to delve into various contextual variables and compare different contexts in which leadership occurs. Most likely, this might partly explain why crisis and extreme contexts have been looked upon more closely as these variables are reasonably easier to quantify compared to mundane contextual aspects that are difficult to measure and grasp.

## 2.4 Chapter Summary

After having critically discussed traditional and recent views on the role of leaders and followers, it becomes apparent that there is a need for qualitative in-depth studies that try to capture how culture, structure and other mundane contextual variables affect the way leadership is constructed among followers in practice.

## 3 Methodology

*The purpose of this chapter is to outline and discuss the logics behind our chosen methods and processes of this study. We will start by introducing our ontological and epistemological considerations in order to reach a deeper understanding of the research approach. A critical discussion of the research design and the data collection method will follow. Lastly, we will present our reasoning regarding the interpretation of data and the trustworthiness of our results.*

### 3.1 Research Approach

As Thomas (2013) highlights, the research approach should be more extensive than simply signifying the chosen methods of a study. It might for instance be a good idea to clarify the reasons for employing an inductive approach and delving into the underlying meanings in people's words and actions. Conversely, it is reasonably important to explain the background for adopting a deductive method by closely defining variables and concepts beforehand that one may subsequently test on the real world (Thomas, 2013). There are certainly various aspects that can explain the researcher's framework of a study. Some highly relevant crossroads will be presented below combined with a discussion of our choice of direction of this study.

When researchers are discussing and questioning the suitable methods in a particular study, the potential disagreements are often found to derive from the fact that people perceive the nature of the world in diverse ways. *Ontology* concerns the individual's understanding of the world and of what he/she is looking at. One could for example claim that all visible and audible things represent the *real world*. As opposed to this standpoint, it is legitimate to argue that there are underlying phenomena and mechanisms beyond the more tangible things that better represent the world (Thomas, 2013). In a resembling way, Campbell & Wasco (2000) state that every researcher must announce whether he/she believes in one objective and real world. In contrast to the latter view, this thesis advocates for the co-existence of multiple realities. Rather than attempting to define concepts in advance that are objectively proven, an *inductive approach* was chosen to humbly search for various realities that emerge from the interactions between leaders and followers. This is mainly because it is believed that the realities of followers vary to a large extent depending on the context. Since potential contextual aspects of interest are numerous and the work context is the focus of this research, it is argued that an open approach is suitable in order to greatly increase the chances of discovering rich data.

Although the ontological orientation is elementary, it might be even more common among researchers to account for their epistemological considerations (Carter & Little, 2007). *Epistemology* is typically defined as the nature and manner of production of knowledge, serving to enrich one's understanding of the world (Thomas, 2013). As Campbell & Wasco

(2000) note there are four principal epistemological positions with differing viewpoints on what constitutes reality: *positivism*, *realism*, *critical theory* and *constructivism*. Whereas positivists aim at capturing the true and pure reality, constructivists believe that knowledge emanates from subjective and socially constructed realities. Contrary to researchers of the former position, constructivists actively interpret the meanings of words and events and accordingly leave their own imprints on the conducted research (Thomas, 2013). In this study we employ a constructivist approach since our intention is to investigate the meanings of the socially constructed realities of followers.

Just as we believe that there is no single truth about followers and their ties to leadership, we are equally aware of our own subjective realities in regards to how we as researchers interpret the collected data. As we will hold interviews with our participants, the data can be thought of as *situated knowledge*, and our positions as researchers reasonably affect the observations and sensemaking of the collected answers. Thomas (2013) accentuates the importance of being aware of this *positionality*, which seems to resemble Alvesson & Sköldberg's (2009) *reflexivity*. To ensure transparency regarding our own role as researchers, a description of our position will follow.

As to the number, we are two researchers conducting this study, one being a male Swedish student and the other one being a female German student. Our idea with this project is to elevate the perspective of followers, as we argue that their role in the leadership act is still underestimated. Likewise, we want to illuminate the impact of context on interpretations of leadership since we both have experienced managers in different workplaces and perceived their leadership to vary greatly depending on the context. Although we acknowledge the leader, follower and the context as three fundamental constituents of leadership, we want to focus on the two latter. By switching the perspective and interviewing the subordinates rather than the managers, we hope that our unconventional approach to leadership will give new insights about the complex phenomenon of leadership.

Finally, by researching and interpreting the followers' realities in depth, we seek to discover the view of an insider, which may generate a deeper understanding of the knowledge. Thus, our working method is in line with what Maude (2011) refers to as an *emic approach* as opposed to the more generic *etic approach*.

## 3.2 Research Design

Seeing that our research questions intend to illuminate and understand the followers' subjective constructions of leadership in depth, we selected a method that allows for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Morgan & Smircich (1980) assert that when the social constructions are of interest, it is critical to understand the phenomenon in its context. This is due to the fact that social constructions are in fact processes that contain a lot of information such as words, metaphors and language games. If these processes are merely looked upon retrospectively outside their contexts, one can reasonably assume that a substantial amount of contextual complementary knowledge gets lost (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). Given the central role of context in our thesis, we choose the method of *interviews* which we conduct in the



actual work settings rather than via telephone or internet. To maximise the chances of reaching a complex understanding of the followers' leadership constructions, we have chosen to do a *qualitative multiple case study*. While quantitative research is conducted by using numbers, qualitative research concerns words, thoughts and images (Thomas, 2013). As implied before, it is the words and thoughts manifested in the constructions of leadership that we examine. We considered selecting only one case for this study to be able to dig even deeper into the followers' constructions of leadership in one specific context. Yet, since we seek to optimise the chances of covering a large amount of relevant contextual variables, we find it valuable to conduct interviews in two comparatively contrasting organisations. The idea behind choosing a white-collar organisational context and a blue-collar organisational context is that the followers' constructions of leadership may be very distinct as the two organisations are truly differing. Correspondingly, among all the potential variables that could distinguish one context from another, we believe that the followers' level of education can be particularly interesting in regards to how leadership is constructed. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that this is an in-depth study and not a comparative one that aims at testing our hypotheses and making generalisations. If our purpose was to confirm our hypotheses, i.e. if phenomenon one leads to phenomenon two, it would have arguably been convenient to increase the number of studied cases and in addition conduct quantitative research by the use of a survey.

### 3.3 Data Collection Method

As previously stated, we decided to interview followers and delve into their constructions of leadership. Alvesson (2011) brings attention to the different method types one can choose from regarding the degree of structure of the interview questions. *Structured, semi-structured* and *unstructured interviews* are further described as the three main positions. In this study, we held semi-structured interviews to stick to our inductive approach and leave space for the individual to freely underline what he/she perceives to be particularly important. Consequently, we asked only five planned and open-ended questions that covered what Thomas (2013) terms *interview schedule*, i.e. a list of the issues we wanted to include. As a complement, we asked follow-up questions that we did not plan beforehand, permitting the interviewees to share additional thoughts and experiences. Yet it is important to highlight that there was a notable variation among the respondents regarding the amount of information they shared. Whereas some of them provided us with rich and detailed responses which exceeded what we had initially planned, others gave us brief answers, leading us to intervene and helping them along the way. As a result, the length of the interviews was approximately 15 to 30 minutes depending on the individual.

Considering this, we believe it was a good idea to have some structure in the interviews since we think that some of the interviewees would have had difficulties expressing their thoughts if they had been provided with less structure. However, there may be various explanations for the limited information sharing of some of the interviewees. Evidently, the personality and the context might be two reasons. We did not notice any difference related to the context and strongly believe that the personalities played a central role. Furthermore, the interviews were held in English and all of the respondents had Swedish as their native language. The language

barrier was clearly affecting and limiting some of the answers we got even though we intervened and occasionally helped them translate Swedish words into English. In an attempt to diminish the effect of the language barrier and to make the interviewees feel comfortable, we introduced ourselves and chatted with the participants for a few minutes before commencing. According to Thomas (2013), any subject, e.g. the weather, can serve as an icebreaker and as a means to achieve what he refers to as *establishing rapport*. Whilst the interviewees seemed to be comfortable with us as researchers, they knew very little or nothing about the topic of the interview by the time we met them. The fact that we did not inform the interviewees in advance about the research topic is a potential flaw that we discussed afterwards. We simply expected the two managers to inform them about the topic since we had only been in contact with the managers and thoroughly explained the subject of our study to them. Since it was them who organised the appointments with us, we did not talk to the interviewees beforehand. In a future research project, we would not take for granted that the managers inform the participants about the study.

The data was collected from a Swedish architectural consultancy firm, i.e. a white-collar context, and a Swedish firm offering installation services, i.e. a blue-collar context. Four individuals working under the same manager were interviewed in each organisation and, as uttered before, all interviews were held at the actual workplaces in order to get a more complete understanding of the contexts. Also, we could interpret body language, laughter, hesitations and other data that most likely would have been more difficult to perceive if the interviews were conducted via internet or telephone. Additionally, it would conceivably have been more complicated to establish rapport between the interviewees and ourselves if we used telephone interviews instead. To ensure that we could fully focus on the interviewees while they were talking, the interviews were recorded and we took sporadic notes if we found something particularly interesting. All the interviews were carried out by both researchers in order to get more nuanced interpretations of the employees' answers. The participants were interviewed individually due to two reasons. First, the purpose of this study is not to investigate the discourses or jargon that occur in groups. Rather, the aim is to illuminate the individual's construction of leadership. Second, a data collection method as e.g. group interviews or focus groups might have impeded the individual's willingness to share sensitive information. After all, the topic is quite delicate and it may be inconvenient to share true opinions about the manager in a group situation.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

Once we had all eight interviews recorded, we began the data analysis by briefly exchanging some general thoughts about the material. This strategy helped us finding a starting point from which we could proceed individually and analyse the data more thoroughly. The first thing we did was to split the eight interviews equally to transcribe the data. The advantage with transcriptions is that they capture every word being expressed in the interviews. However, behavioural cues are left out if the researchers do not take any complementary notes (Thomas, 2013). As declared before, we took some notes in order to include aspects that the audio recording could not capture. In accordance with Ryan & Bernard (2003), we decided to look for themes and subthemes, to choose the most relevant and important themes, to code

them into clusters and hierarchies and lastly to link the themes to theory. Although we followed an inductive approach, we are aware that thereby our prior understanding and theoretical lens of the studied phenomenon affected the construction of our themes. Key terms in the literature review, ontological and epistemological orientations, personal values and researchers' experiences are examples that shape the prior understanding (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

We transcribed the data almost straight away while our memories were still fresh. Once the transcripts were completed, we immediately started analysing the material individually and divided the two contexts between us. One of us analysed the four interviews from the white-collar context and the other one the ones from the blue-collar context. We read through the transcripts several times, with breaks in between, to facilitate the discovery of patterns in the text. One of the most straightforward strategies to identify themes is to look for repetition (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Accordingly, we identified topics and opinions that were repeated throughout the interviews in the two separate contexts. Simultaneously, we searched for metaphors and analogies that are typically hidden in the interviewees' rhetoric. Pauses in speech and laughter were listened to carefully as these could also contain valuable hints. Those are all useful techniques for pinpointing tendencies and themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Nevertheless, we beared in mind that the ample amount of pauses in our interviews could be due to the language barrier that we have touched upon earlier.

In addition to searching for patterns based on what the interviewees said, Ryan & Bernard (2003) suggest to look for what was *not* mentioned. Hence we identified gaps and missing information to gain important clues. For instance, some participants in the blue-collar context appreciated certain aspects about their manager and the workplace that they thought had improved. When digging deeper into the interviewees' responses, we could identify the pattern of valuing change even though most of them did not explicitly utter it. Likewise, the fact that the interviewees in the blue-collar context did not bring up terms as autonomy and independence might signal that the followers in the installation firm are fond of structure and guidelines of the daily work tasks.

Except identifying patterns based on the different techniques described above, we marked the data with colours in order to organise the material and get a better overview. In accordance with the *constant comparative method* depicted by Thomas (2013) as the fundamental analytic method for interpretative researchers, we continuously compared the data several times to interconnect the developed themes. By mapping our themes based on the coloured chunks of text, we could see how some themes were overlapping and how different chunks of text were compatible with several themes simultaneously. Although we were responsible for the work and theme mapping of one context each, we discussed every single chunk of all the interviews together as a means to criticise and disrupt our own themes. Further, we tried to be consistent in the logics behind the themes we created. For example, we agreed that every theme should be based on what the interviewees explicitly said rather than on implicit meanings or supporting theory.

The four contextual variables that have been developed during the analysis (organisational and occupational culture, climate, organisational design and structure, leadership style) all derive from our interpretations of the empirical material. Although culture and climate could

be argued to be two overlapping concepts, we found it useful to distinguish between them since the interviewees shared a lot of opinions about both the immediate context (climate) and the underlying and profound values (organisational and occupational culture). In other words, we reasoned that it would be too much material to cover if only one contextual variable covered both the short-term and long-term experience of the atmosphere at work. Moreover, in both the architectural firm and the installation firm, the respondents expressed multiple views about the formalisation of rules, degree of autonomy, distribution of power, skills of employees etc. that led us to the choice of having organisational design and structure as a contextual variable for our analysis. Also, one could question why we selected leadership style as a contextual variable as the variable directly relates to a person rather than the workplace itself. The reason for claiming that leadership style is a contextual variable is that all the variables we use in this study illuminate the follower's perspective. The leader's behaviour was a prominent aspect in the interviews and from the follower's view, the leader and his/her behaviour is part of the context in the same way as the follower would form part of the context from the leader's perspective. Thus, all the four variables in this research represent experiences and thoughts about leadership and the work context that are seen through the followers' lens.

In conclusion, the followers in the two organisations differed in the descriptions of leadership and the context, which resulted in different empirical themes. Yet as we could identify the four contextual variables in both workplaces we decided to use these four variables as a framework. We agreed that it would facilitate and clarify the basis for our analysis.

### 3.5 Trustworthiness and Generalisation

Besides interpreting the interviews, it is reasonably important to question the degree of *trustworthiness* of the empirical material, or *validity* as quantitative research typically refers to it, from the participant's perspective. The question at issue is whether the results and transcripts indeed represent the interviewees' intentions (Farrelly, 2013). Obviously, it is difficult to judge the trustworthiness of the results. However there are several methods one can utilise in order to enhance the probabilities of credible interpretations. As mentioned earlier, we took notes during the interviews, listened to the recordings several times, and discussed every interview and many quotes thoroughly to achieve more nuanced interpretations. During the interviews we also asked the respondents what they meant if we did not understand their intention. However, as some interviewees had difficulties in giving a more detailed picture about their intention, we had to make some far-reaching interpretations by asking questions such as *as are you saying that...? Is your point then that...?* Naturally, when we perceived that a participant needed more guidance, we also understood that our seemingly leading questions might evoke what Thomas (2013) calls *experimenter-expectancy effects*. Although we tried to control our gestures and the tone of voice in line with the recommendations of Thomas (2013), the guiding questions might have biased the results and put the trustworthiness at stake. Additionally, in accordance with Farrelly (2013), a potential flaw in our research is that we did not ask the interviewees to read the transcripts and confirm that the transcripts were in accordance with the original intentions. One could also claim that

it is difficult to fully capture the original intentions since the interviewees could potentially be lying or answering the questions in a way that they believe they are supposed to.

Another important aspect that concerns the trustworthiness of the study is the *transferability* or *generalisation* of our results. In quantitative research, the aim is that the sample is valid enough to make generalisations for the whole population that one has chosen to study. In qualitative research, the transferability rather concerns the researcher himself/herself in terms of how accurately and thoroughly the work has been done. By clearly describing the context one has studied in detail, transferring the results to other contexts is facilitated (Farrelly, 2013). Nevertheless, it is essential to note that making generalisations within social science and qualitative research is more complex since people and their interactions are the main subject of a study. Whereas variables and phenomena might be more controllable and predictable in natural science, people's behaviours are unpredictable and tightly connected to the context they are part of (Thomas, 2013). As a result, it is more difficult to generalise our findings to other contexts since there is arguably a close relationship between the followers' constructions and the unique contexts. Hence, the term *reliability* does not seem to be relevant for this study. If other researchers attempt to conduct a similar study, the results will most likely be very distinct since different contexts would generate different findings.

Finally, we would like to add that we attempted to demonstrate good ethics vis-à-vis our participants. As an example, before commencing we informed the interviewees about the purpose of the research project and our study background to give them a chance to drop out if they liked to. We applied what Thomas (2013) refers to as *implied consent* i.e. we assumed that the individuals gave their consent to participate as long as they did not say anything else. Further, we particularly informed them that they are anonymous in our study and that all the information will be treated confidentially. At last, we also gave both the interviewees and the managers the opportunity to receive a copy of our final thesis via email.

### 3.6 Chapter Summary

To summarise, we have described that we do not believe in one objective reality but rather in different constructions of reality. We have accounted for the qualitative method that forms this study in terms of having in-depth semi-structured interviews with employees in two different contexts. By describing our inductive approach, we have demonstrated how empirical themes and contextual variables have been based on the interviews. Finally, we have explained that we worked through the material thoroughly in order to ensure a well thought out analysis and to enhance the trustworthiness of the results.

## 4 Analysis and Discussion

*This chapter provides the findings that our empirical research revealed. We present our research outline and give definitions of the contextual aspects that were uncovered. To cluster our findings, we then proceed with describing and discussing four developed themes within each context separately. A close analysis of the collected data will occur within each theme through interpreting and discussing the findings in regards to existing theory. The chapter finishes with highlighting similarities and dissimilarities of the two unique contexts and utilises the main findings to extent a traditional model.*

### 4.1 Research Outline

The interviews were conducted amongst the employees of two different departments at two different companies, with one being an architectural firm and the other one being an installation services firm. Based on the empirical material, four themes per context were identified. The eight themes in capital letters are thus based on what the co-workers explicitly said and represent their *ideas of good leadership*. The subheadings relate to the four contextual aspects of *climate, organisational and occupational culture, organisational design and structure, and leadership style*. These contextual aspects were not necessarily mentioned directly by the interviewees themselves. Rather they were identified by the researchers during the analysis of the interviews, as already mentioned in the methodology chapter. In both organisations, these variables appeared to affect how the followers interpreted their leaders' actions. Before delving into the analysis and discussion, the different contextual aspects are defined.

#### 4.1.1 The contextual variables

The first variable of climate follows the definition that “[c]limate is the shared perception of employees about their work entity: an organization, division, department, or work group” (Landy & Conte, 2010, p.564). Climate includes thus aspects that are more apparent and visible such as the physical layout of the office, atmosphere and business environment.

Culture, as the second variable, mostly looks at the more underlying level of values and assumptions. Given that there is some overlap between *culture* and *climate*, the terms are referred to in a similar way in which Landy & Conte (2010) distinguish between them:

Climate is about the context in which action occurs, and culture is about the meaning that is intended by and inferred from those actions  
(Landy & Conte, 2010, p.578).

More specifically, culture contains discovered aspects such as formal versus informal communication, feedback and the role of humour.

The third variable of organisational design and structure deals with components of the contexts such as the type of organisation, formal versus informal rules and decision making processes.

Lastly, the fourth contextual variable is identified as the leadership style. It is of vital importance to remark that the leadership style does hereby not define the meaning of leadership, as usually assumed by traditional leadership literature where the follower is target of the leader's behaviour rather than acknowledging the follower's influence on the relationship. By contrast, in this research study the follower is considered to be equally critical for the formation of the relationship. In fact, if this study conversely aimed at depicting the leader's interpretations of leadership, the followers would have been regarded as a contextual variable that affects the leader's constructions. Yet the purpose with this study is to illuminate the follower's perspective. Consequently, the style of the leader is revealed as one crucial contextual factor that constitute the followers' sensemaking in the two chosen companies. Hence, the leadership style is examined closely from the followers' perspective and it is merely speculated on the leader's intentions.

For a closer understanding of the following analysis, it is suggested to already take a look at *Figure 1* on page 42 which shows a simplistic overview of the relation of the contextual variables and the followers' constructions. The relationship between the eight empirical themes and the four contextual aspects which will be analysed and discussed successively.

#### 4.1.2 Clarification of terms

As alluded to earlier, the terms of manager and subordinate describe another type of relationship than the terms of leader and follower. Although the distinction is crucial, this chapter will not limit the terms of manager and subordinate to their formal roles but utilise them as synonyms for leader and follower. This is due to the fact that adapted, everyday language was utilised during the conducted interviews by both interviewees and researchers. In the event that the different meanings are explicitly addressed, it will be apparent from the context.

## 4.2 The architectural context

The first context that was selected for this research is a Swedish architectural firm with offices in three different cities in Sweden. One of the offices was chosen for this paper. At the present time, it consists of approximately one hundred employees. Essentially, it is a consulting firm and the office is organised in different *studios*, i.e. different project groups who deal with several clients simultaneously. Every studio has its own manager and one of them was chosen for the purpose of this paper. Interviews were held among four subordinates who all work under the same manager and four themes were revealed of all the data. The themes will be introduced below and discussed thoroughly.

## **THEME 1: GOOD LEADERSHIP IS ABOUT BEING SUPPORTIVE**

A prominent pattern that was found among the co-workers at the architecture firm was the perception of their manager as being supportive. More specifically, all of the interviewees described their manager as always being there to support and protect them when they need him and when problems arise. One employee expressed it like this:

*“He supported my team and talked, and he was always there when we needed him.”*

Similarly, the other participants also valued that the manager gets involved and protects them when a situation becomes difficult or sensitive in some manner. This is how another interviewee described the manager:

*“Well, I suppose the most valued part of his leadership is when I have a discussion with our clients and if the clients get upset with me or kind of treat me unfairly, I can always speak with my boss. And, he’ll take it over and he’ll manage it because it’s not okay that we in the middle and lower position are supposed to take heat from outside.”*

Although the support from the manager is appreciated and depicted as a valuable leadership skill, one could criticise that the support the leader provides, e.g. taking over in case issues with customers arise, reminds more of the responsibility of a lawyer rather than of a leader. Interestingly, the followers ascribed this behaviour to leadership as such, which corresponds with Meindl’s (1995) *romance of leadership* notion that stresses people’s bias to make sense of organisational events and outcomes by attributing these to the acts of leaders (Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007).

### **Leadership style**

The followers do not perceive their manager to be controlling or pushing them into a certain direction. Quite the contrary, the manager is described to give them a lot of freedom and responsibility and to be modestly engaged in their daily work tasks. Hence there appears to be a consensus among the four followers in the sense that they perceive their manager as being supportive. One participant depicted the freedom in this way:

*“He lets me take a lot of responsibility as long as everything works and the results come through, then, he lets me manage most things.”*

Another respondent gave a resembling picture concerning taking a day off from work:

*“There is a lot of freedom in the project and in the company, yes. It is not strict; it is about [being] responsible. I mean, I can’t do my six hours a day because it’s freedom, I have to do my eight hours and do my job and do what I have to do. So.... it’s quite free. And if sometimes, I need something, I can take off. No problem.”*

It is clear that the subordinates feel empowered and that they perceive their manager as demonstrating trust and faith in them. According to Heller & Yukl (1969), there is a large spectrum describing the extent to which a manager employs *empowering leadership* (also called *participative leadership* and *democratic leadership*). On one side of the spectrum, the manager makes his/her own decisions without explaining and legitimising them for the



subordinates. On the other side of the scale, the manager delegates and encourages subordinates to make their own decisions (Heller & Yukl, 1969). In the architectural firm, it seems the subordinates would be placed on the latter side of the spectrum as they all accentuate that they have a lot of responsibility and freedom to make their own decisions in the everyday work.

### **Organisational and occupational culture**

Interestingly, Zhang & Bartol (2010) found that empowering leadership has a positive influence on employees' *intrinsic motivation* and *creative process engagement*. The results revealed that the two variables, in turn, have a positive effect on the employees' creativity. Hence, considering that the occupation of architects reflects a creative work culture that certainly aims at stimulating creativity among the employees, one could argue that the empowering leadership style is legitimate.

In addition to mirroring a creative culture, the architectural firm can also be said to exemplify the organisational culture of a *professional service firm (PSF)*. As Løwendahl (2005) underlines, the term *professional service* can be defined in different ways and is commonly interpreted as a service being provided by *professionals*. A profession is typically defined as an occupation that requires consolidated knowledge, usually in the form of a prestigious higher academic education (Løwendahl, 2005). Thus, as architects are academics and professionals, it is likely that the profession itself plays a significant role in the work environment and shapes the norm about convenient leadership styles to a certain extent. One of the interviewees illustrated how the promotion criteria are affected by the profession of architecture:

*“They get a promotion, which does not actually mean that you are a good boss, it just means that you are good at your trait. A lot of the people that are bosses here are not very good at it. They are good architects and then they have been promoted to a leadership position.”*

This focus on technical competencies represents a common pattern in many organisations. For instance, Hill (2013) confirms that particularly in professional service firms there is often a lack of leadership and management skills since these firms usually attract people by offering financial and status rewards. In fact, there is evidence that the architects divide their duties into lower and higher status work, as the statement of one participant revealed:

*“What I do is fairly low status in this office.”*

Consequently, the overall prestige thinking at the architectural context seem to place great value on the profession itself and the profession-related knowledge rather than on typical leadership skills. This interpretation of the quote goes hand in hand with the reasoning of Kerr & Jermier (1978) who claim that leadership is less important in certain contexts, not least in knowledge-intensive contexts. Consequently, the manager's empowering leadership style might be an expression of the independent culture that distinguishes a PSF from a blue-collar context. Furthermore, clients and their experience of the service are crucial in a PSF (Løwendahl, 2005), which might suggest that the subordinates have a great interest in impressing the clients. In a way, one could argue that the clients as an important stakeholder

might largely impact the followers' daily work tasks and thereby almost hold a managerial role.

To go one step further, one could claim that rather than analysing the style of leadership, there might be no leadership apparent at all. Such a critical interpretation is based on the common view that leadership reflects indoctrination, as stated in Mintzberg's (1980) concept of *normative control* i.e. top-down indoctrination. In other words, most leadership styles aim at influencing the subordinates by getting into their minds. One could thus argue that leadership is non-existent at the architects' project group. Alternatively, Kerr & Jermier's (1978) found that knowledge-intensive contexts simply require a lower degree of leadership. Accordingly, the manager's behaviour might reflect a context-adjusted leadership that connects to a high degree of delegation in order to comply with the follower's expectations of autonomy and responsibility.

## **THEME 2: GOOD LEADERSHIP MEANS BEING PRESENT**

Contrasting to the positive picture of the manager as being supportive and empowering, one could also make sense of the participants' answers in a more adverse manner. At the same time as they value their manager's ability to be supportive when they need him, there is a distinct pattern among the interviewees in remarking on the manager's absence in their daily work life.

### **Leadership style**

One respondent described the manager's lack of presence as follows:

*"I know he is a manager and he has a lot of projects to take care of—but sometimes it feels like he is not so much in the project, for instance our project. Maybe he should get more into our project to see what we are doing here more in detail [rather] than the general big picture."*

Equally, another individual framed it like this:

*"[The] manager is absent, would be nice if he was more visible and informed about what's happening. He is putting too little time with the staff, would be nice if he always attended the weekly meetings."*

Thus, when interpreting the respondents' replies, it seems there is no mutual exclusion between being supportive and being absent as a manager. None of the participants criticised what the manager actually *does*, rather, they all remarked on what he *does not*. On the one hand, the followers appreciate that they have a large responsibility and that the manager is being protective and supportive when problems arise. On the other hand, they think that he is not present enough and hence should be more involved into the projects by attending the weekly meetings.

With respect to the participants' answers, one could argue that it is more appropriate to refer to the manager's absenteeism as *laissez-faire leadership* rather than poor leadership. In fact, there are components of the followers' leadership constructions that could be claimed to be compatible with what Bass (1997) portrays as *laissez-faire leadership*. However, despite the

fact that the manager's absenteeism per se dominates laissez-faire leadership, this style concerns additional aspects of leadership that did not become apparent during the interviews. For instance, it is stated that managers who execute laissez-faire leadership are absent even in situations when they are needed. Hence these leaders are described to fail when it comes to assisting subordinates who have explicitly requested their help (Bass, 1997). These conditions are clearly not applicable in the case of the architectural firm as there is an evident consent to the picture of the manager as being there when needed. The absenteeism depicted in the interviews seems to be more similar to what Bass (1997) refers to as *passive management by exception*. Pursuant to this type of leadership, the manager intervenes as soon as a problem becomes serious. As opposed to being absent when needed, the manager in the architectural firm could be claimed to be absent when there is a *desire* to get his opinions and guidance.

### **Organisational and occupational culture**

The lack of presence could reveal a lack of *feedback culture*, which could both be related to the culture of this specific organisation and to the underlying architectural occupational culture. The followers seem to refer to the manager's absenteeism on a more general level and express that it would be preferable to communicate more on a daily basis. One of the respondents described how he/she consults with one of the colleagues instead of the manager as he is often away:

*"Then I...I and my colleague, we talk a lot. So we supported each other in some times there."*

Remarkably, the respondent also expressed that he/she waits until the manager is back at the office to get feedback rather than sending him an email when he is being absent:

*"Often I wait until he is here. Yes."*

Correspondingly, there seems to be a tendency of both parties in the leader-follower relationship to adopt a more pragmatic orientation towards feedback, mainly contacting each other when there is a concrete reason to do so, which is often manifested in a problem. Moreover, the followers describe that they are usually being hesitant about approaching the leader first. Another individual confirmed this pattern while at the same time recognising it as a potential issue:

*"I usually have formal contact with him when I perceive there is a problem, like, you know, just a couple of weeks ago. But I have actually decided that I am going to not only contact him when there is a problem because I do not think that this is funny either. I mean, because I was like maybe I should give him positive feedback as well like 'I am doing good now, so thank you for setting that up for me', so that he knows that he has done a good job."*

Interestingly, the pragmatic approach to feedback among the architects resembles the medical students' *action-oriented view* of feedback in the work of Watling, Driessen, van der Vleuten, Vanstone & Lingard (2013). The music students in the same study expected regular feedback and described it as being necessary for their development. By contrast, the medical students described that they were fond of working independently and that most of the feedback they received was *in the moment*, i.e. in the workplace setting. When their tutors attempted to provide formal feedback on a more regular basis, the medical students criticised the feedback for lacking substance and being too abstract (Watling et al., 2013). Yet, as Baker (2010)

argues, a feedback-friendly culture fosters higher behavioural change among employees, which is beneficial for innovation and growth of the organisation. Unlike doctors, architects are typically working in profit organisations and compete with one another in innovative architectural design. Consequently, it might be particularly damaging for architects to underestimate the importance of feedback.

Potentially, the architectural profession resembles the medical profession in the sense of working with various clients/patients, therefore the culture is characterised by a high degree of autonomy and independency. Thus these independent and pragmatic cultures could possibly explain why the participants of this study, despite their critique of the lack of feedback, merely seek feedback from their manager when they perceive the necessity. As mentioned before, the overall picture appears to be that the subordinates appreciate the responsibility and trust that the manager gives them. Nevertheless, they desire for more feedback, and the culture could represent one contextual aspect that hinders them from approaching the manager to ask for it.

### **THEME 3: GOOD LEADERSHIP INCORPORATES CLARITY**

In addition to communicating feedback, there are further elements in a workplace that need to be communicated one way or another. Informal rules signify an important aspect that characterise this unique work environment. As a matter of fact the interviewees in the architectural firm hold fragmented views on the prevailing rules. One of the respondents looked upon the rules as follows:

*“There are very, very, very many informal rules that I still have not gotten the hang of. So this is tricky. My current manager has not been here for that long so I think he can actually come up with—and there have been a couple of others that have been newly recruited, and they probably have the same questions that I have—so they probably come up with... they question some of the culture, and I think that is good. I think that the leadership, you know, management has realised that they have to formalise a lot of the rules, so that it is clear what the deal is.”*

In contrast to the quote above was another interviewee’s perception of the norms and rules at work:

*“I think the norm is... everyone here is well-educated and they know how to behave.”*

#### **Organisational design and structure**

As apparent in the first quote, the participant asserts that there are many informal rules at the workplace. The first participant evidently interprets the abundant amount of informal rules as a confusing element in the daily work life. Contrary to this perception, the second respondent holds that the employees are well-educated and familiar with the norms, thus there is no need for formal rules in this organisational design. In essence, the respondent’s view is that a higher education implies a higher maturity and thus less need for leadership. Similarly, the *Hersey-Blanchard Situational Leadership Model* as one contingency theory suggests that if a subordinate’s *job maturity*, e.g. the job-related knowledge and skills, is high, a leader should show less structuring behaviour and allow a higher degree of self-direction (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977). In fact, there might be a dominant norm at the architecture firm which

states that everyone is self-responsible for comprehending the informal rules and that a leader should not intervene.

In any case, both interviewees seem to agree that there are few explicit formal rules that the employees need to be familiar with. However, both quotes arguably illustrate ambiguity regarding appropriate behaviour, since one of them states that there are many informal rules that are difficult to grasp, and the other contends that everybody is familiar with the norms at the workplace.

Another interviewee shared his/her impression of unclarity at work regarding the office structure:

*“Well, I thought in the beginning that it was interesting that we didn’t have a very pronounced leader figure, that we had several different bosses that did their own projects. And it felt kind of...well...it wasn’t like a hierarchy, it was more a flat structure and I could work with anyone, and I thought that was really good.”*

The follower’s words signal that the workplace structure consists of several projects divided into studios, with a general organisational structure being flat.

In accordance with the five organisational configurations that Mintzberg (1980) lists, the architectural firm seems to have numerous similarities with a *professional bureaucracy*. As the author points out, a company does rarely contain all the exact elements that constitute a certain type of structure. Rather, they are typically a mix of several, if not all, configurations. However, there is usually a dominant structure that characterises an organisation (Mintzberg, 1980). As alluded to previously, the architectural firm is described to be characterised by informal rules, signalling that there is a low formalisation of behaviour and a vertical decentralisation of power. Thus, the bureaucratic elements do not lie in formalised rules and coordinating codes of conduct. In fact, it is the standardisation of skills that is the coordinating mechanism in a professional bureaucracy, and this mechanism enables a decentralisation of power (Mintzberg, 1980).

In spite of the standardisation of skills, there seems to be a conflicting view upon the clarity of the rules at the workplace. In other words, the standardisation of skills does not seem to coordinate the employees’ behaviour to the extent that the leader might desire. In the architectural context, there are hence reasons to believe that there is a lack of communication from the management. This does not imply that the manager ought to standardise and formalise more rules in order to synchronise all of the followers’ meanings. Nonetheless, the management should be aware of the different social constructions that tend to fragmentise the workforce and might eventually lead to misalignment of the organisation’s studios. Most likely it lies in the leader’s interest to create a shared meaning among the followers in order to reduce the incoherence at the workplace (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012).

### **Climate**

Another factor that seems to confine the context and further increase the incoherence is the subordinates’ perception that the different studios are communicating with each other to a limited extent. This was one respondent’s view:

*“There’s a small group, partners. I think sometimes this is, how to put it, they keep things for themselves...internal admiration, do you understand what I mean? ... Yes, even if they have to sometimes, but sometimes it’s too much, I think.”*

One of the respondent’s colleagues also stressed the autonomy of the different project groups. This is how he/she answered the question about whether he/she perceived the climate at the office to be open:

*“Yes I do, but it’s very different depending on which boss you work with, so it’s not a general climate. It’s...in my project, and with my current manager, it’s a very open relationship, but I know other examples that are not so.”*

With these words into consideration, the climate at the office seems rather complex. As the leadership in the different project groups is described to differ substantially, which most likely creates different interpretations of the workplace, it is difficult to pinpoint one shared climate at the architectural firm. As Landy & Conte (2010) note, it is commonly suggested that there are several climates within most organisations. Although the architectural office is designed as an open-plan office, the different studios sit in fairly closed subgroups, thus might all represent varying *subclimates*.

James & James (1989) have developed four climate dimensions and one of them seems highly applicable to the subclimate in the interviewed project group: *leader support and facilitation*. As mentioned earlier, all interviewees described the manager as being supportive and facilitating the followers’ work when needed. Resembling to the dimension leader support and facilitation, Landy & Conte (2010) distinguish between an *autocratic climate* and a *democratic climate* and describe the latter as prevailing in an organisation where individuals have a good deal of individual responsibility and opportunities for risk-taking. This is confessedly the case in the project group as they repeatedly mentioned the great responsibility and trust that they experience to possess. Thus, in accordance with this distinction, there seems to be a democratic climate within the studio group itself.

The additional dimension of *work-group cooperation and friendliness* highlighted by James & James (1989) could be another valid description for the project group of this study, but hardly a fair description for the cooperation and communication between the work groups at the organisational level. Admittedly, at an organisational level this appears more complex since the managers of the different project groups are depicted as creating and communicating different subclimates. Therefore, although an organisational climate always contains various subclimates, the subclimates at the architectural firm seem to be somehow clashing. Arguably, the incompatibility can induce tensions between the studios and result in a code of conduct that is perceived to be diffuse.

### **Organisational and occupational culture**

One can argue that the perceptions of the followers in terms of closed climate might further derive from more underlying differences on the level of culture e.g. from different values and assumptions. Sitkin & Roth (1993) found that *value congruence* i.e. the compatibility of the values of an organisation with individuals’ values provides the basis for establishing trusting relationships. The contrasting views among the co-workers regarding rules and norms imply

that there is an uncertainty regarding existing values as such. Value congruence is thus hardly achievable since the followers perceive that common goals and values of the organisation are rarely communicated. Consequently, the project groups might act based on self-interest and are less likely to trust one another.

In conclusion, the decentralised organisational structure and the varying climate and culture within the organisation seem to be important contextual factors that affect the followers' interpretations of their leader's communication patterns. Although an open climate within their studio prevails, the overall organisational structure and variation seems to reinforce their desire for more and clearer communication on the part of their leader.

#### **THEME 4: GOOD LEADERSHIP INCLUDES FRIENDSHIP**

In order to ensure a well-functioning relationship, the quality of the contact between leader and follower constitutes an essential aspect. As referred to earlier, from the follower's point of view, the leadership style can be regarded as a contextual variable as it is part of the work context that forms the follower's interpretations and opinions about leadership. The manager's leadership styles in terms of the subordinates' daily work tasks has already been analysed thoroughly. Now, it is the type of relationship that is of interest. In particular, the degree of informal contact between leader and follower is examined.

##### **Leadership style**

Among the interviewed followers of the architectural firm, there are slightly varying opinions on whether a manager should be a friend. One of the interviewees framed it this way:

*“Good leadership for me is not necessarily my friend at all. I do not need, my boss does not need to be my friend. He needs to be organised, he needs to have a plan, and he has to see... I mean, if you are going to work with people, you have to be interested in people, otherwise you should be working only with project management in the project, focusing on that. Somebody who is willing to see the individual.”*

In a slightly different manner, one of the colleagues expressed that the manager should be a friend as long as the limit between friendship and work is respected:

*“My manager is like, he can be a friend when you need to make a joke or drink coffee together, and he can be strict regarding the job and when it is serious things. So there is a limit and you have to know where the limit is—friend or business. And there is no problem, I think we know all where the limit is with him.”*

Similarly, another participant also valued friendship as part of the leadership practice and perceived his/her contact with the manager as both formal and informal:

*“Both. If I, like this other day, I had some other problem in another project, and then I talked to him...and he supported me how to do, for example. That was formal, but also we eat lunch together and so on, so both.”*

Three out of four respondents within the architectural firm described informal elements in terms of the contact with their manager e.g. small talk and joint coffee breaks, signalling that friendship is included in the leadership style.

### **Organisational and occupational culture**

Sveningsson & Blom (2011) argue that the organisational and occupational context plays a key role for the development of “buddy-like behaviour” (Sveningsson & Blom, 2011, p.105). They claim that there is a stronger tendency in knowledge-intensive firms to care about the subordinate’s well-being and to develop friendly relations as the work tasks require a high level of autonomy. This can be compared to other contexts such as a blue-collar context where the manager may have a more directing role, thus friendship might be more difficult to establish. Moreover, a relation characterised by friendship is arguably more convenient in a context where retaining the subordinates at the workplace is considered crucial (Sveningsson & Blom, 2011). As the architectural firm is a knowledge-intensive context with large projects characterising the occupation and the everyday work life, it is reasonable to believe that there is a high interest in retaining the employees. Thus in order to achieve a successful retention of the followers, it might be convenient to adopt a leadership style that includes friendship.

One could speculate about the leader’s intentions concerning the degree of friendship in the leader-follower relation. Does the manager act like a friend since he believes that they construct leadership as an informal practice in this particular white-collar context? Regardless of the manager’s intentions, the interplay between the occupational context and the leadership style is apparent. In other words, the informal leadership style and the knowledge-intensive culture are presumably linked to each other irrespective of the direction of causality between these two variables. Furthermore, one can assume that these two contextual factors have a substantial impact on the followers’ constructions of good respectively poor leadership.

## **4.3 The installation services context**

The second context that was chosen for this research is a Swedish company offering services such as technical installation and sanitations for buildings. The four interviewees all work under the same manager in one office department and are mainly responsible for administrative and project leading work in regards to offering solutions for ventilation systems in buildings and plants. They are involved in the office’s everyday business and are the ones chosen for the interviews as they are all in more steady contact with the departmental manager. The on-site workers, in contrast, represent the executive body of the organisation and are assigned to one of the project leaders of the department. Once again, interviews were conducted amongst four subordinates who all work under the same manager. Thereby several interesting findings were uncovered and organised into the following four themes.

### **THEME 1: GOOD LEADERSHIP IS ABOUT BEING PROTECTIVE**

All participants viewed their leader as protecting them, which was perceived as a good leader’s trait. One interviewee described the manager in the following way:



*“I know that my manager will always back me up a hundred per cent. And if I’m doing something wrong, he will tell me straight away, but he will never make a fool of me in front of any other person.”*

In a similar way, another participant reflected:

*“It’s very important that he always protects you. If something goes wrong, he always asks me first, not say anything about me before talking to me.”*

This idea was reinforced by the statement of a co-worker who highlighted the trait of being protective without fearing conflicts:

*“My manager is not afraid of taking fights.”*

### **Climate**

The respondent here referred to the manager’s behavioural pattern to take the heat from outside, i.e. the company’s external environment. Through the statement the respondent attributes strength and assertiveness to the role of the leader. Accordingly, the followers perceive it as the leader’s responsibility to take over and sort out the problems that emerge within the external environment. When the interviewees were asked about the work climate, there was agreement upon the fact that it was perceived as very hectic and stressful with a lot of work:

*“All of us have to be in time and be well prepared ... [we] don’t know what’s going to happen in the next 15 minutes. They sometimes have to rush away and anything can happen, you know. Some of our co-workers in the field may be sick one day and we have planned the day, they are going to do something very important. So we have to change the operation very quick and very fast.”*

Hence there is emphasis on the ability to react quickly and constantly adapt to changing circumstances. When reflecting on the follower’s shared opinion that good leadership means being protective, their idea can be viewed as being closely connected to the nature of the business their company operates in. Although it is their own responsibility to carry out the tasks, the hectic nature of their daily work operations might reinforce the follower’s need for seeing a strong leader figure who backs them up. Hence, the context might affect the followers’ constructions in a way that creates their expectations for transformative leadership. Certainly, one could argue that the leader shows little or even no leadership actions at all when he merely interacts with external parties, such as clients and customers, and thereby almost acts within a lawyer’s field of responsibility. The reason why the followers emphasise their leader’s trait of being protective may be that they seek and value his intervention when taking over difficult situations, which strengthens their trustful relationship.

### **Leadership style**

Interestingly, the interviewees shared the view that being hard like their manager in contrast to acting on feelings is a more efficient and convenient leadership style. Taken from one interview:

*“I’m more like focused on being nice and he is very, can be very hard and efficient ... But, his way works probably better than mine, because I’m a nicer guy.”*

Equally, someone shared the opinion that acting without regulating one’s negative emotions mirrors poor behaviour in general:

*“If I get angry or upset, I can be very black and white. And sometimes that’s not good because maybe it’s a smoother way to act with using your brain.”*

One follower revealed that the leader sometimes yelled to express dissatisfaction, which in this case was perceived as disturbing:

*“Yes, when he is yelling, when he is yelling. He doesn’t do that so much no more. In the beginning, I said “It doesn’t work on me, you know. You can yell as much as you want, I won’t listen.”*

When asking about his/her idea of what good leadership means, the participant stated:

*“I think, when you’re correct, and stay calm. I think that’s good leadership. ... Bad leadership is yelling because of stress.”*

These words signal that acting according to negative emotions is perceived negatively by the subordinates. This relates to Grandey (2000) who advocates that the *regulation* of emotional expression is critical to meet job demands, often also labelled *concept of emotional labor* (Hochschild, 1983; Morris & Feldman, 1996). Yet, amongst the interviewees, there are slightly different opinions with regard to the degree to which their leader should control his emotions. More specifically, another interviewee appeared to be aware of the potential benefit of yelling as a mean of indicating direction:

*“It helps... you get more alert about which things you have to focus on.”*

While there are fragmented ideas regarding the potential benefit of yelling, by and large the leader’s behaviour of being hard and strict seems to fulfil the followers’ needs for guidance and structure. These needs, in turn, could be seen as deriving from the occupational culture, since this type of industrial and blue-collar work environment is usually highly structured (Fiedler, 1976). Relating this to the leader-follower relationship as such, one can reasonably assume that the occupational and organisational culture leads to the tendency of the followers to expect task-oriented behaviour from their leader, i.e. wanting the leader to initiate structure.

One might conclude that the followers’ sensemaking is merely composed of high task orientation and heroic elements of the leader’s actions that have been depicted. However, besides these previous depicted situations in which a certain image of the leader prevailed, contrasting yet complementing constructions can be identified among the followers. These build upon the idea that a good leadership style does not follow a ‘one size fits all’ approach but acknowledges people’s differences. One interviewee frames it like this:

*“Everybody’s different, none two are the same, and one is good at one thing and one is better at another thing. ... Good leadership is to make everybody do their best, to see the differences in people and use them to what they do best.”*

This quote reveals that, besides the task-oriented behaviour that the followers seem to expect from their leader, they may have this somewhat noble concept that a leader should act person-oriented to develop the follower’s skills. With this in mind, one respondent illustrated another leader’s habit more detailed:

*“Well, he kind of wants to help them in the right way by ‘have you thought of doing that’ and ‘okay, you haven’t done it but do it this week and show me in the end of the next week’. So, to help them, guide them to the right way of doing stuff without saying ‘just do it now!’, but saying ‘oh okay, it’s not done, well, that’s not good but do it this week, and we will check on it next week so you have understood how it was supposed to be done’.”*

This quote reveals that the followers perceive the leader as being involved in everyday’s concrete activities e.g. by sitting down with them and finding an individual way to fulfill the given task. As discussed earlier, Dansereau et al.’s (1975) LMX theory advocates for the leader’s need to adopt different behaviour depending on the individual subordinate they interact with. Thus strikingly, while there is evidence for the followers’ expectation of high task orientation, their desire for a more relation-oriented leadership style is existent at the same time.

### **Organisational and occupational culture**

Besides the individual level, the departmental subculture may reinforce the followers’ sensemaking. When asking if the department as a unit was seen special in some way, one interviewed member strongly agreed:

*“Yes, definitely. We’re the only department in this building not having a coffee list.”*

To prove that their department is extraordinary, the respondent distanced it from other units by further illustrating:

*“It’s because of all of us. We think it would be a defeat to have a list who is making coffee, who is buying bread and butter this week, who is starting the dishwasher... When we heard everyone else had this list, we just decided we’re not, we’re gonna make it anyway.”*

As it appears, the subculture that is present in the department springs from a people-oriented environment. While organisational culture is seen as the overall culture of the organisation, it is thought by many that there are co-existing *subcultures* (Schein, 2004; Kotter & Heskett, 1992). This means that, in fact, leadership might be constructed differently in different parts of the same organisation. In consequence, the fact that the followers construct their leadership in the sense of a personal leader-follower relationship—in addition to the task orientation that usually prevails in such organisational cultures—might be associated with their units’ subculture. This is shown to involve personal commitment and involvement beyond formal compliance with the standardised rules.

## **THEME 2: GOOD LEADERSHIP FOSTERS A ‘JUST DO IT’ MENTALITY**

The second theme that was uncovered generally associates leadership with quick action taking. An individual described the manager as digging into problems immediately:

*“He deals with problems right away, almost always. He is not afraid to dig into problems, asking ‘why’ and ‘how’ and ‘anything you want to tell me?’ ... And then, it’s over and it felt like it’s not a big deal. You just do it and it’s over.”*

Thereby, mostly informal communication takes place, decreasing the need for formal meetings:

*“You have [formal meetings] every second week. We had meetings every week before but we said it was too much meetings.”*

One co-worker described the manager as being easy to contact:

*“Often the doors are open and maybe my manager comes into my office or I come into his office, or I just yell if it’s just a short question.”*

### **Climate**

The open doors are being highlighted as one aspect that constitutes the climate of the workplace. Sveningsson & Blom (2011) affirm that open doors permit the leader to better sense the follower’s feelings, thereby promoting more communication. Simultaneously, one can argue that open doors decrease the level of formal communication since there are no physical barriers that the follower needs to get out of the way, e.g. it is easier to ‘just yell’, as the above statement indicates. Arguably, the followers construct the idea that good leadership fosters a ‘just do it’ mentality around the straightforward and clear communication that is confirmed to constitute the context.

### **Organisational and occupational culture**

This straight communication goes hand in hand with the values of ambition and high performance, which are clearly noticed as enacted values by one interviewee:

*“[The company] has a long tradition of doing what it’s doing and trying to be the key player on the market, and trying to be best. ... It’s our company culture that we want to be the best.”*

Their motto of ‘make it happen, make it quick’ is enabled both through the helpful attitude between both the leader and the follower and amongst the followers as a group. The overall atmosphere was described as follows:

*“It’s not competitive...among the co-workers. Not whatsoever, what I can see. We, all of us try to help each other in the way it’s possible, and we can manage in time.”*

Simultaneously, taking the initiative to start conversations was seen as a two-sided responsibility. Taken from another interview where the participant explained the approaching in case there is an issue he/she wishes to address:

*"I just walk to [my manager's] office and start talking, and if it's something private I just close the door."*

There was agreement amongst the interviewees that there is mutual feedback between them and their leader, indicating a strong feedback culture. When listening to the participants, it was not difficult to observe that they utilise the same, simple and clear language when providing the leader with feedback:

*"So there we can come in with a good feedback to him. What he does, and when he does it. That's the feedback I give him: what's wrong, what I think is wrong, what you should think about, and the way I should have it when I get out the staff out on the site, how it should be delivered and what I want to have. ... That feedback he has to get to close the business."*

Besides highlighting the manager as an active party of the situation, here a more active role is ascribed to the followers, too. They seem to be aware of the fact that their feedback is valued by the leader and that it has, most likely, action implications. The role of feedback can thus be viewed as crucial for providing development direction and motivating change, as Hollenbeck & McCall (1999) propose. Thereby the mutual feedback culture facilitates the creation of shared meaning between the leader and the followers and eventually among the entire organisation, which is seen as key to countering fragmentation and misalignment (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003).

A crucial component of the informal communication culture in this context is humour that is shown by using joking, teasing and the mean of irony. One participant depicted the culture of often teasing one another:

*"You need to be a person that don't take things personally; So I can say: 'Oh, you're stupid!' and likewise. It is not a game but nothing personal."*

This quote is very applicable to illustrate the department's unique sort of humour, which Sveningsson et al. (2012) refer to as *nagging*. The role of humour can be viewed as a norm of the unique organisational culture that is internalised by the people in the department, making it difficult for outsiders to understand:

*"We have an open climate, and sometimes if we get a guest and they are not aware of this, some people can get a bit surprised and they really don't know how to handle it. Because sometimes I observe people and you can see that they don't know how to handle it: "Is it just for fun or do they mean it? Is he stupid or they just say it?"*

In general, small talk and joking is seen as helpful to switch off work from time to time, as another interviewee's statement indicates:

*"There is a lot of things of... a lot you have to remember. And I think everyone needs a break, just to relax a bit, talk about something else, look out the window. So, in that way, I definitely think it's a good thing."*

Romero & Cruthirds (2006) define organisational humour as consisting of "amusing communications that produce positive emotions and cognitions in the individual, group, or

organization” (p.59). Amongst the different types of humour that they distinguish, *mild aggressive humor*, which is often manifested as satire or teasing, may be existing at the office department. Arguably, its playful way helps people express disagreement without negative side effects (Kahn, 1989). In a similar manner, Eisenhardt, Kahwajy & Bourgeois III (1997) look upon how humour helps to release tension and promote collaboration in organisations. They note that humour works as a defence mechanism, when “people can distance themselves psychologically by putting those situations into a broader life context” (p.81), which is often accomplished by using irony.

The unique culture of humour at the workplace can thus be viewed as a mean to ease stress, while it simultaneously helps expressing dissatisfaction through feedback to the leader, which in turn leads to an effective and timely handling of appearing conflicts. Consequently, it might be a reason why there seems to be a high level of coherence amongst the follower’s interpretations and less room for ambiguity and confusion.

### **THEME 3: GOOD LEADERSHIP MEANS PROVIDING HELP**

Another revealed theme observes how the followers make sense of the help they get from their manager.

#### **Leadership style**

One of the interviewees stated that a good leader is:

*“Someone who can help you ... someone to approve that you’re thinking the right way.”*

Another follower mentioned that there is a high degree of control involved from the manager’s side:

*“My manager is very in control; he likes control. ... If he sees I am free, I get [the work]. If I don’t want it, I get it anyway.”*

One could argue that there is the sense that the leader targets followers’ acting rather than their thinking and feeling, and that it is merely about controlling them. One follower even expressed the need to ask the leader to control his/her daily work tasks:

*“It’s something that maybe I want to email that I want him to read before I send it.”*

If this behaviour is mainly interpreted as top-down controlling, it in turn may represent management rather than leadership (Sveningsson et al., 2012). However, by sitting down with the co-worker and listening, one could argue that these actions shown by the leader emphasise the leading-following interaction and thus can be related to post-heroic leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006). In agreement with this, one participant made sense of the leader’s high level of involvement:

*“He sees I struggle and he tries to help me with easy things, with correct typing when you send emails and stuff, you know.”*

As this quote illustrates, the subordinates value the leader’s actions in the sense of being there to help them when they need it rather than feeling controlled. In a slightly different manner,

these actions could also be attributed to Sveningsson et al.'s (2012) concept of *mundane managerial leadership* which claims managerial actions to be part of rather than beyond leadership. Accordingly, the leader may show mundane acting by managing everyday problems and taking care of routine work e.g. by proofreading emails. In addition to managing everyday problems and actively providing help, the manager seems to involve the followers in the decision making process:

*“My manager will have a discussion first. And also I think he can make his own decisions and won't have input for every...for a lot of things, places before he takes decisions.”*

Suggesting that there is a link between job design and stress, Landy & Conte (2010) put forward the idea that worker participation in decision making can increase their sense of autonomy and control, letting them perceive their work as more meaningful. As Hackman & Oldham (1980) state, this eventually increases motivation and job satisfaction and reduces stress. Thus, bearing in mind that the followers perceive the work as very hectic and stressful and assuming that their leader is fully aware of these high demands set by the environment, one might speculate that by involving his co-workers in democratic decision making, he shows an deliberate act to increase their well-being.

### **Organisational design and structure**

While different interpretations of the leader's intentions may be co-existing, the kind of active help may relate to the formalisation of rules within the organisation. Generally, the interviewees agreed that there are more formal than informal rules. Also, there is a high expectation that everyone internalises the rules quickly:

*“Everyone is right to do stupid things but not stupid-stupid, and you don't do it twice or three times!”*

Apparently, the formal rules are quite strict and everyone must act correspondingly, for instance when meeting deadlines. The established formal rules indicate that there is a clear bureaucratic element in the daily work tasks. With an apparent standardisation of work processes it is hence reasonable to perceive the workplace as a *machine bureaucracy*. Further, the followers' level of autonomy is limited due to the centralisation of power that prevails in this organisational configuration (Mintzberg, 1980). On the one hand, the followers could interpret the manager's active help as a restricting element in this machine bureaucracy. On the other hand, the help that their manager provides seems to facilitate their work life in terms of initiating structure and guidance.

### **THEME 4: GOOD LEADERSHIP PROMOTES CHANGE**

The last theme was detected around a more implicit idea amongst the followers. Essentially, it is based on the view that a leader should act in facilitating change. Referring back to the method of yelling, the interviewee who expressed unhappiness with this behaviour of his/her manager explained:

*“He yelled a lot, you know, about everything. But it didn't work, so he changed his methods, you know, stay calm instead. And it helps.”*

By stating this, the follower provides an example of the leader's efforts to change his own behaviour. As it appears, this co-worker noticed the leader's effort to change, valued the attempt and evaluated it as being successful. The way the follower constructs leadership in his/her relation with the leader emphasises the leader's ability of self-reflectivity. More broadly speaking, there seemed to be openness towards change, perceiving it as something beneficial:

*"You have to find some new solutions because there's a new problem somewhere. So if you just do it always the same, you don't come forward. You just step on the same place all the time."*

### **Organisational design and structure**

Amongst the department there seems to be agreement that—rather than complicating things—guidelines and formal rules add value in the sense that they provide structure and transparency. More concretely, when the manager implemented new rules this setting up of new guidelines was seen as necessary by the followers:

*"When you're working with people, we have all different needs, and they all want to have more money, everyone wants more money. But, we don't have the money. So I think he takes care of that very good, really. About the steps, so that has become much better since he became the manager here. The salary, we set the salaries for the employees here. We have different steps, how long time, what you can do and so on, so that's much better really now than it was before. Because now it's guidelines, what you should do for getting that kind of salary, and if you have worked so many years you get that salary, and you do that to get that salary..."*

This positive view on guidelines rather than experiencing them as a restrictive factor underpins the meaning of transparency that was identified as another value constituting this unique work context. The value becomes particularly evident when the interviewees mention the systems that they work with. Due to the synchronisation of the systems, insights into other projects are facilitated. Therefore one participant perceived the systems as making life easier since they increase transparency for both the organisation and his ability of self-control:

*"They can see everything. ... I'm guided, I can see if it got, which way we are going—plus or minus. It's good, really."*

Similarly, it was revealed during the interviews that production had partly been shifted in-house. While this change was implemented by management to achieve an even higher level of centralisation, one interviewee explained that this had positive effects on the communication as well:

*"We come closer to electricians and plumbers, so that is better, really. It's easier to discuss problems. ... It's better because if you have some problems, electricity or plumbing, it's easy to go plumbing that way, electrician that way. And you hope that someone can answer your questions"*

As shown, the followers attach meaning and value to their leader's as well as top management's change efforts. Arguing that leadership, contrasting management, means



initiating and promoting change work (Barker 1997; Carroll & Levy, 2008; Kotter, 1990), it can be assumed that acts of leadership are evident in the given examples.

However, change is complex and one should be cautious with attributing leadership to complex organisational processes (Sveningsson et al., 2012). Interestingly, the followers seem to attribute successful change acts to their leader. As stated before, Meindl (1985) claims that followers have a tendency to underestimate their own roles as well as contextual factors for organisational events and changes, and overestimate the leader's ability to influence. Hence, although their leader was shown to be only partially involved in change, the interviewees tend to attribute successful change to the leader rather than to the context, e.g. to the organisational culture in terms of feedback and straightforward communication, or to the open climate.

#### 4.4 Comparison between the two organisational contexts

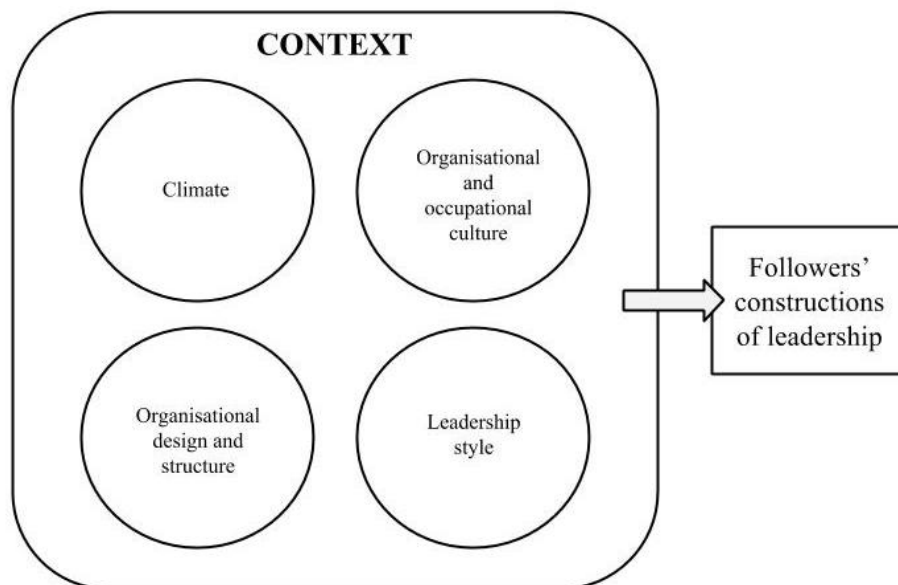
After having critically and thoroughly examined the two contexts, their most remarkable differences are being discussed. Thereby it is crucial to bear in mind that the design of this study is a close-up study and not a comparison study. Hence focus lies on the influence of the context as the main variable instead of focusing on the different follower's constructions per se.

In general, the followers' ideas of good leadership are constructed around the themes of being present, showing support, establishing trust, providing clarity, allowing responsibility and initiating structure.

Besides these rather generic similarities, the differences between the two organisational contexts appear to be remarkable. While the architects generally approve the great deal of responsibility and independent work design, the employees at the installing company experience a higher degree of control and involvement on the part of their leader. In this blue-collar context, the interviewees provided many concrete situations of interacting with their manager. As argued earlier, their constructions of a good leader contain many aspects that are in line with post-heroic leadership. Some ideas, such as their expectation of being protected, could additionally relate to transformative leadership or, alternatively, to managerial actions rather than leadership. By contrast, examples of actual interactions between the manager and his subordinates were more rarely given by the architects. In conclusion, this creates the impression that leadership as such may here be encountered to a lesser degree. Indeed, it is striking that in both organisations the interviewees tended to attribute actions to the concept of leadership that do not relate to leadership as such, for instance when describing their manager as taking over issues with clients. Hence the actual spread of leadership in organisational practice appears to be less than commonly assumed, which is most likely controversial in the leadership research field.

Overall, arguing that the followers' constructions link to the context, the dissimilarities can be explained by the fact that the chosen contexts differ distinctively in all of the identified contextual factors. The culture of the architectural firm represents a professional knowledge firm and thus a white-collar context, while the installing firm acts in a blue-collar

environment. While the architects' culture emphasises creativity, innovation and autonomy, the installing services employees comply with values of a high degree of control, quick action-taking, ambition and performance. In addition, they rely on a high amount of informal and straightforward communication culture that includes mutual feedback and nagging humour. Formal meetings, however, are also part of the office routine. In contrast, there is a lower level of communication amongst the architects, which includes informal aspects but relies on an lower initiative towards feedback. The overall climate among the architectural project groups seems rather closed, yet the climate of the respective project group is depicted as democratic. Conversely, at the installing firm a general open climate prevails, both within and amongst the different organisation's subsystems. In terms of structure, this context resembles formalisation and centralisation e.g. regarding rules and decision making processes (machine bureaucracy). Contrasting these characteristics, the architectural company performs a low formalisation of behaviour and decentralisation of power (professional bureaucracy).



**Figure 1** A simplistic overview of the relation between the contextual aspects and the followers' constructions of leadership (own source)

Most strikingly, there was a higher level of variation amongst the followers' sensemaking at the architectural context. Arguably, the level of autonomy might induce the particular variety of views and interpretations within the same context. Following this reasoning, it is logical that the higher degree of formalisation provided a lower degree of variation at the installation services context.

To sum up, organisational and occupational culture, climate, organisational design and structure, and leadership style appear to be contextual variables that have a substantial impact on the followers' constructions of leadership in this study. *Figure 1* illustrates this relation by representing the four variables that were found to be the most important components of the two organisational contexts.

## 4.5 Extension of the contingency approaches

After having thoroughly discussed and analysed the two contexts, the main findings from this research suggest an extension of past contingency theories.

In short, these theories acknowledge that situational aspects regarding the followers' personality presuppose adopting different leadership styles. A common example of a contingency theory is provided by Hersey & Blanchard (1977) who highlight two facets that determine the follower's maturity level (*job maturity* and *psychological maturity*) as the essential variables when a leader decides on which style he or she adopts. As referred to before, job maturity concerns the job-related knowledge and skills, and psychological maturity the self-respect and self-confidence of a follower (Yukl, 2010). The leader should exercise structuring behaviour towards a follower characterised by low maturity, considerate behaviour towards a moderate mature follower, and allow the mature follower a high degree of self-direction (Landy & Conte, 2010).

As opposed to the traditional contingency theories where leadership is viewed from the leader's perspective, this extension suggests to switch the perspective, thus delve into how leadership is interpreted through the followers' lens. The contingency approaches form part of transactional studies, hence maintain a passive role of followers. By contrast, the findings of this thesis build on the co-producing perspective of followership i.e. acknowledge the followers as actively constructing leadership. Therefore the role that is ascribed to followers differs from the one in the contingency approaches. Accordingly, a situation is viewed as more complex since the act of leadership is a process constructed by many.

The main finding of this thesis is that followers' sensemaking of leadership is affected by the contextual level of an organisation and thus represents a highly complex process. Thereby *organisational and occupational culture, climate, organisational design and structure* and *leadership style* are suggested to be variables that influence the followers' constructions. In consequence, the role of the contextual variables in affecting followers' interpretations leaves the individual level of the followers' maturity behind and thus extends traditional theories.

More concretely, the level of autonomy represents a critical factor within the level of context. Recalling that in the white-collar context the leadership style was merely of empowering and delegating nature, one can reason that this links to the context which was perceived as being characterised by norms of independence, creativity and professionalism and by informality of rules. Similarly, a higher level of control, formalised processes and centralisation was found to constitute the blue-collar context, where overall task-oriented and post-heroic leadership prevailed. Drawing on these analysis, one could reason that in contexts which consist of a higher level of autonomy, followers' sensemaking of a leader's action is more likely to vary due to freedom and less unity. Likewise, a relative coherence of meanings is more likely to follow from a context where the followers have a lower level of autonomy. In short, the respective level of autonomy between leader and follower that is required by different contexts lead naturally to eventually foster alignment or variation.

In sum, it is suggested that, besides the followers' individual level, leaders should take the impact of the contextual factors into account. Hereby both variety and coherence of followers' interpretations should be considered, which emphasises the leaders' need to engage in management of meaning. In other words, a leader should pay close attention to his/her own leadership style, organisational and occupational culture, climate and finally organisational design and structure since all these contextual variables affect the way leadership is interpreted by followers.

## 4.6 Chapter Summary

A number of insights were uncovered by the in-depth analysis and discussion of the empirical findings, followed by a short overview of the main similarities and dissimilarities. As outlined, the level of autonomy that a context entails has emerged as a main factor through the analysis of the contextual variables. An extension of the contingency approaches was described, the aim of which is to add the contextual level to followers' sensemaking from a co-producer perspective on the leadership act.

# 5 Conclusion

*This chapter presents a summary of our key findings. Therefore research aims are briefly stated, followed by the concluding points and insights of the research work. Ultimately, practical contributions and implications for future research are depicted.*

## 5.1 Research Aims and Objectives

This thesis has examined the relation between followers' constructions of leadership and the contexts of two organisational departments. At the beginning, three research questions were presented which seek to show how a context relates to followers' sensemaking. Thereby the aim was to identify contextual aspects and implications for leaders' actions.

Through the research, the empirical material unveiled a number of insightful interpretations that serve to answer the particular questions. These concluding findings can be summarised as:

- Context matters. The organisational context plays a crucial role for how followers' construct leadership in their day-to-day work in the two organisations
- The contextual aspects that are identified from the followers' constructions are organisational and occupational culture, climate, organisational design and structure, and leadership style
- The contexts entail different levels of autonomy which suggest different degrees of leadership

More concretely, the first concluding point refers to the dominant finding within this research that context matters for understanding how followers make sense of leadership in their daily work. As research so far has mostly examined extreme contexts, this represents a significant finding. As a second concluding point, the aspects that influence the followers' processes of sensemaking include different components of an organisational context. In this research organisational and occupational culture, climate, organisational design and structure, and leadership style were identified and distinguished as the four distinct contextual variables. As a last point, the uniqueness of contexts implies that some leadership actions are more suitable than others in certain contexts. Thereby a context's degree of autonomy is crucial for the leader to consider. Consequently, the implications for leaders' actions concern the degree of leadership as such.

Overall, the findings emphasise a more critical standpoint on leadership i.e. that there is no 'one size fits all' approach but that leader behaviour should follow the contextual level, besides acknowledging the individual level. By answering these questions, the understanding within follower-centric approaches to leadership and the relation between context and followers' sensemaking of leadership shall be enhanced.

## 5.2 Research Limitations

Some limitations are encountered in the endeavor of this research. To begin with, for the purpose of performing an in-depth study, the scope of this research has been limited to two Swedish companies. Thus, the findings will possibly vary if a similar research is conducted in another national country.

Next, the four contextual aspects which were identified within the empirical findings do not propose to be the only essential ones that can be said to define a context, especially when noting the limited amount of conducted interviews in two unique contexts. Conducting more interviews would have possibly led to a more solid foundation. In addition, the contextual aspects may be not that clearly distinguished in other contexts. The stated definitions are thus provided in order to enable the conduction of an in-depth study within the scope of this research and do not claim to be generally applicable.

Further, although there is no attempt in detecting micro level factors, there is awareness of their role in constructing behaviour and meaning. However, since interest does not lie in enhancing knowledge in regards to the individual-level or group-level relations, those are deliberately not examined. While acknowledging the interplay of the different levels and their roles in the sensemaking process, the interest of this research is to investigate the relation between the context and the followers' sensemaking.

Finally, following an interpretative approach, the research analysis merely reflects personal interpretation. Overall, while feeling that the contributions are significant enough to justify the reasoning of this research, the attempt is not to become too deterministic in general.

## 5.3 Practical Implications

The main purpose with the findings was to contribute to the theory with insights about the importance of understanding followers' interpretations of leadership in regards to the context. One aim was therefore to fill a gap in the literature regarding the complexity of social constructions. These results are of direct practical relevance.

Firstly, today's leaders' behaviour is still shaped to a large extent by the dominant theoretical view that it is mainly the leader who attempts and succeeds the follower to think in many ways. As the findings of this study reveal, this view overemphasises the role of leadership for success. Given that a leader aims at targeting followers' thinking and feeling, the responses of the followers are crucial for a leader to study. One implication is thus that closely listening to followers' ideas can help leaders to understand how to improve their attempts of leading.

Secondly, referring back to structure theory as the main social theory that this paper pursues, it is argued that the context largely affects leadership. Leaders must acknowledge the crucial role of the context on an everyday basis rather than only focus on extreme contexts or contexts in risk when it may be too late to turn things around. The fact that mundane contexts remain overlooked might be the source of tensions that increase ambiguity and fragmentation.

The implication is therefore that it is advisable for leaders to pay closer attention to different contextual aspects within the unique work context. Overall this may imply that, in organisational practice, a leader's behaviour might be more constrained than often assumed. Instead of signifying a negative restriction, this finding can contribute to a more realistic view on leadership. Precisely because it is very difficult to influence people, it becomes even more important for leaders to dedicate time to understand followers' sensemaking.

The main practical contribution of this research is to develop an understanding that can help leaders and followers to tackle day-to-day challenges in today's highly complex environments. To improve leader-follower relations, leaders should be aware of and reflect on the followers' opinions and the respective context which embeds thinking, feeling and actions, and ultimately differs in terms of its needs for leadership.

## 5.4 Future Research

This thesis has intentionally left out the leaders' constructions to avoid a leader-centric view. It would however be interesting for future studies to examine the sensemaking of both parties of the leader-follower relationship in one context. Likewise, there is value in exploring the joint contributions of the individual level and the contextual level to the discussion of leadership constructions. Moreover, this study shall encourage to take a more critical view on leadership by calling attention to the fact that leadership as such is a much more rare phenomenon as commonly supposed. It might therefore be beneficial for the research field to delve into a closer examination of reasons that explain why in some contexts leadership takes place to a greater extent than in others.

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