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–Managing People, Knowledge and Change

Unpacking followership in a management consultancy

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose behind our study was to understand how individuals socially construct followership in a management consultancy. We did this through exploring the relations between consultants and their selected leaders, as well as through exploring how they related to the notion of followership.

Literature review – We selected theory that was relevant with respect to our research question and the aim of our study. Firstly, we shortly reviewed the field of followership, by looking at existing views, after which we took our own stance within this literature. We then continued with theory about social constructions, that is, about contextual attributes, schemas, and subject positions. Finally, we presented theory that could be connected to the context that encompassed our thesis, which was about professional service firms and knowledge intensive firms.

Methodology – To fulfill our purpose and answer our research question we conducted a case study. We used an interpretative and abductive approach that allowed an iterative dialogue between the data and theory. The methods of our choice were qualitative and our empirical data consisted of 15 interviews, conducted at our case company CMC. Yet we also cross–checked our findings with documents and minor observations.

Findings – We found that followership is a phenomenon which can be constructed, interpreted and acted upon in various ways, dependent upon individual points of reference and context. We displayed these various interpretations via four subject positions: the coachee, the networker, the tourist, and the owner. As our findings pointed to the importance of context, we thereby abstained from arguing that these constructions were in any way absolute or linear.

Contributions – Our contribution to the existing literature offers a perspective on how followership was socially constructed in a management consultancy. We mainly distinguished our findings from the existing followership research by abstaining from imposing definitions on participants, but rather aimed to reflect the multiplicity of meanings amongst actors in the field. Thereby, we aimed to offer a more grounded understanding of followership.

Keywords – Followership, social constructions, professional service firms, PSFs, knowledge intensive firms, KIFs, management consultancy

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1. Introduction

The introduction aims to set the scope of our research. First, we introduce the reader to the field of the phenomenon of followership and explain why looking into it is relevant. Then we go on to problematize what has been written about it so far, thereby clarifying the purpose of our research, and posing our research question. Finally, we describe the context in which we conducted our study and describe the outline for the thesis.

1.1 Background

–A leader without followers is simply a man taking a walk.

In 2014 during a popular US TV–show called The Tonight Show, John Boehner, speaker of the house of the United States, said that it is important for a political party to be aligned on what issues they should address and discuss in their program. If the majority of the party has the same idea about what should be done, the leader should listen to, and conform with the ideas of the followers. If not, and the leader goes in another direction than the rest of the party, he would simply be a man taking a walk, as no one would follow him. Little did Boehner know that this quote, while being about leadership, sheds light on an important, but largely ignored, part of leadership –followership (Uhl–Bien, Riggio, Lowe & Carsten, 2014).

A large number of scientific papers on leadership start with pointing out the popularity of leadership and its prominent role in society, media, and academic literature. This may be as leadership is a popular topic (Yukl, 2013) that has gained foothold amongst many practitioners and scholars. It has been widely used, even to that point that some scholars claim that the term is overused (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017; Learmonth & Morell, 2017). Moreover, within the abundance of leadership literature (see for instance Carroll, Levy & Richmond, 2008; Schedlitzki, & Edwards, 2014; Yukl, 2013), some perspectives have even gone rather unnoticed (Ford & Harding, 2015). This becomes especially salient when considering followers in the leadership equation. For instance, although followership is inherently connected with leadership, it nonetheless seems to have a position that is almost overshadowed in academic literature (Uhl–Bien, et al., 2014).

Yet, fairly recently, a body of research that argues that followers are seen as co–constructors of leadership processes (see Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017; Collinson, 2006; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Uhl–Bien et al., 2014) has started to emerge. This gives leadership research new possibilities to explore the importance of followership (Blom & Alvesson, 2014). It is promising, as followers may be regarded as central for leadership to come alive (Blom & Alvesson, 2014). In addition, according to Baker (2007), looking into followership may enhance the understanding of the behavior of employees in organizations. She argues that followership is a lens through which one can view organizational behavior, dependent and independent behavior, and the interdependency of leaders and followers to get insights on how organizations work (p.58). That is, to learn about followership is to learn about social interactions in organizations.

Followership is hence a useful lens in at least two ways: *it opens the door into a myriad of perspectives on leadership processes* (Blom & Alvesson, 2014) and *it can help us understand what is going on in organizations through giving us insight in social processes* (Baker, 2007). Thus, as followership may be a lens that is useful, it might be helpful to explore what the phenomenon may entail. Uhl–Bien et al. (2014) reviewed literature on followership and created an overview. Based on that, they propose an inclusive definition of what followership is. They state that followership happens:

> *a. in relation to leaders or the leadership process, and/or*
> *b. in contexts in which individuals identify themselves in follower positions (e.g. subordinates) or as having follower identities (Collinson, 2006; DeRue & Ashford, 2010 in Uhl–bien et al., 2014).*

In this definition, there are undeniably many ways in which followership might manifest itself. Yet, to accept this definition may come with repercussions for researchers who are looking into followership. That is, it may be subject to the same fallacy as observed in leadership literature, where researchers often use definitions that are too vague or that may capture almost everything, and thereby nothing (Alvesson, 2019; Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017).

With regards to this, one may begin to question the components (*a* and *b*) in the definition given above. At first glance, point *a.* may seem true. To claim that somebody who is a leader has followers seems plausible, otherwise it would just be a man who takes a walk, as John

Boehner pointed out in the beginning of this thesis. However, such a definition may be too ambiguous. For example, as the definition refers to a relation. Subsequently, such a definition may capture almost everything regardless of if it really is followership that one is looking at, or simply another type of influence (Alvesson, 2019). Furthermore, there is a rhetoric is present amongst academics and in organizations, as the language used by them habitually labels relations as leadership/followership (Ford & Harding, 2015; Learmonth & Morell, 2017). For example, actors in the field may label their employees as followers without considering if there actually is any leadership present. There might hence be a tendency to faulty label relations which should be taken into consideration (Learmonth & Morell, 2017). The fallacy of habitually labelling relations can be both done by practitioners, but also by academics, meaning that we as researchers are just as much subject to do this as anyone else. Hence, the question is, who is the one who has the agency to decide what followership is? The answer to that may remain unwritten, however, it may be insufficient nonetheless to label employees as followers simply because a relation to a leader is assumed to be present. Therefore, we reside with Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) and argue that whoever looks into the phenomenon of followership may benefit from questioning taken for granted assumptions in a more reflexive manner to prevent faulty labeling.

Second, point *b.* concerns identities. It captures a part of the followership literature that rests on the assumption that a person has to actively identify with a follower position (Collinson, 2006; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Uhl–bien et al., 2014). In this literature, followership identities have to be claimed, otherwise no leadership will happen (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Thus, some perspectives in research (Collinson, 2006; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Uhl–bien et al., 2014) argue that followership is mostly about identifying. However, as Alvesson (2019) puts it:

> *in many cases, managers are not a head higher than their subordinates and may be equal or even lower in [...] skills. Far from always there is a straightforward interaction of people involved granting each identities as leader and follower (p.33).*

Therefore, we could argue that interactions and situations in organizations are rarely simple enough to assume that identification with follower position happens frequently. Sometimes, the context may even encourage people to disidentify with the position of a follower.

1.2 Followership in PSFs

It is quite easy to imagine work contexts where workers have reasons to disidentify with follower positions. While there may be an attraction towards leadership ideals amongst management, subordinates may be less enthusiastic or ambivalent about followership and even reject follower identities (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson 2017; Alvesson, 2017, p.12). It may not be an appealing position to identify with, as there is a stereotype that followers are timid and passive sheep (Collinson, 2006). Additionally, it may not be as attractive to identify as a follower, as it can be seen as a less appealing source of identity–work (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). The word ‘follower’ on its own has, according to Bligh (2011, p.432), connotations of subordination and passivity. Also, to be a follower is to mark a lower social status, and to be inferior to a leader, and in some contexts, individuals may therefore be prone to downplay the superior–inferior relation (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). Hence, ‘follower’ may even be, according to Learmonth & Morell (2017, p.264), a term that insults people, especially if they have a dismissive view of more senior colleagues. The authors even ask themselves: how many academics would refer to themselves as ‘followers’?

Perhaps not that many academics are inclined to prone to call themselves ‘followers’ and it may well be an equally unattractive self–view for other professions. For example, workers in professional service firms (PSFs) such as management consultancies, work in an extensive autonomous manner and have contingent power (Alvehus & Empson, forthcoming). Feelings of inferiority may be present in such settings and, consequently, denying or bypassing the position of a follower may happen (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). Moreover, one might expect a more self–starting and self–motivated worker in PSFs, with a limited need of organizing the work through the help of a leader’s guidance (Alvehus & Empson, 2014; Løwendahl, 2005). If one would apply the literature on followership identification to a PSF, then consultants have to claim the identity of a follower in order for leadership to happen. That is, at least if we follow the reasoning of Collinson (2006), DeRue and Ashford (2010), and Uhl–bien et al. (2014) on followership. At the same time, there might be reasons for knowledge workers such as consultants to construct followership differently (or to entirely disengage in followership). Carsten, Uhl–Bien, West, Patera and McGregor (2010) came to the conclusion that followers construct followership as both proactive and passive, pointing to the idea that constructions vary amongst settings. Other research has shown that identity and behavior may show different things, for instance as some may identify with follower positions, yet act leader–

like (Uhl–Bien & Carsten, 2017). This then implies that if we just look at identity, we would miss parts of the picture and we may be limiting our horizons if we seek to find followership as an articulated identity. Perhaps the question is whether we may need a more grounded and nuanced view to understand followership?

For research, to assume that there are follower identities 'out there' waiting to be discovered may be an oversimplification of the concept of followership. Even so, insinuating that somebody is a follower, by for instance studying a follower identity may have unwanted effects (Ford & Harding, 2015). Such efforts, Ford and Harding (2015) argue, may cause research participants to find themselves in positions (of followers) that limit how they express themselves, ultimately stripping the study of its possibility to stay 'open minded'. Given that language has performative effects, posing certain questions about how one is a follower, especially since followership is laden with negative connotations (Gronn, 2002; Bligh, 2011) and leadership with positive, may render research results limited to efforts of positive self–portrayal (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016).

On its own, studying what effects overly positive images of leadership may have on people may be interesting (Ford & Harding, 2015), yet such an assumption still rests on the idea of the *two kinds of people template* –there are leaders and followers, period. Such a template has the effect of pigeonholing people in *categories* of leaders and followers (Alvesson, 2019), while desensitizing research and practitioners from social relations in organizations. We hence indeed propose a more cautious and careful inquiry, one that encompasses for social constructions.

1.3 Purpose and research question

According to Berger & Luckmann (1966) individuals shape, interpret, and create their realities in interactions while also considering norms (e.g. accepted forms of behavior), which can also be referred to as the social construction of reality. If we assume that this is how reality comes into being, then siding with a definition on followership (such as i.e. given by Uhl–Bien et al., 2014) would imply that we are restraining the outlook on followership. This may be the case as attributing a way of reasoning (e.g. seeking identities) onto a reality that is socially constructed, strips the constructors of their agency (Bresnen, 1995). We hence intend to challenge the thought that followers(hip) can be researched, captured, and ascribed as a set of characteristics by looking into identity or behavior. On the contrary, we argue that in the social world everything is fluid and ever–changing and that there are a diverse set of meanings, and frames of reference that individuals hold about the phenomenon of followership (Carsten et al., 2010). If we dismiss the fact that meanings and frames of references may vary among individuals, it consequently becomes difficult to capture how phenomena are socially constructed. Instead, we may fall in the trap of ignoring individuals' own agency in interpreting and formulating what followership means to them.

Our aim is thus to complement theory and research with a more nuanced understanding of followership. We will do so by analyzing qualitative accounts acquired in interviews with participating consultants in a management consultancy. By doing so, we examine the constitutions, perceptions and assumptions that the consultants place upon the concept of followership. Consequently, the question we look into is the following:

How is followership socially constructed within a management consultancy?

By doing so we may provide a more nuanced understanding and complement previous research on the topic. In addition, we also provide practitioners with insights on how the phenomenon of followership may influence individuals in the field.

1.4 Case – Change Management Consultancy (CMC)

In order to tackle our aim and research question, we have chosen to perform this study in a management consultancy – CMC. CMC is a PSF with highly educated consultants who work autonomously, with a high degree of specialization within certain domains. What is special about the company is that CMC has a way of encouraging for leadership, where all employees are asked to 'select their own leader' that will evaluate them throughout the year. They are, in other words, consultants who are implicitly put in positions of followers in terms of the language that CMC uses. That is, the consultants have to select a *leader*, which thus results in the fact that the term *leader* may implicitly label consultants as followers. Therefore, the consultants find themselves both in a relation and in a context that insinuate that they are followers. Thus, this setting may be a good ground for us to study followership, since the consultants may provide accounts of what it means to be a follower.

In contrast however, the consultants are in a setting where there may not be that much *willingness* to identify with follower positions, because of for example negative stereotypes (Collinson, 2006) or the importance of contingent power in PSFs (Alvehus & Empson, forthcoming). Comparing these two side by side, this context in combination with having a relation to a leader on one hand, but a setting where consultants may be prone to disidentify on the other hand, creates the mystery of our research. How then, may we comprehend the relation consultants have to their leader and understand how they relate to followership? We aim to answer this question by conducting a qualitative research, using interviews to pinpoint social constructions that consultants may hold about the phenomenon of followership.

1.5 Thesis outline

In the following chapter, we elaborate on the literature review of our thesis, which includes theory on followership, and we then discuss how these theories fit in relation the stance we take in our research. Furthermore, we present theory about social constructions that is relevant for our research, whereby we mainly look into contextual attributes, schemas, and subject positions. After this we present the literature that relates to the context in which our research takes place, that is, related to professional service firms and knowledge intensive firms. Hereupon a methods chapter follows, explaining our qualitative approach to understanding how followership is constructed in CMC. Based on that, we present a chapter which showcases the findings of our conducted research, and a discussion chapter, where we talk back to our literature review through applying theory to our findings. In the final chapter, that is, the conclusion, we conclude our findings and answer our research question about how followership is constructed in a management consultancy.

2. Literature review

In this chapter we aim to introduce the literature that relates to our research. In the first part of the chapter, we describe a literature review of the phenomenon of followership, as we intend to provide the reader with an overview of the literature to explain the background and our own stance towards the phenomenon. In the second and third part of the chapter we explain the theoretical background of the thesis, that is, the literature we later use as a toolbox to critique, confirm, reflect on and 'talk with' our empirical data. In this section, we discuss social constructions and then outline relevant literature on the context to give the reader a picture of what the context of a management consultancy may entail.

2.1 Followership

In research, a varied picture of followership exists; followers may be passive recipients or proactive constructors of leaders and leadership, but literature has rarely focused on followership on its own (Carsten, et al., 2010; Uhl–Bien et al., 2014). Consider for instance follower–centric theories, where one would expect that these theories focus on followership solely, but instead they focus on followers in relation to leadership (Hogg, 2001; Meindl, 1995). While these theories are valid places to find insights, they are nonetheless leadership centered, meaning that followers and followership end up in an overshadowed position (Carsten et al., 2010). As Carsten et al. (2010) put it, there is limited research on the nature of followership and how it is constructed in such theoretical approaches.

There are a multitude of ways in which followership is studied in research, for example as role, as accomplished in a social process, and as an identity (Uhl–Bien et. al, 2014), and some of these may even be regarded as intertwined. This is in line with Uhl–Bien and Carsten (2017), who acknowledge the fact that combined views of followership may offer the possibility to encompass individuals' varying understandings and meanings of followership, and what it means to be a follower. The first way one may look into followership is through role–based views, which we discuss below.

Thus, one possibility to explore followership is through role–based views (Uhl–Bien et al., 2014). A typical example is to study the role of a follower in leadership, such as a subordinate answering to a manager. In this view, scholars consider followers as the independent variable, whereas they view leaders as the dependent variable (Uhl–Bien et al., 2014). That is, these inquiries study how followers behave (independent variable) and their role in impacting leadership (dependent variable). However, there is no clear–cut way of describing such a role, as in some studies, followers are characterized as passive and obedient (Kelley, 1992). Other studies, however, describe followers as more active and state they are moving away from subordination in favor of togetherness and understanding of mutually desired needs and outcomes (Carsten et al., 2010, p.152; Collinson, 2006). In other words, there is no consensus in academia on a clear and uniform view of how followers enact leadership.

Carsten et al. (2010) argue that the role–based approach is concerned with follower perspectives on *leadership*, yet it rarely asks the question about the nature of followership, or about a followers' perspective on *followership*. Role–based theories on followership, despite their shifted focus on how followers can impact leadership, are hence still concerned with leadership behaviors (Carsten et al., 2010). These theories, according to the authors, give a limited outlook on followership, and fail to encompass a grounded understanding of followership. We therefore continue to another view on followership, namely the constructivist view.

Applying a constructivist view gives researchers a detailed and situational understanding of how followership is enacted within social processes (Uhl–Bien et al., 2014). Some scholars argue that this is the preferred approach to studying leadership (and followership), as it can capture the relational nature of the phenomena that are not necessarily tied to hierarchical roles (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Fairhurst & Uhl–Bien, 2012). In search for a more fundamental understanding of what followership is, we may indeed benefit from taking a look outside of role theories, and consider relational processes (Carsten et al., 2010). However, by dismissing formally prescribed positional definitions, such an approach requires us to be more cautious when considering what constitutes the phenomenon of followership (Uhl–Bien & Carsten, 2017, p.148). This is the case because in contexts where organizational structures are looser and more adhocratic than in traditional hierarchies, followers have a better opportunity to follow whomever they wish (Roberts, Hann, & Slaughter, 2006). Uhl–Bien and Carsten (2017) argue accordingly that when followers are free to choose, deference may be seen in identity but not in behavior. That is, in such contexts, individuals may show leadership behavior but identify as followers. Therefore, we consider theories that focus on identities within followership next.

An example of the identity–based view on followership is a study on how leaders and followers identities come into being (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Identity, according to Gecas (1982), is basically what gives substance to the self–concept. The self–concept is a collection of beliefs and meanings one holds about oneself and the act of identification happens through utilizing this collection (Gecas, 1982; Lord, Douglas, Brown & Freiberg, 1999; Markus, 1977). Moreover, DeRue & Ashford (2010) state that a follower identity happens through the processes of someone granting and claiming it and this behavior establishes and maintains the identity. Thus, followership is not solely prescribed to hierarchy and roles. DeRue and Ashford (2010) explain that the process of establishing a follower identity consists of three elements coming together: *individual internalization, relational recognition*, and *collective endorsement*. However, a follower identity will not be taken upon if the individual internalization does not happen, as these three are a sequence (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). In contrast, internalization/identification with a follower position is not an attractive thought for many employees, especially when for example they consider themselves to be autonomous in their work (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). Therefore, in the next section, we consider the concept of disidentification and its relation to follower positions.

2.2 Disidentification

'Identities within organizations' is everything but a straight–forward topic. Identities are projects of the self that undergo continuous changes and adjustments (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). When it comes to organizational identities, employees may adopt or distance themselves from it (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). Identities can also be resisted and replaced with alternative identity creations, that are created by the individual in order to avoid subjugation (Fleming & Spicer, 2007). It is hence not given that even though a certain identity is encouraged in an organization, it will be accepted by its members.

There are studies showing that individuals may avoid taking up certain identities for various reasons. Individuals may engage in disidentification; an effort of distancing themselves from unwanted identities through self–categorization and putting themselves in other positions (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017; Steele & Aronson 1995). Thus, self–categorizations may serve as a useful lens because they shed light on what is included and what is excluded from the self–concept (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). That is, if a person is attracted to an identity, one may self–categorize as such, and exclude other alternatives. An example of an attractive identity is that of a leader. This could be the case because leadership has a certain appeal to it and people like to identify with the idea of ‘being a leader’ (Sveningsson, Alvehus & Alvesson, 2012, p.72). Consequently, if one is attracted to the idea of having a leader identity, it would imply that the same person would strive to distance themselves from the position of a follower.

Identities are also aimed to be 'optimally distinctive' (Brewer 1991). Brewer (1991) concluded in his research that being too indistinctive may result in being unable to look at oneself as distinct in relation to others, whereas being too distinctive may result in being vulnerable to isolation. He states that inordinate forms of (in)distinctiveness therefore can become a threat to one's self–worth and feeling of safety. This may then have implications for a setting where a selected amount of people in a group get to be socially positioned as leaders –the experience of the group may be that it is too indistinctive to be a follower, whereas it may be distinctive enough to be a leader. Therefore, individuals may then be prone to disidentify with a follower position and identify with the position of a leader instead.

Individuals also seek out affirmations that will not 'threaten domain of their self–concepts' (Aronson, Blanton & Cooper, 1995, p.987), meaning that affirmations that differ from the self–concept will be avoided. That is, if one holds an idea about themselves as a leader, anything that will deny that will be avoided, such as for instance affirmations that suggest that one is a follower. In a similar way, disidentification may happen when there is little a person can do about a certain identity that is put upon him or her (Elsbach, 1999), such as being placed in an indistinct organizational position, or a follower position as in our case. Just because such identity is expected by others to be claimed by those put in a follower position, does not mean that it will be claimed. This may be deepened due to the stereotypes surrounding the position (Collinson, 2006; Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017), since if those are negative, one may separate from such a position in order to maintain a good self–concept (Aronson, Blanton & Cooper). Therefore, those that would like to see themselves as superior to the position of a follower, may find it troublesome to identify with such a position. It may thus be useful to consider the fact that as followership is related to in different ways, a way which captures these interpretations and meanings should be considered.

Through deconstructing the meanings that individuals attach to phenomena (e.g. to unpack followership), one may discover hidden assumptions and meanings (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). For instance, assumptions about followership may denote submission, inferiority, and passivity (Bligh 2011; Collinson, 2006), causing people to abstain from labeling themselves as such in favor of for instance labeling themselves as leaders (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016; Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). Since there are strong connotations surrounding followership, it is difficult for researchers to access the meanings of followership, as few would acknowledge and position themselves as such (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). To put it simple, instead of looking for a particular view on followership that 'should be out there' it may be better to find out how others interpret followership instead.

Such an approach is especially useful as it may shed light on individuals' agency in how they construct concepts instead of imposing a view on them (Bresnen, 1995). Thus, we follow the idea of Bresnen (1995) and other scholars (see Bryman, 1986) that leadership may encompass a variety of meanings and frames of reference for different individuals. We, therefore, assume that the same may be true for followership and that studying these will enhance the understanding of followership (Carsten et al., 2010, p.544). Thus, exploring followers' own accounts and frames of reference, instead of looking at (imposed) roles or articulated identities, may sensitize oneself to varying meanings which individuals may have around followership. As articulated identities are more focused on one's selfhood (Braidotti, 2011), however, we could argue that construction meanings around followership do not happen in isolation. Rather, they seem to be a product that derive from interaction, also known as subject positions (Davies & Harré, 1990), which we will look into next.

2.3 Going into social constructions

In order to clarify the concepts of identity and subject positions, we make a clear distinction. Subject positions, as opposed from identities, are subjected to the evaluation of the self *and* others (Törrönen, 2001). They differ from the concept of identity in the sense that they are openly negotiated and ever–changing, and reflect social interactions, while identities are more an individual idea of fixing one's own selfhood (Braidotti, 2011). That is, identities are ideas that give the self–concept body (Gecas, 1982), whereas subject positions are accomplished in interaction and conversations, reflecting the multiplicity of meanings and relations that constitute the human subject (Törrönen, 2001). For instance, descriptors such as a consultant in a consultancy point out what 'self' is appropriate within the given situation. That means, there is no rigid and set identity, but rather a variety of fluid positions that constitute one's subject position in society (Dagg & Haugaard, 2016). Subject positions offer us insights about what is normal, desirable or prohibited, thereby granting us ‘viewpoints and classificatory schemas to think and act in concrete situations’ (Törrönen, 2001, p.315). They should however also be distinguished from social roles, as they differ from social roles in the sense that they are produced in interaction; some accounts of subject positions will be accepted in interactions and others will be invalidated by the surroundings (Davies & Harré, 1990; Törrönen, 2001). Surroundings, that is, context is hence also an important factor to consider, when looking at subject positions. Thus, we go on explore context and schemas that can be tied to subject positions.

Social constructions can be understood in terms of an interplay between schemas and context (Weick, 1993). Schemas are knowledge structures and may be used by individuals to comprehend information and perceive their surroundings accordingly (Markus, 1977). Schemas may play a part in how individuals socially construct and understand relations (Lord & Hall, 2003). For instance, according to Courpasson and Dany (2003), the status and competence differences in a hierarchical organization may be vast and visible. They state that it can create a schema (idea) that business leaders higher up in the hierarchy should be obeyed because of their greater status and competence. This may cause individuals to construct followership as something equal to passivity and obedience (Courpasson & Dany, 2003). Thus, interpretations made through a schema may result in leader–follower relations, in situations where contextual attributes such as status and competence differences are salient (Lord & Hall, 2003). However, there are also examples of followership being something which is more proactive and followers may hence challenge the view of the manager/leader (Carsten et al., 2010; Kelley, 1992; Blom & Alvesson, 2014).

Schemas and context affect each other (Weick, 1993), and Carsten et al. (2010) explain that context consists of contextual attributes, that are variables serving as important pieces of information, such as organizational climate. They argue that these attributes are recognized by the individual and taken into account when making sense of what is going on. The context, then, may moderate what behavior is acceptable in a given situation –schematic behavior (Weick, 1995; Lord & Hall, 2003). For example, if one sees an organizational climate that is relaxed (context), it can be expected that an individual pick it up and believes that it is appropriate to come in late (schematic behavior). In their study, Carsten et al. (2010) hypothesized that the organizational climate and leadership style is important for individual’s schemas, and for their constructions of followership, but there might be more variables that are important to consider.

Organizational contexts consist of more components than climate and leadership style, such as the composition of people (e.g. capabilities, level of autonomy, high knowledge intensity or not) and structure (size and shape, traditional hierarchy or not) (Porter & McLaughlin, 2006). For example, people may play an important role, as partners or colleagues may be a second source of ideas and interpretations, and individuals' schemas may hence be influenced by others (Weick, 1993). Consequently, more components in the context may play a part in influencing the schemas, and these components will guide the next section.

2.4 Context

So far, throughout the theory chapter, we have referred to the importance of context without really going into detail. However, the context is an important factor to take into account in relation to the schemas (Weick 1993). Thus, we will now go over parts of the context that may be connected to how followership is constructed within our case study. The context of our research can be connected to theory about management consultancies, PSFs, and KIFs, something we elaborate on below.

Historically, interest in PSFs is not new, as research has been looking into this empirical domain for its contradiction of the widely spread idea about bureaucratic organizations (Blau & Scott, 1962; Barley, 2005; Alvehus & Empson, forthcoming). Von Nordenflycht (2010) argues that a PSF comes with distinctive characteristics in comparison to a bureaucratic organization, such as a higher level of autonomy and specific expertise. PSFs can be said to contain, to various degrees, 'three important characteristics, which are knowledge intensity, low capital intensity, and a professionalized workforce' (von Nordenflycht, 2010, p.156). Yet, not all are always important. Particularly, management consultancies sell their services in terms of consulting, which can be linked to the low capital (no inventory) characteristic (Von Nordenflycht, 2010).

According to von Nordenflycht (2010), knowledge intensity is another significant characteristic in management consultancies. It is seen as the core of the firm, as using and creating specific knowledge is at the heart of activities that consultants engage in (Hislop, Bosua & Helms, 2018). As one of the characteristics of a professional service firm is the knowledge intensity, one could acknowledge that there is an overlap between knowledge intensive firms and professional service firms (Alvesson, 2004; Hislop, Bosua & Helms, 2018). Therefore, even though the term PSF is not completely interchangeable with KIF, we use it as such in our thesis, as both characteristics are helpful in describing a management consultancy.

There are many possible definitions for the term knowledge intensive firms (Swart, Kinnie & Purcell, 2003; Alvesson, 2004; von Nordenflycht, 2010; Hislop, Bosua & Helms, 2018). KIFs can be generalized by stating that every firm, to some extent, is knowledge–intensive (Hislop, Bosua & Helms, 2018). However, being more specific might in this case be of greater use, as it gives the context a clear scope. We have thus chosen to follow Alvesson (2004), who describes KIFs as organizations that provide professional services, deploy a highly skilled and mostly autonomous labor force, use specialized knowledge to offer services to the market and favor an adhocratic structure over a bureaucratic one. Autonomy here can be explained as responsible autonomy, which means that there is total freedom of task allocation and no need to ask anyone for permission to finish tasks, but little power over objectives, or 'why' one does what one does (Lashley, 1999). This is a type of autonomy where the task allocation is entirely up to the individual as long as the individual knows he or she is accountable for the outcome (Friedman, 1977).

Alvesson (2004) argues that the structure of a KIF can be distinguished by its highly decentralized way of organizing, which disregards the need for standardization, management and routine. Furthermore, he states that as the levels of customization and innovation are high within PSFs and KIFS, one could even argue that it becomes very difficult to integrate standardization and supervision. Therefore, tasks and situations may become more complicated and ambiguity is a frequently recurring aspect in employees’ work, both externally, as it may be unclear what a owner expects from knowledge workers (Swart, Kinnie & Purcell, 2003), and internally, as there may not be a standardized way of resolving a task (Alvesson, 2004). Thus, employees that work in a KIF may experience uncertainty on how they should solve certain tasks or problems, due to the ambiguous nature of their work, the organizational structures and the decentralized way of working.

Furthermore, as KIFs do not rely so much on standardization, management and routine (Alvesson, 2004), social capital becomes more relevant (Swart, Kinnie & Purcell, 2003).

Hislop, Bosua and Helms (2018) state that social capital points to people's networks of social relationships. Thus, when one considers that a KIF's core product is a service and consists of ambiguous knowledge, which is often the case in management consulting, the importance of a network through which knowledge can be acquired and used is significant in order to execute work effectively (Swart, Kinnie & Purcell, 2003; Alvesson, 2004; Hislop, Bosua & Helms, 2018). Therefore, we argue that having an overview of who knows what and who knows who becomes an important asset for knowledge workers to maintain.

In addition, Alvesson (2004) states that in KIFs, one may find partner–and ownerships structures, whereby some firms allow all employees to buy shares in the company. He argues that apart from the financial and influential dimensions that come with a partner–/ownership structure, there is another dimension with a more symbolic ring to it. That is, the benefit of having shares brings about trust, the experience of inclusion and a means to strongly identify with the company, which enhances the already present sense of shared responsibility (Alvesson, 2004). Partnership, according to Empson (2017, p.57) may even be a means of creating motivation and commitment amongst autonomous professionals.

Finally, some KIFs may work with the concept of invoicing as an important measuring system (Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian, & Samuel 1998). By deploying such a system, KIFs encourage employees to perform high, whereby the prospect of an incentive when achieving goals, and the idea of status loss, guilt and humiliation when failing to achieve the set goals are often part of the system (Alvesson, 2004). Forms of control that target self–images, beliefs, and emotions are strong characterizations of a KIF, and the effects have control over its' employees, as they may feel high amounts of pressure to deliver a high performance (Alvesson, 2004), which may thus lead to overwork. Overwork, in KIFs, may even go so far that it turns into a norm, evoking both positive and negative feelings amongst the employees (Empson, 2017). Empson (2017) argues that while professionals take pride in their capacity of being able to work hard, working over–hours may jeopardize their health and be a source of stress.

2.5 Summary

We began the chapter with reviewing followership theories. There are varying views on followership and perhaps one of the most significant insight is that there seems to be an emphasis on followership identities amongst most researchers (see Uhl–Bien et al., 2013 for instance). We complemented that view by adding research about disidentification and subject positions, as it may be an important way of looking at how someone relates to the position of a follower. However, looking at the review of the followership literature altogether, we could conclude that there are few theories that encompass for a grounded understanding of how followership is constructed, not least in contexts where individual employees are given a choice on which leaders to follow. Consequently, the section after the followership literature is about how these social constructions may then be spotted, by utilizing the concepts of schemas and contextual attributes. Finally, as context is important within the literature on social constructions, the chapter ends with an overview of literature that together paints a picture of the context of a management consultancy, which we use interrelated with the definition of PSFs/KIFs.

3. Methodology

In this chapter, we aim to present how we conducted our study and clarify the what, how and why behind the research. This chapter begins with the philosophical underpinnings, as we lay out the ground for our thesis in terms of ontological and epistemological standpoints. This part serves as a means to justify *why* we have chosen our approach. We then go on to the empirical material followed by our method of analyzing the data. In those sections, we describe *what* we have collected from our sources and *how* we have analyzed this data collection. After that, we continue on to ethics and credibility of our study. Finally, we reflexively evaluate our method, to point out what lenses we utilized and what consequences and limitations our approach had. After all, when conducting research from a socially constructionist perspective, the statement from Friedrich Nietzsche (found in Hislop, Bosua & Helms, 2018) seems applicable, as he argued that one cannot claim that there is one absolute truth. Thus, when it comes to how to write about a study's methodology, there is not one right way of doing so.

3.1 Philosophical underpinnings

At first sight, philosophical underpinnings might sound a bit obsolete, as they may have an ancient (Greek) ring to it. So, why then are they important? Because, based on whether one for example has a positivistic or a social constructionistic stance, the outcomes of writing the method, selecting the theory and analyzing the empirical material may differ greatly. This is in line with Habermas (1988), who argues that setting a standpoint in research is important, since it composes a generic purpose and creates a [clear] frame of reference. Furthermore, a systematic investigation of reality takes place *within* this generated system of reference (Habermas, 1988, p.44), thereby creating and constructing reality (Law & Urry, 2004; Styhre, 2013). This assumption can be connected to Kukla (2000), who states that we, as human beings, invent the properties of the world rather than discover them. The properties are not 'out there' but are rather constructs of the human mind (Kukla, 2000). Thus, we assume that the world around us is socially constructed, as we intend to bring attention to what meanings and assumptions individuals hold about the concept of followership.

3.2 Research approach

Throughout our research we were guided by the method of 'creating a mystery'. Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) describe this as 'an approach to theory development that uses theory and imagination to critically open up alternative ways of framing empirical material' (p.15). We applied this concept through using an abductive approach. According to Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018), the abductive approach can be described as successfully combining and reinterpreting empirical data and theory within a single case. They state that continuously taking into account both combining and reinterpreting is important in attempts to understand 'a hypothetical and overarching pattern' that explains the discussed case (p.4). That is, if one goes back and forth between the literature and findings, such iterative action will allow a dialogue between data and theory. This approach can also be linked to following a hermeneutic circle, which 'involves an endless set of movements between text and context' (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018; Prasad, 2018, p.36). We have abstained from both an inductive and deductive approach, as the former may bring the risk of incorrectly generalizing findings, whereas the latter applies generalized rules to explain a single case (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018), bringing the risk that general rules may not be applicable, as we solely intended to explain our own case.

Furthermore, we used both primary and complementary data within our approach. We chose interviews as primary data to conduct our research, whereby we reside with Alvesson (2010), who states that experiences of humans do not lie out there to be discovered. However, social reality may be captured in a person's experience (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015), by for instance asking people about accounts of their 'life word' and then interpreting that data (Prasad, 2018; Bryman, 2008, p.363). Thus, we took on an interpretive approach, as this approach takes human interpretation as a point of reference when studying the social world (Prasad, 2018, p.13). Moreover, we have used observations and document analysis as complementary data.

3.2.1 CMC – A case of autonomous consultants following voluntarily?

In line with the abductive approach, our research consisted of one case study which we conducted at CMC. CMC is a management consultancy that has multiple offices throughout Scandinavia, whereby the office where we conducted our research consisted of 30 consultants and one support employee at that time. CMC works with a concept which is called the 'select your own leader'. This concept triggered our interest in CMC, as we were immediately curious about the context. Highly autonomous, knowledge–intensive consultants who *choose* their own leader seemed interesting, as one would normally not expect autonomous consultants to enthusiastically follow a leader, or therefore, to *identify* themselves as followers at all. Since the implications of the concept are that everyone can be a leader, does that then mean that everyone at CMC can be a follower? Hence, we thought that CMC was an insightful setting to look into the concept of *followership*, as due to the structure and concept, we are provided with a unique case. We aimed to study *followership* in the context of a *knowledge intensive firm* to contribute to the existing literature and get a deeper understanding of how followership was *constructed* within CMC.

3.3 Empirical material

The empirical material of our research consists of two parts, the primary data (interviews) and the complementary data (observations and document analysis). In this section we explain what empirical material we used, how we used it and why. Furthermore, in our approach to the material we align with Alvesson and Deetz (2000) as they state that the expression 'empirical material' is preferred, since the metaphor 'data collection' may be too straightforward, as if one may simply go out to pick data as if it were picking mushrooms.

Before we conducted the interviews, an interview guide was composed, whereby we based our questions on the phenomenon of followership and our theory chapter (see Appendix 1). As we wanted to 'spend time with the material' (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.83) to give ourselves time to familiarize ourselves with the data, we conducted the interviews in week three (out of twelve). This also gave us time to incubate before drawing conclusions. Incubation is a factor that should be taken into account, as Jett and George (2003) state that in order to be able to come to new insights for a problem, engagement in unrelated tasks or taking breaks is needed. The interviews were conducted within a single case study. Our interview approach was semi structured, in line with what Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) describe as 'a semi structured life world interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena' (p.6). Further, Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) argue that a semi structured interview allows researchers to remain open to interesting follow–up questions in response to the answers given by interviewees.

The interviews took place at the office of CMC in a private room. Therefore, we can say that the environment did not significantly distract the interviewee. The interviews were approximately between 45 and 70 minutes in duration. The duration varied due to the different responses to the last interview question, which was: is there anything you would like to add? and some of the consultants had extensive complementary remarks. The interviewees were selected based on their different levels of experience, that is, varying from junior (zero to two years of working at CMC), medior (three to five years) up to senior consultants (six to ten years), whereby some had recently graduated and some were simultaneously consultants, as well as executing leadership roles. They were contacted with the assistance of two helpful consultants at CMC, who acted as door–openers and helped us to schedule the interviews. The interviews were conducted with 12 consultants and one support employee of CMC. However, the total number of interviews was 15, as we spoke to two of the consultants twice, to enhance our understanding of the context of CMC. However, since we focused our research on the construction of followership, we decided to merely use the introductory interviews and the one with the support employee as a complementary source to enhance our understanding of CMC and the context. All interviewees were engaged in the 'select your own leader' concept, where some were followers and others were both followers and leaders for several people.

Because of the necessity to gather accounts and content–rich answers, in–depth interviews were conducted. The focus was thus placed on letting the interviewees describe their experiences of followership and what it meant to them, without too much intervention, other than encouraging them to keep on talking, in line with Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015, p.60). Such interviews can be compared with conversations between the interviewers and the interviewees, where the researcher listens for examples of the interviewee experience (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002, p. 55–57). Our interviews were hence centered around asking about descriptions, meanings of events and ideas expressed from the interviewee's perspective. We began the interviews with stating that we would completely anonymize the interviewees in terms of what they said, how they said it, their characteristic use of language, their level of experience and their gender. Alvesson and Deetz (2000) explain that doing so may encourage interviewees to speak more freely. We then continued with a personal introduction of ourselves and asked the interviewees practical questions, as such introduction creates a closer relation to the interviewees, thus developing trust to talk more openly (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

After the introduction we asked deeper questions concerning our research, whereby after the first five interviews we looked for commonalities amongst the interview answers, to prepare for and improve the remaining interviews. Furthermore, we 'provoked' the interviewees by mentioning statements that previous interviewees have made in order to build trust and explore the deeper aspects of our phenomenon (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p.197; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Finally, we divided the labor during the interview in the sense that one of us was listening and observing, whereas the other was asking the questions and engaged in the dialogue with the interviewee. We did this so that one could focus on what was being said and the other on keeping the interview going.

As descriptions of experiences, meaning, identity, and behavior are not necessarily aligned with each other (Svenningson & Alvesson, 2003) observations may be used to go beyond what is being brought up in an interview (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000), as they might display behavior that is not talked about in the interviews. Moreover, Schaefer and Alvesson (2017) explain that it is significant to adopt a thoughtful and precise attitude towards sources that are applied within research, especially since interview studies have a tendency towards a 'lack of source critique' (p.1). They argue that source critique is important for a thorough examination, reflection, assessment, declination and discussion of empirical material, in order to validate that knowledge claims are based on strong evidence. Therefore, we decided to complement our interviews with observations and document analysis. We also worked at the company's office at three occasions, to gain a deeper understanding of the context and the employee's daily work. The observations meant that we joined two Friday meetings of approximately three hours at the office of CMC, in which all of the 31 employees working at CMC discussed ongoing affairs regarding internal structures, the goal and vision of CMC and their personal life. Apart from that we worked at CMC's office for three days and analyzed the 'select your own leader' focus–contract documents. We consider these sources as complementary data, as they complement our primary data rather than being an independent source of new information.

3.4 Data analysis

In this section, we explain how we analyzed the primary data through the means of transcription, coding and the methods of analysis. Furthermore, we analyzed the complementary data by using the findings from our primary data, thus exploiting them as Schaefer & Alvesson (2017) call it, as extrasource critique, which is to 'cross–check and validate accounts of various interviewees' (p. 9).

Transcription can be considered as part of the analysis (Styhre, 2013), as the determined level of detail of the transcription is important to the analysis that comes afterward (Riessman, 2008). We were both involved in transcribing the interviews by using a transcribing program, but we transcribed individually. Then, as the analysis came into being in parallel, we let the level of detail of the remaining transcriptions be more precise and determined by the analysis. Thus, as we progressed in our research, we were able to pinpoint more easily which parts of the text had to be transcribed in more detail.

The results of the interviews were processed in a program which gave us the possibility to code the interviews and to reveal commonalities between them and the theory. With regards to coding, we followed the *descriptive, analytical* and *pattern coding* as described by Catino and Patriotta (2013) (inspired by Miles & Huberman, 1984) to code our interview data. The descriptive codes were thus used to grasp and describe the different concepts that arose from the empirical data, for example, the word ‘push’, which was mentioned by most of the interviewees. As analytical coding refers to codes that are based on the connection between theoretical models and descriptive codes (Catino & Patriotta, 2013), we reread the descriptive codes multiple times and connected them to the concepts from our theoretical framework (i.e. schemas about followership). However, it should also be noted that the descriptive and analytical codes gave us new insights on what theories could be relevant for our thesis. Thus, this sometimes-introduced usage of other theories than those already included in our theoretical framework, which was in line with our abductive approach –it allowed us to go back and forth between the field and theory. Finally, we looked for patterns within the descriptive and analytical codes, as Catino and Patriotta (2013) state that patterns create a stronger relationship between the concepts, empirical data and theory (development).

After transcribing and coding all the interviews, the analysis combined two focuses. We scrutinized the what –simply on the content, and the how (found in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015, p.123) –concerning structure, language, and way of telling. Moreover, we also payed attention to what formulation the interviewees did *not* use, or what they avoided talking about, as in line with Alvesson & Deetz’ (2000) recommendations for a careful inquiry. Furthermore, the excerpt–commentary unit (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995) as described by Rennstam & Wästerfors (2015) was used to analyze and identify the different themes that surfaced.

We conducted our observations in relation to our interview findings, thereby selecting themes that the interviewees talked about and looking out for them in practice. This is due to the fact that Schaefer and Alvesson (2017) claim that in order to be a useful complement to interviews, observations should be connected to what is being said in the interviews. This way, the observations can be used to strengthen claims, as they confirm findings from the primary data (Schaefer & Alvesson, 2017).

In order to minimize the potential bias and establish the credibility of our findings, we also analyzed relevant organizational documents. Document analysis is the procedure of both reviewing and evaluating documents in order to strengthen findings from the field (Bowen, 2009, p.27). We analyzed the documents with the same line of thought as when we did the observations: in relation to the thematic findings of the interviews, to confirm findings from the primary data.

3.5 Quality and reflexivity

In this section we explain how we ensured the quality of our research and integrate the way we applied reflexivity within our approach. With quality, we refer to the credibility of our inquiry. In addition, we have also added a section about ethics in order to ensure that our research was conducted without causing any harm to the company that we have been collaborating with. Finally, with reflexivity we mean that we reflected on our own assumptions.

3.5.1 Credibility and ethics

In order to strengthen our claims, we made the following efforts to establish credibility in the findings that derived from our empirical material and analysis: extrasource critique, as mentioned above, data saturation, triangulation, thick descriptions, and time spent in the field. Firstly, data saturation is about collecting and analyzing the data continuously until a certain point is reached where the researcher experiences that there is enough empirical data to make solid claims (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010). In our case, we conducted 15 interviews over the course of two weeks, and after that we even had the possibility to go back to the field and interview more consultants. Yet, we abstained from conducting more interviews as the interview material we acquired already pointed in the same direction and little new information seemed to emerge in the last two interviews. In addition, we complemented our interviews with observations and analyzed documents until we arrived at a point where we reached the point of data saturation. This can furthermore be connected to the concept of triangulation, as Denzin (1970) describes triangulation as ‘the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon’ (p.291).

Furthermore, thick descriptions are rich accounts of cases that may be used to enhance the understanding of the field. Such descriptions are especially important for case study research as they make it possible to look at phenomena in depth, by paying attention to granular details, feelings, webs of relationships, silence, and innuendo (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010). In order to enhance our own understanding and to guide the reader in understanding our case, we presented the case in several chapters, whereby we gave details about different aspects, such as the organizational context and the LS–concept that has been key for our findings, to show the different layers which are present and make the case come alive for the reader.

Finally, the time in the field was an effort from our side to build trust between us and the interviewees. Such efforts are essential to increasing the likelihood of receiving more open and thus more credible answers (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe 2010). To accomplish this, we spent time at CMC before beginning the thesis in introductory interviews.

While ethics may also increase the credibility of the study, in our inquiry we treated research ethics as more than just a means of getting better answers. Research ethics concern the way researchers conduct their study with regards to anonymity and confidentiality of participants, especially in social research (Crow & Wiles, 2008). In our case, both were important in order to maximize our chances of getting richer and more credible accounts (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Also, ethics is a means of avoiding deceiving and harming the respondents and respecting their privacy. Thus, in our case, it has also been a way of caring for the individuals we have interviewed. In order to avoid harm and ensure that the interviewees gave us their consent to record and use their quotes, we began each interview with informing the interviewees about our procedures. We told them who would have access to the interview data, how we intended to use their quotes and what we meant with anonymity. We reassured our interviewees about their possibility of stopping the interview whenever they felt uncomfortable or wanted to talk off–record. We also explained that quotes would merely be used by us to support our findings, but that it would not be possible to tell from our thesis who said what. We clarified that this was achieved by stripping the interviewees of their characteristics that could distinguish them, such as position in the company, language and/or gender.

3.5.2 Reflexivity

In research, assumptions may be hard to avoid and thus it is important to reflect on the assumptions of the study (Schaefer & Alvesson, 2017). Reflexive paragraphs may fall into the trap of merely becoming 'a box that has to be ticked' as reflexivity is complex, challenging and can never be seen as complete (Brannick & Coghlan, 2006; Jeanes & Huzzard, 2014, p.2).

Therefore, it should be noted that even though we explicitly touch upon reflexivity within this section, it is an ongoing process, which we aimed to apply throughout our whole thesis.

Research may be seen as a fundamentally interpretative practice that is impossible to disentangle from pre–understandings and elements of theory–impregnation (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). There might hence be certain biases present within the way that we wrote our thesis. For example, pre–understandings of the context might influence a researcher's interpretation of the interview material (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2012). Our own background, ambitions, values and discrepancies in interpretation also caused biases, such as leaning towards certain findings. To reduce this risk, we used extrasource critique (Schaefer & Alvesson, 2017) throughout the thesis in order to check that our findings may be cross–checked via different empirical sources. In addition, we reduced our differences in interpretation by continuously evaluating our findings together as a pair in order to reach a common understanding about the findings. Furthermore, as one may assume that everything is already theory impregnated (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2014), we should also take into account that we selected and evaluated the theoretical background based on our own pre–laden assumptions, ideas, beliefs and expectations. We attempted to remain critical towards our selection and application by cross–checking each other's choices of theory for the theoretical background. Furthermore, we also utilized critical theory to evaluate and challenge the choices of theory for our theoretical background, as Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) point out that it is encourages critical reflection.

The interview material derived from interviewees who all worked at CMC at that time. This may have resulted in a positively biased view of the 'select your own leader'–concept, as all consultants worked with the concept and were enthusiastic about it. Interviewing people about the LS–concept who left the organization might have provided us with other accounts, as 'consulting people who can verify or question accounts of other interviewees' (Schaefer & Alvesson, 2017, p.9) can lead to contradicting outcomes. However, as we looked into how followership is constructed *within* CMC, we argue that challenging our findings in such a way had a limited relevance for our study. Finally, we maintained a reflexive approach towards the fact that we view our research as our own interpretations rather than an objective description of what is out there. This can be seen through statements such as 'it may be the case that', or 'the interviewees description of what he means'. These show that we do not present our findings as absolute truths.

3.6 Summary

In this chapter we explained the what, how and why behind our inquiry. We began by explaining the philosophical underpinnings to our research –a social constructivists' stance. We then went on to describe our research approach and the case of the company where we conducted our research. After this we continued by presenting how we collected our empirical material and analyzed our data. Finally, we concluded the chapter by critically reflecting on our underlying assumptions as well as discussing the quality of our research.

4. Findings

In this chapter we introduce our empirical findings, based on the accounts of the interviewees. The findings are presented within three themes that we identified based on the coding's of our empirical material. First, we explain the case of CMC to a greater extent, whereby our research is scoped to one office of CMC, where 30 consultants and one support employee work. After explaining the context, we present our findings, which we introduce within the three following themes: formal followership, informal followership, and non–followership. We then summarize our findings, which is a stepping stone for our discussion about the empirical material in combination with our theoretical background in the next chapter.

4.1 CMC – Everyone can be a leader

CMC is a management consultancy which is active in the whole of Scandinavia and certain parts of Europe. It was founded approximately 20 years ago in Denmark. The company is the employer of 900 people, of which more than 300 employees are owners and moreover, most employees are in the possession of shares of the company. CMC focuses on providing consultancy regarding change and other related domains (e.g. supply chain management, innovation and leadership). The employees of CMC are highly educated, their work is organized fairly autonomous, and they have a (high) degree of specialization within the company's domains. Furthermore, the consultants employed by CMC are free to run their own projects in as far as one could say that the way their work is organized is more owner–driven than that it is envisaged in a formal structure. They, for instance, do not have set job descriptions or an official hierarchical structure. Instead, they work with a structure that consists of ownership and levels, whereby the levels vary from zero to nine.

At CMC, everyone is seen as responsible for the firm's success, that is, the consultants carry a shared responsibility for the business results. The difference within this shared responsibility is that consultants on level zero/one are juniors, such as student workers and recent graduates, and carry less responsibility for the business results, whereas consultants on level eight/nine are considered full partner and carry most responsibility in terms of running local offices and leading practices (domains) or service lines (areas of expertise). This is expressed in the following quote:

Interviewee (6): You could lead a service line, which is, you know, an area of specialization. You could also be leading a practice, or you could be part of or being responsible for leading an office. Those three dimensions increase as you go up in level and your degree of responsibility increases.

CMC offers all employees the possibility to buy shares in the company, whereby consultants on level one to four can buy employee shares, and consultants on level five up to nine can buy partner shares. As the organization has a so called flat formal structure, there are no direct reporting systems. In order to formalize the shared responsibility, CMC utilizes another concept instead, which is called the 'select your own leader'–concept (LS–concept). The concept is called the 'select your own leader', as the consultants create a contract together with their selected leader, which is focused on the goals they themselves would like to achieve within the upcoming year. At the same time, these goals have to contribute to the company and its success, and they may hence be regarded as a formalized expression of the shared responsibility. As we analyzed the focus contract documents, we found that CMC uses a template for the contract, thus although the consultants are allowed to determine their own goals, it always has to happen within the given template. Additionally, the goals are evaluated by the leader, who then gives suggestions about possible alterations before the contract is finalized. This is displayed in the quote below:

Interviewee (3): I do have some guidelines in my focus contract. You do not decide those yourself, but they are focus areas that you need to kind of follow. They are set areas within the contract, such as invoicing or subject matter expertise. But what goals I set in those areas I could decide pretty much by myself. I made a draft and then I got feedback.

Interviewer: What feedback did you get on this?

Interviewee (3): I got recommendations from my leader, for example to not just think about what I want to do, but also about what I would be able to do with the outcomes, if I reach that goal. However, I also felt like I decided it, that is, when I look at it from the perspective that I made the decision [about what should be in the contract] and it was my focus contract.

In addition, the contract is evaluated at least twice a year, for a mid–year review and a final review. In the final review, the selected leader together with the practice lead of the consultant decides whether or not the consultant may be promoted to the next level and discusses this with the consultant. In practice, the way the concept and contract are utilized can differ extensively from the official concept. For example, some practices require that consultants select their leader within the practice and some practices do not allow consultants to pick a leader that is more than five levels higher than they are themselves. Furthermore, consultants and leaders are allowed to make individual alterations, which means that some may meet officially more often than twice a year. Finally, some leaders/consultants have many unofficial meetings and check–ups, whereas others may never speak apart from the mandatory meetings twice a year. An example of this is the following quote:

> *Interviewee (9): And I think it is a bit different from practice to practice, how [the LS–concept] is organized. In some practices you cannot, as a level one, perhaps choose a level nine as a leader, but then you choose a level five. And a level five gets to choose a level nine. So, there is some kind hierarchy, but that differs per practice.*

What is special about this LS–concept is that by implementing this concept, CMC encourages leader–and followership by implication. When initially talking to some of the consultants at CMC, they also stated that they thought that '*everyone can be a leader'*. This strengthens the idea that if everyone can be a leader, there may also be a need for many followers. However, this also means that consultants are either simultaneously leader *and* follower, or that there may be an absence of followers. What would that then mean for everyone who considers themselves to be a leader?

The name of the LS–concept itself (*select* your own leader) seems to suggest that consultants select the leader that they would like to 'follow'. Follow however, is stated in quotation marks here, as although one may expect many expressions of followership, it seemed rarely explicitly articulated within the accounts that the consultants gave us. This made it complicated to spot how the consultants in CMC thought about followership. It is therefore more complex in comparison to leadership, which was a topic that occurred frequently when the consultants were asked about what followership means to them. Within the following paragraphs we present the accounts of followership that consultants described, that is, within the formal (LS–concept) and informal (outside of the LS–concept) context of CMC.

4.2 Formal followership – 'Select your own leader'

Even though the consultants of CMC were free to select whomever as their leader, the fact that they utilized the LS–concept nonetheless resulted in consultants *formally* being placed in implicit follower positions. Since consultants were allowed to utilize the LS–concept in whatever way they saw fit (apart from the mandatory meetings twice per year), consultants expressed accounts of how they 'followed' their official leaders in different ways. For instance, as interviewee (2) expressed that:

> *Interviewee (2): I think the LS–concept is very good for myself to reflect on what I want to learn in the coming year. And also sides that I would like to work on more. It has been a good guidance for me since I started in CMC to actually put things there that are relevant to me, where I would like to develop [...]. I think that is where I have had most help from the concept, to reflect on [where I want to go] and to talk with my leader about it. And then you and your leader are working on finding the right ways to go there.*

The interviewee described that the concept had been helpful with regards to personal development, whereby the leader assisted in helping him to find the right direction. The interviewee hence decided *where* he wanted to go, whereby the leader had an influence on *how* to get there. Therefore, 'following' the selected leader was not per se about the destination, but rather about the road towards it. Yet this was just one account of several ways in which the consultants expressed that they followed their leaders. Another interviewee explained that the leader was sought out in situations where the interviewee needed advice:

> *Interviewer: And within the project, who do you turn to if something does not go the way you want or if you need advice? Who do you usually call upon to assist you?*
>
> *Interviewee (11): It can actually be to two persons. One is my focus contract leader if it is an internal thing, but if it is within a project at the customer's place, then I go to my sponsor.*

In this quote, it is possible to distinguish two ways of getting help. For internal issues I(11) usually sought out his official leader to get assistance, whereas assistance within projects was sought in relation to his sponsor. In addition to seeking directions and assistance in various ways, it appeared as if the consultants had more reasons to interact with their leaders. One interviewee displayed this by talking about the significance of thinking outside of the box and personal development, as is shown in the following quote:

Interviewer: And how would you then assess the LS–concept?

Interviewee (12):I still think... The downside is that when it is my own responsibility, I am stuck in my own way of thinking, probably. So I think the focus contract leader is able to push me in directions that I might not see myself as they might not be obvious to me. But another person could appoint me in that direction. So I definitely think it has strength.

Interviewer: Why would you like to be pushed? And how?

Interviewee (12): I mean, I do not have carrier ambitions in terms of becoming a top manager or anything, but I have career ambitions in terms of developing myself and becoming a better person, privately, but also in terms of my profession. So, being able to help my owners in a better way. I think that is my general goal of what I am and what I do, I just want to keep on developing and becoming better at different things.

As can be seen in the quote, the interviewee described that he believed that a strength of the contract was that the leader could push him. The interviewee pointed out that he 'gets stuck in his own thinking', and that the contract and the relation to his leader were a means of development, as well as a means to be pushed in directions he could not have imagined himself. When asked why pushing was important to him, the interviewee explained that it helped him in his professional and personal development, and this signifies that the leaders may have an important role when seen from the consultants' perspective. This case is just one example of when the leader seemed to have a guiding and developing role for the interviewee, yet this is something to which we will return to and explore further in the next chapter.

4.3 Informal followership – That is the beauty of it

In addition to the formal followership expressions, consultants regularly described that they did not see their official LS–concept leaders as the only ones that they could turn to. For instance, interviewee (5) explained that he often went outside of his focus contract and reached out to his network to get guidance from other consultants in the firm:

Interviewer: [When you need assistance], is there anyone else you have these conversations with?

Interviewee (5): Yes, and I think that is the beauty of it. I have similar conversations with colleagues all over the firm. I do not have any different conversations with my focus contract manager then with any other [consultants] that can make me succeed in terms of what is written down [in the contract]. I review it with my focus contract manager twice a year and that is when we sit down formerly, the ones that are mandatory. But apart from that, we do not use it.

In this quote, I(5) explained that he had conversations about assistance with whomever he wanted. This quote therefore shows that the interviewee used other sources than his official leader. Other interviewees, such as interviewee (12), expressed that he sought out multiple 'informal leaders'. An example of a consultant who stated that he had multiple leaders outside of the contract is the following:

Interviewee (12): Since we have this loose leadership, and no real managers or anything, I think, myself and others probably also, find people that you sort of [go-to] ... 'This guy is really good at this; this is my go-to guy within this area of expertise'. For example, if it is about people development, I will probably go to Douglas here in our office, because that is what he works with a lot. So yeah, they are sort of my informal leaders within their specific areas. [...] And also, I think it is good to find that person that might resemble yourself in the way they work, because that way might suit you the best.

Here I(12) states that he went to people within different areas of expertise, depending on what he needed and the extent to which they resembled to his own way of working. Another example of this was an interviewee that had an unofficial mentor for guidance. Consider for instance the quote from this interviewee:

Interviewee (2): I have also, except for a leader, a commercial sparing mentor... We are talking about how I can work on my commercial side. He is very good at making cold calls. It is out of my comfort zone to call up a person 'and see if we can go for lunch'. Then, I have a person that is good at it and can give tricks to a person was not maybe born with it but has improved and is taking that journey.

Although it is not formalized to have mentors, the interviewee sought out a mentor nonetheless, in order to be able to improve his commercial side. This can be connected to Alvesson, Blom and Svenningson (2017), who argue that employees may not only follow leaders (high–influencing persons) but can also deviate to follow medium–influencing persons, such as peers with a certain area of expertise. The interviewee here hence gave accounts of how he utilized the relation to a sparring mentor in order to get guidance. However, there were also accounts of where the interviewees seemed to bypass, reform or distance themselves from the idea of followership.

4.4 Disidentification with a follower position

A clear finding in the field was that, albeit the fact that consultants all seemed to be engaged in the LS–concept, they did not explicitly talk about themselves as followers. Rather, on several occasions the consultants spoke of themselves as leaders, for instance when asked about what followership meant to them. Below is an account of this:

> *Interviewer: What would then the notion of followership mean to you?*
>
> *Interviewee (2): I want to inspire and help people either become better on what they do or just get a better structure in what to do. Maybe avoid workload in projects. Be the leader in telling others why we are doing this. I feel good when I felt that I could help someone to do something, so I do it for myself as well.*

In this quote, the interviewee spoke about his leadership, instead of talking about his followership. The accounts from the consultants may have been influenced by the negative stereotype surrounding the word ‘follower’, which may be a reason why people are not prone to present themselves as such (Collinson, 2006; Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). In addition, as workers in a management consultancy are usually highly educated and autonomous (Alvesson, 2004), they may not lean towards calling themselves followers. This is because the word autonomy already insinuates a degree of independence, but followership does not (Bligh, 2011). This may hence be why the consultants displayed acts of bypassing the position of a follower. Furthermore, this line of reasoning could be connected to Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson (2017), who argue that denying or bypassing such a position is a means of presenting oneself in a positive light. While this may also be a matter of misinterpretation of the question, it reoccurred amongst several consultants who were interviewed, for instance:

Interviewer: What does the notion of followership mean to you?

Interviewee (5): Followership, that is something that we are really trying to integrate in CMC. For example, next year my name may be up there as a possible contract leader and the leader is the one that is supposed to help you with your success and put the right coaching and challenges in place. And that is where we try to put followership into practice. It takes time to be a leader, as you have a great responsibility.

This interviewee also displayed himself as a leader, rather than taking on a follower position when explaining what the concept meant to him. I(5) focused on what his role as a leader would be in relation to the concept instead. These two statements, when considered together, imply that there were tendencies amongst the consultants to rather lean towards a leader position than a follower position. This may be the case as in both examples, when the interviewees were asked about what followership meant to them, they answered the question by talking about followership as if they were *solely* leaders. Yet, they themselves were also put in follower positions because of the LS–concept, but the interviewees did not seem to consider this when they answered the question. Here is another example of when an interviewee told us about how he experienced being a follower, with the emphasis on his leadership position:

Interviewer: What is your experience with followership within your own position?

Interviewee (7): When they ask me for advice, or...?

Interviewer: Well, do you experience being a follower sometimes as well?

Interviewee (7): I am being a follower. Both when it comes to colleagues' ways of doing things and colleagues being inspiring just by who they are. And also, I think I have a lot of followers here. Because I can hear from time to time that when this question comes up: 'who is the most recognized for his/her expertise in area X?' [the consultants] say, it is me. I just try to do what I believe in. So, then that will create followers. But that is not the main goal.

In this example, while some followership was acknowledged by the interviewee, I(7) at the same time acknowledged he was perceived a leader by his peers. At first, the interviewee spoke about his experience of being a follower as looking at how others do their work and admitted that they were inspiring to him. Later, however, I(7) portrayed himself as a leader by highlighting and focusing on that others acknowledged and looked up to his expertise. Claiming a leader identity is something that may happen often, due to the popularity of the concept (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017).

Yet, what is interesting here is that this was done when the interviewee was specifically asked about how he experienced being a *follower*. Since everyone in CMC was put in a follower position, this position may not live up to an 'optimally distinctive' position. This is in line with Brewers (1991) reasoning about how individuals strive to categorize themselves as distinctive, and thus asking somebody about their experiences with indistinctive (follower) positions may seem as a threat to their self–concept. In conclusion, this may be the case because such a question could have been an affirmation that suggested that the interviewee was a follower and evoked a will to distinguish himself from the most common categorization in the LS–concept: a follower. This quote may hence show an effort of the interviewee downplaying his follower position.

In addition, sometimes taking on a follower position was even actively *avoided* by the consultants. It seemed to be a matter of the interviewee viewing and categorizing himself as following the contract under the *guidance* of a leader, rather than *following* a leader, which may both be acts of avoiding taking on a follower position. A matter of using other words than 'follow' reoccurred during the interviews. An example of this follows below:

> *Interviewer: All right. So, you have a leader, a contract leader, but how do you experience being a follower? A contractee?*
>
> *Interviewee (11): [pauses and stutters] Ehh… Uhm... I guess it is pretty fair to follow … Ehh.. or to be under a senior... It is that the focus contract is a lot about my wishes and where I want to go, so it kind of feels like, getting help with... and it is mostly* ***my*** *input. So, working according to the model is… or, following the* ***contract*** *feels good for me at least. It is up to me to make sure that we realized what we have agreed in the contract, maybe more than my focus contract leader. We make it together. He gives his input. But it is after all it is going to be my words, and it should be more on me. I need to follow up on it, rather than that* ***we*** *need to make sure that it will happen.*

In this quote, the interviewee seemed uncomfortable using the word ‘following’. Instead of using the word ‘following’ he switched to using terms such as ‘be under’ and ‘working’. In addition, the interviewee also stated that whether the contract, its’ content, and that what was in it would be fulfilled or not, was up to him to realize. Thus, the interviewee presented himself as someone responsible and in control of the contract, something which would arguably be unexpected of a follower. Both the choice of words and the statement about the contract being I(11)’s responsibility may hence have been an act of distancing himself from a follower position. Furthermore, distancing seems to imply that I(11) abstained from the idea that he *needed* a leader. Rather, he leaned towards explaining his relation to his leader as *using* his leader when it suited him, whereby his leader was there to give input, not to make sure that the contract was carried out according to the composed goals. This may be an example of consultants who diminish the importance of leaders supporting their work. By doing so, consultants also distanced themselves from the idea of being a follower. Another example of this is a consultant who used his relation in such a manner:

> *Interviewee: What does the ‘select your own leader’–concept mean to you?*
>
> *Interviewee (7): Well, not that much, I would say. For others, it means a lot, it means very much. And then it comes down to what kind of support do you need? If you have been in the game for many years, you do not need [leadership] that much. So, for me, it is more like that place where you ventilate ideas and get views on how to do things differently. I do not need much support when it comes to my daily work.*

When referring to the contract, the interviewee expressed a limited need for leadership as a means of support, but rather utilized it for different purposes. This, according to the interviewee, was connected to the amount of years that he had been ‘in the game’, that is, to the time spent as a management consultant. Hence, the interviewee here pointed to his senior position, thus simultaneously dismissing the idea of being of being in an inferior position in need of leadership. That is, instead of taking on a clear-cut follower position, this is an example of a consultant that not only distanced himself from the idea of following someone else, but also created other ways to utilize the relation to the leader. For example, by using him to ‘ventilate ideas’ and ‘get views on how to think differently’.

So far, the consultants bypassed, diminished and actively avoided the position of a follower. However, another account of disidentification that consultants expressed was a matter of reforming the idea of being a follower. The interviewees referred to followership as something which *was not* 'respecting authority'. Instead, it was about benefiting the consultant in terms of learning, granting him or her access to new expertise, experiences, and networks. An example of this is for instance:

> *Interviewee (1): I think [following] does not mean respecting another person in the hierarchical sense, where you respect your manager because of authority. But it means being interested in what kind of experiences and competences the leader has in order to learn. So, I think being a follower, is also a lot about a learning mindset.*
>
> *Interviewer: And how do you personally experience the followership side as being a follower?*
>
> *Interviewee (1): Since we are so flexible and dynamic in terms of which projects we work with, when we work, who we work with and so forth, I think it works super. You can follow many people, you do not need to follow one. So there is not just one manager you are reporting to. You are actually following a lot of people and this creates spin–offs. So, following more persons will create more opportunities, so you can do more projects that you would like to do.*

Here, I(1) dismissed the view of followership as a matter of being inferior to somebody else per se. The interviewee did not describe followership as respecting one person in a hierarchical position, but rather as learning from multiple persons who have more specific knowledge and expertise. It was, thus, more about learning than about acknowledging the hierarchical asymmetry between two people, according to the interviewee. However, *learning* competences and experiences from someone else still insinuates asymmetry; the one who learns arguably has less knowledge than the other one who teaches. Followership is not seen, at least by the consultants of CMC, as something that is inherently about subordination because of authority or differences in position. Instead, it is here tied to superiority of someone who has more knowledge than the interviewee. This is plausible since knowledge is seen as important asset in KIFs (Kärreman, 2010). It is hence a matter of giving individual interpretation to the word 'following'.

This act of attaching a meaning sheds light on an interesting aspect of how followership was constructed in CMC. I(1) identified with being a follower to a greater extent than the other interviewees, but he reformed followership nonetheless. As identification with a (follower) position when it involves submission may be avoided, reforming them into alternative identities may be preferable (Fleming & Spicer, 2007). Therefore, consultants may see fit to reinterpret the position of a follower, replacing it with a position that is less about subjugation in relation to hierarchy, and more about personal development in relation to their possibility to be autonomous. Thus, the interviewee's interpretation may be a cue for us to understand how the consultants view followership, pointing towards the possible different social constructions they held.

Overall, the interviewees gave accounts of bypassing, diminishing, actively avoiding or reforming the position of a follower, even though our setting implied for the consultants to take on a follower position. Within the LS–concept, consultants were asked to 'select a leader' that could help with guidance, expertise, and ideas. Thus, as one person was arguably given the position of the *leader*, consequently, we may expect that the other one would take on the position of a *follower*. However, as I(1) displayed, there may be alternative frames of references and interpretations around how consultants see followership. This led us to consider alternative ways in which the consultants constructed followership, and this is thus the focus for the upcoming chapter.

4.5 Summary

We began the chapter with a detailed description of our case. Later, we presented the rest of our most significant empirical findings in relation to our research, by highlighting three important themes – formal followership, informal followership, and disidentification. The first and second theme displayed accounts of the consultants in relation to formal and informal followership, that is, within the formal (LS–concept) and informal (outside of the LS–concept) context of CMC. The third theme consisted of accounts where the consultants avoided talking about themselves as followers. Taken together, these three themes serve as a means of understanding how there might be a varied view on followership in CMC. Thus, in the next chapter we will tie these findings to our theoretical background in order to discuss how followership was constructed in a management consultancy.

5. Discussion

We structure the discussion based on the empirical material of the previous chapter. First, we explore the accounts of the ‘followers’ (consultants) about their relations to their selected leader(s), which derived from both the formal as well as the informal accounts of followership. We do this through setting up and elaborating on four subject positions which derive from the contextual attributes and schemas that consultants seem to tap into within CMC. Then we go on to explore the disidentification the consultants have with the idea of followership, linking it to four subject positions. At the very end of the chapter, we tie it together in a summary where we discuss how followership is constructed in a management consultancy to complement research with a more nuanced understanding of followership.

5.1 Followership – A series of subject positions

The section about disidentification in the previous chapter pointed out an important contradiction. While there were implied positions for the consultants to take on (that of followers), it was *not* taken upon by the consultants. Hence, ‘followers’ (that is, consultants) seemed to find themselves in other subject positions regardless of what was formally prescribed. With subject positions, we refer here to the multiple positions that an individual has (Davies & Harré, 1990), for example, one may be a student, but also a consultant, a buddhist, a sister, and a wrestler. These positions, Davies and Harré (1990) argue, are produced in interactions and depend hence on the relation and context that one finds oneself in. Thus, subject positions come into being in the many social relations that one has and create vantage points for the individuals to understand the world (Davies & Harré, 1990). We go on to explore the accounts of consultants in relation to their leaders to distinguish what subject positions may exist.

In order to explain how we spot the subject positions, we present the construction of subject positions in a sequence (although in practice, there may not always be a sequence present). This merely serves as an example of how subject positions could be constructed, and to guide the reader, yet by no means do we argue that this process is linear. First, the context is noticed and made sense of (Weick, 1995). Then, a schema is accessed. A schema is comparable to a script that can help to interpret and comprehend what happens in the surroundings (Lord & Hall, 2003). Lord and Hall (2003) also argue schemas may guide the appropriate actions and behavior. Such behavior, as well as the context and schemas may then serve as a lens to spot the subject positions. As subject positions are produced in interactions, they become visible in the accounts about relations. In our case, the accounts that the consultants expressed were in relation to their leaders. Thus, the subject positions produced became visible through taking on schemas, context, and accounts of relations as lenses. The subject positions we identified are the coachee, the networker, the tourist and the owner.

5.1.1 The coachee – Call me maybe?

Within CMC, the consultants have shared responsibility towards the organization. As consultants climb to higher levels in the organization, their responsibility increases accordingly. An example of that is the following quote:

> *Interviewee (6): We do not have any appointed managers, everyone is a consultant, everyone is responsible for selling, and everyone is responsible for leading. Those three dimensions increase as you go up in level and your degree of responsibility increases quite aggressively. And that can be quite a burden.*

As I(6) points out, CMC has no managers who are appointed to specific tasks, but rather they have a shared responsibility in terms of consulting, selling, and leading. This is something that we also noticed as being a part of the focus contract template during our document analysis. The focus contract constituted several sections aimed at contributing to the firm's success. Furthermore, shared responsibility can be tied to the characteristics of KIFs, as these often have shared ownership structures where consultants are responsible for the firm's business results (Alvesson, 2004). Thus, the higher level the consultants are on, the more this responsibility increases, but the responsibility is there for everyone. It may, according to the interviewee, even be experienced as 'quite a burden'. As Lord and Hall (2003) point out that contextual attributes consist of information make sense out of the context. In this case thus, shared responsibility may be seen as a contextual attribute and it may be seen as an important piece of information, because it influences how consultants experience their level of responsibility within CMC. Moreover, in relation to the shared responsibility in CMC consultants may also experience a heavy workload, especially once they advance to higher levels. Here is an example of a heavy workload becoming visible:

> *Interviewee (9): Another area that is important is how to handle it [as a leader] when you see colleagues are working too much or have a high–stress level. We are so driven by business*

> *results, but we need leaders that also see the people in the organization and that react if you have an over–performance of 180% and ask why and how and what kind of support you get.*

According to I(9), CMC is driven by business results, which is something we also observed during their meetings when the consultants were informed about the status of the key performance indicators of the company. This is also a common characteristic of a KIF, as their success is usually measured against chargeability (Covaleski et al., 1998). In CMC, those results are a shared responsibility for all consultants, and may be 'quite a burden' as explained by I(6) in the previous section. The shared responsibility may also lead consultants in KIFs to experience negative emotions, as Alvesson (2004) explains that systems such as shared ownership may put consultants under pressure to perform. When being under such pressure, workload may become the norm in PSFs (KIFs), which may lead to increased stress levels (Empson, 2017). Moreover, as all consultants in CMC have a shared responsibility, this may add to the interviewee's experienced workload, because he may have felt accountable to deliver a high performance. Hence, tendencies of taking on heavy workloads may consist of another contextual attribute, together with the shared responsibility as mentioned before.

Contextual attributes make relevant information in the environment visible, and this is comprehended through a knowledge structure, that is, a schema (Weick, 1995). The consultants may then go on to use the schema as a point of reference or script, to make sense of the relation to their leader. Therefore, the schema may serve as a cognitive handbook that takes the context into account and is accessed to make sense of the situation at hand. Below is an example:

> *Interviewee (2): Some people might have a call every second week with their leader, but I have been bad on having that with my leader. Especially when I have too much to do. The meetings are disappearing, and I have talked to him that we should... Maybe if we are not booking meetings and if I am disappearing for a while, that is when I need him to call me, because that is when I have too much to do. So that is what I need support. That is something we have come up with as an agreement when there is too much time [going in between the times that we meet] and I am not in the office or something, that is because I am out in the projects too much.*

In this quote, I(2) showcased that support is needed from the leader when posed in a busy setting, such as 'being out in projects too much'. Lord and Hall (2003) observed that when certain contextual attributes become visible (such as workload in combination with shared responsibility) a schema can be accessed by individuals and help them understand and act in their relations. A similar tendency can be observed here as well. Heavy workload and shared responsibility may be noticed and perceived as challenging, such as the interviewee refers to here as ‘too much to do’. Such information may cause one to access the most plausible schema (handbook). The schema, in turn, provides the consultants with the most sensible position they can take on within the relation, that is, the subject position. As these positions are produced in interaction and relations in order to make sense of what is going on (Davies & Harré, 1990), we argue that the relation between the leader and the interviewee constituted of at least two positions. One was the position of someone who gave support in the workload and shared responsibility and the other that demanded and received support. The latter subject position, we have named *the coachee*. The coachee seeks support from the leader when his or her workload is high. The pressure of the heavy workload may be amplified by the shared responsibility consultants have, increasing their stress levels. Just like a coachee relies on a coach for help, this subject position can be seen in a relation where there is possibility to for a consultant to get support from their leader.

5.1.2 The networker – Lost in the looseness

The organizational structure of CMC seems to be ambiguous when described by the consultants. An example of such ambiguity is the following quote:

> *Interviewee (3): Within CMC the structure is very loose, which might result in that you get a bit lost in the looseness. This might especially be the case when you are new to the firm, as you may not know where to begin and who to go to, and I can imagine that may feel frustrating.*

The example above may be interpreted as consultants who feel insecure and ‘lost’ due to what the interviewee called ‘loose structures’. Such structures may thus be experienced as ambiguous, because as I(3) pointed out, consultants may not know how to navigate these structures. Consultants may experience trouble when finding out and deciding who to turn to in order to accomplish their daily work. Especially, due to the ambiguous structures of CMC according to the interviewee, it is difficult to know what consultants have relevant knowledge that can meet the need of the one who is lost. This can be tied to Alvesson (2004), as he argues that ambiguity is an inherent part of the context of a KIF. As consultants may experience the structure of CMC as ambiguous, ambiguity and loose structures become important pieces of knowledge for the consultants, which can be referred to as contextual attributes as explained before by Lord & Hall (2003). That is, as ambiguity and loose structures become salient for the consultants, they may cause them to interpret their environment in certain ways.

In addition, there are other contextual attributes that are recognized by the consultants. Network position and internal knowledge are two other relevant examples. They can be seen in the quote below:

> *Interviewer: What does the 'select your own leader'–concept mean to you?*
>
> *Interviewee (9): I think it is a really interesting concept. There is a tendency to select the leader that can give you the best assignments. So, it is better to choose a leader that is on a high level because then you get more responsibilities, as you are on the radar of that person.*

As I(9) describes, the position someone holds within CMC's network and the knowledge someone possesses about the best assignments were seen as important. This may be strengthened by the first two contextual attributes of ambiguity and loose structures, as someone in a good network position (i.e. someone on a high level) may be able to help the consultants find their way within the ambiguous structures (e.g. find the best assignments). As the interviewee puts it, being close to someone in a good network position puts one 'on the radar of that person'. Being acknowledged by someone in such a position may enhance the chance of being staffed on the wanted projects (e.g. projects where the consultants get more responsibility). Thus, the contextual attributes that derive from the above are ambiguity, loose structures, network position, and internal knowledge.

When the contextual attributes mentioned above become noticed, a certain schema is developed –one where it is appropriate to seek out somebody with a good network position and who has internal knowledge. The subject position, that is, the position of the one who is accessing the network position and internal knowledge is called *the networker* by us. The networker accesses a schema that helps him or her the to gain a sense of who they should talk to and benefit from tapping into the other person's knowledge and network position. Here is one example of an account where this subject position is visible:

> *Interviewer: And do you have contact with your leader in–between [the official contract meetings]? About what, for instance?*

Interviewee (1): It can be problems I experienced in everyday work, to get her input on how I should do [something]. It can be navigating in the organization, 'who should I talk to?' 'I have a problem with this guy, how should I solve that?' So it is more of the mentoring talks. Not necessarily matters related to the contract. But yeah, life here at CMC.

In this example, the interviewee brought up matters that are outside of the contract in order to get guidance. The interviewee's initiative seemed to be to get help with matters such as direction and guidance about how to comprehend and navigate in the ambiguity and loose structure of CMC. I(1) did this through posing questions that determined what people in the network were relevant to talk to and to understand what paths were available. Yet, it seemed to be more than mere guidance; the interviewee also used the relation to the (senior) leader to tap into the network position of the leader, his internal knowledge, and experience. The behavior of seeking such knowledge also seemed to be encouraged for by CMC as it was a part of the consultants' contract template. Moreover, this behavior can be connected to the importance of social capital. Social capital points to people's network of social relationship within a KIF and makes the consultants' work easier to execute (Swart & Kinnie, 2003; Alvesson, 2004; Hislop, Bosua & Helms, 2018). We argue that this situation creates another schema, as consultants make sense of the contextual attributes and gain accession to a schema (handbook) that helps them in navigating 'the loose structures' by talking to their leader. Thus, the networker navigates in the ambiguity and loose structures of CMC, but also utilizes the leader's network position, and internal knowledge (who to talk to, staffing information, and so on) to for instance get staffed on wanted projects and get guidance.

5.1.3 The tourist – You tell me, I have no clue

The consultancy job at CMC has been, on several accounts, described as ambiguous or at least unclear. This was also observed during one of the meetings that we shadowed, as the consultants discussed how to organize work in order to gain a clearer sense of direction. In this context, however, it concerns ambiguity of work tasks that the consultants are expected to do. There are several examples of this, one of which captures the ambiguity of the work tasks:

Interviewer: And how is your work organized?

Interviewee (10): You tell me, I have no clue. It happens, someone calls, an email comes in, someone approaches me here in the office or in Denmark, and then it goes from there.

In this quote, the interviewee showcased that he did not know how his own work tasks were organized, but he rather let it be determined by contingencies such as emails or calls. As KIFs rarely rely on routine and standardization (Alvesson, 2004) the tasks the consultants were asked to perform may hence be emergent and the organization of tasks may be rather unclear to them. In addition, there are neither formal job descriptions nor structures, making several of the consultants describe the organization as messy:

> *Interviewee (3): I could imagine that there are so many people that would not fit in this organization, because they are used to the structure of different divisions and who is deciding what. All of a sudden, you come in to [CMC] where you can make financial decisions without asking. There is kind of a mentality of: 'we have hired you because you are smart, so then we know you will take smart decisions'. I could imagine that a lot of senior people that come into the organization would say: 'whoa, what the f*ck is this?' Of course, you can feel like you are a little dot in this whole messy organization.*

Here, the interviewee pointed out that this is not an organization for everyone, as the decision–making in CMC was not as clear–cut as in companies with division structures. I(3) contrasted CMC with other workplaces and distinguished it with the example of the interviewee being allowed to make decisions. He explained that the management in CMC trusted him with responsibility due to him 'being smart'. Being smart (knowledgeable) is demanded in the focus contract, but it can also be considered as (same as ambiguity) a characteristic of a KIF, as their workforce is usually highly educated and work is rarely organized in a standardized way (Hislop, Bosua & Helms, 2018). At the same time, he experienced his position as a 'dot in this whole messy organization'. This implies that even though he was in a position to make decisions, CMC was still seen as ambiguous. Hence, the two contextual attributes presented in this quote are knowledge work and ambiguous work tasks.

Based on the contextual properties of knowledge work and ambiguity surrounding work tasks, some interviewees expressed that they need someone who guides them in the right direction in order to reach the goal they have set for themselves. This quote is an example of this:

> *Interviewer: How do you experience that role of contractee? What does it mean to you?*

Interviewee (1): That is in order to put a direction for the coming year. And highlight already now, what would be the most important things I should do to get to reach the goal, which me and the contract leader has set together. It is a very collaborative approach. So there is no job description. Nobody here has a job description. So you do not really know what you are going to achieve and you have to come up with that yourself. For some, it can probably be extremely hard. Because they are used to it or they anticipate that somebody else can tell you what to do, but it is almost never the case. But I like it.

In the quote above, the interviewee pointed out that he, together with his leader, agreed on a direction, but that it was up to him to come up with what his goal should be. He thus determined the goal but utilized the relation to the leader for feedback about his direction and the means of how to reach that goal. This can be connected to Daly (1995), who argues that feedback is important for employees. I(1) then drew upon the non–existent job descriptions to highlight that he did not have set work tasks, and it was up to him to decide on the goal and find a way in the ambiguous setting. Therefore, he was receptive to his leader and asked for support in order to clarify the goal and the way. Thus, feedback is an important contextual attribute within CMC.

The three contextual attributes, knowledge work, ambiguity of work tasks, and feedback – constitute the cues for another schema that hence becomes visible. This schema relates to the subject position we name *the tourist.* Much like a tourist, this subject position is about the consultant oriented towards a certain direction and utilizing the relation to a leader in order to gain guidance and knowledge about the destination. The direction is pre–determined by the consultant alone, yet the leader plays an important role in clarifying the means of getting there. An example of this subject position is showcased below:

Interviewee (2): It is important for me to have a person that can help me with some good examples or tips and tricks for what I can do to go in that direction. So, I am choosing my leader based on where I want to go or if that a person has some experience in an area. Then, I have a person that is good at it and has some tricks from a person that was not born with it but has improved and is taking that journey. For me, it is important to choose a person that has taken the same sort of journey.

In this quote, the sense of direction and the information about it seemed to be key, where the interviewee sought out a leader who had been in the same situation that he had been in. Here, the direction was decided upon by the interviewee, yet the leader had a possibility to influence the ideas of the interviewee. For instance, I(2) sought out ‘good examples or tips and tricks’ and ‘support on what he should do’ from the leader, meaning that although the direction was not altered, the means of getting there and the how–to’s were influenced by the leader. The schematic behavior of the tourist is to seek knowledge and feedback from somebody knowledgeable in order to clarify how to best reach a goal. The possible road towards the desired destination may be have ambiguous instructions (ambiguous work tasks) on how to get there and need clarification. This is comparable to a tourist looking for advice, knowledge and feedback from someone experienced, about a journey and a destination.

5.1.4 The owner – Everybody should succeed

The way the consultants worked at CMC is independent, as they claimed that they were entitled to organize their work according to their own needs and schedules. Upon being asked about how their work was structured, almost all consultants answered that it was up to them to structure it, regardless of their level. An example of what such autonomy entails is presented below:

> *Interviewee (3): So I think that my work is mainly organized by myself. I have the autonomy to decide how I am going to structure days usually. If you look at it from a general perspective, my days are always organized by myself. Yesterday, I spent two hours and it was a Sunday. And the other day, I was working out during lunch for two hours. And so it is very much up to me how I structure my hours at least.*

In this quote, the interviewee gave examples of what he took into account when structuring his days, but still emphasized that he had the autonomy to schedule his work. I(3) was even allowed to be away several hours during the day, and compensate for it during the weekend. This implies then that CMC’s context can be described as autonomous, in line with von Nordenflycht (2010), who describes the context of KIFs as autonomous. However, autonomy in the sense that I(3) is capable of choosing his schedule is not the only interesting insight about CMC’s context. The freedom of structuring the work however he wanted, such as being able to choose to take a longer lunch, can be connected to the term responsible autonomy, (Friedman, 1977). Responsible autonomy implies a is a degree of freedom in task allocation which also comes with implications, as one is held accountable for delivering the work (Lashley, 1999). If I(3) thus chose to take a longer lunch, working the weekend became an option to finish the tasks he was responsible for. Besides autonomy, accountability is also an contextual attribute. These were reoccurring aspects that several consultants highlighted. Yet, when looking closer at these two contextual attributes, a third and fourth emerged. For example, upon being asked what the concept of selecting a leader means, a consultant expressed that:

> *Interviewer: Could you describe for us how your contract relationship works?*
>
> *Interviewee (11): I would say we are more need–based, we call each other when something comes up, but we do not have a regular touch basis. If we need to handle something then we do it but if there is nothing, then we are all fine. It is mostly me initiating the calls, but sometimes it could be that [my leader] has spoken to someone and there's a chance for a project, and then he calls me. [...] Some managers are really strict on: 'What have you done this week?' We have none of those discussions, which is nice. And that is also a part of the way that our firm works, that we are measured on invoicing. Because of that, you are not questioned on your allocation of time.*

I(11) expressed that his leader did not control what he does, because CMC is measured on invoicing. This is in line with Covaleski et al. (1998) who state that KIFs are known to measure their chargeability and this ties into the shared responsibility within CMC. The chargeability was also something which we found during our document analysis, as it was stated in the focus contract that the amount of invoicing was something that the consultants were measured against. Furthermore, I(11) explained that he summoned his leader when the need for advice or support arose in an ad hoc manner, but it seemed as if the interviewee was the one deciding when to summon the leader. He even referred to the relation as 'need–based'. In addition, another interviewee confirmed that work within CMC sorted itself out, based on how important it was:

> *Interviewee (11): I always have a lot of stuff that I have not done yet, but it kind of sorts itself out. If it disappears, eventually it was not important enough and then nobody asks for it, so it never gets done. It happens that people do not show up or they do not call in. If they feel like it they do, if they do not, they do not. [...] So if you have too much need for control, then you will not survive mentally here, you will die.*

The interviewee even stated that it was not possible to work at CMC for those that are in need of control, as ‘you will not survive mentally, you will die’. This points to the fact that the structure and nature of work at CMC is emergent and adhocratic, something which is common for KIFs (e.g. Kanter 1983; Kunda 1992). There is hence a third and fourth contextual attribute besides accountability and autonomy, namely adhocracy and shared responsibility. All these four led us to consider a fourth subject position.

The owner is a subject position in relation to the leader, in a context where there is a degree of autonomy, accountability, adhocracy, and shared responsibility. This is a subject position that is produced by a person who gives accounts of utilizing their leader as a tool to contribute to the overall business results:

> *Interviewer: In what way are you working together with your leader?*
>
> *Interviewee (5): We are not working together on a daily basis, but we are working together on my challenges and therefore, our common foundation for success. I would say he is very accessible, challenging, and helpful. We want to succeed in terms of everybody should succeed, because if everybody becomes partners in this firm, then everybody is a winner. That is the beauty of it. Because if I do not succeed, my leader... or the whole firm will be less successful. […] Me [and my leader] never really talk about the contract, only when it is mandatory. Apart from that, my perspective is that I am trying to do the best that I can, and I would most likely not do anything different if we had more formal follow–ups. So, I try to involve him whenever I feel that it is about me being successful. I do not involve him in terms of 'you are my contract manager; I need to have you with me now'. I involve him when I feel that he can contribute for the sake of us [as a company] being successful. We only talk occasionally; we talk when it feels necessary to talk. Then I try to update him, not on the contract managing part, but about how we are doing as a company.*

The interviewee expressed that the focus contract was less relevant to him, and that he would not behave differently with more formal rules, as he described that he already 'does the best he can'. He explained that he did this, because of his accountability in contributing to the success of the firm, something from which everyone profits. This can be tied to shared responsibility that is described before by Alvesson (2004). Thus, I (5) did not need a leader to motivate him, as he was autonomous and self–starting, such as Løwendahl (2005) argued is common amongst consultants. Furthermore, the interviewee himself determined when he had a touchpoint with his leader, displaying his sense of autonomy to decide whether he needed his leader or not. The interviewee explained that he proactively summoned his leader, either when in need of assistance in adhocratic manner, or when he needed to be challenged in order to succeed. Thus, the interviewee distracted the attention from himself as an individual and put the emphasis on the shared responsibility within the firm. The schematic behavior of the owner can hence be tied to independent and self–starting behavior, but also to being able to determine when and how he needs the leader on a demand and need–basis. Much like an owner, taking on this subject position implies that the consultant can do as he pleases, as he acts as a partner in relation to his leader, rather than taking on a follower position.

5.2 Disidentification

In this chapter, we introduced four subject positions that were produced in the relation between the consultants and their leaders *(phenomenon a)*. A different finding was that, as explained in the previous chapter, the vast majority of accounts concerned disidentification with the notion of followership and/or being a follower *(phenomenon b)*. Therefore, we argue that:

a. the consultants related to their leaders in different ways, yet;

b. within these relations they almost exclusively did *not* relate to the notion of followership or identify with being a follower.

How can we then comprehend the relations between the consultants and their selected 'leaders'? One way of understanding these relations is through the four subject positions *(phenomenon a)*. What is interesting to note, is that all of the subject positions displayed accounts of disidentification *(phenomenon b)*. There hence seems to be a relation between the subject positions *(a)* and the disidentifications *(b)*. Consider for instance *the coachee* who switches the idea of following to 'get support' upon being asked about his relation to the leader. Another example is *the networker* who utilizes the relation to position himself favorable within CMC and gathers useful knowledge, rather than giving any accounts of explicit following. *The tourist* rather seems to be looking for 'tips and tricks' and feedback to get to a goal he sets independently of his leader, instead of following a direction his leader sets. Lastly, *the owner* seems to utilize the importance of reaching business results and the impact of that on the company's success, in order to emphasize his position of an equal in relation to his leader, and bypass the position of being a follower. As asymmetry usually refers to a relation in which one has a leading position and the other a follower (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017), bypassing asymmetry may point towards an attempt to balance the asymmetry in the relation, thereby taking on less of a follower position, and more that of a partner.

Thus, the relation between *phenomenon a* and *b* can be explained by taking a closer look at how subject positions relate to identities. People identify with subject positions that offer useful viewpoints and schemas on how to think and act in concrete situations (Lord & Hall, 2003; Markus, 1977; Törrönen, 2001). That is, whatever subject position is seen as useful in a given context may be accepted (Fairclough, 1992, p.55; Shapiro, 1992, p.3; Törrönen, 2001). For instance, when the context calls for the consultants to deal with heavy workloads, gather extensive social capital, work autonomously and be accountable for business results, that insinuates that a subordinate and inactive position (e.g. a follower position may be interpreted as such) may be regarded unuseful. Additionally, some subject positions may cancel out others. According to (Fairclough, 1992, p.55; Shapiro, 1992, p.3; Törrönen, 2001) identification with subject positions may be a way of taking a (relatively explicit) stance against other subject positions. In our case, the position that seemed to be downplayed was the one of a follower, whereby four other, more favorable subject positions were emphasized by the consultants. Another explanation may be one in line with Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson (2017), who state that if one sees themselves as autonomous, such a view may clash, and create tension with the idea of being a follower. Since the context of CMC asks for consultants to execute their work autonomously, it becomes difficult to combine this with being in the position of a follower. Additionally, if problematic stereotype and negative connotations surround a position, it seems plausible that people will be more prone to disidentify with it (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). Thus, if a subject position is seen as neither useful nor attractive, individuals may distance themselves from it and imposing such positions on others may prove to have limited value.

Perhaps here, the issue with pigeonholing individuals in categories such as leaders and followers shows its limitations (Alvesson, 2019; Ford & Harding, 2015). Indeed, our findings arguably point to the complexity of the human subject that complicates such categorizations, something that Ford and Harding (2015) argue is a perspective that has been missing in leadership (and followership) literature. Possibly, expecting that people subjugate to follower positions just because a contract calls for that may be a simplistic presumption about what followership is.

Ford and Harding (2015) also go on to question the purpose of studying followers, arguing that research putting people in follower identities or subject positions cause their participants to 'constitute themselves as followers to conform with the requirements of the research study' (p.7). While we agree with them in a sense that such pigeonholing of identities may render unwanted results, we question the statement that participants always 'conform' in such ways. Our study has indeed shown that individuals may disidentify with follower positions, making it problematic to claim that followership happens (at least in the sense that DeRue and Ashford, 2010 theorized). However, accounts of disidentification can uncover different meanings, as in our case they pointed us towards alternative subject positions that seemed to replace followership, ultimately revealing how the consultants related to and thought of the idea of followership.

5.3 Summary and concluding remarks

So far, we argued that the consultants take on subject positions and that they disidentify with the idea of being a follower – two seemingly unrelated phenomena. However, these two findings were crucial in order to point out our mystery. When we compare these two side by side, consultants seem to have a relation to their leader on one hand, but disidentify with the notion of followership *within* that same relation on the other hand. This is contradictory, since firstly, the context of CMC highly implies that consultants are positioned as followers in those relations. Secondly, someone who has a relation to a leader is usually regarded as being (in) a follower (position), at least according to research on followership (Uhl–Bien, et al., 2014).

Therefore, we explored the accounts the consultants gave us more in–depth, by looking at the interplay between contextual attributes and schema, a combination which research has previously used to study social constructions (e.g. Bresnen, 1995; Carsten et al., 2010). We began with identifying the contextual attributes and schemas. These served as a lens to pinpoint the four subject positions –the networker, the coachee, the tourist and the owner. All may be found summarized in the matrix below.

Subject positions → Dimensions ↓	Coachee	Networker	Tourist	Owner
Disidentification	Reforming: 'Following means getting support'	Downplaying: 'I only use my leader for his network'	Bypassing: 'I only need tips and trick, not a direction'	Distancing: 'I am a partner, and I do not follow'
Contextual attributes	Shared responsibility, Workload	Ambiguity, Loose structures, Network position, Organizational knowledge	Ambiguity, Knowledge work, Feedback	Accountability, Adhocracy, Autonomy, Shared responsibility
Schematic behavior	Asking for support	Navigating the organization	Demanding guidance	Summoning the leader

Matrix 5.1

As displayed in matrix 5.1, there are different dimensions that relate to the subject positions, which are the disidentification, the contextual attributes, and the schematic behavior. Although the dimensions differ per subject position, some overlap may be spotted (e.g. both the networker and the tourist share the contextual attribute of ambiguity). Since these are based on accounts of how the consultants in CMC construct followership, the subject positions should not be treated as a means of categorizing people in four pigeonholes, or as 'four roles of followers'. In addition, the fact that we present four subject positions, they ought not to be taken as any sort of absolute representation of followership within CMC. Instead, our findings point to the importance of context, interpretation and fluidity of social constructions. Followership is hence neither isolated from its surroundings, nor is it a one(four)–size fits all. Alternatively, followership is a phenomenon which can be interpreted and acted upon in various ways dependent upon individual points of reference and context. Thus, it seems as if consultants construct followership in varying ways, just as Carsten et al., (2010) found about followership and Bresnen (1995) found about leadership.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter we aim to present the reader with the conclusion of our research, and thereby answer our research question. Our conclusion consists of a research contribution, the limitations of our research, and the implications those may have for future research. These derived from our theory, method, empirical findings and the discussion in the previous chapters.

6.1 Research contribution

The purpose behind our study was to understand how individuals socially construct followership in a management consultancy. Consequently, the following question was the guiding light throughout our thesis:

How is followership socially constructed within a management consultancy?

To fulfill the purpose of our research and answer of our research question, we explored the relations between the consultants and their leaders. We did this by asking the consultants for accounts of the relation to their leaders and what the notion of followership meant to them. These accounts lead us to four subject positions that we named the coachee, the networker, the tourist, and the owner. Thereby we used contextual attributes and schemas as a lens to spot the subject positions. Based on our findings we can state that *a)* the consultants related to their leaders in different ways, yet *b)* within these relations they did *not* relate to the notion of followership or identify with being a follower.

What is interesting to note, is that disidentification happened despite of the fact that the context of the CMC implied that consultants were placed in follower positions. With context, we refer to the environment of a management consultancy and the 'select your own leader'–concept that allowed the consultants to pick their own leaders. While such a concept would arguably put the consultant that select a leader in a follower position, the majority of the consultants still abstained from talking about themselves as followers. Rather, they reformed, downplayed, bypassed and/or distanced themselves from the position of being a follower.

Subsequently, as there was a relation between the two phenomena (subject positions *a)*, and disidentification *b)*), we went on to clarify this relation by examining how subject positions related to identities. We found that if a subject position is seen as unuseful or unattractive, which is most likely the case with a follower position, disidentification with a subject position may happen. Hence, the expectation that people submit themselves to a follower position, solely due to a contract that implies they are followers, is too simplistic. Rather, followership is a phenomenon which can be interpreted and acted upon in various ways dependent upon individual points of reference and context. For example, as instead of constructing followership in a unanimous way, consultants took upon different subject positions, depending on their environment. We therefore abstain from arguing that these constructions are in any way absolute. Furthermore, as consultants construct followership in varying ways, the contextual attributes, together with the schemas and subject positions may offer a perspective for academics and practitioners on to understand how followership is socially constructed. The subject positions have implications for followership research, as it may be a suggestion to engage in more interpretative research instead of merely imposing roles or identities upon followers. Our research arguably shows that people have varying interpretations and meanings surrounding followership, and thus sticking with rigid and generalized frameworks for what followership is may be less fruitful when trying to unpack and make sense out of it.

In addition, while we thus agree with Ford and Harding (2015) that pigeonholing people in follower positions renders unwanted results, we would like to question whether or not participants always comply to acts of imposed categorization by researchers. We challenge that assumption because in our case, the consultants thus did not accept being put in a follower position, either by us as researchers, or by the concept of the company. On the contrary, accounts of disidentification with a follower position did prove useful, as they uncovered different meanings about followership, which made us aware of other subject positions than that of a follower. Thus, disidentification served as a lens to enable us to spot other social constructions, and therefore, the difference here is that, instead of imposing either identities or roles in advance we used them to make sense out of the empirical material. Therefore we can argue that completely dismissing research about followers or followership because of the imposing effect it renders would be an assumption that is faulty, yet solely considering positions of a follower as a role when trying to unpack followership is also not fruitful.

6.2 Research limitations

The drawback of doing a case study is that generalization may be impossible (Yin, 2013), which may limit the implications of our findings. To put it simply, generalizing them to a broader context may be difficult. Also, relying upon interpreting accounts of people to build an analysis, ultimately limited us to explore the meanings and assumptions attached to the concept of followership. That is, we can explore the idea people hold about followership, however such an approach blinds us from seeing how such things translate into behavior and processes in organizations. We may thus interpret what the participants *say* that they do, but our approach has the shortcoming of not being able to account for work practices that also relate to followership (what participants actually *do* in practice). Complementing with other methodologies such as extensive participative observations may therefore render more ways in which followership can be unpacked.

Although our thesis is concerned with subjective accounts of how consultants speak about followership and construct it, we do not necessarily see subjectivity as a deficiency. One cannot escape subjectivity, but one can use it as a resource or a sense of imagination to present new insights (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011). Tapping into others' subjectivities, such as listening to consultants' assumptions and meanings is thus not a means of reporting an objective or unanimous view of followership, but it rather poses new ideas and assumptions that can expand the view that we have on current followership theory. Consequently, we use these limitations as well as our findings to propose future research possibilities in the following section, that can expand on our findings regarding the social construction of followership.

6.3 Implications for future research

As organizations all differ in their settings, this is a factor to consider for future research. For example, the context of our research was situated within company that had characteristics similar to a professional service firm. One of the implications of our setting was thus that there were not many official reporting systems, and that we had a unique setting in regard to the leadership (and followership) encouragement by the company. Research may hence benefit from looking into the social construction of followership in a setting where there are standardized reporting systems – that is, where there are more subordinates and managers. As we have seen in our research, context is a significant factor for how employees make sense out of situations, thus, conducting such a research in a setting with formal reporting systems may provide different perspectives on the social construction of followership.

Furthermore, future research should consider zooming in on leader–follower relations in practice. Behavior is difficult to capture in accounts that derive from interviews, and may also be faulty, as results derive from given *accounts of behavior* rather than from observed behavior. Therefore, observations could be a suggested implication, as it may be able to encompass for behavior in such a relation. Nonetheless, we hope that this thesis has helped to demonstrate how studying constructions in greater detail can encompass for the rich and varying organizational life and bring about interest in the different social constructions of followership in a management consultancy.

7. Appendix 1 – Interview guide

Opening questions:

Regarding the interviewee's biography and background within and/or outside the organization.

What does your daily work entail?

Please describe your major tasks and responsibilities within the team/organization.

How would you say your major tasks and responsibilities are organized within groups (project/team)?

And who (else) influences how you organize your work?

Deeper questions:

Is someone here at work inspiring you? If so, who, when and how?

How is the view of yourself influenced? Why?

What does the notion of leadership mean to you?

How do you experience the leadership concept of CMC?

How would you say you the 'select your own leader'–concept applies to you?

- Could you give us a practical example of this?
- How do you experience this

What would your preferred position look like within this concept?

What does the notion of followership mean to you?

- What is your experience of this within your position?
- Could you give us a practical example of this?

If the conversations turn to the focus contract sessions (the most tangible output of the 'select your own leader'–concept)

How do you assess the focus/contract session?

Closing question:

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Informative questions (extra):

Could you describe the organizational structure of CMC?

Could you describe the leadership concept of CMC?

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