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# Embracing relational vulnerabilities at the top: a study of managerial identity work amidst the insecurities of the self

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to revitalise the concept of relational vulnerability in advancing the theory of managerial identity work. Drawing on 35 semi-structured interviews and 12 podcast interviews with top managers in Finland, we identify two entwined themes through which top managers practise identity work by negotiating their vulnerabilities in the workplace. Our study illustrates the embodied subtlety of relational vulnerabilities in top managers' identity negotiations by showing they can function as a tool for the managers' professional development. Our study contributes to the broader discussion on a more humane working life by investigating the ways in which top managers can foster workplaces in which vulnerabilities are used as a starting point for improvement rather than as a tool for disparaging the self and the others. This is an aspect of managerial identity work that deserves to be more profoundly considered in both academic debate and managerial practice.

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Managerial identity work; relational vulnerability; managerial vulnerability; embodiment; top managers; humane working life

## Introduction

Well, it doesn't consist of what many imagine when trying to be the right kind of brave and strong leader. You don't get far by thinking this. In my view, the phrase 'subordinates make the leader' is the right way to go. How to get there? It's all about honesty in everything you do. Even if you make mistakes, everybody makes them. Then be honest about them and shoulder the responsibility of your mistakes. (Company D, interview 5)

We live in a turbulent world that is characterised by economic, political, social, and environmental volatility and vulnerabilities affecting the organisational, group, and individual levels. In response to this turbulence, leading businesses and people have been calling for new identity-crafting from employees and managers. Brown (2022) suggests identity work as a reflexive process in which identities are actively worked on via social interaction, thus rendering visible the relational aspect of managerial identity work. As rendered visible in the opening vignette, this paper focuses on aspects of managerial identity work that are underdeveloped in the literature: the embodied honesty with oneself that can be experienced when working on the self through relational vulnerabilities. The quotation above represents our core argument: embracing managerial vulnerabilities and understanding their fundamentally embodied and intercorporeal nature (Pullen and Vachhani 2021) in organisations in considerate ways can help to better achieve

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organisational goals and employee satisfaction. Thus, the following questions are explored in this paper: How do top managers engage in subtle identity work through actively realising their relational vulnerabilities, and what kinds of effects do these processes have on their organisations? How can managers foster environments in which mistakes and weaknesses are used as a starting point for improvement rather than as a target of punitive measures?

There is an ever-growing and multifaceted discussion on managerial identity work in the field of organisation studies (see, e.g. Hay 2014; Costas and Kärreman 2016; Petriglieri, Petriglieri, and Wood 2018; Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020; see also the recent review of identity work literature in organisation and management studies by Brown 2022), defined here as a reflexive and ongoing self-project (Bolander, Holmberg, and Fellbom 2019; Cherrier and Murray 2007). In the research literature, subjectively construed identities are conceived as ‘the meanings that individuals reflexively attach to themselves (Brown 2015, 23) and may be understood as individuals’ answers to fundamental existential questions, such as ‘Who am I?’, ‘Who do I want to become?’, and ‘How should I act?’ (Brown 2022). Most of the literature on managerial identity work focuses on how the identities of participants are developed, strengthened, and repaired. The differing versions of the self represent a compelling arena to make sense of, as not much is known about how legitimate versions of selves constructed in relation to others – perhaps made legitimate because the observation that ‘It is not just me who is saying this’ seems to matter in our study.

From an academic perspective, managerial work has been widely ‘constructed as an activity of brains without bodies’ (Sinclair 2005, 402), and vulnerability is commonly understood as a rather negative concept in the organisation studies literature, often related to weakness, dependency, and powerlessness. Moreover, in the dominant constructions of leaders, they are expected to be ‘bodiless’, in control and strong – not vulnerable (Corlett, Mavin, and Beech 2019). Individuals become equipped and, with agency, can decide ‘whether to be different (e.g. vulnerable) or not (e.g. invulnerable) at work’ (Corlett, Ruane, and Mavin 2021, 2). Yet, vulnerability may have positive outcomes in terms of performance and the fostering of a supportive work culture.

Corlett, Mavin, and Beech (2019, 557) theorise vulnerability as a relational activity comprising ‘processes of recognising and claiming vulnerability, developing social support to share vulnerability with trusted others and recognising alternative ways of conceptualising and responding to vulnerability.’ This is the understanding of vulnerability on which our study is focused. This paper highlights how top managers experience moments of deconstruction when reflecting on themselves and their relationships with colleagues and subordinates (Iszatt-White, Kempster, and Carroll 2017; Nicholson and Carroll 2013).

The empirical material in this study is drawn from interviews with 35 top Finnish executives in heavy industries who experienced and attempted to manage market liberalisation in the 1990s. The context of market liberalisation is unique because it demonstrates a transition phase in which novel and more international markets have opened up a new avenue for engaging in new forms of identity work and in which managers are therefore exposed to many kinds of relational vulnerabilities in their workplace. Therefore, in our paper, we are especially interested in how these top managers seem resolute in their existing thinking patterns, with strong and established positions to the managers themselves in their fields. The teasing out of the relational vulnerabilities of these managers – who possess a very strong historical background and a seemingly strong sense of self – is especially interesting starting point of the study. In addition to the interview material, we use 12 interviews from the timely Finnish podcast series, *Leadcast*, founded in 2019. In this business podcast, two female lawyers converse with inspiring top managers about their career paths and leadership. We decided to combine the two data sets; we first worked on them separately but soon noticed that the managers from two distinct generations actually talked about the same phenomena – managerial identities and vulnerabilities. It was surprising to observe the top managers speak about how their work and vulnerabilities had not changed over time. However, in academia, the existing explorations about the relation between identity work and vulnerability in top managers’ work are limited.

This article proceeds as follows. First, we frame our empirical study by introducing the literature on managerial identity work and relational vulnerability. Next, we outline our methodological

choices and detail our empirical material. Then, we present our research material and interpretations regarding two topics: (1) letting go of the ideals of managerial solitude in favour of relationships with others and (2) overcoming the need to bolster one's identity through a willingness to accept unachieved perfection and eternal incompleteness. We relate our findings to findings from the current literature by following a description of our two data themes. Finally, we discuss some of the implications of these findings in advancing our understanding of management practice, how to study it, and its practical implications. We conclude by presenting directions for future research that could further illuminate the value of recognising relational vulnerabilities in management development processes.

## Theoretical background

### *Previous literature on managerial identity work*

Identity is a well-established construct in critical management studies (see Brown 2022; Brown and Lewis 2011; Collinson 2003), and it is becoming so in critical leadership studies (Carroll and Levy 2010). Such studies tend to build on Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) 'identity work' framework, which revolves around an interplay between self-identity (the self as reflexively understood), identity work (the ongoing struggle to achieve self-identity), and identity regulation (the often tacit adoption of discourses and practices that shape certain identities above others). This framework is useful for our study because it highlights identity work as a reflexive and ongoing project (Bolander, Holmberg, and Fellbom 2019; Driver 2019; Cherrier and Murray 2007; Giddens 1991), aiming to produce interpretations and an understanding of the self. Most of the research concerning identity work in the field of organisation studies tend to neglect its affective and material nature (Aslan 2016). Contemporary workplaces, characterised by flexibility, complexity and chaos, have forced the static conceptualisation of identity to move towards a more reflexive, relational understandings of it. This has meaningful implications for how people work and how management occurs: people, including managers, feel the need to establish a sense of coherent self in times of ambiguity and uncertainty (Järventie-Thesleff and Tienari, 2016, 237).

The discussions of managerial identity (Hay 2014; Koveshnikov, Vaara, and Ehrnrooth 2016; Miszenko, Guenter, and Day 2017; Warhurst and Black 2017; Watson 2009) and managerial identity work (Bolander, Holmberg, and Fellbom 2019; Bresnen et al. 2019; Brown 2022; 2015; Brown et al. 2021; Caza, Vough, and Puranik 2018; Cuganesan 2017; Gjerde and Alvesson 2020; Watson 2008) often define identity as a process through which managers construct a sense of the self and the other (Cuganesan 2017; Koveshnikov, Vaara, and Ehrnrooth 2016, 1354) in relation to the surrounding context. As Petriglieri, Petriglieri, and Wood (2018) found in their study on temporary identity workspaces of managers, managerial identity work involved 'developing a coherent understanding of the self in relation to others and to the institution that anchored participants to their current organization while preparing them for future ones' (479). Hence, in a turbulent world, managers must achieve a degree of coherence in their self-conception to address challenges and the spectrum of different opinions around them (Bresnen et al. 2019), as well as to succeed in their work by learning to become managers (Bolander, Holmberg, and Fellbom 2019). As Koveshnikov, Vaara, and Ehrnrooth (2016, 1353) argued, 'a key part of this identity work is related to cultural stereotypes', defined as context-dependent attributions of belonging to a certain social group (Macrae and Bodenhausen 2000), as identity work invokes the use and enactment of them in different organisational settings (Koveshnikov, Vaara, and Ehrnrooth 2016).

Scholars of managerial identity work have mostly focused on its rational side (Gagnon 2008), paying less attention to how embodied sensations or emotions affect the process of managerial identity work in relational ways (Petriglieri, Petriglieri, and Wood 2018). Therefore, exploring managerial identity work from the conceptual lens of relational vulnerabilities opens up new paths for understanding the ways in which senses, emotions, and embodied interaction with others form

the core of managerial identity work. In the next section, we will more thoroughly discuss what is already known about the theoretical concept of relational vulnerability.

### ***On the concept of relational vulnerability***

The concept of vulnerability is derived from the Latin word *vulnus* ('wound') and means the 'individual's capacity to be open to a variety of wounds' (Wainwright and Williams 2005, 29). Vulnerability is traditionally understood as being related to weakness, dependency, and powerlessness (Gilson 2014). Conventional understandings of vulnerability also typically conceive it as a property shared by all (Butler et al. 2016). In this view, all human beings can be considered vulnerable. These perspectives contrast with established sociocultural expectations of managers within organisations as being perfect, in control, strong, always correct, and knowledgeable (Corlett, Mavin, and Beech 2019). Vulnerability is also closely related to notions of insecurity, explored, for example, by Roskies and Louis-Guerin (1990), who understood managerial insecurity as a 'chronic, ambiguous threat' (345). However, this reductive, negative view of vulnerability leads to problematic implications, risking an ethical responsiveness to vulnerability and thus preventing the concept from possessing the normative value many theorists wish it to have (Gilson 2014).

This paper aims to refocus the existing understanding of vulnerability towards something more than a lamentable weakness that should be overcome (Käll 2016). Instead, we theorise vulnerability as an embodied ability, that entails both painful and joyful aspects of meaningful work (Satama, Biehl, and Helin 2022). In this paper, we understand vulnerability as a sensible capacity to authentically relate to others (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011; Satama 2016), and view it as a fundamentally embodied concept. Vulnerability is thus a *pre-condition* for an individual's ability to connect with others in humane ways (Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds 2014). By following Wainwright and Williams (2005, 29), and the more recent study on relational vulnerabilities by Johansson and Wickström (2023), we understand relational vulnerability as the intrinsic ability of humans to be open to their experiences, reflect upon their physical and mental states of existence, and navigate their lives.

Our study thus sees the value of vulnerability in its openness to the world and others as part of life itself (see Butler et al. 2016, 29). The notion of building relationships and establishing trust through vulnerability has also tentatively entered the leadership research agenda (Ladkin 2013; Brescoll 2016). In this paper, we aim to uncover the ways in which managers and policymakers can foster environments in which mistakes and weaknesses are used as a starting point for improvement and innovation rather than as the target of punitive measures. Redefining vulnerability as relational vulnerability, which entails walking the line between oversharing and professionalism, could lead to the acceptance of responsibility, caring for others, and the discovery of new ways of managing in the workplace. In line with Corlett, Mavin, and Beech (2019, 572; Cunliffe 2008) we find sharing vulnerability as a way of learning through relational processes and therefore as an exceptionally important means for managerial identity development in contemporary working life.

In our view, vulnerability is an aspect that structures our lives and belongs to everybody. It is both a process and a product of societal and cultural acts. In organisation studies, vulnerability is commonly understood as entirely negative and related to weakness, dependency and powerlessness; in the dominant constructions, leaders are expected to be in control and strong, not vulnerable (Corlett, Mavin, and Beech 2019), as the opening quote of this part also renders visible. Conceptually, vulnerability attaches, for example, to notions of passion, entailing both joyful and wounding aspects (Satama, Biehl, and Helin 2022), and to suffering as a shared experience (Stowell and Warren 2018). However, literature relating vulnerability specifically to managerial identity and identity work is limited (for exceptions, see Corlett, Mavin, and Beech 2019; Hay 2014; Thomas and Linstead 2002; Warhurst 2011).

Brown (2010) famously equated vulnerability to honesty, humility and non-arrogance, helping to build deeper connections with people. However, these efforts at mutual trust-building are exaggerated by the media, where vulnerability is very much on display: in our therapeutic and confessional

'emotion economy' (Gridstaff and Murray 2015), celebrities (e.g. the Kardashians) and ordinary people are unfiltered, uncensored and open about personal feelings, mobilising them to awareness and for product marketing. Establishing trust and building relationships through sharing negative emotions has also tentatively entered the leadership research agenda (Brescoll 2016; Hay 2014; Ladkin and Taylor 2010).

As a key field in understanding how people are managed in responsible ways in contemporary work life, management and organisation studies needs to more deeply examine vulnerable relationships at work through further research. The main objective of our study is therefore to conceptualise relational vulnerability as an embodied and empowering process within managerial identity work, and by doing so, to advance a more humane working life, which is affluent, considers different life situations and is managed in socially sustainable ways. Next, we turn to the methodology of our study.

## Methodology

### Research material

Our case study explores the identity-making processes of 47 Finnish top executives in globally operating industries. It consists of two interview datasets. The first round of interviews explores the identity-making processes of 35 Finnish top executives in globally operating metal and forestry industries asking how they managed a fundamental change from national markets to global industries in the context of the financial and market liberalisation since the 1980s. Top managers of these MNCs are well known in Finnish business media and members of the Finnish business elite. This first data set was part of a larger multidisciplinary research project focused on the arrival and translation of management ideas in Finland during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including during market liberalisation. Having the idea of this paper on mind, the first author of this paper asked for the second author of the paper to have a permission to look at this data set from the perspective of relational, managerial vulnerabilities.

Between December 2007 and March 2008, the second author interviewed 35 senior managers from four large corporations, which were listed on the stock exchange (NASDAQ OMX Helsinki). She was particularly interested in the rise of market-driven management ideas and practices, and thus chose to interview experienced executives who had lived through the market-driven changes in their respective industries in recent decades, in order to understand the identity-making processes in the times of organisational and societal transformation, as according Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003), with the introduction of novel practices the construction of 'the self' in situations changes, because their daily work, 'managing', is changing (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003). All managers interviewed were currently or previously members of the board of directors, leading strategic positions in their organisations (see Table 1 for details).

To complement the older interviews with 35 top managers of MNCs, we use 12 recent interviews from one of the most popular Finnish podcast series, 'Leadcast', founded in May 2019, in order to explore the identity-making processes of current top managers of MNC's. In the business podcast 'Leadcast', two women lawyers conversate with inspiring top managers about their career paths and leadership, and the podcast is available online for free. We asked the podcast owners for permission to use

**Table 1.** Interviewees of the MNCs.

Interviewees	Company A	Company B	Company C	Company D	Total
CEO/General director	3	3	2	2	10
Chief personnel manager	3	2	1	–	6
Chief financial officer	4	1	1	–	6
Chief R&D manager	2	2	1	1	6
Chair of the company board	3	1	2	1	7
Total number of interviews	15	9	7	4	35

their interviews as research material in this study, and they agreed to it. The top managers' podcast interviews used for this study consist of top managers working in large, international companies from various business fields, including many from forestry and metal industries (please see [Table 2](#) for details). The interviews lasted for one hour each, and they were recorded between 2019 and 2022.

As with the first set of interviews, the idea was to explore top managers from field of business that operate globally, as the most international companies and fields are likely to be introduced to the new ideas first. The novel ideas and practices impact top managers' work practices and thus probably require identity work as the construction of 'the self' in situations changes because the top managers daily work of managing changes (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003). Our idea in combining these two different interview sets was to compare the older interview material of top managers of MNC's from 2008 to 2009 to the recent podcast interview material with top managers of contemporary MNC's from 2019, and by doing so, to gain rich and multi-faceted understanding of the identity-negotiations and their entwinement to relational vulnerabilities over time. Hence, we were interested *both*, in differences and similarities in terms of the identity-making processes of top managers of MNC's that operate in the global businesses, and are thus introduced with the latest management ideas and practices. In these identity-negotiation processes, also the relational vulnerabilities become visible and thus possible to study further.

The interviewees in both interview datasets represented several generations of managers: the youngest were in their forties, the oldest approaching their nineties. Many of the former – and some of the present – managers had worked in the company since the 1960s; some of them had started as early as in the 1950s. Older manager generations had often started in the company as trainees and had been promoted to more demanding posts, finally ending up as members of executive groups or even chief executive officers. The older managers with extensive careers within the company had a long historical perspective and a multifaceted outlook regarding the management of their company. This was also a clear difference compared to recently recruited managers: for most of them, their post as a member of the executive group or even chief executive officer was their first post in the company.

To elicit these experiences, we first reanalysed 35 semi-structured interviews conducted with top managers of MNC's in 2008 and 2009, including chief executive officers, general directors, chief personnel managers, financial directors, and research and development managers. All managers interviewed were currently or previously members of the board of directors, leading strategic positions in their organisations (see [Table 1](#) for details). Interviews were held on company premises or at the interviewees' homes, whichever the interviewee preferred. Most interviews lasted approximately 80 minutes, with some extending to 100 minutes. There was only one woman among the respondents, accurately depicting the presence of women in the top management of Finnish metal and forest industry companies at the time. All interviews were recorded with the respondents' consent and transcribed.

**Table 2.** Podcast interviewees.

	Title	Business field/industry	Male/female
Manager 1	Financial manager	Metal industry	Female
Manager 2	Communication and brand manager	Paper industry	Female
Manager 3	Chair of the company boards	Finance and paper industries	Male
Manager 4	CEO	Paper Industry	Male
Manager 5	Chair and board member	Several Nordic public and private companies	Female
Manager 6	Chair of the company board	Information technology	Male
Manager 7	CEO	Creative industries	Female
Manager 8	Chair of the company board	Banking	Male
Manager 9	CEO	Operational competence	Female
Manager 10	Chair and board member	Creative industries	Male
Manager 11	Industrial counsellor	Several MNC's from various fields	Male
Manager 12	CEO	Medical industry	Female

When interviewing the first dataset of executives, the second author asked them to look back on the changes that had taken place in their work over the course of their careers. She also asked the managers to describe the critical turning points in their company's history and what these implied in practice for the business and its management, as well as for their managerial selves. The identity-negotiations and managerial vulnerabilities amidst the adoption of new management ideas and practices became visible in several ways in the interviews, described in the findings section of this paper.

The metal and forestry industries were selected for the focus of the first dataset because studying them opens up the opportunity to achieve the longest historical perspective of Finnish management. However, in recent decades, all the companies in these sectors have been transformed due to the globalisation of economic markets and the abolition of trade barriers (Lilja and Tainio 1996). With financial liberalisation in the 1980s, foreign investments in Finnish firms grew steadily (Lilja and Tainio 1996). At the same time, the companies experienced major structural transformations: They grew rapidly in size, adopted new organisational models and took steps towards internationalisation emerging as global leaders in their lines of business (Hjerppe and Larsson, 2006).

Our idea in combining these two different interview sets was to analyse identity-making processes of top managers that happen apart from time and context of management. We were interested *both*, in differences and similarities in terms of the identity-making processes of top managers of MNC's that operate in the global businesses, and are thus introduced with the latest management ideas and practices. It was surprising to notice how top managers speak about how their work and vulnerabilities had *not* changed over time, so the ideas of the insecurities of the self were already there. In the following section, we explain how we conducted the analysis of our study in practice.

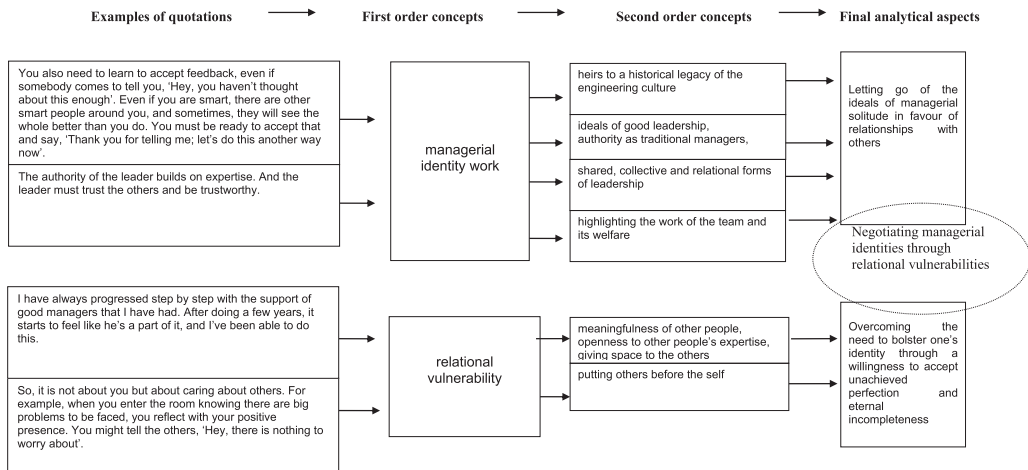
## Analysis

In our analysis, we are interested in understanding how top managers engage in identity work through working on their vulnerabilities in relational ways, that is, the construction of 'the self' in situations in which their daily work, 'managing', is changing with the introduction of novel practices (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003) and thus raising relational vulnerabilities in their thinking and being with others.

We began the analysis with a close reading of all 35 top managers' interviews and 12 top managers' podcast interviews. We conducted our analysis in the spirit of Gioian analysis (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013; Corley and Gioia, 2004). The Gioian analysis proceeds from a full set of first-order terms and second-order themes and aggregate dimensions, which form a basis for building a data structure (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013; Corley and Gioia 2004). Following Gioia et al. analysis (2013), the categories and themes emerged from the research material and were grouped into a data structure (see Figure 1). The data structure allows us to organise our interview material into a visual aid, which shows 'a graphic representation of how we progressed from raw data to terms and themes in conducting the analyses' (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013, 20). This enhances rigour in qualitative research (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013; Tracy 2010).

In practice, we began our analysis by reading the interview materials separately and selected quotations that *described the top managers' identity-making processes*. We coded the interview data with the aid of Atlas.ti software, using the notes from the initial readings of the text as a starting point. After this, we read the data again theme by theme. At this stage, the themes and the coding became clearer, and linkages between the themes started to take form. We then listed the most popular themes and coded the themes accordingly, with a content – related name. After reading the coded interviews again, we then merged the codes which had a similar content. As a result, we classified the selected quotes into two broad categories (first-order codes) – *managerial identity work* and *relational vulnerability* – which emerged from the research material.





**Figure 1.** Analysis process in the spirit of the Gioian data structure.

After this, we carefully examined these to achieve consensus on the selection and primary analysis; it was clear that we had identified similar kinds of specific, thematic categories, such as *historical protection versus openness to the future*, in the research material. We then compared the results to our initial postulation and grouped them. The final list of codes emerged from the text during the coding process. At the end of the coding process, most of the mass of text was assigned at least one code. All in all, the data set is rich and varied, but saturated as well. Our idea was to move back and forth between the research material and the emerging structure of the theoretical arguments (Locke 2001). Via collective reflection (cf. Gutzan and Tuckermann 2019), the analysis was developed reflexively into the final two perspectives that, in our view, captured the ways the top managers practised identity work via their vulnerabilities relationally, namely: (1) *letting go of the ideals of managerial strength and solitude towards sensible relationality and expertise with others*, and (2) *overcoming the need of bolstering one's identity by willing to accept the continuous incompleteness* (See Figure 1).

### **Self-reflection and evaluation of research conducted and limitations**

We drew on Tracy's framework for evaluating the quality of qualitative research throughout our study. According to Tracy (2010), internal validity and reliability in qualitative research arise from several practices. Tracy (2010) presents eight key criteria by which qualitative research can be evaluated. They are: (1) relevant topic, (2) accuracy (rich rigour), (3) sincerity, (4) credibility (5) resonance, (6) significance of contribution (7) ethics and (8) appropriateness (meaningful consistency). There are also other evaluation frameworks for qualitative research and for case studies (Yin 2014).

There is limited research on the topic of managerial identity work from the perspective of relational vulnerabilities. This is where Tracy's (2010) criterion, the significance of the contribution, both theoretical and practical one, is realised. In order to ensure research reliability, we followed Gioia et al.'s (2013) methodology and explained the analysis process in detail. Also, in order to accomplish rich rigour and credibility, we used direct quotations to achieve a thick description of the phenomenon (Korin, Seeck, and Liikamaa 2023; Merriam and Tisdell 2016) as well as to enable the reader to experience the connection between the interviewees' speech and its interpretation (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013). We have explained the theoretical constructions of the research accurately, including how they relate to each other, in order to also increase the credibility of the research (cf. Tracy 2010, credibility) and coherence (cf. Tracy 2010, Meaningful coherence). We have selected methods that are suitable for answering the research questions, also in order to enable in credibility and especially accuracy (rich rigour) (Tracy 2010, 840). We have also reflected

our own position as researchers, and used a Gioian analysis method in order to make our analysis transparent (cf. Tracy 2010, sincerity and ethics). Following Tracy's criteria (2010), we believe, our study meets several criteria, such as valuable topic, rich rigour and credibility. However, there is always room for improvement, we could have increased our accuracy by explaining the choices and alternatives of the method in more detail. The results of this qualitative study are not generalizable to other contexts, but they do provide analytic generalisations (Yin 2014) and relevant principles (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013) to the literature on managerial identity work and managerial vulnerabilities.

Qualitative research is based on many different theoretical approaches (e.g. ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, constructionism, phenomenology). These different approaches influence the way qualitative research is understood and form the analytical framework that guides data collection and data analysis. After all, the underlying theory can significantly influence the understanding of the unit of analysis (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). It is therefore necessary that research theory and research practices support each other (Tracy 2010). Mainly, our methods are, according to Burrell and Morgan's (1979) framework, in the interpretive paradigm, relying on constructionist epistemology.

With regard to limitations of the study, the most obvious limitation of the empirical material is that all the respondents were top managers or chairpersons of company boards and hence have a limited perspective of organisational culture and by focusing only on the top managers, the voice of the employees remains missing. This kind of approach certainly underrates the experience of shop-floor employees and distinct cultures in various parts of MNCs (see Alvesson 1987, 6). However, many of the respondents had worked in numerous positions and had experience of several organisational levels. They also had various standpoints in the organisation as they represented different branches of management. Another important point to keep in mind is that in both datasets the interviewee accounts were retrospective – the interviewees were recalling events that had happened to them in the past over a long period of time, or had heard of or learned about from others.

## **The embodied negotiation of top managers' selves by working on relational vulnerabilities: two complementary themes**

### ***Overcoming the need to bolster one's professionalism by understanding vulnerable incompleteness of self as a source of embodied learning at work***

Based on the analysis, we identified two themes through which top managers worked on the relational vulnerabilities and thus practiced identity work in embodied ways. We wish to highlight how the two themes described here are highly interrelated and partly overlapping. Therefore, no clear or simple boundaries between the two themes can be made although the two themes are discussed separately here. In the first part of our analysis, we illustrate how the top managers continuously referred to unachieved perfection of their professional selves – of which one materialisation seemed to be education, a traditional means of bolstering one's identity by emphasising experience. In this first theme identified, the managers seemed to work on their personal experiences and learn to know truly who they are as managers in order to be able to reflect their managerial selves in relation to the others. For example, one top manager described his *little-by-little approach to his career development* as follows:

I have always progressed step-by-step with the support of good managers that I have had. After doing a few years, it starts to feel like he [the manager] a part of it, and I've been able to do this. And you start thinking "Hey, there's another step forward here". And that's how I've gone forward for decades in my career. I have never set a goal to reach one day. (Top manager, *Leadcast*)

As described in the interview quote above, surrendering to one's vulnerabilities – particularly the feeling of being incapable of handling certain work-related tasks – living, and the opportunities that come with living make room for new possibilities. Also, in this case, the idea 'Go big or go

home' does not seem relevant. Instead, the core of the manager's identity development is their taking small steps throughout their career to deepen their professional knowledge as a top manager. Thus, there is no need for any great goals or ambitions, but rather the ability to focus on present moments and how one feels here and now, and let life and surrounding individuals carry one forward. Another top manager described the ways in which she turned a traumatic experience filled with a sense of relational vulnerability into positive energy in her top managerial self:

When I got breast cancer and was going through the biggest crisis of my life, I had the feeling that I had to figure out means to turn negative things into positive ones. I was thinking about how the cancer that I had would help me grow as a human being. After I had survived it after many severe treatments, I had long discussions with the hospital owner, and I was asked to join its board. And as I had this principle of seizing every opportunity, I talked to the other owners and finally found myself on the board. Shortly after that, I also bought a small piece share of the hospital. (Top manager, *Leadcast*)

In the quote above, the top manager's vulnerable experience with breast cancer enabled her to reach out to people close to her immediate context and feel connected to them (in this case, the hospital owner). Further exemplifying this theme, one of the managers also highlighted the meaningfulness of his overall *experiences* in his leadership role and in life more generally, these experiences help foster personal strength and are an important platform of managerial identity work, stating the following:

I would say the experiences you have count a lot; they make you *stronger*. (Company B, Interview 2)

Another top manager described how making mistakes and really *experiencing them* demanded she possess a sense of embodied courage and willingness to accept managerial incompleteness. Here, the meaningfulness of her versatile and relationally vulnerable experiences became a central part of her managerial identity work as well:

I feel safe; if I need help, I'll get it. And if I make a mistake, it's not so horrible either if I confess my mistake and reflect on what can be learned from that experience. This actually materialised on my second day of work, when my supervisor said 'always remember that mistakes can be made, but not the same mistake twice'. And then I felt like "Yes, now I just try to do my best and if something goes wrong, I'll call my boss [and say] listen, this is what happened now'. (Top manager, *Leadcast*)

As the following quote illustrates, another concept expressed by the top managers was *surrendering to the flow of life*, because there are events that one cannot influence or react to alone. These events were particularly hard to handle for a newly-become manager, who was still working on the insecurities of the self, while being forced to make tough decisions:

I had to lay off people that I had recruited myself. It was very hard, and, of course, I blamed myself for it. As the CEO, I always had the feeling that I need to be perfect and that I need to know everything, be the example for everyone at every moment. And the idea of admitting that I don't know everything or that I have screwed it up is pretty hard for the inexperienced leader that I was in those times. (Top manager, *Leadcast*)

Here, the top manager continues his story by expressing how it was important for him to realise how his *performance* in front of the board could not last forever, as perfection seemed to be an unachievable aspect of managerial identity work. He felt negatively about showing no authentic thoughts and feelings; so, he decided to turn to a different mindset regarding his relational vulnerabilities:

I always had plans in front of the board, which I articulated very well, and the government always encouraged and supported my thoughts. But I had a feeling inside myself that I was not enough and that my plans were fake in some sense. Then, at some point, I questioned myself: why do I keep all these worries inside of me? I could discuss them with the chairman of the board, and so I did. I suggested to him that I would leave my position as the manager. If I had done that, I would have felt like a loser forever. I would have remembered this failure forever. But the members of the board believed in me and encouraged me to continue. And so we climbed up from that pit. (Top manager, *Leadcast*)

Sometimes, the top managers described a lack of flexibility in regard to listening to their colleagues and subordinates and focusing on the humane side of their leading, as such practices were considered nonsense by the middle management. In this sense, relational vulnerabilities were stifled, and, consequently, there was no room for genuine managerial identity work and professional development either. These views of some of the top managers often caused many kinds of problems within the company, as described by one top manager:

It was especially middle management, the engineering technicians, who had terrible difficulties talking about these kinds of 'soft' things ... that side was missing. I worked there pretty long and often heard that and how the *manager doesn't listen*. So there was room for improvement. (Company C, Interview 4)

Importantly, another theme we identified from the top manager interviews was that mistake avoidance may not always improve employees' skills and, thus, may not be desirable; rather, mistakes can be viewed as a useful part of developing oneself as a person and relational learning (Corlett, Mavin, and Beech 2019; Cunliffe 2008) and the organisation as a whole:

When led in the wrong way, the person knows what she or he must do and only does it, nothing extra. And by doing this, the person does avoid making mistakes, but it does not benefit the company much. Any organisation can do well or badly if people are managed badly. (Company D, Interview 5)

Thus, the acceptance of incompleteness seemed important in the identity work process of the top managers. By showing one's vulnerabilities, it is possible to learn something from experiences and move forward. Another aspect identified in the identity work of the top managers relates to the aspect of *putting others before the self*. One top manager explained this concept in the following way:

And in a way, the authority of a leader builds on the attempts to make others' lives easier. So, it is not about you, but about caring about others. For example, when you enter the room knowing there are big problems to be faced, you reflect with your positive presence and don't make the problems bigger than they are. You might tell the others, 'Hey, there is nothing to worry about'. You don't create a sense of panic, but rather create a sense of trust and energy for the others in the room; that would be ideal. (Company C, interview 9)

However, accepting mistakes as a general principle does not mean they should always be accepted. Indeed, the managers discussed the presence of a fine line between accepting and managing mistakes at work, as exemplified in the following argument:

You can make mistakes when you do not make the same mistakes two or three times. If you do, then it starts to be stupid. (Company C, Interview 3)

The manager being open to others makes their identity vulnerable perceived by themselves but often leads to something good. There must be an atmosphere of psychological safety in the workplace in order to talk openly with subordinates, as described in the following comment:

If there is a tricky thing, it is better to describe it just as it is. If you start squirming and dragging as a manager, nothing good will follow. So, trust is based on the ability to be brave and tell people directly how things are and, of course, justify things. For example, numbers are often discouraging, but when you show the ratings in front of your personnel, they will understand you and what it is all about. (Company C, Interview 3)

As previously mentioned, thoroughly engaging in relational vulnerabilities leads to greater organisational outcomes and the independence of employees. However, this was described as not the reality in many organisational contexts, as there are top managers who are never challenged or questioned, thus leading to unhealthy organisation in terms of well-being at work. Accepting and openly discussing the personal vulnerabilities of managers themselves seemed to be an important factor of accepting vulnerabilities in the working community more broadly. One of the interviewed top managers described the following:

You need to be able to say 'Hey, I was wrong; I did not understand. So, let's do this in this other way'. I know some managers who have been put on a pedestal; well, maybe that's a caricature. But, anyway, they were always right, and nobody ever questioned them. And that's awful, of course, because then the organisation

will also select people who will never be able to work independently. In that case, the organisation doesn't work well at all. (Company C, Interview 1)

To summarise the first theme of our analysis, openly realising the relational vulnerabilities of top managers themselves and surrendering to the flow of life seem to lead to a greater sense of oneself for everyone within the organisation, 'shaping [a] human being who aspires to be the author of his or her own life' (Brown 2022, 33). As described in the first part of the analysis, knowing oneself profoundly as a manager was essential in the identity work process before moving on working on relational vulnerabilities in relation to others. This recognition of oneself and one's personal vulnerabilities in the managerial identity work process led us to recognise the second aspect of the identity work of top managers – letting go of the cultural ideals how a top manager should work towards a bodily vulnerable relationality with others – which we discuss in the next section.

### ***Letting go of the cultural ideals of strong managerial solitude in favour of vulnerable embodiment with others***

In this section, we aim to highlight the top managers' strongly embedded, relationally constructed identities in their existing organisations and their historical roots of these organisations: letting go of their previous, rigid mindsets regarding how to be a 'proper' manager on the one hand and being open to understanding different perspectives of themselves via being positioned in vulnerable connection with others. From this perspective, the top managers acknowledged the negative aspects of the engineering mentality, a culturally constructed custom in which protecting one's identity becomes an obstacle for crafting oneself in more liberated, open-minded ways. The use of old management ideas, overly simplistic views, and superficial understandings of new management ideas prevented a top manager from genuine personal renewal, as they remained quite fixed in the processes of organising in the company (Brown 2022). Through active, constant identity work, the top managers were able to move forward in the meanings they attach to their identities in relation to their respective companies.

The top managers were active *heirs to a historical legacy of the engineering culture* and firmly bound together by their organisational and personal histories. Simultaneously, they were attempting to let go these connections and, in doing so, create space for genuine change and professional growth. This was exemplified by one of the top managers stating the following:

The ideals of good leadership are instilled very early in our lives. The first ideals or ideas we receive impart significant meaning in our lives; they guide our thinking and living in ways that make it more difficult to change them as life goes on. (Company A, Interviewee 2)

Here, the *ideals of good leadership* are seen as rooted in the top manager's very first memories of the top manager's life experiences. The dominant managerial discourse is constructed around the idea of viewing vulnerability as a weakness (Corlett, Mavin, and Beech 2019; Hay 2014), encouraging leaders and managers to deny or hide it. Expressing emotions, particularly in bodily expressive ways, can be risky and place leaders in more vulnerable positions (Raelin and Raelin 2011), hindering the discovery of their true identities. In the above interview excerpt, the top manager reflects on factors that complicate the identity work process, including their strong historical background; this paves the way for managerial identities of the future. It is easier to hold onto old habits and shield oneself from the threats of the outside world than open oneself up to managerial vulnerabilities and publicly acknowledge them. As time passes and the top manager gains more experience, it becomes even more difficult for them to delve into their vulnerabilities. Relational vulnerability becomes even trickier: As the top manager becomes more experienced, there are greater expectations that they know their own business.

In our empirical material, the top managers also seemed to highlight their *authority as traditional managers*: true to the legacy of their organisation on the one hand but, surprisingly, wanting to move towards a more genuine willingness for collaboration on the other. One of the strongest

demonstrations of this finding materialised in the top managers' authentic joy for others' success, as described as follows:

When being a manager, seeing others succeeding produces pleasure and satisfaction in my work. One of the manager's responsibilities is to take care that there are young people to continue the work in the future. And then these kinds of moments of success are a sign that I have succeeded in it in one of my main tasks. (Top manager, *Leadcast*)

Feelings of pride regarding subordinates' work and the shift from the self to others represented other themes at the heart of the identity work of the managers explored here. This idea also connects to relational vulnerability, which argues for the corporeal, affective, and socio-political interdependency between people (Johansson and Wickström 2023). The strongly rooted tradition of the leader 'knowing everything' seemed to be abandoned in the interviews with the top managers, to allow them to grow from an identity perspective, with two of the top managers describing the following:

I am the most proud of the people I have recruited along the way. I've always gotten kicks out of some of my teams succeeding and the organisation getting things done. (Top manager, *Leadcast*)

You must be ready to give your all and be open to others. You also need to learn to accept feedback, even if somebody comes to tell you, 'Hey, you haven't thought about this enough'. Even if you are smart, there are other smart people around you, and sometimes, they will see the whole better than you do. You must be ready to accept that and say, 'Thank you for telling me; let's do this another way now'. (Company B, Interview 3)

In this respect, the importance of *shared and relational forms of leadership* (Raelin 2016; Tourish 2014) was rendered visible, and the individual identities of the leaders became less noticeable. This relates to the meaningfulness of social interaction in the process of identity work, as identities are actively worked on in relation to others (Brown 2022). Furthermore, the interview extracts above capture a genuine willingness of the top managers to accept the imperfection of the managerial self and the power of learning from others in lieu of holding all the cards in one's own hand. Relational vulnerability, in this sense, became a means of overcoming the heavy burden of cultural expectations regarding how a manager should act and what they should know to instead create a pathway for the top manager's identity growth.

Additionally, one of the top managers described his management style and expectations as having developed over the years through his recognition of the role of others in the process of identity work, illustrating how the negotiation of his managerial identity occurred invisibly in the sense this 'negotiation' was not seen by others for some time:

When I started my career in a hierarchical organisation, there was this leader who knew everything and told everybody what to do. But, the more I learned, the more I noticed how this way of thinking is so wrong, so wrong. The leader must organise prerequisites and possibilities for the others, and then the leader has to trust in people; leaders must clearly communicate goals and trust. (Company B, Interview 1)

The quotes above and below showcase how the phenomenon of managers telling their subordinates how to work does not fit today's leadership agenda. Rather, leaders must expose themselves to various vulnerabilities by *trusting the people they lead* and giving them space to work independently. Then, the top manager has no strong control over how employees specifically spend their workdays, creating a sense of relational vulnerability.

Well, the authority of the leader builds on expertise. And the leader must trust the others and be trustworthy. And the key is to find clever people around you. (Company C, Interview 6)

[There is also] the fact that you need to trust your subordinates. Usually, the subordinates stretch in a situation where they are trusted, so you get the best out of them. But, if one tries to shackle and put pressure on a subordinate or even make threats, they will definitely freeze up. (Company D, Interview 5)

The two quotations above exemplify the managers' beliefs on how to be a proper leader and fulfil others' expectations through the establishment of trust. In other words, identity work is captured in

the in-depth, long-lasting shift from an authoritarian mindset to one that appreciates others, trusts others, and leads collectively. Based on the top managers' reflections, it seems that managerial identity is built by something greater than the formal position itself or an authoritative sense of self; it is negotiated relationally, as will be illustrated by the manager comments below. This subtle process entails continuous identity work and the carving out of the manager's personality and competencies by the manager themselves. Only then can management truly emerge as a relational activity:

Authority does not emerge based on your hierarchical position in the company but instead based on your substantive knowledge. There can be so many kinds of knowledge . . . You can be good at leading teams or know your business. But, in today's business world, it's no longer enough if you only know how to turn the nut. (Company C, Interview 1)

I have tried to make room for my subordinates as a leader. In fact, I don't like the whole term 'subordinate'; I'd rather like to talk about 'teams' or 'colleagues'. I'm sure some of the people around me also think I demand a lot. But I have strived not to demand from others more than what I demand from myself. (Top manager, *Leadcast*)

The identity work of the top manager seems to build on relational actions. Here, relational vulnerability comes into the play and seems to be the key in negotiating managerial identity: via an emphasis on respect for subordinates and the recognition of their needs and aspirations rather than formal managerial duties (Tronto 1993). In this process, employees' 'the-leader-knows-all' attitudes may then be perceived as threats to the preferred managerial identities by the managers themselves (Brown et al. 2021):

I want to make sure the working community *thinks together*. I do not want them to utilise the manager's authority or commanding mentality. I like a deliberate and open atmosphere in my leadership. (Company A, Interview 2)

In fact, the relational aspect of vulnerability – in other words, the *meaningfulness of other people* – seems to help the top manager overcome the perceived insecurities of him or herself attached to managerial work (see Roskies and Louis-Guerin 1990) associated with the traditional view of vulnerability (i.e. connected to loss and weakness). The quote above illustrates the ways in which a top manager can encourage their employees towards flourishing relational vulnerabilities: through collaboration, the top manager and the employees work on the same level, for the same goal, and are considered a holistic entity, which may ultimately facilitate the handling of difficult situations in the top manager's work.

Managerial identity work is thus built on *the work of the team and its welfare*. The team, in actuality, is enhanced by the relational vulnerabilities by which they become inevitably surrounded over time. In addition, the small, subtle interactions between the manager and their subordinates comprise essential parts of the relational aspect of the crafting of managerial selves:

I don't know whether it is a management idea or an area of learning or what, but I have always moved along with other people. This includes in the factories, not just in the meeting room, drinking coffee. I bring my subordinates together from time to time and speak with them. They also have the opportunity to ask questions in these moments. (Company D, Interview 2)

There seemed to be *various cultural, organisational, and societal factors* attached to the top managers' identity work, including the organisational structure, time pressures, attitudes regarding personal development within their organisations. One top manager described the growth of their empathy for other top managers over time as they experienced complicated situations in their career, thus creating a new platform for practising identity work and realising the relational vulnerabilities of others:

The further I have progressed in my career, the more I have begun to feel sympathy for my former bosses. Leadership is a pretty lonely affair. We all, both leaders and subordinates, should look ourselves in the mirror every now and then and think about our behaviour; do I burden my boss unnecessarily? (Top manager, *Leadcast*)

These factors affect how managerial identity is actualised as a relational activity in the top managers' everyday work and 'how identity may be undertaken as an active collective re-appropriation

of organising as a means of achieving more autonomous selves' (Reedy, King, and Coupland 2016, 34). Recognising how managerial identities are authored and negotiated through relationally vulnerable processes, thoughts, and actions – as described in both parts of our analysis – seems to lead to more productive collaboration and greater employee well-being at all organisational levels.

## Discussion and conclusion

In this study, we focused on how top managers negotiated their identities through the conceptual lens of relational vulnerability. By combining two different kinds of datasets, consisting of 47 interviews in total, of Finnish top managers working in MNCs, we explored the ways top managers made sense of themselves in relation to their vulnerabilities they experienced at work. Based on our findings, we argue that by recognising the *relational* and *embodied* nature of vulnerability (Corlett, Mavin, and Beech 2019) affects the ways vulnerability can be viewed as an empowering and bolstering aspect of their identity negotiations. of managing people and things to have the courage to act in relation to others in supportive and open ways (Koerner 2014), accept their vulnerability as managers (Corlett and Mavin 2021; 2019) and be ready to be exposed to criticisms are elements at the heart of a more humane managerial identity work. We identified two entwined aspects of identity undoing in top managers' work: (1) *overcoming the need to bolster one's professionalism by understanding vulnerable incompleteness of self as a source of embodied learning at work* and (2) *letting go of the cultural ideals of strong managerial solitude in favour of vulnerable embodiment with others*. There are strong, established socio-cultural norms regarding the comportment of leaders, managers, and employees in organisations: perfect, in control, contained, strong, exemplifying masculine qualities, always correct, and knowledgeable (Corlett, Mavin, and Beech 2019; Hay 2014). By combining the literature on managerial identity work (Bolander, Holmberg, and Fellbom 2019; Bresnen et al. 2019; Brown 2022; 2015; Brown et al. 2021; Caza, Vough, and Puranik 2018; Gjerde and Alvesson 2020) and relational vulnerability (Corlett and Mavin 2021; Johansson and Wickström 2023) in the field of organisation and management studies, we have described how vulnerability can be redefined as a strength in the workplace – while walking the line between oversharing and professionalism – which may lead to the acceptance of responsibility, the demonstration of greater care for others, and the discovery of new methods of management.

In regard to the first aspect, our analysis showed managerial identity work is a constant, embodied process of reflecting one's own managerial vulnerabilities and professional self, as well as the deeply rooted ideals of authoritarian leadership towards accepting one's relational vulnerabilities. Only by so doing, the top manager could start to build a managerial identity by valuing the empowering aspects of these relational vulnerabilities in the workplace. The second aspect of our analysis captured a broader, cultural aspect of managerial identity work and negotiation of managerial vulnerabilities. In this aspect, the top managers protected their existing managerial identity by using approving language and describing supportive acts. By doing so, they found a balance between their internal thoughts and feelings and the wider organisational intentions and expectations surrounding them. This illustrated the accounts on which the managerial identity work was based and the relational perspective entwined in the process. The ideals related to rational engineering thoughts seemed to have merged with the companies' management rhetoric and practice decades ago, serving as the dominant, often unquestioned manner in which top managers were expected to approach their professional selves in slightly different ways.

The contributions of this paper are as follows: First, our study contributes to the existing literature on managerial identity work (Bolander, Holmberg, and Fellbom 2019; Bresnen et al. 2019; Brown 2022; 2015; Brown et al. 2021; Caza, Vough, and Puranik 2018; Gjerde and Alvesson 2020) by analysing how top managers continuously worked on their identities through their embodied presence and vulnerabilities in relational ways (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011; Raelin 2016) and highlighting the meaningfulness of the fundamentally *embodied* side of managerial identity work. By doing so, we expanded the existing discussion on managerial identity work, which has previously only focused



on the brain rather than the body and on rational thought instead of emotions (Petriglieri, Petriglieri, and Wood 2018). By seriously considering the relational view of managerial work, our study also showed how managerial identity is in constant interplay with a company's historical background (Maclean et al. 2014) and social constructions (Cobb, Stephens, and Watson 2001; Cunliffe 2008); hence, it continuously affects and is affected by both the context and the actors within it, making it dialectic in nature (Collinson 2005; DeRue and Ashford 2010).

Second, our research also advances our understanding of the concept of vulnerability by complementing current research on managerial vulnerabilities, which have previously been seen as a weakness (Corlett and Mavin 2019). In this study, we understood vulnerability as a relational concept as well as an ability to authentically be in relation with others (Satama, Biehl, and Helin 2022; Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011; Johansson and Wickström 2023; Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds 2014; Satama, Biehl, and Helin 2022; Satama 2016), thus leading to the positive development of managerial identity work, relational learning and well-being at work (Corlett, Ruane, and Mavin 2021).

Furthermore, our analysis indicates another novel concept, namely strategies for overcoming the stigma of being vulnerable as a manager, which are necessary to develop more humane workplaces and were the original greater aim of this study. Goffman (1963) defined stigma as a 'mark' of social disgrace, developed socially and excluding those who bear it from full social acceptance. People with such 'marks' acquire a 'spoiled identity', leading to various forms of social exclusion. While there is much research examining 'what stigma is' or how it can be managed at different analytical levels (Zhang et al. 2021), there is minimal research on what the stigmatised can do to potentially overcome the marks of stigmatisation. Recent research stresses both the relational nature of stigma and the need to rely on collective practices of the workplace to overcome it (Garcia-Lorenzo et al., 2022). Our research shows that, by focusing on the meaningfulness of other people in their personal development and recognising that identities are authored through relational processes, managers can overcome the stigma of being vulnerable, allowing their vulnerabilities to flourish and facilitating the well-being of all within the organisation.

Unlike research focusing on stigma as a mark with which individuals must cope or its management in isolation (Zhang et al. 2021), our research shows that overcoming the stigma of being vulnerable in leadership positions is a relational process involving the self, others, and the context within which the mark is produced, maintained, and potentially contested. Stigmatisation reduces the person 'from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one' (Goffman 1963, 3), so that managers are then forced to manage its negative effects through strategies of identity work. Stigmatisation, as a relational perspective, exists in the eye of the beholder: it is imposed on others and often contrasts with one's sense of self (Goffman 1963). This creates tension and a potential space of negotiation where the vulnerable, stigmatised person can challenge or at least disrupt stigmatisation practices and ideologies in management practice (Shih 2004), enabling better working conditions. This is not a matter of thinking oneself out of the structural realities of stigma; rather, it is a matter of mobilising collective anti-stigmatising practices, as our interviewed managers demonstrated. Resisting the stigma of being vulnerable when in a power position therefore needs to be a relational, collective phenomenon. In our view, this should be further explored in future studies on relational vulnerabilities in the workplace.

Methodologically, our paper provided an example of how interview materials gathered from different sources and from different times can be put to discuss together to complement each other and how certain research phenomena are visible in organisations over time. We acknowledge that our study is limited in several respects because the experience of managerial identity and understanding of the managers' knowledge are inherently subjective (Warhurst and Black 2017); their relation to the audience remain slightly blurred. In other words, the relationships in the field are far more complex than often described in scholarly debates. We also acknowledge that our 35 interviews from four MNCs are retrospective in that the interviewees recalled experiences and events that had happened to them over a long period of time. However, such sensemaking is largely possible only when individuals look back and attempt to sort out what happened (Weick 1995). We

believe that combining these interviews with more recent podcast interviews with other top managers showed how our arguments were visible in different periods of leadership and last over time.

With regard to future studies, in addition to the idea of researching the relational vulnerabilities and their connection to the notion of stigma that we discussed above, the national and sector-specific elements of the globalised context explored here deserve more attention in future studies about managerial identity work and its relationship with relational vulnerability. It would be interesting to explore further the cultural differences in how vulnerabilities are expressed, negotiated and managed, and what kinds of implications these differences have for the organisations, their members and well-being more broadly. Finally, we hope this study will encourage other organisational scholars to more widely explore the interrelations between the collective actions and individual endeavours as well as the subtle nuances and meanings of identity work and relational vulnerabilities in different organisational settings.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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