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Relational Leadership as Meaningful Co-Action

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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BA (Hons), MSc, MBA

Adam Smith Business School

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Abstract

Relational Leadership as Meaningful Co-Action

In the established field of leadership studies, Relational Leadership is a relatively new and under explored view of a familiar phenomenon. Scholars conceptualise Relational Leadership differently depending upon their philosophical position, in particular whether they privilege leaders' traits and characteristics (known as an entity perspective) or foreground the relationships and interactions that enable leadership to be accomplished (a social constructionist relational perspective). To date there have been relatively few empirical studies that research Relational Leadership from a social constructionist perspective. This thesis adds to this underdeveloped body of empirical literature.

The study uses data from an in-depth ethnographic single case study comprising the executive team of a large and complex UK local authority. The study took place as members of the executive team grappled with previously unheard of economic and social challenges following the global financial crash of 2007/8. Data is drawn from participant observation of the executive team's meetings over a one year period, a series of in-depth interviews with executive team members, and a contextual analysis incorporating a review of relevant press coverage during the time.

The study's research question was: *How is leadership relationally accomplished?* The question was subsequently operationalised through the following additional three questions:

- Q1: How are relational strategies adopted by the case study team?
- Q2: How do these relational strategies support the accomplishment of the team's strategic task?
- Q3: What contextual factors impact and are impacted by the relational strategies that are commonly adopted within the team?

Adopting a Grounded Theory method, a theory of *Relational Leadership as Meaningful Co-Action* is developed. *Meaningful Co-Action* epitomises the ways in which the group *went-on-together* in socially and situationally developed ways through their moment-by-moment interactions. Social processes gave rise to individual process mediated through

contextual constraining and enabling forces. It was adherence to relational group norms that allowed the collective accomplishment of their leadership task.

The study makes empirical, methodological and practice contributions. These are:

Empirical Contribution Building on what is a relatively small body of theory on Relational Leadership, for the first time in a UK local authority Executive Team.

Developing a theory of *Relational Leadership as Meaningful Co-Action* as the way that leadership was accomplished in the case study organization.

Methodological Contribution Makes a contribution to Grounded Theory by explicitly utilising reflexivity towards disconfirming data as a mechanism for establishing theoretical sensitivity.

Practice Contribution The findings from this study may inform the practice of management, particularly organization consultants working with leaders and teams.

Acknowledgements

The completion of this PhD thesis represents the culmination of over 6 years of study – its bringing into being coinciding with a deep personal transformation and a fundamental shift in what I take to be real and good and true. I can never be the same. Happily, I haven't had to walk this journey alone and I would like to now take the chance to say thank you to some of the people without whom I would not have completed.

Firstly, I am deeply indebted to my first Supervisor, Professor Robert MacIntosh whose patience, guidance, motivation, enthusiasm and immense knowledge have been a constant source of comfort and inspiration over the years. Always very gentle with the ego of an apprentice researcher, Robert has illuminated the path at every step and helped me with what was an existential as well as an academic journey. I appreciated Robert's tolerance of my 'wanting to know more' before committing myself to paper and his extreme sensitivity when it all seemed too much. His guidance helped me at all stages of the research and writing process. I could not imagine having a better advisor and mentor for my PhD study.

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I would not have been able to undertake this PhD without access to a top team who were prepared to set aside their own ego needs and support a PhD student. I am indebted to the

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Author's declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Signature:

Printed Name: Jacqueline Anne Conway

List of Appendices

Appendix 1

Letter to participants outlining my ethical requirements to them

Appendix 2

Summary of PhD research to participants to meet the requirements of the University of Glasgow Ethics Committee approval

Chapter 1: Introduction

In the beginning, is the relation.

Martin Buber

1.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter presents a brief overview of the purpose and context for this study, which explores leadership from a relational perspective using an interpretivist method utilising grounded theory as the data analysis and theory development approach. The investigation took the form of a single in-depth longitudinal ethnographic case study with the executive team of one of the UK's largest local authorities during a period of unprecedented change against the backdrop of a global economic crisis.

Many of the organizational catastrophes that have occurred in recent decades such as the global financial crisis in 2008 (US News in Press) to the DeepWater Horizon oil spill in 2010 (The Guardian, in press) have been put down to a failure in leadership. Furthermore, the consequences of leadership failures are not confined to the organizations in which they occur, as both of these examples can attest. As our organizations become larger, more global and interconnected, what happens in organizations far in time and space from us can have a devastating and lasting impact on us. If we have a genuine and well-intentioned desire to improve leadership then we must begin by exploring the underpinning assumptions about what we think leadership is and the ways in which those assumptions are contributing to this 'leadership failure'.

The prevailing idea in the leadership literature is of a heroic individual who is imbued with leadership qualities, traits and characteristics that enable 'him' to take up his leadership role. This thesis will explore the limitations of this view, which are largely based on often unacknowledged assumptions about the underpinning philosophy that these ideas are based upon. In this thesis I will further argue that the entity approaches to leadership theorising that assume leaders have the ultimate agency to affect change in organizations – and that this ability is largely based on their inherent and stable traits and characteristics – are not only flawed, but

potentially dangerous in an increasingly volatile, unpredictable, complex and ambiguous world (Horney, Pasmore et al., 2010).

As a counterpoint to this dominant paradigm of leadership theorising, this thesis will explore leadership from a social constructionist perspective in which the accomplishment of leadership is viewed as a shared relational task, a perspective known as *relational leadership*. In so doing, it moves the focus away from the traits and characteristics of individual social actors towards exploring the conditions that are necessary for the accomplishment of leadership through the building of a theory of *Relational Leadership as Meaningful Co-Action*.

1.2 Research question

My interpretivist and inductive empirical investigation utilises a grounded theory approach. As such it began with a relatively open research question that allowed me the “flexibility and freedom to explore a phenomenon in depth” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990: 37). Whilst a research question in a Grounded Theory approach starts out relatively broadly, “it becomes progressively narrowed and more focused during the research process, as concepts and their relationships are discovered to be relevant or irrelevant” (ibid).

As I have noted above, the theoretical sensitivity that I developed through my initial, very broad, exploration of the leadership literature and subsequent more focused attention on leadership from a socially constructionist epistemological position led me to start with a broad question:

How is leadership relationally accomplished?

The question was subsequently operationalised through the following additional three questions:

- Q1: How are relational strategies adopted by the case study team?
- Q2: How do these relational strategies support the accomplishment of the team’s strategic task?
- Q3: What contextual factors impact and are impacted by the relational strategies that are commonly adopted with the team?

1.3 Contribution to knowledge

Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe (1991: 141) note that doctoral research can make a contribution to knowledge in three principal ways: “as new knowledge about the world of management, as new theories and ideas, or as new methods of investigation” and ideally incorporates some elements of each. This thesis makes a contribution in all three areas, under the respective headings of Practice Contribution, Empirical Contribution and Methodological Contribution. Specifically, it attempts to explore leadership from a relational constructionist perspective in a single in-depth ethnographic case adopting the naturalistic inquiry stance of Lincoln and Guba (1995), whilst applying methodological rigour using Charmaz’s (2008) development of an emergent grounded theory approach, following Strauss and Corbin (1990).

Specifically, this thesis makes the following contributions to knowledge:

Empirical Contribution	<p>Building on what is a relatively small body of theory on Relational Leadership, for the first time in a UK local authority Executive Team.</p> <p>Developing a theory of <i>Relational Leadership as Meaningful Co-Action</i> as the way that leadership was accomplished in the case study organization.</p>
Methodological Contribution	<p>Makes a contribution to Grounded Theory by explicitly utilising reflexivity towards disconfirming data as a mechanism for establishing theoretical sensitivity.</p>
Practice Contribution	<p>The findings from this study may inform the practice of management, particularly organization consultants working with leaders and teams.</p>

1.4 Background to case study organization

The case study organization in which this research was conducted is one of the largest local authorities in the UK. For the purposes of confidentiality, it will be referred to as LocalGov.

Following the global financial crisis of 2007, the worst since the great depression of the 1930s, central government was forced to significantly reduce the block grants to local authorities who were then required to make unprecedented and ongoing year-on-year savings with the expectation that there would be no substantive impact on service delivery. It was against this backdrop that I undertook my single ethnographic study in one of the largest – and what has subsequently been voted the best – local authority in the United Kingdom.

My research involved four components. The primary data collection took place over a one year period from October 2011 to September 2012 in the form of participant observation with the Executive Management Team (EMT) during their fortnightly team meetings. Throughout that time I had numerous informal conversations with the Executive Directors as I began my initial coding of the data. I also used press reports and cuttings as an important source of secondary data. In so doing I was able to examine how issues were being handled internally within the EMT and how these issues played out in the press. At the end of the participant observation phase I undertook a series of semi structured interviews with each of the executive directors which lasted between 90 minutes and 2 hours during which time the initial concepts and categories that I had developed through the initial data analysis process were discussed and made sense of. The fourth component of the research was that at the time of this research I was also acting as an organization change and development consultant to one of the divisions working on systemic change issues relating to the challenges being faced across LocalGov. That work continues and has been extended to other parts of LocalGov.

As mentioned above, during the research – and indeed continuing today – I keep a reflective journal of the research and consulting work and this has proved an invaluable resource throughout the research process. I received frequent academic supervision and I also have professional supervision.

1.5 Social Constructionist Research

This research shares a commitment with social constructionist scholars for a shift away from individual knowledge towards communal construction (Gergen, 2009[2]). It can be traced to Mead's (1934) underpinning ideas from symbolic interactionism which were later expanded by Berger and Luckman (1966) and the phenomenology

of Schutz (1970). Social constructionism is the ‘theoretical perspective’ (Crotty, 1998: 2) that underpins this research endeavour.

Social constructionism replaces three modernist ideas with new ways to think about organization science. That is replacing “rational agency with communal rationality, empirical knowledge with social construction and language as representation with language as action” (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996: 356). Ideas of rational agency stem from Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke (1948), Descartes (1931; 1968) and Kant (1781) who rejected religious and royal totalitarianism and replaced it with the “bounded and sacred principality” of the individual (Gergen, 1996, 358). This philosophy of the individual permeated into theories of leadership in which the individual mind of the leader became the preeminent object of study vis-à-vis their agency to act on the organization as a separate and distinct entity which could be controlled, managed and changed.

A fundamental difference between social constructionist scholars and those working in a more traditional mode is their view of language. Modernists view language as “a tool used to describe and report on reality” (Boje, et al., 2004: 571) and as such it is through language in use that we come to know the inner minds and representations of the social actors who make such utterances. There are scholars working across many disciplines related to organization theory such as social psychology (Shotter & Gergen, 1989; Gergen, 1999; 2004; Potter & Whetherell, 1997; Shotter, 2008) and cultural anthropology (Geertz, 1973; Gioia, 2004; Rosen, 1991; Rampton, 2004; Castanheira, Crawford et al. 2001) who share a view of “language as a shaping force” (Alvesson & Kärrenman, 2000:142) and who agree that “the proper understanding of societies, social institutions, identities, and event cultures may be viewed as discursively constructed ensembles of texts” (Alvesson & Kärrenman, 2000:137). This “linguistic turn” (ibid) in the social sciences is predicated upon the idea that social actors do not use language to describe a pre-existing reality that is ‘out there’, but rather that language is used to achieve things and in so doing it is the mechanism where organizations and other institutions actually come into being.

The tradition of empiricist positivism, or logical positivism, which also stems from Enlightenment thinking and “entails an ontology of an ordered universe made up of atomistic, discrete and observable events” (Blaikie, 1993: 94), continues to dominate

the social sciences. The presumption is of a concrete and observable world available for scientific exploration and understanding through the scientific method (Crotty, 1998) from which truth claims can be made. For those scholars working with traditional views of language as a representation tool, then it can be used in the same way as other research objects to bring us closer to understanding things as true and good and real. Scholars who subscribe to language's creative and constructive capacity relate to language and discourse quite differently from scholars working in a positivistic tradition.

More recently a branch of social constructionism has been developed which places "the primacy of relations in socially constructing organizational realities" (Dachler & Hosking, 1995). This *relational constructionism* has a number of distinct features: "it clearly speaks about ontology and power (unlike many other constructionisms); it centres and gives ontology to construction processes (to how rather than what) and sees persons and worlds as emerging in processes (rather than assuming individual minds and actions); it opens up the possibility of soft self-other differentiation (rather than assuming that 'hard differentiation' of 'how it really is'); and it centres dialogical practices as ways of relating that can enable and support multiple local forms of life rather than imposing one dominant rationality on others" (Hosking 2011: 47). From the relational constructionist perspective Hosking refers to "a special kind of conversation" which is akin to Shotter's (2008) notion of a "relationally-responsive version of social constructionism" which challenges assumptions that we come to understand each other through our talk and posits instead that in our utterances we are responding to each other in a special kind of relationship. Shotter argues that "it is the character of these conversationally developed and developing relations, and the events occurring within them, that are coming to be seen as of much greater importance than the shared ideas to which they might (or might not) give rise" (Shotter, 2008: 1).

The term *relations* in relational constructionism is not being used with its usual meaning in the social sciences; that is "relations between bounded and separately existing persons/entities/ontologies" (Hosking, 2011: 56) but instead "invites us to explore ways of being in relation that depart from the subject-object separation" (Hosking: 2011: 57). The relational constructionist perspective is concerned with the ongoing processes of how relations are constructed. Such an orientation invites

researchers to accord relational processes as the unit of analysis in the research endeavour and to regard the inquiry process itself as the product. These are underpinning principles in this thesis and they shall be expanded upon throughout.

1.6 *A priori* considerations

Grounded theory is a form of inductive theory building in which the theory development is grounded in and generated through the data. Unlike deductive research, in which an already established hypothesis is tested through the research process, a grounded theory project requires the researcher to be sufficiently open to exploring what the data reveals. That said, practically speaking, one must begin somewhere. Glaser (1978) advanced *a priori* conditioning as a way to begin so that a degree of pre-conditioning is undertaken as a way to develop *theoretical sensitivity* so that the researcher is able to design a research study that is philosophically and methodologically consistent with the phenomenon being investigated. Strauss and Corbin note that the development of theoretical sensitivity comes from two sources. The first is the technical literature and the second is professional experience (1990: 42).

My initial incursions into philosophy, whilst simultaneously exploring the vast literature on leadership, caused me to question the very assumptions that dominate about leaders and leadership. At the same time, my reflections on my professional practice as an organization change and development consultant were increasingly leading me towards a dissatisfaction towards the way I intervened in organizational settings based on what I was gradually saw as a problematic conceptualisation of organization and leadership. I became ever more drawn to social constructionism (Gergen, 1999) as a helpful way to conceptualise how we understand and make sense of what happens within organizations, and latterly towards relational constructionism (Hosking, 2011) as a way to reframe leadership. I brought these *a priori* considerations into this research project.

1.7 Thesis structure

The format of a doctoral thesis in management or organization usually follows the customary format of introduction, literature review followed by methodology before a series of discrete chapters introducing and analysing the data (Phillips & Pugh, 2010: 60). A grounded theory approach, which is essentially concerned with the

gradual building of theory, supports an alternative structure. This is principally because of the way the literature is used in a grounded theory study. In research underpinned by a positivistic approach, the literature review is undertaken at the beginning of the research project in order to demonstrate that the researcher knows “the contributions that others have made to the knowledge pool relevant to their topic” (Hart, 1998: 26). In so doing the researcher establishes which gaps in the literature exist and therefore where (s)he may be able to undertake research that makes a contribution to new knowledge. In contrast, in a grounded theory approach, although the researcher will have background knowledge in the technical literature it is unwise to be so immersed in it that the research is constrained to the extent that the data is not the primary source from which the theory is developed. Accordingly this thesis is structured with the methodology chapter preceding the literature review and the data description and data analysis chapters thereafter.

Chapter 2 outlines the method adopted in the thesis and the underpinning philosophy thereof. It consists of three major sections. The first articulates and defends the philosophical position of this thesis, which is counter to the dominant paradigm in organization and management research. The second section outlines an appropriate methodology for the entire study which is consistent with the underpinning philosophy and the ways in which different components of the methodology interweave. The third section outlines the mechanics of the data collection, analysis and theory development undertaken over the course of a 2 year period through a process of inductive theory building.

Chapter 3 presents a review of the extant literature on relational leadership and how and to what effect a social constructionist epistemology makes a contribution. Although this is presented as one single literature, the process of developing it was iteratively undertaken in connection with the data and the emergent categories that were grounded in the data. Chapter 4 takes this one step further. As the data analysis continued a number of categories emerged which have not been conceptually or empirically explored in the relational leadership literature and to which my data was connected. For completeness, I have outlined the literature to which my data is conceptually linked in this chapter so that the ideas which I develop from my data are set out and explained.

Chapter 5 is the first data analysis chapter. It begins by providing detail about the case study organization, for which I have used the pseudonym LocalGov. The chapter then develops the concepts and initial categories that emerged from the data with thorough examples. This process represented the Open Coding phase of the data analysis process.

Chapter 6 further develops the analysis of the data through the process of Axial Coding in which the initial 5 categories were further developed and then distilled into two Refined Categories. This process subjected these categories to further theoretical sensitivity with different bodies of literature (which are outlined in Chapter 4) and were further related to the data as a means of validation.

Through a final process of data analysis procedurally known as selective coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), I subjected the Refined Categories to further scrutiny to lead to the development of a theory which answers the research question as grounded in the data from the case study organization. This is outlined in Chapter 7.

Chapter 8 summarises the contribution to knowledge that this thesis claims to make. It also highlights the limitation of the study and where potential future research could be undertaken.

Consistent with an ethnographic, naturalist inquiry, my research endeavour has been underpinned by reflexive practice. In Chapter 9 I offer some reflections on the research process, the findings and the meaning-making I have undertaken throughout the course of the work.

Chapter 2 – Methodology

“In research, as in conversation, we meet ourselves”

(Morgan, 1983)

2.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology adopted for this research project and sets out arguments about the internal consistency of the methodology with both the research question and the approach to analysing the data. This is an important part of the research process, as Fairclough (2010: 225) notes: “settling on a methodology for a particular research project is not just a matter of selecting from an existing repertoire of methods. It is a theoretical process which constructs an object of research (a researchable object, a set of researchable questions) for the research topic by bringing to bear on it relevant theoretical perspectives and frameworks”. This is consistent with Crotty’s view (1998: 13) that the social researcher is required to articulate their method decisions and outline the way they influence the research process so that it can be held up to scrutiny. The intention here is to enable such scrutiny on the part of the reader.

For the social science researcher, the way one asks the research question, frames the inquiry, collects data and goes about analysing it are interwoven. Done in a considered and systematic way, this should illuminate the ontological and epistemological leanings of the researcher. As Denzin (2001: 3) states, “all inquiry reflects the standpoint of the inquirer”. In 1983, Gareth Morgan considered the matter of research method and strategy in his edited book, *Beyond Method*. In it, he argues that scientific knowledge is generated through a process of engagement between the scientist and the object under investigation (Morgan, [1] 1983: 13). He argues that this process of engagement occurs through the scientist’s particular frame of reference and that since different scientists can and do engage with the object in different ways, there are therefore many different kinds of knowledge. This he refers to as “the problem of knowledge and its social construction” (Morgan, [1] 1983: 11).

The first part of the chapter articulates the philosophical underpinnings of this research; the ontological and epistemological assumptions that I hold and the way

my position relative to these considerations impacts on the method adopted in this research project. From this, I present the research strategy that I have adopted and offer a justification for single case study and the ethnographic manner in which I have collected my data. Some consideration is then given to the linguistic turn in the social sciences and the status of discourse as data for the social science researcher. This leads into a summary of interactional sociolinguistics as a form of discourse analysis that is closely related to conversation analysis, which is the approach that I have taken to analyse my data. The remainder provides detail of the mechanics of the analytical process using a grounded theory approach that I have taken (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and concludes with some consideration being given to the explicitly subjective nature of this research.

2.2 Philosophical underpinning of the research

What brings would-be scholars to want to understand organizations? Is it as part of an attempt to predict and control organizations? To understand them so that we might conquer them? Or is it based on a curiosity about how they work (or don't) and why? There has been a great deal of debate on the dualistic position of those who seek truth and knowledge and those who are content with wonder. The former is by far the dominant paradigm in the West, where "the terms within which organization is understood and studied are still primarily defined by what Bataille would call a 'restrictive economy', one of parsimony, calculation and utility" (Rehn & O'Doherty, 2007: 100). Contrast this with an interest in the wonder of organizations, which Campbell Jones and René ten Bos (2007: 3-4) suggest is a crucial part of understanding organizations. We are in wonder because organizations are full of what Derrida (1993) might refer to as *aporia*, meaning we are at a loss, an impasse, full of puzzlement about what we find before us. Geertz (1973:10) notes that as researchers we face the challenge of grappling with things that are at once "strange, irregular and explicit". The concept of *aporia* lends itself to those scholars working in an interpretive tradition who are curious by the non-rational and unpredictable side of organizations; content to abandon the false hope of seeking a definitive truth.

"For us, dealing with aporias is pivotal to organization. It is true that organizations find solutions, make clear pathways and seek control. Yet, at the same time they produce problems, impasses, contradictions, difficulties, uncontrollability and disorganization. These are not mere supplements to

proper organization, but are the property of organizations. Those who work in organizations have experiences that are clearly not straightforward and that can be referred to as aporetic. One aspect of aporia seems to be crucially important for the exercise of philosophy, to wit, the idea about proof, resolution or certainty. We leave that for the police. Philosophy is about taking seriously the experience of aporia and undecidability, about continuously becoming naive, becoming child”

(Jones and René ten Bos (2007: 4).

In *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis*, (Burrell & Morgan 1979) which has been described as “the most comprehensive classificatory summaries of the field of organization studies” (Rehn & O’Doherty, 2007:22), Burrell and Morgan argue that “all theories of organization are based upon a philosophy of science and a theory of society” and that as such a social science researcher, however unwittingly, locates themselves and their research within a particular paradigm in social philosophy. The research philosophy that a researcher adopts holds significant assumptions about the way the researcher views the world (Saunders, 2007: 101). Yet, as I will outline in this chapter and then in greater detail in the literature review, much of the research undertaken in the social sciences generally and in organization theory specifically, makes little reference to the philosophical location of the work. Indeed, some would argue that “there is a systematic philosophical cover-up in organization studies” (Rehn & O’Doherty, 2007:21). My own reading for this thesis has pointed to a split between the traditions on how explicit each makes the philosophical assumptions underpinning the research. Those working in a positivistic tradition tend to be silent on such matters, taking an almost tautological position of *we know this to be true, because it’s true*. This contrasts with those coming from a subjectivist and interpretivist tradition who are more likely to explicitly locate their work within a philosophic tradition. Their work is more avant-garde so it is understandable that there seems to be an insecure need for justification that the method is valid in its own right.

If we accept that “mainly philosophy remains implicit and unproblematised in organization studies” (Rehn & O’Doherty, 2007:35) then it leads to a next logical question: *Is this important?* Scholars such as Heil consider such issues as fundamental to the way we make sense of the corporate world, for “as long as the

philosophical foundation remains unarticulated, it cannot open itself to critique as a discipline or field and consequently a fundamental avenue for developing the field remains closed” (Heil, 2001: 20). I will argue that what we give ontology to – that is what we take to be real – and how we come to know what we know – epistemological considerations, lie at the heart of what we are attempting to do in our research endeavour. In considering the ontological and epistemological position that I hold as a researcher within the social sciences, I will outline the way that this shapes not only the research question that I have developed, but also the research strategy, theoretical perspective, and methodological approach.

2.3 To what do we give ontology?

Ontology is concerned with the very nature of reality and whether it exists outside of the researcher – a realist or objectivist ontology – or a construction from within one’s own mind – nominalist ontology (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Bryman, 2004; Crotty, 1998). The literature review will illustrate that what scholars give ontology to – that is what they take to be real – is of central importance in the entity / relational leadership debate. Entity scholars take a realist position (Burrell & Morgan, 1979: 4) and consider leaders to be discrete entities that can act into an organizational system that they are separate and distinct from. It is consistent with a Cartesian understanding of human relationships “in which other humans are occurrent in a similar way to physical objects and relating to others is like building a bridge between two *res cognitans* that are separated and closed off from each other” (Heil, 2011: 163).

Contrast this with relational constructionist scholars who give ontology to the relationships that enable the accomplishment of leadership as a co-constructed event by social actors who engage in a specific cultural and historical milieu. It is based on the notion that the way we understand the external social world is in a constant state of revision as social actors interact to create their own reality (Bryman, 2004: 17). The nominalist ontological position adopted here is predicated on the idea that there is no ‘real’ social world existing outside of the individual other than the name and symbols that are assigned to them for the purpose of classification and sense making (Burrell & Morgan, 1979: 4).

The antithesis to reality being ‘out there’ ready to be observed and understood is that we construct our reality socially through interaction with others in a continuously co-evolving, co-creating interplay between self, other and society. It requires a shift in our attention from the idea of simple to complex realities. The objects of our research are located in an interactive environment that impacts them and is impacted by them. To assume that we can isolate variables for study whilst assuming everything else in the environment remains stable is problematic if we are to build an understanding of organizations as human systems (Lincoln & Guba, 1985: 51). This is because the objects of the research are both the elements (or variables), be they leaders, decision making processes, or marketing strategies, *and* their context.

As we can see, ontological assumptions and commitments underpin what types of research questions we ask and how we conduct our inquiry (Bryman, 2004: 18). Consistent with a relational approach grounded in a social constructionist perspective, the position taken in this study is that leadership is a relational accomplishment.

2.4 Epistemological considerations

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerned with questions of what knowledge can be acquired and by what methods. Different philosophical orientations have been privileged over others in various cultural traditions and historical eras (Partington, 2002: 3) and have therefore influenced what has come to be accepted as legitimate and reliable forms of knowledge. Issues of epistemology are important because what we come to accept as “the truth” will have far reaching consequences in every area of our lives. The ability to postulate that one has arrived at a neutral and incontrovertible truth can be and is used to give power and authority to some groups over others. We are all familiar with the adage, *knowledge is power*.

As Partington (2002: 2) notes, it is through our epistemological investigations that “we attempt to reflect on the methods and standards through which reliable and verifiable knowledge is produced”. This idea connects to that of Crotty that there is a requirement on the researcher to be “epistemologically consistent” (1998: 16) in the way one determines what is acceptable knowledge with how one frames the research, undertakes it and makes sense of it. Other scholars advocate mixed methods (Bryman, 2007). This research will adhere to the rules of a naturalistic inquiry and in

Chapter 8 I will outline some of the problems that trying to accommodate different research paradigms has had for relational leadership.

From its roots in ancient Greek philosophy and until the age of the Enlightenment, objectivist notions that presume truth and meaning reside in the objects of research independently of the consciousness of the researcher, has and still does dominate Western scientific notions (Crotty, 1998: 42). These *empiricist* ideas – typified in the work of John Locke (Locke, 1948) – attempt to justify the mind as a mirror, that at birth our mind is a blank slate – a *tabula rasa* – and that it is our experience of the world that saturates it. In contrast, *rationalist* ideas stemming from Plato’s *The Republic* (see 2007) and later Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) posit that there is some knowledge that is innate and we access this through reason. As the debate between them has continued, “rationalism fares no better than empiricism in solving the riddle of mental knowledge” (Gergen (1999: 11).

Therefore, a central issue regarding our philosophical orientation with respect to epistemology is the question of whether the social sciences can be studied and understood according to the same laws, principles and procedures as the natural and physical sciences. If not, what should replace it? A positivist stance assumes that it can and must (Bryman, 2004: 11). It is predicated upon the belief that it is possible and indeed desirable and that research produces objective, unbiased and value-free knowledge that aims to discover universal truths. Although it is recognised that a universal final truth may be unattainable, it is accepted that researchers successively seek it by challenging and testing the hypotheses of previous findings which are “treated as provisional and open to further testing” (Wetherell, 2001: 11).

Since the birth of the social sciences, some scholars have adopted those same positivistic epistemological assumptions and borrowed the methods used by those studying the natural and physical sciences. Psychology’s use of statistical methods and models to understand human behaviour is an obvious example. Increasingly, however, such a stance is being seen as “somewhat simplistic, ahistorical, decontextualized, reductionist, aphilosophical, and nonreflexive” (Prasad & Prasad, 2002: 5). As the social sciences have developed, the differing underpinning assumptions that the social analysis are built upon are rarely made explicit, yet as Morgan argues, they “exert a decisive influence on the nature of theory and research”

(Morgan, 1983: 13) because the results of empirical research are “largely determined by the nature of the ‘problematic’ or ‘theoretical framework’ adopted” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979: 141). At the heart of each is a rejection of the taken-for-granted character of language. Cunliffe (2002, 129) differentiates scholars who “take a monologic, objectivist stance and view language as epistemology (as method) and a second, less developed approach that sees our social experience being constructed through language, that is, language as ontology (as being)”.

A broad dissatisfaction with traditional epistemological ideas as a way to understand the social sciences is underpinned by the development of three ideas. These ideas, under the banner of post-modernism, are the *crisis of representation*, the *crisis of value neutrality* and the *end of reason* (Gergen, 1999).

The *crisis of representation* relates to how individuals use language to share the contents of their minds with others. We do this through words in the language tradition of our culture and time. Therefore how we make our inner world available to others is inherently limited by the words we have available to use. For example, Inuits have 30 different words to describe snow; in the English language we have only one. It therefore follows that our ability to understand each other in our communicative acts is limited by the language that we have available to us. Given the subjectivity of language and its use, how can we accurately state that the word that we use fully represents the truth?

What we take to be true is always coloured by the cultural, familial, religious and gendered assumptions that we have accumulated over the course of our lives. If what we understood to be true was an incontestable fact then how could we explain that what we believed to be true in our youth bears little resemblance to what we believe at middle age? That an individual’s interests shape their descriptions of the world is what Gergen is referring to as the *crisis of value neutrality*. If I am personally invested, then my position as a neutral observer becomes highly suspect and as such it should be subjected to *ideological critique* (Habermas, 1978) in order that my interests, ideologies and biases are revealed. Although we have come to accept this in politics and religion, there has been much less challenge to the neutrality of science. A notable example is in the climate change debate, where differing scientific opinions are patently used to further particular political positions.

The final of the three major challenges to traditional epistemological ideas is the *end of reason*. This deconstructionist perspective challenges the neutrality of language. It posits that some language forms privilege some groups over others, a notion that therefore calls into question what we can claim to be truth, objectivity and accuracy in reporting. Based on the work of Derrida, it challenges our confidence in reason because all words are only meaningful in relation to other words.

These three points have enormous implications for studying the social sciences. They question the very underpinning philosophies of what and how we can know what we think we know. Explored from a post-modernist perspective, cherished ideas of a universal truth are obliterated. As a result, note Wetherall et al, “the researcher’s aim is to investigate meaning and significance, rather than to predict and control” (2001: 11-12). In attending to the three crises outlined above by Gergen, rather than deny or ignore the observer/researcher’s partial understanding and special interests, we ought to make these explicit and attend to the inherent bias that they introduce. In so doing, we move towards a more ethical research endeavour because the claims we make as researchers are always open to scrutiny, ideas are less sacrosanct and there is less possibility towards a righteous fundamentalism in the claims we make.

2.5 The ways in which philosophy shapes this research

As has been noted above, taking a naturalistic position is not simply about using different methods to answer the similar types of questions that have dominated organization and leadership research hitherto. This ‘new paradigm’ is underpinned by fundamentally different assumptions about what is real and how we can know what we think we know from those operating from a positivist, rationalist perspective. A naturalist inquiry starts from the premise that the design should begin from a set of broad contingencies but should thereafter be allowed to emerge as we permit events in the process to unfold. The research process lets go of the illusion of control and allows for the emergent qualities of the research to be part of the work of the research. This is consistent with a Grounded Theory approach adopted in this thesis in which these broad contingencies are synonymous with the development of theoretical sensitivity (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These ideas will be explored in depth in the next chapter. Lincoln and Guba (1985: 56) summarise the basic beliefs and assumptions associated with the new paradigm in the table below.

Basic Beliefs and Associated Principles of the New Paradigm	
New Paradigm Basic Belief	Associated Principle
Complex	Real-world entities are a diverse lot of complex systems and organisms.
Heterarchic	Systems and organisms experience many simultaneous and potentially equally dominant orderings – none of which are ‘naturally’ ordered.
Holographic	Images of systems and organisms are created by a dynamic holograph, the three-dimensional images of which are stored and recreated by the interference patterns of laser beams.
Indeterminate	Future states of systems and organisms are in principle unpredictable.
Mutually causal	Systems and organisms evolve and change together in such a way (with feedback and feedforward) as to make the distinction between cause and effect meaningless.
Morphogenetic	New forms of systems and organisms unpredicated (and unpredictable) from any of their parts can arise spontaneously under conditions of diversity, openness, complexity, mutual causality and indeterminacy.
Perspectival	Mental processes, instruments, and even disciplines are not neutral.

Table 2.1 – Adapted from Lincoln and Guba

If we are to accept this, it has major implications for the way we conduct our research. Crucially, it begins by questioning the very idea of a research plan that is conceptualised at the start of the research process. In the meantime, it should be noted that it is crucially important that such research remains trustworthy. The research strategy outlined below illustrates how I have attempted to ensure this in this research endeavour.

2.6 Research Strategy

This study is an inductive inquiry beginning with the research question:

How is leadership relationally accomplished?

The question was subsequently operationalised through the following additional three questions:

Q1: How are relational strategies adopted by the case study team?

Q2: How do these relational strategies support the accomplishment of the team’s strategic task?

Q3: What contextual factors impact and are impacted by the relational strategies that are commonly adopted with the team?

The following sections will outline the various methodological threads that hold this research project together. These various components are outlined in the table below before an explanation of each is provided.

Table of Qualitative Choices		
<i>Method adopted</i>	<i>Purpose and Rational</i>	<i>Internal Consistency</i>
Single in-depth case study	Thorough immersion in data; ability to corroborate emerging concepts and categories; particularisation, not generalisation.	Following Gioia's interpretivist method, consistent with ethnography, consistent with grounded theory.
Ethnography	Live among those being researched to develop deep understanding and insight.	Consistent with social constructionist epistemology; ensures depth, necessary in a single case.
Discourse as data	Explore how language constructs and maintains the social world. Meaning made through language, not merely representative of it.	Consistent with social constructionist epistemology and the linguistic turn in the social sciences.
Interactional Sociolinguistics	Analytic frame to determine the meaning behind talk and language use. Explores how meaning is made at multiple levels or analysis.	Branch of linguistic ethnography; draws on Gumperz's anthropology and Goffman's sociology of symbolic interaction
Grounded theory	To see with depth what the data is revealing; to build a theory grounded in the data.	Consistent with an interpretivist method, ethnography and discourse as data.

Table 2.2: Table of qualitative choices

2.7 Case study justification

Case study research is prominent across many disciplines including anthropology, political science, business and management, communications, economics, education, medicine, social work, and sociology (Gerring, 2007). It is used in different ways to different ends depending on the discipline, the subject being investigated, the philosophical leaning of the researcher, the type of research question being asked, and the type of knowledge one is trying to create.

A distinction between alternative approaches can be seen in the way two well-known case study scholars conceptualise it. Robert Stake (1995) deploys case study research that "draws from naturalistic, holistic, ethnographic, phenomenological, and biographic research methods" (Stake, 1995: xi). It contrasts with the case study approach taken by Yin (1994) which belongs to a positivist epistemology inconsistent with the philosophical position of this work. More recently Langley &

Abdallah (2011) contrast what they call the Eisenhardt method with the Gioia method, which they have chosen “because they are not only powerful and useful but also representative of the most common sets of epistemological assumptions, methodological toolkits, and rhetorical frames supporting qualitative research in this field” (2011: 122).

2.7.1 The Eisenhardt Approach

Kathleen Eisenhardt’s approach to case study research (Eisenhardt, 1989) is akin to Yin’s in its positivistic philosophical position. Eisenhardt, her students, and co-authors have successfully used it to across a range of topics with more than a dozen published articles since her seminal paper in 1989. The method used is a multiple case study approach where cases are chosen because they have similarities across a number of factors yet a significant difference in one area. This area is then utilised for comparative purposes. Multiple researchers are used to triangulate and validate findings which are presented in both table form and also narratively outlining high and low case examples.

Eisenhardt herself notes that the purpose of this inductive and positivist approach is to develop “testable hypotheses and theory which are generalizable across settings” (1989: 546). In order to achieve theory development which can then be said to be generalizable, the method utilises between 4 and 10 case studies. The analyses of the cases are twofold. They begin with “within-case narratives and are followed by iterative processes of case comparison that continues until a set of constructs that might explain similarities and differences in outcomes begins to emerge” (Langley & Abdallah, 2011: 112). The approach is consistent with Yin’s in that it emphasises the logic of replication across different cases as a way to extend and verify theoretical relationships developed in previous studies.

Although considered a highly robust approach, Langley and Abdallah suggest there are limitations to this method, namely that it focuses in variance between cases missing the complexity and temporality of the case in favour of a definitive answer. They note “variance models have their own value but they compress time, limit attention to temporal ordering and

assume that there is such a thing as a final outcomes, something that can be questionable in many cases” (Langley & Abdallah, 2011: 115). A second weakness that they outline is to question the novelty and surprise which is inherent in the findings in the Eisenhardt method. They claim that rhetoric is used to overemphasise novel theory development and that calls into question the authenticity of the work.

2.7.2 The Gioia Approach

In contrast to the Eisenhardt method, Langley and Abdallah look to the work of Dennis Gioia who utilises a single in-depth case approach. Gioia’s work and that of his students has received much acclaim and has been adopted by other scholars. As such Langley and Abdallah suggest it is an alternative case study template. Gioia’s interpretivist method is explained by him thus:

“In my research life, I am a grounded theorist. I pick people’s brains for a living, trying to figure out how they make sense of their organizational experience. I then write descriptive, analytical narratives that try to capture what I think they know. Those narratives are usually written around salient themes that represent their experience to other interested readers”. (Gioia, 2004: 101).

This ethnographic type of case study research involves, through immersion in the culture of the organization or society being studied, “first-order” data through direct observation and other data collection approaches with the aim of creating “second-order” theories and concepts that make sense of what has been observed (Van Maanen, 1979). The researcher must get close to the social actors in order to build an understanding of how the social order is constructed. This contrasts with a positivistic approach in which the distance of the researcher is what is valued and where borders and boundaries between the researcher and the research subject are created. The immersion into the culture in ethnography is intended to deconstruct those borders so that a fuller understanding of what it is like to be part of that culture can be better understood. Methodologically, it builds on Strauss & Corbin’s

grounded theory (1990) where the aim is to develop theory that resonates with both the researcher and the participants.

Langley & Abdallah (2011) consider Gioia's work an exemplar in this type of research and the grounded conceptual framework and data analysis approach has been taken up by other scholars. The main limitations of the approach is whether the findings in their single cases have transferability and relevance to other settings, which as we have noted above, is an ongoing criticism of research that does not adhere to positivist values. In this and other interpretive research it is left, note Langely and Abdallah, for the reader to determine if the findings might be usefully applied to other settings. However, as Stake argues (1995: 102) "case study research shares the burden of clarifying descriptions and sophisticating interpretations" and that enabling readers to make their own generalising comes from the presentation of "good raw material".

2.7.3 Presenting case study research

Another challenge with this type of research is how the data can be packaged and presented in such a way that it does more than provide a protracted, tedious, sequential narrative that lacks insight or interest (Langley & Abdallah, 2011: 121). However it has been noted (Stake, 1995: 43) that the function of this type of research "is not necessarily to map and conquer the world but to sophisticate the beholding of it. Thick description, experiential understanding, and multiple realities are expected in qualitative case studies. In order to be able to provide detailed understanding and 'thick description' the researcher has to get sufficiently close to the object of their research". Scholars working in this tradition view the closeness of the researcher to their case as an inherent strength as it enables a sophisticated, nuanced understanding of what they have observed. In addition, an in-depth interpretive case study is a rich learning ground for researchers: "If researchers wish to develop their own skills to a high level, then concrete, context-dependent experience is just as central for them as to professionals learning any other specific skills" (Flyvberg, 2006: 223).

As I have already outlined, in naturalist or interpretive research both the inquiry process and the inquiry product are assessed to determine quality. The product criteria that a single case inquiry should be assessed against are resonance, rhetoric, empowerment and applicability (Lincoln & Guba, 1990). Resonance relates to the extent to which the final research artefact, in this case a thesis, is consistent and congruent with the underpinning philosophical belief system so that there is coherence between the research process and product. The rhetoric criteria relates to the way the document is structured, written and presented. Good quality writing exhibits the craftsmanship of the writer and stylistic devices that make reading it enjoyable. Empowerment as a criterion relates to the extent to which the content has the capacity to educate and call interested parties to action as a consequence of the findings. Lastly, the applicability criteria relates to the extent to which the reader is able to draw inferences from the work that could be applied to their own situation.

The criteria that the process is assessed against are trustworthiness and authenticity, which were intended to parallel the quality criteria adopted within a positivistic tradition (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Trustworthiness relates to the quality criteria of rigor and includes credibility, transferability and dependability and confirmability. To assure credibility Lincoln and Guba (1986: 77) suggest that a prolonged, persistent period of intensive engagement with the research subject is necessary coupled with negative case analysis where instances to disprove emergent themes are explored, ideally through the use of a peer debriefing process whereby the researcher accounts for their actions to a neutral third party. Transferability is analogous to external validity and is accomplished through the use of thick descriptive data which provides the reader with sufficient information and understanding that they themselves can determine if the emerging themes have utility across other situations and cases. Dependability is accomplished through the research process being auditable through the use of field notes, logs and journals in addition to the primary data. An audit of the research process would use confirmability as the quality criteria. These relate to issues of reliability and objectivity respectively in the positivistic tradition.

The Mechanics of the Analytic Process section later in this chapter outlines the ways in which this research adheres to these criteria.

There are a number of different types of case study that can be undertaken. These include the critical case in which the researcher tests a clearly defined hypothesis; a unique case where the subject of the research is unique or extreme or the revelatory cast in which the researcher has “the opportunity to observe and analyse a phenomenon previously inaccessible to scientific investigation” (Yin, 1994: 44).

Given that this research belongs to the naturalistic and interpretive tradition, I have selected a single case study “chosen for its revelatory potential and richness of data” (Langley & Abdallah, 2011: 109). The obligation in this research is to understand deeply this one case rather than studying this case as a means to understand other cases, for as Stake notes, “the real business of case study is particularization, not generalization” (Stake, 1995: 7). There will never be another exact organizational context in which what was true for the case study organization could also be universally true in another place and time. Just as Heraclitus observed over twenty-five hundred years ago, you can’t step in the same river twice (Mesle, 2008: 8).

Stake argues that we should bring a “sincere interest” (ibid: 1) to our case study and that in so doing we can come to fully understand it as it is, unfettered by our own presumptions. For as Campbell (1975: 179) notes, we are very competent common-sense knowers, a type of knowing that cannot be replaced with quantitative and scientific knowing: “This is not to say that such common sense naturalistic observation is objective, dependable, or unbiased. But it is all that we have. It is the only route to knowledge – noisy, fallible, and biased though it be”. MacIntosh, Bonnet et al (2007: 369) advocate “taking an attitude of inquiry” in our research which involves “opening our purposes, assumptions, sense-making and patterns of action to reflection” as a condition for quality.

As I will outline in section 4.12, one such way to overcome the presentation of the data as merely a sequential narrative of events is to develop grounded

theory from the data through a rigorous process of emergent conceptual analysis (Charmaz, 2008: 156). The process involves beginning with an inductive logic, but rather than being content to merely describe what emerges from the data, the researcher using a grounded theory approach will move to abductive reasoning “to account for surprises, anomalies and/or puzzles in the collected data” (ibid: 157).

My research aims to adhere to the process and product criteria set out by Lincoln and Guba (1981; 1985; 1986) and is consistent with the approach taken by Helstad & Møller and explored in section 3.6.4 which aims not to be “statistically generalizable” but rather “analytically generalizable” that is that the findings from one study may be used as a guide to what may occur in other settings” (2013: 250).

2.8 Ethnography

Ethnographic research places the researcher within the context that the research is taking place with a view to developing a deep knowing and understanding of how people are the way they are in that context, at that time. The ethnographer’s data collection method is to “live among” the data collection subjects (Rosen, 1991: 5) for a sufficient period of time that a rich understanding of how the social actors construct their social world. “The relationships between ethnographer and informants in the field, which form the bases of subsequent theorizing and conclusions, are expressed through social interaction in which the ethnographer participates; thus ethnographers help to construct the observations that become their data” (Davies, 1998: 5).

As such, an ethnographic study is one in which both data collection and analysis are “irrevocably mated to the other” (Rosen, 1991: 1). By being situated within the research environment, the researcher is able to explore how those involved both create their context and are created by it. Castanheira, Crawford et al (2001: 357) note that “the interactional ethnographer, therefore, must look at what is constructed in and through the moment-by-moment interactions among members of a social group; how members negotiate events through these interactions; and the ways in which knowledge and texts generated in one event become linked to, and thus a resource for, members' actions in subsequent events”. Here, Rampton (2004: 4) outlines what the ethnographer can expect:

“Every moment in the unfolding of communicative action is unique and never-to-be-repeated, but this also involves linguistic forms, rhetorical strategies, semiotic materials and institutional genres that have achieved a degree of stability, status and resonance in the world beyond the encounter-on-hand. Individuals only ever have partial control over these forms, materials and strategies, and you can see the partiality of this control in face-to-face interaction, where there are two or more people involved in trying to build a provisional consensus on ‘meaning’ sequentially from one turn to the next, as well as in the afterlife that signs, texts and utterances have when they get reported or recycled elsewhere”.

It makes sense, therefore, that the researcher does not have a hypothesis to ‘test’- although they may have an idea of the areas of interest to them. Rather, the ethnographic endeavour is to observe sufficiently to interpret this through “thick description” (Geertz, 1973). However, as Rosen states, “interpretation is the consummate goal of ethnography because meaning is understood in the social constructionist realm to derive from interpretation, where knowledge is significant only insofar as it is meaningful” (1991: 1).

In the collection of first-order data, what we are told by the actors involved very often cannot be observed directly. Therefore, how can we know with any certainty what has actually taken place? Similarly, through the use of direct observation how can the researcher be sure that he/she grasp the meaning of what he/she see? Each of these data collection methods supports the other and in some ways minimises the weaknesses inherent in any one approach. However the ethnographic report will always be a second or third order report of what has occurred and is necessarily interpretive. If we accept this, then how can ethnographic researchers account for their work? Rosen argues that “while the authority of an interpretation is never absolute, its value does not rest on whether an alternative explanation can account for the same data. Instead, its value rests on whether the explanation accounts for the data in a plausible manner, or whether we are able to provide our own accountings for the reported data. An ethnographic work is valid even in this latter case, for the goal of generating meaning for the cultural data of another is accomplished” (Rosen, 1991: 2). The role of the organizational ethnographer is to understanding how

meaning is generated through a social order that the participants co-create through rich description and analysis.

Organizational ethnography is consistent with the social constructionist epistemological tradition outlined above. It is an interpretive approach that presupposes that organizational members enact their world through social interaction and where reality is a social product.

“At the heart of organizational ethnography, therefore, lies the assumption that, because corporate culture is a concept about meaning and its construction, about ideas, values, beliefs and assumptions, it might reasonably be studied from a social constructionist, interpretivist perspective, from a perspective exploring how the shared meaning system of the members of any particular organization is created and recreated in relationship to the social processes of organization”.

(Rosen, 1991: 5).

As I have mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, this is an ethnographic study of the top team in a large, complex UK local authority. Procedurally, my choice of organization to study was both practical and strategic. It was practical in that what I will refer to as LocalGov is an organization that I had access to, having consulted in the organization for some time prior to the research work beginning. Gaining access to the privileged executive team meetings on a fortnightly basis for 10 months is a rare form of access so the practical part of the choice is that they were willing to allow me to undertake with the research without putting many restrictions upon me, other than normal issues of confidentiality.

More important were the strategic reasons for my choice. Since the global financial crisis in 2007/8 local authorities throughout the UK have been expected to deliver the same levels of service with substantial cuts to their budget. Whilst they are powerful entities politically and socially, they are also hugely constrained in what they can do by Westminster and devolved governments. Although run by a chief executive, LocalGov non-elected officers are highly constrained by their political masters in the local authority. That having been said, each of the directors has a significant amount of responsibility, far greater than many chief executives in private sector

organizations. For example, both the Education and Social Work divisions of this local authority have a budget responsibility of over £500 million and the staff numbers in education alone exceed 10,000. The work done by the council is deeply scrutinised through the local and national media and this acts as another interesting dynamic in the way the team conducts themselves.

Methodologically my research has taken the form of participant observation of the team meetings which was then followed up by one-to-one semi-structured interviews with key members of the CMT. The rationale for undertaking an ethnographic study was to build a thick description *and* analysis of the way leadership was relationally accomplished. There are a number of ways that an organizational ethnographer can conduct their inquiry through participant observation depending upon the extent to which either the participation or the observation is privileged. Although the formal part of the research was conducted from an entirely observational standpoint, I was simultaneously consulting to the director of one of the divisions and his senior team so in this respect, I was informally gathering additional data from a more participative perspective.

2.9 The linguistic turn – discourse as data

Through what mechanisms can we observe this subjective, co-created meaning-making world? Over the last 15 years, there has been a shift towards language as a central source of data for the study of organizations. Alvesson & Kärreman, (2000: 1126) note that “language (and language use) is increasingly being understood as the most important phenomenon, accessible for empirical investigation, in social and organizational research” Or, put more simply in the words of Samuel Beckett: “Words are all we have” (Beckett, 2012).

Scholars from across diverse disciplines and disparate research traditions began working with discourse in different ways for different reasons. These differences are not merely subtle variation and nuance; at their most extreme they stem from conflicting epistemological and ontological traditions. This has resulted in a wide variation in the way that organizational scholars working within different philosophical spheres use discourse analysis. Wetherell et al argue that discourse analysis “is best understood as a field of research rather than a single practice” (2001: 5). Scholars working from a postmodernist paradigm argue that that this

'linguistic turn' towards a dialogical stance "replaces notions of language as a means of representing reality by the idea of it as being constitutive or formative; that is, rather than being merely descriptive of already existing circumstances, language gives form to reality" (Cunliffe, 2001: 351). For scholars working in this tradition discourse becomes a methodology for examining how language constructs and maintains our social world rather than a method that helps us analyse a pre-existing reality (Phillips, 2002: 2).

Linguistic philosophers such as Wittgenstein (1969) who position language as constitutive of social reality (Cunliffe, 2002), as opposed to being merely a device which describes a pre-existing reality, have been highly influential in the way we study social systems and organizations (Phillips, 2002). This social constructionist stance does not represent a single approach to the study of organizations: it too operates along a continuum. It contrasts a critical realist position which posits that there are some things outside of the person that are real and are therefore researchable with a postmodernist position which offers a "strong challenge to the ambition of understanding the social world through some form of empirical enquiry" (Alvesson, 2002: 11). Given this ambiguity, it is necessary to articulate a working definition of discourse analysis as it will be used in this research drawn from the literature.

Wetherell et al (2001) outline four distinct approaches to discourse analysis. The first approach is concerned with the structure, functions and uses of the language itself as has been the traditional domain of linguistics. In the second approach, the area of interest is in the way the language is used, rather than the language itself; acknowledging that the user of language is constrained by context in their language use. The patterns within the language and the use of terms unique to that domain are the focus for the third approach to discourse analysis. This is closely related to the fourth approach which is concerned with how such patterns in language shape and constitute the social realm. It is in this fourth approach that issues of power become dominant with the functions of language being both to enable and constrain. Yet in all of these discourse analysis approaches, there is an underlying acknowledgement of the importance of the situated location of the language and that it is constitutive rather than neutral (Wetherell et al, 2001: 6-7).

Michael Foucault, argued that “discourse is a complex, differentiated practice, governed by analysable rules and transformations” (1972: 232) and has been credited as the single most influential scholar on how discourse is used in the social sciences (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000: 1128). Foucault (1969) argued that discourse was the best method for examining the concepts of power and knowledge in society. His archaeological approach was developed to determine the “rules that regulate and govern social practice” and later, a genealogical method designed to “record the singularity of surface events” (Burrell, 1979: 229).

Scholars taking a postmodern stance are concerned with how we can know that statements can represent things given the three ideas postulated by Gergen above. Discourse analysts believe a more productive consideration is what language actually accomplishes (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000: 1137). The social construction of our reality “must depend on some form of consensual language” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985: 71) and it is therefore language, discourse and meaning-making that take centre stage in this approach.

2.10 Interactional Sociolinguistics

Interactional sociolinguistics is a method utilised in the analytic coding process in this research. It is a branch of linguistic ethnography that provides an analytic frame to help us understand the meaning behind our utterances. Drawing jointly on the work of linguistic anthropologist John Gumperz (1982) and the sociologist Erving Goffman (1959), it endeavours to analyse discourse “in its wider socio-cultural context, and draws on the analysts’ knowledge of the community and its norms in interpreting what is going on in an interaction” (Vine, Holmes et al, 2008: 345). It pays particular attention to the efforts social actors make in getting their needs met by exploring the meaning of indirect inferences through an analysis of verbal and other semiotic material (Rampton, 2004: 2).

Goffman’s focus on social interaction and its use in helping scholars understand the performative nature of organizational life connects with Gumperz’s focus on situation inference in which our understanding of the meaning being made in a situation can only be achieved through a deep understanding of the context in which it takes place (Schiffrin, 1994: 105). Both disciplines have common intellectual roots and it is already well-established that sociologists make use of the linguists’

sentence-level analysis to understand interactive strategies and in turn linguists draw on macro-sociologists' ideas about groups and cultures in order to better understand language's social norms in context (Gumperz, 1982: 4).

(Rampton (2004: 4) describes the four analytic resources from which that researchers using this framework draw. These are:

- a) linguistics and discourse analysis provide a provisional view of the communicative affordances of the linguistic resources that participants draw on in communication;
- b) Goffman and conversation analysis provide frameworks and procedures for investigating situated encounters. More specifically, they help us to see: the ongoing, sequential construction of 'local architectures of intersubjectivity' (Heritage 1997); the rituals and moral accountabilities permeating the use of semiotic forms and strategies; and the shifting spatio-temporal distribution of attention and involvement in situations of physical co-presence;
- c) ethnography provides: a sense of the stability, status and resonance that linguistic forms, rhetorical strategies and semiotic materials have in different social networks beyond the encounter-on-hand; an idea of how and where an encounter fits into longer and broader biographies, institutions and histories; and a sense of the cultural and personal perspectives/experiences that participants bring to interactions, and take from them;
- d) other public and academic discourses provide purpose and relevance for the analysis, as well as a broader picture of the environment where the study is sited.

(Rampton, 2004: 4-5)

There have been a number of studies in which leadership has been explored using interactional sociolinguistics (Vine, Holmes et al, 2008; Erickson & Schultz, 1982; Takano, 2005; Schnurr, 2009; Henderson, 2005; Morand, 1996; Baxter, 2001 Fetzer & Bull, 2012). However all of these remain loyal to the dominant entity perspective

of leadership. As an analytic framework, it has been interpreted as well placed to analyse leadership practice due to its focus on the way in which “relationships are seen to be negotiated and maintained through talk” (Vine et al, 2008: 339). Given the intention at the heart of this thesis to explore the ways leadership is relationally accomplished in LocalGov’s Executive Management Team, it provides a useful analytic frame which is epistemologically consistent with the approach taken here.

As I have noted above, a single ethnographic case study has been undertaken in this thesis. Gumperz’s (1982: 3) approach is consistent with my research strategy, illustrated when he says: “linguistic anthropologists employing ethnographic methods to survey what they call rules of speaking as they apply to speech events, have shown that language usage, norms for what counts as appropriate speech behaviour, as well as the very definitions of such events vary from culture to culture and context to context”.

This results in a framework that “benefits from both contextual information and fine-grained analytic tools to understand how meaning is negotiated between participants in interaction... The analysis involves paying particular attention to the clues people use to interpret conversational interaction within its ethnographic context. In practice, this includes such features as turn-taking and content, as well as pronoun use, discourse markers (e.g. oh, okay, well), pauses, hesitations and paralinguistic behaviour, amongst a much wider range of relevant features” (Vine et al, 2008: 345).

Interactional sociolinguistics differs from most approaches to conversational analysis in that it moves beyond a micro-level semiotic analysis. This approach is more concerned with the ways in which meaning is conveyed on multiple levels where what is said is taken to mean something by the group and persons involved and “involves inferences based on linguistic features that from the perspective of text based analysis count as marginal, or semantically insignificant” (Gumperz, 1982: 207). Therefore, we can explore what comes to be accepted as relational accomplishments by what is allowed to be spoken and how it is said and that which must only be tacitly understood.

Truth claims, which have been problematised elsewhere in this chapter, are similarly held as suspicious by those working with this analytic frame. The inferences of the

communication cannot ever be known as a definitive truth. Gumperz notes, “conversational inference is thus not a matter of assigning truth values to instances of talk. An inference is adequate if it is (a) reasonable given the circumstances at hand, (b) confirmed by information conveyed at various levels of signalling, and (c) implicitly accepted in the course of conversational negotiation” (1982: 208).

All of this points to the sociolinguist’s understanding of the social world not as a homogeneous whole, but rather “something very complex that is constituted through face-to-face interaction” (Deckert et al, 2011: 86). Deckert et al (2011) consider identity as the central theme in sociolinguistics: how this is developed through and between communicative interaction in and between people in a locally situated context. How these identities are indexed is contingent upon the situation, the social context which is embedded in a historical context that is continually shaping what can and cannot be said. It is in this way that interactional sociolinguistics connects to Goffman’s work, in which the construction of identity was central (Goffman, 1959).

In identity work Goffman conceptualises two kinds of communication – “expressions given and expressions given off” (1959: 16). Goffman’s work is primarily concerned with the ‘given off’ expressions. That is the wide range of actions that an actor displays that are taken to mean something by others. What is ‘given off’ may be intentioned or unintentioned and it may or may not be consistent with the verbal utterances that are given. Simply put, in interactional sociolinguistics, what is given off, sociologically speaking is assessed alongside what is given linguistically. One such area is the face work that social actors do, which he defines as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (Goffman, 1967: 5). Deckert et al (2011: 100) describe it as “an interactional achievement in which all interactants work to maintain each other’s faces”. Although Vine et al (2008L 346) differentiate between task-oriented and relational oriented behaviours, face work occurs in both. Face work as conceptualised by Goffman and taken up by Schein, (1999) has special significance in this study, as will be explored in greater detail in the next two chapters.

This analytical framework has also been chosen because it allows the discourse between the team to be explored vis-à-vis boundary issues around power, status, role

and identity within the group (Gumperz, 1982: 6-7) and how these are managed relationally. It is accepted that everyone in the senior team is in many ways constrained in what they can and cannot say; in effect some topics are permissible and others not. The group norms around such things have a historical flavour – they are part of the wider cultural milieu in which the actors operate (Gumperz, 1982: 165). “It is ethnographically oriented, taking account of the analyst’s understanding of the socio-cultural context of the interaction under investigation, and it makes use of the micro-level analytic techniques to explore how participants negotiate meaning in face-to-face interaction. As such, it makes use of the kind of background and self-reported information gathered through interviews and observations and uses this to support analysis of talk in action” (Vine et al, 2008: 343).

2.11 Ethics

Before moving on to the approach taken in collecting and analysing the data and in the development of theory, I will outline the ways in which I have ensured this research was undertaken with the appropriate levels of responsible conduct.

The University of Glasgow Adam Smith Business School “requires all research involving human participants or human data or material is subject to ethical review” (Adam Smith Business School Ethics Committee Guidelines). I applied for Ethics Approval for this research in May 2010. This submission can be seen in Appendix 1. Minor amendments to my submission were requested via my supervisor, which were approved later that same month. Appendix 2 is the letter to the individual members of the Executive Team in the case study organization and the Summary of PhD Research to be Undertaken document that was attached to the letter outlining the research.

In addition to meeting the formal ethical obligations as set out by the University of Glasgow, throughout my research I used a number signs from the team to determine that they were continuing to consent to my being there and conducting research. This meant that from an internally ethical position, I was able to feel satisfied that the team were giving ongoing consent. Below I outline two examples where I was thus able to satisfy myself that my research case study organization was giving ongoing consent.

As this was a longitudinal research project, I had frequent and prolonged time with the Executive Management Team during my formal data collection process in their EMT meetings and informally as we travelled together to these meetings at various locations. During these informal times I would speak about the research and engage the participants in a joint sense-making exploration of what I was observing. Oftentimes during these types of conversation, either one-to-one or in a group I would ask: ‘are you all still okay with me being here?’ This was always confirmed.

At the end of my research, to honour a commitment I made at the beginning, I presented my findings to the EMT in LocalGov. During that meeting we had a good quality conversation about what I had found and the ways in which my research had evolved. At the end of the session the Chief Executive asked if I would make contact once my research was complete to work with the team in my capacity as an organization change and development consultant “because you know us so well and we trust you, Jacqueline”. This exchange verified that even at the end of the research, the consent I had gained at the beginning was intact and that I had done nothing to compromise the trust they had placed in me during my research with them.

2.12 Data collection approach

A research design relates to the criteria used when evaluating how to undertake social research. It is also reflective of the priority given to a range of dimensions in the research process, as I have outlined in this chapter (Bryman, 2004: 26-27).

This part of the chapter outlines the specific decisions I have taken in collecting and analysing the data. It begins by drawing on the components already outlined in this chapter to set out in detail the research strategy that I have adopted, including detail of the type of case I have used and my justification for the team and organization that I have chosen. From there, I go on to outline the mechanics of the data analytic process which has led me to the understandings of what I observed.

The primary data were transcripts of the 14 executive team meetings that I observed over 12 months between October 2013 and September 2013 alongside the transcripts of the interviews with each of the executive directors. The secondary data comprised meeting agendas, reports, presentations and minutes from previous meetings. These were supplemented by collecting press reports on the subjects under discussion at the

meetings and a wider contextual analysis of how LocalGov was being reported on in the local and national press at the time. During the time of my research I also continued to consult to one of the executive directors and his leadership team. During the observations of the team meetings I made notes and after each meeting wrote a reflective diary of my initial observations and interpretations. This chapter provides a more detailed interpretive analysis on the data and presents 5 theoretical propositions that are not accounted for in the current relational leadership literature.

2.13 Grounded Theory - coding and analysis process

The coding and analysis process I have adopted follows an ‘emergent tradition’ grounded theory approach. That is, it draws on Strauss & Corbin’s (1990) framework but “with 21st century caveats” (Charmez, 2010: 163) which include simultaneously considering a number of theoretical possibilities and being mindful of and consistent with the underpinning epistemology of the work.

The thesis utilizes grounded theory as an approach to analysing the data for four reasons. Firstly relational leadership is in its infancy and there has been very little empirical work done to build theory relating to it as a conceptual framework. The purpose of this thesis is to develop some middle range theories of how relational leadership was accomplished in the case study organization, rather than test hypothesis already established. Grounded theory is a method specifically designed for theory building. Secondly, since this thesis is underpinned by a social and relational constructionist epistemology, it provides a suitable alternative to data analysis methods rooted in positivistic epistemology in which language is viewed as representing reality. Thirdly, a grounded theory method counters some of the criticisms of naturalistic enquiry and in-depth case studies where the use of ‘thick description’ has the potential to merely describe what was observed rather than produce something meaningful with it. Grounded theory satisfactorily resolves these issues. Lastly, the approach is particularly well suited to case study and ethnographic research (Strauss & Corbin, 1987: 221).

Furthermore, the interpretivist stance that I have adopted and which I earlier proposed is epistemologically consistent with researching social and relational constructionism and is also consistent with a grounded theory approach. A goal of grounded theory, to generate theoretical analysis that fit with the empirical reality, requires researchers to become thoroughly familiar with their research subject

(Charmaz, 2010:162). Accordingly, an ethnographic study supports practically research that uses Grounded Theory. Beginning with an inductive logic it thereafter “moves into abductive reasoning as the research seeks to understand emergent empirical findings” (Charmaz, 2010: 157). At this stage, the researcher remains open to all possibilities from the data and moves iteratively between data and checking hypotheses. This successive data coding and analysis process builds refinements towards the ultimate development of theory. There are multiple ways in which researchers have interpreted Strauss & Corbin’s approach which in large part stems from the assumption of the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the participant.

One particular approach to undertaking grounded theory which develops Strauss and Corbin’s method by “repositioning the researcher as the author of a reconstruction of experience and meaning” (Mills et al, 2006: 26) is known as constructivist grounded theory initially developed by the sociologist Kathy Charmaz. “Grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves. Thus researchers construct a theory ‘grounded’ in their data. Grounded theory begins with inductive data, invokes iterative strategies of going back and forth between data and analysis, uses comparative methods and keeps you interacting and involved with your data and emerging analysis” (Charmaz, 2014: 1). Charmaz notes that the development of her constructivist grounded theory is consistent with the current form of social constructionism with strong currents between the two (Charmaz, 2014: 14). Charmaz (2014: 15) lists 9 distinctions of grounded theory research. These are:

- 1 Conduct data collection and analysis simultaneously in an iterative process
- 2 Analyse actions and processes rather than themes and structure
- 3 Use comparative methods
- 4 Draw on data (e.g. narratives and descriptions) in service of developing new conceptual categories
- 5 Develop inductive abstract analytic categories through systematic data analysis
- 6 Emphasize theory construction rather than description or application of current theories
- 7 Engage in theoretical sampling
- 8 Search for variation in the studied categories or process
- 9 Pursue developing a category rather than covering a specific empirical topic

I will illustrate, in the data analysis process that I have undertaken, that each of these 9 criteria are met through the systematic way in which the research process was undertaken and documented. Table 2.3 provides an overview of the phases and stages of this research process.

Research process of grounded theory development		
Phase	Activity	Rationale
Research Design		
Stage 1: Review technical literature	Broadly define the research question	Narrow focus of enquiry Locate philosophical orientation of the study
Stage 2: Select Case	Theoretical, not random, sampling	Ensure case study was theoretically useful case Determine appropriate levels of access
Data Collection		
Stage 3: Develop rigorous data collection protocol	Multiple data collection methods. Determine primary and secondary sources of data	Increase construct validity. Strengthen grounding of theory by providing sufficient contextual understanding
Stage 4: Enter the field	Iterative process of data collection and analysis	Build ever-deepening understanding of the data and enables inductive theory building.
Data Analysis		
Step 5: Develop concepts	Open coding	Develop concepts, and initial 5 categories
Step 6: Create initial and then refined categories	Axial coding	Develop connections between a category and its sub-categories allowing for the development of 2 refined categories
Step 7: Develop Theory	Selective coding	Integrate categories to build a theoretical framework
Step 9: Reaching closure	Theoretical saturation when possible	Ends process when marginal improvement becomes small
Literature comparison		
Step 10: Compare emergent theory with extant literature	Comparisons with conflicting frameworks. Comparisons with similar frameworks	Improves construct definitions and therefore internal validity. Also improves external validity by establishing the domain to which the study's findings can be generalised.

Table 2.3 Research process of Grounded Theory development

This table summarises the whole research process. I will now explain the mechanics of the data analysis process. This process is explicated in more detail of the throughout the three data analysis chapters (that is Chapters 5, 6 and 7) but summarised here.

2.13.1 Developing Theoretical Sensitivity

Strauss and Corbin note that novice researchers “often fail to see much of what is there because they come to analytic sessions wearing blinders, composed of assumptions, experience, and immersion in the literature” (1990: 75). The antidote to this, they contend, is to develop theoretical sensitivity, that is to “to ‘see’ with depth what is there” (ibid, 76) and they propose a number of ways to do this, such as the use of questioning, or making comparisons. In addition to the techniques they advocate, I found my reaction to disconfirming data to be a way to personally advance my theoretical sensitivity. This took the form of noticing when something ‘unexpected’ happened. This sensation of surprise alerted me to fact that my assumptions and bias had been triggered and that this was therefore an important area to pay attention to. My process for attaining theoretical sensitivity was fivefold.

- Firstly, throughout the entire research process, I kept a reflective journal. This is a discipline that has proved helpful to me in my professional life wherein I use the contents of my journal to form the basis of the professional supervision that I receive.
- During my research I similarly had regular academic supervision in which my supervisor and I explored what I was seeing in the data and how to make sense of this.
- The third way was by having ongoing informal conversations with participants and others in LocalGov where I would use Socratic Method questioning (Gross, 2002) to explore ‘what’s going on here’?
- In addition I am part of an informal study dyad of me and my sister, a psychotherapist who was 2 years ahead of me in her PhD research

endeavour. We would meet on a weekly basis to explore together what was arising from our research.

- In addition to these four areas, I explored a wide and varied body of literature more generally which inevitably informed my thinking but which I tried to ‘hold lightly’ in relation to my data.

2.13.2 Open Coding

Open coding is the primary process for developing concepts directly from the data in the initial stages of analysis. These concepts are “the basis unit of analysis in a grounded theory method” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990: 63) and it is as we conceptualise these that we begin to make sense of what the data is illuminating.

The approach that I took in the open coding was to undertake an interactive process of looking at the data on the line-by-line basis for the concepts arising from the micro-linguistic utterances used by the participants and towards the macro-level meaning of these utterances in a wider context. The aim was to “saturate categories by constantly comparing incidents with incidents until categories emerge” (Cresswell, 1994: 156). I did this by transferring all transcribed data into the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. The sources were as follows:

Primary Data

- Transcription of the 14 EMT meetings that I attended over a 1 year period;
- Transcription of 7 semi-structured interviews with members of the EMT.

Secondary Data

- Minutes and papers from the EMT meetings – a total of 112 documents;
- Reflective diary inserts – a total of 19 documents
- Press clippings.

From this the initial 3 concepts were determined using the coding process from the primary data, for example:

Concept	Data
Solidarity	<i>this event just shows you how far we've come in terms of our international credibility as an events city, it's really good;</i>
Camaraderie	<i>you're trying really hard not to grin as you say that...</i>
Conflict avoidance	<i>let's take that off-line</i>

Table 2.4 Example of concept formation from the data

2.13.3 Axial Coding

The approach taken in the next phase of the data analysis, which is outlined in Chapter 6, is to remain close to the descriptive and explanatory data outlined in Chapter 5, but to develop a more fully articulated proposition for each of the 5 initial categories (known as subcategories) and how these were further developed into two refined categories.

The interpretive analysis outlined in Chapter 6 represents a deepening of the data analysis where patterns that emerged from the initial coding of the data are then explored more fully. The analysis is therefore more conceptual in nature. The longitudinal nature of the research allowed time for the early provisional concepts and subcategories to be developed and tested. As I have explained in section 2.9 of the method chapter, I used interactional sociolinguistics as the conceptual frameworks for this task. The purpose of this data analysis and interpretation stage was to come to a final articulation of a set of refined categories ready for selective coding and theory development which is outlined in Chapter 7. This process, note Strauss and Corbin (1990, 107) links four distinct categories takes place through a process that involves:

- a. *The hypothetical relating of subcategories to a category by means of statements denoting the nature of relationships between them and the phenomenon;*

- b. The *verification* of those hypotheses against actual data;
- c. The continued search for the properties of categories and subcategories, and the *dimensional locations* of the data; and
- d. Exploring *variation* in the phenomenon.

In my analysis, I did this in the following way:

- The refined category is named and a very brief description of that refined category is explained;
- The subcategories that make up this refined category are listed;
- Each subcategory is taken in turn to develop its conceptual merit in-and-of itself. This is done by adopting the following approach:
 - ~ A descriptive summary of the elements of the subcategory appropriated from the data;
 - ~ An interpretive analysis of the subcategory and how it relates to either the relational leadership literature or another body of literature (e.g. symbolic interactionism);
 - ~ The development of a propositional subcategory statement that draws these elements together.
- The refined category is then subject to further Axial Coding with the aim of advanced category development in which the components of each of the subcategories are linked following Strauss and Corbin's 4-stage process as outlined above and the Refined Category is clearly explicated.

2.14 Theory building

The ultimate purpose of the grounded theory method is the final integration of the disparate strands towards the development of a theory that meets the criteria of trustworthiness and authenticity outlined in section 2.7.3. This is predominately a creative endeavour, for as Hammersley and Atkinson (1983: 48) note "it isn't like a solution to a puzzle or a math problem".

The 2 refined categories that were developed through the Axial coding process and subjected to further development as they related back to the data became the basis for the selective coding process towards the development of an integrative theory that remained grounded in the data. Chapter 9 outlines the initial storyline that was created and which provides "a descriptive narrative about the central phenomenon of

the study” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990: 116) which attained the quality criteria of trustworthiness and authenticity. The storyline makes explicit the core category which integrates the two refined categories and the 5 subcategories from the previous two data analysis processes. It then goes on to explore this theory in detail and the way in which it relates to other conceptual frames and how it specifically relates to the relational leadership empirical literature.

Chapter 3 – Literature Review

3.1 Chapter overview

The purpose of this literature review is to understand and synthesise the intellectual territory of relational leadership with a view to providing a critique of the way the subject has been explored by scholars thus far. The method that I have adopted follows Tranfield et al (2003) with the aim of conducting a review of the body of literature “in a systematic, transparent, and reproducible matter” (214). Tranfield et al’s systematic review draws on a medical science method that usually corresponds to a positivist epistemology. It remains, however, a thorough means of searching the literature in preparation for a more inductive piece of empirical research. Although this thesis embraces an interpretivist epistemology which privileges my own voice and meaning-making as a way to obtain ontology, I have chosen to adopt the systematic review because it provides a more rigorous framework in which to undertake an evaluation of the literature than a narrative review (Thorpe, Holt, et al. 2005).

Below, I outline the search strategy that I have adopted including the criteria for inclusion/exclusion and the search findings that this produced. I then make explicit the decisions made thereafter and provide detail of the way the included literature was categorised. At the point of analysis and critique, the review is “necessarily inductive and interpretive” (Thorpe, Holt, et al. 2005).

3.2 Search Strategy

The approach taken has been to critique the articles found in peer reviewed journals and academic texts (Zorn & Campbell, 2006). The decision to broaden the search criteria beyond peer-reviewed journal articles was taken because of the relatively small size of this body of literature and to provide an understanding of the theoretical depth with which many of the studies are drawn from.

Tranfield et al, drawing on Engel & Kuzel (1992) note that establishing quality and relevance criteria in qualitative research can be problematic and admit that much of the ideas underpinning a systematic review have positivistic origins. As I have mentioned above, the use of the principles of a systematic review in this study is to provide a visible audit trail of the decisions made with the aim of being systematic

and transparent in my approach. Given the relatively small size of the literature on relational leadership, decisions on *relevance* were made using the four-step criteria outlined below. However decisions on *quality* were not used as a selection criterion and were dealt with during the critique and analysis phase of the review.

In the first stage, a multi-database search was undertaken on EBSCOHost. Databases included in the search were Business Source Premier; PsycARTICLES; Psychology and Behaviour Science Collection; PsycINFO and SocINDEX. These five databases cover the vast majority of all leadership and business literature.

Using the search criteria “relational” AND “leadership” retrieved 1,322 results, a review of which indicated that much of the literature from that search was not related to the body of theorising known as relational leadership. A second, more narrowly focused, multi-database search based on the same criteria as those outlined above was then undertaken (Westley & Mintzbert, 1989; Barge, 2012) for “relational leadership” for peer-reviewed journal articles and books and retrieved 379 citations. This body of literature fell into four broad categories about which I made decisions regarding their inclusion/exclusion in the review. The table 3.1 below summarises the categories.

Excluded from literature review	Included in literature review
Category 1 - <i>Relational issues only touched on</i>	Category 3 - <i>Entity relational leadership literature</i>
Loose connection to relational matters in leadership. Read to establish what category they belonged to but not included in the literature review.	Representatively included to provide an overview and synthesis of this body of literature.
Category 2 – <i>Relationality plays a secondary or minor role</i>	Category 4 - <i>Socially constructionist relational leadership literature</i>
This body of literature was concerned with other theoretical areas and draw on relationality as a minor sub-category.	All literature reviewed. 6 empirical studies identified, each of which is reviewed in detail. Analysis of major themes from non-empirical work also included.

Table 3.1 Literature inclusion/exclusion

The first category highlighted literature that had some loose connection to relational matters but was otherwise not connected to the ideas under consideration in this thesis. The items in this category were excluded. A second category was defined by items in which there was a dominant subject area and issues of relationality played a secondary or minor role. An example of this is “*Individual Reactions to Leadership Succession in Workgroups*” (Ballinger & Schoorman, 2007: 118) which integrates theories of “cognitive appraisal, relational leadership, and trust to develop a model of how individual affective reactions to leadership succession influence attitudes and behaviours”. This article makes a contribution to the literature on leadership succession, not relational leadership. The term relational leadership was used very broadly to describe a leader who attends to relationships but does not refer to Relational Leadership Theory, and as such it was excluded from the study. All other similar work that makes a contribution to another body of theory and in which issues of relationality were of secondary or minor note were excluded from this review.

From the remaining search findings I undertook a high level review of the literature which elucidated an important epistemological distinction between two sub-categories of relational leadership which could be further categorised as ‘entity relational perspectives’ and “socially constructed relational perspectives” following Uhl-Bien (2006) which became the third category. This entity relational literature is consistent with the wider entity perspectives of leadership. This body of theorising makes a contribution to entity perspectives of leadership by bringing in issues of relationality. This literature is referred to but not exhaustively reviewed. Its primary purpose in the literature review was to provide sufficient detail that comparisons could be drawn between it and a socially constructionist relational perspective, which is the primary focus of this review and is the area where I think the most exciting new leadership ideas are being developed. This is represented as category 4.

As the review progressed towards an increasingly narrow and specific body of literature, which includes conceptual and empirical studies, there were fewer sources which were directly relevant to this study and eventually the review became concerned with a small and highly specific set of concepts and ideas. This was necessitated by the relatively small size of this body of literature once my exclusion/inclusion criteria were used. After the inclusion/exclusion criteria was used, the search in category 4 retrieved only 21 articles, books or book chapters that

met the criteria of being about socially constructionist ideas of relational leadership. The table in section 3.6 (page 70) outlines the references included after this stage of the search.

Due to the disparate theoretical threads that connect a socially constructionist perspective on relational leadership, further searches were then undertaken to more thoroughly map the intellectual terrain through critique and analysis. This secondary search which supplemented the systematic approach originally taken was required due to the limits inherent in computer-based bibliographic searches in this emerging conceptual domain, or what Markham (2010: 1122) calls “the potential problem of ‘blindness’ in tracing the evolution of Relational Leadership Theory”. This stems from the fact that many authors refer to relational leadership in the abstract or title which has only very limited connection to the relational leadership theory that is being explored in this literature review

Other scholars are dealing with ideas and approaches inherent to a socially constructionist approach to relational leadership but are not using this name. Limiting the review to a purely rational systematic method following the use of key terms such as ‘relational leadership’ would have missed scholars who have worked with the key ideas and concepts of relational leadership but who may be referring to it using different terms. It was by following the thread of ideas and exploring their theoretical origins in more detail that I was able to provide a richer analysis of their body of work but in so doing I deviate from a systematic review.

Many scholars limit their literature reviews to top-tiered academic journals, whilst I have aimed to include all literature from top-tiered journals on relational leadership, I have chosen to thereafter expand my review when these journals cite other sources such as books, conference papers and periodicals. Given that a socially constructionist relational leadership perspective is in its infancy, many of the ideas that constitute it are being explored in multiple areas.

The last stage of my review process, which was undertaken alongside the review and critique of the key literature, was to identify the key themes that were emerging from this body of work and undertake an analysis of this literature that was specifically related to the key theme and how it interacted with it. I did this by tabling the key

themes against each author. Lastly, I have more thoroughly reviewed the literature in this category which was empirical in nature.

3.3 Entity perspectives of Leadership

Leadership is a concept that has received extensive attention from both within and outwith the academic community. A database search on Web of Science searching all databases highlighted 356,992 citations under the terms leader and leadership, which only represents academic work on leaders and leadership. Given the sheer size of the leadership literature; from scholarly articles in top-rated academic journals to a plethora of populist ‘airport’ books, it is clear that leadership as a concept is both ubiquitous and important. Indeed Bass notes that our interest in leadership dates from the time of the very emergence of civilisation (Bass, 2008).

There are many hundreds of definitions of leadership and ideas of what leaders do to accomplish it. This literature review will illustrate that the dominant approach to the study of leadership has been on understanding *leaders* with a focus on the traits and characteristics that they possess as individual and discrete entities. This body of theorising about leaders has come to be known as an entity perspective (Uhl-Bien, 2006). This review will explore some of the main limitations of the entity approaches to leadership and compare this with an emerging body of scholarly theorising on *leadership as a relational process* which is underpinned by a socially constructionist epistemology.

From as early as the 1920s trait, or great-man, theories of leadership, which explained leadership in terms of the personality traits and characteristics of business and political leaders, dominated leadership theorising (Bass, 2008). Eventually these were seen as too simplistic to fully explain the phenomenon of leadership and the context and situation in which the leader was operating were later added as important variables on when specific traits led to the best outcomes. However, even as this ‘situational leadership’ grew in its prevalence from the late 1940s onwards (Stogdill, 1948) leader traits remained a central tenant of the way leadership was conceptualised (Bass, 2008).

Entity perspectives of leadership stem from psychological ideas that human beings possess a relatively stable set of traits or characteristics based on the fabric of their personality (Avolio & Bass, 1988; Sashking, 1988; Yammarino & Bass, 1990; Day

& Antonakis, 2011). Central to entity perspectives is the now vast body of literature around charismatic leaders and transformational leaders who are conceptualised as having agency “by demonstrating important personal characteristics” (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987) which contribute to the accomplishment of the leadership task.

What all of these phases have in common is that they belong to what has come to be known as entity perspectives of leadership which “derives from modernist and universalistic aspirations to maximise control over human circumstances” (Hay & Hodgkinson, 2006). Parry and Bryman (2006) conceptualised these entity approaches under four chronological phases of leadership theory:

1. Trait theories (concerned with an identification of the leader’s traits).
2. Behavioural theories (concerned with the identification of the behavioural style of the leader).
3. Contingency theories (concerned with a focus on fitting behavioural styles to situational factors).
4. New theories (concerned with a focus on the articulation of a vision).

The idea of the charismatic leader became popular during the middle part of the 20th century and from the 1980s onwards much empirical work on this phenomenon has been done (Waldman, Bass et al., 1990). The description of charismatic leaders has often been imbued with the mystical quality that these individuals are assumed to possess. It transforms the idea of the leader from someone with a hierarchically superior position to that of a super-human, outlined by Bass (2008: 576) below:

“Charismatics exude confidence, dominance, a sense of purpose, and the ability to articulate goals and ideas for which followers are already prepared psychologically. The response of followers is likewise extreme. It is cognitive and emotional as well as devoted and unquestioning. Charismatic leaders have extraordinary influence over their followers, who become imbued with moral inspiration and purpose. The followers experience a magnetic attraction that transcends their usual experience. They become disciples and zealots”.

This almost evangelical view of the charismatic leader elevates leadership out of the ordinary and into the extraordinary. It puts leadership out of reach for the ordinary man or woman who hasn’t been imbued with these mystical qualities and as with all

other entity perspectives the subtext is: you either have it or you don't. Based on personality theory in psychology, a key way to conceptualise personality is that it is a combination of nature and nurture, and whatever the relative mix of the two, one's personality is relatively fixed by the age of seven years (Pervin, 1993). Within the same stable of charismatic leadership are offshoots such as Visionary Leadership (Sashkin, 1988; Westley & Mintzbert, 1989; Nanus, 1992), Maximum Leadership (Zaleznich & de Vries, 1975), and Heroic Leadership (Roper, 2000; Lowney, 2010). Dominant among these charismatic perspectives, and the one which has aimed to explore the phenomenon empirically, is Transformational Leadership (Bass, Avolio et al., 1989; Bass, Waldman et al., 1987; Avolio & Bass, 1995; Jung, Bass et al., 1995).

Burns (1978) outlined the attributes of the transforming leader and argued that transformational and transactional leadership were multidimensional. Avolio and Bass (1995) began work to measure quantitatively these two factors in the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) which tests leaders on nine lower and higher factorial structures. This work has been developed extensively by them and other scholars since then (Bass & Avolio, 1989; Avolio & Bass, 1995; Lowe, Kroeck et al., 1996; Hartog, Muijen et al., 1997 Antonakis, 2001; Tejada, Scandura et al., Avolio & Bass, 2004 Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008).

A fundamental limitation of this perspective is the deeply ingrained positivistic epistemological psychological orientation. Such an epistemology creates a separation between the leader and the context in which their leadership is enacted. It assumes leaders are discrete entities that can be researched and theorised; the result of which has been an approach dominated by an examination of the persona, traits, qualities and characteristics of individual leaders, even when those leaders are being examined within the context of a dyad, group or organization.

This epistemological orientation in leadership research is so deep-seated that there has been very little challenge of its validity. This has, to an extent, locked scholars into a self-perpetuating cycle. Their assumptions about the nature of knowledge results in them asking cause and effect type questions, looking for replicability and generalisability that lends itself only to comparison "for those contextual phenomena that can assume a variable analytic form" (Barge & Fairhurst, 2009: 1069). This in

turn dictates the type of methods adopted which leads to analysis and conclusions that further support their unquestioned epistemology.

At the heart of all of these perspectives on leadership is what Hay and Hodgkinson (2006) call “systems-control” thinking which assumes that the leaders determine organizational goals and then act in ways to motivate others towards these goals. They view this as deeply problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, it assumes a unitary view of the organization in which all members share and are motivated in goal-orientated ways and assumes an organizational norm of consensus and cohesion. Such a view marginalises difference and the reality of competition, conflict, tension and power struggles. Secondly, system-control theories, which include transformational and charismatic leadership, position the leader as a “gifted individual seemingly in possession of almost superhuman, magical powers that may be seen to spellbind followers to act in ways desired by the leader” (Hay & Hodgkinson, 2006).

Inherent in these views is the assumption of the aloneness and loneliness of the leader. The literature focuses on how they are ‘different’ from the majority. This mindset at best serves to alienate the people holding leadership positions from those they lead, and at worst can lead to *hubris*, with all of its associated dangers and pitfalls (Owen, 2007). The literature can also be shown to romanticise leaders, lessening the chance of a dispassionate critique (Meindl, 1990: 330).

3.4 Relational Entity Perspectives

The literature search on relational leadership highlighted a deep divide between scholars using the term ‘relational leadership’ yet who were working within two radically different philosophical traditions (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012: 654). These traditions can be classified as an entity relational perspective and a social constructionist relational perspective (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

There are two underlying epistemological assumptions inherent in an entity perspective. The first is a modernist view based on a Cartesian philosophy of the knowing mind in which “individuals are assumed to have access to the contents of their mind; mind contents and knowledge are viewed as properties of entities, as individual possessions” (Dachler & Hosking, 1995: 1). The second assumption is that these individual possessions of mind are “the ultimate origins of the design and

control of internal nature and of external nature, including other people or groups” (Dachler & Hosking, 1995: 1). Consistent with this epistemology is a conceptualisation of relationship from what is known as a subject-object perspective. That is the knower (the owner of the knowing-mind) is distinguishable from the ontologically separate known, which becomes the object.

These epistemological assumptions only allow a subject-object understanding of relationships. The subject (leader) is understood as a knowing individual distinguishable from the object (follower) who is implicitly viewed as passive, as knowable and malleable only by the subject. The subject is active and the object is passive. “Social relations are enacted by subjects to achieve knowledge about, and influence over other people and groups... Relations, and therefore knowledge and influence, are understood as more or less instrumental for the subject’s understanding of order” (Dachler & Hosking, 1995: 3).

However the literature also highlights that scholars working across the entire leadership discipline in general, and in entity relational perspectives specifically, rarely make explicit the philosophical positioning of their work in which they assume leaders operate as separate individual entities who lead into an organization that sits ontologically separate from them.

An entity perspective on relational leadership remains concerned with the traits, characteristics and behaviours of individual actors, but the focus shifts to those traits that contribute to positive interpersonal relationships between leaders and their followers (Hollander, 1992; Brower, Schoorman et al., 2000; Russell, 2003; Somech, 2003; Eagly, 2005; Ford & Seers, 2006; Maak & Pless, 2006; Parry & Bryman, 2006; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Ming-Jian & Ming-Chia, 2007; Campbell, Ward et al., 2008; Hernandez, 2008; James & Henriques, 2009; McCallum & O’Connell, 2009; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Fulop & Mark, 2013; Gonzalez & Chakraborty, 2013; Men & Stacks, 2013; Stocker, Jaconshagen et al., 2014). These scholars tend to agree that “a deepened understanding of effective leadership is built on relationships, and that the quality of relationships reflects the quality of leadership. Relational leadership is introduced as a forum for enhancing effective leadership. The approach is centered on interpersonal relationships” (Ferch & Mitchell, 2011).

Transformational and neo-charismatic scholars have turned their attention to the issue of relationship and other scholars working within this philosophical tradition are concerned with distributed and collective forms of leadership (Ospina & Hittleman, 2011) whilst others (Ballinger & Schoorman, 2007) are concerned with the stabilising of relations between leadership and followers. In their book *Advancing Relational Leadership Research* the editors claim that “bringing relationality to the leadership field means viewing the invisible threads that connect actors engaged in leadership processes and relationships as part of the reality to be studied” (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012: xx).

Many scholars (Hollander, 1992; Brower, Schoorman et al., 2000; Russell, 2003; Somech, 2003; Eagly, 2005; Ford & Seers, 2006; Parry & Bryman, 2006; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Ming-Jian & Ming-Chia, 2007; Campbell, Ward et al., 2008; Hernandez, 2008; James & Henriques, 2009; McCallum & O’Connell, 2009; Gonzalez & Chakraborty, 2013; Men & Stacks, 2013; Stocker, Jaconshagen et al., 2014) use the term relational leadership as a proxy for matters of content that have a relational dimension such as competitive versus collaborative. Such disagreements and misunderstandings, they argue, are a result “of un-reflected taken for granted about the epistemological stance of the scholar”. Carmeli, Ben-Hador et al (2009: 1559) define a relational leader as “sensitive to opportunities to refine and further encourage positive relationships between members in the organization” with employee vigour being statistically correlated with improved job performance. In another study they describe the relational leader as one “who models relational behaviors by encouraging collaboration and open communication and promoting sincere behaviors” (Carmeli, Tishler et al., 2012: 36).

What is evident from this literature is that scholars working within a relational entity perspective are interested in the relational *things* that individual leaders *do*. They remain committed to the leader as an individual entity and their epistemology is to explore which leadership characteristics, traits or behaviours can be classed as more relational than others. In such a view, a relational leader becomes ontologically possible in just the same way that a transformational or charismatic leader is ontologically possible.

This approach attempts to adopt a less individualistic view of leadership than the wider entity literature by shifting the focus towards relationships. However it continues to be underpinned by an assumption that individual leaders construct organizational realities. In this perspective “subordinates are treated as the objects of leadership: as less active, less knowledgeable and as having less access to the (privileged) goals and interests possessed by the leader. It is vital to note that within this narrative of leadership subordinates cannot, in principle, be understood to be as self-developed and self-responsible as is the leader. Rather, the central concern is implicitly always that of how the leader/subject gets the follower/object to think, talk, or act in ways that reflect the leader’s perspective” (Dachler & Hosking, 1995). It assumes, in the same way that the traditional leadership literature does, that “leaders have certain ‘essential’ qualities and capabilities” (Wood, 2005: 1102) and this body of theorising focuses on the individuals’ “perceptions, intentions, behaviors, personalities, expectations, and evaluations relative to their relationships with one another” (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

In this way the emergence of the relational processes that create the desired organizational outcomes stem from the individual characteristics that the leader brings to his/her interpersonal exchanges with their followers. Put another way (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011: 1443) “many contemporary relational leadership theories employ an entitative ontology and relational epistemology, where leaders and managers of networks and relational mechanisms, users of linguistic routines and/or resources, and facilitators of collaborative practices”.

Ideas of relationality in leadership were traditionally conceptualised as being about the “behavioural styles that are relationship-orientated” (Uhl-Bien, 2006: 654) and that create relational outcomes of high-quality, trusting relationships. Dominant in this area has been the exploration of the dyadic relationship between leader and subordinate, called Leader-Member Exchange, or LMX (Graen, Novak et al., 1982; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1991; Gerstner & Day, 1997). The LMX literature is predominantly concerned with explaining and predicting the outcomes of a high-quality relationship between leader and follower (Settoon, Bennett et al., 1996). The method utilised in LMX research, such as determining what constitutes “high-quality” in the dyadic relationship, applies deductive reasoning and belongs to a

positivist epistemology which favours researching at the smallest unit of analysis – in this case individual interactions between the leader and follower.

Problematic in LMX theory is the level of analysis (Dansereau, Yammarino et al., 1995) in which discrete individual communicative acts are analysed with the assumption that they reflect relationships and outcomes at other levels of analysis, such as organizational outcomes. Schriesheim et al (2002: 515) argue that there is poor alignment between leadership theory and the level of analysis at which it is examined. Having reviewed the literature they conclude that there have been no empirical studies that explore dyadic representations and then built their theory at that level. Theory is invariably developed at the group level or against a strategic or operational outcome, or an approach that “may be characterized as theorizing one thing (‘A’), while tests have typically examined something else (‘B’)”. There has been some movement by LMX scholars to move beyond the leader-follower dyad towards leaders and groups, but as yet the same level-of-analysis issues that characterise the early LMX literature are present in these studies of a wider scope (Schriesheim, Castro et al., 2002).

Raelin (2011: 201) argues that a failing of LMX is the assumption of asymmetry in the relationship between the leader and the follower. As with all entity perspectives on leadership, it is the leader who is assumed to have almost complete agency. In contrast, scholars working from a socially constructionist perspective believe that “followers participate directly in the production of leadership outcomes: There can be no direction if followers do not understand and accept; no alignment if followers do not coordinate; no commitment if followers do not put the share work above their own interests” (Day & Drath, 2012).

Leaders differentiate amongst subordinates based on role-making and contractual behaviours that lead to the development of these relationships (Brower et al., 2000; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). There is an assumption of asymmetry in the relationship between leader and subordinate although each party evaluates the ability, benevolence, and integrity of the other. LMX is thus a model of individual perception that is initiated in the minds of actors rather than as a capturing of the social interactions among the parties without a privileging of any one single actor and his/her singular interpretation. Indeed, relational leadership theory allows for

leadership to occur beyond hierarchical roles and positions. Similarly, by focusing on the ‘interconnectedness’ among social actors (Whitehead, 1967), Leadership-As-Practice is a process model that cannot be reduced to an individual or even to discrete relations. Rather, it is a synchronous interpenetrating process which is irrevocably evolving. As Martin Wood (2005) points out, in leadership ‘the relation is the thing itself’. (Raelin, 2011)

Another significant point of departure for LMX scholars and those working from a social constructionist perspective is different interpretations of the nature of language and what it signifies. Those working from a positivistic tradition see language as being a representation of reality, a signifier (Fairhurst, 2012). Those working from a socially constructionist standpoint see communicative acts as “more than a simple act of transmission; it is about the construction and negotiation of meaning (Deetz, 1992; Jian et al., 2008). Leadership actors can thus be passive receptors of meaning (Foucault, 1980, 1990, 1995) as much as they can be transformative agents (Fairhurst 2007)” (Fairhurst, 2007: 1068). Later in this chapter we’ll explore this distinction in more detail.

However the most significant limitation of LMX, in my view, is the absence of context in the research endeavour. Hunt and Dodge (Hunt & Dodge, 2001: 435) summarise it that LMX scholars “...have believed that leader–follower relationships exist in a vacuum...[the] context in which leadership is enacted has been almost completely ignored”. As this thesis will later illustrate, issues of context, follower-participation in leadership outcomes and the ongoing emergent and complex nature of communication underpin socially constructionist ideas of leadership and therefore reject almost all of the premises that LMX is based upon.

3.5 The Relational Turn

In their book *Advancing Relational Leadership: A Dialogue Amongst Perspectives*, Uhl-Bien & Ospina (2012) make the distinction between those scholars of relational leadership who are working within a modernist stance and those taking an entity perspective (Hollander, 1992; Brower, Schoorman et al., 2000; Russell, 2003; Somech, 2003; Eagly, 2005; Ford & Seers, 2006; Maak & Pless, 2006; Parry & Bryman, 2006; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Ming-Jian & Ming-Chia, 2007; Campbell, Ward, et al., 2008; Hernandez, 2008; James & Henriques, 2009; McCallum and O’Connell,

2009; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Fulop & Mark, 2013; Gonzalez & Chakraborty, 2013; Men & Stacks, 2013; Stocker, Jacobshagen et al., 2014) and those taking a postmodernist stance from a constructionist perspective (Barge, 2008; Bathurst & Cain, 2013; Binns, 2008; Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Drath, 2001; Fulop & Mark, 2013; Hay & Hodgkinson, 2006; Helstad & Møller, 2013; Houglum, 2012; Hosking, 1988; 2012; Hosking et al, 2012; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Gergen, 2009; Ospina, 2010; Küpers, 2013; McNamee, 2011; Ospina & Foldy, 2010; Sinha, 2010; Weibler & Rohn-Endres, 2010). They argue that there is very little dialogue or consensus between scholars working within each perspective – which is acknowledged as more of a continuum than simply two definitive, clearly articulated schools of thought.

Scholars exploring leadership from a relational constructionist perspective have a very different conceptualisation of relational leadership from those working from an entity relational perspective (Dachler & Hosking, 1988; Ospina & Sorenson, 2006; Uhl-Bien, 2006, Gergen, 2009; Hosking, 2011; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012; Day & Drath, 2012; Fairhurst, 2012). They consider the entitative approach to have “serious deficiencies” in helping us understand relations between people and how this enables the accomplishment of the leadership task (Hosking & Morley, 1991: 62). A relational perspective is concerned with the processes that occur to make the practice of leadership possible. It belongs to an epistemology that “rejects the notion of the autonomous, self-determining individual with a secure unitary identity” (Alvesson, 2002: 50). Rather than assuming that leadership is located in the person who is ‘leader’ in a hierarchical sense, it believes leadership to be a constantly evolving social process that is being negotiated and enacted by all of the social actors involved (Wood, 2005: 1103). It follows that viewing leadership from this vantage point, the unit of analysis shifts from individuals to relationships (Uhl-Bien, 2006: 662).

This is consistent with Hosking’s (2011 [2]: 52) view that a relationally constructionist perspective is “a sociology or philosophy of (social) science” that draws on “feminist critiques of science and related approaches to inquiry, literary criticism, cognitive social psychology, interactionist, cognitive and phenomenological sociologies, critical social anthropology, collaborative consulting and some expressions of postmodernism and post-structuralism”. Alvesson and

Sveningsson (2012: 210) highlight this privileging of relationships rather than individuals as the basic unit of analysis when they claim that leadership is “intrinsically social and relational, an on-going process of shared making of meaning”. They agree with Uhl-Bien (2006) that a socially constructionist relational perspective is more ambitious than an entity relational stance in that it requires scholars to conceptualise individuals as being “constructed in the relational context rather than being treated as distinct and separate entities” (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012: 211). This is a view shared by Ospina and Sorensen (2006: 193) who privilege the relational and systemic which they believe “emerges and manifests itself through relations and in relationships, and it cannot exist outside of these relations”.

Dachler and Hosking (1995) outline their idea of a relational approach as one in which issues of knowledge and truth are addressed and understood as and through the social processes of relating. Within this tradition, Barge and Fairhurst (2012: 228) consider leadership as “a lived and experienced social activity in which persons-in-conversation, action, meaning, and context are dynamically interrelated”. Consistent with this position, Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011: 1430) reason that relational leadership “requires a relational ontology, which means going back to the fundamental philosophical issue of understanding social experience as intersubjective (Cunliffe, 2010) and leadership as a way of being-in-relation-to-others”. This relational ontology provokes us to consider organizations as communities of people and conversations in which, consistent with the dialogic turn, where organizations are “literally talked and texted into existence” (Boje, Oswick, et al, 2004: 574).

Relational perspectives invite different questions to be asked of the phenomenon under investigation. Rather than asking questions about leaders as *subject* and their interactions with and impact on followers as *object*, a relational perspective is concerned with the social processes through which meaning is made and reality is enacted. The ‘what’ types of questions privileged in the entity perspective are replaced with questions of *how* and *why*. These types of questions direct us to explore processes of relating and interacting and “this means that the central question becomes how the ‘social’ in the social construction of reality is to be understood” (Dachler & Hosking, 1995: 367).

Other scholars see the necessity of abandoning traditional ways of thinking about leadership as of a more fundamental nature. Gergen (2009) argues that “the presumption of person as bounded units now emerges as a threat to the well-being of the world”. He contends that many of the organization and societal problems that we face today are as a result of what is essentially a Western enlightenment tradition of privileging the self. He argues that it is the idea of our ‘selves’ as separate from others that has created a sense of fundamental isolation and unrelenting evaluation, the darker side of which is the prevalence of “narcissism, conceit, vanity, egotism, selfishness, and arrogance” (Gergen, 2009).

Indeed, a review of this literature highlighted that the scholars who are interested in exploring leadership as a co-created relational process do so not just because of an alternative epistemological and ontological philosophical stance, but as a way to conceptualise and bring about a new social order; and new way to think of what is possible in organizations and in society. Uhl-Bien (2006: 655) defines relational leadership as “a social influence process through which emergent coordination (i.e. evolving social order) and change (i.e. new values, attitudes, approaches, behaviours, ideologies, etc) are constructed and produced”. This is supported by Hosking and Morley (1991: 56) when they argue that in abandoning entitative assumptions “it becomes possible to investigate the plurality of participants’ valuations, including, for example, their constructions of membership”. We can see from this how other scholars attempt to define or make sense of relational leadership as a social construction are underpinned by the possibility of more democratic organizational forms.

As we see above, relationships are understood here on the basis of the properties of the relationship; what people *do* in relationship, the subject’s behaviours, methods of interaction and ways of being. Although the original literature search did not retrieve his work, this is highly consistent with the work of Raelin (2011: 197) when he suggests that “if the assumption that reality can be distinguished and sorted by the human mind is relaxed, the dualist epistemology can be supplanted by a practice epistemology that conceives of practice as an ongoing recursive encounter among parties to a social interaction. Leadership arises from this social interaction as a contestation among mutual inquirers who share their intersubjective meanings. It is, therefore, a process of social construction that focuses not on the makers of processes

but on the processes made within the concurrent undertaking (Hosking, 2000). Accordingly, leadership is constituted within both coordinated and random conversations and other communicative acts that convey the collective consciousness of the community”.

3.6 Empirical Studies into Relational Leadership

The literature search outlined in section 2.2 above recovered 21 research papers on relational leadership from a social constructionist perspective.

Only six of these were empirical studies. The table below summarizes each of these articles. The shaded entries represent the empirical studies which are individually critiqued in the next section. For the other 15, I have reviewed these by way of exploring the main themes from them and these are outlined in the remainder of the chapter.

<i>Author</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Publication</i>	<i>Description</i>
Barge, K.	Systemic constructionist leadership and working from within the present moment	Advancing Relational Leadership Research: A Dialogue Among Perspectives	Relational Constructionist / Theoretical
Bathurst, R. & Cain, T.	Embodied leadership: The aesthetics of gesture	Leadership	Relational Constructionist / Theoretical
Binns, J.	The Ethics of Relational Leading: Gender Matters	Gender, Work and Organization	Relational Constructionist / Empirical
Cunliffe, A. & Eriksen, M.	Relational Leadership	Human Relations	Relational Constructionist / Empirical
Dachler, H. P. & Hosking, D. M.	The primacy of relations in socially constructing organizational realities	Management and organization: Relational alternatives to individualism.	Relational Constructionist / Theoretical
Fulop, L. & Mark, A.	Relational leadership: decision-making and the messiness of context in healthcare	Leadership	Relational Constructionist / Theoretical
Hay, A. & Hodgkinson, M.	Rethinking Leadership – A Way forward for teaching leadership	Leadership and Organization Development Journal	Relational Constructionist / Empirical

Helstad, K. & Møller, J.	Leadership as relational work: risks and opportunities	Leadership in Education	Relational Constructionist / Empirical
Houglum, D. T.	Myth-Busters: Traditional and Emergent Leadership	E:CO	Relational Constructionist / Theoretical
Hosking, D. M. & Shamir	A Dialogue on Entitative and Relational Discourses	Advancing Relational Leadership Research: A Dialogue Among Perspectives	Relational Constructionist / Theoretical
Hosking, D. M.	Moving relationality: Meditations on a relational approach to leadership	Sage Handbook of Leadership	Relational Constructionist / Theoretical
Hosking, D. M.	Organizing, Leadership and Skilful Process	Journal of Management Studies	Relational Constructionist / Theoretical
Hosking, D. M.	Bounded Entities, Constructivist Revisions, and Radical Re-Constructions	Cognition, Brain, Behavior	Relational Constructionist / Theoretical
Hosking, D. M.	Organizing Processes	Journal of Management Studies	Relational Constructionist / Theoretical
Hosking, D. M.	Discourses of relations and relational processes		Relational Constructionist / Theoretical
Hosking, D. M.	Not Leaders, Not Followers: A post-modern discourse of leadership processes	Follower-centred perspectives on leadership	Relational Constructionist / Theoretical
Küpers, W. M.	Embodied inter-practices of leadership – Phenomenological perspectives on relational and responsive leading and following	Leadership	Relational Constructionist / Theoretical
McNamee, S.	From Social Construction to Relational Construction: Practices from the Edge	Psychological Studies	Relational Constructionist / Theoretical
Ospina, S. & Foldy, E.	Building bridges from the margins: The work of leadership in social change organizations	The Leadership Quarterly	Relational Constructionist / Empirical

Singha, P.	The Dramatic Genre in Leadership Studies: Implications for research and practice	Leadership	Relational Constructionist / Theoretical
Weibler, J. & Rohn-Endres, S.	Learning Conversation and Shared Network Leadership	Journal of Personnel Psychology	Relational Constructionist / Empirical

In the next section I will briefly describe the core elements of each of the 6 empirical studies of relational leadership. Section 6.7 then critiques the six by exploring similarities and differences and the major themes that have emerged.

Binns's (2008) empirical study investigates the "possibilities and challenges of becoming an ethical subject against the pressures on leaders to instrumentalize and masculinize their relational work" (Binns, 2008: 600). This feminist critique reconceptualises leading as a social practice, consistent with other leadership practice scholars such as Raelin (2011). The study begins by outlining the theoretical framing of Binns's argument, which is a feminist critique of power, ethics and reflexivity.

The method adopted – a qualitative study of 16 cross-disciplinary leaders with diverse backgrounds based in Perth, Australia – involved a series of semi-structured interviews with each of the leaders on three separate occasions. The theme of the first interview was leadership located in the context of the participants' own work practices; the second was based on working relationships; and the third interview focused on issues of learning, emotion and gender. Binns notes that the "research methodology has been shaped by an epistemological positioning in critical feminism and post structuralism" (Binns, 2008: 607).

Binns contends that the practices that constitute a 'relational ideal' are that of caring, enabling, acknowledging and learning: which are inherently feminine practices. Exploring relational power from a feminist or gendered perspective provides a critique, it is argued, to the dominant paradigm of the heroic leader central to which are "the heroic ideals of certainty and closure" (ibid, 609). Issues of power, and by extension ethics, therefore take on significant meaning.

Binns contends that there is an “embodied estrangement of the feminized subject from the ideals of heroic leadership” which relational leadership is well placed to redress. The work is normative in that it posits a ‘relational ideal’ defined as “leading as a practice of caring for colleagues, enabling others to act, acknowledging and learning from one’s mistakes and being emotionally authentic (ibid: 601).

Consistent with other scholars working in this way, Binns challenges – through a feminist perspective – the ontological splitting of self and other in favour of a shift to “ethical comportment to reciprocity, mutuality and connectedness” (ibid, 604). She concludes that reflexive practice “goes beyond introspection to encompass a critical awareness of the broader social, cultural and discursive shaping on identities, practices and constructs” (ibid, 616).

It is clear from her study that Binns explored the work from an already established conceptual frame – a feminist critique of power, ethics and reflexivity and indeed, this is what she therefore found in her work. This is more akin to deductive research than an inductive grounded theory approach in which the researcher attempts to remain as open as possible to what the can be found in the data rather than looking for something specific before you begin (Corley, 2015). Although Binns makes a strong argument, her strong conceptual framework may have limited her to what else the data may have elucidated had she taken a more inductive approach.

Cunliffe and Eriksen’s (2011) research study was undertaken in the Transportation Security Authority (TSA), which was set up by the US government post 9/11 with a remit over the US transportation security system with specific interest in those who had taken up the roles of Federal Security Director (FSD), which were newly-created roles.

The methodology consisted of a 3 year single-case ethnography with data collected via a series of semi-structured interviews with the FSDs that were taped and transcribed for analysis. The researchers reflected on their data and the research experience and compared this to the relational leadership literature with a view to abductively building a practical theory from the field. This involved an “iterative process of reading and re-reading data, looking for ‘surprises’” (Cunliffe & Eriksen,

2011: 1431) and by then explicating new theories to make sense of them. The study sought to make a contribution in two ways:

- a) by offering a way of conceptualizing relational leadership as an inherently moral and dialogical practice, based on Ricoeur's notion of ethical selfhood and Bakhtin's work on dialogism, and
- b) by offering new kinds of action guiding anticipatory understandings (Shotter, 2008) that may sensitise leaders to the impact of their interactions and enable them to become more reflexive and ethical practitioners.

Central to their purpose was to establish "new possibilities for morally-responsible leadership" (ibid) which is increasingly required following the global economic crisis in 2007. They position their social constructionist orientation as relationally-responsive, "within a broadly hermeneutic-phenomenological ontology of relational and embodied experience – as selves-in-relation-to-others – and an epistemology grounded in knowing-from-within interactive moments" (ibid, 1433).

The moral aspect of relational leadership is based on 'character' – or as people having a 'heart' - which is communicated in conversations between people. They posit that relational leadership means "recognizing the intersubjective nature of life, the inherently polyphonic and heteroglossic nature of relationship, and the need to engage in relational dialogue" (ibid, 1437) or "abductively evolving from the everyday sensemaking" (ibid: 1438).

In their findings and analysis they contrast heroic models of leadership with a way to conceptualise relational leadership which is "to be responsive, and responsible and accountable to others in our everyday interactions with them" (ibid, 1439). Drawing on Ricoeur (1992), the interwoven and intersubjective nature of being human calls forth a moral and ethical responsibility we have to relationships wherein what becomes important is "the ethics of reciprocity" (Ricoeur, 1992: 318), that is of living well with others connecting to Bakhtin's view that dialogism and ethics are entwined.

Although not explicitly described as a grounded theory methodology, the authors use a process of abductive theory building using relational leadership as a conceptual frame through which to understand the data.

Leadership, they contend, is accomplished in the “mundane” and small details of conversation and as such they correspond with Shotter’s prompting to “pay attention to the subtleties of the present moment and to develop new ways of ‘acting, looking, listening, talking and evaluating” (Shotter, 2010: 160). This new practice of leadership, they conclude, means creating open dialogue, being responsible for recognising and responsively attending to difference through *scenic moments*, where together people draw out of the features of the landscape so that what may have remained hidden is noticed and attended to. In addition they suggest it is important to become attuned to sensing and responding in the present moment with relational integrity that respects and responds to difference.

What is clear from Cunliffe and Eriksen’s work (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011) is that far from simply operating within a pre-existing relational leadership conceptual framework, as they went about their empirical study, they were creating their own version of relational leadership because they had found the literature on the matter up to that point to be lacking. They theorise relational leadership as having four conceptual threads: leadership is a way of being-in-the world; encompasses working out, dialogically, what is meaningful with others; means recognizing that working through differences is inherently a moral responsibility; and involves practical wisdom (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). We will turn later to issues of morality and ethics and how these relate to relational leadership in contrast to entity perspectives.

Far from aggrandising leadership as in the entity perspectives, Cunliffe and Eriksen’s empirical work became increasingly interested in the mundane everyday social interactions that make organizational outcomes possible. Taking such a stance requires us to shift our attention away from the individual leader towards leadership as an accomplishment by and through organizational actors.

Hay and Hodgkinson’s (2006) study aimed to provide an answer to the call to strengthen leadership education in MBA programmes by conceptualising leadership from a different ontological position than that favoured by most business schools.

The main premise of their argument is that there is a great deal of ambiguity surrounding what leadership is, citing the split between entitative and social / relational constructionist theories that have been outlined previously in this chapter.

The method adopted draws on a wider study undertaken with 36 MBA graduates where interview transcripts were analysed using an interpretive approach, an alternative, the authors argue, to the quantitative studies that focus on the measurement of leaders traits and characteristics.

They cite a “dissatisfaction with mainstream systems-control thinking” (2006: 146) which conceptualises organizations “as if they were big machine-like systems rationally devised to meet unambiguous organizational goals” (Watson, 2005: 2), and contrast this with a process-relational leadership perspective which they argue “offers a more grounded and realistic conceptualisation which accepts the plurality of organizational life, focuses on leadership as an emergent process which includes the contributions of others and sees leadership as integral to the organising and managing of work” (Hay & Hodgkinson, 2006: 148).

In particular they outline three main concerns and weaknesses to systems-control thinking which they argue, firstly, views organization as “unitary and fixed”. This is problematic for the study of leadership in that it assumes that all organization members share the goals of the organization and are motivated towards their achievement. This view is seen in the transformation and charismatic leadership literature in which subordinates transcend their own self-interest in favour of that of the organization and that leaders have a pivotal role in moving people to such a position by virtue of their charisma. The fixed nature of systems-control thinking can be seen to “ignore the essentially emergent nature of organizational life in that organising and managing is in a constant state of becoming” (ibid: 149).

The second issue they identify with this perspective is what they call “the promotion of the superhero”. Given their focus on leadership education in higher education, they see attempts to conceptualise leaders as heroic as being inherently limiting; it is based on an assumption that it cannot be taught, but is rather an inherent personality trait. They point to the work of Collins (2005) and Badaracco (2001) for

unpretentious, humble and shy leaders “not to inspire or thrill, but focus on small things, careful moves and measured efforts” (Hay & Hodgkinson, 2006: 150).

The third issue they posit is that of “the isolated leader and the neglect of group processes” (ibid: 151) which they reject in favour of a view that accepts that many people can collectively and simultaneously contribute to the process of leadership in organizations.

Their contribution centres on a process-relational perspective of leadership to be incorporated into management education. Adopting such a stance would better reflect the complexity inherent in organizations; which is often neglected in the transformational and charismatic leadership literature. In addition it moves leadership from the elevated position of the heroic leader to everyone who may find themselves in a leadership position at some point during their career. Central to the teaching of this process-relational perspective would be processes to influence and persuade others, communication, bargaining, negotiating and conflict resolution (ibid: 154).

Whereas the paper is written from a social constructionist relational perspective, it does not make explicit the underlying ontological position of this perspective and how it differs from an entity perspective. As such, the description of an alternative way to leadership could be viewed as merely yet another facet of how leaders do leadership as ontologically distinct entities. It does little to explicate ideas of the truly relational nature of a socially constructionist perspective which sees leadership being a relational accomplishment.

Helstad and Møller’s (2013) study is an empirical analysis of the interactions and collaborative processes that enable leadership to evolve in situated activities. The researchers pose the following research questions: How is leadership constituted and exercised in the interaction between a principal and a group of teachers? What is at stake in their discussions, and how do these professionals handle possible tensions emerging from their talk?

The study was conducted with a group of teachers who had initiated an improvement project set in a secondary school on the outskirts of the city of Oslo, Norway. The

method adopted was an analysis of the micro-level interactions between the principal and the project group supplemented by a series of interviews and an exploration of the macro-level factors that provide the context for the enacting of leadership practices. The research design adopted an ethnographic fieldwork as the researchers took part in the project group over a three year period. Data were collected from transcripts of the meetings and interviews which were “repeatedly examined for inductive identifications of issues related to the nature and content of interactions and our analytical concepts” (ibid, 249). The authors used interaction analysis (IA) as a data analysis approach which enables a multi-level analysis of “how the individual-, social-, and institutional-level aspects of activities converge in such interrelations” (ibid, 250).

Helstad and Møller consider the various forms of documentation to “mutually constitute the object” (2013: 250) the object being the ways the various actors “interact in situated activities, and explore how leadership as an interactively achieved practice is played out in interactions” (ibid). Consistent with this type of discursive, dialogic approach, the research is not attempting to provide a statistically generalizable theory but rather that the findings from their study may occur in other situations and as such is analytically generalizable.

The findings illustrate that issues of authority, power and trust are deeply interconnected. They posit that “seeing power and trust as a relationship means that relations are always two-way. It means that the actions of subordinates and superiors influence the structure of domination and the conditions for trust-building” (Helstad & Møller, 2013: 247). Following Shotter & Cunliffe (2003) and Mäkitalo & Säljö (2002) the authors conceptualise the relationship between “enduring institutional practices” and meaning making in situated activities.

Their findings are consistent with the views of Hosking (2011 [1] [2]) that “leading and following is a fluid, interactive and reciprocal process” (Helstad & Møller, 2013: 247). In addition, leaders do not have unlimited agency to do as they please – they are bound by institutional practices or ‘scripts’ in which divisions or authority are maintained. Relational leadership did not abandon ideas of hierarchy nor did it assume that power was collapsed to the whole; indeed, Helstad and Møller argue that power and authority did not disappear in the distribution process, rather they perceive

relational agency as the “capacity to align one’s thoughts and actions with those of others in order to interpret problems of practice and to respond to those interpretations seems to be a key capability for school leaders” (2013: 260).

Ospina and Foldy’s (2010) research draws on the stories about the work of leaders in 40 US-based social change organizations to explore how exemplary leaders “secure the connectedness needed for collaborative work” (292). Using a constructionist lens the study uses interpretive, narrative inquiry techniques to identify salient leadership practices. They note that empirical advances have failed to keep pace with theoretical work in the constructionist approach, partly due to the requirement towards a “careful match of lens, focus and method to ensure the integrity of the design” (ibid: 294) and because it is difficult to operationalise (ibid: 303). They see an effective way to tackle this challenge is to use practice theory as a theoretical anchor as, like other social constructionist approaches, it rejects a focus on individual traits and characteristics of leaders and followers and instead “provides a way to break down the joint work they engage in to accomplish their mission” (ibid). Using practice theory also incorporates context “not as a variable nor as background, but as a constitutive dimension of the relation dynamics that call forth leadership (Ospina & Hittleman, 2009)” (Ospina & Foldy, 2010: 303).

The authors see relational leadership theory as synonymous with what Crosby and Kiedrowski call ““integrative leadership”” which they define as “fostering collective action across boundaries to advance the common good” (2008: 1). This is of particular interest to the authors of this study because they were concerned with the relational conditions that are necessary to “foster collective action within and across boundaries” (Ospina & Foldy, 2010: 292).

The study highlighted 5 leadership practices that create the conditions for collaborative work to be done. These are: prompting cognitive shifts; naming and shaping identity; engaging dialogue about difference; creating equitable governance mechanisms; and weaving multiple worlds together through interpersonal relationships. The research makes three contributions. These are:

- a) The researchers give voice of the largely unrepresented social change organizations in the academic literature;

- b) The research applies a relational constructionist lens to the empirical study of leadership, which as has been noted above, has lagged behind theoretical considerations of the subject;
- c) The five specific leadership practices noted above make up a type of work called ‘bridging’ which connects disparate perspectives.

However the authors note that a limitation of the study that they were not able to connect the leadership practices with organizational outcomes.

Weibler and Rohn Endres’s (2010) work focuses on shared leadership in interorganizational networks as opposed to relational leadership in the strictest sense as it has been adopted by the scholars in the other five empirical studies outlined above. However, it has been included in this section on empirical studies because it, like the others, assumes a relational process ontology and advocates a shift from leader to leadership. They base their approach on a “conception of shared leadership in terms of generative dialogue on relational understanding” following Fletcher and Käufer (2003).

Their grounded theory methodology, “with its focus on process and action/interaction” enabled their investigation of relational processes in interorganizational networks. The study was conducted in Germany in two interorganizational networks which were comparable in type and purpose. The data were collected through a combination of interviews, participant observation and from documentary sources from other organizations.

Their findings revealed that shared network leadership emerged through the process of high-quality learning conversations synonymous with generative dialogue and offers three contributions which are important for relational leadership theorising. The first of these is that shared network leadership is a pattern of leadership that combines both collective and individual leadership processes and activities. As such it is consistent with Uhl-Bien’s (2006) call for relational perspectives of leadership to include entity perspectives, a view later shared by Gronn (2009: 383) that a better understanding of leadership is achieved when both individual and collective perspectives are taken together. The second contribution that this research claims is that it is the support of individual leaders who are passionate about designing the

conditions necessary for networks to function that are a crucial factor in the emergence of shared network leadership. Further, it says that individual and collective perspectives are therefore deeply interrelated. Their third contribution is a development of Fletcher & Käufer's (2003) key features of dialogue to move beyond face-to-face interactions towards more context-based refinement (Weilber & Rohn-Endres: 2010: 193).

What their study does not do, and indeed does not cite as a limitation, is to question the disparate ontological position of taking either an individual or a collective stance in relational to leadership theorising and as such fail to acknowledge the ways in which taking an integrative approach may be problematic both philosophically and methodologically.

3.7 Discussion of the empirical studies

The different epistemological positions of scholars working within an entity and a socially constructionist relational stance give ontology to different things. In an entity perspective the term 'relational leader' is used to describe a type of leader – in much the same way one can be a 'transformational leader' or a 'charismatic leader'. Here 'leader' is given ontology and therefore it is entirely consistent within entity tradition to explore the traits and characteristics of the leader that are assumed to give rise to their leadership capability. If we accept and can live with the fact that scholars working within two very different epistemological traditions use the same term – relational leadership – this is not overly problematic, so long as we can discern which 'school' of relational leadership that scholar is working within.

However my review of the literature highlights that this is not always the case and this is problematic as we work to better understand leadership from a relational perspective. For example, Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) argue that in their empirical study of leadership at the Federal Security Directors (FSD) they found both entity and discursive relational leadership approaches deficient in helping them understand the phenomenon they were exploring. They therefore attempted to build on relational leadership theory by exploring leadership "embedded in the everyday interactions and conversations" (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011: 1428) in which they conceptualise leadership as "embedded in the everyday relationally-responsive dialogic practices of leaders" (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011: 1425). This approach is consistent with that

taken by other socially constructionist relational leadership scholars who view leadership as a shared accomplishment through language and relationship (Dachler, 1992; Ospina & Sorenson, 2006; Hosking, 2011; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012). However, they then go on to say that “relational *leaders* recognize the importance of being responsive to the present moment in organizing and problem-solving” (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011: 1143 my emphasis) and that “relational leaders are open to the present moment and to future possibilities, they engage in ‘questioning, provoking, answering, agreeing, objecting’ dialogue” (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011: 1437). In so doing, they give the individual leader ontology and privilege their relational skills. In effect they categorise them as a type of leader in much the same way entity scholars would afford a type to transformational leaders or charismatic leaders. This is at odds with the work of Hosking and others (Dachler, 1992; Ospina & Sorenson, 2006; Hosking, 2011; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012) who see leadership purely as a joint accomplishment in and through relationship. These scholars do not give ontology to individual leaders but focus rather than the relational accomplishment of leadership in and through various social actors.

Hay and Hodgkinson’s (2005: 150) work is similarly problematic. They reject ideas of the heroic leader in favour of “focusing attention away from ideas of inspirational powers and instead a suggestion of an ordinary person working alongside others”. However this stance remains within an entitative ontology. The approach that the leader adopts is more humble, more relational, however it retains a reliance on their traits and characteristics, in this case softer relational traits, which are deemed necessary for the accomplishment of leadership.

This is a subtle but crucial difference in the way relational leadership scholars conceptualise the phenomenon. We have seen that Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) are using relational leadership as one type of leadership from a broader typology. Their perspective on what makes a relational leader focuses not on the traits and characteristics that a leader has but rather the things that a relational leader does. Their work is predicated on the idea that in the doing of relationship a set of skills are required and as such this approach is very closely aligned to an entity perspective in that a critical component of the accomplishment of the leadership is whether the leader can exhibit relational skills and abilities.

Binns (2008) drawing on Foucault, views leading relationally as an approach to free ourselves from the desire to dominate the other; which is the heroic script of the trait theories of leadership. In order to do so, Binns presents reflexivity as a technology of the self (see Foucault, 1988) in which self-transformation is made possible. She says: “relational leading is achieved through an always unfinished process of critical self-appraisal and self-transformation. It is about becoming, rather than being” (Binns, 2008: 609).

Given that a relational stance privileges the other as much as the self and the other is always inherently unknowable, Binns contends that taking a view leading from a relational perspective means embracing uncertainty. This is in stark contrast to the heroic leader conceptualised in the entity perspectives. Here it is certainty, decisiveness, control and persistence that are valued – traits that Binns argues are “synonymous with symbolic and embodied masculinity” (Binns, 2008: 604). However, she is still referring to traits, as Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) and Hay and Hodgkinson (2005) do.

A relational perspective rooted in a socially constructionist stance, is not concerned with a relational *leader*, because the idea of the individual leader who sits outside the context and the organization and can act into it is being fundamentally opposed. In a socially constructionist stance, relational leadership relates to the ways in which leadership is essentially a relational act. One cannot therefore be categorised as either a relational leader or not a relational leader. All leadership is a relational accomplishment and scholars from this perspective, to remain wholly consistent with their philosophical position are concerned, albeit in differing ways, with the relational dynamics occurring between and through social actors in order for such joint leadership to be accomplished.

Uhl-Bien and Ospina’s thesis as editors of *Advancing Relational Leadership: A Dialogue Amongst Perspectives* (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012: xxii) is that dialogue and openness between perspectives is “imperative for advancing new understandings of leadership”. This may be a nice idea, but is deeply problematic. A hybrid approach (Fulop & Mark, 2013) such as that taken by Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) leaves us with less clarity rather than more clarity on what relational leadership is.

The remainder of this chapter will outline some of the major concerns that scholars working in this way and draw on some of the underpinning theorising to locate them within the wider academic literature.

3.8 Leadership as Process

Adopting a relational perspective invites us to explore the processual nature of becoming in the ever-evolving relational interactions with others. This way of thinking “privileges an ontology of movement, emergence and becoming in which the transient and ephemeral nature of what is ‘real’ is accentuated. What is real for postmodern thinkers is not so much social states, or entities, but emergent relational interactions and patternings that are recursively intimated in the fluxing and transforming of our life-worlds” (Chia, 1995). As we engage in the constructive process of meaning making through language in interaction with others, it is these processes that become the unit of analysis in our research endeavours (Dachler & Hosking, 1995). This is akin to the shift in focus away from being, conceptualised as a static state, to that of becoming, or in-process. These ideas have been established in the organization literature (Cooper & Law, 1995). Ontology is given to the “myriad of heterogeneous yet interlocking organizing micro-processes” (Chia, 1995) through which organization is accomplished.

Drawing from process metaphysics as conceptualised by Whitehead (1967) and Bergson (1999), this view counters Western-held assumptions about the concrete, separate nature of the reality. A core assumption of such a worldview is that the most reliable way to examine and understand the natural world is to concern ourselves with the processual nature of phenomena (Wood, 2005: 1103). Chia (1999: 217-220) outlines the three axioms of process metaphysics as a commitment to the *becoming* of things located in an incontrovertible process epistemology; the logic of otherness stemming from an assumption that a thing cannot be isolated and viewed discretely without considering the importance of context; and the principle of immanence which states that every outcome holds traces and is therefore a result of its ‘genealogical past’. He argues that the flaw of an entity perspective is in the assumption that stability is the natural order of things and that change is an “exceptional state” (Chia, 1999: 210), which is akin to what Whitehead (1929) referred to as Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness.

The illusion of stability alluded to above is what Ford and Ford (1994, 766) refer to as temporary resting points – or Material Manifestation Points – where the *process* slows down to the extent that it appears static. If we relate this idea to leaders, then what appears from an entity perspective to be inherent and ever-present traits or characteristics become the frequent re-enactment of particular behavioural processes. These are only conceived of as static when we assume a permanent and unchangeable world. The enactment and re-enactment of such processes forces us to examine leadership relationally, in the way that leaders interact with others. It becomes a reciprocal process of emerging leadership rather than an examination of a statically-conceived-of leader.

Hosking (1988; 147) describes the analytical focus on:

“processes in which influential ‘acts of organizing’ contribute to the structuring of interactions and relationships, activities and sentiments; processes in which definitions of social order are negotiated, found acceptable, implemented and renegotiated; processes in which interdependencies are organized in ways which, to a greater or lesser degree, promote the values and interests of the social order”.

If we are to accept this, then there are inevitable implications for the way leadership is empirically researched. It will impact the types of questions we ask about leadership. Fairhurst (2007) argues that leadership psychologists have been concerned with answering cause-and-effect ‘why’ questions that enable them to build generalisable theory. Relational leadership, by contrast, is concerned with *how* leadership is accomplished. With such a focus, one must look to culture and context for explanation and when one does so, the uniqueness of a situation and a rich description thereof is privileged over the goal of creating generalisable theory. Such a focus would also require us to look at the repertoire of relational strategies that leaders draw on in myriad organizational situations. Rather than relational strategies being grounded in personality structures – as an entity perspective would suggest – a process and relational perspective explores the ways in which actors co-create organization as they explore the emergent possibilities that relationship provides. Those leaders who are able to suspend habitual ways of relating and experiment with

finding new, emergent, creative and novel ways to relate to others will create organizational possibilities that would otherwise not be available.

This in turn leads us to questions of methodology and the most appropriate way to empirically study the phenomenon. It is in this area that the literature is less clear. Wood (1999, 1117) proposes that such an approach lends itself to “a methodological focus on relations, connexions, dependences and reciprocities” that are best studied using a “qualitative, interpretive and ethnographic research strategy”. However, he also acknowledges the challenges in retaining the complexity that is inherent in a processual approach. Uhl-Bien (2006: 670) states that the focus of investigation “would be on how relational interactions contribute to the generation and emergence of social order” and offers the study of participatory practices as an example. In contrast, Hosking (1988:164) argues that the “study of leadership, properly conceived, is the study of the processes in which flexible social order is negotiated and practised so as to protect and promote the values and interests in which they are grounded”.

Indeed a commitment to leadership as a process requires us to explore the richness and complexity of relational processes, which is “only partly manifest in verbal interactions”. As I have already noted, the approach of LMX research to analyse discrete communicative interactions between leader and follower is therefore lacking in several significant ways. Firstly it assumes these discrete interactions are representative of wider patterns of interaction, which may or may not be the case. More importantly, it misses how meaning is being made between the actors in more subtle ways that go beyond language. More significant still, I believe that LMX research, and indeed all discourse methods that are concerned with only the spoken word at a specific moment in time do not give enough weight to the issues of temporality and how relationships form gradually over time, and crucially the impact that context has on all of these issues. “Processes are framed and guided by a cultural context and norms for identities and how people relate to each other. Age, gender, race, ethnicity, expertise, authority, formal structures, corporate ideologies all frame and guide the ways relational work is being done” (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012).

3.9 Ethics

Many of the empirical studies outlined above see relational leadership was a way to have a more ethical form of leadership than the heroic approaches advocate, which is ultimately “confident action without consideration of its affects on others”. As was noted in section 3.6.2, Cunliffe & Eriksen (2011) drew on the work of Ricoeur to inform an ethical dimension of leadership in their study with the Federal Security Directors which means ‘ethical intention aiming at the ‘good life’ with and for others, in just institutions’” (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011).

In the wake of the global financial crisis where a failure of leadership has cited as a key contributory factor there have been calls for more ethically-based leadership models which reject the possessive individualism that dominates the entity perspective. Even Bernard Bass (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999) who championed the transformational leader, began to realise the limits of the approach:

“The immature, self-aggrandizing charismatic leader is pseudo transformational. He or she may seem uplifting and responsible but on closer examination is found to be a false Messiah. Much more needs to be learned about the ethical and moral factors that distinguish the truly Transformational leaders from the pseudo Transformational leader”.

Ethics is also considered by Maak and Pless (2006) this time linking issues of ethics with that of a responsible leader who is accountable to a wide range of stakeholders within and outwith their organization for economic, environmental and societal impacts. They contend that “winning the mandate to lead requires a relational leadership approach based on inclusion, collaboration and co-operation with different stakeholder groups” (103).

Although these ethical perspectives hint at the reciprocal systemic nature of organizations to the wider context in which they operate, none of these scholars go so far as to deny the ‘possessive individualism’ underpinning entitative approaches. Rather, their conceptualisation of the leader towards stakeholders, in the words of Gergen (2009) “relies on a conception of fundamentally separate entities, related to each other like the collision of billiard balls”. The Enlightenment assumption of

bounded separate selves still prevails in this conceptualisation and as such the literature on ethics as it relates to relational leadership is somewhat preachy – with a focus on what such leaders should do, or assume that relational and responsible leaders are doing certain things is a binary, simplistic way. For example, (Maak & Pless, 2006: 100):

“Responsible leaders mobilize people and lead teams, often across business, countries and/or cultures to achieve performance objectives that are derived from the strategic objectives of the firm. They also coach and reinforce employees to achieve these objectives in an ethical, respectful and ‘relationally intelligent’ way (Pless and Maak, 2005). They create incentives to encourage respectful collaboration inside and outside the organization, to foster responsiveness to stakeholder (Freeman, 2004) and advocate ethical behaviour. They safeguard freedom of speech and support the voicing of ethical wrong-doing. They ensure that employment standards are adhered to (worldwide, and also in the supply chain); that working conditions are humane, safe, healthy and non-discriminatory; that employees regardless of background (nationality, gender, age, etc.) are provided fair and equal employment opportunities and that the needs of employees for recreation, work-life balance and meaningful work are addressed”.

In addition to being an unfeasibility long list, this type of thing only serves to reinforce the idea of the heroic leader, who in a superhuman way affects changes far in time and space from their decision making. It assumes that not only does the leader in some way sit outside of the system and control it from there, but that this system is able to be controlled and manipulated by the single heroic leader by virtue of their mythical-level traits.

In the entitative literature, the view, opinion and standpoint of the person with positional power and how they communicate this ‘out there’ and the traits and characteristics that they utilise to do this is privileged. In a socially constructionist relational epistemology, meanings do not possess an ultimate truth. In the words of Binns (2008:602), “ethical leadership practice is not about the achievement of perfect relationships, nor a kind of moral purity, as such concepts deny the complex humanity of embodied subjects”.

This relates to the way that power is conceptualised in the entity leadership literature. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2012) note that within this paradigm, leadership is portrayed as an inherently positive quality, reflecting a romantic idea of a leader as a person who, starting from their own good intentions, achieves positive outcomes whilst achieving harmony and consensus. They note that the literature tends to differentiate people who operate from a non-ethical position, such as Hitler or Osama bin Laden as tyrants rather than leaders (Jackson & Parry, 2011). This simplistic idea about how ‘real leaders’ use power has ensured that the critical reflection of issues of ethics, power and morality in leadership have been overlooked or dealt with only very superficially (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012). Conventional leadership theory has assigned to the heroic leader “almost unilateral control over the construction of organizational reality” (Sinha, 2010: 187) predicated on the presumption of “asymmetrical power relations” (Vine, Holmes, et al., 2008) between leader and follower. Not only are such leaders allowed to take control over others, but it is expected of them. In contrast, from a relational constructionist position, there is an acceptance that followers also have “autonomy and discretion” (Sinha, 2010: 187). Helstad & Møller (2013: 247) note that “power and trust are closely interrelated. Seeing power and trust as a relationship means that relations are always two-way. It means that the actions of subordinates and superiors influence the structure of domination and the conditions for trust-building. Given the mutual dependence of members in set of roles, trust becomes critical for achieving goals that require sustained collective effort”.

3.10 What’s involved in the relating process?

As I have noted above, scholars working from a relational perspective pose different questions to those working within a positivistic epistemology. “It invites questions about the social processes by which certain understandings come about and represent the social reality with reference to which certain behaviours make sense and not others. A relational perspective of leadership cannot ask questions about ‘what’ (content) without asking how (process) certain communally held knowledge is created and given ontology. This means the central question becomes how the ‘social’ in the social construction of reality is to be understood” (Dachler & Hosking, 1995).

Within the relational leadership literature, many of the scholars (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Hosking and Fineman, 1990) outline the relational practices and processes that enable the accomplishment of leadership in and through relationship with others. For example, for Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) this includes creating open dialogue, accepting responsibility for recognising and addressing moments of difference, creating scenic moments what shape a context for work out differences; understanding the importance of relational integrity, and becoming more attuned to sensing and responding in the present moment. For Hosking and Fineman (1990: 598) “actors act intelligently when they show an understanding of the relationship between their values and interests in context”.

Attempting to discover what relational leaders do with an relational constructionist perspective is deeply problematic. Research that aims to describe, in a normative way, what relational leaders do continues to give ontology to leaders in the same way that trait and entity approaches do and as such it at odds with the fundamental premise of relational and social constructionism which gives ontology not to individuals but to *relationships*.

3.11 The role of language

In an entity perspective, ideas about communication relate to the way the leader communicates with the follower (Uhl-Bien, 2006). In such instances, what and how the leader communicates is emphasised. The role of the follower is explored primarily to discern if the leader has been successful in that the follower has received the intention of the communication as conceptualised by the leader. It is a classic sender-receiver view of communication theory.

An alternative to this view is where communication is characterised by mutual causality and reciprocity where “human beings exist in a world of interlocking sequences of action, or circuits of interaction, which over time become guided by relational rules” (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008). The concept of circuits of interaction is drawn from cybernetic theory which emphasises the self-regulating feedback loops present in the system which creates and sustains the patterns of interactions.

Barge agrees with Alvesson and Fairhurst that language is not just a representation of reality, but that it is through language that organization is given ontology. Barge (2010) follows Bateson's (1972) ecological perspective on human systems, requires us to focus on mutually causal patterns of interaction, essentially a focus on the shared ongoing moving in and out of communicative acts. In this way, Barge argues, scholars seeking to understand relational leadership from a socially constructionist perspective seek to interpret and analyse in four distinct ways: "(a) focus on the patterns of connections comprising human systems rather than on their individual elements; (b) treat aspects of the human system as "made" versus "found"; (c) view relationships as contextually embedded within other relationships as opposed to being decontextualized; and (d) recognize how the joint interplay of all participants within a particular human system works to co-create leadership" (Barge, 2012: 111).

Given that any social practice is "co-created, contextual and contestable" (Barge, 2012), defining what counts as leadership becomes deeply problematic and depends on how various linguistic elements cohere into discursive context that qualifies certain forms of talk as leadership but not others" (Barge, 2012). Dynamic context plays a crucial role as what counts as leadership is determined as the social actors "negotiate a working definition of the situation" (Barge, 2012). Communicative acts in their localised context are given a privileged ontology and it is these communicative acts that are the mechanisms through which leadership work is done, co-created by organizational actors. As such, a relational stance is for many scholars synonymous with the linguistic turn. Scholars such as Barge and Fairhurst (2007) view leadership as a discursive construction that provides a credible alternative to psychology's individualist entity perspective. And so we see in this fledgling body of research a focus on the ongoing relational practices that facilitate and enable both recurring patterns and the opportunity for novelty and creativity, each of which become the organising in which strategic outcomes can occur. This becomes the appropriate unit of analysis rather than individual leaders (Raelin, 2011).

This perspective also challenges the notion that leadership is achieved predominantly by virtue of one's organizational position – a view that assumes agency where none may exist. Rather, it postulates that leadership is accomplished through an evolving interaction between participating social actors. In this way, it is similar to a body of theorising known as complex responsive processes, which assumes that

organizations *are* the patterns, processes and power relations created by and through communicative interaction. It follows that discourse will be central to any examination of how, and with what effect, this relational interaction occurs.

Stacey (2003) argues for an approach that focuses on the communicative interaction of people in significant groups. He suggests that concepts from the complexity sciences offer analogies that assist us in understanding human interaction using the process sociology of Elias and the symbolic interactionism of Mead. This radically social perspective on group functioning may provide a useful construct in elucidating our understanding of relational leadership.

He contests the idea that leaders have innate traits and characteristics and argues that all behaviour is formed in social processes. In this way, he draws on Elias's contention that "social and personality structures evolve together" (Stacey, 2003; 39). What is accomplished in social interaction are patterns that promote further interaction. This derives from Mead's (1934) conception of significant symbols, where a gesture by one calls forth a similar response or gesture in the other. Stacey refers to the combination of these theories in understanding social functioning as the "theory of complex responsive processes of relating" (2003; 66).

3.12 Chapter summary

This literature review has demonstrated a divergence in opinion on what relational leadership actually is by scholars working from two different philosophical traditions (Uhl-Bien 2006).

The majority of scholars claiming to be working on relational leadership subscribe to the prevailing scientific paradigm that has dominated leadership theorising. The previous chapter on methodology and how philosophy shapes the research process explicates this in some detail, see sections 2.2 to 2.5. These scholars operate from a realist ontology that privileges individual actors over relationships and a positivist epistemology that assumes relational factors are static and stable enough to be observed, surveyed and assessed and which correlate to organizational outcomes. This is consistent with an entitative approach to leadership that highlights the traits and characteristics of individual actors and imbues them with almost complete agency over organizational outcomes. Although it is concerned with how leaders

relate to others, it continues to locate those others – or followers – vis-à-vis the leader. Such as placement of the leader's position assumes a hierarchy of leader over leadership and as such the focus remains at the level of the heroic individual. The followers play only a minor supporting role in this leadership drama. Types of entity perspectives include leader-member exchange theory (Bower, 2000), charismatic leadership (Weber, 1946), transformational leadership (Avolio & Bass, 1995), heroic leadership (Burns, 1978), and adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1994).

For a small number of scholars, and an even smaller number who are undertaking empirical work, this “strangely mechanical, lifeless picture of persons, social relationships, and social action” (Hosking & Morely, 1991: 40) is too limiting a paradigm to fully explain the complexity of the leadership phenomenon and the importance of relationships in the accomplishment of the leadership task. These scholars, working within a socially constructionist epistemology, are concerning themselves with the interplay of context, dialogue and relationships as a way to explore leadership are a shared endeavour. These scholars honour the relational processes which enable the accomplishment of the leadership task. The intersubjective nature of our lives, that there can be no self without the other, is a radical departure from the entity perspectives. A relational constructionist paradigm rejects the dominant male gendering of a heroic leader in favour of a more democratic, distributed and socially-informed approach. Such an approach does not aim to dismiss the idea or existence of the leader out of hand, but it does question the agency given to individual leaders and it rejects the almost mystical qualities that some entity scholars imbue in those leaders.

The relational turn, as it has been described, sits comfortably beside the linguistic turn. Indeed issues of dialogue and shared meaning-making sit at the centre of a relational approach.

Chapter 4 – Theoretical Foundation

4.1 Chapter Introduction

The previous chapter explored the scholarly work that has been done to advance the idea of Relational Leadership from a social constructionist standpoint and contextualised this in the wider leadership literature, contrasting it with entity perspectives. The purpose of this chapter is to explicate social constructionism and its theoretical roots and explore a number of associated themes that are of interest. They will be further developed as they relate to the data in Chapter 6 – Data Interpretation.

4.2 Social Constructionism and associated theories

Social constructionism is an interpretivist sociology that sees reality as being created only as we come together with others in relationship to make meaning and sense of our social world. Burr (2003) credits the emergence of social constructionism to Gergen's (1973) paper "Social Psychology as History" in which he argues that it is futile to look for once-and-for-all descriptions of people and social life because they are constantly changing and are inherently culturally specific. Some 36 years later, Gergen continues to argue that we "suspend the quest for conclusive answers" and instead "celebrate multiplicity" (Gergen, 2009: 374). In much of his scholarly writing on social and relational construction, Gergen notes that it has echoes of many earlier works which includes the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1967), Martin Buber (1970), and Mead (1967) and other American pragmatists, in particular Bulmer (1969) and Goffman (1959). Social constructionism grew out of what Gergen (1999: 47) calls the "troubled assumptions in the Western tradition – assumptions of self, truth, rationality, and moral principle." These are the very things the traditional leadership literature has tried to incarcerate and explore

Although reluctant to provide a definition of social constructionism, Gergen suggests that it is underpinned by four working assumptions (1999). These are:

1. *The terms by which we understand our world and our self are neither required nor demanded by 'what there is.'*

He explains this as the possibility that for any state of affairs there are an unlimited number of potential descriptions and explanations. No one description or explanation could be deemed to be superior to others in its capacity to capture the situation. In addition, the role of language is central, for it is with language that we construct our worlds.

2. *Our modes of description and/or representation are derived from relationship.*

Meaning is created not in the individual mind but in relationship with others. It is produced through our ongoing coordination where we seek agreement and affirmations. This means that nothing exists for us until we make it intelligible through relationship.

3. *As we describe, explain or otherwise represent, so do we fashion the future.*

Language is the main feature in our social worlds; it is the very thing that makes us human and it therefore constitutes social life itself. Everything we know is only known through our practices of language and where it is limited, we will be limited also. We continually generate meaning and new meanings together in a forward-focused way. History is therefore not destiny.

4. *Reflection on our forms of understanding is vital for our future well-being.*

We generate good reasons, good evidence and good values through which to evaluate our current traditions from within a particular tradition. It will be a construction like all others. The practice of reflexivity, in which we make our cultural traditions and assumptions explicit and open to scrutiny by ourselves and others, is celebrated by constructionists.

We can see from these assumptions that social constructionism rejects the Cartesian notion of the bounded individual underpinned by dualist presumptions such as “mind and body, subject and object, self and other” (Gergen, 2009: xxi). Yet the plight of the scholar working in this new tradition is great; so ingrained is this individualist ideology that it is easy to assume that it is self-evident and without contention. Yet it has only dominated since the Enlightenment. Prior to this groups and societies were regarded as more important than individuals.

The idea of the relational being is central to social constructionism in that it disputes the notion that there is such a thing as a “self-contained privately cognizing individual” (McNamee, 2011: 125). Relational issues are privileged over the idea of an embodied individual in that we are born into a world of relationships and it is through them that we become ourselves. This contrasts with constructivism, where the emphasis is on the way the individual mind, which remains central, actively constructs itself through interaction with the social world. This difference in emphasis is subtle yet deeply important. The constructivist stance remains committed to an individualist ontology whereas the constructionist position holds that there is no self without the other, that we are uniquely formed in and through our interactions with others.

Following an individualist ideology means that the other will forever remain unknown, or at least only ever partially known, to us. We are fundamentally isolated from others. This isolated individual is celebrated in our popular press and Hollywood movies with stories that acclaim the heroic ‘self-made man’ who defies convention and saves the day, but who forever must pay the price by being disconnected and never really understood. This Gergen refers to as *fundamental isolation*. However if it is the individual who saves the day, it follows that it must also be the individual who loses the day, and so both our actions and our failures belong only to us. The responsibility for the wider context in which we operate is dismissed, increasing the potential for feelings of personal inferiority and what Gergen calls *unrelenting evaluation*. In order to protect ourselves from this we pursue *the search self-esteem* and the pursuit of goals which serve us individually, often at the expense of others. These three modern phenomena – fundamental isolation, unrelenting evaluation and the search for self-esteem – Gergen contends (2009) are in large part responsible for many of the global difficulties that we are experiencing, particularly as different cultures seek to solve them in different and non-compatible ways. In this we can see that social constructionism is not a theory that is isolated from matters in the ‘real world’ but aims to find ways of being together so that new ways of understanding and solving global issues might be found.

It is increasingly accepted that social constructionism is a fundamental part of the sociological worldview (Fine, 1993: 76) and is one that provides a frame for

interactionists to “address the formulation of social problems” through the examination and exploration of ongoing, dynamic and historical processes that affect the social. It is an approach that “allows interactionists to examine the dynamic, historical processes affecting the social system (ibid: 75).

Other scholars working in this way have drawn heavily from the American Pragmatists whose symbolic interactionist sociology developed in the second half of the twentieth century primarily in Chicago, derived in particular by the work of George Herbert Mead who believed that people’s selves are social products. The term symbolic interactionism was devised by Henry Bulmer, one of Mead’s students in Chicago. Despite the usual fractures, disagreements and imprecision that one can expect from emerging schools of thought as it sought to establish itself, symbolic interactionism remains underpinned by Henry Bulmer’s (1969) three premises. These (Fine, 1993: 64) are:

- We know things by their meanings
- The meanings are created through social interaction
- Meanings change through interaction.

As Bolman and Deal point out, “... a symbolic view approaches structure as stage design: and arrangement of space, lighting, props, and costumes that make the drama vivid and credible to its audience...One dramaturgical role of structure is to reflect and convey prevailing social values and myths” (1991: 275).

4.3 The symbolic and performative nature of group functioning

Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical sociology (1959) explores all social interaction as a staged drama. He doesn’t go as far as Gergen in that he remains committed to the idea of individual actors who are ontologically separate. He argues that when we interact with others we attempt to make sense of the other so that we might know how to be in relation to them. We observe the dress, manner, speech etc., that the other is supplying for us. These things are referred to by Goffman as ‘front’ and described as the “the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance” (Goffman, 1959: 32). We know that the ‘front’ that a person provides in one setting may be radically different from the ‘front’ they display in a different setting, such as at a business

meeting versus playing with their children at home. It is because we rarely make it explicit which version of ourselves that we are presenting to the other in a given moment that the other must look for cues in the symbols that we present to them for sense making. Goffman describes this activity in which we serve to influence others in different social situations as a ‘performance’. The other is wholly implicated in this performance because they are an audience to our performance and we in turn to theirs. We have choices as to whether we accept the performance of the other and if we do, we have come to what Goffman refers to as a *working consensus* in which “participants contribute to a single over-all definition of the situation which involves not so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honoured” (Goffman, 1959: 21).

As actors in this drama, we are constrained in how we behave; we do not have limitless available options. One of the limits on our current performance will be how consistent it is with previous performances that we have enacted with the same audience. Inconsistency could lead our audience to question the authenticity of our performance which could have negative social consequences for us; we could be seen as ‘a fake’. Another constraint on our performance is the extent to which it “will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society” (ibid: 45). To the extent to which the performance is consistent with the common values of the society, it is seen to be ceremonial in nature – following the work of Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown and the ceremonial aspect of a performance is filled with these ritual observances. (Charon, 2010: 169).

Performance teams are constituted when the performance is shared by a group or organization in a sophisticated adherence to a set of idealized routines that enable the performance to be credible in the eyes of the audience. However, as Goffman notes, the audience do not always need to be present for the drama to be performed either individually or collectively (ibid: 87).

The location – or region – of the drama is symbolically important. Where we choose to enact our performance can add greatly to its sense of authenticity and therefore credibility. Attention is often given by the performance team as to whether the performance goes to the audience, or the audience to the performance and at what

point in space and time this will occur. Goffman notes that the “impression and understanding fostered by the performance will tend to saturate the region and time span, so that any individual located in this space-time manifold will be in a position to observe the performance and be guided by the definition of the situation which the performance fosters” (Goffman, 1959: 109). Setting and props become important contributors to the overall faithfulness of the performance.

Before concluding this brief overview of Goffman’s dramaturgical sociology, one other matter is of importance. A performance team can have a back region or back stage, in which they can knowingly contradict or undermine the performance. An example might be when a teenager uses profanity with friends but never in the home. An example of this was excruciatingly observed when George W Bush addressed UK Prime Minister as “Yo Blair” at the G8 Summit in Russia in 2006. The media storm that ensued was in part because of the deference that was expected to be displayed from one world leader towards another was obviously lacking and contradicted the customary performance that such leaders were expected to adhere to. It is by observing such a departure from the carefully constructed performance put on for an audience that we can come to see that the performance has been carefully constructed.

4.4 Face Work

In considering relational issues in groups and between leader and follower another concept that has been of interest to the symbolic interactionists is the issues of face and the work that we do interpersonally to gain and maintain it. The concept of face is Chinese in origin and relates to the way deference and social standing is mediated in social interaction so that social norms are adhered to. In the West, it was taken up in the social sciences most notably by Goffman (1955; 1956; 1959; 1970) and described as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact.” (Goffman 1955: 213). Following Durkheim (1953) and Radcliffe-Brown (1961) face work shifts attention away from the individual towards the group through the symbolic meaning of their actions. Ho (1976: 883) describes it as “the respectability and/or deference which a person can claim for himself from others, by virtue of the relative position he occupies in his social network and the degree to which he is judged to have functioned adequately in that position as well as acceptably in his general conduct.”

Analysing social interaction from the perspective of face work allows one to explicate the symbolic meaning from the interactions of people in a given context and therefore explore the role face work has in developing and maintaining relationships in organizations.

This is a valid endeavour because it is accepted (Goffman, 1956; Ho, 1976) that we are continually involved in face work in our interactions with others and that it serves as a potent social motivator. As such, face work is involved in locating and maintaining our social standing in the groups and society to which we belong, which is why failure to manage face can have such a negative impact on us. Face work is accomplished through the interpersonal rituals that are embedded in social activity in ways that are characteristically ceremonial towards either deference or demeanour (Goffman, 1956: 477). Deference rituals can be avoidant or presentational in nature. Avoidance rituals relate to “those forms of deference which lead the actor to keep at a distance from the recipient” (Goffman, 1956: 481). Presentation rituals, on the other hand, are “acts through which the individual makes specific attestations to recipients concerning how he regards them” (Goffman, 1956: 485).

In an organizational context, hierarchy and power structures create expectations of deference to those in superordinate positions and afford those in positions of relative power greater freedom to choose responses that do not necessarily maintain face. The familiar sound of Sir Alan Sugar telling his Apprentices “You’re Fired!” could never be reciprocated with a similarly face-destroying retort. The lower the position in the organization the less scope one has in deciding whether or not – or to what extent – (s)he engage in face work. Adherence to the norms of face in a particular organization can ensure one moves through the ranks because they are deemed to be ‘acceptable’ in that culture. Those in positions of authority have the ability to make decisions that affect the fate of individuals at lower levels, all of which points to a strong political dimension in face work.

This connects to Goffman’s second ceremonial ritual in face work that relates to the standards of conduct and dress that an actor adopts to provide cues as to their standing in a particular social grouping, known as Demeanour. ‘Good’ demeanour relates to an actors’ adherence to what is expected and required of him so as not to endanger others as they present themselves as interactants to him within given rules

and conventions. As a researcher, our role is to explore the interaction rituals for their symbolic purpose so that we might make meaning of what is going on between actors. It also relates to standards of dress and other symbols that specify where one sits in the organizational hierarchy.

It is important to note that both deference and demeanour are often adhered to unconsciously. That is, our socialisation into any given group or society happens gradually over the course of our lives and the traces of what is acceptable in our earlier experiences are notable in the institutions that we belong to. For example, the deference to authority that we come to accept when we are children relating to our teacher has a strong parallel with what is expected of us when we enter the world of work and come to know the social norms around how we interact with our bosses. We are more likely to notice issues of face work when the norms and expected standards are not adhered to by ourselves and others and we see the way such misdemeanours are punished.

Face work has an important function in establishing and maintaining group norms (Feldman, 1984). Groups generally want to safeguard members' self-image and minimise personal embarrassment and will therefore "establish norms that discourage topics of conversation or situations in which face is unlikely to be inadvertently broken" (Feldman, 1984: 49). Group behaviour that from an 'economic rational man' stance seems unusual or peculiar is given new insight when we make ourselves open to the possibility that it serves a function to protect the group from psychologically intolerable risks and group-breakdown. Face work is one way the group collectively protect themselves from such risks.

4.5 Reciprocity and Social Exchange Theory

If we are to accept that our reality is constructed socially through relationships, then we must accept the inherent reliance that we have on others and they on us to create and sustain societies and by extension, organizations. Two conceptual frameworks have utility in advancing our understanding of how these relationships are formed and sustained. They are the Norm of Reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) and Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964). Both have long been used by researchers to help us understand the motivational basis behind leader and employee behaviour and which

leader behaviours in turn increase employee morale (Settoon, Bennett et al., 1996: 219).

Gouldner (1960: 168) notes that the stability of a social system depends on the “mutually contingent exchange of gratifications, that is, on reciprocity as exchange.” What is being exchanged in the reciprocal arrangement need not be spoken of explicitly, yet both parties are aware of what makes up the exchange. Citing Malinowski (2013) Gouldner notes that anthropologists have discovered that people expect a balance between what is being exchanged over time and if this does not happen then certain penalties are imposed by the society (Gouldner, 1960: 170). However beyond this belief of the exchange is a generalised norm of reciprocity which defines certain actions and contingent obligations as repayments for benefits received (*ibid*). These obligations are evoked on the basis of past behaviour between the parties – that is the way we are treated in the present is based on how we have behaved toward the other in the past. What Gouldner does not explicate is whether the past behaviour has to be directly related to the two parties in the reciprocal exchange, or whether it can be based on one party’s knowledge of the other’s behaviour via some third party source is in effect, the reputation of the other rather than their direct behaviour. This would seem to be a failing in the theory, in that there are various theories to support the idea that our behaviour is determined by our expectations of the other, such as was illustrated with what has become known as the Pygmalion Effect (Kierein & Gold, 2000).

In an organizational context, issues around the asymmetrical nature of relationships have to be factored in. In Gouldner’s conceptualisation of reciprocity, both parties have both rights and obligations and therefore he suggests an ethical dimension to the reciprocal nature of the exchange. If there were only rights on one side and duties on the other then there would be no exchange occurring – it would be completely one-sided. In order for it to be reciprocal then, both parties have to have rights and duties in the relationship in which they complement and fulfil some division of labour. “In sum, the norm of reciprocity requires that if others have been fulfilling their status duties to you, you in turn have an additional or second-order obligation (repayment) to fulfil your status duties to them arrangement” (Gouldner, 1960: 170).

Scholars have debated the extent to which equivalence is necessary for the exchange to be reciprocal, that is the extent to which there is a balance between what is being exchanged between the two parties. In the generalised norm of reciprocity Gouldner attests to two types of equivalence: *heteromorphic* reciprocity means that “the things exchanged are concretely different but should be equal in value” whereas *homoeomorphic* reciprocity states that what is exchanged should be concretely alike, in a tit-for-tit or tat-for-tat arrangement (Gouldner, 1960: 170). Goffman (1956: 476) refers to two different rules of conduct in social exchange as symmetrical and asymmetrical. A symmetrical rule “is one which leads an individual to have obligations or expectations regarding others that these others have in regard to him” whereas an asymmetrical rule “is one that leads others to treat and be treated by an individual differently from the way he treats and is treated by them (ibid).

There are obviously implications for social functioning if we are to accept the norm of reciprocity. One implication is that it provides a stabilising function for the group in that it sets expectations about acceptable behaviour (and in this way is consistent with functional theory). In the early phases of groups it can function as a “starting mechanism” as the group develop a differentiated set of obligations upon each other (Gouldner, 1960: 176).

Social Exchange Theory implies that the basis of any exchange is economic or social in nature (Blau, 1964). In socially-based exchanges the benefits of the exchange “may be valued primarily because they are symbols of a high-quality relationship; it is the exchange of mutual support that is of concern to the parties involved” (Settoon, Bennett et al., 1996: 220). The level of analysis of the exchange in the management literature has focused on either organization-level exchanges between the employee and the organization or between the dyadic relationship between leader and follower, primarily in Leader-Member Exchange theory, which was explored in the literature review in section 3.4. I would argue that both are problematic.

In organization/employee exchange theorising, the organization is given ontology as a real and distinct entity with which the employee can enter into an exchange. It presupposes that we can have a relationship with an organization and that we can interact with it – and it with us. These assumptions were eloquently challenged by Greenfield (1973), who disputes the notion of an organization as an objective

structure and recognises its base in human action. This view is supported by Schein (1973: 780) who agrees that “we should recognise the degree to which organizations are merely the social realities created by their members”.

As outlined section 3.4 of the literature review, there are significant limitations of LMX research. Primarily, these relate to the level of analysis and the failure to factor in the emerging nature of relationship formulation over time. LMX is concerned with researching discrete communicative acts and then extrapolating these to assess the quality of the dyadic relationship and the impact that this has on organizational outcomes. In so doing, researchers adopting this approach presuppose that discrete communicative acts are in some way representative of a relationship, failing to bring in the temporal and processual nature of ongoing relationship formulation. My manager and I may disagree and argue today, but our relationship tomorrow could be strengthened because of it. LMX fails to capture these elements of relationship.

Notwithstanding its limitation as a theoretical framework (Emerson, 1976), Social Exchange Theory is useful in helping researchers explore relational leadership for a number of reasons. It provides a framework for researchers to shift the emphasis away from the individual and towards the social and relational exchange between them. This privileging of relationship over individuals enables one to meaningfully explore what happens *between* people as they go on together in a dynamically evolving relational interplay. In so doing it centres on the social – or contextual – circumstances that enable and constrain the relationship’s evolution. It presupposes we are people, in relationship, in context, and makes the interplay of all three an appropriate unit of analysis for research.

4.6 Language use and metaphors

A central concept in symbolic interactionism is the use of symbols, especially words (Charon, 2010: 43). Or as Wittgenstein (1967: section 20e) put it “the meaning of a word is its use in the language”. The symbolic purpose of language has a particular meaning for those scholars who believe our social worlds to be socially constructed through our talk. Both postmodernists and discourse analysts agree that the way conventional research treats and understands language is deeply flawed, namely that it represents reality. The view of Alvesson and Kärreman is that “an emphasis on the representational capacities of language conceal and obfuscate the more productive

question of its creative and functional capacities: what language actually accomplishes” (2000: 137).

Lackoff and Johnson (1980) illustrate the ways in which the words that we commonly use and by which we understand our world are frequently appropriated from other contexts and move us beyond a literal interpretation to a metaphorical one. The note that the metaphors that are used to make sense of our reality have a deep impact on our subsequent behaviour. If we use a war metaphor to make sense of an argument, they suggest, that will in turn impact on the viable options we have available to us to making sense of and dealing with the argument. We position ourselves relative to others as combatants with the range of possibilities open to them. As such, of all of the linguistic devices that we have at our disposal, the use of metaphor is perhaps the most ubiquitous.

Hawkes (1972: 1) defines a metaphor as referring to “a particular set of linguistic processes whereby aspects of one object are ‘carried over’ or transferred to another object so that the second object is spoken of as if it were the first.” It is viewed by Morgan (1983: 601) as “a basic structural form of experience through which human beings engage, organize, and understand their world.” They elucidate subtle themes than can be lost or overlooked in normal language and provide an “indirect way to grapple with issues that are too complex, mysterious, or threatening to approach head-on” (Bolman and Deal, 1991: 267).

4.7 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has fragmented away from the core literature on relational leadership for the purpose of examining some of the theories and ideas that underpin a social relational constructionist stance, which are not always made fully explicit in the relational leadership literature. As I will illustrate, these are evident in my data. Indeed, given that the term ‘relational leadership’ is being used by scholars working from very different philosophical positions, it has been necessary to clarify which ‘school’ and intellectual heritage this work is drawing upon.

There are other scholars have taken on the principles of symbolic interactionism and used to explore other areas of organizational functioning. For example Beech, (2008; 2010) and in collaboration with others (Beech & Johnson, 2005; Beech, MacIntosh,

et al, 2008), explores identity construction which is described as “a mutually co-constructive interaction between individuals and social structures” (Beech, 2010: 1). Beech considers the interplay between a person’s so called ‘self-identity’ and their ‘social identity’ and explores the identity construction.

The use of metaphor in understanding organizations (Morgan, 1983; ED6 & Oswick, 1996; Cornelissen, 2004) draws heavily on Bulmer (1969) and other symbolic interactionists (Fine, 1993). Other directions in which scholars have developed symbolic interactionism are power and ideology in organizations (Musolf, 1992); cultural studies (Denzin, 2008); symbolism in the media (Trevino, 1987), meaning making during illness (Fife, 1994), and organizational metaphors.

This chapter has attempted to explicate some of the literature and conceptual arenas in which relational constructionism is, to varying degrees, connected so that when the ideas are discussed in the remainder of this thesis, their genesis has been explained. However, it is important to note that although this chapter precedes the analysis of the data, in reality the iterative process of reviewing the data for emergent concepts and categories and the subsequent development of theory happened simultaneously with the immersion in both the relational leadership literature and the broader connected literature outlined in this chapter.

Chapter 5 – Preliminary Findings

5.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter presents the preliminary findings from the data through a process of open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) in which firstly, conceptual labels were assigned to discrete data and subsequently these concepts were classified where the data relate to similar phenomena. The purpose of this stage in the data analysis process was to uncover from the data the categories that are present that could be exposed via theoretical sensitivity to further scrutiny in the axial coding outlined in the next chapter and to the ultimate development of a grounded theory through a selective coding process outlined in chapter 7.

This chapter begins with a description of the case study organization before moving on to detail the ways in which the data was coded into concepts and the initial categories that emerged through the process of developing theoretical sensitivity towards the open questions: What is going on here? What's it all about? What is it that I'm seeing? The mechanisms that I adopted in this process were multifaceted as I discovered that some procedures proved to have more utility in the development of particular categories than others. In other words, not all methods for developing theoretical sensitivity were equally useful in each type of category that emerged in data. Given this messiness and complexity, in the narrative accounts where I introduce the data, I also explicate the mechanism that enabled me to arrive at first order categories that met the quality criteria of trustworthiness that I outlined in section 2.7.3.

5.2 Contextual Background to LocalGov

The case study organization is one of the largest local authorities in the UK in one the largest and highest density cities, with over 1 million citizens living in the greater-city area. It is one of the most polarised cities in Europe with a large middle class population living in cosmopolitan areas of the city and enjoying abundant artistic and cultural offerings juxtaposed with other parts of the city which remain in extreme poverty characterised by high levels of worklessness, social deprivation, drug use, and crime. For the purpose of maintaining confidentiality, the case study organization will be referred to as LocalGov.

At the time of the study, LocalGov had been controlled by one left-leaning political party for over two decades. However there was a significant and growing presence of a second political party in the city which has been gaining momentum and at the time of the data collection this posed a major threat to the majority political party in the Council. Each elected political member has an associated employed executive officer who has day-to-day responsibility for the main service areas across the city. Against this backdrop, the Executive Management Team, led by the Chief Executive, has day-to-day responsibility for implementing the Council's strategy. The team is made up of an Executive Director with responsibility for each of the main service areas and includes the Head of Corporate Affairs, the Head of Corporate Governance who also report to the Chief Executive. The team meet fortnightly with every third meeting including the wider Management Group (made up of the other Heads of Service) and the Chief Executives of the wholly-owned subsidiaries of the council.

These are organised in the following way

- Chief Executive's office
- Corporate Services
- Finance
- Education
- Social Work
- Land and Environment
- Regeneration and Development

To ensure anonymity, I won't assign the actual names to each post holder but will refer to them by a numerical code with will be Executive Director plus an assigned number, for example, ED1; ED2 etc. I will anonymise each of the directors against their code, other than the Chief Executive, to whom I shall refer as CEO.

At the time that this research was undertaken, the senior team at LocalGov, known as the Executive Management Team (EMT), were dealing with some of the most challenging strategic issues that they had ever encountered following the global financial crash of 2007/08. Since the financial year 2008-09, the Council had experienced year-on-year cash reductions in its settlement from Government resulting from the economic climate and the reduction in public sector finances.

The half yearly Corporate Risk Management Report (section 11 Service Reform, 11.1) which was published in October 2011, the month the data collection began, stated that “The Council has established a comprehensive Service Reform Programme with a view to generating significant efficiencies and savings in 2011-12 for future years. Initiatives with a value of £71.0m were incorporated with Service budgets for 2011-12”. This was against a total approved gross expenditure of £515m. Later in the same report (11.4) its author outlined that “The review of integrated services across the Council family is currently showing a projected annual shortfall of £0.9m. Work is continuing to identify options to generate further savings”. Ongoing savings for the financial year 2013-14 amounted to £16 million.

The Risk Register that same month categorised five types of strategic risk for the City Council. The first set of risks were under the category of *Meeting the Financial Challenge* and included items such as the impact of budget deficit; changing demographic profile within a public sector environment, and service reform, i.e. the capacity of council to deliver on the scale of the current service reform agenda. The next category of risk the EMT was concerned with was *Reducing the Effect of the Economic Downturn on the People Living in the City* and included issues such as increasing access to lifelong learning, healthy and active lifestyles, and educational attainment. Under the third risk category, *Investing in Staff and having a Flexible Workforce* were risks such as residual equal pay / single status issues and resilience and safety. The fourth category, concerned with *Supporting the City's Economy* had city regeneration, worklessness, and social renewal registered as risks. The last category was concerned with a number of *Wholly-owned Subsidiaries* who operate semi-autonomously and deliver peripheral services such as parking, cultural activities, and care services. Their governance is linked to that of the Council. In this last category was their collective budget provision, and failure to maintain the security and functionality of the council website and payment system.

In addition to the saving outlined above, LocalGov embarked upon a major voluntary redundancy and early retirement programme in order to meet some of the necessary savings. However even now in 2015, it remains the city's largest single employer. The EMT was not immune to these changes. During the course of the data collection three executive directors left and were replaced. The first of these was at the

beginning of the data collection in 2011, another in mid-2012 and a third at the end of the research in mid-2013.

The city has a vocal local press which scrutinises LocalGov's day-to-day activities. A national newspaper is based in the city and it takes a keen interest in the matters relating to LocalGov's activities, the personalities in the local authority and the politicians who have overall political control of LocalGov. The location of a national newspaper in the city means that many media stories that would usually remain of purely local interest are reported nationally. This puts LocalGov under a disproportionate level of media and political scrutiny. In addition to this, the City has historically been a place where local government politicians have subsequently gone on to take up seats in Parliament and in some cases gone on to hold senior roles in Government. These factors in combination amount to LocalGov being one of the UKs most strategically important local authorities.

The data collection took the form of participant observation at the Executive Management Team meetings over a 10 month period. The meetings by and large happened on a fortnightly basis and every third meeting included the wider management team. I was not present for these meetings. In total I observed 11 meetings, each lasting approximately 3 hours which gave me 33 hours of recorded data. In addition to this I used both papers from the meetings, the agenda and minutes from previous meetings and press cuttings of subjects discussed by the team as a secondary source of data to provide additional contextual information. After my first cut analysis I then interviewed each Executive Director, which involved 7 two-hour interviews. I was also consulting to one the Executive Directors and his senior team whilst I was undertaking my research over the entire period and continue to do so. In this capacity I was able to engage in many dozens of hours of informal conversations with both members of the Executive Management Team and Assistant Directors as a form of secondary data.

Culturally, the relationship of the elected officials to the non-elected officers – the Executive Management Team – is one predicated on the politicians being in charge of setting the direction of the council and being the visible face of the council. Historically, politicians would have executive team members – and indeed other staff members at lower grades – removed from post because they were not driving a politicians political agenda strongly enough.

5.3 Open coding – the development of 4 initial categories through concepts

The open coding process created 12 primary concepts. Through an a process of looking for ways in which some of the concepts were linked and could be better understood through the development of what became 4 higher level categories. These are:

- Meeting purpose
- Contextual Mirroring
- Mutuality
- Face work

This table illustrates the 12 concepts and how these were grouped to create the categories.

<i>Chapter 5 Coding Approach</i>		
Data Analysis Phase 1		Data Analysis Phase 2
Development of Concepts		Development of Initial Categories
Evasion	→	Meeting Purpose
Superficiality		
Formality		
Shared metaphors	→	Contextual Mirroring
Constraining forces		
Enabling forces		
Competence	→	Mutuality
Protection		
Belonging		
Solidarity	→	Face Work
Camaraderie		
Conflict Avoidance		

Table 5.1 Data analysis and theory development

Each of these categories will be discussed in detail by illustrating from the data how the concepts were arrived at through an approach of undertaking open coding to utterances by the executive team members either in their meetings or during the

semi-structured interviews that I conducted with them. To do so I adopted interactional sociolinguistics as a discourse strategy following Gumperz (1982) and Goffman (1959), which is outlined in more detail in Chapter 2 section 10. The symbiotic relationship of these micro-level utterances and the context in which they take place enables those adopting this analytic strategy to move between the micro and the macro to understand language in context and move beyond a view of language as a representational system towards “the more productive question of its creative and functional capacities: what language actually accomplishes” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2002: 137).

In the remainder of the chapter, I will label each of the 4 initial categories and describe the concepts that made up the category with reference to the primary and secondary data sources. Each concept was tested to determine if there was sufficient data to reliably consider it a concept for inclusion. I also utilised the interactional sociolinguistic method to determine whether the concepts and category operated at the micro level, the macro level, or both. In some instances, reviewing the data from a wide-angle, looking at the overall meaning of the statements being made prompted me to ask questions about what I was seeing in the data and from here I would then explore the discourse at the micro level to see if there were multiple other examples of it in the data. At other times, it was a micro level analysis of discrete utterances that highlighted the possibility of a concept emerging from the data and I would thereby seek to explore for its wider meaning in other data points, both primary and secondary.

Whichever way a concept emerged, I have supported the category development through multiple data points at both the micro and macro level. In this chapter I have outlined this by providing the macro level storyline to provide a thick description of the concept and then provide examples of micro-level talk which supports this concept. It is important to note that some concepts lend themselves better to macro analysis and others to micro level analysis and this is reflected in the relative size of the micro and macro data analysis.

5.4 Initial Category 1 – Meeting purpose

The first category, meeting purpose, was derived from concepts which stemmed from a sense of disconfirming data about assumptions as to the purpose and function of the meeting. These concepts are:

- Evasion
- Superficiality
- Formality

5.4.1 Concept #1: Evasion

The term Evasion is used to label a concept that relates to the EMT choosing not to discuss substantive issues at their team meetings. Even when these issues were on the agenda, they were evaded. This occurred when the group tacitly accepted that the issue was ‘not up for discussion’ in that their opinions would not affect the outcome, or where there was an understanding that the substance of the subject would be dealt with off-line by a limited group of people.

My experience of the team at LocalGov prior to beginning my research was of a well-functioning, delivery-focused team who were highly successful in a complex, challenging political and economic environment. From the outside in – and this was also borne out in the press reports I analysed – the picture was of a joined-up team who appeared to be aligned in their strategic task and totally on-message. Because they outwardly conformed to my preconceived ideas about ‘functional teams’ I assumed that the factors I had witnessed in other teams that contributed to their success would also be evident in this team. I was to be proven wrong.

For example, there were a number of strategic initiatives that I knew were being considered and I assumed that these would be discussed at length and decisions taken about them during the EMT meetings. LocalGov had been asked by central Government to look for radical ways to make substantive cost reductions over a number of years. One such option was that a number of geographically connected local authorities would effectively merge parts of their delivery, such as payments for services and support functions such

as procurement. My secondary-source data collection, which was an ongoing review of media coverage of LocalGov, their top team and major initiatives that were generating a high level of public interest, highlighted this to be an issue that generated a high degree of public interest and scrutiny and which was potentially politically sensitive given that it required multiple local authorities to relinquish a great deal of power and control. This issue was an agenda item at my first meeting.

As I began my data collection I felt excited that the team were going to discuss this issue in my very first meeting and I assumed that this would represent 'high quality data' in that it would generate a lot of debate which I assumed would be contentious. A director introduced a paper on the strategic initiative and some possible ways forward:

ED2 *So, I've drafted a paper on [name of strategic initiative] which outlines where we're at in our thinking. CEO and I went to a [name of strategic initiative forum with other local authorities]; em,*

ED3 *I bet that was fun... [laughter]*

ED2 *Yeah, great way to spend an afternoon... So, you can see from the paper that there's quite a bit to be fleshed out if this is going to happen. I'm going to propose that ED1, CEO and I attend the next meeting on [date of next meeting] and flesh out its feasibility.*

ED6 *Have we put it on the risk register?*

ED2 *Yes, it's...*

ED3 *And it's in red? [laughter]*

ED2 *Yes, it's there. So we'll go to the next meeting and I'll update you in due course.*

There was some general conversation about some of the personalities involved in other local authorities and how this might have an impact and two of the directors mentioned that it might prove to be contentious and this was acknowledged, but the conversation at this point was brought to an abrupt end and the next item of the agenda was taken up.

In this next example, the team were discussing a contentious issue about the rebuilding of a primary school in the area. Local residents had been complaining to politicians and been vocal in the media and the story had run in both the local and national press for three weeks. In this excerpt, the team raise the issue but many of the substantive problems with the build are not discussed in detail. There is no question that these issues are being ignored by the team, indeed, the build finally went ahead without any delays or problems, but it was not talked about in any detail in the team meeting.

CEO *What's your take, ED3, on where we are with the P12 Strategy?*

ED3 *There's just always, I just always work on the land, that there's always slippage. The [name of primary school] one is the one that is going to be coming next and it's going to be making progress, but it is a difficult site... it's a funicular railway we need up from [name of street] to get up there and we do have challenges there as to how to get a buggy up that hill. But there you go, it was a good idea to put it in [name of area] at one time, and in terms of the refurb, they are very difficult because, as ED6 would verify, it's not until the guys actually get in and they start to take apart things, you know, to expose the roof, and that kinda thing do you see the potential difficulties that are in there and I think that that's going to have... it's going to slip because we're going to have bother with the neighbours in the West End. That's going to be a huge problem... huge reputational problem...*

CEO *Is it an organization or just individuals?*

ED3 *It's just individuals complaining about lorries being there and coming up their road. We've put sensors into people's houses and eh, and [name of building contractor] have great experience of this, but it is going to be a huge challenge for us, and that's the way it's going to be. .*

CEO *And how's that going?*

ED3 *Slowly: slow, slow, slow. [name of another primary school] is progressing and we're hoping to learn from it and then we need to start to bring the [third primary school] one on, but it is very slow. But we're waiting to be asked about the next set of SFT and I'd*

expected to be asked about that by the end of February but there's not been anything and I suspect that if we don't hear, we won't until post-election.

CEO *Okay. Any other issues anybody wants to raise?*

Of a meeting that lasted almost 2 hours, less than five minutes of it were devoted to this important strategic topic. The agenda was as follows:

1. Notes of previous meeting
2. Matters arising
3. Pilot Summer Internship Programme
4. *Geographically connected local authorities (strategic issue referred to in this section)*
5. Half yearly Corporate Risk Management Report
6. Budget Monitoring Report
7. Improving Performance Indicators
8. Winter Resilience
9. Update from Corporate Working Groups (*of which there were 5*)
10. Any Other Business

EMT Agenda 18 October 2011

My initial observations were characterised as surprise and a feeling of being deeply perplexed at what I was experiencing. On further reflection, I realise that the surprise I felt at the way the team handled their discussion about these issues came from my own assumptions that I had about the way a top team would or should conduct themselves. In making these assumptions I was drawing on both my experience of operating in a senior team and having spent the last decade as an Organization Consultant working with top teams in a myriad of organizational settings. All of the functional teams that I have worked with had a high degree of healthy subject-related conflict, in which they would disagree, challenge and make sense of issues in a robust way in their discussions. This helped the team arrive at a 'good enough' solution and for – in the main – everyone to be able to sufficiently support the decision for it to be well implemented in the organization.

Below is an excerpt from my reflective journal which I subsequently used this to develop my theoretical sensitivity.

Reflective Journal Entry

I think I might have missed something. I remember sitting forward ever so slightly in my chair, excited. This is it I thought, this is going to be dynamite data... I'll follow this issue right through my data collection process and see how the issue develops. Then they had this really wishy-washy superficial discussion about a couple of aspects of it. Someone had a brief mention of the risk register, there was some tactic agreement for CEO and ED2 to take it forward and that was it! What was going on? This is the biggest strategic initiative that they are faced with and it got about 4 minutes of air time without anything being really talked about or moved forward. I honestly thought I might have drifted off or something. Thank goodness for the recording. Totally bizarre. I'll have to talk to Robert about this, because so far there just isn't any data to work with.

As I used the disconfirming data to question the assumptions and blinkers to my research process, and in conversation with my academic supervisor, I was able to highlight a number of assumptions. These assumptions were that important subjects are talked about openly and freely in functional teams, that issues are resolved 'in the room'; that substantive content constituted 'good data'.

Here are some other micro-level dialogue examples for the concept of Evasion.

ED1 "We're at the bottom of the local government league table on these indices, but then, they just aren't tackling the same issues as us, so it's not a like-for-like comparison".

ED4 "And the other one which is absolutely worth an honourable mention are the levels of performance in relation to homelessness against the set of circumstances the homelessness staff are

expected to work with. I mean, we got, eh, if there's a list of easy to difficult, eh, we've got the difficult end. Nobody has got a homelessness challenge like we've got and actually those fairly middle ranking performances are actually a credit to us because those are easily places where we could have been away down the bottom".

ED3 "When I looked at the last one, there was a lot of attention on the cost per: you know, the cost per pupil; the cost per vulnerable adult; and you know when you looked at our cost, it was, of course, sky high! But I'm just interested in what people are going to make of that".

5.4.2 Concept #2: Superficiality

In addition to the team avoiding having their substantive strategic conversations in the EMT meetings, these meetings consisted of entire conversations where the team were immersed in superficial detail and where the substantive points were not discussed.

In this example, the EMT members were discussing reductions in council-employee car parking which was being severely cut as part of the cost saving exercise. Below, is a transcript of the group discussion on what I understood to be a deeply contentious issue because it meant that most of the staff that had previously enjoyed free city-centre parking, including the executive directors would no longer have this benefit-in-kind. The executive directors were concerned about this personally and had privately complained to each other about how many objections they had to field from their staff about the initiative. However in the group, there was very little being said to challenge the proposal that was being made to reduce the amount of staff car parking across the city.

CEO *Next Item is...? [looks at his papers]*

ED2 *Car parking.*

CEO *You've got our attention... [laughter] ... yeah?*

ED4 *We love car parking. [laughter]*

ED2 *I'd just like to circulate this, just for information... Take it away and read it, it's just for information. I just want to give you a summary of where we are in terms of our reduced estate. Within the City Centre, the total number of spaces available now will be 94 spaces. The number of spaces we've been asked to provide for are 250. That's made up of pool cars, something like 97 pool cars, and a number of spaces that were identified under the criteria of emergency response, daily use, etc. That's still being subject to a level of scrutiny so it might change, and obviously we're looking at relocating these spaces all within the building up into the new [name of new council city car park] car park. We also have the fact that we have 79 elected members so we'll have to review what arrangements are put in place for them for parking. At the moment, they can either have a travel card or they can get travel allowance or they can get a car parking space.*

ED1 *My memory of that is that quite a few didn't have car parking spaces after 2007.*

ED2 *58 currently have space and obviously it's grown over the last few years. So we have limited spaces under the building and we have capacity over in [name of new council city car park]. What we've got in the report is a timescale that takes us to 25th May when the new arrangements are put in place, spaces are withdrawn and passes are then issued to those to qualify... Eh, passes are made available for pool cars and then we have to identify what we do with elected members. But it's quite a tight timescale, but we're on target. The additional thing we're introducing is the Salary Sacrifice Scheme which means that if anyone wishes to park within [name of company managing car parks for the council] car parks and they are an employee of the council or one of the arms-length companies they can qualify through the Salary Sacrifice Scheme to have a reduced rate. They'll put a couple of scenarios for full time and part time workers. So if you are a full time worker, if you go onto page 3, they've allocated a number of days based on the year less*

annual leave, public holidays etc and you're on the 40% tax bracket then you'd be paying about £50 a month and if you are on the other tax bracket you'd be paying £57 a month or thereabouts and it varies depending on your shift pattern. We have a contractor now in place who will facilitate that called [name of initiative]. One of the criteria for those passes though, it's an annual pass, it can't just be for 3 months. One of the other issues we're looking at for the senior management team is that if for example you were looking to park in the Council HQ car park, and that might be appropriate because we are often on call on work till late in the evening or need morning access to elected members, that we can potentially get a space within the Council HQ complex but it is a paid-for space which means there's an equivalent free space made available in [new council city car park] and for either a pool car or a named officer. A named officer who doesn't qualify for a free space. We'd obviously have to work that through depending on how many free spaces we have available. We wouldn't necessarily want the underground car park filled with pool cars but that for discussion. There's a team working with strategic HR here and with arms-length companies to look at guidelines about who parks where, particularly pool cars. I think Land and Environment, you've got the biggest number of pool cars. I'm not sure whether they are cars or whether they are other types of vehicles but they are all over the city at the moment and some of them are actually within [name of company managing car parks for the council] car parks anyway I think. So maybe they don't all need to be relocated to this area, maybe they could potentially remain down in those areas. But we are working through these issues. It is quite a tight timescale in order to manage the process.

CEO *Okay?*

ED1 *CEO, can I ask ED2, the 250 ... so you've got 94 spaces and you've got 250 people looking for them? Does that include the elected members in the 250? Or are they on top of that?*

- ED2 *They are on top of that.*
- ED1 *So it's actually 350 people who are looking for spaces?... So are you just going to do a cull?*
- ED2 *We've had very good responses back from Member Services and we're working through those responses now. It's very much officers who are in and maybe out 3 or 4 times a day and they need a space to come back to. That space will be made available at [new council city car park] or under the building depending on their needs. We've got a couple of disabled employees over at Education and Social Work who have specific needs and they may need to be located within the building. We've a way to go but we've made significant progress in engaging the Member Services. Thank you for your cooperation... and honesty.*
[laughter]
- CEO *Next item folks...*

The next example involves a presentation of the budget based on the local government settlement which sees LocalGov's block grant subject to further year-on-year reductions resulting in profound changes to the service provision.

- ED1 *Okay, shall I move on to the budget stuff?*
- CEO *Okay.*
- ED1 *We expect to get the local government settlement next Thursday and I will be looking very quickly at what is the level of the grant. There's been a lot of discussion up to date about the distribution so there shouldn't be any issues about that. There shouldn't be any surprises around that – it'll just be the bottom line. But you can't possibly work out what that is because there's so many calculations to be done. So we'll get that on the 8th. Em, after that there's a service reform meeting on the 15th December and what we're taking to that, there'll be a settlement. There'll be, proposals have come forward, particularly for the summer, which the members are still mindful to accept there may be some proposal from what you've seen today, em, to do with span of control etc but that will be an overall thing as [head of finance] talked about. There'll be a whole range of things, productivity issues etc that will be part of*

that. Also, we'll have a paper on reserves and the use of reserves and we'll tackle that going forward. So that's on the 15th. What I'd like to suggest CEO – em I hadn't – is maybe briefly meet the Executive Directors after that on what the members have got so I'll set up meeting up with CEO and yourselves for that. After it's going to the [name of political group] just because of timings on the 16th of January with a view to setting the budge on 9th Feb. So my view is that they are looking for what I call a bland budget. Pretty below the radar...

ED3 *Surprise, surprise [laughter]*

ED1 *So that's what we're looking at and that's where we are.*

CEO *Okay, any questions at all?*

ED7 *19th January, is that when we'll be able to restaff then?*

ED1 *What?*

ED7 *Is that when we'll be able to restaff?*

ED1 *When?*

ED7 *When it's been to the [name of political group]*

ED1 *30th January*

ED7 *Oh, I thought you said the 19th*

ED1 *No, it's going twice.*

CEO *You know how it goes and then they get a couple of weeks to think about it?*

ED1 *Well they get to ask all of these questions, it takes the heat out of the whole thing and then we go back so it's not until the 30th. What I would maybe say is that we wouldn't be giving all of the budget options to all of the staff. What we would maybe need to do is provide a financial update on the forecast.*

ED1 *Aye, well do that.*

CEO *Well do that*

ED7 *I take it you won't have to do that in December, yeah?*

CEO *But you could tell them about budget setting day, meetings with political groups, you don't need to mention that date for it but that there will be consideration by the [name of political group],*

the [name of political group] and a decision on whatever day in February it is.

ED3 *ED7 I was going to set dates in February for CEO and ED1 to come out to speak to senior managers as you did last year. But one of the things, will I go for the end of the February?*

ED1 *Yes, after the 9th. ... Well that's providing the budget goes through, you know? [laughter]*

CEO *You'll get a budget [laughter]*

ED2 *ED1, you said you'd have the information on the 8th. Do you have any idea at what time?*

ED1 *We don't get the information until Mr [name of politician] stands up in parliament. It's usually about 2 or half past two.*

ED1 *It depends. We'll need to find out. Last year I think he stood up in the morning, which was unusual, so we'll have to find out but normally parliament is in the afternoon.*

ED7 *You could still be faced with an emergency motion. That's what you're worried about, isn't it?*

ED2 *Yeah.*

CEO *I wouldn't worry too much about that on the day. ED1's just going to say: 'it's just been announced and we need time to analyse it'.*

ED1 *Yeah.*

CEO *You know [name of political party] won't want to make a knee jerk reaction until they understand it.*

ED1 *Until they understand it.*

CEO *They might make a broad statement like: 'a knife to the heart' or somesuch*

ED3 *Just guessing [laughter]*

CEO. *Yeah.*

This excerpt is emblematic of what I experienced in the EMT meetings. There would be an item on the agenda which I would assume would generate a lot of discussion and debate, however the subject would be dealt with superficially and quickly, without any major debate or challenge. In a

meeting lasting 85 minutes, less than four minutes were taken up by this issue. The other agenda items were as follows:

1. Note of Previous Meeting
2. Matters Arising
3. Statutory Performance Indicators
4. Budget Monitoring Period 10
5. Budget 2012/13 (*this is the item referred to in this section*)
6. Significant Issues
7. Youth Olympic Games
8. Any Other Business

EMT Agenda 7 February 2012

In my entire time observing the team, nothing that was ever said in the EMT meeting led to a change of a decision that had been made outside of the meeting. Challenge was kept to an absolute minimum. Each of the directors occupying a position on the EMT are experienced, sophisticated senior managers who are leading divisions which are far in excess of that of many organizations. For example, the Director of Education presides over an ‘organization’ of over 10,000 people and with an annual budget of just over £500 million. The Director of Social Work, although with less people, has a budget in the same region. Part of what characterises these leaders within their divisions and in the interactions I witnessed or personally had with them during the course of the data collection was of individuals with very robust personal opinions and who were highly achievement-focused. I was curious about an assumption that I brought to the way I *thought* the EMT *should* conduct themselves. I expected high levels of healthy conflict in which issues were thrashed out until a resolution was achieved. Nothing could be farther than what I observed. The meetings were sanitised. Very little was ever actually *said* about anything, although the micro processes being used, as I will illustrate, were deeply insightful.

I was so perplexed that I asked my Supervisor for a special session to discuss my “non-data”. Thankfully, I was reminded that in these types of naturalist inquiry, we often have to set aside what we thought we would find

once we are confronted with what we do find. But the impact on me was profound. I had been confronted by my own assumptions, biases and prejudices about what I *thought* should go on at such a meeting. I assumed that the subject-matter would be the data and I would be able to tell a story of how an executive team in a complex, volatile, unpredictable environment saw at least one high-level strategic initiative through to completion. I assumed a rationalist, simplistic notion of what the meetings were *for*. I would now have to rethink this and attend to the data in a fundamentally different way.

These concepts were leading me towards the identification of a category which I have called Meeting Purpose. I spoke with all of the team members individually about this to help me make sense of what I was witnessing.

All the directors, particularly those long-standing executives who had come to know and expect this to be the way that the team functioned knew that the team were not there to talk about the difficult issues – this was done elsewhere; out of sight. Here is how ED2 described it:

JAC *Ah, okay, so when that happens why is it undiscussable in the meeting and then why is it then discussable somewhere else off line?*

ED2 *Eh, sometimes, eh, there are things, eh, that CEO doesn't want opened up in meetings and you don't necessarily know that in advance and eh, and if answer is not here, you'll meet individually or somewhere else. And if you're the one who's got the issue about it then you've got to pursue it, which we did. I can't remember It'll come back to me and I was saying: I just don't understand how this works. In saying that you were hoping someone was going to explain it to us and you were also hoping that someone else was also going to say they didn't understand it either. But for whatever reason CEO didn't want that discussed so he shut that down. It is a bit frustrating on the day, but as I say you've got to look at these things in round it's not worth getting excited about.*

Here's what ED5 said about this:

ED5 *I think everybody's in the room with the corporate masks on. Everything's great, not an issue, blah, blah, blah. Where the reality is that we all know that somebody in that room might be getting hassle off of a particular member or whatever else. So I think, whether it is insecurity, and I think some of it is insecurity, some of us are new and some people are finding their new roles or whatever, but I think we're all just hiding behind this corporate mask. Take the car parking issue, no-one said a word in the room, everyone seemed relaxed but people were livid about that cos they're getting it in the neck from all angles.*

I was keen to hear from CEO, who was the Chair and owner of the meeting, why he had constructed it in the way that he had. Here's what he told me:

JAC *And would you see the debate, where you get in and about the issues, as happening outside of the meeting and the issue is brought into the meeting once it has been brought to some sort of resolution?*

CEO *A bit of both. I don't think there is one answer to that for every single issue. You know, it varies. So, some issues, people get the papers, they look at the item, they look it through and they think 'gee, I'm not happy with that' and so they'll talk to one of their colleagues who would maybe have a view on it, who'll maybe even be more of an expert about it, to understand it better. And that takes place before the meeting. At the meeting itself some people can throw things on the table. People were happy with the paper but when somebody else raises a point they say, 'hey wait a minute'. But sometimes you have to call a halt to the debate at some point. So sometimes there's an issue when you are like, I know where you are coming from here, deal with that offline because it's just more about information than understanding the issue rather than it's something that's going to change the decision. So a lot of these things are taken off line. It's almost like*

the Director of Education will say, look I'll tell you about this later because I understand that, don't worry about it, you'll be okay with it. That type of thing. Another issue would be that, maybe from my point of, it's not going to be helpful in any way to embarrass somebody at the meeting. So when they've got something completely wrong I'll say, look that can be dealt with off line.

One director, newly appointed during the course of the research, spoke of how the relational aspects of the team were not as forthcoming as he hoped.

ED6 *My observation is that CEO has a small nucleus of people that he relies on and will interact with on a daily basis and I think that's where the real decisions are taking place and the real information is getting traded.*

JAC *What's the impact of that then on leadership in the council?*

ED6 *Oh, it's just blows a hole in it. You feel undervalued, you could feel that you've got a title, whatever that is, but you have absolutely no control over anything. On a real personal level I find it quite embarrassing at times as well when where I've been one or two people and they go for lunch together and you're left sitting there. I actually have found it to be really embarrassing stroke ignorant. So it's actually demoralising.*

Some directors, even very long standing ones, can come unstuck by this social norm in the group of not raising substantive issues, as illustrated in this example.

ED6 *There was a meeting in that brand new school in [name of part of city] before you came in, I think, and there was an issue came up that day, and it was about severance and money and I tried to open it up – and I don't know if others did too – but CEO didn't want to talk about it. He said, well we're not here to talk about that, see ED1. So sometimes discussions get shut down. But you do go and see ED1.*

As I tried to make sense of my own surprise and even disappointment of the way the team functioned and also how it was experienced differently by newer members of the team and those who were longer standing members, I began to ask myself the question, what function or purpose does this meeting serve if not for the team to collectively work through strategic issues? What purpose does it serve that newer members of the team experienced the interpersonal relationships within the group as fairly cool, leading them to hold themselves back from activity in a way that would be more comfortable for them, such as showing vulnerability? A key question to the member of the team was, what purpose did they think it served?

ED4 *The purpose of the EMT, of that meeting, is that you are all aware of the issues. But the real kicking the issues about is done elsewhere.*

We can see from ED4's assessment is that it was predominantly for sharing information, but she accepts that the 'real work' happens elsewhere. ED6 has a slightly different take on it. His view is that the team is for coordinating purposes. This isn't at odds with ED4's assessment, as it connects to the need to share information.

ED6 *Probably its core purpose is coordination of each of the big parts of the corporate empire. A lot of what goes on there, you take a policy and you say how does that look from Social Work, from Education, so a lot of it is about coordination rather than decision.*

Another director alluded to the work that the team does happens outside of the meeting. Indeed, ED2 and the other longer standing members of the team were perfectly happy with the way the team functioned, specifically that substantive issues were not talked about during the meeting. It was only those newer members who were still finding their way and being socialised into the team who found this either perplexing or frustrating.

ED3 *We could become more of a driver except for the political dimension and that, I think, is what stops CEO making us too*

strong as a team, because politically in [name of city] it would be wrong for the Executive Management Team to be seen as driving the bus. The Leader drives the bus. My Assistant Director, who has worked across a few local authorities says the political relationship here is very different. Much, more dangerous. In other councils the councillors are happy to let officers do all the drudge and make all of the hard calls and they just finger pick around the edges. Whereas here, people have high ambitions. They are politicians and they want to be making decisions and they would scythe you off at the knees. If you lose a politician you are gone. I think maybe in my reflections on the management team this is why CEO runs it the way he does.

JAC *That's really interesting. So it isn't an accident?*

ED3 *I don't think it's an accident. And I used to think that it was just CEO's style, but I don't think it is. I think he is much smarter than that. Because he's still here. You are not able to stay in LocalGov by accident because it doesn't suffer fools. No, he does it like that for his own very deliberate reasons [laughs].*

These reasons were not made explicit to newer members of the team and were not necessarily talked about by longer standing members. Part of the way that newer members were socialised into the team was that they had to figure this out for themselves and learn how to be effective in a group with these kinds of social norms, as is illustrated in this excerpt when we attended meetings alongside the previous incumbent of the role, whom I shall call Sarah:

JAC *Thinking now the of EMT can you think of examples of where it first struck you that that team operated was different from what you expected in terms of how much debate there was or how the agenda was. Can you say something about the EMT Meeting specifically?*

ED5 *I turned up and I shadowed Sarah. Well I turned up and joined Sarah for two meetings before I'd left my previous employment. And I was really excited I thought, this will be great. [name of city], big city, it'll be great to see how this team works. And I*

remember within 5 or 10 minutes thinking: 'god, this is strange' . After it... Sarah had raised an issue at the meeting, and she almost apologised to me saying: 'I had to raise that there, normally you don't speak'. I thought how bizarre that was. I came away thinking it was almost like a committee. It's like tick the box we've had a team meeting but you go through the agenda as quickly as you can and then you get back out again. And also, I just detected right away that it was a group of individuals meeting rather than a team.

This discrepancy between what I expected the team to do was shared by one of the incoming directors.

ED6 *Okay, well I guess Jacqueline that it's slightly different to what I expected. Helpfully for me is that I've sat on the private sector board and before that a public sector leadership team. When I came along I thought it would be a real whizzy team and a real bond there of social interaction. And I don't mean going to each other's houses for dinner parties but 'what happened at the weekend' or people showing a bit of vulnerability. What surprises me about it is that it is very very transactional. So there's an agenda... it's probably a management agenda rather than a leadership agenda. But, there's no depth to the discussion.*

This represents a significant difference with other members of the team. The more long-standing and well-established members of the team were much more comfortable with the format of the team meetings and accepted the ways that things were done. For example ED3's comment above that it was part of a deliberate strategy by the CEO. In the excerpt above ED6 makes a link between the team's ability to successfully carry out their strategic task with vulnerability. As a fairly new member of the team, ED5 was uncomfortably experiencing the gap between his expectations of the team with how he was experiencing it working in reality.

5.4.3 Concept #3: Formality

There were two other things about the team meeting that seemed to serve a performative function for the team. Each one was held at a different location in a Council building across the City. The team would meet outside the Council headquarters at 0830 and would be taken by minibus to where the meeting would take place. The conversation in the minibus and prior to the meeting beginning was warm, friendly and informal. Some work related issues were sometimes mentioned but with a lightness and usually with some humour.

The first meeting that I attended took place at a social work office in one of the most socially deprived areas of the City. Close to the entrance to the building is a pharmacy which distributed methadone to heroin addicts who could be seen loitering outside. It seemed clear they frequented both the pharmacy and the social work building. The arrival of the Executive Management Team, wearing suits carrying brief cases contrasted starkly with the picture of the service users of this division.

Although a room had been booked for the meeting, it was cold and damp, there was wire mesh on the windows and there was no tea or coffee available. The Director of Social Work went to ask for some and it was brought in to us, in a grudging fashion by a young woman with a piercing through her lip. There was some light critique of this and some stilted laughter about how depressing the whole thing was. The meeting was over in 90 minutes. This was in such stark contrast to the next meeting which took place two weeks later at a primary school, again in one of the more deprived areas of the city. I expected a similar situation to last time, but I couldn't have been more mistaken. The school is situated in a densely populated deprived area where there is a high proportion of unemployment. Ethnic minorities make up around 50 percent of the school population, many of whom are recent migrants to the UK. A significant proportion of the children come from one-parent families. The sandstone school was newly refurbished as part of LocalGov's ongoing school enhancement programme.

We were greeted by small groups of children, all of whom were wearing school uniforms, “Welcome to our school”. At every corner, or doorway or set of stairs that led us to our meeting room, a small group of smiling children, well-rehearsed and obviously excited by their VIP guests greeted us “Welcome to our school” and would show us the way on their part of the school journey we were negotiating. We were shown into a large classroom where we would be having the meeting. The head teacher had put freshly cut flowers in the room for us, there was home baking and freshly brewed coffee in large flasks. The enormity of what this executive team were responsible for was only beginning to hit home. From drug addicted third-generation worklessness to refurbishing schools to improve the life chances of children all against the backdrop of a cut-throat political environment. And again, once inside the room the assembled group would laugh and joke with each other, for example about a city landmark which is habitually scaled to place a traffic cone on top off:

ED3 “If they’d just bloody-well commissioned the thing to have a cone on top of it the Police’s lives would be much easier”

[raucous laughter]

ED4 Yeah, but then they’d all want one! [referring to political parties].

And then these types of light conversation would be punctuated by the CEO, who would bring the meeting to order. In this we can see the way that the CEO uses language to evoke a ritual observance that begins the meeting:

18 th October	<i>Okay now, let’s make a start</i>
29 th November	<i>Shall we get underway, okay firstly, I like to welcome...</i>
17 th January	<i>Right, let’s get underway...</i>
7 th February	<i>Let’s make a start.</i>
21 st February	<i>Okay folks, number one, item number one.</i>
6 th March	<i>Okay, folks let’s get underway.</i>
20 th March	<i>This is very cosy isn’t it? Okay, let’s get underway.</i>
10 th April	<i>Let’s make a start. Okay, minutes of the previous meeting...</i>
24 th April	<i>Okay, let’s begin folks.</i>

1st May *I think everybody's here. Let's make a start.*
 27th June *Okay, we should begin folks.*

The warmth and friendly atmosphere that I experienced in the minibus and prior to the meetings beginning were punctuated when the Chief Executive opened the meeting whereupon the atmosphere would switch to one of formality.

Similarly, during the meeting, the CEO was in every case the person who would move the agenda on and close down issues. Indeed, his use of the word 'okay' was used as a marker that the previous subject was now closed and that we was moving on to the next agenda item. Here are some examples:

CEO Okay, thanks very much. ... Okay, let's get back to the agenda proper then. We'll go to the previous meeting – do we have any points about the accuracy? ... nope? Any matters arising? Okay, ED3 are you taking us through the next item?

CEO Okay. We'll move on then to the budget monitoring plan.

CEO Okay. Anybody else have any other issues? Okay, right. Thanks very much.

CEO Okay. And ED4, you've got the next one.

CEO Okay, I'm going to suggest that we move item 7 up next to Budget Monitoring and then I'm going to ask ED1 to give us an update on where we are with the budget process. And once we've dealt with that we'll be onto attendance and exclusion.

CEO Okay, let's move on then. ED7, you've got the next report which is the Centre for Cities Outlook.

When I asked about why the team had the meetings off-site, here's what some of the directors told me:

ED6 We're so big, you know, so we're not always close to the people on the ground. It's CEO's way of establishing a presence out there in the field. That we're visible and accessible. You know? It'd be

much, much easier to just have them here [in the City Council headquarters]. That's why we do it.

ED3 *Em, I'm so used to it now that I don't even think about it. I think we had a meeting, maybe about three years back, and it was on the back of some stupid headline by some crackpot at [name of local newspaper] some member of staff didn't know who CEO was or somesuch. Utter nonsense. But anyway we decided to start having the meetings across the city in council premises and that CEO would be shadowed by somebody in the council or the council family. My strategy is to get out quite a lot, so you're not just the person who shows up when there's a crisis, so in that respect I'm quite visible across the city. But other directors with a different structure in their division, they're quite remote from their people.*

As mentioned by ED3, above, another symbolic aspect of the team meetings is that on the days there was an EMT meeting, the Chief Executive would be 'shadowed' by somebody from within LocalGov. This could be from any part of the council, for example a teacher, a fraud investigator or a refuse collector. In my informal conversations with directors they all saw this was a way to put a face and a personality on the chief executive when the workforce was so remote and disparate from him. One director told me that the only CEO most people 'know' is the CEO they see reported in the press. The shadowing was his way to imbue the CEO with some realness, because they knew the people who were shadowing him would go back into their respective parts of the business with stories about CEO and what he was like as an individual and the way the wider team conducted themselves.

However the most profound performative ritual that I experienced in observing the team remained the function and purpose of the team meeting itself. In entering the organization to begin my research, I brought with me my own assumptions about what an executive team meeting should be about; namely that it would be the place where the team would identify and share organizational issues and challenges, would appraise options and

problem solve these issues through open dialogue and would action decisions. I was to learn that my assumptions were misplaced.

Once I had established what wasn't going on in the meeting, I became increasingly curious about what *was* happening in the meetings and began to make sense of what it was I was observing and why. To do this, I began to look at the fine-grain of the conversations that were taking place in the meeting. As I did so, it became increasingly clear that the performative nature of the meeting extended to the conversations that were taking place within it. Specifically, the group were engaged in face work – that is conversation that aligned them to colleagues as one of the team, and mutually supportive. As I will illustrate in the next section, we can see that the content of what is being said is less important than the attempt by the actor to maintain and support face.

5.5 Initial Category 2 – Contextual Mirroring

The three concepts that made up the category of Contextual Mirroring are:

- Shared Metaphors
- Constraining Forces
- Enabling Forces

5.5.1 Concept # 1: Shared Metaphors

As I continued to observe the team, speaking informally to directors and acting as an Organization Consultant to one director and his top team, I was increasingly struck with the seemingly unconscious use of shared metaphors to talk about their experience of what it was like to work in that environment.

In particular, death, dying and violence metaphors were heavily used by everyone in the senior team. Unlike smaller and councils which in large part are governed by councillors who would spend their entire political career in local government, 20 councillors from LocalGov in the last 15 years had moved into National politics and this is part fuelled the high levels of scrutiny by the local and national press. Careers were won or lost on the

basis of the reputation of certain political members and the executive directors who were associated with those political officers could often take the blame for the political fall-out of a poor decision. Two executive directors were replaced during the time of the data collection, one of which was unexpected by the EMT member. In this excerpt we can see the directors have to accept that there is a brutality to the way that things might end for a director.

ED6 *If you are not bold in these jobs then you won't survive. You have to think outside the box and then see it through. That requires the political buy-in; taking the flack, and then half way through process, people can kill you. They'll say: 'ah you've not done this right, or 'you've not done that'.*

The executive directors were continually moving between taking up a role as a bold leader of transformation whilst simultaneously managing the very real possibility that their career could come to a brutal and swift end. This point was articulated by ED6:

ED6 *There's a couple of instances when, em, one is that some of what is around in terms of the culture in [name of city]: it can have a harshness to it, it can be political brutality. You know, directors are brought in and if they don't cut it they're gone. It's just: gone by the end of the week: gone in sixty seconds.*

Each of the executive directors was aware of this political brutality and those who had worked successfully in the City Council over a period of years had both come to accept the toughness of the environment in which they worked and had learned to thrive in it. ED1 talks here about counselling one of her executive director colleagues who was subsequently removed from post and who had wanted to push against a political decision that had been made. ED1 was clear that there would be consequences to that action.

- ED1 *I remember [previous executive director] saying before a meeting: 'I'm going to tell them, da, da, da,' and I said: 'You see if you do? They will do you in. The next time you are looking for money, forget it'. So that's how we work. You wouldn't have seen it. We'll help them, but in the end the fist will come down.*
- JAC *So, there's a toughness there that's required because of that context you are talking about.*
- ED1 *A real toughness.*
- JAC *And that's because if the toughness doesn't stop here it'll happen further up the chain?*
- ED1 *You can't have the politicians falling out, you can't have the politicians wanting to have a go at the officers. CEO is very good about making sure that none of that happens. But we have this toughness and that's how we do it.*

Almost everyone on the team has seen colleagues from the team be at the receiving end of this 'brutality' culminating in some cases of the person being sacked. In these cases, the person was either unaware of the reciprocal currency at play in the organization or they chose not to adhere to it.

- JAC *And what happens in that team when somebody isn't, and I guess you've alluded to it with [name of previous director], but it sounds like there are social norms – ways of being in that team that are even if they are not articulated everybody knows the way you are expected to turn up and show up and behave. So what happens if they don't behave in that way?*
- ED2 *They don't survive. They aren't around. They're just not here anymore.*

ED6 was one of the longest standing directors and throughout his career was able to determine when an issue was worth getting involved in. He spoke about those directors who had left because they hadn't necessarily known when they ought to hold back and let the politics settle down before an issue could be tackled.

ED6 *Some people who have the bottle for the fights don't know which ones you should have and which ones you shouldn't. You should have very, very, very few fights is my view.*

Even politically astute directors can come in for the brutality at the hands of the political administration. Given the huge budget cuts the City Council had to cope with, there were many difficult decisions that had to be taken about what should be prioritised. One example of this was the 'potholes versus education' issue. The administration took the decision that under enormous financial pressure that educational attainment was more important than maintaining the roads to the usual standard. This meant that the Education division received less of a budget reduction than Environmental Services who had to take a huge hit. Eventually issues around the condition of the roads in the city hit the press during a prolonged and critical campaign. This brought the elected member with responsibility for roads under a great deal of public criticism and this in turn began to impact their Westminster ambitions. As a consequence the education division came in for their criticism and this was directed personally at ED3.

JAC *And who makes those moral decisions about education over potholes?*

ED3 *I think we are now in very, very difficult territory. I got a really, really hard time at the budget which I've never had before. I mean real scything stuff: 'how dare you come here...' personal stuff, horrible stuff.*

The metaphors of brutality continued in this excerpt as ED6 talks about the possibility of being 'bumped off at any moment'.

JAC *So in the council and in your own division, how do you think you need to be as a leader?*

ED6 *[laugh] Very upbeat! I think there's always a danger when you are a leader, I mean, I'm very, very positive, I have a very positive outlook on things. I think you need to be that as a leader in the current climate. I know that by the very nature of this job I'm going*

to get criticised by all sorts of people. I could get bumped off at any moment.

Length of service in role and within the council was very important in this context. Most of the directors (with the exception of ED5) have worked in the City Council for more than 10 years, some up to 30 years. There is a great deal of status given to longevity, illustrated here by ED5, who had been in post for 11 months at the time of this interview:

ED5 *But there is also an imbalance between the team in terms of roles and responsibilities. And I guess there's part of that, I might not accept it but I can understand it, where people have been in the team longer where they are perceived to be more senior. They get exposed to other things but I think it should be a team of equals and everybody should be charged with driving forward the corporate agenda before their departmental agenda. But I don't see it.*

One way this mutuality played out was that the executive director had to be constantly aware and be discerning about the issues that CEO should be made aware of and the stage in the process that he should be made aware of it. Protection from CEO became part of the reciprocal arrangement.

ED5 *Day 1 CEO will say, 'if I know what's going on I can protect you. If you let me know then I can do something about it. If I don't know about it, I can't help. Then you'll go to the dogs'.*

The use of death and violence metaphors may have been being used unconsciously by the executive directors, but they were metaphors shared by them all. It mirrored the very real possibility that they would be confronted with this both in terms of their own roles, or have to deal with it in their own division. During the research the City Council was taken to court after a reversing bin lorry struck an elderly man who later died of his injuries. The collection service is part of the core responsibility of the Director of Land & Environment Services. This was a huge story in the

media which had 19 articles in the two biggest newspapers in the city over 3 weeks, it had significant political ramifications and had a big impact on the Land and Environment staff who had to deal with the issue. This points to one of the ways that each of the successful executive directors engage in the mutuality with CEO: with providing him with enough information to provide some security, to let him know of an issue and provide assurance that it was in hand, or to flag an issue sufficiently early that we was able to work alongside the executive director to provide a solution.

In addition to the EMT being subject to this metaphorical brutality by their political masters, they too were in a position to let people go at the moment's notice. In this excerpt, ED5 speaks of an issue with a member of his team where there was an issue of poor performance coupled with low levels of trust between the director and the head of service.

ED5 In the end Jacqueline, he just didn't last. I bumped him to [name of project in another division] because I just couldn't have that in my team. Not when we're all watching our backs.

In this excerpt, the executive director speaks of how issues of competence permeated the entire organization, not just the EMT.

ED2 At the committee, they'll know if there's something that we've missed so you need people who you know aren't going to drop the ball and then leave you to pick up the pieces. We've got to get in this together or there'll be blood on the floor.

In this way, the EMT members were both subject to this metaphorical brutality and were also the initiators of it. They were both the oppressors and the oppressed. This was also the case for the politicians. Prior to the data collection beginning, the leader of the council resigned publicly during a large scandal and has since removed himself completely from public life. The local newspaper at the time ran the story on their front page for 4 consecutive days and the national newspaper for 2 consecutive days.

The shared use of such metaphors was a way for team members to stay in relationship with each other. They would often speak using these metaphors and yet until I pointed this out to them after my initial data analysis, they were unaware of this.

5.5.2 Concept #2: Constraining Forces

The more I examined the way that the team functioned and understood the organization and its context, the more I was able to see that the performative function of the EMT meetings and the behaviours of the executive team members was a mirror of what was happening in the wider organization. For example, the Elected Members Meeting is where the substantial political decisions are made. However as I spoke with people about how that meeting worked I was told that most of the political manoeuvring happened outside of the meeting and things were ratified at the meeting. This illustrated that the way the EMT meeting functioned was a mirror to the way that the political committees worked.

The city council has responsibility for a large and diverse community of 600,000 people in the city and reaches 1.2 million in the greater-city area. All of the hands-on service directors, in this case Education, Social Work, Regeneration Services, and Land and Environment have responsibility for services where they are literally dealing with death, brutality and hardship on a daily basis. All of this has played out in the local and national media. ED3 speaks here of the case of a 15 year old schoolboy who was killed after sustaining head injuries and having a seizure in a school fight.

ED3 *Now this year, I had a child killed in one of our schools. He was killed. He didn't just drop down and die, another child hit him – what was it – five times? It was two children one was hit by a sponge ball and the other one at fourteen years old – boof – five hits and then he walks away and the other boy walks over sits on a bench and within one minute, eyes roll, keels over and he's gone! He has a major brain bleed and the next day his parents have to turn his life support machine off. And, you know, we've had all kinds of fallout from that and that will continue because as you can*

imagine, his parents will never rest. And that's [name of city]. That's [name of city] and children die and teachers die in tragedy. Not because of cancer.

During the research period the Director of Social Work retired at the age of 54. ED3 spoke of the pressure that all of the executive directors and the director of social work in particular were under given the sense that at any moment there could be a major catastrophe to deal with, such as that of Baby P in Haringey in London after which the Director of Social Services was forced to resign following the outcry and relentless press coverage of it.

ED3 *We are in a precarious position you know because we have more than half the council's budget between us. You know, we have £500 million each. Well his is slightly less than mine. But that's a major whack. That's nearly a billion of a council budget between two of us and I'm universal and he's targeted but we both deal with the most vulnerable families. So one of his bits, he said: 'I've got to go because I've been here since 2004'. He arrived a few months before me and eh, in [name of city] you're waiting for the day for the child to die. Or the old person to die. Before you know it, your world would be upside down.*

The two excerpts above refer to deeply held concerns about the welfare of the people in the city under LocalGov's jurisdiction.

One of the most significant constraining forces for the EMT was anticipating how issues would be portrayed in the media. Given the level of media interest and scrutiny (*ED4: We're just not like any other council, they'll all over us*) there was often discussion about how things were portrayed in the media.

ED4 *There's a couple of points I would make, one is we will need to be careful as we go forward about the Homecare Indicators and, eh, what they mean. Because, eh, the whole world of reablement where we provide people with an intense service for a short period of time and then effectively assisting people to cope on their own will*

substantially change our expenditure profile. It's a much better service for people but measured against these indicators our performance will decline and the press would have a field day with that.

CEO *Well I guess, can I suggest in terms of taking this forward you sit down with [name of head of service] and you meet individually with Directors having looked at what should our response be because it's where you put the effort it. Let's do an analysis on how it might play out in the media and make sure [name of head of corporate affairs] is involved.*

The interview excerpt highlights the frustration for a newly appointment director coming to terms with the way in which the media impact strategic decision making.

ED5 *I'm still new and I'm still finding my feet. To caveat it, it's a hugely political organization with a big P first of all. It's hugely political. Eh, and I think that we play into that as well and we've become political with a small p. So we're always saying: 'what's the angle on this, and how do we defend that' rather than saying: 'how do we deliver services to improve the quality of life for people?' So my observation is that CEO has a small nucleus of people that he relies on and will interact with on a daily basis and I think that's where the real decisions are taking place and the real information is getting traded.*

With the extent of the budget cuts across the city, both politicians and non-elected officers had to carefully craft messages that alluded to the savings that were required without highlighting to the public the ways in which service delivery would be impacted. For example, given that LocalGov embarked on a massive programme of voluntary redundancy and early retirement which reduced the workforce by 35% over the period between 2009 and 2011, and the hiving off of funds from Land and Environment to ensure critical services in Education and Social Work were not affected, these messages were carefully managed. In LocalGov's Annual

Performance Report 2009/10, the leader of the council outlined the scale of the financial challenges without mentioning reductions in service:

[Name of city] has not been immune to the challenging economic conditions which the world has faced over the past year, but LocalGov has been working hard to make sure our great city continues to thrive. These challenges are continuing and our current estimate is that we will need to find savings of £115 million over the next two years.

As we consider how this spending gap can be met, rest assured that we will be protecting the priority areas of education and early years, jobs and the economy and targeted support for the most vulnerable. The scale of the challenge faced by the UK's councils in the coming years is staggering, but [name of city] is not afraid to take difficult decisions and we've started that process already.

We have already taken bold and radical steps to reduce spending and deliver services more efficiently. These include setting up a series of arm's-length external organizations to run a range of council services including sport and leisure, community safety, property and Information and Technology. This has delivered a one off income of £160 million and recurring annual savings of £23 million.

5.5.3 Concept #3: Enabling Forces

There were forces within the cultural context that were enabling for the EMT members by which they were given relative freedom to affect the changes in their area that they wanted to see. One such area is where EMT members, having 'proved your worth' were given sufficient liberty to make and implement strategic decisions.

ED3 *And then, because I've been able to do that year on year, he doesn't do that challenge anymore. He doesn't invite me anymore. He says that as much as it entertained him it didn't really have a value because he then could see from the papers I was bringing*

and what I presented that I had a complete analysis of where we were going and what we were doing and why we were doing it.

Given the scale of the challenges, the EMT members were encouraged to find bold and innovative ways in which to either make saving or to generate new income and to continue to work ambitiously for the residents of the city.

ED6 I know that by the very nature of this job I'm going to get criticised by all sorts of people. But I'm also going to get criticised because I like to do things, I like to deliver new things. And you have two options in life, you either deliver and take criticism, dare I say [name of initiative that was subsequently cancelled], you know, do we drive these things forward and take criticism or do we sit back and do nothing. So if you do nothing... you know I could let the engine idle, I could just say, you know we're not going to bother with [name of initiative that was subsequently cancelled]. Let's just save the money and do something else... let's not regenerate [name of part of the city] because it's controversial, but we can't be. My point of view is that leadership in my field effectively has to be about driving the city forward, we have to be very positive about the city, we have to be selling the city and I need my staff to be saying that they buy into that. That they need to understand, and I've spoken to them all individually and said 'look, I'm different from what was here before'. I'm not criticising what was here before, but I'm about delivering for the city, it says Regeneration and Development Services above the door. That's what I want: a physical regeneration agenda. And everybody knows that. If you were to talk to my staff I don't think anybody could claim that they didn't know that was the main thoughts and drive for the department. So I think that as a leader I have to be out there saying 'this is what we're doing, this is what we're doing' and driving the staff forward in that. And that's difficult because not everybody will buy into your vision and not everyone will have the same outlook on life that you'll have. Sometimes, you can be hamstrung by the

smallest, daftest things that happens. Even though you're making great strides in one it can be a wee thing that kills you. But funnily enough, I think I've got a great ally in CEO. Because if I go to CEO and I say 'look, I've come up with this regeneration plan' then I think sometimes he just goes, 'right, brilliant'. There's not this sense of I have to convince and persuade him every single time something new comes up. He does want to see business plans, he does want to see why we're doing it and the justification but CEO will turn into your greatest supporter as long as you're there. So for me being a leader in the department, and out there in the view of the people who are interested in what we do, I'm recognised as a leader. But at the same time I'm part of a management team and I recognise I need the buy-in of the team and the leader of the management team.

ED6 Because everything that we're doing is under the umbrella of reform. There's not a thing that we're doing... to make the budget savings is about reform in some way or another. If you are not bold in these jobs then you won't deliver. You have to think outside the box and then see it through.

5.6 Initial Category 3 – Mutuality

The category of Mutuality was developed out of three connected concepts that were prevalent in the data. These were:

- Competence
- Protection
- Belonging

5.6.1 Concept# 1: Competence

In my data, the idea that the council - and in particular the executive officers - were deemed to be 'competent' by their political masters seemed to be an important underpinning theme. Competence therefore became the basis for the reciprocal relationship between the leader (Chief Executive) and the

follower (Executive Director). Here ED1 outlines why competence is so critical:

ED1 *So competence is a big issue. They'll say: 'that's not competent'. That's an issue. So if the officers are incompetent then the administration isn't competent. And then if you look at the administration, you know, saying, that's what they're hearing then everybody gets very, very sensitive to them saying: 'you're letting us down'.*

Accordingly, the executive directors would strive to achieve a reputation for competence which would largely stem from them making the political administration and the elected officials look competent. This in turn would stem from the way the administration or an elected official – or the City Council at large – was perceived on an issue-by-issue basis in the local and national media. Of course, the portrayal of competence through the media is a highly subjective one which operates in complex and non-rational ways, so it was not merely enough for the executive director to do the right, but also was for them to be seen to do the right thing.

The reciprocal arrangement that was arrived at by the CEO and the directors was based on them building a strong case that they are competent and that they can be trusted to go to the CEO with an issue before it becomes a crisis. The fact that the CEO is leading such a huge organization which is required to be highly reactive to what is in the press and to calm, appease and support politicians ensures that he is exceptionally busy. As such having competent executive directors in each of the divisions whom he can trust to deliver what's needed and to do so with political sensitivity is crucially important. Early in their relationship with the CEO, each executive directors had to prove their competence. As the CEO became confident in their ability and in the fact that they would bring issues to him if any did arise, meant that he would eventually take a more hands-off approach and leave the executive director to get on with things. In the excerpt below, ED3 outlines how she went from having to justify her division's performance at formal review

broad. Having convinced CEO that she had her division in hand, she is no longer expected to provide that level of justification for her division.

ED3 *When I first came CEO used to invite me to an attainment analysis meeting, with the previous head of strategic performance – the person who used to be in that role. They would do an analysis and then I would be challenged on that analysis. And much to CEO's entertainment I shredded everything that they did. I did it arithmetically which appealed to CEO's accountancy mind, percentage of a percentage and I unpicked it all and told them it was rubbish and I didn't accept what they were saying about how we were performing. But here's where I do think we are performing, and here's my analysis and here's where we're going to go next and blah, blah, blah. And then, because I've been able to do that year on year, he doesn't do that challenge anymore. He doesn't invite me anymore. He says that as much as it entertained him it didn't really have a value because he then could see from the papers I was bringing and what I presented that I had a complete analysis of where we were going and what we were doing and why we were doing it. And last year we took another spike up and he asked me to do an analysis of why we'd managed to do that and then what we were going to do next and it was a nice little challenge for me. So he didn't ask me to do it this year.*

Notwithstanding the challenging nature of being or appearing competent, if the executive director achieved this then the chief executive would reciprocate by protecting the director from the harshest forms of 'brutality'. This brutality takes the form of all of the myriad ways an executive director's career at the council could come to an abrupt, and often shocking, end. In this way, *competence* and *protection* were the reciprocal currency at play between the actors.

JAC *I'm also interested in the way you've got CEO's support. Can you say a bit more about how that shows up? How do you know you've got his support? You've alluded to the fact that he lets you put*

things through that you think are important. So, he lets you be bold and he's bold, but what else?

ED6 *I have regular discussions with CEO and the agenda and where we're going. When I got the job CEO takes you in, and I'm sure everybody's the same and he has a chat with you about, if things are going on he wants to know about them. If he knows about them then he'll support you. If he doesn't know about it and it goes wrong he can't turn around and defend your position. So I've just taken the view that more is good; more information is good. So I go and see him with a crazy idea or a list of things that are on my agenda so there's very little that will come through that he's not aware of. And before I took it to a forum where it would be announced I'd go and say, 'Look, I think this is where I think it's going'. Remember you have a lot of political things as well, maybe the leader or my convenor saying I want this or that. So I'm not talking about miniscule decisions, I'm talking about things that will take you down a certain path that involve being bold. Day to day decisions it would be very rare that you would take it to CEO. At the end of the day, anybody who says they've always made the right decision is a liar. So the relationship with CEO is one I've had to foster as you would imagine. I've had to come in... if someone gets appointed in the background, and its politicians who appoint Executive Directors, but then you need to come in and prove your worth. Once or twice you get praise. Very rarely, but once or twice you get it and you say: 'that says a thousand things'. Sometimes I think if he's not phoning you and saying, 'I need to see you, there's a problem' then things are going swimmingly.*

Although both the CEO and the Executive Directors did know what the reciprocal currency was, it was rarely explicitly talked about. So how then did each of the directors come to know what was expected of them by the CEO? How did they become aware of the reciprocal currency between themselves and the CEO – what it was that was being reciprocated? In this segment, ED2 breaks competence down into technical competence in being able to do your job and political competence.

- JAC *Okay. I have a question now about leadership. What do you think it takes to be a leader in the City Council?*
- ED2 *Phew! Two or three things I would think. Not necessarily in any particular order. Good judgement, because, eh, at the senior levels in the organization you are managing a lot of complexity and eh, at any point in time on virtually any issue you are not only dealing with that issue. Either you are about to set a precedent or you there is already a precedent that you are about to break, or what you are about to do impacts on somebody else, so I think, eh, good judgement. And I think there's two elements to that probably. One is professional. So you, eh, you have to be good at your job. Someone seemed quite surprised at a meeting [name of director of social work] was at a while ago that he actually was a social worker. They went: 'oh, what kind of social worker were you?' by which they meant, community care or childcare or whatever and he said: 'a good one': so you'd better be good at your job. So [name of finance director] had better be a shit-hot accountant. And [name of director of corporate services] had better be a very very good legal-eagle because that's what we need. So you'd better be good at your job and you'd better make the right professional judgements. And the second element of judgement is political. You'd better have your political antennae switched on because there ain't nothing in [name of city] that ain't political and what goes with that is the level of scrutiny. So everything we do... if your local daily newspaper is the [name of national newspaper] then it's a lot tougher than if it were the [name of small town newspaper]. So, judgement in those two manifestations, both professional and political would be one thing. I think self-awareness... I think there are people who are very good at their job and are not as aware as they should be of the impact that they have on the people who are around about them... So, you'd better have good judgement, you'd better have self-awareness, I think eh, I actually think in my professional life that is a thing I am hypersensitive about: the effect you are having on meetings and on the people round about you and*

you'd better have bottle. Bounce-back-ability a football manager coined it as. Because there isn't anything you can do in [name of city] that means that nothing will go wrong. Things are gonna go wrong, the issue is, what you do about it.

5.6.2 Concept# 2: Protection

These executive directors are leaders of significant parts of the council each with a large and complex portfolio of responsibilities and substantial budgets. For example, ED6, quoted above has a budget of almost £500 million. In addition to being led by a strong chief executive who himself was managing the needs and desires of his political masters, these leaders were also leading their respective parts of the organization. In this excerpt ED3 outlines the mutuality that exists between her and the CEO:

ED3 *So I would trust my life with CEO because if you do right by him, d'you know? As long as I'm delivering the goods he is happy to give me my head. I don't have regular catch ups with him, he never asks to see me. What I try to do is every so often I go in and I'll have four or five finger points, this is for you to know: blip, blip, blip, blip, blip end. That's it. Just so you know. And then I leave. As long as he knows that's what I'm doing and I deliver the goods in terms of attainment and the positive outcomes for the council then he generally leaves me alone. And it's a good set up. So I know that he would back me up.*

The ability to deal with issues of crises well is another part of what was expected of EMT members in order to be in receipt of the protection afforded by the CEO.

ED4 *Do you know who Sugar Rae Robinson was?*

JAC *No*

ED4 *Sugar Rae Robinson might have been the best boxer of all time. An American boxer in the late 50s and early 60s and at one point in his career, his record was like 110 fights and 109 wins with just one loss. And he said in an article that he learned more about himself in the one loss, because you're lying there on your butt and*

everybody's cheering the other guy. So then what are you going to do? Are you just going to crawl away or you getting up and going back in? Because that's what you've got to decide. And eh, in a way, in a less dramatic way, things will go wrong. We had, and I used this example with somebody the other day, we had to go and see CEO a couple of years ago. 'You see these wee memory sticks CEO? Well we just lost one with the details of 176 sex offenders on it and the person who found it thought the best thing to do was to hand it into [national newspaper]. And it wasn't encrypted, so they had everything. All their offence details, all of their addresses: everything. In the course that week myself and the then Criminal Justice Manager, [name of Criminal Justice Manager] and I were in CEO's office twice a day every day, saying this happened, now we're doing that.... And at the end of the week we were going out and CEO said: 'hold on, you carry on [name of Criminal Justice Manager], we'll catch you up' and he said that [name of Criminal Justice Manager] had done very well because he had, well it wasn't his fault. It was a member of his staff who made a monumental blunder but in the course of the week [name of Criminal Justice Manager] did an incredibly good job of disaster recovery, so eh, you better have and you'd better understand that not everything is going to go right and when things go wrong if you fold under pressure you won't last long here.

What seemed interesting to me was that the executive directors could *simultaneously* hold a view that their position was precarious *whilst* maintaining a high degree of respect for and trust in the CEO. Far from appearing a deliberate quid-pro-quo type of relationship, one which could be measured or predicted on the basis on discrete interactions between the CEO and his director, (such as those that are measured in traditional LMX research) the whole situation was more precarious and unpredictable than that and happened in many micro interactions over time. The CEO alluded to the precarious nature of the directors' positions in this excerpt:

CEO *Sometimes it can be a surprise. At a senior level, more often than not it will be a surprise, not necessarily the underlying tensions but the timing of an issue can be a surprise. I haven't detected people getting a little bit wary about it. Em, I think, well I'd like to think anyway that there's an acceptance that, if you are doing your job, then, I haven't seen anybody who's not been doing their job suffering from it in that way. There might be some people who think they're doing their job but who aren't doing their job, but the unsettling bit, and myself included, I'm accountable as well, but I guess the unsettling bit would be that sometimes it can appear a bit subjective. So for example, they might be meeting all of the performance measures I've set them, but they're not driving some agenda, which is a political agenda hard enough or in the right direction. Sometimes it can be a breakdown in personalities, but I think that's just happens in any sphere.*

In this excerpt, the EMT member alludes to how precarious the position is.

ED1 *That's the context. It's interesting because people will say to me, you know, em, they didn't know it was coming. And I think I'm the only one left now apart from CEO from the nine years ago. And they'll say: 'ED1, you're still around with blah, blah, blah, and I'll say: 'that I know of'. Because you just don't know when it'll be you and that's how it works, and that's the environment that we work within.*

Another aspect of the reciprocal arrangement between the CEO and the team is the acceptance that the CEO will be directed to make decisions to let people go based on subjective political reason, as was illustrated above. In the example below we can see that this is widely accepted within the team, although it won't be openly talked about and discussed. However, everyone knows that part of the relational deal is that the CEO may have to make a difficult decision about an Executive Director. So the political dimension pervades all aspects of CEO's leadership.

CEO *Well that's interesting, because I've been encouraged that, em, I mean we're a political organization but the same pressures are there whereby people can be fulfilling the expectations that people have of them but in a political environment they are maybe not meeting the Administration's ambitions. In a company environment they maybe aren't meeting the Board's ambitions. So there have been a couple of occasions where I've had to deal with that as a management issue, in other words if you've not got the confidence of the political administration you're not going to be able to do your job. So, I've been quite encouraged that that hasn't disrupted, as far as I can see, the management team. Changes like that, you know, they're not positive, you know, people would prefer that's not happening, but it's life, so I think there's an acceptance of the environment and the pressures you are working under.*

JAC *And how open are those things in the team?*

CEO *Oh, they'll all know. They'll all know what's happening but they don't necessarily know the detailed reasoning. What they'll know is that I've had a conversation and as a result of that conversation there's going to be a parting of the ways so they all know how that works. But I think given, well generally speaking they don't want to get too close to that situation. So, they'll not ignore it but they'll have separate conversations with the person who's caught in that situation.*

Much of this could be explained by the political context the Council operates within. Many smaller council's policies and operating practices remain under the media radar unless and until there is either a highly controversial policy or a major public interest story. But in the case of LocalGov, the highly vocal media play a significant role in determining the style of leadership at the council. They are part of the wider system.

In this excerpt, ED5 is trying to make sense of what's it like in the team, of what it is that is expected of him. If we view this from a reciprocal currency perspective, ED5's initiation into the team is to be kept at arm's length – even 11 months after taking up his role. He doesn't belong to the CEO's

inner sanctum, he's not 'his eyes and ears' in other places. There's more he still has to do in order to be fully trusted, fully brought it. He's struggling to come to terms with the reciprocal currency.

JAC *Is there anything else about the dynamics of the team that you want to reflect on or say?*

ED5 *What I'm getting told is that CEO has ED2 in some groups and she's his eyes and ears for things going wrong. So what, do I not have eyes and ears to do it?*

Here, ED1 relates to being part of the 'inner sanctum' and the shared understanding of what's expected of you. What we can see from ED1's comments below, is that if you are competent and a team player, described as not "messing with 'city hall'", then you have autonomy to lead and manage your own division very much in the way you want.

ED1 *Em, we have a very strong corporate centre. CEO, myself and ED2. Em, and we always work as a team. What ED6 or ED3 will always say is: 'don't mess with City Hall' which is the corporate centre. So their view is if you play corporately then you are left to get on with what you want to do.*

5.6.3 Concept# 3: Belonging

There was a great deal of complexity and inconsistency in the way that CEO was relating to his executive directors which tended to depend upon the length of service that the executive director had – not for longevity's own sake – but because during that time the CEO and his direct report were establishing trust and other reciprocal arrangements in the relationship. Over time, both parties were establishing often tacit or unspoken ways, of relating to each other and where they came to understand what was expected of each other. Despite the lack of substantive discussion in the EMT meetings and the hands off approach the CEO was said to have with his direct reports, each executive director was clear what was expected of them and was aware that they would know if they were deviating from the CEO's expectations. It was clear that there is a form of mutuality between the CEO and each of his

direct reports in that there is a tacit understanding of what is expected of each other in this politically hostile environment. This was largely consistent amongst each of the executive directors but not totally uniform. For example, those directors who worked in the corporate centre – that is Finance and the Corporate functions (known as the ‘inner sanctum’ or ‘city hall’) spent a great deal more time with the CEO than the service functions.

Longer standing members of the team, such as ED3 and ED6, have come to accept, and even appreciate, that this is the way that things work. They are aware of the reciprocal nature of the arrangement with the CEO and they are happy to go along with this. Part of this is that they have no desire to get involved in corporate-level things so those in the inner sanctum are comfortable that they are concentrating in their own area whilst letting them get on with the strategic running of the council. ED5, however has increasingly struggled with this idea, in part due to the assumptions about what a functional team should look like and the fact that he has a personal desire to make a difference at a divisional *and* a strategic/corporate level.

ED5 *One of the things that I’ve set out my stall on when I went through the appointment process and recently again to CEO is that I don’t want to be the Director of Operations in [name of division]. And this is SO important. I’ve said to CEO, 11 months in I think I’m getting the service to where it needs to be in terms of the operational side but the trick in the title is Executive Director. I’ve said to CEO that I want to make sure that my division follows a policy agenda but personally 11 months in I want to display and get exposed to Executive Director working. Some common themes, or “ED5, go and run with that policy,” that’s the space that I want to get into... I’ve had one or two people saying, there’s a [name of strategic initiative] project and I’ve asked CEO a few times, why can’t I just run [name of strategic initiative]? I’ve got more corporate working ability than anybody before because I worked in the Chief Executive’s department and my plea is, let me get in at that. Once I get my service and I’m comfortable my team are running it then I want exposed to that. Why can’t I sit in on the*

budget meeting with the Leader and represent the management team? And I've said to CEO maybe I need to get some specifics and go back, but I've come in... look I'm so far away from the finished article, but was a director at [another local authority] and spent a couple of years in the private sector I think I've hit the ground quicker than I expected as well. Some of the stuff we talk about at the management team, I get it really quickly and things that people who are coming in needs to get mentored or coached but I know my way around that. And politically I know my way around that as well. So I think I've hit the ground running with the corporate agenda and I want to get more of that. For me, if I was asked where do I belong, the first thing I would want to say and I don't feel like it right now is CEO's leadership team. My own team would be my first port of call. But I just feel so far removed from it.

ED3, a Director responsible for managing education across the city, and a £500 million budget, spoke of how she and colleagues come to know what is expected of them by the Chief Executive and what to expect in return:

ED3 *If people aren't reading the cues from around the table then CEO has to do something. And I suppose everybody has their leadership strengths ... and his fault is that he would maybe allow the bit of string to roll out too far and then people would be upset by the whiplash as it gets pulled back in.*

Despite this, the directors spoke positively about the CEO. In this excerpt, ED3 talks about the pattern of what she and the CEO expect from each other:

ED3 *I don't find CEO's style naturally empowering in terms of sitting around a table. But I really like him. When I first came to the council it was the situation where ED6 and I were the grade below where we are now and there was a person in post who was both education and social work. It was a political appointment, it was a tricky time. And we went through a very difficult time where ED6*

and I became very chummy and that person was then removed from post – screaming and kicking – so it was a kind of difficult development and CEO was very good to me in a very quiet way. He didn't know... well he had to work it all out. I mean, he is a ruthless man. I went to him to say, look I've had it; just to let you know out of courtesy I'm going to be leaving because I just can't work with that person. I've tried everything, I've done the coaching and I've tried all of the different techniques and I've given up the coaching because it's not working and he was just great and he said: 'no, just stay and leave it with me'. And he did and he got a politician – he got [name of leader of the council at the time] – to speak to me. He's just got a different way, he just never gives anything away, you know? So I would trust my life with CEO because if you do right by him, d'you know? As long as I'm delivering the goods he is happy to give me my head. I don't have regular catch ups with him, he never asks to see me. What I try to do is every so often I go in and I'll have four or five finger points...this is for you to know: blip, blip, blip, blip, blip - end. That's it. Just so you know. And then I leave. As long as he knows that's what I'm doing and I deliver the goods in terms of attainment and the positive outcomes for the council then he generally leaves me alone. And it's a good set up. So I know that he would back me up.

Unlike much of the relational leadership literature which assumes that relational leaders have good interpersonal skills; are able to relate well socially and seek the view and opinions of others, ED3's statement above shows that none of those things have to be present for there to be deep trust and mutual respect between the CEO and the Executive Director and that the work of leadership can happen in a very quiet, subtle, way.

5.7 Initial Category 4 – Face Work

The second category that was created from the initial analysis of the data is Face Work which was generated from 3 concepts. There are outlined here.

- Solidarity
- Camaraderie
- Conflict Avoidance

5.7.1 Concept #1: Solidarity

The first concept I have called Solidarity. By solidarity I am referring to the way talk within the group ties the group members together with a sense of cooperation and community in which they share their leadership task. It is the ways in which the group build a sense of cohesion where they work in alliance with each other. It is demonstrated in interactions in which, besides the substantive content being discussed, the dialogue is operating at another level – that is to illustrate to colleagues that you are part of the team and someone to be relied on.

In this excerpt, one of the newly appointed directors, ED6, is attending his first meeting post-appointment. ED1, has just outlined at length a National and International Networks project for which she has just completed a pilot review. It has now been brought to the team for discussion but with a number of key recommendations which would have to be taken up by the new director and his team. In this excerpt, his first spoken words in the team meeting are predominantly about establishing a sense of solidarity. In it ED6 is concerned with positioning himself as a member of the team who can be relied upon.

CEO *Okay, open up to questions...*

ED6 *I think this is a very good paper, CEO, and it's very topical within [name of his division] in terms of our support for other strategies. I think the recommendations are well made, they are well thought out and even within the department, whereas we recognise the cost and the physical cost of the trips, flights and accommodation, we don't take account of what the impact is within the service. So I really like this paper. I think it's good. I agree with ED1's comments about [name of his division] potentially leading this. It fits in well with the national strategy. The international office will need to work with us on that but I welcome this paper. I think it's*

something we should implement as quickly as possible and try and connect what it is we're trying to do across the city.

In the excerpt above, ED6 begins by validating and supporting colleagues on the paper, and does this via the CEO, as a way to formalise this input: “*I think this is a very good paper, CEO, and ...*” he then goes on to contextualise it as strategically relevant and of importance within his division vis-à-vis other strategic initiatives: “*it's very topical within [name of his division] in terms of our support for other strategies*”. He then specifically agrees with the recommendations: “*I think the recommendations are well made, they are well thought out and even within the department*” and then notes that he understands some of the implications, setting out his competence: “*whereas we recognise the cost and the physical cost of the trips, flights and accommodation, we don't currently take account of what the impact is within the service*”. ED6 then goes on to repeat an opinion in support of it: “*So I really like this paper. I think it's good*” before explicitly aligning himself with his more long-standing and well established colleague who happens to be the report's author: “*I agree with ED1's comments about [name of his division] potentially leading this*”. He then repeats a message where he contextualises it as strategically relevant: “*It fits in well with the national strategy*” and notes that he understands some of the key implications of it: “*The international office will need to work with us on that but I welcome this paper. I think it's something we should implement as quickly as possible and try and connect what it is we're trying to do across the city*”.

Thinking about these comments under the concept of solidarity encourages us to look at the context in which ED6 makes these comments and look beyond their explicit meaning to why ED6 has chosen, in his first words as part of the Executive Management Team what he has said and the way he has said it. In his response to the report, he is communicating solidarity to the team, and his utterances are intended to gain the trust and acceptance of team members. He is positioning himself as ‘in it for the team’. The linguistic choices that ED6 makes as he both asserts his understanding of the report's importance and his acceptance of taking the recommendations

on in his own division illuminate his knowledge that his utterances are being assessed on whether he can be relied upon to be a good team member.

In this segment, we can see the ways in which ED6 simultaneously attends to the task aspect of his work in that he accepts the paper and accepts responsibility for taking it forward in his division. However he spends a much greater amount of time in aligning himself with colleagues and letting them know he is a colleague who can be relied upon to do what's required for the corporate good. There are some important contextual reasons why ED6 may have chosen to position himself in this way. ED6's predecessor was removed from post due to quality issues on a major strategic project. Given the size and complexity of LocalGov, being seen as a team player, a person who can be relied on, and who will work in the council's best interests is critically important. In discussions with ED1 about this she told me:

ED1 "[Name of previous director] *was a problem because she kept everything to herself. So she was like this* [makes gesture of keeping things close to her chest] *and she had some big issues she was leading on...And* [name of previous director] *would never give you a thing in writing about it, she had not an idea about the governance... And in the end she didn't survive it. It just fell apart. In her view it fell apart because she was undermined, but it fell apart because, they were always going to fall apart. With ED6 coming in, we now have the governance in place... In this organization, you know I've worked in* [another local authority] *and here we deliver. If you don't deliver you don't stay... I'll give you an example. When* [name of previous director] *was on leave there was a report on the* [confidential strategic initiative] *but already we were under a lot of pressure from the opposition because we were going into an election and the opposition were demanding to see X, Y and Z. Said their civil rights were being violated because they didn't have access to it – this is our world – and so when we sat down with the officers to go through the figures and she said: 'this figure is wrong' and we're like 'what do you*

mean?’ and she’s like: ‘in fact they are all wrong’. CEO goes deadly quiet – because we’d never been shown the figures. And I said: ‘maybe you could just take us through it’ and we had to say the report was being continued. And that was really the start of things changing, because you just couldn’t have it”.

Positioning yourself as a member of the team who can be relied upon to do what is necessary for the benefit of the wider organization is of crucial importance within LocalGov. The previous director didn’t. The supplementary press reports that I examined illustrated how high profile and bruising these stories became with reporters digging deeper and deeper in the lives of the directors who were exiting and press reports about ‘golden goodbyes’ for providing six figure pay-outs for directors who were leaving LocalGov, even when this was due to issues of poor performance.

However, the face work was done by all members of the team and the longer-established members were also keen to show solidarity to long-established colleagues and new colleagues alike. In this excerpt, ED3 is responding to the same paper, and to ED6’s response to it.

CEO *Anybody else?*

ED3 *I would echo what ED6 said. We have our own international education side of things and we do an immense amount of global education. I was pleased to hear [name of politician] on the radio this morning from Brazil speaking about global education and the importance of it. Because we continue to invest in that whilst other authorities have had it disappear. We’ve continued to do that because of the city dimension and because of the diversity of the city but economically we absolutely, I think it needs to grow within [name of ED6’s division], and to sit there it’s quite feasible that a service can have an international office that links in to the Mayor’s work that actually leads on the work that is particular to their area and within their area of expertise, and with all due respect, that’s not the Mayor’s Office area of expertise which is economic strategy. So, we lead on education internationally but we feed in. In*

the same way I would see [name of ED6's division] leading on the economic strategy but feeding in too. So it wouldn't usurp what the Mayor's side does but it would strengthen it much more.

Analysing this interaction as an action of face work, we can see that ED3 does similar work to that of ED6, but in a more straightforward, less effusive way. Firstly ED3 positions herself alongside ED6 when she says: *I would echo what ED6 said.* She then positions her own division vis-à-vis the initiative: *We have our own international education side of things and we do an immense amount of global education. I was pleased to hear [name of politician] on the radio this morning from Brazil speaking about global education and the importance of it.* ED3 then links her own division to the wider organization and the way the budget is being spent which is a tacit acknowledgement, which was discussed multiple times in my data collection, that ED3's area has the largest single proportion of the budget. *Because we continue to invest in that whilst other authorities have had it disappear.* She then makes a statement which illustrates her knowledge of the city and the wider policies whilst also supporting ED6's division taking over the work outlined in ED1's paper. *We've continued to do that because of the city dimension and because of the diversity of the city but economically we absolutely should continue this and, I think it needs to grow within [name of ED6's division].*

At a mirco-linguistic level, here are a number of other examples from the data in which members of the team, in their meetings, demonstrate solidarity:

ED4 *"This event just shows you how far we've come in terms of our international credibility as an events city, is really good".*

ED7 *"My team can help you with that, ED5, we've collected quite a bit of data on it and it'll help you make your case in the report that goes to the Committee".*

In this example, we can see how the team collectively come to an agreement by staying in relationship with each other using humour and by providing each other with reassurances. In this except a senior manager, whom we'll call Ross is presenting a report that was a continuation from a report that came to the group several months early regarding how LocalGov redeployed people who did not want to take voluntary redundancy. This was another deeply contentious issue. I was not present when it had been brought to the team previously but the outcome of that meeting was that more work had to be done to find a solution that was sufficiently acceptable to all of the directors.

Ross *So I think the last time this one was presented it generated quite a lot of discussion [laughs]*

CEO *Non-contentious [laughter]*

In this example, a senior manager from the finance team who is not on the EMT has just presented a paper on options for generating additional funds by using Council property for marketing and advertising activity.

ED5 *CEO, I think this is a good paper. There is a piece of work here still to be done on this. I think we could do more on this. If we look back to point 2.6 there's an opportunity for the Council to add commercially here. And I think there are issues we need to consider, which are the council's position against the front line. Civic messages against commercial income... So I think there's a piece of work that we should continue to do that should help us to take advantage of our asset.*

Much like ED6 does in the earlier example, ED5 begins, again by addressing CEO directly, by showing his support for the paper. *CEO, I think this is a good paper.* He then supports the ongoing feasibility work that is being recommended in the paper and then builds on this that even more could be done, positioning himself as a person who is willing to take project on ensure maximum benefit from them: *There is a piece of work here still to be done on this. I think we could do more on this.* As a relatively new

member of the team, much like ED6, ED5 expands on what the paper is calling for and shows that he is both aware of the implications of the initiative and what the executive team would need to balance in making a decision – that is prioritise their civil or commercial responsibilities. *If we look back to point 2.6 there's an opportunity for the Council to add commercially here. And I think there are issues we need to consider, which are the council's position against the front line. Civic messages against commercial income...* ED5 then reinforces the ways in which the initiative is strategically important: *So I think there's a piece of work that we should continue to do that should help us to take advantage of our assets.*

5.7.2 Concept #2: Camaraderie

The next concept under the initial category of Face Work is Camaraderie. This concept refers to the affinity, sense of togetherness and mutual support the group provide each other. I have differentiated this from solidarity because it is possible for there to be solidarity in a group without it being good natured and which is underpinned by a sense of goodwill and interpersonal support for each other. These following excerpts illustrate some of the ways that camaraderie was evidenced in their talk.

The data is filled with examples where there were short bursts of good-natured analysis of something that was happening politically. Although the subject being discussed were invariably issues that would have a high level of impact on the City Council these interactions were always good-natured, never tense and never overly mocking or critical of politicians. Another dynamic here is that the CEO steps in to reposition things for the group as a way to steady the nerves in the room. In this first example, the team were discussing the budget statement to be announced in Parliament.

ED1 *Last year I think he [the minister] stood up in the morning, which was unusual, so we'll have to find out but normally Parliament is in the afternoon.*

ED7 *You could still be faced with an emergency motion. That's what you're worried about, isn't it?*

ED2 *Yeah.*

- CEO *I wouldn't worry too much about that on the day. ED1's just going to say: 'it's just been announced and we need time to analyse it'.*
- ED1 *Yeah.*
- CEO *You know [name of political party] won't want to make a knee jerk reaction until they understand it.*
- ED1 *Until they understand it.*
- CEO *They might make a broad statement like: 'a knife to the heart' or somesuch...*
- ED3 *Just guessing [laughter]*
- All *[laughter]*
- CEO *Yeah.*

In the 6 weeks in a run-up to any sort of election there is a ban on incumbent elected officials using the working of the council as a mechanism to gain votes. In this excerpt, which was in the run up to local council elections, the subject is discussed.

- ED2 *Attached is a letter that went out to all elected members. It's a standard letter that's been adapted from last year, em, just to remind them about the restrictions that we have about publicity. I think like the first time ED7, we also had a session with all the media officers across the council and the arms-length companies and I certainly got a lot out of it and I think it went down really well. It was twelve scenarios we gave to, was it six teams we split into?*
- ED7 *Yeah.*
- ED2 *So they were all live scenarios. So they wanted us to do a photo-shoot outside some new build nursery or something..*
- ED7 *Just to pluck an example...*
- ED3 *Just pluck an example out of the air [laugh]... with the leader?*
- All *[laughter]*
- ED7 *Yes*
- ED2 *With the leader and local members – [name of political party] local members for example.*
- ED3 *There only are [name of political party] local members.*

ED2 *Is that something that we should doing...?*

[laughter]

CEO [laugh] *well that's not so bad...*

ED2 *And it was quite testing. There are no real right or wrong answers. You just have to look at every situation on its merits and take a view. What I've done for directors is I've attached the updated Code of Recommended Practice.*

ED7 *We always follow it?*

ED2 *We always follow it, to the letter. Even when we're criticised. This guidance is easier to read and it's broken down into the key principles and helpfully at the very end of it at section 33 and it talks about heightened sensitivity and it applies to or local elections in the pre-election period, we call it, in [name of city], because we don't stop business, it runs right through... I'm going to pull together some protocols into the next term to help staff. Almost like a workflow of what is acceptable and what is absolutely not acceptable and then there's that grey area in the middle which is always going to be a judgement call.*

ED3 *We're opening a school in that period: [name of school]*

ED2 *Jeepers! These are things we'll have to look at.*

ED7 *What date is it?*

ED3 *I'm sure it's the 28th March period.*

ED2 *It's any publicity that could influence voters intentions?*

CEO *If you look at the guide ... I was looking at this in reverse in a way. If you look at paragraph 35 as a starting point... "in general Local Authorities should not issue any publicity which seeks to influence voters". That's the starting point – right? So if you take that one [school opening] then [name of local councillor] could present an issue which is 'I want to thank staff or parents' or stuff like that. And that would be fine in some ways, right, if it was a private session. But if it's published, if it's in the [name of local newspaper] or it's in the [name of national newspaper], if it's in anything like that, then it is publicity and it will influence votes.*

ED3 *Oh yes, indeed.*

ED7 *So we can't do a formal opening with a member?*

ED3 *Oh dear no.*
 All [raucous laughter]

Some other discrete examples of camaraderie in the team are:

ED4 *If that happens I want someone to take me to the pub and only tell me after I've had about 10 pints! [laughter]*

ED1 *I feel your pain there ED3. [laughter] It was my turn last month and it looks like it's your turn this month.*

ED7 *It's know it's nuisance, ED5, but if you keep plugging away at it they'll eventually see the merit ... or just get bored talking about it.*

5.7.3 Concept # 3: Avoidance

This concept refers to talk and actions in which the team do not deal with a potentially contentious issue directly as doing so would in some way damage the group dynamic. It illustrates that the group are more concerned with group cohesion and harmony in the meetings than in challenges issues that are problematic or contentious.

ED6 *If something's crap or it's not performing as well as it should do we just let it tick over and say 'well I didn't want to cause anyone offence' so you don't say anything.*

It is clear from the data that the dynamic in the meetings is more important than high levels of conflict and debate. Here is another example:

ED 4 *There isn't any way in a big corporate organization with everybody with different priorities and different approaches that you're not going to have tension. The question is whether it is going to be used in a constructive way or whether it's going to be some kind of horrible dark dynamic that permeates everything. And I don't think that is what it's like. So in terms of the corporate management team, the corporate process works.*

When I asked him about the tone of the meeting and what he was trying to create this is what he told me:

CEO *Well it's, I'd hope it would be, the atmosphere has to be relaxed. Informal to an extent. People can have views on any of the issues, not just the ones in their particular area. But, I guess it's more the environment, there's a responsibility on everybody to help people move forward together. You know, so sometimes there can be quite confrontational issues but not confrontation just for the sake of it. It has to be with a purpose in mind.*

The CEO in part sees his role as enabling the group to carry out its strategic task in the meeting without undue conflict. As we can see from this excerpt, this includes that everyone has their say about specific issues but that they are concise about it. That people are not criticised or 'taken to task' on specific issues, or what he refers to as 'finger pointing.

JAC *Can you say a word about the tone?*

CEO *Well the tone I want everybody, again there's a responsibility to the deal, as it were, that everybody gets the opportunity to get their say, but they have to realise that there's a lot of items on the agenda, that we're time constrained so they need to be concise, so it's generally not the kind of forum where somebody can have a rant about something. It's more about making points that will influence the decision. And certainly, it's not a forum whereby, I certainly don't think it's a forum where you would be holding someone to task in any meaningful way. I think it's more appropriate that you can hold us all to task. You know: 'we're all doing badly here, we all need to raise our game' but not finger pointing: 'you need to raise your game'. That's something that takes place outside the executive management team.*

CEO, as the leader of the team, sees his role as centrally involved in enabling and facilitating the team.

JAC *Sure. So what would you say your role is in that meeting, then?*

CEO *Well I'd hope I show a bit of leadership outright by saying, not outright, but more direct leadership in some cases where I'll say, 'look, we're going to have to do this and I want to hear any views as to why we can't do this and I want to do it now' so I'm giving a view right at the start because I think it's an issue that is important. But there are other times when you end up a bit like the referee, almost. There's different views going around and you've to try and cajole people and try and get them to come to a view that you can take forward, keeping people on board. So, it's a bit, it varies that way but I would hope that everybody is clear at the end of the day, as I mentioned earlier, that it's not a vote. As Chief Executive, I have to take a view. So it might well be that if I took a situation where, let's say the Director of Finance had a view about things and let's say nobody else agreed. Well the decision might be to go with the Director of Finance and people will have to go along with that. But that doesn't happen too often; otherwise the team just won't pull together.*

The face work that is done within this environment is often about what is not said, not just what is verbalised. Not being openly hostile or antagonistic is a key way that members of the team remain in relationship with each other in the meeting.

Chapter 6 - Data Analysis: Refining Categories

6.1 Chapter introduction

The previous chapter presented, by way of a descriptive and explanatory analysis of the primary and secondary data, the approach by which these data were developed into concepts and subsequently coded into 4 categories of Meeting Purpose; Contextual Mirroring; Mutuality and Face Work. My intent in the previous chapter was to expose as clearly as possible the process by which I began my initial data coding into the categories that emerged and in so doing to present the data that led me to this coding so that it might be open to scrutiny and review.

Chapter 5 outlined the first two data analysis phases and a summary of the concepts and initial categories elicited through this process. This is further outlined in Table 5.1 This chapter develops those 4 categories through the ongoing Axial Coding into two refined categories which form the basis for the grounded theory that is developed through a selective coding process outlined in detail in Chapter 7.

Data Analysis Process			
Chapter 5		Chapter 6	
Phase 1: Establishing concepts		Phase 2: Developing Initial Categories	Phase 3: Refining Categories
Evasion	→	Meeting Purpose	→
Superficiality			
Formality			
Shared Metaphors	→	Contextual Mirroring	
Constraining forces			
Enabling forces			
Competence	→	Mutuality	→
Protection			
Belonging			
Solidarity	→	Face Work	
Camaraderie			
Conflict Avoidance			
			Performative Practices
			Reciprocal Accords

Table 6.1 – Data Analysis Process Phases 1-3

6.2 Data Analysis Process

The approach taken in the Axial coding process is to develop the refined categories in a way that illustrates the two refined categories of Performative Practices and Reciprocal Accords through a continued interpretive analysis. It will signpost back to where patterns emerged from the initial coding of the data in the previous chapter without necessarily repeating at length the actual data. This ongoing interpretive

analysis represents a deepening of the data analysis where patterns that emerged from the initial coding of the data are linked and explored for their connectedness. The purpose of this data analysis and interpretation stage was to come to a final articulation of a set of refined categories ready for selective coding and theory development which is outlined in Chapter 7. In my analysis, I did this in the following way:

- The refined category is named and a very brief description of that refined category is explained;
- The subcategories that make up this refined category are listed;
- Each subcategory is taken in turn to develop its conceptual merit in-and-of itself. This is done by adopting the following approach:
 - ~ A descriptive summary of the elements of the subcategory appropriated from the data;
 - ~ An interpretive analysis of the subcategory and how it relates to either the relational leadership literature or another body of literature (e.g. symbolic interactionism);
 - ~ The development of a propositional subcategory statement that draws these elements together.
- The refined category is then subject to further Axial Coding with the aim of advanced category development in which the components of each of the subcategories are linked and the Refined Category is explained.

6.3 Refined Category 1: Performative Practices

The category of Performative Practices has been developed to capture the sense of symbolic action and cultural performance that underpins the rituals that the EMT observes and how these relate to what is culturally acceptable within the LocalGov's organizational and wider societal context. It is used as a heuristic device and draws on a number of conceptual domains. Most significantly, it is influenced by the work of Goffman (1959) on the performative nature of our social interactions. This body of work has been outlined in more detail in section 4.3. The two subcategories that make up the refined category of Performative Practices are:

- Meeting Purpose
- Contextual Mirroring

6.3.1 Initial Category - Meeting Purpose

The first theme that emerged from the open coding was a question about the purpose and function of the executive team meetings. This emerged as I reflected on my experience of being surprised and confused when my assumptions were challenged about what I could expect from the team meetings and how there were conducted. This was further supported with a similar view taken by new members of the team as they attempted to make sense of what was acceptable in the team and therefore adhere to the social norms of the group. This was outlined in detail in section 5.4 and is summarised below.

6.3.1.1 Descriptive data summary of subcategory 1 - Meeting Purpose

- ~ Important strategic items are given minimal airtime.
- ~ Contentious issues are not discussed or are closed down.
- ~ Problems and issues are resolved 'off-line'.
- ~ New team members are perplexed as to what the team meetings are for.
- ~ Team meetings take place at LocalGov offices across the city.
- ~ The Chief Executive, CEO, is 'shadowed' by a member of staff.

6.3.1.2 Interpretive analysis of subcategory 1 - Meeting Purpose

The executive team meetings happen on a fortnightly basis and constitute the only formal forum where the whole team regularly come together. Given the scale of portfolio that each of the executive directors have and the importance that each of them afford to the work that they do, I found that the executive directors were motivated to do good work and were time pressured by multiple complex demands. For example, a review of the minutes of all meetings that I attended outlined 27 major strategic projects that were underway during the time of the data collection. I therefore trust that activities that serve no useful purpose and value hold little appeal for these directors. This is important because it means that I ruled out the possibility, so far as is possible, that the meetings served *no* purpose and that it could not be deemed to be a 'waste of time'. Indeed, no one in the team described it as such. The team meeting did – and does – have a

definitive purpose; it is just initially unclear to me as to what this might be. The data highlighted that the executive team meetings were not where problems were identified, options appraised and decisions taken, some of the things one might reasonably expect a senior team to undertake during their only planned meeting.

The data found that despite not adhering to conventional standards, the team members valued it nonetheless. (*ED4: I think the meetings function pretty well; ED6: It's the only real chance for us to be together at the same time*). This led to me becoming curious as to what purpose the meetings did serve. Within symbolic interactionism, and in particular taken up by Goffman (1959; 1971) we can therefore look to other ways in which the executive team meetings serve a more symbolic purpose. Goffman's dramaturgical approach sees social life as something that is staged, much like a drama. The EMT meetings could be viewed in such a way where the *performance team* – in this case executive team members – cooperate with each other in staging the act through a series of *ritual observances* based on a *working consensus* of the roles they must each play in order for the performance to be successful.

In order for the meeting to be performed satisfactorily e.g. where important subjects are given minimal airtime, or contentious issues are not discussed etc., each of the actors in the executive team must come to some tacit agreement about the group norms that the group will adopt and sustain. These norms, rules, processes and structures of the social interaction is the group's *interaction order* and it requires everyone to adhere to it for the performance to be successful. The fact that the meetings take place in LocalGov offices across the city, including schools, coupled with the fact that the CEO is shadowed for the day by a member of staff from within LocalGov, or from within one the wholly owned subsidiary organizations, illustrates that the audience for the performance are the staff and service users of LocalGov. The meetings constitute the executive management team being *front stage* during the meetings whilst they are traveling there and when they are moving in and out of the building. But they all know and accept that the real work is done privately, amongst themselves and their

teams *backstage*. I do not mean to suggest that the work done in the smaller teams is not also performative in nature, but I would suggest it would be a different type of performance given different working consensus as to what those other gatherings were for.

The CEO calling the meeting to order, he being the only person who could deem a subject closed, (*CEO: Okay, let's move on; Right, next? etc.*) and the off-site location of the meetings are some examples of the ritual observances of the performance which serve an important purpose in building the success and credibility of the performance. That is – the audience accept it as authentic. These ideas considered were under the concept Formality outlined in section 5.4.3.

For the performance to be deemed credible by the audience, the executive team members were required to maintain the interaction order all the while that the audience could be observing them. It required group members to come to understand (through their own processes, as it was rarely explicitly discussed) and adhere to the working consensus about the meeting. Adherence to the rules of the performance and the ritual observances of it became one of the ways in which the group stay in relationship with each other.

6.3.1.3 Interpretative analysis statement

In summary, the following interpretations are made from the data under the coding category Meeting Purpose:

- a) The EMT meetings are performative and symbolic in nature.
- b) The audience of the performance are external to the team and the team take their performance to the audience.
- c) The audience of the meeting performance need to be present to be exposed to the performance, They were also exposed to it via the publication of minutes.
- d) The group have come to a sophisticated working consensus as to the rules and structure of the performance.
- e) The performance is underpinned by a number of ritual observances.

f) Relationships are sustained by adherence to the performance's interaction order.

6.3.1.4 Relating the sub-category Meeting Purpose to a refined category Performative Practices.

Based on the interpretive analysis outlined above, the following proposition statement is offered.

The primary purpose of the executive team meetings are symbolic and performative.

6.3.2 Initial Category – Contextual Mirroring

The second subcategory that constitutes the refined category of Performative Practices relates to the social norms that were evidenced within the team and specifically the way that these social norms operated as a fractal – or a mirror - of what was acceptable in the wider organizational / political context. These practices acted as either constraining forces or enabling forces and were largely evidenced through metaphorical talk of corporate brutality and death. The use of graphic shared metaphors illustrated what was at stake when EMT and other members did not adhere to what was expected of them. This was outlined in section 5.5.1.

The particular type of shared metaphors used throughout the organization concerned violence, brutality and death. When I questioned the team about this in my feedback session they at first couldn't believe that they used such language and I had to show them the data, at which point they were shocked and astonished. The fact that they used metaphorical language about violence and brutality, and the fact that they were not consciously aware that they used and shared the use of such metaphors, pointed to a potentially important part of their culture that they were dealing with.

The constraining forces upon all of the EMT and crucially including the CEO was evidenced by the way in which issues were taken up by the press. This is outlined in more detail in section 5.5.2 but includes the group

exploring how decisions they were taking would be perceived by the press or by the politicians: *(ED5: So we're always saying: 'what's the angle on this, and how do we defend that')*.

However, there were also enabling forces, particularly when long standing directors have proven themselves *(ED4: We have a saying around here, if you make one mistake and your otherwise performing it's pretty much ignored. If you make two mistakes, it looks like you're dropping the ball. If you make three mistakes, you're out)*. Another enabling force is the requirement on the EMT members to be bold and ambitious in their plans for the city. *(ED6: My point of view is that leadership in my field effectively has to be about driving the city forward)*.

One such an enabling force was the requirement on the EMT members to do bold and ambitious work for the good of the city, as was outlined in section 5.5.3. The Executive Directors were encouraged to think strategically and bring proposals forward to the CEO which in turn would go to the political committees for signoff. These sorts of initiatives, such as the regeneration of a particularly run-down part of the city, or the hosting of a sporting event, or music awards, often received a great deal of positive press coverage and was career-enhancing for politicians. In this way, the EMT members had a great deal of scope in creatively finding and executing such initiatives.

6.3.2.2 Descriptive data summary of Contextual Mirroring

- ~ The EMT meetings mirrored the Committee Meetings held by politicians where decisions were taken outside of the meeting.
- ~ Ultimately, LocalGov is a political organization and politics supersedes everything else.
- ~ The repertoire of available options for the leaders on the EMT in LocalGov were highly constrained by what was acceptable in the wider organizational culture and context which in turn what constrained by what was acceptable a broader societal level.
- ~ Executive directors consistently spoke of the corporate and political environment using death and violence metaphors.

- ~ Failure to deliver on the policy agenda would lead to, metaphorically speaking, a punishment of violence.
- ~ Failure to meet the political agenda of an elected representative can lead to the brutal end of a career (death metaphors).
- ~ Everyone in the team was aware of this culture of brutality and to varying degrees had learned to work effectively despite it.
- ~ LocalGov was dealing with death, dying and brutality in the wider community.

6.3.2.3 Interpretive analysis of Contextual Mirroring

The literature on entity approaches highlighted a propensity to imbue leaders with what I would argue is the assumption of too much agency. It assumes that charismatic, visionary and heroic leaders can accomplish amazing feats by dint of their traits and characteristics. The data from this study highlighted something quite different. Many of the social norms that were observed in the executive management team were also observed in other parts of the wider organization and indeed in the wider social and political environment that LocalGov operates within. One such example is the formality of meetings in which decisions are ratified rather than openly talked about. Far from leaders being able to do what they wanted to affect change, I observed that leaders were highly constrained. However these constraints were not arbitrary or random, but were similar in nature and scope to the constraints that the EMT's political masters were under and constrained further in the wider social and political environment. This self-similarity (Wheatley, 2011: 141) of constraints on action in different parts of the system was illustrated when I attempted to make sense of the EMT's norms as they related to other parts of the organizational system.

The fact that the CEO and others were in many ways constrained by the cultural norms of the organization challenges the deterministic assumptions underpinning entity approaches to leadership. It is true that the CEO and his team could and did affect change, but not without constraint and only within the parameters of what was contextually and culturally acceptable. So behaviour in the executive management team was a contextual mirror of acceptable behaviour in the wider organizational system. Leaders in the

system are simultaneously capable of enabling transformation and were also bound by stable structures within the system.

In his seminal text, Gareth Morgan (1997: 11) posits that organizational executives, among others, are adept at ‘reading’ organizational situations and making sense of these in order to accomplish their leadership task. The development of this situational reading skill develops intuitively, or subconsciously through the use of metaphors “that lead us to see and understand organizations in distinctive yet partial ways” (ibid). The use of metaphors enables organizational actors to indirectly contend with issues which would otherwise be “too complex, mysterious, or threatening” (Bolman & Deal, 1991: 267) and which would be lost or overlooked by the use of more straightforward language. Bolman and Deal contend that “metaphors compress complicated issues into understandable images, influencing our attitudes, evaluations, and action” (1991: 268) and Stein (1997: 234) notes that “organizational metaphors and similies serve as a path to understand how members of a work group imagine themselves and their situation.”

As outlined in detail in 5.5.1, the sanitised language used in the EMT meetings contrasted starkly with the metaphors used by the team members during our one-to-one conversations. All directors used death and violence imagery and spoke of the brutality of the environment and how precarious their position was within it. The punishment for not adhering to individual politicians’ political agendas would be some form of metaphorical death: to ultimately cease to exist within LocalGov. Using a psychodynamic frame, the use of these metaphors point to the emotional reality of team members; that they carry a deep anxiety about what Stein (1997: 232) refers to as “murder of the spirit” which is “a ubiquitous but little-explored non-physical act of violence in the workplace in which people are experienced and experience themselves as things, as commodities, as objects”.

6.3.2.4 Interpretive analysis statements

Analysing the data using the idea of a contextual mirror enabled the following interpretations to be made:

- a) The performative and symbolic nature of the EMT meetings was mirrored in the committee meeting structure by political leaders in LocalGov.
- b) The CEO's leadership style, what he allowed and didn't and his focus on how issues would play out in the media, was mirrored in the behaviour of the political masters.
- c) Changes in political leaders had very little change to the ordering structures that were acceptable across the LocalGov context.
- d) Executive members were expected to function in the full knowledge that their roles were precarious and they could be at the receiving end of corporate brutality at any time.
- e) Executive team members were simultaneously the oppressors and the oppressed.
- f) The threat of symbolic death and brutality was mirrored in wider political environment.
- g) The threat of symbolic death and brutality was mirrored in the wider social environment in which LocalGov operated in that there were multiple examples where service users in the city could come to grave harm and in which LocalGov would in some way be implicated.
- h) The shared use of such metaphors was a way for team members to stay in relationship with each other.

6.3.2.4 Relating the subcategory Contextual Mirroring to the refined category Performative Practices.

Based on the interpretive analysis outlined above, the following proposition statement is offered.

Leaders within LocalGov were constrained in the repertoire of available choices of enacting their leadership and stayed in relationship by adhering to acceptable forms of behaviour which represented a contextual mirror of the wider culture and context and did so through the shared use of graphic metaphors.

6.3.3 Performative Practices – advanced category development

The structure in LocalGov is similar to that of many local authorities across the UK where elected representatives formulate strategy and direction which is then executed by employed ‘officers’ who are expected to execute these strategies whilst remaining politically neutral. However some of the executive team members commented that in smaller local authorities where the elected representatives were more likely to be content with a political career that operated only at the local level, the employed officers had a greater levels of power and autonomy. In terms of the way that the executive team members both conduct themselves in their meetings and how this has an impact on their reputation outside of that meeting was alluded to when ED6 said:

“You’d better have self-awareness, I think eh, I actually think in my professional life that is a thing I am hyper-sensitive about: the effect you are having on meetings and on the people round about you.”

In much the same way that it is the elected Leader of the Council who chairs the major Policy Board and it is this person who both calls the meeting to order to sets the tone and structure for the meeting, the CEO’s overly formal approach to the meetings is a mirror of the political forums in LocalGov. I noted in section 5.4.3 the contrast between the executive team members traveling together in a minibus to various LocalGov locations across the city and their demeanour and more formal behaviour as soon as the meeting started was stark. (ED6: “everyone is wearing corporate masks”).

Another link between the category of meeting purpose and contextual mirroring is where ED6 referred to the core purpose of the meeting:

“Probably its core purpose is coordination of each of the big parts of the corporate empire. A lot of what goes on there, you take a policy and you say how does that look from Social Work, from Education, so a lot of it is about coordination rather than decision”.

Formally, the major Policy Board of the council notes its terms of reference as to “*ratify all of the Council’s decisions where such matters are discharged by specifically delegated committees*” meaning that, much like the EMT meetings, the decisions are made elsewhere and the formal meetings ratify decisions already taken. This connects to the performative function of the executive meetings and how it mirrors what is happening within the wider culture. Once I understood this, it helped me make sense of the fact that important strategic issues are given minimal airtime and contentious issues are not discussed or closed down and that ‘problems’ and issues are resolved off-line, all of which were questions I posed at the open coding stage of the data analysis.

The EMT meetings are formally minuted and the minutes of the meeting are published on LocalGov’s website and are open to scrutiny by politicians, the public and the press. As a group of non-elected officers operating in a highly-politicised environment, they are highly sensitised to the way their actions and decisions are translated into messages that are consumed by a range of stakeholders. The EMT meetings are performative in nature even though the audience of their performance may not be in the room. Their actions and dialogue could still be considered to be what Goffman (1959) would refer to as front-of-stage. This front-of-stage nature of the major Committees and Boards where their decisions and actions are also minuted and subsequently open to public scrutiny is a mirror of what happens with the EMT. These include the Finance and Audit Scrutiny Committee, the Community Planning Partnership Strategic Board, the Health and Social Care Integrated Shadow Board, and the Licensing and Regulatory Committee.

The public profile of politicians is a key to their electoral success (Caprara, et al, 2002) and the way this profile is crafted and stage-managed can be viewed as a strategic advantage. On the face of it, a Chief Executive having to have a member of staff shadow him one day every fortnight could be seen as a large disruption to what that Chief Executive might be able to accomplish that day, for issues of directness, confidentiality etc. However it was only ever referred to as a positive thing, both publicly and privately.

The fact that this shadowing takes place on the day when the EMT takes place and that the location of these meetings are in various LocalGov sites across the city further points to the stage-managed quality of these events. Indeed ED3 explicitly alluded to this:

“Em, I’m so used to it now that I don’t even think about it. I think we had a meeting, maybe about three years back, and it was on the back of some stupid headline by some crackpot at [name of local newspaper] some member of staff didn’t know who CEO was or some-such. Utter nonsense. But anyway we decided to start having the meetings across the city in council premises and that CEO would be shadowed by somebody in the council or the council family”.

We can therefore assume that the public profile of the EMT and with the CEO in particular is important in the same way that it is for politicians. However, it should be said that the CEO’s actions in this regard, and in all other respects to his profile were what I can best describe as benign. At no point could any of his actions to be construed to be making any sort of bipartisan political point

Both the initially ambiguous function of the executive team meetings and the ways in which the EMT, including the CEO, were highly constrained in what they were able to do within the bounds of what was acceptable in the wider culture and context of the LocalGov point to the performative nature of the executive team.

6.4 Refined Category 2: Reciprocal Accords

The category of Reciprocal Accords has been developed to capture the reciprocal nature of the relationships in the EMT, especially between the Chief Executive and the Executive Directors. It draws on Gouldner’s (1960) Norm of Reciprocity in which there is a fair exchange between parties – even if the exchange is not exchanging like-for-like. Much like the previous refined category, Reciprocal Accords is a heuristic device with the aim of naming connected phenomena found in the data where there was some form of mutually contingent exchange evidenced

through dialogue or behaviour. The two subcategories that make up the refined category of Reciprocal Accords are:

- Mutuality
- Face Work

6.4.1 Initial Category – Mutuality

The second theme emerged as team members tried to make sense of their dyadic relationship with the Chief Executive. It highlighted that those team members who were satisfied with the interpersonal and professional relationship that they had with CEO had come to tacitly understand what was expected of them and what they could expect in return from CEO. The concepts that relate to this category were outlined in section 5.5. Below is a summary of the main data points under this theme prior to the interpretive analysis.

6.4.1.1 Descriptive data summary of subcategory – Mutuality

- ~ Relational expectations between leader and follower were never formally negotiated and rarely made explicit.
- ~ Executive Directors knew of the expectations the Chief Executive had of them over time by being in relationship and coming to tacit understanding of what was and was not acceptable.
- ~ Relational quality was based on adherence to these tacit expectations.
- ~ Competence was an expectation placed on followers.
- ~ Protection from corporate brutality was an expectation placed on the leader.
- ~ The mutuality that was shared between the CEO and the Executive Directors was similar to the mutuality between the CEO and the elected politicians.

6.4.1.2 Interpretive analysis of subcategory – Mutuality

Although everyone in the group held the CEO in very high regard both personally and professionally, (*ED3: I really like CEO; ED4: CEO is a really good Chief Exec, etc.*) it was clear that those people who had been in the team longer had a greater acceptance of the nature and quality of the

relationship that they had with him. This was irrespective of whether they were in the '*inner sanctum*', that is the group working in the corporate centre who had more day-to-day dealings with the CEO and tended to work very closely with him, or service delivery directors, who were '*left to get on with things*' in their own division.

The temporal nature of the relationship process was brought to the foreground as each of the directors' spoke of the relationship developing and deepening over time, whereby they came to understand what was expected of them and what they could expect in return. What was expected of the executive directors by the CEO was rarely, if ever, talked about explicitly and so during the data collection phase, the newer directors were still trying to make sense of this and figure out what the currency of the mutual exchange between themselves and the CEO was. If they misjudged aspects of the relationship they could experience the '*whiplash*' of CEO letting them know they had overstepped what was acceptable to him. It was in experiencing the reaction of the Chief Executive when they either 'got it right', or 'got it wrong' that socialised them into their role in the organization.

The literature review highlighted the role of negotiation in relational leadership (see section 3.8) whereby the elements and nature of a positive relationship is negotiated between the parties. In order for this to occur, and what the literature suggests is a foundational component of negotiation, is that what is being negotiated is made explicit between the two parties (Hosking & Morely, 1991). My data does not support this. All the executive directors that I spoke with talked about the relationship that they had with the CEO being developed gradually over time in which both parties came to a gradual understanding of what was acceptable in their dyadic relationship. This was rarely if ever discussed explicitly, but was rather an emergent process that occurred as they went about their work. The foundation for the relationship between the Chief Executive and the Executive Directors were not interpersonal in nature, as some relational leadership literature posits (see sections 2.3 and 2.6 of the literature review) but rather was based on a

set of tacit work-based agreements about what was expected. These were based on competence (see section 5.6.1) and protection (see section 5.6.2).

My interpretation of the data points to reciprocity, not negotiation, being the main relational factor employed by the leader and follower. Unlike LMX, what was being reciprocated could not be easily interpreted from discrete communicative interactions, but was patterned over time.

6.4.1.3 Interpretive analysis statements

Analysing the data using Mutuality as a lens, enabled the following interpretations to be made:

- a) Reciprocity, not negotiation, was the main relational process adopted by the leader and follower.
- b) The relationship was based on a heteromorphic exchange that both parties knew and accepted, but was rarely if ever explicitly discussed.
- c) The currency of what was exchanged from follower to leader was based on competency and political sensitivity.
- d) The currency of what was exchanged from the leader to the follower was based on protection from forms of corporate brutality.
- e) Interpersonal relationships followed adherence to the expectations, not the other way around.
- f) Gaining and losing face was an important part of this mutuality evidenced between team members.

6.4.3 Relating the subcategory Mutuality to the refined category of Reciprocal Accords

Based on the interpretive analysis outlined above, the following proposition statement is offered.

The leader/follower relationship was based on a tacitly agreed mutually contingent benefits.

6.4.3 Initial Category – Face Work

The fourth theme relates to the way that the team members interact and connect to each other in the team meetings. As I have mentioned in section 5.3, the meetings primarily perform a symbolic and performative function for an external audience. However the data coding highlighted another important function of the team meetings, that is for the members to attach and connect to each other and their shared purpose. I found that they did this in highly patterned and structured ways, particularly before, during and after the team meetings. Talk that illustrated solidarity is outlined in section 5.6.1 and camaraderie in section 5.7.2. Section 5.7.3 outlines how conflict was avoided within the team.

6.4.3.1 Descriptive data summary of Face Work

- ~ A high proportion of the executive team meeting's time was taken up with comments that were designed to be supportive encouraging, understanding and to demonstrate that members could rely on each other.
- ~ Challenge in the team meetings was kept to a minimum over supporting one's colleagues, even when issues were contentious and there was disagreement between team members.
- ~ Newcomers into the team were especially careful to attend to comments that positioned them as a person who could be relied upon.
- ~ The way the team interacted before, during and after the meetings were markedly different.

6.4.3.2 Interpretive analysis of Face Work

As I have outlined in the literature review, when people in social groups attend to their social standing vis-à-vis others is to undertake what Goffman (1959: 213) calls Face Work; that is “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact.” The executive team in LocalGov, in all of their interactions but particularly in their team meetings, were doing face work. The type of face work done in the group setting was a potent social norm and there were multiple instances of this in the data. So puissant was the norm of polite face work, that challenge and disagreement was not

countenanced in the team meetings. It was expected that this would be done elsewhere.

The three concepts of solidarity, camaraderie, and conflict avoidance are the ways in which the group engage in face work. The performative nature of the team meetings further happens in the face work that the team members attend to. Their use of death and brutality metaphors also provides some insight into the context the group are working within. I have spoken of the contextual mirroring within the team and the way that this restrained them in their ability to call on a full repertoire of actions. The brutality of the wider political environment is largely masked as politicians behaving in ways that are deemed to be polite.

The maintenance of one's standing in the group was achieved in and through the social encounters between parties. The close attention to face work by all members of the group meant the team meetings had a good-natured lightness about them. Subjects were skipped over quickly and items on the agenda were very respectfully received. In particular, the newer members of the team were keen to demonstrate their competence, their knowledge, and that they could be relied upon to be a team player and put their own and their divisions needs after the greater good of LocalGov.

Reciprocity also has a place in face work. Ho (1976) suggests that social expectations are reciprocal in nature in which "potential conflicts arise when there is a discrepancy between what a person expects or claims from others and what others extend to him. The possibility of losing face can arise not only from the individual's failure to meet his obligations but also from the failure of others to act in accordance with his expectations of them - that is, not only from the individual's own actions, but also from how he is treated by others".

6.4.3.3 Interpretive analysis statements

Analysing the data using Goffman's face work as a conceptual frame, the following interpretations to be made:

- a) Loss of face was experienced by the newcomers to the team and this was a way they were socialised into it and learned an important component of the reciprocal currency that was to be exchanged.
- b) There were high degrees of verbal cooperation in team meetings, even when contentious issues were being discussed.
- c) Demonstrating support, encouragement and understanding were important ways the team members stayed in relationship with each other.
- d) The Chief Executive chaired the team meetings in such a way to protect the face of team members from public shame, embarrassment and humiliation.

6.4.3.4 Relating subcategory Face Work to the refined category Reciprocal Accords.

Based on the interpretive analysis outlined above, the following proposition statement is offered.

Work to afford, maintain and prize the 'face' of others in the team underpinned that way the members of the group stayed in relationship with each other.

6.4.4 Reciprocal Accords – advanced category development

The notion of reciprocity is important in our understanding of social world because it “fixes the outline of our nonvoluntary social obligations” (Becker, 1990: 3) and conceptualises it as a deontic virtue – that it has an ethical and moral underpinning. The approach taken in this thesis is akin to Gouldner’s (1960: 169) Norm of Reciprocity in which “each party has *rights* and *duties*” towards the other. Or as Homas (1961: 286) notes: “influence over others is purchased at the price of allowing one’s self to be influenced by others”. Reciprocity, it is claimed, can be either be *heteromorphic*, meaning what was being exchanged although different, could be deemed comparable, versus *homoeomorphic* equivalence where what was exchanged was concretely alike (Gouldner, 1960: 170).

The data highlights that the form of reciprocity between the CEO and the Executive Directors was heteromorphic in that it was not concretely alike. The CEO had an expectation of competence of the directors. Although the Executive Directors may have expected the CEO to also be competent, if he were not, they had no leverage to do anything about this; it was not part of what was being exchanged. As the data shows, in return for competence, both technically and politically, the CEO provided a degree of protection to the directors to the worst excesses of the politicians' whims.

The acceptance of the reciprocal accords by all members of the team was illustrated by the consequences of those who left the team during the research process.

[Name of previous director] *was a problem because she kept everything to himself. So he was like this* [makes gesture of keeping things close to his chest] *and he had some big issues she was leading on... And in the end she didn't survive it... If you don't deliver you don't stay.*

In this way the data is consistent with Hollander (1980: 117) when he refers to acceptance of the exchange mechanisms where there is perceived fairness. "By rewarding the members whose activities contribute to the group's goals, and not rewarding those whose activities do not, the leader provides a basis for effecting desired ends".

The three subcategories of mutuality, shared metaphors, and face work share a number of components. Each of them serve to underpin the ways in which the team could expect each other to behave towards each other. Each accepted, relative to the length of time in the team and the deeper their understanding of the social norms and group dynamics at play, that they were deeply interconnected and that none of them could do their work without the others. A very tangible example of this is that as the budget cuts increased and the relatively easy cuts had been made, the group had to work together to determine where the longer terms savings were to be made.

'Essential services' such as Education and Social Work were deemed to be too strategically important and politically sensitive to endure any substantial

reductions: the political fallout of a social work catastrophe such as the case of ‘Baby P’ in Haringey in which a child was murdered through failings of social workers and the local authority at a systemic level would not be countenanced in LocalGov. As such it was the divisions of Regeneration & Development and Land and Environment who have borne the greatest burden. The reciprocal accord was that those directors were playing their part in securing the wider LocalGov strategy and often received a great deal of public affirmation about the sacrifices their divisions made.

The reciprocal accords within and between the team were the glue that held it all together. The relational quality in the team was largely based on adherence to the tacit expectations both of how the members related to each other and the Chief Executive, and what was required of them substantively in discharging their area of responsibility. Politeness, social rewarding and verbal cooperation were widely reciprocated in the team. This was in contrast with some of the metaphorical language and that the group shared – of death and brutality – highlighting the beneath the surface understanding of just what was at stake is anyone chose not to conform to the reciprocal accords: *“you just don’t survive it”*.

6.5 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has presented an interpretive analysis of the data that was initially presented descriptively in the open coding into a number of concepts which were then developed into subcategories in this chapter and through an ongoing process of Axial Coding, to the development of two refined categories.

The two refined categories that were grounded in the data from the initial 12 concepts identified through the open coding phase of the analysis process informed the Axial coding process. Strauss & Corbin (1990: 97) notes that if the open coding process “fractures the data and allows one to identify some categories, their properties, and dimensional locations. Axial coding puts those data back together in new ways by making connections between a category and its subcategories”.

The interpretations that were developed in this chapter were presented as provisional working propositions to the executive team at LocalGov in November 2014 – which

was the last meeting for the prior to his retirement. The team members' opinions, observations and impressions further informed the refinement of the two categories and the development of the Grounded Theory which is outlined in the next chapter. This is considered good practice in an ethnographic and naturalist research inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Chapter 7 – Theory Development

7.1 Chapter Introduction

The final phase of data analysis was where I undertook selective coding in order to explicate the ‘story line’ to establish theory related to the concepts and categories developed in earlier stage of the analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). My theory is referred to hereafter as *Relational Leadership as Meaningful Co-Action*.

The previous two chapters systematically analysed the data using Charmaz’s (2008) emergent grounded theory approach following Strauss and Corbin (1990). The Open Coding phase identified 12 concepts that were refined into 4 initial categories. The Axial Coding process developed these initial four categories into two refined categories. These were Performative Practices and Reciprocal Accords. These categories were developed “in terms of their salient properties and dimensions and associated paradigmatic relationships” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990: 117). In this section I develop a conceptual and comprehensible theory which I will show remains grounded in the theory.

Table 7.1 illustrates the way the concepts and category refinement process led to the theory that was developed and which will be explained in this chapter.

Data Analysis and Theory development					
Chapter 5			Chapter 6		Chapter 7
Phase 1: Establishing concepts		Phase 2: Developing Initial Categories	Phase 3: Refining Categories		Phase 4: Theory Development
Evasion	→	Meeting Purpose	→	Performative Practices	→ Meaningful Co-Action
Superficiality					
Formality					
Shared metaphors	→	Contextual Mirroring	→	Reciprocal Accords	
Constraining forces					
Enabling forces					
Competence	→	Mutuality	→	Reciprocal Accords	
Protection					
Belonging					
Solidarity	→	Face Work	→	Reciprocal Accords	
Camaraderie					
Conflict Avoidance					

Table 7.1 Completed Theory Development Process

7.2 Relational Leadership as Meaningful Co-Action

From the two refined categories of Performative Practices and Reciprocal Accords, a theory of *Relational Leadership as Meaningful Co-Action* began to emerge. *Meaningful Co-Action* epitomises the ways in which the group *went-on-together* in socially and situationally developed ways through their moment-by-moment interactions. In *Meaningful Co-Action* “social processes are seen as giving rise to individual processes, which in turn are both seen as being mediated by tools created by the culture” (Kumpulainen & Mutanen, 1999: 449). *Co-Action* represents socially shared practices where social meaning construction is a mechanism that sustains social relations amongst the actors. This is consistent with Gill and Borchers’s view that “Skilled co-operative action means being able to understand the communicative situation and know how and when to respond appropriately for the purpose at hand. This skill is of the performance of knowledge in co-action and is a form of social intelligence for sustainable interaction. Social intelligence, here, denotes the ability of actors and agents to manage their relationship with each other” (2008: 38).

Co-Action is a purposeful approach to relationship development and maintenance towards a type of relational equilibrium consistent with Baxter and Simon (1993: 226) who claim that “all relationship efforts can be viewed as problem-oriented repair activity designed to achieve equilibrium”. The *Co-Action* in which the LocalGov EMT team engage is constituted by an ongoing interrelated process through which choices and actions have consequences for the group and for the wider organizational system. The connected and interrelated character of their actions was the cornerstone of their ability to accomplish collectively their leadership task. The maintenance behaviours adopted are the “action and activities used to sustain desired relational definitions” (Stafford, 2011:0279) which include communicative acts designed to signify solidarity, camaraderie and conflict avoidance. Gergen (2009: 133) notes that “Existence in relationship ultimately gives rise to an enormous reservoir of inchoate potentials for action. Within the ongoing stream of co-action these potentials are shaped, diminished, and expanded in unpredictable ways”.

The form of *Co-Action* that I propose does not assume the same level of unpredictability alluded to by Gergen. As I have argued previously, there *are* enabling forces that do allow certain levels of unpredictability within the group, but

there are also more deeply embedded constraining forces in the wider organization and societal system that restricted the possibility, choice, type and extent of the *Co-Action* in which the EMT members could engage.

Because a relational social constructionist perspective makes relationship the central object of exploration, it follows that it is concerned with the temporal and processual nature of how these relationships are created and sustained. My data supports this view since it demonstrates the ways in which relationships within the EMT are in a constant state of being brought into being, always anew in and through *Co-Action*. So, for example, newer directors were initially perplexed by group norms that didn't meet their expectations (*ED5: Well I turned up and joined Sarah for two meetings before I'd left my previous employment. And I was really excited. I thought, this will be great [name of city], big city, it'll be great to see how this team works. And I remember within 5 or 10 minutes thinking: 'god, this is strange'*) but over the course of the study I observed them come to a greater understanding and with it a greater acceptance of the way the group functioned.

The temporal and processual nature of the group relationship development is consistent with the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead (1929, 1967) which rejects the dominant Western preoccupation with Becoming over Being, an idea that has been taken up by Chia (1995). Mesle (2008: 8) notes that: "The world is composed of events and processes. Process philosophers claim that these features of relatedness and process are not mere surface appearance. They go all the way down to the roots of reality. Moreover, process thinkers insist that our failure to recognize that reality is a relational process is a source of great harms. It matters how we think about reality, the world, and ourselves because we act on what we think". When we consider the processual nature of leadership we are invited to consider how things change and develop, whereas a structural perspective inclines us towards the static and stable. The *Co-Action* highlighted in the analysis of data from the EMT illustrates the "continuous emergence of new elements from those already existing" (Cooper, 1976: 999). An example of this is the way in which one of the Directors, ED3, had to change her relational style as people left the team and she felt the need to become increasingly more visible and vocal in the team.

“I used to be able to go along, take myself off to a happy place look remotely intent to CEO but I never contributed my first two or three years and part of that was maybe because I didn’t know. I’m comfortable leading here but leading in the council I didn’t know about expectations so in terms of the executive management team I kept my powder dry for at least two years”.

ED3

Furthermore, *Co-Action* as described here features a symbiosis inherent to the relational dynamics. This “relational responsiveness” (Shotter: 1995) is simultaneously highly creative *and* constrained. Although we could never exactly predict the response that a specific utterance will elicit, we can see from the data that there are norms of interaction and cultural and contextual constraints on how one might respond. Take, for example, the Chief Executive calling the meetings to order in an highly formal way in which he moves from an information relational style to one where he has assumed the persona of the meeting Chair. In each instance, although the words used are slightly different, he signals that the relational dynamic has changed and that there is an expectation that others also adopt a more formal relational style consistent with their performance as Directors in their EMT meeting. These constraints are temporal and processual in nature as “over time, action of the participants typically become patterned, anticipated, and dependable” (Gergen, 2009: 40). My data demonstrates that the *Co-Action* of the Chief Executive and the Directors in the EMT is constrained both ways, and indeed is located within a wider culture context which is as much constraining as it is enabling. For example when ED1 says *“you just wouldn’t get away with that here”*.

Section 5.5.1. explores the metaphors that the group use to describe the punishment and retribution that would be (metaphorically) received if one did not adhere to what was expected: ED2: *“they would scythe you off at the knees”*. It is a subtle and evolving interplay of what must be adhered to and what is allowed to evolve. When the CEO says: *“the time isn’t right for that now”* he is alluding to such constraining forces. In so doing they do recognise the temporal and processual nature of their ongoing leadership task.

Given these constraining and enabling forces, understanding context and culture provides insights into the way in which the *Co-Action* occurs and evolves. Pettigrew

(1987: 650) invites us to see leadership “as a continuous process in context; where context refers to the antecedent conditions of change, the internal structure, cultural, and political context within which leadership occurs, as well as broad features of the outer context of the firm from which much of the legitimacy for change is derived”. I would take the idea of context further than Pettigrew since his conceptualisation is limited to the physical environment. My conceptualisation of context is more closely aligned with Kumpulainen and Mutanen (1999) who contend that contexts are dynamically created and continuously shaped in and through social interactions where the actors make meaning together. They posit the multidimensional nature of context which operates on three levels: “the socio/cultural, institutional and interindividual contexts” (ibid: 450).

This contextually-held process-structure balance has as its basis the concept of purpose (Cooper, 1976: 1000). That is, the members of the group are cooperatively engaged in the attainment of a collective goal. This follows Searle (1983) who views joint action as shared or collective intentionality; its purposefulness is central to the shared action. Significantly, the data indicates that it is the purpose within a given contextual setting that determines the amount and speed of change. Although the core purpose of the organization may remain relatively stable over time, outside forces, which are both qualitative and quantitative in nature, are in play.

For example, financial resources were an obvious constraint at LocalGov during the period of the study given the significant year-on-year budget cuts with a national press report stating that they continue to face a “bleak financial outlook” with 60% cuts and savings since financial year 2008/09 and which will amount to over £100m from 2014-18. However, ‘public mood’, albeit more difficult to measure, had just as great a constraining effect on both the micro and macro issues that the group were involved in. The data showed that although LocalGov were under pressure to ensure that they were able to find significant savings, they were highly constrained in what the organization would be able to reduce funding in – such as Social Work or Education. As such, the divisions of Development & Regeneration and Land & Environment were the areas that had to make a disproportionate amount of savings whilst maintaining certain service levels deemed acceptable by the service users, i.e. the public and the politicians. The secondary data of press reports on LocalGov highlighted that these directorates came under a greater amount of criticism as

residents complained about reduced refuse collection or more potholes in the roads, such as a press report headlined: “potholes ravaged-roads cost taxpayer £108,000”. Within the EMT there was a strong acceptance that the directors looking after these areas were taking a disproportionate amount of the burden and therefore criticism and internally they were supported and validated for these hardships: (ED1: “we all know they’re taking the lion’s share. It’s not fair, but it has to be done”), and (ED3: “ED5 is on the naughty-step more than the rest of us because his division has had to make so many sacrifices”). This links to the refined category of Reciprocal Accords. To help locate this within the *Meaningful Co-Action* we can look again to Gergen when he conceptualises the *Co-Action* process “in which ‘help’ is located with the conjunction of actions” (Gergen, 2009: 31) and in which “all we take to be real, true, valuable, or good finds its origin in coordinated action” (ibid). The data confirmed the view held by relational constructionist scholars that leadership is not the domain of a heroic individual; it cannot happen in isolation. It is interwoven and accomplished through the talk and actions of people as they go on *together*. It is a joint, or shared, accomplishment. Shotter (2008: 17) explains that “the actions of others determine our conduct just as much as anything within ourselves. As a result, the overall outcome of the exchange is simply not up to us”.

Co-Action is similar to what Shotter (1980) calls “joint action”, namely “people being able to influence each other’s behaviour directly and immediately in a bodily fashion, unmediated by any deliberate system of thought” (Shotter, 2008: v). In so doing it connects the *Co-Action* not just with the language use but with what the whole person brings to the encounter. It involves the somatic as well as the dialogic. Stacey notes that “Gergen largely ignores the importance of the human body” (2001: 57) whereas he notes that “Shotter (1993) does regard living bodily responsiveness to events and features of the surroundings as crucial to human relating” (ibid). In this way my notion of *Co-Action* is closer to Shotter’s idea of Joint Action than Gergen’s co-action.

However I wish to differentiate *Co-Action* from Shotter’s Joint Action in one significant way. I make no claim that the *Co-Action* was a performance for and to a “superaddressee” in the way that Shotter does. The notion of a superaddressee that Shotter (1995: 50) contends follows Bakhtin’s (2010) suggestion that speech acts are intended not just for those present from whom a response is required, but reaches out

“beyond those immediately present to us, towards the anticipated responses of a special, invisibly present, third-person Other” (Shotter, 1995: 50).

Although the data highlights the performative nature of much of what goes on in and by the EMT, the audience was not a “superaddressee” in the way Bakhtin and Shotter imply. Rather, in LocalGov it was a specific group of stakeholders who could scrutinise the performance of the EMT either directly, or when not physically present subsequently through artefacts such as minutes of meetings, reports and annual statements. These stakeholders included elected politicians, the local and national media and, via the LocalGov website, residents of the city. This is a much more prosaic interpretation than that hypothesised by Bakhtin, but was nevertheless what a close analysis of the data from this study suggests. The EMT undertook Performative Practices during the study such as the repeated pattern which saw avoidance of taking up substantive issues in the meeting itself, which has been discussed in detail in section 5.4.1. The analysis presented here suggests that this was a *collective* endeavour. Through time, newer members of the group were socialised into the team and the whole group came to adhere to Performative Practices as part of supporting the accomplishment of the group task and developing or maintaining group cohesion.

Conceptualising the relational accomplishment of leadership as *Meaningful Co-Action* introduces a further parallel, this time with the practice turn in strategy (Whittington, 2006) in which leadership is what people *do* rather than what people are. The practice turn in strategy, which Carroll, et al (2008) argue is transferrable to leadership-as-practice, is an attempt to redress the focus on competency-based leadership theorising by shifting towards the “subtle, moral, emotional and relational aspects of leadership” (Bolden & Gosling, 2006: 158). Whittington (2006) outlines three components of practice theory which are praxis, practice and practitioner. Of particular relevance to *Co-Action* is the idea of praxis which are “all the various activities involved in the deliberate formulation and implementation of strategy” (Whittington, 2006: 619). Whittington argues that the “domain of praxis is wide, embracing the routine and the non-routine, the formal and the informal, activities at the corporate centre and activities at the organizational periphery” (ibid). Similar to a practice perspective, *Co-Action* relates to what social actors actually *do* together. This going-on together is based on the assumption that all of the members of the

EMT – not just the Chief Executive – are active participants in their social worlds and in the accomplishment of leadership at LocalGov.

There are three other ways in which I would like to connect a practice perspective with *Co-Action*. These are improvisation, complexity theory and Heidegger's notion of 'dwelling'. The first of these is to develop the improvisational "on the hoof" (Chia & Holt, 2004: 643) way in which "action is taken in a spontaneous and intuitive fashion" (Crossen, 1998: 593) by the leadership actors in LocalGov. Initiated by Heidegger (1926/1962), this "relationally based view of practical action and agency" (Chia & Holt, 2004: 639) rejects the rational intentionality of individual actors as the primary source of outcomes and asserts the primacy of relations in the accomplishment of leadership, which, as I have noted a number of times in this text, is consistent with a relational constructionist perspective. A core characteristic of this shared leadership accomplishment is "the spontaneity of action" where social actors "respond in the moment to stimuli provided by either the audience or fellow actors" (Crossen, 1998: 959). Following a more distributed and relational frame of leadership accomplishment, the data supports the improvisational nature of the shared leadership task as different actors 'take the lead' at different times in an elegant, ongoing performance. An example of this is where the Executive Directors attend committee meetings with their elected officials.

I think you have to manage the tricky situations that come in front of you. Although I say I would quite like CEO to be more proactive and interested, I think that he doesn't miss a trick. He watches, Executive Committee... so our Executive Committee works where all of the directors are there next to their Executive Member but we are not allowed to speak. But he watches how that Executive Member works. Now, I've had 3 or 4 in my time and he watches how that works. If your Executive Member is on top of their brief and able to respond then that is the mark of a good Director. Because I should never have to speak. If I am doing my bit right, [name of elected official] should know just enough to be able to answer and I know when I have to write something down and just slip it to him and he uses that. And only on a rare occasion if it is technical do I nudge him and say: 'this one's mine'. So CEO will watch all of that dynamic. Now the Leader of the Council: CEO is the leader's right hand person and the dynamic in [name of city] is always that the leader is the king

pin and Directors are expected to be there and CEO is there and he'll watch how you interact with the leader and how you keep the leader informed. So you make sure that the leader is never left out on a limb and I have to make a judgement as to what the leader needs to know and when they need to know it. And that's partly to do with CEO too. So, if the leader knows, CEO knows. So you do have to be agile. So you have to be here and know to make a judgement just as the shit is about to hit the fan. So we do nothing until the leader says and you get that squared off – and of course you're getting CEO squared off at the same time so very occasionally I have to run from room to room. If CEO didn't know, then I'd be in more bother. You don't always get it right, but I suppose why I quite like CEO, even when you didn't get it right, CEO will make sure you know you didn't get it right, but in a kind of a supportive way.

ED3

As we can see from this excerpt, far from this improvisation allowing just anything to happen, Crossen, following Weick (1993) notes that actors work with their intuition based on highly attuned understanding of the context through “the rapid processing of experienced information” (Crossen, 1998: 959). Kamoche and Cunha (2003: 2024) define improvisation as “the conception of action as it unfolds, drawing on available cognitive, affective, social and material resources”. From the data, for example, we can see that the newer members of the team, who possess less ‘experienced information’ were more likely to both find the improvisational nature of their shared leadership task more challenging as they were less able to draw on an experienced intuition about what might be acceptable in any given situation. As such, they were more likely to act in ways that were out-with what would be deemed acceptable in that context. The people that these newer directors had been appointed to replace had already been found to have failed to adhere to the constraining structures of the team and the organization. In this way, they had taken their improvisation too far and ultimately their place within the EMT began to become untenable.

In order to make sense of the unpredictable, emergent nature of leadership and organization a number of scholars have looked at the complexity sciences to elucidate a better understanding of the uncertainty and volatility of organizations (MacIntosh, Maclean et al, 2006; Stacey, 2001, 2003; Griffin & Stacey, 2005; Shaw,

2002). Stacey (2003) argues for an approach that focuses on the communicative interaction of people in significant groups. He suggests that concepts from the complexity sciences offer analogies that assist us in understanding human interaction using the process sociology of Elias and the symbolic interactionism of Mead. This radically social perspective on group functioning may provide a useful construct in elucidating our understanding of *Relational Leadership as Meaningful Co-Action* as it relates to the unpredictable and improvisational way in which the social actors are in relationship with each other.

Stacey, draws on Elias's contention that "social and personality structures evolve together" (Stacey, 2003; 39). What is accomplished in social interaction are patterns that promote further interaction. This derives from Mead's (1934) conception of significant symbols, where a gesture by one calls forth a similar response or gesture in the other, as noted above. Stacey refers to the combination of these theories in understanding social functioning as the "theory of complex responsive processes of relating" (2003; 66).

This relating takes place in the communicative interaction between people. When such communication displays little divergence of views and is too stable, the conversation reveals limited thematic structure where creativity, change and difference cannot emerge. In contrast, communicative interaction that displays the unstable and 'edge of chaos' characteristics – that is when the interaction is highly fluid, spontaneous and stimulating – can enable true transformation to happen. Tension is an ever present construct in such interaction as the participants attempt to make sense of each other's point of view. Layered onto this exchange are ideas of power: "Of particular importance is the emergent reproduction of themes and variations that organize communicative actions into membership categories. These tend to be themes of an ideological kind that establish who may take a turn, as well as when and how they may do so. It is the ideological thematic patterning of turn taking/turn making that enable some to take a turn while constraining others from doing so and inevitably the process is one of inclusion and exclusion. In addition, in order to go on together, people have to account to each other for what they do. In other words, the maintenance of relationship imposes constraint. Power is a constraint that excludes some communicative actions and includes others" (Stacey, 2003: 121).

The analysis of the data in this study supports this view. In offering *Meaningful Co-Action* as the way Relational Leadership was accomplished, I do not wish to suggest that the relationships were symmetrical and that the position of the leader did not afford him more flexibility and power in what he was able to say and do. The EMT members were more constrained than the Chief Executive. However my data rejects the seemingly unlimited agency afforded to leaders by scholars working in an entity perspective. The Chief Executive was also highly constrained in his actions and talk by a perception of what would be deemed acceptable in the wider organizational and societal system and by LocalGov's political masters, but his positional power appeared to make him slightly less constrained. The data, however, did not suggest that power was problematic. Indeed, the EMT members spoke of the containing effect of the Chief Executive taking up his role and his power. Yet his power was *given* as much as it was *taken* – it was co-produced. Elias (1978: 74) says: “We say that a person possess great power, as if power were a thing he carried about in his pocket. This use of the word is a relic of magico-mythical ideas. Power is not an amulet possessed by one person and not by another; it is a structural characteristic of human relationships – of all human relationships”.

Stacey's idea of complex responsive processes of relating is *radical* in that it makes no separation between the individual and the social. It is together that people simultaneously evoke and provoke responses in each other in ways that are “iterative, nonlinear, recursive, reflexive” and “self-referential” (Stacey, 2003: 78). This perspective affords the individual, the group and the organization the same ontological status (Stacey, 2001: 95) it is the interaction – the relationship – which has primacy. This is consistent with *Relational Leadership as Meaningful Co-Action*.

Following the work of Mead (1967), Simpson (2009) speaks of *transaction* and differentiates it from *interaction*: “Whereas an inter-action is something that happens between actors who are physically and mentally independent, a trans-action happens across actors who are aspects of a relationally integrated whole; whereas meanings are transmitted between actors in an inter-action, the actors are the continuously emerging meaning in the trans-action” (Simpson, 2009: 1335). *Co-Action* is closer to transaction than interaction. Mead described the social act as a “conversation of gestures”, as I have noted above. “These gestural conversations are where social meanings are constructed, reinforced and disrupted, and at the same time they are the

means by which we come to understand each other and ourselves as mutually and socially constituted” (Simpson, 2009: 1334).

The example used earlier of the Chief Executive, in a formal tone calling the meeting to order represents a significant symbol. In so doing he is inviting others to accept his symbolic gesture and to act accordingly. Of course, the group have a choice as to whether or not they adhere to the expectations of the performance, but either way his calling the meeting to order is a significant symbol and a way in which we can see praxis as the “interconnection and embeddedness of action” (Carroll et al, 2008: 366). However, I would differentiate Simpson’s development of Meads transaction with *Co-Action* in that *Co-Action* considers “human action within a relational confluence” (Gergen, 2009: 31) in which the boundaries between self and other are blurred and problematized in a way that Mead does not recognise. One might simplistically explain this as the Chief Executive imposing his style of chairing the meeting on the others, but such an account would miss the nuanced contextual mirroring that the Chief Executive’s behaviour represented. An entity approach is much less concerned with the contextual factors that are constraining the actions of leaders.

In order for leaders to consciously work in this way, Heidegger’s (1926/1962; 1971) distinction between building and dwelling is helpful. He notes that not all buildings are dwellings and invites us to consider the conditions that enable a place to be a dwelling. “The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans are on the earth is Buan, dwelling” (Heidegger, 1971: 2). Chia and Holt (2006: 637) note that in the dwelling mode “the world does not appear ‘ready-made’ but comes into being and takes on significance through its incorporation into everyday activities”. It is in this way that I incorporate both praxis and dwelling into my conceptualisation of *Co-Action*. I shall now turn to the use of *Meaningful* in the theory of *Meaningful Co-Action* which is important for a number of reasons.

The term *Meaningful* as it is being utilised in the theory being developed here encompasses three different but related concepts. The first way that I am using *Meaningful* is that the *Co-Action* is significant, relevant and consequential. That is, the actors are engaging in *Co-Action* in a purposeful way towards shared outcomes. Secondly it relates to importance. In addition to being purposeful the *Co-Action* is

important in that it helps the actors to collectively accomplish their leadership task in the service of achieving the organization's strategic objectives. The third way that *Meaningful* is being used is as it relates existentially to the identity of the actors. That the accomplishment of the strategic task is in some way connected to the identity that social actors have of themselves as non-elected officers in LocalGov. I shall now take each of these three uses of *Meaningful* and relate them in more detail to the theoretical construct.

The activities that the EMT members are engaged in involve successfully administering public services across a large and disparate city. The successful execution of such a large and complex task happens as the team co-ordinate their activities and roles in a very deliberate way. As they go about their task, they are in constant dialogue with each other and with others across LocalGov and indeed outside it. Hersted and Gergen (2013: 19) note that "progressively realized, communication is a process of mutually moulding meaning" and it is in this way that the *Co-Action* is further linked to *Meaning*. The myriad projects and other work that are necessary to undertake the task are wrapped in a larger purpose that the EMT have about being highly ambitious about the city and raising its overall standing for its residents. One striking feature of the team, that I have already noted, is how much they *cared* about the residents of the city and the city more widely. This was manifested in the attentiveness they had towards issues that would have a substantive positive impact.

This is connected to importance being embedded in the use of the team *Meaningful*. There was a palpable sense in spending time with the team that their work was very important to them individually and collectively. With responsibility for education, social work and the city's infrastructure there was a strong sense of duty and obligation shared by the team and indeed this was evident across LocalGov. A term used often by the EMT members was *legacy*. There was a strong appreciation within the team that the work that they were engaged in would have an impact – either positive or negative – long after each of those members were in post at LocalGov. I am not referring here to legacy leadership as expounded by Whittington et al (2005) which belongs to the entity tradition where legacy leaders are ones whom followers deem as "worthy of imitation" (Whittington et al, 2005: 754) but rather what is more closely akin to Wheatley's connection of meaning to our work when she says: "With

meaning as our centering place, we can journey through the realms of chaos and make sense of the world. With meaning as our attractor, we can recreate ourselves to carry forward what we value most. We can use our own lives as evidence for this human thirst for meaning” (Wheatley, 2011: 154-155). I experienced the EMT members sharing the characteristic of being involved in their work as part of a way to make a positive contribution to the lives of people across the city, connecting to a deeper sense of personal purpose. The data illustrated a strong public service ethos in the group as they shared the task of bringing new possibilities to life. This is not just a strategic task, which a “rational calculus” (Senge, et al, 2005: 89) model would suggest, but rather involved the group being together in the world in a different kind of way. This way, is what Senge et al (2005) would call Presencing – that is “seeing from within the source from which the future whole is emerging, peering back at the present from the future” (Senge, et al, 2005: 90) and in so doing the group are linked to their “highest future possibility and destiny” (ibid).

This connects us to the final way in which the team were engaged in *Meaningful Co-Action* insofar as the work that they were jointly engaged in was also important to people on an individual level in that it provided them with a sense of their own personal identity. Whyte (2001: 3) illustrates two very different ways that our work can have an impact on us when he says: “The human approach to work can be naïve, fatalistic, power-mad, money-grubbing, unenthusiastic, cynical, detached, and obsessive. It can also be selflessly mature, revelatory and life giving; mature in its long-reaching effects, and life giving in the way it gives back to an individual or society as much as it has taken”. The data from the EMT in LocalGov pointed to the latter of these two statements being more akin to what work means for the people in the EMT. As I have noted elsewhere, this was a group of people who *cared* and for whom this work was much more than a way to pay the rent. Each of them often talked in our informal conversations about how their role in public service was deeply aligned to their personal values. These people had, in the words of William Blake a *firm persuasion*, which is to feel that the work that they do is enlarging and challenging for both themselves and for a greater good (Mason, 1988). All of the members of the EMT were people who were in their mid-forties and beyond, all had had some measure of both success and failure and all brought to their leadership task a humility and tentativeness that is only evident in those who have reached a point of giving up the illusion of certitude. In order to lean into this *Meaningful Co-Action* so

that one acts authentically one has to draw on all sources of wisdom, and this includes the body as well as the mind. These leaders were not just adhering to rules of how to be, these were dynamically involved in the evolutionary process of bringing the organization into being.

In this way, *Meaningful Co-Action* has a strong ethical dimension and here again, context is significant. Ethical issues were at the heart of the wider contextual environment in which the EMT and LocalGov find themselves for it was as a consequence of the global financial crisis in 2008 that led to ripples across the entire world and which resulted in the deeply challenging financial circumstances under which that LocalGov found itself operating within. The scope and extent of these financial challenges cannot be overstated. So the EMT were operating against a backdrop which was essentially “a failure in ethical management” (Heil, 2011: 1) in global financial institutions and a business environment suffering from a subsequent “general crisis of legitimacy” (Maak & Pless, 2006: 99).

Hosking argues that if Gergen (2009) is correct in that relational constructionism constructs “the real and the good” then it is also possible for constructing “the not real” and the “not good” (Hosking, 2012: 71). The data highlights that dimensions of the EMT’s ethical practice operated on two levels. The first level was work that was in the service of ethical outcomes for key organizational stakeholders. The second level of ethical practice was the ways in which the group and particularly the Chief Executive in relation to the Directors, acted ethically in their relations to each other.

As I have noted above, a social constructionist perspective does not simply imply that we co-create a world of facts, about truth. As social actors in organizations “we also come to understandings about what is rational and what is valuable and moral” (Hersted & Gergen, 2013: 20), and it is through this process of ethical relating that the group come to a shared understanding that they are collectively working towards ethical outcomes. Ethical action as it relates to *Meaningful Co-Action* is concerned with what is appropriate or good action given the EMT’s responsibility to multiple stakeholders. LocalGov has a social purpose, one to improve the lives of everyone across the city. As such, unlike a commercial organization it has an ethical focus in its *raison d’être*. The data suggests that the EMT had a strong sense that achieving successful outcomes for the residents of the city under their jurisdiction was an

ethical as well as a strategic responsibility they had. Therefore the use of funds, the priorities that were made and the outcomes that were achieved were all in the service of the people they were there to serve. One of the ways that the EMT ensured they were working ethically was to be open and available to all of their stakeholders. In addition to the performative function of having someone shadow the Chief Executive was a willingness to have his decisions and actions scrutinised up-close, the EMT were sensitive to the perception that their position in the organization – and indeed in the City – put them in a position of significant power. Given that the political power in LocalGov belonged to the elected politicians and because any hint by the local media that the non-elected officials were ‘running the show’ the EMT were highly sensitive to the way they used their power and to how they were perceived to use their power.

7.3 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has explicated a theory of *Relational Leadership as Meaningful Co-Action*. It has explored the ways in which *Co-Action* relates to other, similar ideas by scholars such as Shotter’s Joint Action (1980) and Gergen’s (2009) early conceptualisation of co-action. It also outlined the ways in which the term *Meaningful* was being used as a descriptor of the way that the *Co-Action* evolved in the EMT.

In the next chapter, I will explore in more detail the way in which the theory of *Relational Leadership as Meaningful Co-Action* relates to the relational leadership literature that was outlined in chapter 3 of this thesis. I will outline the contribution that this thesis makes and detail the study’s limitation and possibilities for future research.

Chapter 8 – Contribution and Discussion

“To study the relational, is like scooping up a handful of sand. For an instant, you can grasp it – it feels like you have something in hand; yet inexorably, what seemed so solid a minute ago slowly slips through your fingers”.

(Hycner, 2009:7)

8.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter will detail the ways in which this thesis makes contribution to knowledge. It will outline in what ways the study has achieved its initial aims and it will illustrate the ways in which the development of the theory *Relational Leadership as Meaningful Co-Action* answers the initial research question. It will then report on the ways the theory that I have developed has advanced the fledgling body of empirical research on Relational Leadership from a social constructionist perspective. Having expanded this body of knowledge, my successors must now account for this work in future studies (Phillips & Pugh, 1987: 59) and I offer a number of research options that exist for scholars with the addition of my work to the extant literature.

Although I have diligently worked towards high-quality in this thesis, I accept that there were limitations in the choices that I made and flaws in both the process and the outcome. However I wish to illustrate that I am aware of these limitations and how I might mitigate against them in future research projects. In this way the entire research endeavour, both its strengths and the weaknesses are learning aids that I can utilise going forward.

8.2 Contribution to knowledge

This thesis answers a call made as far back as 1978 by McCall and Lombardo for new directions in leadership research: “Approaches to leadership should be less short-range and atomistic - less reductionist. Leaders should be studied in natural settings using observational and other qualitative methodologies. Leadership should be examined through the holistic study of actual behaviour rather than breaking the activities of leaders and the responses of followers into categories of independent and dependent variables” (Pettigrew, 1987: 652).

Early in this research process I found myself aligning with what I believe to be an exciting way to think about leadership which is both philosophically and practically different from the dominant entity perspective. This perspective, Relational Leadership, posits that leadership is a shared accomplishment that happens as human beings come into relationship with each other towards the accomplishment of a shared objective. The literature review highlighted that there has been relatively little empirical research done on Relational Leadership and that the term is used interchangeably by scholars working across different traditions who use the term to refer to very different things.

As I outlined in the introductory chapter of this thesis, there are three principal ways that doctoral research can make a contribution to knowledge. These are “as new knowledge about the world of management, as new theories and ideas, or as new methods of investigation” (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe et al., 1991: 141). This thesis makes a contribution in all three areas, under the respective headings of Practice Contribution, Empirical Contribution and Methodological Contribution.

Empirical Contribution	<p>Building on what is a relatively small body of theory on Relational Leadership, for the first time in a UK local authority Executive Team.</p> <p>Developing a theory of <i>Relational Leadership as Meaningful Co-Action</i> as the way that leadership was accomplished in the case study organization.</p>
Methodological Contribution	<p>Makes a contribution to Grounded Theory by explicitly utilising reflexivity towards disconfirming data as a mechanism for establishing theoretical sensitivity.</p>
Practice Contribution	<p>The findings from this study may inform the practice of management, particularly organization consultants working with leaders and teams.</p>

8.2.1 Empirical contribution

This study's empirical contribution to knowledge is in two parts. The first is the location and context in which the research was undertaken and the second is the development of *Relational Leadership as Meaningful Co-Action*.

The case that I have presented here is unique in the Relational Leadership literature. Although it is an *intrinsic case study* (Stake, 1995: 3), that is I was intrinsically interested in what I would find in LocalGov without the necessity for this case to be in any way representative of any others cases, it was of interest for a number of reasons that add to my contribution. Both the entity theorists (Bass, 2008) and the relational constructionist theorists (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011) are interested in the interface between leadership and organizational change. As I have mentioned, LocalGov was going through a period of unprecedented change and turbulence during the period of my research and their collective leadership task was being tested to the limit. Given the complexity and uncertainty of the economic, political and social environment that LocalGov were operating within, it appeared to me to be a fascinating time in which to study a top team in a UK local authority.

Although to date there has been one other empirical study undertaken in the UK (Hay & Hodgkinson, 2006), this was focussed on exploring the limitations of teaching the dominant theories of leadership in MBA programmes. Its contribution was to provide “practical help to management educators concerned with the teaching of leadership” (ibid: 114). The design and methodology utilised in-depth interviews with former MBA students. Therefore it was methodologically quite different from my study. As such my study is the only UK based longitudinal ethnographic study and it therefore provides a unique insight into the pressures and challenges in leading in a UK local authority during a time of extreme turmoil.

Although both Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011), Helstad and Møller (2013), and Weibler and Rohn Endres (2010) adopt a Grounded Theory methodology, all are towards different research aims from this project and all took place in contextually different situations. Namely in the US, Norway and Germany respectively. In this way they are significantly different from this study.

The study contributes to our wider understanding of Relational Leadership as conceptualising it as *Meaningful Co-Action* in which the accomplishment of the leadership task emerges on and through the way the team *go-on-together* in ways that are conceived of as meaningful both to their identity in that they perceive themselves to be doing important work and that it is directed towards a shared goal of improving the lives of the citizens under LocalGov's jurisdiction.

Meaningful Co-Action has very specific connotations both in terms of how it was conceptualised from what was found through the data analysis process and in how the theory relates to similar ideas put forward by other scholars working from a social constructionist perspective. The term is a heuristic device that also includes the ways in which scholars think about the processual and temporal nature of organizations and how context plays an important role in both enabling and constraining their action. Section 8.3 will summarise what was outlined in the previous chapter this time with an emphasis in the way *Relational Leadership as Meaningful Co-Action* makes a contribution to knowledge.

8.2.2 Methodological contribution

This thesis makes a methodological contribution by utilising reflexivity towards disconfirming data a source for establishing theoretical sensitivity. Strauss and Corbin (1990) outline a number of techniques in which a researcher can develop theoretical sensitivity, which is essentially an approach to help the researcher become attuned to their assumptions, biases and strong theoretical frames. Developing theoretical sensitivity helps researchers to critically evaluate these biases or assumptions as a way to have a more discerning relationship with the data free of the blinkers we might otherwise have. In their book, Strauss and Corbin outline a number of techniques for developing this theoretical sensitivity including analysis of words and phrases (ibid: 81), analysis through comparisons (ibid: 84), and an approach they label 'waving the red flag' (ibid: 91) which is concerned with the cultural biases that we may have and bring into our analysis of data.

Adopting a reflexive relationship with the data, which was based on both the cognitive and somatic reactions that I had, enabled me to become aware when I sensed ‘something’s not right’. I then used these senses as a way to explore my previously unquestioned assumptions. For example, when I felt unease the first time the group only gave a very superficial consideration to a strategic topic that I assumed would generate significant discussion and take up a large portion of the meeting time. It was by experiencing ‘disconfirming data’ that jarred with my own assumptions that I was able to make these assumptions available to my conscious mind and explore the way they were clouding my judgement about what was in the data vis-à-vis what I had been expecting to find. I was then able to set these assumptions aside long enough to re-examine the data being more conscious of what I was imposing on it.

8.2.3 Practice Contribution

The findings from this study may inform the practice of management, particularly organization consultants working with leaders and teams.

A Practice Contribution recognises that an academic work can make an impact on practice in the workplace. In the case of the development of the theory of *Relational Leadership as Meaningful Co-Action*, this thesis provides an alternative way to think about leadership.

This study may prove a helpful resource for organizational consultants who are working with leaders and teams who are dissatisfied with the limits of a heroic archetype conceptualisation of leadership. My own practice as an organization consultant has been greatly deepened as I engage with leaders and senior teams utilizing a relational constructionist approach. It enables me to work with leaders to explore the underlying assumptions that they have about organizational phenomenon and creatively critique if and how different underpinning philosophies are more helpful in enabling them to accomplish their strategic task. An example of this is to question the validity of individual leader development as an approach to enabling organizational change. Such development programmes may be personally enlightening but they tend to ignore context and assume too much agency of the individual

leader. A relational constructionist approach would gravitate towards leadership development happening at a team or organizational level *in situ* as a team grapple with strategic issues. Development content, such as a mechanism to manage transition and change, would be introduced only as it was required in the service of the accomplishment of the strategic task so that leaders ‘try out’ alternative approaches. Such an approach would see the collective sensemaking of the group to be a crucially important development activity.

8.3 Summary of the theory

Relational Leadership as Meaningful Co-Action is a theory of how leadership was relationally accomplished in the Executive Management Team at LocalGov – one of the largest and most strategically important local authorities in the United Kingdom – as they grappled with unprecedented change under enormous political and social pressure.

The theory epitomizes the way in which the group *went-on-together* in their moment by moment interactions which were socially developed and situationally bound. *Meaningful Co-Action* is akin to Gergen’s idea of co-action outlined in his book *Relational Being* where he views co-action as “the process of collaborative action from which all meaning is generated” (2009: xxvii). My conceptualisation of *Co-Action* is closely aligned to that of Gergen’s but with two important caveats. Firstly, I do not assume the same level of unpredictability in communicative interaction that Gergen does. Although he accepts that “over time, action of the participants typically become patterned, anticipated, and dependable” (Gergen, 2009: 40) he also posits that “we are free to invite other forms of reply” (ibid: 133). The constraining forces in the context that the EMT were working within (see section 5.5.2), and the contextual mirroring of their actions in the wider system (see section 5.5), explain the predictability of the way the group interacted. Their patterns of behaviour became group norms and newer members of the team were socialised into the team by learning how to adhere to these group norms. They learned – but were never explicitly told – about the reciprocal accords (see section 6.4) that were afforded to them when they adhered to the group norms, namely protection against symbolic death and brutality (see section 5.5.1) all of which meant they were not “free to invite other forms of reply” (Gergen, 2009: 40) as Gergen suggests.

The other way in which my conceptualisation of *Co-Action* is different from that of Gergen is that he “largely ignores the importance of the human body” (Stacey, 2001: 57) and views *all* interaction happening in and through language use. My theory of *Co-Action* respects the action orientation of the group – that is they get things done which is not just the stuff of talk. Roads were built, children learned to read, jobs were created. There were action and activities as well as talk (Stacey, 2011, 279).

Stacey (2011: 57) notes that where Gergen largely ignores the human body “Shotter (1993) does regard living bodily responsiveness to events and features of the surroundings as crucial to human relating”. The embodied nature of the *Co-Action* is akin to what Shotter (1980: v) calls ‘joint action’ which involves “people being able to influence each other’s behaviour directly and immediately in bodily fashion, unmediated by a deliberate system of thought”. The notion of joint action is further aligned to my notion of *Co-Action* in that it “comes into being when, in their meetings with each other, people’s activities become spontaneously and responsively intertwined or entangled with those of the others around them” (Shotter, 2008: 37).

Shotter argues that joint action is a performance to a “superaddressee” that is he suggests that the our speech and activities are intended not just for those present in the interaction but that it extends “beyond those immediately present to us, towards the anticipated responses of a special, invisibility present, third-person Other” (Shotter, 1995: 50). As I have already noted in the previous chapter, my data did not support this contention and in this way my notion is *Co-Action* is different from Shotter’s notion of joint action.

All of this *Co-Action* is undertaken for the purpose of creating and enhancing meaning within the group and my theory outlines with the ways they took their work to be meaningful. The group shared a strong sense of common purpose and that their collective endeavours would leave a legacy in the city long after they were no longer in post. With “meaning as our centering place, we can journey through the realms of chaos and make sense of the world” (Wheatley, 2001: 154-155).

8.4 Connecting the theory with the research question

The research question that this thesis answered was:

How is leadership relationally accomplished?

The question was subsequently operationalised through the following additional three questions:

Q1: How are relational strategies adopted by the case study team?

Q2: How do these relational strategies support the accomplishment of the team's strategic task?

Q3: What contextual factors impact and are impacted by the relational strategies that are commonly adopted with the team?

I have answered the primary research question of by developing a theory of *Relational Leadership as Meaningful Co-Action* which explicates the way leadership was relationally accomplished with the Executive Management Team at LocalGov.

I have done so by exploring the relational strategies that the EMT adopted as they related to each such as when they avoided conflict (see section 5.7.3) or engaged in talk that built solidarity within the team (see section 5.7.1). These strategies supported the team in the accomplishment of their strategic task because they were adhering to the cultural norms of the organisation and what was acceptable to their political masters whilst still delivering crucial services.

I have said a great deal about the ways in which the contextual factors impacted the team's relational strategies. Specifically the behaviour of the team when they were front-of-stage were performative in nature for an audience either present or who could scrutinise their activity via minutes, reports and press coverage.

8.5 Contrasting this study with the extant literature

There are a number of additional points of considerable importance to be made about the contribution to knowledge that this thesis asserts and the way in which it is different from much of the theory developed in the extant literature. Principally, this thesis is non-normative. It has explored leadership as a relationship accomplishment from a social constructionist perspective and in so doing it has sought to describe the

processes through which Relational Leadership was accomplished in LocalGov; not what *should* have been the case based on theory developed and outlined in the previous literature.

This point is not just concerned with adhering to the process in taking an inductive stance. Rather it was about not beginning the research from a strong ethical or moral position and assuming my views in this regard link to Relational Leadership. Entity scholars in particular argue that relational leaders interact and communicate with followers in a more relational way that privileges listening or that is more collaborative (Ferch & Mitchell, 2011) taking these things to be superior to non-listening and non-collaboration. It is the presence or absence of these relational strategies, they argue, that determines whether one is, or is not, a relational leader. Not only did I attempt to reduce my *a priori* assumptions about the literature as I began the research, but I also set aside my own values and beliefs and what ‘good’ leadership *should be*, particularly what good Relational Leadership is.

This is not to say that a reflexive researcher one cannot hold a strong moral or ethical position vis-à-vis his or her research findings, but when and where one brings this into the process is critically important. To begin from a value-laden position necessarily imposes the researcher’s beliefs on the research process at the point where the researcher should be questioning not just the truth claims of others, but his or her own truth claims, where they stem from and how these impact the meaning made of the data.

Of equal importance, and linked to the previous point, is to reiterate that it was not my intention to explore *what relational leaders do* which is the concern of so many Relational Leadership scholars. Such an approach would have belonged to the entitative paradigm that the thesis philosophically rejects. Even scholars claiming to work within a relational constructionist ontology (Binns, 2008; Hay & Hodgkinson, 2006; Maak & Pless, 2006; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011) describe what relational leaders do and as such continue to give ontology to leaders as distinct entities. This thesis was concerned with exploring the phenomenon of leadership from a relational and social constructionist perspective from a place of open curiosity about what one might find, which is philosophically consistent with the Grounded Theory and interpretivist approach I have taken. As such I have deliberately tried to set aside my

value-laden and ethical position about leadership and organization *at the point of initial data analysis*. Working from an interpretivist stance I believe it is crucially important for researchers to be able to identify and name their inherent bias. It is my contention that if interpretivist research is to gain credibility then at the early stages of the research process, the researcher must bracket off their own views long enough to let what is embedded in the data to emerge.

As we have seen, this study explores Relational Leadership from a social constructionist perspective and highlights the ways in which scholars working within different research perspectives use the term to mean very different things. It provides a critique of the entity relational leadership perspective before going on to more thoroughly examine Relational Leadership from a social constructionist perspective and specifically to critique the six empirical studies on the subject and then undertake a thematic critique of the 21 social constructionist relational leadership literature.

Specifically, entity Relational Leadership scholars are concerned with what relational strategies relational leaders use to accomplish their leadership. In this perspective, the ontology of the individual leader remains intact and the focus is on the relational traits and characteristics such a leader possesses and deploys. As such, it belongs to exactly the same scientific paradigm as all of the other trait theories, such as transformational leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1989), or charismatic leaders (Shamir, House, et al., 1993). I have contrasted this with the Relational Leadership scholars working from a social constructionist stance where leadership is seen as a relational accomplishment and whereby the object of research are the relationships and how they are created and maintained.

8.6 Limitations of the study and possibilities for future research

During the course of the data collection phase of this research I was speaking with the EMT members in LocalGov about what I was seeing and with them jointly making sense of this as I developed the concepts and initial categories and to some extent the refined categories. Once the theory development phase was complete I shared the theory of *Meaningful Co-Action* with the EMT members, but there was no mechanism for me to explicitly create the theory with the participants' ongoing involvement. This is a limitation of this study. Having done so would have provided a richer level of analysis and development of the theory.

As I have previously noted, truth claims have been problematised in this thesis and has followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for quality is trustworthiness and authenticity in a naturalistic inquiry. Therefore the thesis does not offer *Relational Leadership as Meaningful Co-Action* as a definitive truth that can be 'tested' in other settings. That said, further research could be done to determine if *Meaningful Co-Action* has utility in other settings and how this further develops the theory. In addition, there is scope for additional research on the other factors that might enable *Co-Action* to occur in groups other than meaning-making.

This research is an initial exploration of *Relational Leadership Meaningful Co-Action* but more work could be done to develop the theory by looking at it in different groups of leaders, different settings and how all organizational actors contribute to it. Context has been described as an important element of *Meaningful Co-Action* – where it occurs and the conditions which both enable and constrain it. As a single longitudinal case study, this study did not explore how different contexts might impact *Meaningful Co-Action*. Future studies could explore how *Relational Leadership as Meaningful Co-Action* is accomplished within different contexts. Specifically more research could be done on the enabling and constraining forces of *Meaningful Co-Action* to determine if different forms of organizational culture and context are more conducive to groups being-together in this way.

8.7 Concluding remarks

This study, undertaken as a naturalistic inquiry, (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) began with a curiosity about leadership and organization as I tried on an ongoing basis to make sense of them in my work as an organization consultant. As I explored what was for me a new and different philosophy of knowledge and reality to what is the prevailing norm, I was struck that I was able to view these phenomenon in a new and exciting ways. As I explored relational perspectives and saw such a perspective was beginning to inform leadership and organization I knew that this was that I wanted the focus of my study to be.

Tsoukas (1998) said that “the culturally alien appears at first sight incomprehensible and thus disorganised and chaotic” and it was in this way that I first experienced LocalGov when I began this ethnographic study. I came with my own expectations,

prejudices and assumptions about how the executive management team would and should function. However at the beginning of the research endeavour I was not consciously aware of these. It was not until what I observed jarred with me because it did not match what I assumed it would see that I was forced to confront my untested beliefs and ideas. Part of the research process was to understand my deeply held assumptions that I was not even aware of and challenge these so that the research process was not merely a reflection of my opinions and prejudices. In this respect I think my ability as a researcher has been transformed.

The entity relational scholars, whose work I have outlined in the literature review, were applying the same ontological status to relational leaders as to any other type of leader, be that transformational, charismatic, etc. It remains wedded, as traditional psychological approaches to leadership theorising are, to placing the individual centrally in the equation, and assuming levels of personal agency that seemed at odds with my experience in organizations. The relational scholars who are working from a social constructionist perspective offer, in my view, a more complex, nuanced view of how leadership is accomplished and crucially, the role that context plays in that. However, there remains a normative underpinning belief that the relational leader should be good; ethical and valuing interpersonal relationships. This thesis held no such assumptions. It is based on a 'strong' assumption that leadership is accomplished in relationship with other people. However, I make no claim that relational leadership is accomplished when a predetermined set of relational strategies are adhered to or further, that these strategies should be those that could be characterised as ethical, or good, or interpersonally sophisticated.

As I have noted in the literature review, Uhl-Bien and Ospina (2012) argue for a synthesising of the perspectives between and entity and a social constructionist perspective to relational leadership so that they might be "integrated, reconciled, or even produce insights of common interest" (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012: xxvii). My view on this matter is akin to that of Stacey who argues that merging two philosophically disparate ways of thinking amounts to a "rationalisation of confusion" (2003: 8) and that "continuing to work with a way of thinking that is fundamentally contradictory displays a lack of rigor that would be unacceptable in most disciplines" (ibid). Whereas such an endeavour does guard against rigidity by engaging in a dialectic, Uhl-Bien and Ospina, who are at the forefront of advocating

for this “dialogue amongst perspectives” (2006) are relating this to a “Kantian notion of synthesizing two opposites” (Stacey, 2003; 8). I wish to argue that in the case of Relational Leadership this has weakened both entity approaches and social constructionist perspectives because it rejects the very thing that is foundational in each. From a social constructionist perspective, this is a rejection of the subject-object duality which is at the heart of entity perspectives.

Chapter 9 – Reflections

In the very early stages of my research, my supervisor advised me that it was now time to “work on the ‘ologies’” by which he meant epistemology, ontology and methodology. I had heard about methodology but the others were completely new to me.

Like a good and diligent student, I took myself off to find out more about these ‘ologies’. I started in the fairly obvious places, Crotty (1998), Bryman (2004); Burrell and Morgan (1979). This exploration of the ‘ologies’ was taking me into philosophy, asking me to consider deeply personal questions about what it was I take to be real and how I can account for what I think I know. My most deeply-rooted assumptions were being challenged and I became increasingly curious about what I didn’t know and increasingly sceptical about what I assumed I did. So I moved on to Wittgenstein (1969); and Habermas (1978); and Sartre (2012). This journey was one from which there was no going back. Once you begin to deeply question the basis on which you understand the world, you can’t then go back and rest happily with what you then realise are deeply problematic assumptions. So, with my supervisor’s seemingly innocuous sentence I would be forever changed. Ultimately it became a deeply personal discovery which would change the way I would research, think, consult and be in the world.

As a researcher, the social constructionist perspective that I am working within has provided me with enriching and stimulating ways to rethink leadership and explore how leadership is accomplished in organizations. Yet it has also presented significant challenges because this form of reflexive scholarship “raises fundamental questions about our ability as researchers to capture the complex, interactional and emergent nature of social experience” (Cunliffe, 2003: 984). Researchers working in this way have had to cast aside the security that following a well-established positivistic methodology provides and lean into a research endeavour which is quite challenging.

Part of the challenge is that reflexive scholars’ work is often judged and measured against the same criteria as scholars working with more well-established perspectives for “in the modernist zeitgeist, it is the rational voice that should prevail in the interminable contest of opinions” (Gergen, 2009: 359). If we accept that “we need to recognize our philosophical commitments and enact their internal logic” (Cunliffe, 2003: 985) then social constructionist researchers will ask different questions that will consist of atypical research objects and will be conducted using opposing methodologies from those working in a

modernist tradition. Measured against quality criteria that belongs to a positivist perspective, post-modern research it will therefore undoubtedly be found wanting. Morgan makes this point when he suggests that “attempts in much social science debate to judge the utility of different research strategies in terms of universal criteria based on the importance of generalizability, predictability and control, explanation of variance, meaningful understanding, or whatever else are inevitably flawed: These criteria inevitably favour research strategies consistent with the assumptions that generate such criteria as meaningful guidelines for the evaluation of research. It is simply inadequate to attempt to justify a particular style of research in terms of assumptions that give rise to that style of research” (1983[1]: 15). That said, there remains the possibility that interpretivist research is regarded as ‘less than’ traditional approaches in the social sciences.

Indeed, we undertake our research in a context and in this regard I was perplexed that during my course study what had been the Faculty of Management at Glasgow University became the Adam Smith Business School. Adam Smith: that denizen of rational thought and logical positivism was now my PhD school’s namesake, who believed “Great ambition, the desire for real superiority, of leading and directly, seems to be altogether peculiar to man, and speech is the great instrument of ambition” (Klayvas, 2001: 406). I was left to ponder my relative status in a business school that was choosing to align itself with an economic perspective. As a social constructionist scholar, how acceptable am I – are my views – in the Adam Smith Business School?

Unlike positivistic research, I make no attempt to position my work as a definitive truth. Of course I have faithfully endeavoured to undertake a research process which is trustworthy and authentic and not only to explicate at each stage the intellectual turns that I took to enable the reader to determine for him or herself if this was appropriate. At the heart of my research is a stance with other social constructionist researchers who “share in their discontent with the individualist tradition” (Gergen, 2009: xxvii).

The beauty of studying the relational is its “infinite richness and ever-shifting contours” (Hycner, 2009: 7), and yet, this is also its challenge. The challenge is to avoid the natural temptation to either objectify or subjectify our relational nature. As a PhD research project, this work is both individual and collective: individual in that the final artefact must be said to belong to and be a product of my own work. Indeed, the university regulations oblige me at the beginning of the thesis to provide an author’s declaration that “except where

explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work”. But can such an endeavour really ever be *our own work*? In order to be true to what I was seeing in LocalGov, I had to test my assumptions, and mediate and modify my thinking in open dialogue with others. The act of studying the relational was ultimately a relational act in and of itself. The insights and conclusions that I reached “arise out of mutual efforts, and are always subject to an ongoing dialogue and corrective” (Hycner, 2009: 7).

However there was a practical matter of completing a PhD, of pragmatically positioning myself in a philosophical tradition and making sure my research question, method and approach were all consistent and that I could account for my decisions. As the deadline approached, these more practical considerations came to the fore, but with a great deal of background unease. How could I be sure that the position I was taking was the position I would take in 5 or ten years from now? How did I know, with the only limited and partial knowledge I that currently have that what I was committing to the thesis would have any longevity? Of course I can't know any of these and I found I had to live with the unease. We can only make the best decisions we can with the knowledge and wisdom that we have now. To later assess our decisions harshly with additional information and the benefit of greater experience and wisdom, and hindsight would be unkind and unfair to myself. So I have to live with being where I am on my journey. To not review this artefact with more experience and wisdom and knowledge would actually mean I had become stuck in a way of thinking about the world that would be intransigent, so I will try and review it later with kindness.

It has been my experience that a PhD is essentially an exercise in finding out who we are and how we want to be in the world. Some researchers – particularly those working in a positivist tradition would reject this idea. They believe that they, the researcher, should sit outside of their work, almost as if it came into being *through* them but not *of* them. As I began this study I too held such a belief yet it quickly became evident to me that as I began to think about and explore these issues they were, for me, deeply problematic. If we subscribe to an interpretivist approach we invariably open ourselves up to the messiness of the work. The process itself invites us to engage with our own self and what we bring to the research so that as we expand knowledge through the research we simultaneously expand ourselves.

As I reflect on this at the end of a PhD process, I acknowledge that I can see this is what I wanted all along – even if I didn't know this consciously at the beginning of my studies. Something happened recently that brought this realisation into a sharp focus. A colleague of mine recently died of cancer aged 54. At his memorial service, on every chair lay a stone: it was a gift for each of us. These stones were bright and shiny and smooth to touch. During the service, we were told a little known secret about my colleague. He had spent many hours of his free time scouring the beaches of his native Ayrshire and collecting scraggy, unimpressive stones and taking them home with him. In his garage, he had a 'stone tumbler' in which he would place the stones and leave for work. Throughout the day, the stone tumbler would tumble the stones around and around and around. During the process, the stones would knock the hard edges off of each other and in so doing the stones would become shiny and smooth. He believed in an ancient Scottish wisdom that inside every stone lay the stone's soul and that by tumbling the stones, its soul was released. In choosing your seat at the memorial service you were effectively choosing your stone – the one that best connected its soul with yours. This metaphor touched me very, very deeply. I realised as I drove home from the service that I had hoped that my PhD would have been for me like the stone tumbler was for those scraggy, unimpressive stones. It would help connect me to my soul.

Appendix 1

Letter to participants outlining my ethical requirements to them

Dear [participant name]

I am a part-time PhD research student at the University of Glasgow in the Department of Management. The purpose of this letter is to invite you to take part in my research project. This letter outlines the nature of the project, the methods I will use for collecting and analysing data and how this data will be used, or could be used in future.

This letter has a number of attachments. These include:

- An information sheet that outlines my ethical obligations in relation to this research. How I intend to collect and use data, and how I will protect your anonymity and confidentiality.
- A consent form for you to sign, subject to you being entirely satisfied with the details outlined in this letter and the attached information sheet.

Having completed dissertations for both an MSc and an MBA, I have experience in conducting management research within organizations. This research project has had approval from the University of Glasgow (Faculty of Law, Business and Social Sciences) Ethics Committee and I am bound to adhere to their professional Code of Conduct which is in turn guided by general principles of ethical research with human subjects. My PhD Supervisor is Professor Robert MacIntosh. Should you wish to discuss my research with him, you can contact at [REDACTED].

Please take time to review the attached information sheet. Only when you are entirely satisfied should you sign the attached consent form and return it to me in the stamped addressed envelope.

Thank you in advance.

Yours sincerely

Jacqueline Conway

Appendix 2

Summary of PhD research to participants to meet the requirements of the University of Glasgow Ethics Committee approval

Jacqueline Conway is a part-time PhD student at the University of Glasgow, Department of Management. She is being supervised by Professor Robert MacIntosh. Both Jacqueline and Robert are bound by the University's Code of Ethics for undertaking research with human subjects in organizations. Both are happy to sign confidentiality agreements.

Research Question

How is relational leadership accomplished?

Much of the Leadership literature to date has focussed on leadership as a 'trait' or characteristic of a specific leader. From this has come ideas of 'situational leadership' where an effective leader is one whose characteristics match a particular circumstance; charismatic leaders, who have the ability to engender great loyalty from their 'followers' and transformational leaders, who have the necessary suite of traits and skills to effect transformational change in an organization.

More recently we have seen the emergence in a very small body of literature on the idea of leadership as a social process that happens in groups of people rather than a trait that a person 'has'. It is this area of leadership that is of interest in this research.

This research is interested in the way top teams identify issues or problems; how they make sense of these; how they appraise various options; and finally how they make decisions as to which solution they should choose.

This research is specifically interested, therefore, in how 'relational leadership' is accomplished in teams and which group processes they employ to accomplish it.

Research Approach

Jacqueline wishes to undertake a single in-depth case study with a top team in an organization going through major strategic challenges. The research would consist of Jacqueline observing your Executive Team meetings, all of which would be recorded. It would also include Jacqueline conducting 1-2-1 semi-structured interviews with members of the team to gain your views and assessment of what took place in the meetings.

The benefits to the client

Jacqueline would offer the insights – totally confidentially – to you on the effective ways you are engaging in group process and how leadership is dispersed in the group. Should the case study organization wish, Professor Robert MacIntosh would be prepared to offer a Master class for the team.

No charges will be made in respect of any part of this research to the case study organization.

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