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Training Organisational Soldiers

Leadership and Control in Trainee Programs

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Abstract

Title   Training Organisational Soldiers: Leadership and Control in Trainee Programs

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Purpose   The purpose of our research is to provide a more critical perspective on leadership and leadership development within the context of trainee programs. Therefore we aim to understand how leadership is constructed in trainee programs and how companies make use of trainee programs to control trainees.

Methodology   We based our research on a qualitative research design and combined an interpretive and a critical stance.

Theoretical Perspective   As a theoretical background for our study we provided an overview of the existing literature on trainee programs in connection to leadership, identity and control.

Empirical Foundation   The empirical material for this thesis was mainly generated by eight semi-structured interviews with trainees from a trainee program in a globally operating retail organisation located in Sweden. Furthermore, we added survey answers, company documents and notes from conversations with the HR team to our empirical basis.

Main Findings   We found that leadership is constructed as something solely positive in the trainee program and that the leadership discourse is used to trigger the trainees' identity work. This discourse can, on the one hand, be supportive of the trainees' identity work and, on the other hand, lead to struggles and uncertainties. In both cases it functions as an organisational control mechanism which de- and reconstructs the trainees' identities in accordance with the organisational objectives.

Keywords   Trainee Programs, Leadership, Leadership Development, Identity, Control

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Leadership means success in today's society. It has become the missing element that organisations, both in the public and private sector, have found to guarantee their survival in today's fiercely competitive business environment (Ford, Hearding & Learmonth, 2008, p. 9). Good leadership is perceived as the Holy Grail of effectiveness and efficiency. Adding to this increased organisational performance, it even has the power to achieve social change as well as a satisfied society (Alain, 2012). Admittedly leadership may be a component in achieving these progressive outcomes but the concept has also become a grandiose buzzword cultivated in books and articles.

The grandiosity of leadership seeks to disregard matters of substance while loading the concept with positive connotations that serve groups, organisations as well as individuals and their self-esteem (Alvesson, 2013). In the promotion of these positive notions, there is a predisposition to hide some of the unfavourable characteristics of the phenomenon while reinforcing the positivity in society. This grandiosity is even manifested in academia as scholars promote leadership as the solution to a number of organisational problems and as a source of various opportunities. For example, leadership has been associated with higher employee engagement and financial performance (Barrick, Thurgood, Smith & Courtright, 2015), better job performance (Vidyarthi, Anand & Liden, 2014), and increased employee motivation and creativity (Zhang & Bartol, 2010). Thus, the demand for leadership is in accordance with the supply of literature supporting the claimed significance of leadership in different areas. Consequently, the number of courses tailored towards developing leadership capability, such as trainee programs, has also increased (Ford, Hearding & Learmonth, 2008, p. 9).

Influenced by the grandiose buzzword 'leadership', many graduates seek to start their professional careers in a trainee program, the number of which has rapidly increased in Sweden over the past few years (Brydolf, 2013). Usually, the programs target graduates to develop their skills, to build organisational loyalty and most importantly to increase their leadership competence in order to ensure their career advancement and the future success of

the company (Garavan & Morley, 1997). During this moulding process, the organisation holds significant power in shaping the participants' identity (Carden & Callahan, 2007) as their sense of self is partly shaped and constructed within the organisational context (Alvesson, 2009, p. 190) and its organisational discourses around leadership (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

The leadership discourse employed in trainee programs is influenced by broader societal and academic discourses around the concept (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012). The existing literature on leadership has been positioned within a number of different camps, of which we recognise two: the traditional approach and the more critical ambiguity-centred approach to leadership. The traditional approach has strived to discover how leadership can be employed in organisations as the solution to a variety of problems with the direction of solely accountable heroic leaders or post-heroic leaders, who promote a more shared leadership model (Crevani, Lindgren & Packendorff, 2007). The traditional leadership approach dominated by positive and powerful discourses can be countered with a more critical perspective on leadership (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). Alvesson and Spicer (2011) for example suggest that there are inherent ambiguities in leadership, which are embedded in the followers and the context, and should not be denied. Here, the discourse-driven nature, the cultural context, and the power and politics of leadership need to be acknowledged resulting in a more cryptic definition of the concept (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012).

Literature recognises that these leadership discourses are significant in managers' identity work (e.g. Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006; Ford, Hearding & Learmonth, 2008; Carroll & Levy, 2008). Especially, the excessive positivity of the traditional leadership approach is identified to extend its implications to individuals' sense of self and self-esteem, which is mediated by the discourses organisational members are exposed to (Collinson, 2012). The organisational discourses around leadership thus direct individuals' identity work as they provide frameworks and norms for organisational members to position their self-definition (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Especially newcomers into the organisation, such as trainees, engage in considerable identity work and form a self-definition with respect to their surroundings and the organisational expectations (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). During this socialisation process, identity can be used as a dimension of organisational control as suggested by Alvesson and Willmott (2002), according to whom organisational practices can inform individuals' self-identities. In particular, positive leadership discourses

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are identified as a source of identity regulation, on the one hand, controlling organisational members' behaviour but, on the other hand, providing them with support in the identity construction process (Alvesson, 2009, p. 207).

Our interest in this research lies in understanding the interplay between these three complex and ambiguous concepts: leadership, identity and control. We want to examine what implications leadership construction in trainee programs has on trainees' identities and how trainee programs can be used as means to achieve organisational control.

1.2   Problem Statement

Today, the organisational literature on leadership appears to be endless (Heracleous, 2003, p. 54) and also the topic of leadership development seems to gain in importance, which is reflected by the increasing availability and popularity of trainee programs (Brydolf, 2013). However, the number of studies taking a more critical stance towards leadership, leadership development and trainee programs in particular is comparably small. Therefore, we want to contribute with this thesis to the small but emerging (Bresnen, 1995) critical perspective on leadership and leadership development. By qualitatively studying the construction of leadership in trainee programs and how this can be understood in terms of control, we combine an interpretive and a critical approach. This is done to enable us, on the one hand, to understand not only the trainee programs' but also the trainees' perspectives on leadership (interpretive) and, on the other hand, to introduce our view on the connection between leadership discourse and organisational control (critical). The subject of this qualitative study is a management trainee program in a globally operating retail organisation located in Sweden and in this thesis we refer to it with the pseudonym 'Fuco'.

1.3   Research Aims and Questions

Our research aims to understand how leadership is constructed within our research context, what its controlling effects are, as well as the interaction between leadership, control and identity construction. To achieve this purpose, we use the following research questions:

1. How is leadership constructed in trainee programs?

2. How do companies use trainee programs to control trainees?

We recognise that the answers to our research questions might be interesting to four groups. First, we have a personal interest in studying trainee programs, as this is a possible option for starting our own careers. Second, by not only considering the managerial perspective but also the views of trainees, we can enhance participants' own understanding of their situation in traineeships. Third, we hope to give some practical advice to the particular company we study, but also to provide practitioners in general with useful insights into the connection of leadership construction and control in trainee programs. Last, scholars should be listed as our main interest group. While the phenomena of leadership, leadership development and especially trainee programs increases in popularity, there is only a comparably small body of work that is critically reflecting on them. Therefore we want to enhance the scholarly understanding of these concepts from both an interpretive and a critical vantage point.

1.4   Outline of the Thesis

Our thesis is structured in six main chapters; introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, discussion and conclusion. After the introduction of our study in this chapter, we develop the theoretical basis for our research in the literature review. This second chapter provides an overview of the existing literature on trainee programs in connection to leadership, identity and control. In the third chapter we present the methodology applied in our research by introducing our metatheoretical starting point, our research design, our data analysis approach and finally our understanding and realisation of reflexivity. Chapter four displays the findings from our data analysis. After the description of the context our research takes place in, we continue with answering our research questions by highlighting the themes around leadership construction, identity and control in trainee programs. We employ the subsequent discussion chapter to further elaborate on these themes and to present trainee programs in a new light with the help of an analogy related to training soldiers. Finally, the sixth chapter consists of some concluding remarks on our research and we show in how far our study has practical implications, address the limitations of our research, and provide suggestions for further research.

2 Literature Review

This section frames our research purpose and explores the existing literature on leadership, identity and control. We start by examining the different approaches and criticisms around the concept of leadership as recognised by academia and move on to introduce trainee programs. By elaborating on them with the notion of leadership development, we begin to examine the meaning of identity in regards to our research context. Finally, we discuss the traditional views on control as identified in prevailing research.

2.1 Dominant Leadership Approaches Underlying Trainee Programs

In order to interpret how leadership is constructed in trainee programs, it is necessary to consider the major perspectives on leadership, which have been dominating so far. One attempt to define leadership has been to contrast it with management (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). On the one hand, managers have been depicted as relying on their formal position and focusing mainly on administrative tasks including budgeting and controlling. Thus, management has been described as aiming at controlling behaviour. On the other hand, leaders have been framed as targeting the thinking and feeling of people. However, this rigid management-leadership distinction presenting leadership as more advanced, better and completely separable from management has been questioned because the grandiose leadership discourse does not resemble organisational reality mainly consisting of managerial tasks and mundane activities (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003b).

A way of structuring the traditional leadership approaches is provided by Heracleous (2003), who lists four research streams on leadership. The first stream, the trait approach, "has sought to determine the qualities that can distinguish leaders from non-leaders" (Heracleous, 2003, p. 56). Hence, the ability to take on a leadership role has been seen as dependent on traits inherent in a person. The second stream has focused on behaviours of leadership and therefore it has been named 'leadership style approach'. Within this approach task-centred leadership has been compared to people-centred leadership to find out whether the focus has been placed on getting things done or on people issues (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). The 'contingency approach' is listed as the third stream, where the leadership style depends on the situation.

The assumption in this case is that there is not one specific leadership style that can be effectively applied in all situations. Rather contextual factors, such as the nature of the work, the external environment, and the followers have an influence on the effectiveness of the leadership style. Last but not least, Heracleous (2003, p. 61) covers the overlapping concepts of transformational and charismatic leadership by stating that "in these approaches leaders are seen as managers of meaning, who define organisational reality by articulating compelling visions, missions, and values". The leader's strong communication abilities and his/her striking character result in respect and ultimately in the commitment of followers as they become willing to obey the leader. As the leader is placed in the centre and other contextual factors are marginalised, the charismatic and the transformational leadership approach can be seen as part of the 'heroic leadership' dimension.

In contrast, within post-heroic leadership there is not one leader who is in focus but leadership is depicted as a more democratic approach, where every organisational member should be regarded as a leader (Ford, Hearding & Learmonth, 2008, p. 16). The idea behind this is that shared leadership results in new relationships and a more efficient as well as effective organisation. In this case, the formal leader is a people-friend, who holds her/himself back and focuses on relations to make people feel good.

Another concept worth mentioning is authentic leadership. In this model leaders have full insight into themselves and their personality exists in isolation from interactions with others. A leader has to be true to her/himself (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) to be able to reveal the inner goodness. Thus, authentic leaders are

> "those that are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others' values/moral perspectives, knowledge, and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and of high moral character." (Avolio et al., 2004, pp. 802-804)

Moreover, according to Gardner et al. (2005) authenticity is not only connected to self-awareness but also to open and trustful leader-follower relationships that focus on the follower development. Although this model has recently gained in popularity, there are some authors who are more sceptical of this concept. One point of criticism they present is that the

expression of true self is not possible at work as this environment often asks for adaption and sometimes even role-play (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2013; Nyberg and Sveningsson, 2014).

It becomes apparent that all of the approaches covered so far portray leadership with a positive undertone. The underlying assumption that leadership is positive can be connected to the concept of grandiosity introduced by Alvesson (2013). As the leader role contributes to the attempt to give oneself a status-enhancing image while marginalising issues of substance, a more critical perspective on leadership is brought forth with the concept of grandiosity. Also, in the book '*Metaphors We Lead By*' by Alvesson and Spicer (2011), leadership is reviewed in a critical light. The underlying assumption in the so-called ambiguity-centred approach towards leadership in this book is the social construction of the leadership phenomenon (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Alvesson and Spicer (2011) suggest that the ambiguities and incoherencies concerning leadership should not be denied but embraced and accepted. Hence, leadership is presented as an ambiguous and contradictory construction, where not only the leaders themselves but also the followers and the context are considered as potential sources for ambiguous meanings. For instance, the context can be an important source of ambiguity as the "culture forms leadership rather than the other way around" (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011, p. 27). In a nutshell, the authors do not see the possibility of achieving an unambiguous definition of leadership. They rather understand it as "a 'blurred concept' around and through which language-games orient themselves" (Kelly, 2008, p. 775). In connection to this, Alvesson and Sveningsson (2012) emphasise the culture- and discourse-driven nature of leadership where culture and discourse build the basis for leadership ideals, which influence people exercising leadership. In this case, also the 'darker sides' of leadership are considered by acknowledging power and politics as crucial aspects. Thus, the constructions of leadership are shaped by cultural rules and dominant discourses, which in turn are influenced by the leadership approaches elaborated above. The discourses on leadership are particularly present in trainee programs that we review next.

2.2   Trainee Programs as Leadership Training

Companies contribute considerable amounts of effort and resources to recruit top graduates into their organisation as knowledge is viewed as a core competitive advantage in contemporary organisations (McDermott, Mangan & O'Connor, 2006). To specifically target

these graduates, companies are increasingly adopting trainee programs as a method to develop graduates' abilities, to build organisational loyalty, and to cultivate managerial competencies ensuring career advancement to leadership positions (Garavan & Morley, 1997). Today, trainee programs offered by organisations are commonplace and their number and popularity has increased rapidly. In Sweden for example, the amount of trainee programs has augmented from 50 to approximately 200 in the last 10 years (Brydolf, 2013).

The definition of a trainee can vary across countries and cultures but with respect to the Swedish context, a trainee is described as a graduate student within the field of, for example business, engineering or IT, who is employed by a company and trained to gain a future leadership position through a well-structured program (Englund, 2015). The program structure is ensured by a special certification given by Traineeguiden.se, a Swedish site for trainee placement ads, which facilitates applicants in the search of an appropriate program for them. Many of the programs include both practical and theoretical elements as well as an international period, and through rotations across the various organisational functions, the trainees can experience multiple roles and tasks to find the most suitable position for them. Thus, in a period of 12-24 months the graduates develop their skills through learning-by-doing (Ferring & Staufenbiel, 1993, p. 224) with the purpose of training their leadership capabilities to take on future leadership roles (Dysvik, Kuvaas & Buch, 2010). Some of the most popular trainee programs of companies in Sweden include those by ABB, H&M, Ericsson, Volvo, Scania, and Nordea (Englund, 2015).

The introduction of trainee programs has many rationales, one being developing high levels of leadership competence (Englund, 2015; McDermott et al., 2006) to achieve the necessary ability for organisations to reinvent themselves (Day, 2000). According to Day (2000, p. 582) this increase in leadership competence can be defined as "expanding the collective capacity of organisational members to engage effectively in leadership roles and processes". He argues that organisations must attend to both leader and leadership development; concepts where a distinction is important. According to him, 'leader development' is purposefully investing in the organisation's human capital as the emphasis typically lies in individual-based knowledge and skills that enable people to think and act in innovative ways in any organisational role. Here, focus is given to constructing intrapersonal competence through development initiatives focusing on self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-motivation, which are seen as contributors to increased core leadership skills such as individual knowledge, trust, and

personal power. Day (2000) therefore perceives leader development as grounded in the conventional, individualistic approach to leadership, in which effectiveness occurs through the development of individual skills.

Whereas leader development is viewed as the development of human capital and intrapersonal capabilities, 'leadership development' refers to the improvement of social capital that is formed through the work relationships in an organisation (Day, 2000). According to Day (2000, p. 585) leadership development stresses the significance of building interpersonal competence that can be defined as "intelligence in terms of the ability to understand people". In contrast to leader development, the author perceives leadership development relying on a more contemporary, relational conceptualisation of leadership that assumes leadership as a function of social resources in an organisation. However, organisations need to develop both the intrapersonal and the interpersonal capabilities to achieve effective leadership competence (Day, 2000). This becomes significant also for trainee programs as without proper investment in individual preparation of the trainees, organisations could face the risk of placing their future potentials in situations that are far too challenging for them. Because of the limited amount of research done on trainee programs and because of the assumed importance of intrapersonal competence development, we need to look into the concept of identity to understand the trainee program phenomenon on a deeper level.

2.3 Construction of Leader Identity in Trainee Programs

The purpose of trainee programs may be to increase leadership competence in organisations to establish lines of succession for future leadership positions, however, in this process organisations hold substantial power in shaping the identities of employees (Carden & Callahan, 2007). Alvesson (2009, p. 190) refers to identity as a person's view of him- or herself that is constructed, multiple, and changing. According to Alvesson (2009, p. 191), the construction of identity happens through comparisons and interactions with other people and groups; and in an organisational context identity has to be regarded as a more social than individualised concept. As people have the tendency to categorise themselves into various social classifications, such as gender, age, religion, and organisational membership, the term social identity is used to indicate the group category an individual identifies him- or herself with (Alvesson, 2009, p. 191; Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Through this categorisation

individuals can structure their social environment and scrutinise themselves and others within that environment through different roles (Carden & Callahan, 2007) such as friend, co-worker, leader or trainee. Positive identity construction is influenced by the comparison of one's in-groups and out-groups, whereas being unsatisfied with the social identity might result in individuals leaving their existing group (Carden & Callahan, 2007; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel, 1982).

Most literature regards this social identity as a crucial element of identity work. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003, p. 1165) refer to identity work as "people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness". Hereby, identity work can be understood as finding temporary answers to the question 'Who am I?' or 'What do I stand for?'. Accordingly, Alvesson (2009, p. 190) claims that the purpose of identity work is to accomplish the sensation of a consistent and strong self that works as a basis for social affairs. Following most contemporary research, it is thus common to see identity as temporary and emergent, rather than static and stable, as it is continuously constructed, negotiated and reproduced in social interactions (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006).

Especially in newcomer socialisation, identity work is noteworthy since newcomers, such as trainees, engage in identity work to constitute their 'new' self-definition (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Many scholars of personality theory suggest that the socialisation process and self-concept are intertwined, meaning that the development or revision of a sense of self is complemented by the sense of where one is and what the surrounding expectations are (Hogan, 1976; Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Organisational newcomers engage in constructing their identity for example through role expectations that emerge through the symbolic, verbal and non-verbal interactions of individuals (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Looking at trainee programs, this interaction is communicated through for instance traineeship advertisements and realised in leadership training sessions. Through this interaction trainees start to deal with the ambiguity they face regarding their roles, status, expectations, organisational power structures, and behavioural norms (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

The identity work in the process of newcomer socialisation leads according to Ibarra (1999) to the construction of 'provisional selves'. Ibarra (1999, p. 765) argues that "people adapt to new professional roles by experimenting with images that serve as trials for possible but not yet

fully elaborated professional identities". This means that for example trainees, who are new to the organisation and the leader role, take images of possible or desired future selves as a basis for their identity construction. However, these 'provisional selves' are played and serve only as temporary solutions to bridge the gap between the trainees' present self-understanding and their understanding of the role expectations. Professional identities are more easily changed in an early career phase and only become stable when gaining experiences over time. In a nutshell, the images of a desired future self form the newcomers' identities, which are only provisional and might still change (Ibarra, 1999).

Another significant source of identity work, also present in the socialisation process and informing the trainees' provisional selves, are discourses. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) understand discourses as a way of reasoning with a vocabulary that establishes the social world in a specific manner and subsequently shapes practice. Many scholars argue that the leadership discourse with terms such as 'leader', 'team', 'vision' is loaded with positive connotations that offer a more appealing managerial identity when contrasted with managerial discourse that is seen as 'bureaucratic' or 'administrative' (e.g. Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006). In their research on middle managers and leadership discourse, Sveningsson and Larsson (2006) for instance suggest that the positive leadership talk creates a fantasy, which substitutes for any real and considerable influence in the organisation. Therefore, even though leadership can be seen as an input in identity work controlling who one is, it does not necessarily extend to what one does (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a). This conflicting situation can generate frustration and identity struggles at the individual level. For example, in their research on how managers position themselves in terms of leadership, Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a) have discovered that when leaders described their tasks in detail, they mainly spoke of administrative work. This creates identity struggles for individuals between the pressure of leadership discourse to act like a leader and the pressure from the organisation to accomplish administrative tasks (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

Leadership discourse is not only claimed to be a source of identity struggles but it can function as an organisational disciplinary device (Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006). This statement complements the research by Alvesson and Willmott (2002) that also recognises identity as a significant dimension of organisational control. The authors perceive that organisations have developed certain procedures in a way that enables the shaping and

directing of individuals' self-identities. This identity regulation comprises of more and less premeditated influences on social practices that shape the identity construction and reconstruction process. Due to this influence, the organisation can become "a significant source of identification for individuals, corporate identity (the perceived core characteristics of an organisation) then informs (self-)*identity work*" (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 625). According to Alvesson and Willmott (2002), identity processes can thus be conceptualised as an interplay between individual's self-identity, identity work and identity regulation. Here, leadership discourse is seen as a method of accomplishing identity regulation that consequently influences organisational members' identity work and ultimately shapes employees' self-positioning. Hence, the positive connotation of leadership discourse inspires and regulates their self-image, feelings and identifications (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Identity regulation indirectly disciplines individuals, on the one hand, to act in accordance with company-specific ideas and norms but, on the other hand, provides them with support in their identity construction process strengthening their self-esteem and security (Alvesson, 2009, p. 207).

Identity regulation can therefore benefit organisational members because of its positive support and additionally because of the enactment of desired identities (Anteby, 2008). According to Anteby (2008) desired identities, for example trainees wishing to belong to the group of leaders, can constitute compelling incentives for encouraging actions and simultaneously act as an engaging form of control. In contrast to future-oriented provisional selves (Ibarra, 1999), desired identities are built on previously enacted identities along with future ones and therefore it applies that "past identities fuel desire" (Anteby, 2008, p. 216). Anteby's (2008) study on identity incentives in an aeronautic plant shows how employees can desire to endorse their identity through selective incentives, which can be implicitly facilitated by management motivating and controlling their behaviour. This means that the potential coexistence of control and desire has to be acknowledged (Anteby, 2008).

In trainee programs, identity regulation might be perceived as a form of support and enactment of desired identity but it can simultaneously be used as a control method. To further investigate this aspect, we next take a closer look at the existing literature on control.

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2.4   Possible Control Mechanisms in Trainee Programs

To be able to answer our second research question we have to elaborate on the different control mechanisms recognised in the literature. Edwards (1981) has presented three broad strategies of control. The first is simple control, in which owners or hired managers exercise power directly and personally in an authoritarian way. A supervisor within a simple control system executes all three elements of control specified by Edwards (1981) in the form of provision of the initial direction to the worker, performance evaluation, and later rewards and punishments. This strategy is rather obtrusive and obvious as the authority figure is directly involved with the entire process while workers do not actively participate (Gossett, 2009). The second is technical control that embeds control in the physical technology of the organisation, for example machines. Hence, a physical device replaces the controlling influence of a supervisor. The third is bureaucratic control where control "derives from the hierarchically based social relations of the organisation and its concomitant sets of systemic rational-legal rules that reward compliance and punish noncompliance" (Barker, 1993, p. 409). In other words, bureaucratic rule systems are employed to control organisational members in an impersonal way. According to Edwards (1981), the last two strategies resemble 'structural' forms of control as power is impersonal and institutionalised in the structure of the organisation. All of these three control systems can be characterised as obtrusive because the organisational members have a passive role in the control process and are guarded by external sources of influence such as supervisors, machinery or rule systems (Gossett, 2009). In contrast, organisations can also use more subtle control mechanisms that unobtrusively regulate individuals' behaviour and actions.

According to Gossett (2009), unobtrusive strategies require active member participation in the control process and the members' close identification with the system as a whole as well as the organisational values. The members are subtly controlled by organisational identification to make decisions, which are in line with objectives of the organisation (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). Thus, organisational members are influenced in a more indirect way, which seems to be more appealing to them or in the words of Tompkins and Cheney (1985, p.165) the trend moves "from negative sanctions that instill fear to the positive incentives of security, identification, and common mission". However, Bisel, Ford and Keyton (2007) claim that apart from the internalisation of organisational values, resistance can also be an outcome of this control attempt. To further explore the concept of unobtrusive control, we need to review

the subcategories of this control strategy as the different forms are significant for the identity work performed in trainee programs and in the socialisation process.

The first form of unobtrusive control we focus on is cultural control. Here, social aspects are utilised to guard organisational members even if there is no formal rule system available (Gossett, 2009). The personal connections with peers lead to strong bonds and a cohesive sense of community, which strengthen the employees' loyalty towards the organisation. According to Alvesson (2009, p. 212), "the corporate culture (ideology) – a set of guiding ideas, beliefs, emotions, and values" is often used to control people through the provision of guidelines for thinking, feeling and acting. This control form is not relying only on external structures of control but is decentralised and includes many different sources, as all organisational members are involved in the control process by identifying with the organisation and supervising one's own behaviour. Organisational values and cultural material, such as rites, rituals, stories and jargon, help not only to steer the behaviour of organisational members but also to influence the identity of an individual. Hence, cultural symbols play a major role in how people see and define themselves while offering organisational members a combination of guidance, control and support (Alvesson, 2009, p. 213).

As an extension of cultural control, we next refer to the concept of concertive control, which also belongs to the unobtrusive category. Tompkins and Cheney (1985) write about concertive control as the supplement to the three control mechanisms listed by Edwards (1981). The focus on teamwork and flat hierarchies is connected to the strong core values. Hence, the member interaction and consensus about values are key aspects of this control form, where members work with each other to fulfil organisational goals (Gossett, 2009). According to Barker (1993), this participative and democratic system of control underscores the role of the workers themselves. The self-managed teams for instance exert powerful self-control and adhere to normative rules, which make the team members take decisions that are appropriate for the organisation. Thus, Barker (1993, p. 408) concludes that "the concertive system […] appeared to draw the iron cage tighter and to constrain the organisation's members more powerfully". He explains the increased control over the workers by two causes. First, the power the team members exercise on each other results in peer pressure while simultaneously the social relations conceal its controlling aspects. Second, concertive control is highly subtle and includes identification with the system and the team as well as the

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unawareness of the team members concerning the control they are exposed to. The author therefore affirms the

> "two theoretical predictions about the future of organisational activity. The first, which extends from Weber (1978) to Foucault (1976, 1980), asserts that organisational life will become increasingly rationalised and controlled. The second, which emerges primarily from Tompkins and Cheney (1985), Tannenbaum (1986), and Edwards (1981), posits that organisational control will become less apparent and more powerful." (Barker, 1993, p. 435)

As the workers strongly identify with their team's values, rules and goals (Barker, 1993), concertive control also connects to identity regulation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Resistance to the control of the team seems to be rather difficult because the identification of oneself as a teammate makes the individual dependent on the group. In a nutshell, the identification with each other and the organisation opens ways to control the organisational members.

Another control mechanism, which we identify as a subcategory of unobtrusive control, is the concept of aspirational control introduced by Alvesson and Kärreman (2007). They claim that organisational members can be guarded by linking individual's identity and self-esteem to a specific career prospect. Thus, the members identify with what they want to become in the future, which "'binds' the identity of people to the conditions and rewards that are offered" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011, p. 171). In their article, Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) emphasise that HR departments have a strong influence on the meaning-making and identity construction of individuals and can use aspirational control to align organisational and individual identities. In conclusion, by making people identify with their aspirations organisations can regulate identities and steer individuals to behave in compliance with organisational objectives.

2.5   Chapter Summary

To summarise, we give an overview of the key parts in the literature review. In the existing literature we recognise two main streams on leadership theory: the 'traditional' approach towards leadership and the more critical approach. Under the traditional leadership approach

we introduced heroic, post-heroic and authentic leadership, as well as the leadership-management distinction. For most of these approaches, we also provided more critical voices and finally continued to the critical ambiguity-centred approach (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011) towards leadership. Next, we moved to the concept of trainee programs. After displaying their purpose and basic characteristics, we focused on the programs' aim to develop leadership competence. Following this, we turned our focus to the role of identity within the context of trainee programs and presented the concepts of identity, identity work, identity struggles and discourses while connecting them to newcomer socialisation. Finally, identity regulation was brought forth as both disciplining and supporting. We then proceeded to describe different control mechanisms and contrasted between the obtrusive control forms of simple, technical and bureaucratic control and the unobtrusive control forms of cultural, concertive and aspirational control. The purpose of this theoretical background was to discuss these concepts and their relation to each other to later position our research amongst the existing literature. Thus, this theoretical background serves as a basis for the remaining chapters.

3 Methodology

This chapter presents our chosen methodology for conducting our research. We begin by introducing our metatheoretical starting point that underpins our research approach. We then describe our qualitative research design and elaborate on the methods we used to collect our data. We conclude by presenting our analytical process and by discussing the importance of reflexivity for our research.

3.1 Metatheoretical Starting Point

As we are trying to understand the construction of leadership within trainee programs in depth, we are taking an interpretive philosophical stance when pursuing our first research question on the construction of leadership. Within this paradigm we consider the perspectives of the subject – in our case for example the trainees – and use the findings to add to the existing theories of leadership and control. A key point of the interpretive tradition is the expectation that no objective truth exists but that there are multiple meanings and that the researcher is an active part of the subjective knowledge construction (Merriam, 2002, p. 5). The perspective that the nature of reality is socially constructed shapes our inquiry, as we for instance have to consider that leader identities are constructed through discourse, which is a way of reasoning with vocabulary that can be said to constitute a particular version of the social world (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). When we turn to our second research question concerning the role of control in trainee programs, we shift our attention to the critical rather than the interpretive paradigm. This means that we consider "how larger contextual factors affect the ways in which individuals construct reality" (Merriam, 2002, p. 4). In particular, we explore how companies exert control over trainees and thereby shape their reality constructions in a way that is advantageous for the organisation.

3.2 Research Design

In order to follow our underlying theoretical standpoint, we relied on qualitative research methods to provide answers to our research questions. Given that our theoretical

underpinnings of leadership, identity and control are complex in nature, we saw qualitative methods as the most suitable approach for conducting our research as this allowed a deeper understanding of the phenomena and accounted for our own stand in the socially constructed world. The subject of our study was a management trainee program in a global retail company located in Sweden and as a basis for our analysis we employed a combination of company documents, surveys and interviews.

In the beginning of our research process we met with the human resource (HR) managers responsible for the trainee program. During these meetings we developed a mutual understanding of the purpose and expectations of our research and were provided with the contact information of the participants. Together with the organisation we decided that the participants would only include former trainees, who had completed the trainee program one year ago. These participants were chosen as they were the first ones having gone through the program as it is today and as it is described in the company documents. Due to the fact that these participants were already in their full-time positions in the company, they were able to look at the program in retrospect and reflect on their experiences more insightfully. Thus we considered them a purposeful sample (Merriam, 2002, p. 12) of participants to provide us with answers to our research questions.

Furthermore, we used these meetings to gain insights into the HR department's understanding of the trainee program. These conversations were not held as formal interviews, nevertheless, we consider them as data because they helped us learning about the company's view on their trainee program and thus yielded a contextual frame for our study. In addition to the insights we gained in these conversations, we also received official documents concerning the leadership approach at Fuco from the HR managers. These documents presented the organisation's understanding of leadership, explanations of the underlying values directing the company, as well as a general introduction to the trainee program. We used the documents in connection to our first research question, as through them we were able to analyse how leadership is constructed in the company and to investigate which education the trainees are exposed to. Thus, the conversations with the HR managers and the document analysis built the basis for our analysis of the company's perspective on leadership imparted in the trainee program.

To further enrich the validity of the discoveries, we also employed other data collection methods (Merriam, 2002, p. 12) of surveys and interviews, through which we were able to

obtain a broader and more in-depth perspective into the trainee program. Having met with the HR managers, we designed an online survey for our research participants. This survey consisted of 17 questions concerning the trainees' background, leadership definition and their experiences of the trainee program. The survey answers were utilised as a source of data for our analysis; however, the main purpose of conducting the survey was to spot topics, which could be of special interest in the in-depth interviews. Hence, the survey answers supported us in formulating interview questions that could lead to interesting outcomes.

With the support of the survey answers, we created an interview guide with open-ended questions, the purpose of which was to uncover the trainees' view on leadership and the trainee program. The interviews were semi-structured and attempted to gather information in regards to participants' perspectives of the studied phenomena (Kvale, 1996, p. 1). We consider that interviews as a data collection method were well suited for our purpose of exploring the experiences of the participants through their own words. We began the interviews with introductory questions concerning the trainees' background and their views on the recruitment process. Subsequently, we gave them the opportunity to talk freely about their experiences of the trainee program and their understanding of leadership. After these questions, we posed more concrete questions, which subtly aimed at finding answers helpful for our second research question concerning control. Lastly, we gave the trainees a chance to talk about their overall satisfaction with the program and their current positions in the organisation. In total we conducted eight interviews lasting between 35 and 60 minutes in the course of March and April. Five of the interviews were conducted in a face-to-face situation with two interviewers at the offices of the site or at a coffee shop. However, with three participants it was not possible to arrange a personal meeting; therefore in these cases we applied the alternative of a telephone interview or contacted them via Skype. With the permission of our interviewees, we recorded the interviews to prepare the data analysis by generating interview transcriptions.

To confirm our access to the organisation we signed a Non-Disclosure Agreement and used a pseudonym for the company name. Also, by assuring the anonymity of the trainees with the usage of fictitious names, we hoped to receive honest answers from the respondents and ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of our study. In some instances we also had to modify the participants' statements in a reasonable way to make them easier to read.

3.3   Data Analysis

Even if we formally did the data analysis after the data collection phase, we acknowledge that the interpretation process started once we conducted the interviews. Hence, to some extent the data collection and analysis appeared simultaneously (Merriam, 2002, p. 14).

During our research, we employed the qualitative method of hermeneutics, which allows for the analysis of different forms of texts (Prasad, 2005, p. 30) represented in our case by documents, survey answers and interview transcripts. According to this approach, three aspects have to be considered in an iterative spiral: the author of the text, the historical context, and the analyser/ourselves. Thus, we applied the hermeneutic circle (Prasad, 2005, p. 34) to move between the text and the wider context of for example the company culture. Hence, we as researchers had to gain a certain intimacy with the texts in order to be able to reveal hidden meanings, while simultaneously staying aware of our own pre-understandings.

These pre-understandings partly derived from a leadership course we attended during our studies. To be able to make use of the theoretical preconceptions learned during these lectures, we utilised an abductive approach, which "has some characteristics of both induction and deduction" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 4). In accordance with our hermeneutical starting point, this method warranted the move between our pre-understandings and the empirical material. With the help of the theoretical preconceptions, such as leadership theory, we conducted the analysis of the empirical material what in turn led to refinements of the theory.

Based on this abductive approach and Peter and Bernard's (2003) recommendation to scrutinise the data concerning for instance repetitions, metaphors and analogies as well as similarities and differences, we started our formal analysis after transcribing the interviews and reading through the survey answers and documents. By adding comments, working with colour coding and creating tables, we were able to find themes or categories and to name them. In the process of interpretation we had to reduce some of the identified subcategories and agree on the most important categories that answered our research questions, leaving us with categories like people-orientation, growth and development, being the 'new one', frustration and struggles, or support. Comparable to the process of theorising (Swedberg, 2012), we used the findings from the empirical material to add our own arguments to already

existing theory like our concepts of identity deconstruction and reconstruction, which complement theories on control.

The validity of our study was enhanced not only through the combination of surveys, interviews and documents, but also through our awareness concerning paradigms. While we mainly took an interpretive approach for pursuing our first research question, we supplemented this by critical thinking when addressing our second research question. As our underlying paradigms, our data collection method as well as our analysis indicate, we as researchers were part of the knowledge production. Therefore, we had to acknowledge our own pre-understandings and engage in reflexivity throughout our research process, which we elaborate on in the following section.

3.4   Reflexivity

To improve the quality of research, Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009, p. 8) propose that researchers need to be reflexive in the knowledge development process. The authors argue that the 'results of interpretation' (all references to empirical material) have a problematic relationship with the external context, which has to be considered by simultaneously performing critical self-exploration of the researcher's own interpretations about the empirical data, its construction, and the research context.

In our research, being reflexive was crucial as we researchers had an active role in analysing and interpreting what the trainees mean. As our main focus was to study the subjective construction of leadership and its controlling aspects in trainee programs, we could not rely on an objective reality but we had to consider the subjectivities of the participants as well as those of our own (Merriam, 2002, p. 5). Our own biases and assumptions were related to the site, topic and theoretical content. Firstly, one bias concerned our pre-understanding of the organisation. As a well-known global retailer, the organisation is visibly present in the society and we had acquainted ourselves with it and its culture primarily experiencing it in a positive light. This together with the friendliness and enthusiastic involvement of the HR team might have influenced our judgment of the trainees' experiences and implicitly directed us to find something that would please the organisation. Secondly, as the topic originated from our personal interest in trainee programs and possibly enrolling in one, we had developed a prior understanding of the programs and their recruitment processes. Therefore, we might have

brought a positive undertone into the study, as we might have subconsciously wanted to confirm our assumptions out of personal interest. By acknowledging these biases, we could allow the discovery of more ground-breaking findings.

Furthermore, as relatively inexperienced researchers, another difficulty we faced when interpreting the data, was our limited theoretical background. According to Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009, p. 273), this limitation may restrict possible analyses, as researchers are more likely to draw from familiar conceptualisations, as in our case for example the conventional theories within the leadership field. To avoid this limitation we familiarised ourselves with additional theories to strengthen our repertoire of interpretations. Moreover, we believe that our self-awareness was also enhanced by the fact that we were two researchers, as working with another person facilitated the detection of each other's pre-understandings and biases and brought more variety in our interpretation.

To consider our biases and assumptions and to maintain reflexivity, we saw ourselves as being part of the knowledge construction. To improve not only the reflexivity but also the credibility and reliability of the study, we moved in a four-level structure to create reflexive interpretation (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 271). First, interacting with the empirical data, we were attentive to what questions to ask, who to ask, and how to ask those questions. Second, when interpreting this material, we extended our interpretive repertoire to allow the interplay between data and interpretation. The method we applied was asking an external party, our supervisor, to critically assess and question our findings. Third, it was also important to critically evaluate the underlying aspects of ideology, power and social reproduction. To consider this focus, we took a more critical stance and questioned the empirical data: 'What lies behind the initial obvious understandings? Does the strong culture of the organisation influence the trainees? Do the trainees aim to become leaders or is the idea organisationally reproduced?' Last on the four levels, we reflected on our own text production and critically reviewed our own language, possible claims of authority and selectivity of voices. By moving between these four levels and considering our biases and limitations, we continuously interacted with the data, which enabled us to detect the complex relationship between the knowledge production, context and our own involvement to ultimately enhance the quality of our research.

3.5   Chapter Summary

To sum up, this chapter introduced the philosophical standpoint of our research as well as our methods for the data collection and analysis. We began by reviewing the interpretive and critical paradigms underlying our research and continued by presenting our qualitative research design. Elaborating on our selection of documents, surveys and interviews as our data collection methods, we moved on to describe how we employed hermeneutics and an abductive approach in analysing our data. We concluded this chapter by outlining the importance of reflexivity for our research and for our findings, which we present in the following chapter.

4 Findings

In this section we analyse our empirical material and present our findings. We start by briefly introducing the site of our study and the characteristics of the trainee program our research focuses on. Then we continue by introducing the major themes that emerge from our data, the order of which corresponds to our research questions. We begin by looking into the program's and the trainees' construction of leadership, moving to its influence on identity and finishing off with the controlling aspects that we identify within our context. We connect the emerging themes to existing literature but the interplay between all three themes is further discussed in the next chapter.

4.1 Case Presentation

Our research was conducted in a global retail company located in Sweden, which we refer to with the pseudonym 'Fuco'. Fuco has over 100,000 employees and it operates in over 40 countries worldwide. The company is characterised by its denounced culture and values, which originate in the founding of the organisation and which shape its strategy, operations and HR approach. The company is growing rapidly and to secure its leadership capabilities in the long-term it has developed a management trainee program that is now starting its fourth year.

This management trainee program is thus rather young and Fuco invests considerable amounts of resources in it. Instead of targeting freshly graduated students like most trainee programs, Fuco focuses on recruiting individuals with at least one year of leadership experience gained in any environment or context. Because of this requirement, the trainees' medium age is older, around 30. The amount of trainees recruited varies yearly between 10 and 20, and the successful applicants, who pass the long screening process, are placed in different entities that operate under the Fuco Company, such as IT or retail. During a period of 12 months, the trainees work in their assigned function with the exception of the first month spent working at the floor level in a store. The Fuco management trainee program neither includes an international period nor continuous rotations across the organisational functions, which are factors that distinguish it from other trainee programs as introduced in our literature review.

Similarly to other programs, the management trainee program at Fuco also combines practical and theoretical elements. The one-year program is structured in 10 'program-weeks' taking place once a month, where the trainee group meets taking a break from the practical work in their respective departments. With the guidance of the program leaders (the Fuco HR team), other leadership professionals, and respected company figures, the trainees learn about leadership and themselves during the theoretical program-weeks. The goal of these weeks is to give the participants tools to understand Fuco and the company's leadership approach as well as to identify the trainees' personal development needs. In addition to their project supervisor, the participants also have a mentor and a coach who support them in this one-year process. As the main purpose of the program is to secure Fuco's leadership competence for the future, the participants of the management trainee program are told to have faster development to leadership positions with the expectation of them being amongst the top 200 leaders in the company within five to seven years. However, participating in the program does not guarantee a follow-up position in the company and the trainees themselves are responsible for finding their next step in Fuco after the trainee program experience.

4.2   Trainee Program – Construction Site of Leadership

As mentioned in the methodology section we used a combination of documents, surveys and interviews as the basis for our analysis. In the following, we start by answering our first interpretive research question and demonstrate how leadership is constructed in trainee programs. Therefore we use, on the one hand, the statements in the official organisational documents and by the HR team as representations of the trainee program and its leadership approach while, on the other hand, we employ the participants' survey and interview answers as representation of the trainees' perspective.

4.2.1   Fuco's Positive Construction of Leadership

In developing the future leaders of Fuco, the trainee program relies strongly on the organisation's approach to leadership, which is communicated through the organisation's leadership discourse. This discourse becomes apparent in the official company documents and the statements made by the HR team responsible for the trainee program.

The discourse, which underlies the leadership construction in the trainee program, in our opinion depicts leadership as something positive and powerful as demonstrated in the following. For example, a document describing Fuco's approach to leadership states:

> "We think of leadership in terms of approach, relationships and competence rather than focusing on the power of positions in hierarchies."

Through this somewhat ambiguous statement it seems that Fuco's interpretation of leadership is very people-centred and leadership is not limited to a few organisational members by their position. It is rather seen as something everyone can do, which indicates a post-heroic approach to leadership (Ford, Hearding & Learmonth, 2008, p. 16). Moreover, Fuco strongly depends on interpersonal relationships between organisational members. This people-centred strategy stemming from the leadership style approach (Heracleous, 2003, p. 59; Alvesson & Spicer, 2011) is characterised by the common spirit in the organisation as indicated in the leadership document:

> "The Fuco business will never be a one-man show. It is characterised by co-operation between people who believe in the same cause and respect each other's efforts. Everybody is important."

This spirit described in the document also shapes the way leaders are constructed in the trainee program as caring and motivating people-oriented individuals, which we recognise with the metaphor of a 'buddy' as introduced by Sveningsson and Blom (2011). This buddy metaphor communicated by the leadership discourse encourages leaders to care for people and ensure that everyone feels good. The emphasis placed on interpersonal relationships is even more powerfully stated in Fuco's leadership approach:

> "We are interdependent, we need each other. As individuals, teams and as organisations. With clear business assignments and roles we are each other's prerequisites. We make each other become better and we build on each other's strengths and differences."

Referring back to the literature on leader/leadership development (Day, 2000), this significance put on people and interpersonal relations indicates that the trainee program at Fuco relies on leadership development to build the company's future leaders as aligned with the communicated leadership approach.

According to the company, Fuco leaders practice leadership based on their own beliefs and the organisational values while building trust and delegating responsibility. The entire HR idea is based on the ability to give individuals a chance to grow and develop both personally and professionally:

> "To give down-to-earth, straightforward people the possibility to grow, both as individuals and in their professional roles so that together we are strongly committed to creating a better everyday life for ourselves and our customers."

This focus on people development and empowerment further strengthens the construction of leadership as post-heroic, where everyone is empowered and developed (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). As one core capability, Fuco leaders need to possess the ability to lead and develop people:

> "It is about […] empowering co-workers to perform to the best of their abilities, and to continuously develop in their business assignments. We always focus on […] making the business grow as well as the people."

The importance of developing people and the discourse around growth can be associated with the leadership metaphor of a 'gardener', who practices leadership through the development of oneself and others (Huzzard & Spoelstra, 2011). According to Huzzard and Spoelstra (2011) helping employees grow ultimately benefits the organisation they work for and is a very ideal depiction of leadership as it has become popular in today's managerial language. Thus, we recognise that constructing leaders as gardeners and buddies through the leadership discourse seems to produce a positive image of leadership.

The aspect of development is extended additionally to self-growth, which indicates Fuco's and the trainee program's construction of leadership as authentic. This is clearly stated in the organisation's leadership document:

> "Authentic leadership [...] is when you know your resources and build on them. It is when you dare to be yourself, also as a leader. Self-reflection, insight and courage are keys in your continuous growth."

Similarly the HR team responsible for the Fuco trainee program associates knowing oneself with the ability to lead others better:

> "Leaders with great self-awareness are better leaders as they have insights into themselves." – HR team

Through personal development exercises, such as a self-managed learning exercise where the trainees delve into their past and sense of self, the trainee program develops the trainees' intrapersonal competence (Day, 2000) and self-knowledge with the stated goal to construct authentic leaders, who lead by example and consequently foster a healthy organisational atmosphere characterised by trust, integrity and high moral standards (Avolio et al., 2004).

By analysing the company documents and the statements by the HR team, we recognise that the leadership discourse within Fuco constructs leadership as something positive and powerful. Fuco thus relies on post-heroic, people-centred and authentic leadership approaches, which are communicated to the trainees through the trainee program especially during the program-weeks. To get a comprehensive understanding of the influences this has on the trainees' definition, we next analyse the trainees' perception of leadership.

4.2.2   Trainees' Construction of Leadership and Fuco's Influence

Having gone through a one-year management trainee program with the purpose of becoming a leader within Fuco, the interviewees show apparent alignment to the organisation in the way they understand leadership. The way leadership is constructed in the organisation as post-heroic but also people-centred fundamentally influences the trainees' definition of leadership. As an example, Carin understands leadership as empowering others to work freely and take their own decisions while Lisa states:

> "For me right now I think leadership is very much about the ability to motivate and leverage competence in others, as well as gather everyone towards a common goal. If you had asked me five years ago, I would maybe say it's more about the ability to take decisions and to know the answers - but now I think it has changed a little bit." – Lisa

This statement indicates that the trainee program has the ability to shape the participants views on leadership towards the organisational ideals. The people-oriented leadership and the change in view is further acknowledged by other trainees like Marcus:

"I think that before coming to Fuco I saw more of the business side than the people side. So I have become more of a people person in the sense that I care more genuinely about people. This was one of the biggest insights." – Marcus

This quote, which answers the question in how far the trainee has changed through the program, shows that the trainee now sees leaders as caring, motivating, and all in all people-oriented individuals what we view as a similarity to the 'buddy' metaphor (Sveningsson & Blom, 2011). Furthermore, the growth aspect, which is connectable to the 'gardening' metaphor (Huzzard & Spoelstra, 2011), is not only present in the organisation's leadership discourse but also in the way the trainees talk and think about leadership. Sara, when contrasting the leadership approach at Fuco with that of her old employer, exemplifies the growth aspect by recognising that developing people is one of the most motivating elements of leadership:

"To develop people and give them the right tools to actually become better people, better leaders or really reach for goals is the biggest enjoyment I have in my work as a leader. I am a part of developing people." – Sara

This example focuses on supporting the growth of others and shows that the ability to develop people is a main point in the trainees' understanding of leadership. Moreover, we also recognise the concept of authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) in the trainees' statements. In the trainee program, the trainees go through intensive self-learning and supposedly get to know their 'true self' during the year. All the interviewees speak of self-knowledge and authenticity as main wisdoms they gathered and often connect them to their understanding of what leadership means. Peter and Tim exemplify this by giving their definition of leadership:

"Leadership is about getting to know the people and the business comes later through the good relations. So leadership is about relations, responsibility and also being in balance with yourself." – Peter

"I think that leadership is very much about being able to be honest and open. And being yourself." – Tim

Hence, the expressions 'being in balance with yourself' and 'being yourself' are used by the trainees to describe the characteristics of leadership. In our view, this perspective on

leadership is in line with the authentic leadership discourse as brought forth by the HR department.

Another way leadership is constructed by the trainees is by comparing it to management. The trainees draw a clear line between leading people and managing administrative issues. Carin for example highlights this distinction by describing what leadership means to her:

> "And it's a very clear difference between managing and leading people. Giving people motivation and helping them to succeed every day. It's not about telling them what to do and micro-managing in each detail." – Carin

For Carin managing is connected to controlling behaviours, which is not what leadership is about from her point of view. The trainees distinctly separate leadership from management and follow the grandiose discourse around leadership (Alvesson, 2013) by referring to leadership as something better and more important than management. The distinction between a strategically thinking leader and a narrow-minded manager, is exemplified by Axel who explains what he has learned in the trainee program:

> "Thinking more strategically and not just in your own little world, but seeing it with the bigger perspective. That is very much a leadership skill that I think really separates a good senior executive leader from a good middle manager in a company. Being able to go outside your own box and then see how it all works together." – Axel

Axel seems to engage in the discourse around strategic leadership, which implies that management is something inferior to leadership and managers do not need the same mental capabilities as leaders. This discourse influences the construction of leadership by the trainees who empathise with the leader framed as a strategist. Marcus for instance describes this, when asked to define leadership, in a very vivid way by comparing the leader-dog to the person standing behind the dog sledge:

> "And when you are a manager, maybe if you are a line manager, then you can be more of the dog but the more and the higher you go the more you need to be the one behind the sledge. Because if you are always the leader-dog you are in the front running and you don't see the other dogs. But if you are standing behind this then you know you can steer it. But I really like that because before I have always thought you should be

the one in the front or you should do it yourself, but this is not what it is about." – Marcus

This trainee refers to the metaphor of the dog-sledge to contrast the restricted view of the leader-dog, which stands for the manager, with the broad overview of the person behind the sledge, who is representing the leader. In this case, it is possible that the discourse around strategic leadership builds a source of identification for the trainees, which elevates their identities compared to seeing oneself as a manager. However, these discourses inherited by the trainees also have to be confronted with organisational reality.

When asking the trainees in the interviews to define some specific leadership tasks almost all of them have difficulties in listing any concrete ones or it comes down to descriptions that they previously put in the marked out management category. For example Peter lists the following assignments:

"One month I got the chance to do the profit and loss for the store and to send that report down to the service office uh… to practice that. Uh… also I got the chance to look at like uh… certain costs for transportation." – Peter

The very hesitant answer of Peter illustrates the insecurity when talking about specific leadership tasks and also the administrative reality of the glamorous leadership discourse (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a). As the grandiose discourse around leadership does not resemble the practical work of the trainees, this could lead to identity struggles for the individuals (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) who have to maintain their self-identities in this ambiguous situation. Hence, the discourse around leadership has to be considered also in a more critical light as it may imply power and politics.

4.3   Trainee Program – Controlling Trainees' Identities

The following section analyses our empirical material with connection to our second research question 'How do companies use trainee programs to control trainees?' and employs a critical approach by introducing concepts identified in our data. We start by presenting the data pointing to how the program triggers individuals' identity work and fuels their desired identities with the leadership discourse and then continue with an analysis of the struggles

caused by the role expectations and leadership discourse. Finally, we elaborate on the connection between identity and organisational control.

4.3.1   Leadership Discourse as Identity Work Trigger

In the process of constructing leaders, the positive discourse around leadership and the trainee program activities influence not only the trainees' perceptions of leadership but also their identity. From our interviews we notice that the Fuco trainee program initiates the participants' identity work, which is explicitly indicated when the trainees are asked to describe their experiences of the year. Marcus for examples comments:

> "We were all going through this 'Who are you?', 'Who do you want to be?', 'What sort of leadership do you want to do?' and 'What do you want to represent?', 'How do you want to be towards other people?' and 'What have you done?' and so on." – Marcus

This statement is representative of how the trainee program begins to question the trainees' sense of self. Through the extensive focus on self-development in the program-weeks, the trainees thus engage in identity work as they form, maintain, repair and strengthen their sense of self and try to find answers to the question 'Who am I?' (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

The monthly program-weeks play an important role in triggering the identity work, as during these weeks the trainees are encouraged to discuss and share personal things about themselves with the trainee group. The first exercise the group experiences together is called 'lifeline', in which the participants are made to look into their past by dotting down the biggest, both good and bad, happenings of their life. This lifeline is then presented to the trainee group that at this point is still relatively unfamiliar. The trainee program has thus power in triggering identity work, which is indicated when Axel talks about this lifeline assignment the trainee group faced:

> "And then there were a lot of good assignments throughout the program that really forced us to challenge ourselves and to say things about ourselves that at least I have never done before as I don't like to go around discussing what has happened. We were quite forced, not forced, but they told us that 'you really have the opportunity now to share things you haven't shared before'. So when everyone else did it you were more

or less like 'let's do it' […] and you were able to share things that you don't want or like to share." – Axel

Axel's comment not only shows the force the trainee program has on activating the trainees' identity work but also suggests how Fuco uses identity as a method of tying the group together. Exposing themselves to a rather unknown group of people in the beginning of the trainee year seems to strengthen the trainees' connections with each other as well as their identification with the group. The group's tight connections are exemplified by Sara's quote:

"The ten of us [the trainee group] we have really strong bonds." – Sara

Thus by triggering identity work, the personal development exercises can build the trainees feeling of belongingness to the group and cause the group to identify more strongly with each other. Being a trainee seems to become a part of their social identity, and the trainees are triggered to build in-group identification with the other trainees (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Underlying the monthly program-weeks and the various self-development exercises is the leadership discourse, which can be seen as shaping the trainees' perception of the program and of themselves. Commenting on an exercise that seeks to discover how the trainees view each other as leaders, Axel states:

"Of course in a leadership program you would like to be seen as a leader. Of course that is how it is." – Axel

Axel's statement is representative of how the discourse around the program shapes the perceived nature of the program itself that is recognised as a 'leadership program', which consequently influences the trainees' sense of themselves as leaders. Therefore, it seems that the trainees' desire to identify as leaders is encouraged by the program's leadership discourse. The participants' perception of leadership is further inspired by the program's positive construction of the concept. The positive leadership approach is promoted to the trainees by the HR team like Sara exemplifies when asked about the leadership education they received during the program:

"We had a lot of HR managers in the program telling us how they want leaders at Fuco to be. There were also a lot of trainings on feedback, conflict and group dynamics. So we learnt a lot of theory to understand people." – Sara

This comment indicates that the trainees are explicitly exposed to the organisation's leadership approach and they develop their leading skills with respect to the people-orientation corresponding to the previously identified positive construction of leadership by the program. This positive construction furthermore influences the trainees' sense of self as a leader as indicated by Sara when she continues to describe her ability to take on a leadership role:

> "I would say that I am a better leader today than I would have been without the program. It is because I am really sure of who I am as a person and I know what my weaknesses and strengths are and I can work on them. At the same time I can talk to a person for five minutes and see what their strengths and weaknesses are because of the program." – Sara

Through this statement we can notice that by triggering identity work with the help of leadership discourse as communicated by the HR team, the trainee program strengthens the trainees' leadership competence and confidence as well as their identification with the people-centred and authentic leadership styles. The interviewees seem to find their genuine selves through the self-development assignments as they get in contact with their weaknesses and strengths and also learn how to read and develop other people. Marcus also recognises the importance of people when asked about his development:

> "Before I was always thinking 'Is this problem going to affect the world economy? If not, it is not important'. But now if someone's cat is sick, I understand that it could mean the whole world for someone and it matters. So I have a softer side now and empathy for others." – Marcus

The leadership discourse at Fuco seems to influence the trainees' view of themselves as leaders. Marcus for example has developed to see himself as a caring leader and can now be recognised to possess some of the characteristics of the 'buddy' leader (Sveningsson & Blom, 2011). The positive notion of leadership thus seems to influence the trainees' and their identities and can support their identity work, which we analyse in the succeeding section.

4.3.2 Supporting Trainees' Desired Identity

In the trainee program leadership discourse can be seen as a significant means to support the trainees' self-definition, confidence, and security to build strong and capable future leaders (Alvesson, 2009, p. 209). This supportive function of leadership begins already in the recruitment process, where the positive leadership discourse is employed in the recruitment requirements and expectations, and subsequently continues throughout the trainee year to enhance the trainees' desired identities as leaders.

The HR team at Fuco states that one of the most important requirements for acceptance in the trainee program is to have at least one year of leading experience. Because of this prerequisite, the trainees have already gathered prior leadership experience and consequently they have potentially developed a blossoming leader identity. This leader identity is then strengthened by the challenging recruitment process, which makes the applicants stronger and more competitive the closer they get to the placement. Being one of the ten people accepted to the program from almost a thousand applicants seems to act as a confidence boost and positive confirmation of trainees' capabilities and their desired leader identity. Peter exemplifies this by saying:

> "This [acceptance] was like a message to me saying that I did something right on the way and that I had made my way into a big global firm. So I was very proud." – Peter

Peter's identity as a skilled individual and leader is confirmed and strengthened by the successful recruitment process boosting not only his leader identity but also his confidence. Thus, accordingly with Ashforth and Mael (1989), the role expectations of both the trainees and the company, communicated in the recruitment process and the requirements, influence the trainees' identity work in the newcomer socialisation process.

The construction of the trainees' desired identity seems to continue through the positive enhancement caused by the leadership discourse in the program. Some trainees appear to experience the program-weeks even as identity boosts as their leader identities are strengthened while developing their leadership competence (Ford, Hearding & Learmonth, 2008, p. 78). When we asked the interviewees about the confidence increasing aspect of the program, Axel goes into describing his experiences of the program-weeks:

"So you always got these kinds of energy boosts from the weeks. [...] Because after three weeks it was a trainee week so you knew you were totally exhausted and you are like 'what am I doing here' more or less. And then you get into the program-week and after Thursday when you leave you are like 'now I am going back and do everything, I am going to change the world'." – Axel

The slightly grandiose statement by Axel hints that the program-weeks give him an almost superhero-like feeling of powerfulness. During the program-weeks with the other trainees when being guided by the HR team and other company leaders, he is seen as a future leader, what gives him a positive identity boost constructing and validating his leader identity through the employed leadership discourse. Hence, by triggering identity work in the trainee program, the trainees' develop a stronger self-image and leader identity as promoted by the leadership discourse and return to their assigned roles in the different functions with higher self-confidence. Therefore, we recognise that the leadership discourse acts partly as a supportive instrument in the trainees' identity construction. However, the identity work and the leadership discourse are also a source of uncertainty and identity struggles as discussed in the following section.

4.3.3   Trainees Struggling with the Desired Identity

So far we have shown that the construction of the desired leader identities in the trainee program can support the trainees' identity work. However, the identity work triggered through the leadership discourse in the trainee program also involves challenges. Lisa illustrates this contrast by describing her experiences of the trainee year:

"I felt very appreciated and noticed and as if people wanted to invest in you. It was a huge ego boost. Sometimes of course it was challenging because you have to talk about difficult things and look at yourself from other people's perspectives and see that 'okay maybe I am not as good as I want to be'. And you have to be brutally honest with yourself." – Lisa

On the one hand, the trainees experience the excitement and appreciation of being in the Fuco trainee program but, on the other hand, they describe the self-development exercises as stressful. When talking about the experiences related to the challenge of discovering oneself Carin says:

"It was a rollercoaster." – Carin

This metaphor by Carin depicts that the trainee program and its leadership discourse are not just helpful but also challenging with ups and downs like in a rollercoaster. To further analyse the 'downs' of the trainees in the program year we now take a look at the identity struggles the trainees face.

While the trainees are engaging in the language-games (Kelly, 2008) and the discourse-driven nature of leadership (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012) they simultaneously are 'the new ones' in the company. Hence, they end up in a struggle between wanting to be seen as a leader and actually being seen as an organisational novice. One trainee exemplifies her experiences of being new with the words:

> "I feel that at Fuco there's very often this argument that you have to have worked at Fuco for a very long time before you can have a more advanced position […] and this is sometimes very frustrating for me coming from the outside." – Carin

This statement shows not only that it is difficult within this company to be accepted as a leader without having organisational experiences but also that this leads to frustration and identity struggles among the trainees. This frustration is even further intensified by the unwelcoming reactions of the old-timers:

> "Some of the people that have been there for 10 years in the same role all the time were like 'why did they recruit somebody from outside?'. And nobody ever told me about this but I could feel it." – Peter

The trainees are seen as 'enemies' by some of the other employees. The organisational newcomers' identity work (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) is not supported by the unpleasant atmosphere the old-timers create by not providing the expected recognition, what increases the ambiguity for the trainees and decreases their self-confidence.

Another identity struggle, which is also attributable to the contrast between the leadership discourse and the organisational reality, stems from the fact that the so called 'leadership trainees' do not have any leadership tasks in practice. Oscar addresses this conflict quite directly when talking about the difficulties in the program:

> "It was also the frustration of being in a leadership development program or management trainee program without a leadership role, that's a frustration. Then I started to question a little bit if I should go somewhere else and why I am not given a challenge." – Oscar

Through this quote it becomes clear that the trainee program raises expectations within the trainees to have leadership assignments. However, the developing discourse around leadership does not resemble the organisational reality (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a), which does not offer a leadership role to the trainees. This conflicting situation leads to doubts within the trainees and identity struggles as they are exposed to the leadership discourse while having to perform administrative tasks (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) Hence, the trainees are given no chance to practice leadership and to prove their capabilities as explained by Tim:

> "The frustration was about that you went to […] all these really good exercises and challenges [concerning leadership] but then you couldn't really use them or train on them. You have the theoretical ideas of how you should work and what you would like to do but you couldn't really use them." – Tim

The trainees are eager to make use of the leadership skills learned but simultaneously they are hold back, which indicates identity struggles. Not having leadership tasks in the program raises the trainees' concerns about their future. Peter for example answers to the question about the challenges and difficulties in the program:

> "One big thing that stressed many of us out was that we didn't know what would happen after the year." – Peter

The trainees do not have the chance to practice leadership within the program and are perceived as the 'new ones' what makes them insecure concerning their future positions. Moreover, Fuco does not promise a guaranteed leadership position after the program what further enhances the uncertainty for the trainees.

The identity struggles, which evolve as the trainees have the prototype of the leadership discourse in mind while facing a divergent reality, in combination with the ongoing exercises challenging the trainees' characters, increase the insecurity among the trainees. Carin gives her impression on the atmosphere in the program:

"I think the overall atmosphere was really good. But sometimes the program was confusing; there was a lot of confusion also. Confusion about the future or the next steps and of course we worked a lot as well on our individual development. 'Who are we? What is it I want to do?' So that of course caused confusion in yourself." – Carin

She repeats the term confusion various times what shows that questioning her character makes her more uncertain and vulnerable. Sara depicts her initial problems and the following development in the Fuco environment by stating:

"I think it took me three or four months of a lot of frustration and a lot of 'was this the right decision?' until I just one day woke up and realised that this is the best place I have ever been at." – Sara

From this quote we can infer that the frustrations and insecurities within the trainee program build a good basis for forming the trainees according to organisational ideals. In Sara's case it can be seen that her initial difficulties end up in her being fully convinced of the trainee program. In a nutshell, according to our findings the identity struggles the trainees are exposed to in the program and the resulting uncertainties, make the trainees more susceptible to identity work and ease organisational control, which is the focus of the next section.

4.3.4   Identity Control through Deconstruction and Reconstruction

What we can deduce from the last section is that the identity struggles increase the vulnerability of the trainees and thus their susceptibility to identity work. Under these conditions we analyse how companies and their trainee programs use identity as a control mechanism. In the following section we introduce our concepts of *identity deconstruction* and *reconstruction* by presenting how the trainees' identities are first shattered and later restored as a way of exerting organisational control.

We start by displaying in how far concertive control applies in the trainee program. As described earlier, the trainees all categorise themselves as part of the trainee group, which is characterised by very tight connections. However, these tight connections and the identification with each other can serve as a way to hide the accompanying control (Barker, 1993). Axel for instance says when describing his program experiences:

> "We were quite forced, not forced, but they told us that 'you really have the opportunity now to share things you haven't shared before'. So when everyone else did it you were more or less like 'let's do it' […] and you were able to share things that you don't want or like to share." – Axel

The trainees are brought to speak about personal matters in front of a group of strangers but they ultimately claim that doing this is not due to the program forcing them. Therefore the group cohesiveness turns into group pressure while partly covering the controlling effects helpful for the company. Another way the company is able to control the trainees is through using the group to criticise individuals as exemplified by Axel:

> "Once someone said something, some critique, then everyone will follow to build on that critique instead of saying positive things." – Axel

Here, the trainees evaluate each other and this can be called peer control. In this democratic system of control (Barker, 1993) the trainees are supervising each other and therefore actively involved in the control process. Thus, the identification of the trainees with the group and the leadership discourse make them more dependent on other group members and the organisation while facilitating peer control.

As already indicated by some of the quotes above, the group is exploited to deconstruct the trainees' identities. This deconstruction happens for instance in the various program-week exercises, one of which seeks to discover how the trainees perceive each other's leadership capabilities. The trainees are presented with different statements such as 'I would like this person to be my supervisor', after which they put a hand on the shoulder of the person who best matches the proposed statement. In this exercise it becomes apparent, how the judgement of the group contributes to the trainees' identity deconstruction. Introducing this exercise to us as one of the challenges in the trainee program, Axel comments:

> "There were some people in the group who didn't get any hands on their backs. And of course that makes you think and I could see in some of the people's eyes that they took it quite hard […] Of course in a leadership program you would like to be seen as a leader. Of course that is how it is." – Axel

The identities of the trainees, whose leadership abilities are not confirmed by the group, are diminished through this exercise in the trainee program. In other words, by not being

acknowledged as a potential leader, the trainees' developing leader identities are dismantled. The company's power to deconstruct the identities of the trainees is even more clearly articulated by Marcus, who gives account of his experiences with the program coach and mentor:

> "We were playing some sort of a game on how you reach your goals and she [the coach] just knocked me down. Whenever I tried to do something, she just went 'no'. So afterwards at the end of the session I was sitting quiet - and it's not that often that I am sitting quiet – so I was quiet three minutes. And then she was like 'ok, now we can start with the path'. […] And he [the mentor] talked twenty minutes about Fuco and locked us in a room where we talked four hours about me. And I was destroyed after that as well. […] I felt like a Lego-tower that you just knock down and then you have to redo it." – Marcus

Apart from the analogy to a knocked down Lego-tower, the trainee literally expresses his feeling of being destroyed. The program coach and mentor deconstruct the trainee's identity through these intense sessions. With this statement Marcus also indicates that the program's deconstruction of the trainees' identity simultaneously functions as the basis for the following reconstruction.

The trainees' identities are built back up and reconstructed according to the organisational objectives. When asking Peter for his view on the changing effects the program has on his personality he mentions:

> "I think it was really important to get this compass within ourselves." – Peter

This metaphor of a compass illustrates that the trainee program is able to 'implant' a guide in the trainees, which represents the accepted norms and prescribes the trainees' behaviour. Hence, the reconstructed identities of the trainees are in line with this compass and therefore the company's needs. The trainees state that they learn in the program how to act and lead in 'the Fuco way':

> "We have learnt a lot about the Fuco culture and Fuco values and how you want to lead within Fuco according to these values." – Carin

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In response to our question whether the trainee feels properly prepared for a future leadership role, Carin demonstrates the close relationship between organisational culture and leadership. As culture and discourse form the basis for leadership ideals (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012) this also influences the trainees. In other words, the company's culture and values clearly define how leadership is to be understood by the trainees. The strong organisational culture provides the trainees with thought patterns which are appropriate with respect to the company's objectives. For instance the organisational value of humility, which is stressed in all of the organisational documents, is internalised by the trainees. Axel replying to our question concerning his feelings about being part of an 'elite group' displays this internalisation:

> "I think that the group had a very relaxed view on why we were there and it felt like we didn't really see ourselves as anything special at all." – Axel

As humility is one of the most important values for Fuco, it seems that the corporate values can bring the trainees to having a modest perspective on their elitist role. The match between organisational and personal values shows that the corporate culture (Alvesson, 2009, p. 212) has the power to subtly steer the identities of trainees and thus to control them culturally. Furthermore, Marcus gives account of his feeling of connectedness to the company:

> "But it's [laughing] the closest you can come to a sect without being in one. [...] I am one of our generation that is not very brand loyal except for maybe a few brands. But starting here it is the only time in my life I don't really see that I could leave Fuco […] and this is very strongly based on the cultural values." – Marcus

Marcus emphasises his loyalty to the organisation stemming from its culture and even compares Fuco to a sect from which he cannot get away. This loyalty and identification with the organisation strongly informs the self-identities (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) of the trainees. In a nutshell, the trainees are involved in the control process and supervise their own behaviour because of the internalisation of the corporate culture and the organisational identification which is fostered by the leadership discourse.

On top of that, aspirational control can be connected to the trainees' identity reconstruction. The main reason for applying to the trainee program has been the prospect of a leadership position. One answer to the survey question 'Why did you apply to the Fuco trainee program?' is cited in the following:

"Because of the leadership focus and I was ready for my leadership career."

Guided by the leadership discourse the trainees aspire a leadership position. Hence, with the discourse around leadership it is possible to link the trainees' identity and self-esteem to the career prospect (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) of becoming a leader. This aspiration is so strong that it even covers the power of control in the program. Answering to the question whether she felt pressured, Sara for example says:

"No, no pressure from the company or not even pressure from the program. But more pressure from me as I applied to Fuco because I wanted a leadership career and I wanted to get to one of those positions really quickly." – Sara

By emphasising that the pressure does not come from the company but from herself, Sara demonstrates that the trainees are not aware of the control, which accompanies the identity reconstruction. Therefore, we can conclude that the control in this case is more subtle and thereby according to Tompkins and Cheney (1985) more powerful in controlling employees than for example obtrusive forms of control. Even when realising that leadership is something that is not practiced in the trainee program, the trainees can still be steered by promises about their future. Oscar summarises his experiences concerning the leadership aspiration:

"I was told […] 'if you want to lead a business over this and that value, it is not possible for you to [lead a team] right now'. So that was frustrating for me for sure. But then I must say that the people around me were a really good support. Because then I could have a trustful dialogue with the managers in my surrounding who would support me and say that 'we don't see that leadership potential is something that would be a challenge for you Oscar, you could probably step in tomorrow and take on that role'." – Oscar

The trainee is told that a leadership role is something that is impossible in that moment but he is simultaneously lured by the outlook on a future leadership position. By telling the trainees that they principally hold the preconditions for taking on the leadership role and that they only have to be patient to get there, it is possible to align the trainees' identities with what they want to become in the future (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011) and to make them forget about the suboptimal conditions at present. We thus analyse that a trainee program's emphasis on leadership has strong power over the identity construction of the trainees, controlling their beliefs, aspirations and behaviour.

4.4 Chapter Summary

To sum up our findings, we have created a framework abstracting how trainee programs function as a form of control. While the identity work triggering leadership discourse can, on the one hand, be supportive for the trainees it can, on the other hand, lead to struggles and uncertainties. The trainees' increased vulnerability, resulting from these struggles, makes them more susceptible to identity work and eases the identity regulation for the organisation, in form of the identity deconstruction. Hence, the positive and grandiose leadership discourse prevalent in the trainee program triggers the trainees' identity work and can not only increase the insecurity among the trainees but thereby also function as a control mechanism. The trainees' deconstructed identities simultaneously build the basis for the identity reconstruction which also represents a form of organisational control as the trainees identities are regulated in way that is in accordance with the organisational goals. Here, the leadership discourse of the trainee program supports the trainees' identity reconstruction and again functions as a control mechanism. In a nutshell, our findings correspond with the ideas of Alvesson and Willmott (2002) and show that identity and discourse can be employed for exerting organisational control and for disciplining behaviour.
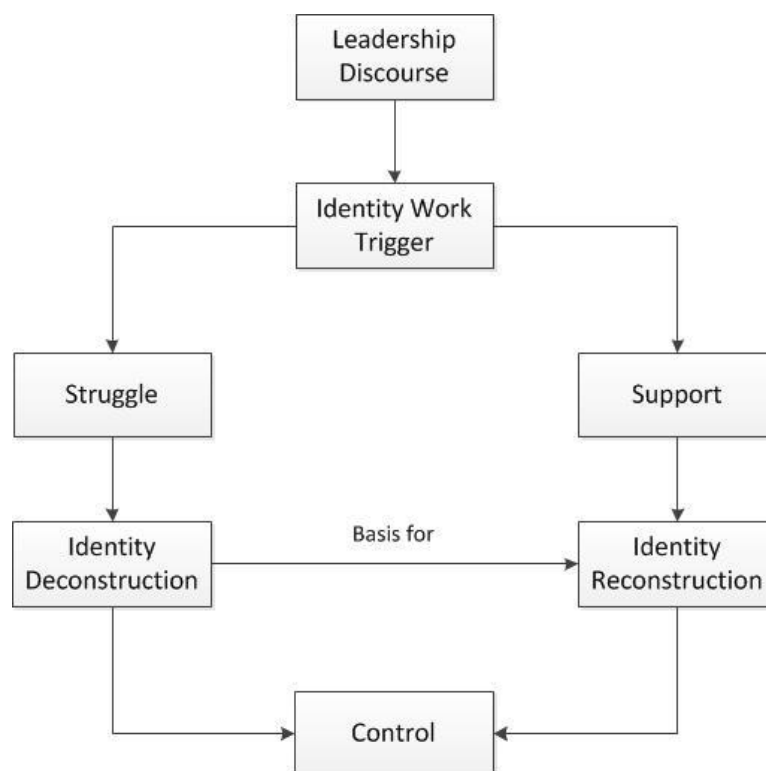

Figure 1 Trainee Programs as a Form of Control

5   Discussion

In this chapter we delve into our findings in greater depth and discover the connections leadership, identity and control have in the context of trainee programs. We review and reflect on our finding that the positive leadership discourse serves as a basis for the deconstruction and reconstruction process of the trainees' identities what resembles a form of control. Moreover, we further explore trainee programs' characteristics and purpose by analysing the similarities and differences between the programs and military trainings, such as military training of the United States Navy SEALs.

5.1   The Positive Notion of Leadership in Trainee Programs

From our research we gather that leadership discourse has a dominant role in trainee programs, as it is particularly prevalent in the Fuco management trainee program. The program presents leadership as something good and our analysis shows that this positive notion is emphasised in terms of empowerment of employees, caring for others, and developing oneself as well as one's team members. This perspective speaks of post-heroic, people-oriented and authentic leadership styles suggesting that the program relies on a more 'traditional' viewpoint on leadership like introduced in our literature. The evident focus on people by the Fuco leaders suggests that the company cares for people issues to a great extent and thus seemingly corresponds to the people-orientation of the leadership style approach as recognised by Heracleous (2003, p. 59). At the same time, the discourse around post-heroic leadership within the company empowers all organisational members and not just a few in a leadership position appointed by their hierarchical location (Ford, Hearding & Learmonth, 2008, p. 16). Moreover, through the trainee program the company wants to build authentic leaders, who are aware of their own morals, strengths and weaknesses (Avolio et al., 2004) and are ultimately self-aware to build trustful and development-oriented leader-follower relationships (Gardner et al., 2005). However, we recognise that the construction of leadership as post-heroic and authentic can be perceived as being contradictory to each other. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2013) critically view authentic leadership as promoting leader-centralism and a heroic leader, which in our opinion contrasts the concept of post-heroic leadership

allowing anyone in the organisation to perform acts of leadership (Ford, Hearding & Learmonth, 2008, p. 16).

Our findings suggest that the grandiose discourse around leadership presented by the organisation in its approach to leadership seemingly influences the trainees' definition of the concept, as they also understand leadership as something 'good'. Additionally to the organisationally promoted view, the positive construction of leadership is further expressed in the manner the trainees differentiate between managing and leading. This distinction resonates the research by Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003b). The trainees are captured in the grandiose discourse around leadership and clearly refer to it as something better than management. Hence, the trainees refuse to accept the ambiguity inherent in leadership (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011) and refer back to the more appealing leadership discourse promoted in the program to keep their view on leadership as clear-cut and as far away from management as possible. Relating to this, another interesting element of our interviews is how clearly and readily our interviewees express their understanding of leadership and thereby furthermore diminish the ambiguity of the concept. This is contradictory to other research as for example the one by Carroll and Levy (2008), who recognise the complexity of leadership in the way their interviewees struggle in articulating its meaning. This contrast reflects the integration of leadership discourse in trainee programs providing clues to the individuals how to act within it. Therefore, we claim that the trainee program's positive construction of leadership becomes embedded in the individuals' assumptions and beliefs through discourse and can also act as a trigger for identity work.

5.2   Leadership Discourse as Trigger for Identity Work: Support and Struggle

The positive notion of leadership as well as the trainee program's personal development exercises provide the trainees with clues how to see themselves within the organisation. As indicated in our findings, the trainees engage in identity work during the program-weeks as they try to form, maintain, and strengthen their self-definition (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Thus, we recognise that the program is providing the participants with 'identity triggers'. These triggers take place during the self-development exercises that encourage the participants to continuously question their identity by delving into their self-definition, their

past and future. As trainees are newcomers to the organisation and experience the trainee program as part of their socialisation process, their sense of self seems to be complemented with the scene and the surrounding expectations (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). According to our analysis, the participants build in-group identification with the trainee group and being a trainee seems to become a part of their social identity as also identified by Ashforth and Mael (1989). Thus we recognise that the trainees' self-concept is intertwined with their socialisation process through the trainee program, where the leadership discourse is highly significant: the trainees come to identify themselves as leaders in accordance with the leadership approach at Fuco.

Being a part of a leadership training program, which is built around the purpose of creating future leaders for the organisation, enhances trainees' identities as leaders (Ford, Hearding & Learmonth, 2008, p. 78). Our findings suggest that in a trainee program, this enhancement begins already in the recruitment stage, where their developing leader identity is confirmed as they are accepted into the program out of nearly a thousand applicants. We recognise that enhancing their identity functions as support also in the reconstruction process and happens through identity incentives, which foster the trainees' desired identity similarly to the research by Anteby (2008). Identity incentives, such as the training sessions during the program-weeks, enable the trainees to enact their desired identities as leaders and encourage action in their identity work. According to Anteby (2008), identity incentives can thus work as an engaging form of control as the employees get to enact their desired identities through them.

From our findings we gather that leadership discourse serves as a significant identity incentive. The positive discourse around leadership seems to influence how the trainees' view themselves as individuals and as leaders. This is in accordance with the study of MBA programs by Warhurst (2012), who claims that the language used in leadership programs enables the construction of specific leadership identities and enhances individuals' self-esteem, confidence and personal credibility. We suggest similar indications in the context of trainee programs as all our interviewees claim to have gained higher confidence in the process of creating their leader identity and finding their role in the organisation. Thus the leadership discourse seemingly serves as a support in their identity work (Alvesson, 2009, p. 208) but moreover directs and controls the trainees to lead the 'Fuco way'.

However, the leadership discourse does not only serve as a supportive function in the trainees' identity work but the trainees also face confusions, struggles and uncertainties

during the year. Our empirical material indicates that the different role expectations in the organisation result in identity struggles, and we suggest that one factor behind this is the positive and grandiose depiction of leadership in the trainee program. Our analysis shows that one identity struggle is experienced between the trainees identifying themselves as leaders while being seen as organisational newcomers. This misalignment results in the trainees not receiving the expected recognition as promoted by the positive discourse on leadership, which subsequently increases the potentiality of an identity conflict in their role. Another source of frustration resulting from the trainee program's leadership discourse is the contradiction between seeing oneself as a leader but not having any leadership tasks in practice. Here, we notice that the leadership discourse in the trainee program does not resemble organisational reality (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a) but leadership seems to become a fantasy substituted for any real influence in the organisation (Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006). Based on our findings we suggest that the struggles the trainees face in combination with the lack of a guaranteed leadership position create uncertainty about their sense of self and situation, and consequently make them more vulnerable towards the program's control efforts.

5.3   Leadership Discourse as Control: Identity Deconstruction and Reconstruction

Throughout the course of the one-year trainee program the trainees' identities are tested in the self-development exercises, while the trainees are in a phase of increased insecurity and vulnerability. The program urges the participants to continuously question their identity, as they are pushed to 'dig deep' into their weaknesses. This close examination of their weaknesses and strengths, while getting criticised on who they are, causes the trainees to face significant challenges in their identity work. We identify that this is achieved by the efforts of the program and call the phenomenon 'identity deconstruction'. Through this deconstruction the trainee program takes away the participants' confidence and self-knowledge, which might be especially important in our case since the trainees are not young graduates. As older, more experienced individuals with previously learned manners and independence, the Fuco trainees' existing sense of self may be harder to regulate (Ibarra, 1999) and thus their original 'settings' first have to be dismantled.

Later their identities are built back up – in a process we name 'identity reconstruction' - in a way that is in accordance with the organisational objectives and with the help of the positive identity-enhancing discourse around leadership. Ford, Hearding and Learmonth (2008, p. 80) recognise a similar phenomenon in their research. According to them, the activities of leadership training programs have the tendency to restrict the potential selves of an individual and often support the manufacturing of one identity profile, which is created by the dominant organisational discourses. This also seems to be the case in our research context, where the deconstruction of trainees limits the leader identity possibilities, while allowing the organisation to build back the 'Lego-tower' in a way that is acknowledged as appropriate and fitting with respect to the company's needs and values. Hence, by first deconstructing the trainees' identities, the company is able to reconstruct them later and thereby to regulate the individuals.

Leadership discourse (Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006) is thus employed in order to affect the trainees' identities and to control their behaviour. With the help of the leadership discourse, which creates a positive connotation of the leader role, the trainees' self-identities are shaped and regulated (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Identity regulation disciplines trainees and aligns them with organisational objectives, which can be understood in terms of control. In our case, it seems that the obtrusive control forms such as simple, technical and bureaucratic control (Edwards, 1981) play a minor role in trainee programs as the trainees are not mainly controlled through supervisors, machines or rule systems. What seems more important is the identification with leadership by the trainees. Leadership becomes a part of the trainees' identities through the leadership discourses, which represent a form of unobtrusive control. Here, control is more subtle or indirect and involves not only the active participation of the trainees but also their identification with the organisation (Gossett, 2009). In our analysis we demonstrate that the trainees conceive control to be less strong and restricting from the company's side. This corresponds with Tompkins' and Cheney's (1985) claim of indirect control being more appealing to organisational members than obtrusive forms of control. Therefore, when restricting our view to the data at hand, we have to dissociate ourselves from the possibility brought forth by Bisel, Ford and Keyton (2007) that this attempt to control could also cause resistance.

In our findings we present the subcategories of unobtrusive control in two groups. We see concertive control as mainly involved in the identity deconstruction process, while cultural

and aspirational control is seen as mainly involved in the identity reconstruction process. We recognise the concept of concertive control (Barker, 1993), where the trainees mutually control others to behave in accordance with the organisational goals. Our findings suggest that the trainees not only identify themselves with the trainee group but that they also engage in supervising each other and contribute to the identity deconstruction process through peer pressure by critically examining each other's weaknesses, strengths and original identity. After this identity deconstruction, the trainees' identities are rebuilt in compliance with the organisational values. The positive leadership discourse in the program is used to emphasise the organisation's leadership ideals, values and culture (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012), and can therefore be seen as a mechanism to achieve cultural control over the participants. The organisation's leadership approach and the company culture begin to inform the trainees' self-identities especially as the trainees are more vulnerable after the deconstruction process. As suggested by Alvesson and Willmott (2002), the leadership discourse thus assists in organisational identification and internalisation of the corporate culture consequently regulating individuals' behaviour.

In connection to the identity reconstruction, we also recognise aspirational control within the trainee program. Directed by the positive notion of leadership, the trainees aspire after a top leadership position in the company. Aspirational control (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) makes the trainees identify with their future role and links identity and self-esteem to this specific idea. The trainees as organisational newcomers use the desirable image of being a leader in the future as a basis for their identity construction (Ibarra, 1999) and to compensate for the absence of leadership tasks in their current situation. As demonstrated previously, the trainees are exposed to the identity struggles between wanting to be a leader and actually being an organisational novice without any leadership responsibility. These struggles in combination with the lack of a guaranteed leadership position increase the trainees' uncertainties about the future. Therefore it makes sense to assume that the organisationally reconstructed identities or the 'provisional selves' (Ibarra, 1999) of the trainees, which are built on this very fragile basis of insecurity and uncertainty, might only be temporary. To sum up, the company stays in control over the trainees by making use of the leadership discourse in order to bring the trainees to identify with what they aspire, while probably not providing a solid base for an enduring identity reconstruction.

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5.4   Trainees – Organisational Soldiers

To understand the phenomenon of trainee programs better, we can refer to the United States Navy SEALs, a specialised body of United States Armed Forces often presented in popular culture. This analogy can be recognised as one way of theorising in social science as analogies can assist in building out a theory with the help of free association and crossing images (Swedberg, 2012). Our analogy of the Navy SEALs is not to be seen "as a representation of a reality 'out there', but as tools for capturing and dealing with what is perceived to be 'out there'" (Morgan, 1980, p. 610). Therefore, with this analogy we mean to paint a stronger picture of our research without however indicating that trainee programs and Navy SEAL training are fully comparable.

To become strong soldiers, both physically and mentally, the SEALs go through a selective recruitment process and are rigorously trained to carry out their mission of defending their country (Navyseals, 2015). In this process of extensive training in ruthless conditions and under the command of their superiors, the developing specialised soldiers are pushed to their limits and brought close to their breaking point only to build them back up stronger than before (Stevens, n.d.). After first feeling powerless they become powerful and are guided by the military discourse around courage and patriotism. This picture bears striking similarities to trainee programs, where a selected body of future leaders is pushed to their limits while being directed by the contextual discourses.

In performing in-depth 'soul-searching', encouraged by the trainee program, the trainees do not only learn how to work and lead according to the institutional values as presented by the discourse, but they also face identity struggles and challenges. The identity struggle between seeing oneself as a leader while being seen as a newcomer causes frustrations, something that is valid also for the Navy SEALs, whose original strength and confidence as soldiers is tested under the command of their superiors in the brutal training sessions that especially mark the initiation phase. However, there is a difference between the Navy SEALs and the trainees. Whereas the Navy SEALs can rely on a certain position and rank after having completed the training, the trainees are not offered a guaranteed leadership position for the time after the program. Still the trainees endure this insecurity, arguably because they identify with their aspired leader role, which makes them controllable (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) and clinging to their provisional self-identities (Ibarra, 1999).

In the identity de- and reconstruction process, we also notice other controlling aspects that sub-consciously enhance the trainees' organisational identification. However, unlike in the training of the Navy SEALS, in the trainee program the disciplined behaviour is not achieved primarily through obtrusive methods of control and superiors using their coercive power, but rather through unobtrusive control mechanisms. The trainees learn how to lead and act accordingly to the organisational values due to the strong and influential relationship between the company culture and the leadership discourse. Leadership discourse, a major component of trainee programs, is thus brought in connection with organisational culture and directs the trainees' internalisation of the company values and consequently behaviour. Furthermore, in this process leadership and the organisation become a source of identification that informs the individuals' self-definitions (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Similarly, during their training process, the Navy SEALs learn to identify themselves with the notion of being a soldier and with the ability to survive anything, while simultaneously they are controlled by the military culture and discourse. The unspoken code created by different mantras and symbols guides the soldiers' behaviour in their training and in their future mission (Divine, n.d.). Additionally, through their extensive training the Navy SEALs adopt a mentality that motivates them to go to the battlefield to fight for their home country or to become a commander, much like the trainees are controlled by their aspirations to become a leader to fight for the success of their company.

The analogy of Navy SEALs brings us to view trainee programs in a new light: their purpose might be to create leaders to battle organisational challenges as appropriated by the organisation's leadership discourse. By deconstructing the trainees' identity and letting them go through tough exercises that test their mentality and takes them to the uncomfortable, just like in the case of Navy SEALs, the trainees are controlled to bring about organisational success. With the notion of leadership, the trainees' identity, behaviour and aspirations are shaped to match those of the organisation, and the trainees become the company's 'soldiers' ready to fight issues of any kind with their leadership tools.

6   Conclusion

This research examined the complex interplay between leadership, identity and control by studying former trainees of the Fuco management trainee program. More precisely our goal was to understand first, how leadership is constructed within our research context and second, what indications of control trainee programs have. Positioning ourselves in the interpretive paradigm with our first aim and in a more critical paradigm with the second, we used qualitative methods to find answers to our research questions.

Our findings indicate that the positive construction of leadership in the trainee program influences the trainees' understanding of the concept. Moreover, it serves as a basis for a deconstruction and reconstruction process of the trainees' identities and is a source of unobtrusive organisational control. By first dismantling the trainees' identities in the deconstruction phase with the help of concertive control by the trainee group, the participants are later reconstructed according to the organisational values and its approach to leadership. With cultural control, the program encourages organisational identification to regulate the trainees' identities. The leadership discourse has a significant role in this process. It not only functions as a form of control by communicating organisational objectives and moulding the trainees' identity accordingly, but also as a source of aspirational control. The leadership discourse seems to foster the trainees' desired identities as they are driven by their future possibility to be a leader within the company.

In order to exert control on the employees, the trainee program cultivates identity work triggers. On the one hand, these triggers function as support in the trainees' identity work but, on the other hand, they are a source of struggles and uncertainty. Our interviewees declared to have found their genuine self through the program and to have developed a stronger leader identity; we however question the extent to which this self-definition is in fact 'genuine'. Based on our indications of control, we claim that this 'genuine' self might rather be an organisational reflection as the Fuco culture bears overpowering influence on their identity construction. The trainees' exposure to the Fuco values and especially the leadership discourse, can help them in their identity construction and strengthen their leader identity, but at the same time they also face the organisational reality and encounter struggles, confusions and uncertainties. They struggle between seeing oneself as a leader and being seen as a newcomer in the organisation as well as being participants of a leadership-training program

without any leadership tasks to perform in their work. These contradictions make us wonder why the trainees still positively evaluate their experiences and continue with the process, especially when they are not guaranteed a position in the company after their trainee year. The positive leadership discourse in the organisation and in society might be an explanation for this issue. This discourse seems to influence the trainees' motivation in such a strong way that they are, in spite of all these challenges, encouraged to strive for their desires and aspirations, and thereby they become the organisational soldiers within Fuco.

Examining the increasingly popular phenomenon of trainee programs through the theories of leadership, identity and control, we contribute to the existing literature of organisational studies by revealing a more critical perspective on leadership and leadership development within the context of trainee programs. Reviewing our topic from both the trainee program's but also the trainees' viewpoint in specific, allows us to support existing literature by confirming the significance of leadership discourse as a control mechanism; and additionally, to supplement existing literature with the concepts of identity de- and reconstruction. Thus, our research highlights that leadership and leadership development in trainee programs is not always as positive as it might seem.

6.1   Practical Implications

As mentioned in the introduction, this study contributes not only to a scholarly knowledge interest but it also provides some practical contributions for trainees and organisations offering trainee programs. As the grandiose discourse around leadership influences the trainees' expectations, it can ultimately lead to identity struggles as soon as the trainees realise the discrepancy between the discourse and the organisational reality. Hence, we recommend organisations to counteract the grandiose discourse around leadership. A more modest picture of leadership, which admits the ambiguities inherent in the concept (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011), could help the trainees construct more autonomous and stable identities and thereby, it could also secure organisational objectives. We view the controlling effects that the organisations exert on the trainees by employing the leadership discourse rather critically. Therefore, we hope that this study makes current trainees and also people considering traineeships as a career option more cautious with regards to the organisational control and power implied in these programs. In a nutshell, the combination of an interpretive and a

critical stance within our study helps not only organisations to better understand their effects on the trainees' identity work but also the trainees themselves to achieve a more critical view on trainee programs and their controlling effects.

6.2   Limitations

While there are a number of theoretical and practical implications as discussed above, we also recognise some limitations to our research that are worth mentioning. Firstly, our research on trainee programs was limited to a specific organisation and program, which might have limited our understanding on trainee programs as a broader phenomenon – especially since our researched program was slightly different from most. Nevertheless, our choice of studying one program gave us the possibility to gather in-depth data increasing the quality of our research. Secondly, we recognise that there might have been some factors, such as the societal contexts, which may have contributed to the respondents' answers and which were not researched in detail. Lastly, it is important to note that our sample size was relatively small due the young age of the program and the time constraints of our thesis. We think that interviewing the trainees' supervisors and other people involved in the program could have presented us with a better and richer understanding of the phenomenon.

6.3   Suggestions for Further Research

The literature on trainee programs is still rather limited and with our research we hope to contribute new knowledge to the phenomenon of trainee programs, especially adding a more critical perspective on it. To further research this particular area and the connection between leadership and control in trainee programs, we encourage academia to conduct a long-term 'before and after' research with trainees. This could provide more developed insights into the process the individuals go through and how they actually develop their competence and identity as well as the role control plays in this. Hence, this could further enlarge the existing body of critical work in this area. In future research, we also identify a possible interest in studying not only trainees' experiences but also those of their supervisors and their colleagues to seek what influence they have on the trainees' development or what differences there might exist between trainees' and other organisational members' identity work. Furthermore, as

hinted at in the limitations, it might be a future aim to develop a more comprehensive study by considering not only one but several trainee programs. With these suggestions, we believe that the studies on the popular and widely practiced concept of trainee programs can develop further over time.

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