
Organisational Change and the Politics of Identity

Four reflexive inquiries into ordinary power struggles and
their role in shaping organisations and individuals

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When those who have power to manipulate changes act as if they have only to explain, and, when their explanations are not at once accepted, shrug off oppositions as ignorance or prejudice, they express a profound contempt for the meaning of lives other than their own. For the reformers have already assimilated these changes to their purposes, and worked out a reformulation which makes sense to them, perhaps through months or years of analysis and debate. If they deny others the chance to do the same, they treat them as puppets dangling by the threads of their own conceptions.

(Marris 1974/1986: 155)

Abstract

This thesis sheds light on the ideals we construct in the workplace and how these emergent ideologies mask over power dynamics and political struggles for meaning and identity. Challenging the idea that ‘office politics’ or ‘small-p politics’ get in the way of change, it is argued that these relational dynamics, where power is inevitably involved, are the source of both organisational stability and change. The research contains four reflexive inquiries into these ordinary power struggles and their role in shaping organisations and individuals. Uniquely, this research draws on the field of bereavement studies to explore the intensified political struggle during periods of disruptive change and loss where organisational death and grief is effectively masked over by the dominant ideology of the entrepreneurial self, which serves to discipline people and encourages individuals to take responsibility for dealing with the consequences of endings and losses and closes down spaces for new social sensemaking that may challenge the prevailing ‘truths’ and thus the existing power figurations. Spanning over 10 years with the first two projects written in 2007/8 and the last two in 2017/19 the thesis also shows the immense power the ideology of the group one belongs to holds over one’s thinking and how engaging in reflexive practice in a community of research with a plurality of voices belonging to other groups and figurations is crucial to gain sufficient detachment to be able to notice and question what counts as ‘truth’ or ‘common sense’. It is argued that:

Organisational continuity and change emerge in the interweaving of intentions and actions of many people in local interaction and change requires feelings of loss as new beginnings inevitably also involve endings. Severe loss or threat of loss can shake one’s sense of who one is and can trigger intense emotions and struggle to regain meaning. The process of grief is a renegotiation of meaning and of relationships and a repair of the basic plot of the life story and sense of self, which calls for witnessing and validation by significant others and social systems. Meaning made promotes growth. Impatiently negating the importance of social sensemaking comes with increased risk of employee withdrawal and reduced engagement. Taking the political struggle for meaning and identity seriously is fundamental to connect the past, present and future in a meaningful way and thus key for the construction of organisations – and of society.

It is argued for:

Taking the political struggle for meaning and identity seriously by increasing our awareness of our historical, cultural and relational embeddedness and ability to tolerate our own and other people’s distress and anxiety so that we may be able to participate in the social reconstruction of meaning and identity perturbed by loss.

Key words: organisational change, meaning, identity, negotiated sensemaking, power struggle, power dynamics, organisational death, accommodation of loss, grief, bereavement, venture closure, lived experience, reflexivity

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INTRODUCTION

This research focuses on how we make sense of what we are doing together and particularly what is being masked over as we go about in our daily business and as we engage in our attempts to make change happen. The methodology is based on reflexive narratives and the thesis contains several narratives from my own work experience. I would like to underline for the reader already at the very beginning that these narratives in themselves are no claims to truth and the research is not aimed at reaching the most accurate description of singular episodes. The narratives, when explored rigorously in a community of research and with a plurality of perspectives, function as entry points to make new sense of wider social trends and how these are particularized in the situations we find ourselves in. Taking a pragmatic stance to research, I am not looking for the truth about a reality but searching for what can increase the power to act in similar situations by making accessible new ways of making sense to a wider community of practitioners.

The research project spans over a period of 10 years during which there has been a growing interest in Western societies on creativity and innovation and in particular on venturing social impact initiatives with a 30% increase in European venture philanthropy and social investment from 2013 to 2016 (Pimperl et al 2018). But aims of making a positive social impact can paradoxically dehumanize business and society. Frequently referring to Schumpeter's (1942) work on the entrepreneur as a creative destructor of the old, the ideology of social innovation praises creativity and innovation and stigmatizes routine and stability as resistance to chance. This effectively glosses over the darker side of innovation; disruption, death and destruction, and silences political resistance, conflict, struggle and pain. I have explored what is masked over and some of the potential consequences of the heroic ideal of the high achiever and the social entrepreneur.

I have myself been a passionate social entrepreneur, seduced by the golden mask of the heroic innovator. Starting more than 10 years ago, I have through reflexive practice inquired into my ways of working and thinking about what we are doing together at work and how this is reflected in our wider social trends. The theme of loss and grief emerged strongly in project 4 but can be seen throughout the research as the disappointment of not living up to ideals and the struggle to make sense of this, a struggle that to a large extent is hidden from the public discourse in fear of stigmatization.

I still aim at contributing to the betterment of society, but with a more nuanced understanding that 'better' is a contested concept and that working hard to improve something sometimes paradoxically lead to the opposite. My research shows the importance of exploring and dealing with the inevitable endings, loss and grief that comes together with innovation and the need to make space for the struggle to reconstruct meaning and identity in the wake of loss.

The thesis is structured in the following way:

- I begin by explaining reflexive narrative inquiry as methodology and how the study of local interactions can provide insights about wider social and organisational trends
- Project 1 is an intellectual autobiography that establishes the researcher as a reflexive practitioner. It shows emergent awareness of how my own thinking is embedded in a historical and relational context. I begin to explore what is masked over by current ideologies and implicitly the theme of loss emerges as the cost of living up to sometimes unachievable ideals
- Project 2 is an inquiry into theoretical assumptions and ideologies of coaching, what they mask over and the potential costs of working with a coach to live up to ideals
- Project 3 explores an attempt to be a social impact consultancy and why having a social impact is not as straight forward as one might think. The focus is on what is glossed over; conflict, disappointment and power dynamics
- Project 4 directly explores the theme of organisational death and loss and the political struggle for meaning and identity during the closure of the social impact consultancy
- The synopsis explores the movement of thought over 10 years by analysing the four projects considering the emergent theme of loss
- Conclusion and contribution place my research in contemporary scholarship and shows the contribution to knowledge and practice
- I end with a narrative from the last residential. This experience brought together the learning and insights over ten years in a way I was both prepared and unprepared for

The projects are kept as they were originally written, which allows for a recognition and reflection of the movement of thought over the ten years of reflexive practice.

METHODOLOGY

Being scientific about the social

In the following, I examine how the rigorous study of ordinary local interaction can provide insights about wider organisational and societal patterns, and thus how the narrative inquiry into my own lived experience as a researcher in organisations can contribute to knowledge and practice.

Introduction

There is not just one way to be scientific. Being scientific about a subject depends on what the subject is. 'From astronomy to physics to zoology, the armamentarium of the inquirer is unique' (Thomas 2012: 28). From a natural sciences perspective, high-quality research is expected to produce true, objective knowledge for generalizations and theory-building. This thinking has been influential also in the field of social sciences and is still so for many empirically oriented social researchers (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000). Since the end of the 1960s, however, this positivist view received a great deal of criticism where the claim has been that 'culture, language, selective perception, subjective forms of cognition, social conventions, politics, ideology, power and narration all, in a complicated way, permeate scientific activity' (ibid: 2). According to Weick (1999), there has been a 'reflexive turn' in management research since the 1980s, with a focus on the need for the researcher to become increasingly more aware of her unexamined metatheoretical commitments and their origins (Johnson and Duberly 2003). Developing the researcher's reflexive ability is at the core of this doctorate programme.

Methodological position

The central theoretical perspective of the doctorate programme is that of organisations as nothing more or less than continuously iterated patterns of interaction between persons. Patterns emerge, without a blueprint or a plan, because of everything people do and don't do in their everyday interactions. Insights from the vast field of complexity sciences are taken up by analogy and combined with social sciences to develop this argument. From complexity sciences the focus is on the patterning phenomenon of emergence, and from the social sciences, combining process sociology and pragmatic philosophy, the focus is on the importance of human interdependence, expressed through power relations in everyday conversational activity. The dynamic patterns of interaction, which by this argument are organisations, emerge in narrative forms. We paradoxically form and are formed by narratives in our local interactions.

Connecting theory and method, the methodological position of the programme is therefore one in which the researcher is not an objective observer gathering data, but both participant and

observer at the same time, exploring everyday experiences of work through multiple iterations of narratives in a community of inquiry. It is a group-based professional doctorate, which runs psychodynamically. This is both to provide a plurality of perspectives for exploring the iterated narratives and to assist each other in surfacing habitual and un-reflected assumptions and thus make the research more plausible, but also because the most potent place for learning about local interaction is in a group. All of this develops the researcher's reflexive ability.

Wanting to gain insight into the negotiated sensemaking of loss and how this relates to organisational change, I have found the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating with its reflexive narrative methodology, highly appropriate.

In the following, I give a more detailed account of the central theoretical perspective of the program and the research methodology. Readers who are familiar with both may prefer to jump directly to project 1 and come back to this later, if needed.

From systems to dynamic patterns of interaction

A systemic process perspective tends to posit that managers can and should take an objective viewpoint from outside the organisation, seen as a system, anticipate the future, and design or shape the organisational processes that move the system in the wanted direction (Stacey 2011). This perspective abstracts from everyday interactions of people and the focus is on extracting and analysing data to develop strategies, gap analyses, and plans for how to move the entire organisation (or chosen divisions or team) to a more successful future. Such an approach treats the world 'as if' it was simple and it is easy to forget that the tools and techniques, models and abstractions we rely upon are in fact simplifications. Of course, an endless search to take 'everything' into account all the time would be paralysing. But when we forget the 'as if' and start believing that organisational work *should* be simple and predictable, we can get disappointed and frustrated when it continuously shows us that it's neither – and it is crucial to understand why not.

Stacey and colleagues (i.e. Stacey 2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2006, 2007, 2010, 2011, 2012; Griffin 2002; Shaw 2002; Stacey et al 2004; Stacey and Griffin 2005, Mowles 2011, 2015) introduce a very different way of thinking about organisations as continuously iterated patterns of interaction between persons, as complex responsive processes of relating. This approach can help to explain the difficulty in 'implementing' strategies and planned change, and why such initiatives often surprise us with unintended outcomes (Dopson 2005).

Stacey bridges the American pragmatist Mead's symbolic interactionism to Elias's process sociology by drawing on analogies from the complexity sciences to develop a theory of human action. In his theory of symbolic interactionism, Mead argues that meaning emerges in the social act

of gesture and response in a 'conversation of gestures' (Mead 1934). Meaning is socially constructed and continuously negotiated. You could say that Mead explores and explains how this social construction of meaning happens in the microprocesses of human relating and communicating. Elias (1939) was also interested in the nature of human interaction and interdependence. He concluded that the development of a society was not due to long-term planning, but 'the consequence of the interweaving, the interplay of the intentions and actions of many, many people' (Elias as quoted by Stacey 2012: 17). Stacey asks the question, 'How could continuous circular processes of gesturing and responding between thousands, even millions of people produce the kind of long-term, widespread coherence or patterns that Elias talks about?' (Stacey 2003a: 65). He draws on complexity sciences to offer important insights into this issue, showing how patterns emerge and change from the local interaction of agents, without following any blueprint and in a way that makes long-term predictability and forecasting impossible. If this is a plausible analogy to the emergence and movement of trends, patterns of human behaviour, that are central to Stacey's argument, then it becomes of utmost importance to take the micro-interactions of people seriously and stop pretending that they are of no consequence to the big picture.

The complex responsive processes perspective directs attention to how identity and intention emerge in these local interactions taking the form of conversations between people. Neither researcher nor manager can step outside of the conversational processes that are the organisation, because the work (and life in general) requires relating to other people. We affect each other. There is no objective, external position from which one can 'operate on' the organisation as a whole. There is only participation in relation to others in local interactions. The work of managers and consultants thus becomes the art of participating as best we can in these local interactions, influencing and being influenced to get things done. We negotiate our different worldviews, our different values and agendas, we compete and collaborate, include and exclude each other continuously. This is the politics of everyday life. Moving from a systemic perspective where the thinking and sensemaking is abstracted from the everyday experience, the responsive processes perspective invites us to reflect on what we are actually doing in these ordinary, everyday political activities of leading, managing, and organising. We are invited to take our experience seriously as participants and observers at the same time as reflexive practitioners.

Making a case for the central role of reflexivity in leadership in her article on 'The Philosopher Leader', Ann Cunliffe (2009) differentiates self-reflexivity, with its roots in phenomenology and social constructionism, from critical reflexivity, which is grounded in critical theory and poststructuralism. Self-reflexivity questions our ways of being and acting in the world, how we make sense of our lived experience, and what is involved in acting responsibly and ethically.

Critical reflexivity aims to ‘unsettle the assumptions underlying textual, theoretical and ideological positions as a basis for thinking more critically about social and organisational policies and practice’ (ibid: 93).

This is precisely what we do as researchers at the DMan programme; we inquire into our lived experience as practitioners, we question our ways of being and acting in the world and we unsettle habitual ways of making sense as we situate them in a wider social context and start questioning them. The doctorate program is part time and requires the participant to be a practitioner and researcher at the same time. The practice informs the research and the research informs the practice at the same time. During the period of the programme, the participants, who are also leaders or consultants, thus develop not only new knowledge but also changes their practice at the same time, through developing their reflexive ability.

Reflexive Narrative Inquiry – four projects and a synopsis

Stacey (2003a: 327) argues that the dynamic patterns of interaction emerge in *narrative forms*, which can be described in terms of continually iterated themes patterning the experience of being together. We assemble and reassemble events as they are experienced into meaningfully temporalized narratives (Rhodes and Brown 2005: 172), and these narratives are contested and decided in a never-ending flow of interaction. If we follow this argument, what we perceive as ‘truth’ or common sense is the story or stories that are espoused by many. Not because they are a correct representation of a reality, but because in the process of negotiation between different ways of making sense of our world, these stories have become dominant and others marginalized. Thus, exploring narratives is no more and no less than exploring patterns of interaction, power dynamics, and politics. Narrative inquirers ‘study an individual’s experience in the world and, through the study, seek ways of enriching and transforming that experience for themselves and others’ (Clandinin and Rosiek 2007: 42). Relationships live at the heart of narrative inquiry:

Narrative inquiry is the study of experience, and experience, as John Dewey taught, is a matter of people in relation contextually and temporally. Participants are in relation, and we as researchers are in relation to participants. Narrative inquiry is an experience. It is people in relation studying with people in relation. (Clandinin and Connelly 2000: 189)

Analysis of narratives is now considered a well-established research method (Czarniawska 2004). The narratives serve as the ‘raw material’ from which propositional themes emerge (Stacey and Griffin 2005: 9–10). By writing and exploring multiple iterations of a narrative over time, the researcher can explore the movement of thought, the movement of patterns of sensemaking, which is the political struggle for meaning.

The DMan thesis consists of four projects, generally developed over a period of 3 years, where all except the first project are reflexive narrative inquiries. My own research has spanned over 10 years, with an 8-year break in my process of reflexive inquiry. This has provided additional insights into the impact of a reflexive practice.

The first project is an intellectual autobiography where I began to practice reflexive skills through exploring how my ways of thinking and making sense of my experience as a manager or consultant had developed over time. This project allowed me to start to gain an increased intellectual detachment and to start questioning what I had seen as common sense or 'truth'.

To acquire insight into human figurations, it is necessary to achieve considerable intellectual detachment from the figuration of which one is a member, from its tendencies to change, its 'inevitability', and from the forces which interlocking but opposing groups exert over each other. (Elias 1970: 165)

The intellectual detachment Elias writes about is necessary because the dominant sensemaking of the human figurations we belong to or want to belong to 'has us' or holds power over us, as I argued above by drawing on Flyvbjerg (1998). It defines common sense. The process of becoming increasingly aware of our assumptions continues throughout the research process. When the four projects are approved by peers and supervisors, the researcher on the DMan writes a synopsis. This is not a traditional summary, but a further reflexive review that explores the movement of thought over the four projects.

Insight into the relative autonomy and immanent dynamics of a figuration is impossible for the people who form that figuration *as long as they are totally involved and entangled* in the altercations and conflicts stemming from their inter-dependencies. (Elias 1970: 165, emphasis added)

Engaging with difference in a community of inquiry is a way to increase our detachment and become more aware of how the interdependencies are influencing our sensemaking. Engaging with people who are not part of the same figurations allows for alternative ways of making sense of our experience. It enables us to see what is generalizable in the sense of being transferable and what is specific for the situation explored.

Researching in a community of inquiry

According to Pardales and Girod (2006), the origins of a community of inquiry goes back to the philosophical work of C. S. Peirce. Being both a scientist and a philosopher, Peirce aimed to bring scientific inquiry to philosophy without becoming Cartesian. One of his central hypotheses was that it is necessary for us 'to subject our thinking to standards that lie outside our own interests,

concerns and reflections' (ibid: 302). This can be achieved by belonging to a community of researchers.

The community of inquiry at the DMan programme consists of peer research students and a small group of the faculty at Hertfordshire Business School. The DMan students belong to learning sets with 2-3 peer researchers and a supervisor. In the learning sets we read, comment upon and discuss each other's iterated narratives extensively. We get to know each other's ways of thinking and can thus also reflect on movement of thought and changes in ways of making sense. The work is highly collaborative yet at the same time unique for the individual researcher as an inquiry into her or his lived experience.

With diverse backgrounds and experiences, programme participants along with the faculty provide multiple perspectives for exploring a problem, or a lived experience, to make sense of what is going on. Belonging to different human figurations with more or less different ways of making sense of the world and our experiences as managers and consultants, we can help each other achieve increased intellectual detachment. The whole group of ~20 researchers plus faculty meet for a long weekend residential four times a year and the learning sets have video conferences in between these residentials.

Reflective thinking, Dewey argues (2007: 10), involves a willingness to 'endure a condition of mental unrest and disturbance'. The suspended judgement required while working to make new sense of what we experience as unsettling is 'likely to be somewhat painful' (ibid). Being in a place of not knowing can be painful in itself; but in this doctorate program what you question is also your own deeply held beliefs about how to operate as a manager and consultant, which relates to your sense of self, and this can raise existential anxiety.

Effective research is potentially transformative of identity (who am I, who are we, what are we doing, how do we now go on together), and is therefore bound to expose vulnerability and raise existential anxiety with all the emotion this brings with it. (Stacey and Griffin 2005: 10)

An important aspect of becoming a reflexive practitioner is therefore to increase our capacity to tolerate this anxiety and mental unrest. Central to the residentials are the community meetings, held on three of the mornings, where the large group meets in an open circle – with no agenda. One aspect of these meetings is to develop the researchers' capacity to notice the emergence and movement of communicative patterns – in other words, complex responsive processes of relating. Emerging themes are being articulated by peers and faculty members and the powerful dynamics of inclusion and exclusion are viscerally experienced; the researcher is sensitized to notice these microprocesses, and at the same time develops an increased capacity to endure the

discomfort of anxiety and shame that generally comes with the potential of being seen as 'unworthy and excluded' (Stacey 2003a: 326):

Any sense that one gets of being about to be exposed to shame and exclusion can quite easily trigger some form of panic, which is the fear of the fear of being exposed. And responses to shame and panic can very easily take the form of aggression and other destructive processes such as envy and jealousy. (ibid)

Adding to this, it can also lead to retreat or silence. This exploration of the direct experience of these dynamics is central to the programme, so full participation in all the residential weekends is mandatory.

'Breakdown'-oriented research with mystery as method

In arguing for an aspect of mystery as method, Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) introduce 'breakdowns' – experiences of situations where our usual ways of operating are not helpful – as opportunities for investigation and knowledge generation. 'A breakdown in understanding represents an excellent opportunity to start a process of theoretical problematization' (ibid: 65). This is where we start our narrative writing in Projects 2–4. The individual researcher whose work as a manager or consultant is the object of their study finds herself in a situation at work that is puzzling and does not make common sense. Shotter describes this as being 'struck by what is unfamiliar' and that these 'striking moments' can leave us 'bewildered as to how to go on' (2016: 150). A breakdown is an opportunity for knowledge generation only if it can be developed into a 'mystery', following Alvesson and Kärreman (2011). Breakdowns can become a mystery only through good grounding in the research literature. DMan researchers take up literature in an emergent way by engaging with scholarship that is relevant to the explored breakdown to deepen the inquiry. If the reading, which requires broad scholarship, an ability to use a plurality of perspectives, and reflexive critique (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011: 71) suggests that the practitioner-researcher's puzzle is underexplored or might challenge existing theory it develops into what Alvesson and Kärreman call a 'genuine mystery': 'A research community is an important resource for establishing and recognizing genuine mysteries' (ibid). A mystery is solved when the practitioner can make good enough sense of what she is experiencing to be able to move on; and a good mystery should have relevance and be useful to others in similar situations.

Developing knowledge for action

Elias (1987: 16) argues that sociological theories of knowledge are 'universals of processes' and claims that 'one can build up a small-scale explanatory model of the figuration one believes to be

universal'. What happens to a human being is not singular but is linked to a social trajectory (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). As with fractals (a recursive and self-similar mathematical set, and a phenomenon referred to in the complexity sciences due to its tendency to appear nearly the same at different levels), we can find and explore patterns that show up that are locally unique yet similar to patterns showing up elsewhere. And when a practitioner recognizes a pattern in her own experience, it resonates with others; and the rigorous examination of experience by researchers in similar situations, similar patterns of interaction, can prove very useful.

The kind of generalizability that I am looking for is not necessarily one which can be proven one way or another, but which triggers *recognition in the reader*, and perhaps *rich resonances* with the reader's own experience, and opens up the lines of enquiry and richer perspectives (Mowles 2015: 13, emphasis added)

Joas (1993: 21) argues that 'truth' is not about getting a correct 'representation of reality in cognition'; rather, it expresses an 'increase of the power to act in relation to an environment' (ibid); according to Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000: 83), 'our understanding is not theoretical but aims at mastering a practical situation'. This could collapse into relativism, but as I have argued above, the developed know-how must be tested for resonance and plausibility in a wider research community with a plurality of voices.

Brinkmann advocates a pragmatic pluralism in thinking ontologically about the social world. He argues that qualitative research into everyday life is not just possible, but that it can be of high scientific value, potentially equal to the quality of much larger research projects. There is quality in what he calls 'everyday analysis' if it meets three criteria: epistemic, aesthetic, and moral (Brinkmann 2012) – what Brinkmann calls 'truth, beauty, and goodness', echoing older philosophies such as Plato.

1. **Truth (epistemic – plausibility):** Brinkmann draws on Elliott and colleagues (1999) to argue that qualitative analyses can be true when they are honest; when the researcher specifies her theoretical perspective; when she situates the persons, episodes, and objects that she addresses, gives examples that back up her conclusions, offers a coherent account of that which can be represented coherently, and offers fragments of that which is fragmented; and when she creates a story that resonates in the reader. This is similar to what Geertz (1973) called a 'thick description' – a description of human behaviour that also describes the context in such a way that the behaviour becomes meaningful to an outsider.
2. **Beauty (aesthetic – resonance):** If the reader is not moved in some way by what she reads, the text will not make a difference. Writing is a craft, and a piece of high-quality research, particularly from a pragmatic stance, influences the reader's thinking and action. Brinkmann

exemplifies what he means by aesthetics in writing: ‘when the researcher reports many concrete details, including their own feelings and doubts, communicates structurally complex narratives with honesty, credibility and vulnerability’ (Brinkmann 2012: 181).

3. **Goodness (moral – usefulness):** ‘A sign that one has succeeded in one’s pursuits as a qualitative everyday life researcher is, from the phronetic and pragmatic perspectives, that one’s everyday life has been enriched. Either because one has solved a problem, achieved a deeper understanding of something or acquired a capacity to act in more fruitful ways [...]’ (ibid: 83, emphasis added).

To summarize, my research of my own everyday experience and relationships in my organisational life can be said to be of scientific quality if it is *plausible*, if it *resonates* within a wider community of practitioners, and if it is *useful* in enabling new ways of being and acting together.

Similar research methodologies and how they differ

Action research

In the 1940s, Kurt Lewin advocated his vision of ‘action research’ where community practitioners analyse and contribute to solve societal problems (Stokols 2006). Effective collaboration among researcher, community members and policy makers are implicit in Lewin’s concept of action research (ibid). Formally, action research is ‘the study of a social situation carried out by those involved in that situation in order to improve both their practice and the quality of their understanding’ (Winter and Munn-Giddings 2001). This immediately seems very similar to what we do in the DMan programme, and the aim is the same: to improve practice and quality of understanding.

There seems to be a much stronger emphasis on solving societal or organisational problems in this approach. The DMan methodology aims at developing new knowledge and practice.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative approach that has become one of the most commonly used methodologies in psychology (Smith 2011). The first IPA paper was published in 1996 (ibid). It has its theoretical origins in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography. It is concerned with lived experience (phenomenology) and sensemaking (double hermeneutic, as the researcher is trying to make sense of how the participant is making sense of their experience) and committed to analyse each case in detail (ideographic). Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty are frequently cited. The approach aims to offer insights into how a person, situated in a particular

context, makes sense of a particular phenomenon. Cope uses this research methodology in studying entrepreneurial learning from failure and argues for its capacity to provide 'situated insights, rich details and thick descriptions' (Cope 2011: 608).

IPA requires intensive qualitative analysis of personal accounts, which are most commonly collected as in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Smith 2011). In this, it differs from the methodology used in the DMan programme, where I have explored my own lived experience through reflexive narratives as part of a community of inquiry in which the researcher can never be objective or external, but is continuously affecting and being affected by the very phenomenon under investigation.

Auto-ethnography

In her article on auto-ethnography, Sally Denshire (2014) gives a theoretical overview of auto-ethnography. It is a relatively young field (the first auto-ethnography was published in the 1960s) and has been criticized for being too subjective. These are still not uncommon objections, but while auto-ethnography does contain elements of autobiography it goes beyond the writing of selves and invites the writers to see themselves as socially, historically, and relationally situated (ibid). Compared to research methodologies where data is collected by the researcher through interviews, and where the researcher is seen more as an external observer, 'an auto-ethnographic representation of practice can function as something of a corrective to depersonalized and disembodied accounts of professional work' (ibid: 836).

The aim of auto-ethnographic work is to extend sociological understanding by scrutinizing dominant narratives, including the researcher's own espoused narratives, which means that 'the discomfort of stepping outside your own received frame is part of the auto-ethnographic task' (ibid: 62). This is very similar to the DMan approach, which also involves a continuous exploration of the researcher's 'frame', or theoretical assumptions, with help from peers. Explaining auto-ethnography, Ellis (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 737) writes that by studying 'a particular life, I hope to understand a way of life', and this approach of exploring the particular in order to make new sense of wider patterns is arguably the same as the DMan approach, where the core argument for doing this is based upon insights from the complexity sciences. The difference between auto-ethnography and reflexive narrative in a community of inquiry is the focus on community. Auto-ethnography continues to be critiqued for its subjective account; and this is probably why a new trend toward collaborative accounts is emerging – stories from more than one point of view, to break the self/other dichotomy (Denshire 2014).

Research ethics as practical judgement

'Relational ethics is an emerging growth area for auto-ethnographers, given the ethical implications for everyone represented in a transgressive telling' (Denshire 2014: 831). When we write about ourselves, we also write about others (Ellis 2007); we are exposing both ourselves and our own vulnerabilities, and those of others. 'How do we honour our relational responsibilities yet present our lives in a complex and truthful way for readers?' Ellis asks (ibid: 14). There is no straightforward answer to this, which is why we keep investigating this question as part of the DMan programme.

Bardone and Lind (2016) argue for a categorical shift from understanding the role of ethics in research in a technocratic way, as a 'reflexive add-on' and adherence to pre-existing rules and guidelines, to a phronetic-based approach where the ability to apply judgement and exercise discretion is key. In social research it is not about 'checkmark ethics', as they call it, but rather a continuous moment-to-moment consideration of relational responsibility. The key element of research ethics, I would argue, is therefore to develop a capacity for practical judgement.

Becoming more aware of our own habituated ways of behaving and making sense, through increased reflexive capabilities, and thus becoming better skilled at practical judgement; one could argue that the process of ethical deliberations in the form of practical judgement is at the core of the DMan. It is an ongoing process, both in learning sets and in the wider research community.

I have discussed what to share of my research, and with whom, multiple times in my learning set. I have sent Projects 3 and 4 to my business partner and we have had several conversations about the research. We continue our relation. I have informed the board members about the research. I have met with two of them. I am very aware that anonymity is weak, given the limited number of people involved in the narratives. This was also commented upon during the viva. Everyone involved will of course have their own version of what happened. This is part of the negotiated sensemaking that I have explored, and this negotiation will continue, also after the thesis has been submitted. Again, the aim of this research has not been to claim truth or to find a correct representation of a reality, but to explore the dynamics of this negotiated sensemaking and how we are influenced by wider social trends at the same time as we perpetuate these trends in our ongoing struggles to make sense of what is going on and to dominate the story of what happened. My own research is of course part of the very same negotiated sensemaking, which is why a core part of the program is to increase the reflexivity of the researcher, as commented above.

Limitations of this research

This research is not an empirical study claiming objectivity over and above the plausibility to and resonance with a wider community of research. As described in the argument for methodology

above, there are many alternative methodological approaches for exploring how change happens in organisations. Investigations treating organisational practice in a more detached way by collecting data through interviews or quantitatively, abstract away from the world of practice. This can be useful to highlight some of the forces that shape practice, for example by identifying patterns in aggregate phenomena (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011). But scientific rationality theories, assuming the researcher as detached and objective, do not capture the logic of practice, as they “do not deal with how the world shows up to actors embedded in relational wholes and situated in unique circumstances but, rather, with how the world appears to observers looking for patterns across different contexts and the underlying forces that shape them” (ibid. 355). Researching power dynamics, I have found this program and methodology most helpful, with its focus on developing the researcher’s reflexivity and working in a community of research.

PROJECT 1

Thinking like an engineer (written in 2007)

Introduction

I hold a Master of Science in electrical engineering and have been working with sales and business development in the IT industry for 8 years in total. As a certified professional coach, I also have about 5 years of experience in coaching, ranging from management coaching via career counselling to supported employment in the public sector.

In 2002 as I went from a career job as a sales manager at a Norwegian high-tech start-up company, MIS, to a counselling job in the public sector. The career change marked a change in focus from sales, marketing, strategy, success and effectiveness, to a focus on people, communication, and human relations.

This project is an exploration of the influences, experiences and ways of thinking that have informed my work throughout my career, and how I have thought about it through the years; it could be described as an 'intellectual autobiography'. The journey through reflections around my education, work, thoughts, and influences has set the stage for exploring several other inquiries and questions. In the final section of this paper, I summarize some of the main ideas emerging, that might form the basis for my further research.

Influenced by scientific method, Kant, and cybernetic systems thinking

I studied electronics and telecommunication at the same university as the three founders of MIS, although I did not know them at the time. I recall taking the studies very seriously. It was important to me to get good grades. My self-discipline was extreme; I recall writing notes to myself demanding me to focus, get a grip, study more and harder. I had learned from my father that I could always improve and that the way to do it was to keep looking for whatever I could become better at. One of the subjects I enjoyed was mathematics (another was psychology, but I didn't follow up on this at the time). I had always loved mathematics. I found it fascinating. A mathematical problem could keep me fixed to my desk for hours, forgetting to eat. I felt enormous satisfaction in solving difficult mathematical problems. This, combined with a strong urge to prove that women were at least as clever as men, influenced me to opt for a technical education.

My major research project at the university was mathematical modelling and simulation of a particular kind of noise in satellite systems called 'intermodulation noise'. This is the kind of noise that occurs when you modulate (combine) several signals (channels) on the same carrier wave. I could have developed a program simulating noise and experimented with channel configurations,

and this would have sufficed. But I was intrigued by the challenge of grasping the complex formulas. They were highly advanced to use, and virtually impossible to fully grasp. Yet I spent days in my study totally focused on one specific formula, apparently doing nothing but staring at a piece of paper. I was driven to *understand* the formula, not simply learn how to use it. I believe this illustrates my way of approaching a challenge: analytical, not practical, and with an intense drive. To understand, I kept analysing in search of the underlying 'truth'. Let me now look at the grounds upon which the whole scientific study is based: the scientific method.

The Scientific Revolution is commonly viewed as a foundation of modern science. It was a movement of thought that began in the 16th century with the publication of Copernicus' *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium*, in which he introduced his heliocentric theory. During the following century, there was a fundamental transformation in scientific ideas and in the more widely held picture of the universe. People came to hold that the laws of nature could be understood through human reason rather than through revelation or by appealing to the mystical.

The scientific method consists of collecting data through observation, forming a hypothesis and then testing it against the quantified data. It is assumed that the scientist is an external observer and that there are underlying laws governing what is observed. Throughout my studies at university I was trained at defining problems, conceptualizing and hypothesizing, creating theoretical models and searching for solutions that could be demonstrated in repeatable experiments. This suited me perfectly, as I enjoyed analytical work and found satisfaction in solving problems and presenting 'the solution' ('q.e.d', Latin for 'hereby proven'). Yet there was another part of me that found little expression during my studies: the more creative, spontaneous and playful aspects of my intellect. These did not fit well with the serious, rational engineer. Writing this evokes the question: Do I have this in common with other engineers? What dominating discourses in this environment may have influenced me to suppress my more unstructured, spontaneous and chaotic urges, eventually leading me (as I make sense of it now) to ignore and forget them for a long time? One of these dominating discourses is influenced by Kantian thinking.

Kant (1724–1804) was one of the most influential thinkers during the Enlightenment period (closely linked with the Scientific Revolution). Kant viewed humans as autonomous and rational beings who were able to define their goals and then take the actions required to realize them (rationalist causality). My diaries from the years at university reveal quite a lot of this thinking; setting goals, forcing myself to work hard to reach them, focusing on what was not good enough to continually improve my results. For example, a marginal note I wrote exhorts me to 'Get a grip! You need to study harder. This is not good enough and you know it'.

It would be very interesting to follow this further, to research into how dominating discourses and ideals affect the narratives I tell about myself and how I experience myself and others, publicly and in private. This will be an important part of the research in my following projects, where I will link it to different ways of thinking about authenticity. For now, the above will suffice, and I will now look at cybernetics.

Cybernetics was one of my subjects at university. A cybernetic system is self-regulating and goal-directed; it adapts to the environment using a negative feedback loop. I also took a course in Total Quality Management (TQM), which again builds upon cybernetic systems thinking. TQM places a strong focus on process measurement and controls as means of continuous improvement (self-regulation through negative feedback). I saw myself as somewhat like a cybernetic system, and I considered myself weak if I couldn't maintain self-control (cybernetic systems self-regulate). I had considerable self-discipline as a student and felt that if I worked hard enough and was disciplined enough, I would reach my pre-set goals; if I didn't, it just indicated that I should work harder.

I also remember thinking about communication between people using the model of satellite communication from my research project (code—send—reduce noise—decode). In my naivety as a young student, for a while I even believed this was a novel discovery. I found out much later that this was introduced in 1949 and is widely known as the Shannon-Weaver Model of Communication (Shannon and Weaver 1949). This model of communication fits well with cybernetic systems thinking and takes the same view of human beings as rational, autonomous beings with an internal world consisting of representations of the external world and ideas created in a mind that we then attempt to transfer to other people. The model encourages people to believe it is possible to 'get it right' and that there is an objective, ultimate truth that can be located somewhere 'out there'.

My ideologies as I started in my first job were strongly influenced by this scientific/systems thinking and rationalist causality. People were rational and focused on the tasks to be done. Self-control was not only possible, but an ideal and everything could and should be improved.

My first job (1997-2000)

My first job was as a management trainee at the well-reputed international IT corporation, Hewlett-Packard (HP). I began work in the marketing department, with the marketing director as my manager and mentor. After a few successes, and having appeared in the national newspaper twice, I moved to the services sales department to learn sales as a conscious career move. I worked in sales for 2 years, with excellent results – in the second year, achieving 150% of my predicted target, resulting in a big bonus.

Going in and out of meetings at HP, I started to notice that something (though I could not have explained exactly what) was going on. People – especially men, I thought – were ‘playing games’ to position themselves. I was amazed that so much time in meetings was wasted, in my opinion. Why couldn’t we just get down to business and get the work done? I was direct in stating my opinions, not reflecting on the effects of what I said or how I said it. I recall saying quite loudly in a meeting that ‘I do *not* agree’, and later receiving feedback from my manager that it was perhaps not the cleverest way of dealing with things (not strategic, as it embarrassed one of the sales consultants I was going to work with).

My way of working was strongly, if not entirely, flavoured by cybernetic systems thinking and its implicit view of human beings as rational, autonomous, goal-seeking individuals. I set myself high goals and deliberately communicated these to others, putting more pressure on myself to reach them. I kept working hard, and I kept seeking feedback on where and how to improve. In one way, it worked: I was successful, and considered ‘a rising star’ in the company. On the other hand, I could not rid myself of the sneaky feeling that I had just been lucky – that the success I enjoyed wasn’t entirely of my own making, and thus I wasn’t really in control. I started worrying slightly that I might eventually fail; I perceived an increasing gap between the goals I had set out for myself and my day-to-day experiences at work.

This seems to be an important part of what to explore further in my future research project. Could it be that the feeling of being an imposter arises because although one is making a real effort, such efforts are based on the idea that outcomes can be planned? As perhaps we unconsciously recognize, the future is unpredictable – so when success comes about, we cannot truly feel that it results exclusively from our own efforts. In such circumstances, it is hard not to feel fraudulent to some extent. My belief system of people being autonomous, self-controlled, goal-seeking beings with a predictable future was being challenged. My increasing sense of unease about this was probably a key influence in driving me to change jobs.

Commercializing a high-tech start-up company; MIS (2000–2002)

I encountered MIS, a Norwegian high-tech start-up company, through a friend. He spoke warmly of the promising technology and highly skilled engineers working at MIS and introduced me to the CEO. A few weeks later, I accepted the job as sales and marketing manager.

My first introduction to the employees was in what was called a MIS Summit, where everybody met to discuss technology and strategy (in that order of priority). There were seven employees at the time, all highly skilled developers doing advanced 3D visualization programming. My first responsibility was to take an optimization technology (a software program that would

reduce the polygon count in a 3D model automatically and thus dramatically reduce file size and rendering time) to the market through direct sales and in establishing resellers worldwide. I recall asking the developers what their expectations of me were; one of them replied, 'To make us filthy rich!'. I saw MIS as a company with great potential, with impressive technology; I wanted to 'professionalize' the company and make it successful.

Coming from a large corporation with strict rules (HP), I arrived in the land of chaos (MIS). There was no business strategy and no knowledge of the customers, no forms, no routines. I was there to sell products, but I couldn't get a grip on how to present the company. How could I represent a company if I didn't know how to present it to the customers... if I didn't have a clear message to convey? In my mind, a business was a system that could (and should) be clearly defined (clear borders). This should be communicated clearly (sender–receiver model) to the target customers (who could also be defined). Nothing of this was in place at MIS as I remember it. I was hired to do sales but felt I didn't have the tools to do my job (how could I sell something if I didn't really understand what was?). I put a lot of effort into getting a strategy and a clear company profile in place; and I did not succeed – at least, not as quickly and smoothly as I expected to. Instead, it cost me (and my colleagues) a lot of frustration and conflict.

I am not saying that it was wrong to discuss a strategy, to learn about the market and talk about how we could contribute to our customers. Reflecting on this now, I would rather say that the problem was that I wasn't prepared for the rather chaotic process I found myself unable to control. I expected to 'gather information' – to rationally extract something that was already there. This was supposed to be straightforward. The notion comes from a positivist worldview (finding what's already out there), in contrast to a constructivist worldview where we make or co-construct what we see. Yet again, I was looking for the truth 'out there'.

Reading Mead (1934), Elias (1939) and Stacey (2011), I am beginning to see communication not so much as a 'sender–receiver' transfer of ideas and thoughts, but more as a way to interact, a way to co-create, to negotiate for meaning and power. I suspect that I might have approached the job at MIS in sales and marketing differently with this way of thinking about communication. I might have been more open to what was going on, instead of focusing entirely on what I thought *should* be going on.

Starting the strategy process at MIS in 2000 (a process of agreeing on a strategy for MIS), I made a drawing of a 'fluffy' company image (A) and a direct line pointing to a well-defined, easily communicated image (B). I wanted to move the company from A to B. I struggled for 2 years to do this; yet during this time, no clear picture of MIS emerged. I expected us to be able to agree on one 'correct picture' of MIS. Thinking in terms of power relations and negotiation for meaning (Stacey,

2007), it makes total sense that there was no united picture; this was continuously negotiated and changing.

I spoke with everybody in MIS trying to find a common denominator of what might describe us as a company. I tried to 'extract the essence' or to find 'the underlying truth'. On one occasion, I recall visiting the Trondheim office to discuss my 'key findings' with the department manager. I entered the room and there he was, leaned back, arms crossed, feet at the table. He did not look at all interested in why I was there or the job I was doing. He oozed scepticism. I did not understand what was going on, nor was I able to put into words how I felt. At the time, I did not make the link to what I had experienced at HP as 'playing games'. I now see the similarities: power games. Why did he pose like that? It might not have been conscious, but it was clearly a demonstration of power. He might as well have said 'who do you think you are'? It's quite interesting that this is the very same person who said he expected me to make him 'filthy rich'. Why didn't he want to cooperate? One possible explanation can be found in Elias's thinking around the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (Elias and Scotson 1994). There was an established group of developers, and I was the newcomer who didn't fit in. I did not share their interests, jargon, or humour – and I was a woman. They wanted me and didn't want me at the same time. Perhaps their public selves wanted me there because they needed someone to do sales, while simultaneously their private selves were threatened by the newcomer.

I was hurt and angry when I left the meeting, but I never told anybody. Why didn't I tell anyone? Why didn't I react and simply just say 'Could you put your feet on the floor, please?' or ask, 'What's going on'? Because I didn't have the language for it, I had no clue about power games and positioning. Possibly because I had grown up as an only child. The general attitude I met from the developers at MIS during this time (and especially this department manager in Trondheim) was that I was spending all the money the developers were making. This was even stated publicly. With a technology focus (thinking about the graduate ring from our university that symbolises 'technology holding the earth'), this may be quite logical. The technology itself is what's valuable, so its creators are the most important – the ones ultimately responsible for making the money. This effectively renders invisible (or at least second rates) all the additional efforts needed – such as sales, marketing, answering the phone, emptying the waste baskets, all the other things needed to 'make the money'.

Why was this going on? Again, I find the ideas of Elias to be quite useful in reflecting on this. The study of a suburban community by Elias and Scotson (1994) shows a marked division within it between the established group and newcomer group of residents.

To preserve what they felt to be of high value, [the established] closed ranks against the newcomers, thus protecting their identity as a group and asserting its superiority. (Elias and Scotson 1994: xxii).

I was quite stunned when I first read this, as it seemed to suddenly enable me to make new sense of what was going on. What I have thought of over the years as my personal struggles may also be understood as dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. At the time, I was merely provoked. I was angry and had not yet learned to take a step back and reflect on what was going on. Reading Elias (2007) on involvement and detachment, I find this to be a good example of high involvement and not enough detachment. Perhaps, if I had been able to reflect on what was going on, I might have approached it differently; taken it all less personally and with a greater sense of curiosity.

Reflecting on how my ways of thinking drove me to work hard, to search for negative feedback in the interests of constant self-improvement, to set high goals and struggle to reach them – it seems obvious that this carries with it a considerable risk of burnout. It seems to effectively shut down what is closely linked to creativity and spontaneity: risk of losing control, chaos, emotions, *anything* that does not fit into a self-regulating, rational, autonomous way of thinking about human beings. I am noticing how we tend to idealize the effective, results-oriented, strong, positive, energetic human being. What happens to me and to other people when we find ourselves unable to live up to this ideal? What happens to creativity and spontaneity? What do these rather strict ideals do to people who appear to be unstructured, chaotic, and emotional? These questions will be part of my future research on public and private selves and authenticity in the workplace.

I struggled for 2 years, and I was exhausted. In hindsight, I believe I was burned out and close to a depression. Seeing me exhausted from ‘pulling my own strings’ and struggling to perform according to my expectations (functioning like a human cybernetic system), a colleague lent me a Norwegian book about how to communicate, *Effekt – Falske smil og ekte ørefiker* (Ihlen et. al. 1997). It was a book that helped me to begin to understand my effect on other people, and vice versa. A combination of several incidents – among them, a car accident in which three people lost their lives – triggered what I began to describe as a ‘wake-up call’. I suddenly started looking for purpose and meaning. I started asking questions such as: What makes people happy at work? How does communication (not) function in organisations? Why is there conflict? I started wondering about why we work as we do.

Shifting from sales to counselling

Driven by my questions, I started reading books – philosophical books, self-help books, spiritual books. One book that made quite an impact on me was *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho (1993). It is a

novel about a young man who has the courage to follow his dream. The two most important concepts in this book are: a) if your heart truly wants something, the whole universe will work to help you; and b) look for the signs that guide you.

The Alchemist has sold 43 million copies and is translated into 56 languages. It obviously strikes a chord with many people. Why is this? Something is going on in our society (in many societies) that emerges as a growing interest in spiritual literature. Coelho has received numerous literary awards from a variety of countries, and he writes a weekly column published in more than 45 countries. He seems to be a great influence on many people. I wonder why so many people again turn to the mystical. It is beyond the scope of this project to consider this further; for now, it will suffice to notice this trend.

In hindsight, I believe *The Alchemist* was the greatest influence on the choice I would make a few months later to leave MIS to go on a 3-month adventure and learn how to dance the salsa. For some time, I had been dreaming about travelling and dancing, but had never allowed myself to do it. Now I had a legitimate reason for myself and my surroundings: I was following my dream, doing what my heart truly wanted. To make sense of what Coelho wrote today, I would rephrase it and say:

Notice how you feel about something, take your own experience seriously, and reflect upon it. Train your sensitivity to what's going on and practise how to notice opportunities that *might* (you don't know this in advance) move you in the direction you want to go. Make the best of whatever happens. The universe doesn't do anything in particular for anyone. But the effect of believing that it does might actually influence you to focus on whatever seems to be 'going your way'.

Perhaps this can explain some of the popularity of spirituality; it is a way of making meaning of what happens in life, it provides a kind of comfort in a world we do not understand.

Following my 3-month expedition, on my return to Norway I started working for a company in the public sector, helping people find and maintain jobs. I found this work meaningful and important, and considered it a 'paid education' since my salary was down to half of what I had received at MIS. I was 'doing what my heart truly wanted'. I had taken a few steps away from doing what I thought I *should* be doing, and towards doing what I *wanted* to do.

Influenced by Gestalt Therapy and Narrative Therapy (2003-2005)

MK is a publicly owned company providing supported employment. My job as a counsellor was to help people get and maintain jobs. I spent quite a lot of time talking with my clients, mainly on one-to-one basis. I would ask a lot of questions to help them reflect on their competence, how they

could contribute, what they enjoyed working with; we would do interview training, encouraging them to believe in and present their competences. During the week I would also be in contact with several employers to find potential jobs – either short-term (to get more practice) or long-term (if possible). I would also follow up with relevant authorities (psychologists, doctors, government institutions, and so on).

In my job at MK I experienced clients yelling at me, crying, not showing up for appointments, and not sticking to agreements. In the beginning, I took the emotional gestures of my clients very personally. I got angry in meetings, and a few times I burst into tears as soon as the client left my office. As an engineer and sales consultant in the IT business I was not used to this, although this time I was more aware of my own shortcomings. I sensed that it could be done differently, possibly with greater benefit for the client. In hindsight, and using the language of Elias (2007), I would say that I was at the very early stage of discovering what ‘detachment’ was; the ability to distance oneself slightly from a situation and reflect on what is going on as it is happening, without becoming too detached.

We were organised into two teams, with six counsellors in each team. The teams would have morning meetings twice a week where we discussed issues with clients on a general basis. We would help each other reflect on how we worked with the client and how we saw ourselves in the process. Gestalt Therapy had quite an influence on our way of working. One of my colleagues (in my team) was an enthusiastic student of it, so we also had team sessions for 3 hours once a month with a Gestalt therapist to help us reflect on how we worked together as a team.

Gestalt Therapy was co-founded by Fritz Perls, Laura Perls, and Paul Goodman in the 1940s and 1950s, and focuses on the individual’s experience in the present moment. The main idea I picked up from Gestalt Therapy (Perls et al 1994) was to pay attention to what is going on in the present moment, and thus allow room for reflection. Gradually, slowly – through the team meetings twice a week, discussions with colleagues, and team sessions with the Gestalt therapist – I trained my awareness to what was going on: to notice my own bodily reactions during a conversation, to notice the body language of other people, to pay attention to the tone of voice and to communicate what I noticed in a sensitive way. I found that there would often be a shift in conversation simply by asking the question, ‘What’s going on here?’. As an example, I can mention an argument I had with one of the managers (the question turned out to be useful not only with clients!). The discussion escalated until I noticed what was happening and asked the question, ‘What is going on here now?’. The pace of the conversation slowed down, the tone of voice was less harsh; it was as though the question had opened a space for exploration and reflection. I would say we became less involved and more detached by considering our response to it. This may warrant further investigation: what

happens in an organisation if I start asking the question, 'What is going on here now?'. Or, in other words, if I start exploring what is going on? I will not address this question in more detail here but make a note of it for my future research.

Another tradition that was a major influence in this company was Narrative Therapy. Two therapists with many years of experience in family therapy ran a series of trainings for all employees over a period of about a year. Narrative Therapy was first developed by Michael White and David Epston during the 1970s and 1980s. The two therapists doing the training at MK based their work on the theories of White and Epston (1990). Briefly, narrative approaches hold that identity is mainly shaped by narratives or stories. Identities that are problematic are revealed by the dominance of a problem-saturated story. Operationally, Narrative Therapy involves a process of deconstruction and meaning-making (finding alternative stories that make sense) achieved through questioning and collaboration with the clients.

My work partner (we worked a lot in pairs), and I engaged in this way of thinking, reading material about Narrative Therapy (White and Epston 1990) and helping each other practice the use of open and reflective questions to help clients explore the narratives in their lives. As an example, I asked a client who said she felt like a hopeless employee questions about episodes where she could remember feeling good about her work or receiving any kind of positive feedback. It turned out that she had received plenty of positive feedback but didn't believe it, because it didn't fit with her story about herself. Gradually working to explore new narratives seemed to influence the clients. This was not about 'figuring out a new story to tell myself', but simply exploring and asking questions around the stories already told opened for new alternatives; 'unsticking' a stuck story.

What I was doing might be explained by using Elias's metaphor of the fishermen and the maelstrom (Elias 2007). In his story, one of the fishermen is paralysed and stuck while the other manages to maintain a level of detachment that enables him to see opportunities that were invisible to the other, thus saving his own life. Perhaps what we were doing was to help the clients to increase their level of detachment by reflecting on and exploring their narratives; and perhaps this enabled them to see more alternatives to find their way 'out of the maelstrom'. Again, this would be worth further research; I sense that it would be linked to the inquiry into what happens if I ask the question 'What is going on here now?' in my organisation, thus possibly increasing the level of detachment.

In addition to working with narratives, I also used the concept of 'externalization' in my work with clients. This is a 'tool' in Narrative Therapy, whereby a problem is conceptualized as being external to the person experiencing it. At the time, I found it extremely useful. On several occasions,

we ‘put the problem on the table’ – describing what it looked like, what effect it had on the participant, when it was most prominent, and when it was not present at all.

Part of this still makes much sense to me, although I now ask questions around the process of ‘externalization’. As I begin to see it, externalization assumes that it is possible to first identify ‘a problem’, then isolate it, and then observe ourselves and the problem from the perspective of an external observer. This is systems thinking (Stacey 2003, Stacey et. al. 2004). What could be problematic about this is that it could give an illusion of control (‘I can control my problem’), thus making it even more painful if one fails to control or remove the problem. It does not take account of the complexity of life and experienced problems. Being aware of this, however, I believe it can be a creative way to work to explore how we think, and in the process perhaps discover ourselves thinking differently.

Working as a counsellor at MK, to help people get and maintain jobs, my curiosity in the art of using conversation as an opportunity for transformation kept growing. I began to explore various options for improving my conversational abilities. I considered Gestalt Therapy, NPL (Neurolinguistic Programming), and Co-Active Coaching. I signed up for Co-Active Coaching, probably because the colleague I shared an office with was taking the courses and was very enthusiastic about it.

Co-Active Coaching

A coach is in a person who supports people (clients) to achieve their goals, with goal setting, encouragement, and questions. ‘Coaching is unlocking people’s potential to maximize their own performance’ (Whitmore 1992: 9).

My attitude at the time was that since the coach was trained in asking questions to unlock an existing potential, I didn’t have to be an expert in the field of management. This was a common notion among coaches at the time: we were trained at asking questions, not giving advice. Over the years, I changed my mind about this as I came to realize that the questions had to come from somewhere. This sounds embarrassingly obvious to me now. Yet the coaching business claimed that coaches merely ask questions to assist the client in ‘finding their own answers’. It’s as if the answers that are found are independent of the questions asked.

Reading through the book used in the Co-Active Coaching course, I notice that the training of coaching skills is built around a model: the ‘Co-Active Coaching Model’ (Whitworth et al 1998: 6, figure 1). At the heart of the model is ‘the client’s agenda’. It is assumed that this agenda (what the client wants) is about ‘fulfilment, balance and process’ – three principles that the authors declare ‘fundamental to the liveliness of life’. This might point me to what I have been having trouble with in coaching all along: the eternal hunt for *liveliness*. Why do I resist this? Because in my experience, life

is not awesome *all the time*; and I don't believe something is wrong (with me and my thinking) when I'm not in a state of continuous awe and joy. In fact, the thought that I *should* be has previously led me to frustration.

Another thing I notice, skimming through the book again, is that I have made quite extensive mark-ups in the introduction. One of the underlined paragraphs says:

Imagine a relationship with someone who is totally curious about your dreams and aspirations, what makes you tick, what you value, what you are most passionate about in your life – a person who will help you clarify your goals and provide the tools for action and learning that lead to the results you want. (ibid., Introduction, xviii)

Quoting this passage now evokes resistance in me. Why? It assumes that clarifying goals, using tools, having a coach will get me the results I want and ultimately make me happy. This is Kantian thinking, viewing humans as autonomous rational individuals able to choose their own goals and decide in advance the actions required to realize them. I resist this as I no longer subscribe to this thinking, especially as I am increasingly influenced by ideas from social constructionism (Shotter 1993; Mead 1934). I am also beginning to suspect that this quest for living my full potential might be part of what burns us out.

Back to MIS

After working at MK for 2 years I decided to start my own company, focusing on coaching and career counselling. I was offered an opportunity to work 50% at MIS while building my own practice. When I found myself at MIS again – this time with Gestalt Therapy, Narrative Therapy and Co-Active Coaching in my backpack, sitting at the very same desk – I thought about what had happened there the last time, when I was a sales and marketing manager.

I saw more of my own role in the conflicts. I had been focusing purely on what was not good enough, and how 'I knew' it *should* be; I had not been respectful and had failed to recognize what was already working well. With a slogan coming from my work with coaching – 'What you focus on grows' – I decided that I must have made things difficult for myself by focusing so persistently on what was not good enough. Focusing on problems produces more problems. I reflected that my insensitivity to what was going on, and my lack of language to express my experience, had also affected what happened. From Gestalt and coaching, I was trained both in noticing what is going on in the moment (atmosphere, my own bodily reactions, intuitions, and so on) and in how to express my observations in words. I realized that when I last worked at MIS, I had been unable to do this. I hadn't been able to explore and talk about my experiences; I now felt that this explained why I had

failed to 'solve the conflicts'. I looked forward to working towards creating a more harmonious work environment where people would support and encourage each other.

This time around, I was much more active in giving and promoting positive feedback. It had an influence on my relations in the company: people seemed to appreciate my presence. Some of the developers even gave me compliments. I also arranged a large group discussion where it became clear that people were longing for more positive feedback, rather than just the critical comments of the engineers. They felt that they held back on ideas, afraid that they might be picked apart. I wrote my slogan ('What you focus on grows') on a whiteboard in the lunchroom.

A highly conflictual process arose between the new and the old CEO. As far as I was concerned, I was not involved in this at all; but I did have several personal conversations with the old CEO, to show my support and do what I could to help him through a difficult time.

In my coaching work (in parallel with my work at MIS), an interest in burnout and stress started to emerge. I worked with managers to help them reflect on how they worked and why they felt stressed. I started to notice that we make a lot of choices based on assumptions that we are often unaware of. A brief story may illustrate. A client came to me and said he wanted to become more effective and structured in his job, to get more things done more quickly. He was successful, but unstructured. And at first, he assumed he had to 'fix' what was 'wrong' and become more structured. In exploring this together (taking a step back and asking, 'What would be different if you were more structured?'), he realized that what he really wanted was to feel better about himself in relation to his job. Even though he was successful, he didn't feel good about himself; so he continued to focus on how to improve, assuming that becoming more 'structured' would solve the problem.

Influenced by Gestalt, Narrative Therapy, and coaching, I explored alternative stories about stress with my clients, such as stories linked to self-confidence and the longing for recognition. I asked questions for them to reflect on and kept exploring whatever seemed to emerge in the conversation. At the end of our conversations, in the absence of any pre-set agenda, and without imposing any predefined direction, there seemed to be meaningful and powerful ideas emerging. This fascinated me – along with a growing curiosity about what assumptions we live by in business life. For example, a client mentioned that he always worked hard to be in control, so that if anyone were to surprise him with an unexpected question, he could demonstrate that he was on top of things. The assumption here is that it is possible to always be on top of things, or in control.

A conversation between an engineer, a coach, and a DMan student

Up until the very last iteration of this project, I have held the belief that my thinking had shifted quite dramatically *away* from Kantian and cybernetic systems thinking. I am beginning to realize that this is not so. This is not a linear movement of thought from 'A' to 'B', even though it may look like movement from Enlightenment via Romanticism to complex responsive processes. My thinking is a mixture of all these influences, all at the same time. As another attempt to tease out my current mixture of beliefs, I took a thought that sometimes bothers me when I go home from work, a thought I share with many of my previous coaching clients: 'I should be more in control of how I spend my time; more structured and more effective'. I then let the discourses from my education as an engineer (E), as a coach (C), and as a DMan student (D) respond to this belief.

E: Definitely! You should plan your days and weeks in advance and keep track of how much time you spend on different projects and activities. Consultants do this, it shouldn't be that difficult. How can your manager do his job if he doesn't know how much time you spend on different tasks?

C: You just have to find out what you *really* want to work with; your ideal job, something that you love. Then this would not be a problem.

D: Why would the problem dissolve if she worked with something she loved?

C: Then she'd be in flow. She would simply do what she loved, and it would be easy for her to organise her work because she would be motivated to do it.

D: You are assuming that once you find a job you love, there will only be harmony; you would always be motivated, never in doubt, no struggles?

C: No, there may be struggles; but she'd have the motivation to fight through it.

D: How can you know this?

C: If you work with something that is truly important for you, you're willing to fight for it. It is possible to find a job like this. And when you do, you'll feel 'at home' or content. The point is to 'follow your energy'.

D: What energy? How do I follow it?

C: You either feel attracted to a job or resistant. You can feel if this is something you really want to do. It makes you enthusiastic, it makes you feel alive. Then you make your choices based on this feeling. Do what makes you feel enthusiastic, what feels important to you.

D: This is a bit black-and-white, isn't it? It is possible to be in tension – to be attracted and resistant to a job at the same time. It seems to me like you're trying to solve paradoxes.

C: What do you mean by solving paradoxes?

D: Human beings can experience tensions, influences from different discourses at the same time.

You seem to believe that there is one part that is 'true' or 'authentic' and that the rest is therefore false. Thus, a person needs to 'figure out' what she really wants to work with; then she has a fixed base or platform, and there are no uncertainties. Referring to Mead, I would say that our 'selves' are under perpetual construction, and thus there is no 'fixed' true self to find. And a person who loves his job today may not do so tomorrow.

C: So, what would you say to her initial statement, that she wants to be more in control of her time?

D: First, I'm quite curious why this urge emerges. She's not the only one in our Western society who feels she needs to be more in control of her time and more effective. What is going on? I believe this has become a dominating discourse in our society: the idea that we somehow 'need to be more effective'. This is mixed with the assumption that it is possible to be in control (derived from systems thinking, with influences from Kant and the Enlightenment). We try to control and improve our effectiveness – and fail. The self-help industry is a response to this cry for help to become more effective through control (even controlling our thoughts). My hypothesis is that if we could get new insights into how unpredictable (and uncontrollable) the future is, we might feel less resistance to what actually happens (as we don't believe something else *should* have happened). If you define stress as 'resisting what is', this might help us to stress less.

C: So, you are saying that the urge to become more effective and in more control of how we spend our time is based on a belief that the future is predictable, and that this is part of what causes stress?

D: It's worth investigating.

Thoughts about future research

This project opens many opportunities for research, the most obvious one being exploring the reasons for burnout. A seemingly subtler theme that emerges is around private and public selves in organisations, and ethics in relation to this. Ever since my first job in the IT industry, I have been wondering why we 'play games' in the workplace, pretending to think and feel other than we actually do. In exploring what happened at MIS in 2000–2002 questions came up around group dynamics and how we differentiate public from private. Why are we pretending?

In my future research I would like to examine this in more depth, but also take it one step further by investigating ethical aspects, such as: What is an appropriate authenticity in the workplace? I will review social constructionism to shed light on the *ideals* we construct in the workplace (key here is the ideal of being in control) and how this may affect the narratives we tell about ourselves and what we choose to reveal and conceal.

PROJECT 2A

An inquiry into the ideologies of Co-Active Coaching (written in 2008)

Background and rationale

The coaching business has expanded dramatically throughout the last 5–10 years. An increasingly large number of coaches are trained and certified. The whole idea of coaching revolves around the quest for personal excellence and fulfilment. The official website of the International Coach Federation (ICF)¹ offers the following definitions of coaching:

Personal and business coaching is an ongoing professional relationship that helps people produce *extraordinary results* in their lives, careers, businesses or organisations.

Coaching is partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to *maximize their personal and professional potential*. (emphasis added)

I am trained and certified as a professional Co-Active Coach at the Coaches Training Institute (CTI). In my coaching practice I have coached managers, middle managers, team leaders, self-employed, unemployed, and people returning to their jobs after burnout. I have been evangelical about what coaching can do for people.

Gradually I have begun to question what it is I do as a coach, and what ideologies I espouse. In Project 1, I found that coaching fits within the control paradigm, which assumes that human beings are autonomous individuals capable of designing their own future. Project 1 also raised the question whether this belief – that we are in control of ourselves and our lives; and that we can, and should, work to maximize our potential – may partly explain why some people burn themselves out.

In my experience from the coaching community in Norway, coaches can sound almost mystical when explaining what it is we actually do. We often hear that ‘to understand what coaching is and what it can do for you, you have to *try it*’ – implying that the benefits cannot be explained in rational terms. In my opinion, this shows a lack of critical reflection in the coaching community on what it is we actually do as coaches, where the concept of Co-Active Coaching comes from, what underlying assumptions are involved, and what the implications and potential consequences for the client (and coach) may be. This project is an attempt at exactly this kind of critical reflection. I ask the following questions:

4. What is it that I do as a coach?

¹ Three standards and self-appointed accreditation bodies are internationally recognized: The International Coach Federation (ICF), the International Association of Coaching (IAC), and the European Coaching Institute (ECI). No independent supervisory board evaluates these programs, and they are all privately owned. www.coachfederation.org.

5. Why do I do what I do; what are the underlying ideologies and assumptions?
6. What are the implications of these ideas?

My hope is that by elucidating the conceptual framework in which Co-Active Coaching is situated, I will enable debate and further reflection around the implications of these ideas.

Process and structure of the project

This is the seventh iteration of the project. The first iteration was a pure write-out of an entire coaching process with one single client, 'Hugo'. Based on my notes from all our sessions, and on my memory of them, I wrote a narrative of what had been going on in each session, in as much detail as possible. I then received critical feedback from my learning set and supervisor to help me reflect on what I had been doing and what assumptions and ideologies I seemed to be influenced by.

Investigating this further, I did a critical review of the two main books used in the Co-Active Coaching training (Kimsey-House et al 1998; Carson 2003).

Starting to get an understanding of the ethos of Co-Active Coaching, my next step was to understand where it comes from in the context of ideas. I found that Strategic Choice Theory matches the theoretical assumptions of Co-Active Coaching in its view of human beings, its teleology (formative and linear), and its perspective on change.

To critically engage with this way of thinking and reflect on its implications, I explored a dramatically different way of thinking about human beings and change: social behaviourism and complex responsive processes of relating, drawing on the work of Mead (1934/1992) and Stacey (2003, 2007).

Much of the work I have done has not made it to the final version of this narrative; for example, I have only kept a very small part of the initial narrative about the process with Hugo. The narrative is structured in the following way:

7. I introduce the ideologies and theoretical assumptions of Co-Active Coaching, as they have become clear to me through my research.
8. I argue for the use of Strategic Choice Theory to describe the theoretical assumptions of Co-Active Coaching and introduce a contrasting theory of complex responsive processes of relating.
9. I focus on three areas that have emerged from my inquiry into my own coaching practice and that are essential to coaching: setting goals and working towards them, the use of questions, and the concept of 'gremlins' or 'saboteurs'. I make sense of what I do (as I set goals, ask questions, and consider 'gremlins') in the light of both Strategic Choice Theory and

complex responsive processes of relating, and reflect upon the implications of these two very different ways of thinking about what I do.

Ideologies and theoretical assumptions of Co-Active Coaching

From a Co-Active Coaching perspective, humans are autonomous, goal-oriented individuals who can take responsibility for creating the meaning and essence of their lives. We can change our entire (work)life by setting goals inspired by our dreams, values, and 'life purpose' (inspired by 'peak experiences', etc) and through managing the negative self-talk that holds us back from reaching our full potential.

According to this humanistic view, the goal is to realize our full potential and live in harmony with our true self. The way to fulfilment is to set goals and work towards them. The thinker takes a realist position; the truth is 'out there' (or rather, located somewhere 'in the client') to be discovered. The client holds the answers; the coach merely asks questions to help locate them.

Teleology is formative when it comes to human beings – it's about unfolding what is already there. Teleology is linear when it comes to context – one can set goals and decide on actions to reach them; the future is predictable.

I have found that the ethos of Co-Active Coaching emerges from humanistic and transpersonal psychology. Although this theoretical lineage is not mentioned in the writings of the founders of this coaching style, Whitmore² acknowledges it in the foreword of *Co-Active Coaching* (Whitworth et al 1998).

Humanistic and transpersonal psychology

Humanistic psychology is a school of psychology that emerged in the 1950s, primarily in the United States. Humanistic psychology takes an optimistic view of human beings and their perfectibility and posits that *individuals can create the meaning and essence of their lives*. With its roots connected to religious revivalism, it presents the main problem of human existence as the alienation of an individual from their true self.

Transpersonal psychology is a school of psychology that studies the transcendent or spiritual aspects of the human experience. The *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* describes transpersonal psychology as '*the study of humanity's highest potential* and with the recognition, understanding, and realization of unitive, spiritual, and transcendent states of consciousness' (Lajoie and Shapiro

² Considered by many to be 'the father of coaching'. Author of *Coaching for Performance* (Whitmore 1992/2002).

1992: 91, emphasis added). Issues considered in transpersonal psychology include spiritual self-development, peak experiences, mystical experiences, and other metaphysical experiences of living.

Humanistic and transpersonal psychology provide the framework for Co-Active Coaching's perspective on human psychology. The coaching also involves assumptions around what change is and how it occurs, as well as adopting a formative and linear teleology. Is there a theory encompassing these ideologies and theoretical assumptions? It would have to match the view of human beings, hold that the world or truth exists 'out there', assume formative and linear teleology, and hold that humans are goal oriented and adapting to the environment to reach their goals. The theory of strategic choice aligns closely with all of these.

Introducing two theories about human psychology and change

Strategic Choice Theory (Child 1972)

Stacey (2007) draws on Strategic Choice Theory and notes the importance of understanding the ideological background to the theory in order to better evaluate it:

It is important to understand the theories of cybernetic systems and cognitivist/humanistic psychology because they provide the key assumptions that tend to be taken for granted in *the theory of strategic choice*. Without this understanding it is not possible to reflect rigorously on the entailments of thinking in terms of strategic choice and so evaluate the prescriptions of the theory. (Stacey 2007: 44, emphasis added)

Given that Co-Active Coaching makes similar assumptions, Stacey's insights here are useful in terms of assessing its influence.

According to the theory of strategic choice, strategy is the general direction in which an *organisation* changes over time. Strategic choice involves setting goals and identifying the actions needed to achieve them. Having decided on the general direction, or strategy, managers are required to design an organisational structure to 'implement' it.

Similarly, a very important factor in coaching is to define personal goals and actions required to achieve them. The next step is to 'change your thinking' or perspective (manage negative self-talk) so as to support the implementation of the intended actions, all with help from the coach as a motivator and partner to help us reflect upon and remove or manage whatever stops us from taking the necessary action to reach our goals.

Strategic Choice Theory assumes that it is possible for powerful individuals to stand 'outside' their organisations and model them in the interest of controlling them. Co-Active Coaching assumes

the same: that it is possible to model ourselves or self-manage to reach our predefined goals, and that the coach can be a catalyst in this process.

The theory of strategic choice takes a humanistic view of human beings. It also takes a rationalist view of the world, which is supposed to exist 'out there'; and, based on cybernetic systems thinking, it sees organisations as adapting to the environment based on negative feedback (continuously improving to minimize the gap between desired outcome and actual results). Co-Active Coaching holds the same view, as described earlier. In other words, the ideologies and assumptions are the same in Strategic Choice Theory as in Co-Active Coaching.

It is interesting to explore the implications of these similarities. As Stacey (2007) concludes in his work on Strategic Choice Theory:

The theory of strategic choice does not allow for the possibility of the simultaneous presence of contradictory ideas. Contradictions are to be solved, tensions and conflicts smoothed away, and dilemmas resolved.

In Strategic Choice Theory, interaction is understood in systemic terms. An immediate consequence of this is a tendency to reify. The system (organisation) in Strategic Choice Theory responds to differences between an expectation (a goal) and actual behaviour. Intention, or choice, is related to the whole (the organisation) and tends to ignore the fact that other organisations (or individuals) are making choices too. The theory implies that it is possible to achieve success by following the predetermined actions. When the anticipated success doesn't happen, the response is simply to put more effort into achieving it.

In this section, after introducing complex responsive processes of relating, I explore the implications of thinking in strategic choice terms as it relates to the art of asking questions, the setting of goals, and the use of 'gremlins' as a concept in coaching.

Complex responsive processes of relating

A dramatically different way of thinking about human beings, interaction, and change, with a different (transformative) teleology, is offered by what Stacey (2003) names 'complex responsive processes of relating'. Here, I provide an overview of how Stacey builds his argument on the thinking of George Herbert Mead, Norbert Elias and complexity sciences (complex adaptive systems).

Mead (1934) argued that human beings are social through and through and that mind, self, and society have evolved and continue to evolve together, in cooperative interaction. This is in stark contrast to the individualistic view of the human as an autonomous being with a 'mind inside' or with an 'authentic core'.

Social interaction is a public conversation of gestures, particularly gestures of a vocal kind, while mind is a conversation of gestures between 'I' and 'me' (the 'I-me' dialectic). Mead argues that there could be no private role-play, including silent conversation ('thinking'), by a body with itself, if there were no public interaction of the same form.

The gesture–response, as a symbol, makes it possible for the gesturer to 'know' (anticipate) what he or she is doing (and what the response might be). Mead described such a gesture–response as a *significant symbol*, where a significant symbol is action that calls forth the same response in the gesturer as in the one to whom it is directed, because they both ascribe similar meaning to it.

Stacey (2003) combines Mead's thinking with that of Norbert Elias (1939). Elias made a detailed study of changes in the way Western people have experienced themselves over hundreds of years and pointed to how social order *emerges* in interactions between people. Further, Stacey draws on responsive processes thinking and complexity theory to argue for his theory of complex responsive processes of relating.

Complexity theory evolved around the concept of non-linearity and dissipative structures. Many agents interacting locally, form global tendencies or patterns that are stable and unstable at the same time. Minor differences can escalate and have big impacts (like the 'butterfly effect'). Novelty arises due to these minor (or major) differences between local agents.

Stacey (2003) argues that in the theory of Complex Adaptive Systems (Gell-Mann 1994, Kauffman 1995), mathematical simulations of pattern emergence from the local interaction of digital agents, the interaction between digital agents (simple computer programs) is analogous to Mead's (1934) significant symbols in human interaction. Mead's insights into human interaction do not go far enough, according to Stacey, who asks: 'How could continuous circular processes of gesturing and responding between thousands, even millions of people produce the kind of long-term, widespread coherence that Elias talks about?' (Stacey 2003: 65). Complexity theory provides an answer to this question; diversity or differences in local interactions form global tendencies or patterns that are paradoxically stable and unstable at the same time.

The key elements of the complex responsive processes perspective are:

10. Meaning emerges in communicative interaction (conversation of gestures).
11. Relating to each other, people are always simultaneously constraining and enabling each other's actions. Power relations are felt as the *dynamics of inclusion and exclusion*.
12. People are always making choices based on evaluative criteria, which constitute ideology.
13. The patterning of conversation, ideologically based choosing, and power relating, simultaneously forms and is formed by themes taking a predominantly narrative form.
14. The *identities of people*, in both their collective and individual aspects, *arise in interaction*.

15. Change is emergent from diversity in local interactions.

The complex responsive processes perspective directs attention to how identity and intention emerge in local interaction taking the form of ordinary conversations between people. This is very different from the notion that intention is the expression of an autonomous individual who reflects and makes choices in the light of expected outcomes.

Comparing the two theories – a summary of key differences

Table 1 compares Strategic Choice Theory versus complex responsive processes of relating in terms of areas that are relevant to this project.

TABLE 1
Comparison of relevant aspects of Strategic Choice Theory versus complex responsive processes.

	Strategic choice theory	Complex responsive processes of relating
Human psychology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Individualistic ▪ Humanistic ▪ Humans are autonomous and goal-oriented individuals capable of creating their own lives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social ▪ Mind, self, and society continuously evolve together in interaction ▪ Identity arises in interaction
Intention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Comes from the individual 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Emerges in interactions
Contradictions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Are to be solved ▪ Aim is harmony 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Are an important part of life ▪ Essential to creativity and novelty
Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Is reified and ascribed to a person or a system (or relationship) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Is a dynamic of inclusion and exclusion in human interaction, and an irremovable aspect
Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Is self-managed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Evolves as a shift in the patterning of conversation.
Goals		
Questions	To be explored further in sections 4–6	
'Gremlin' or 'Saboteur'		

Setting goals and working towards them

It was an early morning in April 2007, and I had just made myself a cup of coffee when the phone rang. It was Hugo. I hadn't spoken with him for more than a year. He was in his usual good mood, and we spoke for a few minutes before he said: 'Majken, I thought I'd try out this 'coaching' to see if there's anything in it for me – do you know of any good coaches?' I recalled he was one of the most

successful sales consultants in the company where we worked together. He always exceeded his sales goals and was awarded many prizes for his results and dedication.

I asked him what he wanted from the coaching, and he told me that the essence was that he wanted to become more effective and organised in his job. I told him that I was not a 'David Allen' with my own programme in how to become effective and get things done (Allen 2001), and I asked him why he felt the need to become more effective. He said he wanted to get things done more efficiently, be more in control, make decisions more quickly, and not postpone things to the last minute.

As a side note, I find it an interesting topic to investigate why people (even very successful people) strive to become an ideal version of themselves – believing that they should change and improve to become more effective, more organised. This observation alone warrants further exploration.

At the end of our phone conversation in April, having talked for almost an hour, Hugo decided he wanted me as his coach.

Kick-off session with Hugo in Oslo

I always have a 2-hour kick-off session when starting up a new coaching relation. The initial session is followed by 10 sessions either face-to-face or over the phone. In Hugo's case, the 10 sessions would be over the phone, as he lives in Oslo and I live in Bergen.

The kick-off session was held in an office in Oslo in May 2007. I had sent him an email with three questions to reflect upon before we began:

16. What are your expectations of me as your coach and of the coaching?
17. What areas would you like us to focus on?
18. What would you like to be different after the 10 sessions of coaching?

I start the kick-off sessions by following up on these three questions. Sometimes the client is very clear about what s/he wants, sometimes it's more intangible. Why do I ask these questions? My rationale has been to get an idea of what the client wants and to push the client to think this through, so that we are working together 'in the right direction'. In other words, one of the most important parts of the kick-off session is to clarify dreams and visions in order to help define the ultimate outputs from the coaching process. It's about objectively setting the goals that we will work towards – just as prescribed by Strategic Choice Theory when managing change in an organisation.

Setting goals and working towards them

The coach's job is to help clients articulate their dreams, desires and aspirations, help them clarify their mission, purpose and goals, and help them achieve that outcome (Whitworth et. al., 1993: 5).

Having helped the client to articulate their dreams and set appropriate goals, the next step of Co-Active Coaching is to encourage them to make any necessary adjustments in their attitude so that they will stick to the agreed action plan. The coach's role here is rather like that of Strategic Choice Theory's expert designer who remodels organisations from the 'outside' in order to achieve expected outcomes.

Drawing on Stacey (2003) and Mead (1934) offers a different perspective on goal-setting – one that is perhaps more accurately described as 'intention-setting'. Rather than assuming linear causality or predictable outcomes, we could see goal setting as a gesture in the endless process of *gesture–response*. From this viewpoint, working out an intention (or 'goal', or visualizing a dream) creates an *organising principle*. The intention will influence our focus and the way we make sense of our experience. It may help us notice what we might otherwise not notice.

There is no guarantee that our intention will be fulfilled; that we will reach our 'goal'. This depends on *continuous negotiation with our surroundings*. We all have our own intentions (whether we're aware of them or not), so there is no guarantee of individuals achieving their diverse aims simply by following pre-planned steps. Yet, by having an intention and being present in the emerging experience, we may notice what *seems* to take us in the direction of our intention, or away from it (again, without any assured outcome, as our lives are unpredictable and complex). In chapter 16 of *Mind, Self and Society*, 'Mind and the Symbol', Mead (1934/1992) writes:

One of the peculiarities of this [nervous] system is that it has, in a sense, a temporal dimension: the things we are going to do can be arranged in a temporal order so that the later processes can in their inception be present determining the earlier processes; what we are going to do can determine our immediate approach to the object (p. 117, emphasis added).

The focus of this way of thinking is on continuous negotiations with our surroundings and the *influence* of intentions and goals. The future evolves from the interweaving of different people's intentions through ongoing interactions in which power relations become relevant, because no individual alone can design the plan or predict the outcome.

What difference does it make whether I espouse Strategic Choice Theory or Mead's thinking about *gesture–response* in relation to goal setting?

If, as a coach, I believe that every human can figure out what they want in life and create it, then I will most likely work to inspire, motivate and push the client to reach their stated goals. My focus will be on what holds them back, or how they hold themselves back, from achieving their

vision. But what if their vision is unrealistic? All coaches stress the importance of setting *realistic* goals. Yet at the same time, a core value of Co-Active Coaching is to see the client as resourceful, creative and whole, and to ‘hold the client big’ – in other words, to strongly believe that the client is fully capable of achieving their dreams. There is a real risk here of pushing the client too hard, possibly to the level of exhaustion.

According to *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, DSM-5*, (American Psychiatric Association 2013) a bipolar disorder is a mood disorder that features extreme mood swings, during which psychosis can occur. During a manic episode, the client will likely exhibit high energy, and they may believe they have special powers. This type of psychosis can lead to reckless or dangerous behaviour. Supporting this, and even cheering them on, can easily happen if a coach is unfamiliar with symptoms of bipolar disorder and ‘holds the client big’ and strongly believes them to be capable of reaching their goals.

What about the influence of the context in which someone works and lives? It can put extremely high demands on a person to self-manage at any cost. I have even observed coaches working on their own thinking, putting pressure on themselves to become more motivated and positive, when they did not thrive in a job – instead of simply choosing another working environment.

In Norway, psychologists have reported cases of clients who have been crushed by their experience of being coached. My emerging hypothesis is that Co-Active Coaching’s combination of a humanistic view of the coach (and client) together with cybernetic principles of adjusting to reach predefined goals (in other words, Strategic Choice Theory), with the ultimate goal being ‘to live one’s full potential’, may lead the client into a never-ending quest where exhaustion may be a consequence.

Yet if, as a coach, I think of goals as intentions in the ongoing flow of gesture and response, my focus will be very different. If the future cannot be designed or predicted by anyone but evolves from the interweaving of different individuals’ intentions, then it becomes crucial to pay attention to the client’s context and relationships. The dynamics of their interactions, negotiations with others, ongoing shifts in intentions, and other people’s influences will be an integral part of the coaching process. Coaching would be more about helping the client become more reflexive, exploring their own thinking and the emergence and movement of identity in interactions and conversations. This way of thinking puts less pressure on the individual. Yet it holds each person fully responsible for all their gestures: even sitting silently, doing nothing, is a gesture that influences.

The art of asking questions

When Hugo called me up for our seventh session, he sounded excited and enthusiastic. He told me he had managed not to think about work one night, that he'd been without his cell phone for several hours and that he'd experienced it as liberating. We stayed with this topic for a few minutes, and this would be a typical moment for me to *ask* what he was learning about himself.

He said something along the lines of, 'I always search for whatever I can become *better* at' – and this triggered me to ask: 'What are five things you're really good at?' His voice shifted gradually from slightly frantic to more relaxed (I don't recall whether I drew his attention to this shift of voice). I asked him, 'If you were to hire someone in your job, what would be the *most* important qualification?' He replied, 'That you're good with people, that you can *read* people'. I said 'So – it's not that you're effective and well organised?' He was quiet for a moment, then exclaimed: 'Wow, I hadn't thought of that!' His enthusiastic tone suggested that something might have moved or changed for him.

Why did I ask him to think of five things he's really good at? What did I assume as I did it? Reflecting on this now, I believe I had a hunch that his fixed focus on how to improve overshadowed everything else and rendered what he was good at 'invisible' to him. My belief was influencing what question I asked, and thus what I chose to direct his attention towards.

I wouldn't have realized this, had I not shared with my learning set the story of what I did in this session with Hugo. It was my supervisor who posed the question about why I asked the client to list five things he was good at, and what my assumptions were as I did it. Noticing one's own taken-for-granted assumptions is extremely difficult, without having them pointed out by someone else. Reflecting on and becoming aware of our own assumptions requires us to discuss our practice with someone in an open and honest way.

Back to the art of asking questions. One of the most dominant characteristics of coaching is that the coach asks questions but does not give advice (the difference between a coach and a mentor). It is said that the client holds the answers, which the coach helps them to uncover through careful questioning. In this respect, the coach plays the role of the Socratic midwife.

Most current practices in coaching focus on *non-directive questioning* – provocation and helping clients to analyse and solve their own challenges – rather than offering any particular advice or direction.

In Project 1, I challenged the notion that questions should be non-directive, since I am not sure this is possible: a question focuses attention in a certain way and is therefore inevitably directive. One could naturally argue that the ideal of non-directiveness is meant to caution the coach against deliberately leading their client to a predetermined end point (which could be construed as

manipulation); but we should acknowledge that all questions direct attention in some way and are therefore potentially influential.

In Co-Active Coaching, however, the use of what is called ‘powerful questions’ is encouraged:

Asking rather than telling is at the foundation of Co-Active Coaching, and the powerful question is a cornerstone. When a person asks you a question, especially a personal question, it sends you looking for an answer in a particular direction. (Whitworth et al 1998: 69, emphasis added)

Powerful questions invite introspection, present additional solutions, and lead to greater creativity and insight. They invite the client to look inside (‘What do you really want?’) or into the future ... The way the question is framed determines where the client looks for the answer. (Whitworth et al 1998: 70, emphasis added)

Thus described, powerful questions are by no means non-directive: they point the client towards an answer. Note also that asking what a client really wants is described as inviting them to ‘look inside’ – again, reflecting the individualistic view of a human being as having a mind and truth residing within them.

Co-Active Coaching never claims to be using non-directive questions. It does, however, claim that the coach is able to self-manage and avoid having a specific agenda. For this to fit together (the use of powerful/directive questions, but without an agenda) requires a particular view on what ‘directive’ means: questions are directive in the sense that they shed light on what is ‘already there’ in the client, to be uncovered.

Thinking about questions in terms of complex responsive processes of relating

In contrast to the above, another way of thinking about questions is to consider human interaction as a continuous flow of gesture and response that is potentially transformative for all participants (Stacey 2003; Mead 1934). Global or thematic patterns emerge from this interaction, not as a result of one single individual’s intention, but from the interweaving of intentions of all the participants.

When asking a question, I am making a gesture. Questions are powerful rhetorical devices in that they ‘move’ the interlocutor to ‘look’ in a particular direction. The response is very often an attempt to reply to the question, or to start reflecting upon the question asked; to look for an answer. Thus, a question strongly influences what direction the conversation takes.

From this perspective, the answer to the question does not exist as a truth that somehow exists independently ‘out there’ or ‘within the client’. Instead, the answer emerges through responding to the question, and is thus co-created in the interaction between coach and client. The client is simultaneously influenced by their previous experiences and what Mead (1934) calls ‘silent

conversations', or what one might call 'thinking', as well as everything else that is influencing them in that moment (such as what's happened earlier that day, problems at home, recent feedback from their boss, and anything else that affects their feelings and outlook at this point); and this includes all the ongoing gestures and responses from the coach.

By asking questions, the coach not only directs the conversation, but also *influences what emerges as an answer*. Again, the coach is not the sole influence; what emerges does so because of all that is said (and not said) and done (and not done) in the moment (including the silent conversations going on for both client and coach). Because a question is such a powerful rhetorical device, its influence is strong: it directs the conversation. The question is not generated purely from within the coach and is not simply an art learned in advance; it comes in direct response to what is going on in the coaching session. It is also influenced by what goes on in the coach's silent conversation. The coach, just like the client, is affected by many different factors all the time. Beliefs and ways of thinking are strong influences, as they direct a person's attention and inform the way they make sense of their experiences.

What are the implications of this understanding? In the Co-Active Coaching perspective, the coach is a catalyst for the client's personal change by helping them to unfold what is already within them, uncovering the 'truth inside'; in this view, the coach is not responsible for the end result or the consequences of their questioning, but has merely helped the client find what was already there. By contrast, if the coach understands themselves as influencing and being influenced by a continuous flow of gestures and responses, where the thematic patterning emerges through all that is said and not said, done and not done – then they are co-constructing the consequences together with the client, and the coach is fully responsible for all the gestures and responses they contribute as a participant in this process.

The latter perspective has a direct impact on the notion of power in a coaching relationship. It can no longer be reified and 'transferred' to the relationship but is very much a part of the dynamics of what goes on in and between coach and client. The coach is no longer 'neutral'; this has important ethical implications.

Gremlins and saboteurs

Through the story of Hugo, I have explored many of the things I do as a coach, two of which made it to the final iteration of the project: the setting of goals and the art of asking questions. There is one more coaching concept or tool I wanted to investigate before I drew conclusions – one that I did not use with Hugo, but have often used with other clients, and that is widely used in Co-Active Coaching:

the concept of 'gremlins' or 'saboteurs'.³ Carson (2003) defines a gremlin as the (negative) narrator in our heads; it could be seen as the source of our 'problem-saturated stories'.

A short story about a gremlin – from my own coaching practice

As already mentioned, the notion of gremlins or saboteurs is widespread in Co-Active Coaching. I have also used the concept quite a lot in my work as a coach. I have not always used the term 'gremlins', but I have explored the problem-saturated story with the client, inquiring into 'When is this present?', 'How does it influence you?', 'What makes it grow?' and even 'What does it look like?'. Let me share an example with a client other than Hugo to illustrate how I have been working with gremlins. This is a condensed version of a narrative I shared with my learning set.

Gertrud was a woman in her late 40s who had decided to become a student. She was a mother of two teenagers and her husband travelled a lot in his job. One of her challenges was that she couldn't sit down and study until she had cleaned her house and her desk was tidy. There was always something that had to be done in the house before she could focus on her project. I asked her to 'turn up the volume' of the conversation she'd have with herself as this was going on. We then turned this into the voice of a gremlin. She visualized her gremlin in detail – looks, tone of voice, body gestures – and gave it a name: Madam. From this day on she started to recognize whenever Madam showed up and when she did, Gertrud would, in her mind's eye or sometimes even literally, guide Madam out the door and set her outside. This simple gesture worked for Gertrud. She told me she would smile as she did it – and then found herself able to sit down and focus on her studies, without doing the housework first.

Of course, we could have explored *why* she felt she had to clean the house first and spent time on analysing this. But for Gertrud – and she said this herself in hindsight, a year after we did this – she needed a practical way to stop these thoughts from disturbing her and enable her to take charge. She felt more powerful, more motivated, more self-confident when she had 'Madam' to deal with and knew what to do about her. The concept of 'gremlins' was very helpful to her.

Exploring the concept of gremlins

I began my investigation by writing the story about Gertrud and talking with my learning set about my experiences with the concept of gremlins. I did a critical review of the book *Taming Your Gremlin* (Carson 2003) – one of the two key books⁴ in the Co-Active Coaching curriculum – and shared this

³ When I first trained as a coach, we talked about 'gremlins'; this has since been renamed to 'saboteurs'.

⁴ The other being Whitworth et al 1998.

with the learning set for further responses. In the following sections, I will examine what came out of this.

Taming Your Gremlin is a classic self-help book. It makes no references to academic sources, theories, or methodology. Instead, Carson uses humour, metaphor, poetic language, fill-in exercises, and meditations to convey his message. The purpose of the book is to help the reader live and enjoy their life to the full – by ‘taming their gremlin’.

Carson presents three simple steps for ‘getting out of your own way’:

19. Simply notice. ‘As you begin to simply notice your gremlin, you will become acutely sensitive to *the fact that you are not your gremlin*, but rather, his observer. As this awareness develops, you will begin to appreciate and enjoy your life more and more. It is for you, the observer, that this book is written’ (p. 5, emphasis added).
20. Choose and play with options. One option is to experiment with change, to try something new; another is to breathe and fully experience your emotions (based on the assumption that when you fully accept an emotion, it changes). Carson writes about several different options to choose from.
21. Be in process. Finally, Carson wraps up the book by saying that you will never tame your gremlin once and for all – it is a continuous process. ‘Being in process is an attitude – an appreciation of this simple truth and of the reality that your life will be forever unfolding and your future always unknown’ (164).

Carson is a psychotherapist and a former faculty member at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School. He is influenced by Gestalt Therapy and mentions Fritz Perls (one of its pioneers) as a ‘brilliant psychiatrist and teacher’ (116).

The ‘Gremlin-Taming Method’ was developed in the 1980s. In many Western industrial countries, the 1980s was a period of renewed optimism and economic liberalization. During this time, the word ‘yuppie’ (to mean ‘young urban professionals’) emerged in many Western countries, reflecting to the rise of a new middle class. University graduates in their late 20s and early 30s were entering the workplace in prestigious office professions, holding more purchasing power with which they purchased trendy, luxurious goods. In this context, with an emerging ideal to be successful, the gremlin-taming method was developed to ‘get out of your own way’.

Carson’s theoretical assumptions

Carson uses the term ‘natural self’ in his book. He claims that we are not our bodies, thoughts, or beliefs – we are our souls (spirit, *prana, re, chi, ki*, God, primordial vibration). This is what he calls our

natural selves or the observer. The gremlin is what is keeping us from being authentic and experiencing our true selves. He thus splits mind, body, and soul, and considers the soul more real or true than the mind or the body. Further on, he assumes that human beings are in control of their minds in that they can 'enter the world of mind by choice':

Taming your gremlin does not involve staying out of the world of mind. It simply involves making certain that you enter the world of mind by choice. (30)

The phrase 'world of mind' is another sign of the splitting between mind, body, and soul into different 'worlds'. The quote below is an elaboration of how the human being can control their own minds and choose to lead their awareness:

Your awareness can lead you or you can lead it. [...] In relationship to your spotlight of awareness, you can be a passenger or a driver, a victim or a participant, a pawn or a player. You choose. Not once and for all, but in each moment or your precious life. [...] Consciously focusing your awareness requires effort. It does not require strain. (28)

Except for his inclusion of a 'soul', Carson's perspective on human beings is in line with Strategic Choice Theory: human beings are autonomous individuals with a mind inside, who can self-manage and even control their minds. The goal in this setting, the ultimate goal, is to tame our gremlins and 'live out' our true selves (our souls).

In terms of Strategic Choice Theory, how would I explain what went on in my coaching with Gertrud? Strategic Choice Theory, like Carson, splits mind and body: it considers the thinking of the mind as something that precedes the action of the body. The concept of gremlins follows this way of thinking, and so the explanation would be quite straightforward:

Gertrud has an 'internal voice' that causes her problems. This voice comes from her gremlin. To achieve her goals (to study), she must 'manage' this voice, or at least manage how she responds to it. Notice the ability to control and adjust her mind by using the gremlin to 'hold' what's problematic or keeping her from reaching her goal.

The internal voice, her gremlin, tells her to clean the house when she wants to be working on her studies. As a coach, I help her to visualize and personalize this voice. We don't treat it 'as if' it is separate from herself; we assume that it is separate, that it is not her. Recall Carson's insistence that we are not our bodies, not our minds, and certainly not our gremlins.

The gremlin approach is not unproblematic. Separating out 'a voice' and externalizing it as 'a gremlin' is rather misleading, since doing so simplifies and reifies 'a problem'. It is impossible to delineate a problem with clear-cut boundaries and treat it as somehow separate from the people and environment in which it arises. Nor can we identify its direct causes, what keeps it 'alive', or how it affects people. This would be an oversimplification, and perhaps an abstraction from what is going

on. With the false belief that the problem can and should be controlled or fully managed – that we should somehow maintain full control of our own mind; we risk finding ourselves deeply frustrated when we fail to do so.

Formulating a new way of understanding the therapeutic process of externalization

I have found the concept of gremlins very useful in my coaching, and indeed have seen shifts in clients' experience of themselves as they have found a tag or a name for the source of their 'problematic discourse'. Many clients seem relieved and become more constructive and creative; they become more 'powerful' and less a victim of circumstances – as in the story of Gertrud earlier. I do not want to dismiss the idea of using the concept of gremlins or view this as a wrong approach, even if I now have a more nuanced understanding of it. I want to explore it further. How can I understand this shift for some of the clients? In the last section, exploring the use of gremlins in the terms of social behaviourism, I was able to take a critical look at what was going on, but this did not explain the positive shifts clients have reported in their experience; it could not account for what seemed to be 'working'.

I was keen to find a way to make new sense of the therapeutic process of externalization. I turned to White and Epston (1990), whom I knew from earlier in my career, as described in Project 1. Their work was appropriate for two reasons: (1) in their work with families, they use Narrative Therapy, which holds that our identities are shaped by the stories we tell about our lives; and (2) they draw upon the theories of Michel Foucault⁵ about power and knowledge being inseparable. Both are in line with Stacey's complex responsive processes thinking, which I wanted to draw on.

I re-immersed myself in the thinking of White and Epston (1990) and how they build their argument to support their use of *externalization* in therapy (especially family therapy). In the following, I will go through their line of argument and critique it based on the thinking of Stacey (2003) and Mead (1934). My aim was to formulate a new way of understanding the therapeutic process of externalization.

White and Epston start their argument in the following way:

In regard to family therapy – which has been our area of special interest – the interpretive method, rather than proposing that some underlying structure or dysfunction in the family determines the behaviour and interactions of family members, would propose that it is the meaning that members attribute to events that determines their behaviour. Thus, for some considerable time I have been interested in how persons organize their lives around specific meanings and how, in so doing, they inadvertently

⁵ Foucault's work on power, and the relationships among power, knowledge, and discourse, is widely discussed and applied by White and Epston (1990). Also see Foucault 1980.

contribute to the 'survival' of, as well as the 'career' of, the problem. (White and Epston 1990: 3, emphasis added)

It is interesting to contrast this view with complex responsive processes of relating and sensemaking. There is some similarity to Mead's 'conversation of gestures', in that meaning is emerging in the flow of gesture–response (meaning is not in the gesture or intention; it is in the gesture–response as it emerges from the interaction). However, White and Epston are different in that they describe meaning as something that can be *attributed* to an event: the event comes first, and then its meaning is assigned. This is a reification of 'an event', with meaning treated as an attribute of the reified event. They also state that this *determines* the behaviour of the family member, implying a linear causality that is very different from the transformative causality assumed by complex responsive processes of relating.

Nevertheless, I find the essence of what White and Epston are saying useful in thinking about group members and shall attempt to rephrase it to make it consistent with the theories of Mead:

The way that members make sense of their experience highly influences (but not in a deterministic way) their responses to the gestures of the other members and to themselves. This sense-making often takes the form of narratives. There is no 'underlying structure' and the focus is thus on the flow of gesture–response.

Having established that the way we make sense, the narratives we tell about ourselves and others, influence our responses, it is worth looking at further descriptions offered by White and Epston:

... persons are rich in lived experience, [and] only a fraction of this experience can be storied and expressed at any one time, and ... a great deal of lived experience inevitably falls outside the dominant stories about the lives and relationships of persons. Those aspects of lived experience that fall outside of the dominant story provide a rich and fertile source for the generation or re-generation, of alternative stories. Following Goffman (1961), I have referred to these aspects of lived experience that fall outside the dominant story as 'unique outcomes'. (15)

The identification of unique outcomes can be facilitated by the *externalization of the dominant 'problem-saturated' description or story* of a persons' life and relationships. (p. 16, emphasis added)

Human beings make sense of their experience in stories and narratives. This is consistent with complex responsive processes thinking, and with what I have already established above. But from what White and Epston write, they assume that there is some kind of experience outside of what is told in the form of narrative. The experience exists independently and can be rediscovered. Shotter (1993), whose thinking is also taken up in the theory of complex responsive processes, writes about

conversational realities and how we construct life through language. In his view, there is no experience outside of the present moment; we can only recreate the past through retelling stories about it.

Again, I shall rephrase the wording of White and Epston – this time, drawing on mathematical chaos theory (how small differences can escalate to become big changes), while at the same time avoiding the assumption that there exists a past experience that can somehow be ‘found’ or identified:

The stories we tell about our past, and who we think we are, will always be slightly different each time we tell them. We can never tell exactly the same story (unless we write it down; but even then, the experience of reading it will always be slightly different). Themes emerge as patterns, thus we recognize the stories as ‘the same’; they are predictable. At the same time, they are unpredictable. Small changes may escalate and become shifts in themes. And shifts in themes in the stories we tell about ourselves and others influence how we perceive and experience ourselves and others.

We make sense of our experience mainly in the form of narratives. The narratives we tell influence how we respond. Small changes in the stories we tell may escalate and become shifts in themes, and this will influence how we perceive ourselves and others; we ‘change our minds’.

Let me now introduce the coach or therapist into this. What White and Epston call ‘dominant problem-saturated stories’ may also be spoken of as themes, or dominating discourses about ourselves, both overt and in our silent conversations. Interacting with another person (the coach or therapist) who is actively ‘looking for’ (or creating in the present) alternative stories to the client’s own, evokes diversity; and these differences may propagate and thus shift the dominating discourse.

Now to the actual act of ‘externalization’:

Through [the] process of externalization, persons gain a reflexive perspective on their lives, and new options become available to them in challenging the ‘truths’ that they experience as defining and specifying of them and their relationships. (White and Epston 1990: 30)

‘Externalizing the dominant problem-saturated story’ is an act of increasing our detachment (Elias 1987) in a situation. If someone is too involved in their own story and stuck in retelling it, then introducing the metaphor of externalization – that is, taking a view ‘as if’ the problem is reified, separate, and external to the person – can help that person to become more reflexive and detached and thus open for reflection.

So far, I have established that we make sense of our experience in our stories or narratives. Diversity or small changes in the themes may propagate and shift the dominating discourse and

discussing the stories with another person may contribute both to the diversity in stories told and to the level of detachment or reflexivity of the client.

Finally, let me look at how White and Epston use the work of Foucault. They refer to Foucault quite extensively in their book, emphasizing his notion that power and knowledge (or truth) cannot be separated:

There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth. (Foucault 1980: 93, cited in White and Epston 1990: 22, emphasis added)

Power and truth are inseparable. What I consider to be the truth about myself 'holds power over me'; it influences me strongly. It is useful to link this to Mead (1934/1992), who writes about the 'I-me dialectic' as paradoxically stable and unstable at the same time. We recreate ourselves in every moment, with the ongoing potential for novelty. As this is a social process (the same process as *between* entities), the 'I-me relation' is not free from power dynamics. I have silent conversations where some voices or discourses are more dominant than others, 'truer' to myself than others. My argument thus becomes:

A change in 'me' is a change in the dynamics of my silent conversations.

Stacey (2007) comes to the same conclusion in respect of change in organisations:

The claim is that conversation is the activity of organizing. Organisational change is change in conversation. (Stacey 2007: 271, emphasis added)

Thus, by exploring the dynamics of the client's conversations and narratives, new stories might emerge; shifts in power dynamics can occur; fresh 'truths' may arise.

Summarizing my line of argument, I started by saying that the way we make sense of our experience strongly influences our responses in our interactions. Further, we make sense mainly by telling stories. The stories we tell about ourselves and others form themes that are predictable and unpredictable at the same time. Small differences may propagate and become shifts in themes or shifts in the dynamics of my conversations, and thus shifts in power relations (what stories I experience as true). Externalization is a way of increasing the level of detachment, helping the client gain a more reflexive view, combined with creating alternative stories where the diversity may cause novel stories to emerge. What we experience as 'truths' about ourselves, influences how we make sense of our experiences and thus our responses in our interaction (we 'have changed').

This section has sought to problematize, then critically engage and reflect upon, what it is that I am doing when I use the technique of ‘gremlins’ or externalization. I have moved from the use of ‘gremlins’ and Carson’s (2003) thinking in strategic choice terms to exploring what I do based on the thinking of Stacey (2003, 2007) and Mead (1934) with the help of White and Epston’s (1990) line of argument.

Any process of externalization is inevitably a simplification. It can be a useful technique if we understand that whatever is externalized ‘as if’ it is separate, reified, and external to the person can lead to abstraction from what is going on. It is clearly problematic to believe that the ‘gremlin’ can be separated out and split from a person, as Carson does when he says that we are not our gremlins. Apart from being an oversimplification, such an approach could tempt both coach and client to explain all problematic thoughts as ‘coming from the gremlin’ – as though they can easily be managed or disposed of, since they derive from a separate entity. I have heard quite a few coaches dismiss criticism or scepticism with ‘That’s just your gremlin talking’.

This kind of reflection is important to the coaching process, as the way we think about what we are doing clearly influences both client and coach. I am by no means insisting that thinking in terms of complex responsive processes is the only ‘correct’ approach to take; but it does offer a very different way of making sense of human interaction and change than the dominant principles of Co-Active Coaching – and is therefore useful in exploring and critiquing that ethos.

Summary and conclusions

My primary aim in this project has been to demystify what goes on in coaching, in order to start reflecting on possible implications of the taken-for-granted assumptions.

I started by narrating my own experience as a professional Co-Active Coach with one client, Hugo. Through inquiring into what it is that I do as a coach with this client, working through the relevant literature, contrasting the found key assumptions with an alternative way of thinking (complex responsive processes of relating), and discussion with peers through numerous iterations, I have gained a better understanding of what I do as a coach and how I impact my clients.

The Co-Active Coaching ethos has strong similarities with Strategic Choice Theory, as described by Stacey (2007) and summarized in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Differences relevant to coaching between Strategic Choice Theory and complex responsive processes of relating.

	Strategic choice theory	Complex responsive processes of relating
Human psychology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Individualistic ▪ Humanistic ▪ Humans are autonomous and goal-oriented individuals capable of creating their own lives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social ▪ Mind, self, and society continuously evolve together in interaction.
Intention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Comes from the individual 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Emerges in interactions
Contradictions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Are to be solved ▪ Aim is harmony 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Are an important part of life ▪ Essential to creativity and novelty
Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Is reified and ascribed to a person or a system (or relationship) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Is a dynamic of inclusion and exclusion in human interaction, and an irremovable aspect
Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Is self-managed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Evolves as a shift in the patterning of conversation
Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Are predefined with the coach and actions needed to reach the goals are identified 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Focus is on the continuous negotiation of intention between different individuals
Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Powerful questions direct the attention ▪ The client holds the answers and the coach merely helps him/her find them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Are gestures ▪ Emerge in the interaction and influence the result ▪ Questions are powerful rhetorical devices and thus highly influential in directing the conversation
'Gremlin' or 'Saboteur'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The 'gremlin' is the negative narrator in your head ▪ You are not your gremlin; it is what is keeping you from being authentic ▪ By becoming aware of your gremlin, you can manage your response to it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Is a metaphor that: ▪ Can influence the perceived level of detachment and so help the client become more reflexive ▪ Can help in creating alternative 'truths', and these diversities may propagate to shift the thematic patterning of conversation about oneself and thus influence how a person experiences him/herself

Implications of the ideologies and assumptions in Co-Active Coaching

I would like to provoke a discussion in the Co-Active Coaching community around the potential risks of thinking in terms of Strategic Choice Theory. Here, along with my own research discoveries, I am drawing on Stacey's (2007) commentary about the implications of thinking in strategic choice terms.

Dangers

The potential dangers can be summarized in two categories:

22. Exhaustion of the client.
23. Rendering invisible the power dynamics in the coaching relationship, so that these cannot be reflected upon.

Exhaustion

Strategic Choice Theory implies that it is possible to achieve success if one follows the agreed action plan. When success doesn't happen, the response is to put more effort into achieving it.

The system (organisation) in Strategic Choice Theory responds to differences between an expectation (a goal) and actual behaviour – as does the coaching relationship in service of the client. Intention, or choice, is related to the individual and tends to ignore the fact that other individuals are also making their own choices.

The idea that humans can realize their full potential by making strategic choices and constantly adjusting their action plan to realize their personal vision is risky, because it implies that there is no end to the effort that could be made in attempting to achieve one's stated goals and it seems to neglect that other people's intentions and goals will have an impact too. In Norway, psychologists are already reporting cases of clients who have been exhausted by this endless struggle.

An unreflected use of the gremlin concept may further add to this. Separating out 'a negative voice' and externalizing it as 'a gremlin' oversimplifies and reifies 'a problem' – which risks becoming an abstraction from what is happening. A further risk is posed by the false belief that the problem can and should be controlled or fully managed; that one should be in control of one's mind. It is deeply frustrating to find that this does not work in practice.

Power dynamics

In Strategic Choice Theory, interaction is understood in systemic terms. An immediate consequence of this is a tendency to reify. In coaching, the coaching relationship is reified as 'an entity' or a system. The coach and client, and the structure of the coaching process, make up 'the coaching

relation'. Power is also reified and made a characteristic of the relationship: power is 'granted' to the relationship. This renders the ongoing power dynamics of the coaching relationship invisible, and thus impossible to reflect upon.

The assumption that the client holds the answers, and the coach merely helps to find them, adds to this potential danger. A coach who believes they are simply helping to unfold what is already enfolded in the client, uncovering the 'truth inside the client', feels no responsibility for the end result or the consequences of their questioning: they have merely helped the client find what was already there. On the other hand, if the coach understands him/herself as influencing and being influenced by a continuous flow of gestures and responses, where the emerging thematic patterning is as it is because of all that is said and not said, done and not done – then that coach is fully responsible for all their own gestures and responses, and also for the consequences that are co-constructed through their participation in this process.

This has an impact on how one thinks about power in a coaching relationship. Instead of 'it' being reified and 'transferred' to the relationship, thinking in terms of complex responsive processes makes power very much a part of the dynamics of what goes on in and between coach and client. In these circumstances, the coach is no longer 'neutral'; I would like to explore the implications of this in my further research by inquiring into power dynamics and ethics in coaching.

Finally, I am by no means dismissing coaching: many clients find it immensely helpful. I would like to prompt further debate and contribute to a more rigorous reflection among coaches about how we think about what we are doing. To quote White and Epston:

If we accept that power and knowledge are inseparable – that a domain of knowledge is a domain of power and a domain of power is a domain of knowledge – and if we accept that we are simultaneously undergoing the effects of power and exercising power over others, then we are unable to take a benign view of our own practices. [...] We would work to identify the context of ideas in which our practices are situated and explore the history of these ideas. This would enable us to identify more readily the effects, dangers, and limitations of these ideas and of our own practices. (White and Epston 1990: 29, my italics)

PROJECT 2B

8 years of suspension and re-habitation to old ways (written in 2016)

Returning to DMan

It has been a struggle to write this narrative. I suppose I had forgotten what a struggle it is to scrutinize my own thinking in writing. Reading one of my research peer's Project 1, I find this reference useful in my own struggle; 'our understanding of the past is constantly being reconstrued based on our understanding of the present with a view to our hopes for the future' (e.g. Stacy and Mowles 2016: 331). The aim of doing this work is thus not to 'get it right', but to increase my awareness of my own current thinking and what is influencing it.

I am discovering that I have been expecting a kind of linear development process, a continuous improvement of knowledge over the 8 years of suspension. And I am beginning to sense that this may not be the case. I find myself disappointed, but also relieved. The sense of being relieved might be because I see how caught-up I still am in the paradigm of continuous improvement and achievement, and how liberating it feels to see that I cannot fully control my own development.

I believe that the different life events have left me more accepting of what is, rather than wishing things were different. There is less resistance and frustration, although these have by no means disappeared completely. I tend to be more flexible and improvise from what is going on, rather trying to focus on what should be going on. *It is what it is; let's get the most out of it.*

I am noticing that this is not quite so when it comes to my personal narrative of who I am. I am not as flexible and accepting towards what I find *myself* doing and thinking, if it is not 'living up to my ideals' or what I believe 'should be'. I still have very high expectations of myself and am disappointed when I don't live up to them.

While writing Project 2, I was practising as a professional coach. Over the 8 years of suspension from the DMan programme, I have worked as a management consultant in different companies, Deloitte being one of them. My work as a management consultant has mainly been as project manager of some sort. Early in my career as a management consultant, I was recognized for having an unusual combination of analytical skills and interpersonal skills. I was quickly able to understand complex issues, from the micro level of detail to the macro level of strategy. And I could communicate well at all levels in the organisation. I got things done and moved things forward.

In 2013 I co-founded a social impact management consultancy, Impact Consulting, together with my business partner, Eric. He is a mechanical engineer with excellent analytical skills and an ability to communicate complex issues in a way that people can understand. Originally an idea

coined by our future chair, we coined the slogan 'IQ + EQ = Value' for our company. EQ stands for 'Emotional Quotient' and is coined by Daniel Goleman (1996).

As I write and rewrite this narrative, and as I read and re-read it based on the comments and reflections of my peers, I am struck by how immersed I still am in the belief that I can and should continuously improve myself.

My current focus in my business

In November 2015, my curiosity to answer the question 'What makes people thrive in life and at work?' took me across the Atlantic to Boston, to visit MIT for an Executive Short Course in Neuroscience for Leadership. Could understanding more about how the brain/body works tell me anything about thriving? And could it be that insights from neuroscience are of importance in the workplace?

At MIT, I was introduced to a unique model for brain/body performance. The model identifies key factors that influence how well the human brain performs. The factors are physical (exercise, nutrition, sleep, mindfulness), emotional (personal value system, drive/motivation, intrapersonal skills), and cognitive (learning capacity, working memory, ability to focus and manage distractions, ability to be creative). The model comes with an assessment of your habits in life. Do you have habits that are supporting a well-functioning brain – or not? You answer an online questionnaire and are given a score on the different factors. You also get personal recommendations of what you can do to optimize your brain performance.

Impact Consulting has recently entered a partnership with the company that has developed the model to take the model to Norway and potentially to the Nordic countries. We have created concepts for leadership, team and organisational development with insights from neuroscience, based on this model. I see a window of opportunity here. There are insights from neuroscience that might contribute to 'the state of thriving' in Norway. By that, I mean that an increased awareness of how we function might contribute to us making better choices for ourselves. Also, there is good potential for business.

When I talk about 'how your brain performs' with senior executives, some of them respond very enthusiastically and with great curiosity. They are eager to learn more and want to participate. Others are sceptical: will this tell them anything new? I am running a pilot group with five senior executives in Bergen and another group of four in Oslo. They are all members of the top management group in their respective companies, and those companies are very successful. The participants have all answered the online questionnaire and received a report with personal recommendations of what they can do to enable their brains to work even better. I have

conversations with them based on this report. Having had five sessions so far, I am noticing that introducing neuroscience opens for a very personal and deeply engaging conversation about the leader herself and about how she runs her organisation.

Why neuroscience? The sales pitch

The decline in the price of oil has had a major impact on business life in Norway. Many people have lost their jobs, and there is a need to innovate and find new ways of doing business and creating new jobs. There is also a continuous focus on cutting costs through developing more effective work processes and reducing bureaucracy. The use of robots programmed to perform routine tasks is swiftly gaining momentum, leaving even more people with the challenge of finding new work. In a future where routine work has been taken over by robots, what kind of work is best for us humans? And what does this require of us? When routine tasks have been automated, the work that remains is the knowledge-intensive type of work that requires us to be 'on top of our game'; we must be proficient learners and innovators.

In this landscape, there is an increasing focus on 'what to do about people'. We are grappling with questions such as: How can we unlock our full potential? How do we enable people to perform at their best? How do we release creativity and innovation? These are the kind of questions that Bjarte Bogsnes, VP of Performance Management in Statoil, raises in his book *Implementing Beyond Budgeting* (2008). He also writes that it is important to understand human nature, so that we can build on it rather than work against it. This is where neuroscience comes into play.

Neuroscience gives us insights into how the brain and body functions and what influences how well the brain/body system works for us. It is a bit like becoming aware that it is a good idea to wash our hands before we eat, to minimize bacteria. Learning about 'how things work' help us make good choices about what to do and what not to do – so that we can work *with* our nature, not *against* it. Introducing our concept for increased performance in organisations, we focus on how well we use our most important tool – the brain. When the brain is given the best circumstances to work properly, we increase our ability to learn, innovate, and perform advanced problem-solving. These are highly valued and necessary capabilities in our current business landscape.

The air we breathe

We are introducing the concept of 'Neuroscience for High Performance' into an existing paradigm of thought. Normally we don't notice how our culture and context influences the way we think and act. It is just there, and we take it in unconsciously, like the air we breathe.

The paradigm of thought that we are introducing our concept into is dominated by a focus on achievement – fulfilling our potential and optimizing performance. The ideal businessperson in Norway is highly successful, optimistic, positive, energized, confident, and happy; yet still humble. We are continuously searching for ways to become better versions of ourselves. We expect ourselves to perform at high levels on every stage. We train for marathons or triathlons, have demanding jobs and three children, we are engaged politically and at school, we are football coaches for our kids, and we make home-baked cakes for the lottery. And we do it all with a big smile, and preferably without boasting too much about it. Where does this come from?

The spirit of capitalism and achievement society

Exploring the question of where my ideals comes from has led me to *The Protestant Work Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism* (Tawney et al 2003). The Protestant work ethic is a moral code stressing hard work, asceticism, and the organisation of one's life in the service of God. It is the attitude that if you work hard and perform good deeds, you are a good person. Weber argues that this moral code or attitude encouraged the growth and development of Western capitalism. With reference to Benjamin Franklin, Weber quotes, 'Time is money' – and continues with, 'He that loses five shillings worth of time, loses five shillings, and might as prudently throw five shillings into the sea'. The moral imperative is, 'Do not waste your time doing things that cannot generate an income'. It is a duty or a calling of the individual to increase capital as an end in itself. The focus on human beings in this context is as resources to generate growth. Developing human resources becomes utilitarian. We develop talent and abilities so that they can optimize the bottom line.

Barbara Ehrenreich writes about 'late capitalism' in her *Smile or Die* (2010), where she argues that positive thinking has destroyed our economy because of its bias towards relentless optimism. This way of thinking tends to overlook potential risks and assumes entitlement to wealth and success. Ehrenreich argues that 'Late capitalism, or consumer capitalism, encourages the individual to want more. And positive thinking is ready at hand to tell them they deserve more and can have it if they really want it and are willing to make an effort to get it' (Ehrenreich 2010: 8). She uses the phrase 'delusional expectations': the belief that everyone can get exactly what they want – it's simply up to each individual to make it happen for themselves. As she puts it: 'the flip side of positivity is a harsh insistence on personal responsibility: if your business fails or your job is eliminated, it must be because you didn't try hard enough or didn't believe firmly enough in the inevitability of your success' (ibid.).

Positive Thinking encourages us to believe that all things are possible through an effort of mind, and that we should stay positive and motivated because this will attract to us the success we

want. By consciously removing negativity – don't read newspapers, and don't talk to negative people – we will be able to maintain our energy and positive momentum. If we become slightly critical, we are told not to overanalyse, not to be so negative; to 'get a grip and get on with it'. This way of thinking seeks to silence criticism, calling it 'whining'.

The effect of this is that we may become stressed and emotionally depleted, according to Ehrenreich. We negate emotions that are 'not positive' and conceal distress. We become inwardly preoccupied as we struggle to always be positive and upbeat. And the idea that we should 'make the most of it' and that 'every cloud has a silver lining' influences us to simply accept things the way they are. We become apathetic and accepting – it is what it is; there is nothing we can do about it. Instead of fighting to improve society, we fight to improve ourselves.

I must admit it is quite painful to read this and to recognize it in my own thinking and attitudes. I start to wonder to what extent I can call my attitudes 'my own', rather than simply finding myself driven by the spirit of the times ('the air that I breathe').

Reading Byung-Chul Han's *The Burnout Society* (2015) is making a profound impression on me. He writes about the pressure to achieve, to become the best version of ourselves – and how this seduces us into becoming *self-exploiting achievement subjects*. I recognize myself in this. It is like holding up a mirror. I also realize, with a sense of shame, that despite this growing awareness I remain compulsively preoccupied with myself and my personal improvement project.

Han argues that the signature affliction of our age is no longer infections, but 'psychic infarctions' (ibid: 8) – not a physical illness due to contamination, but less visible illnesses due to exhaustion and saturation with too much of the same. Examples of symptoms are depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, borderline personality disorder, and burnout syndrome. Han (11) writes that 'depression is the sickness of a society that suffers from excessive positivity.' He explains that it reflects a humanity waging war on itself. Those of us who are losing the war with ourselves – who find ourselves unable to measure up and are tired of becoming ourselves – turn into depressives and losers with exhausted and burn-out souls (10).

This is a dark outlook on our Western capitalistic society. The excess of stimuli, information, and impulses is developing a fragmented and scattered perception, Han argues. Our mode of attention is becoming broad but flat. We are losing our ability to immerse ourselves in our surroundings, to listen deeply, and to simply marvel at the way things are. Han writes, 'a purely hectic rush produces nothing new. It reproduces and accelerates what is already available' (ibid: 13). We are 'caught in the hamster wheel' to use a metaphor and the spinning is accelerating. The consequences for the environment and for the hamsters seem to be increasing rates of burnout and collapse.

Towards Project 3

In Project 3, I want to research the experience of introducing 'Neuroscience for High Performance' to the Norwegian market. This is done in our management consulting boutique Impact Consulting, which I founded in 2012 together with my business partner, Eric. What happens as we try to implement this concept? What unfolds? How do we find ourselves talking about the concept, with our clients and in the media, and how does this change over time? What kind of dynamics are we immersed in?

What might happen as we introduce our concept is that it is taken up in a utilitarian way – as a tool to optimize employee performance for an increased bottom line. It might add to the pressure to achieve and to become oneself. It could potentially increase the risk of burnout. This worries me, just as coaching worried me 8 years ago (as discussed in Project 2).

I am not quite sure why it is so important to me to 'do good'. I am becoming increasingly aware that whatever I do (or don't do), I cannot know in advance if it will have a positive or negative impact. Then how do I know what the 'right' thing to do is?

Through exploring the process of introducing a new concept to the market, I am hoping to shed some light on this. All entrepreneurs developing new technology or new concepts will be in the same situation, not really knowing in advance what the effects and consequences might be. By rigorously reflecting upon the process I am involved in, I hope to contribute to new and helpful insights.

PROJECT 3

With the best of intentions: why having a social impact is not as straightforward as it may seem (written in 2017)

Introduction

In 2002, I was involved in a traffic accident. Three people lost their lives. I learned later that two of them were only 17 and 18 years old. It was a head-on collision. The 18-year-old driver was taking a bend in the wrong lane, passing the car in front of him at full speed – smashing into the car in front of ours. The impact was massive, and we watched it all happen as if in slow motion. One of the cars was pressed completely flat and it was impossible to see anyone in it, let alone help anyone out of it. And in the other car, the driver had been thrown into the back seat and looked dead. His right arm had been ripped off. His wife was still in the passenger seat, alive and in shock. The car was burning.

I can still see every little detail when I talk about the accident, and often my eyes tear up. I remember thinking, after the debrief with the ambulance personnel, how vulnerable life is. I decided in that moment that I wanted to pay back to life. I was lucky to live this time, and to realize what a precious gift life is; the least I could do was to contribute in one way or another to the improvement of the lives of others. I soon quit my job in an IT company and left for 3 months backpack travel to figure out how to spend my life more wisely. Returning, I took a job in the public sector paying half of what I was used to, dedicated to learning how to help people unfold their potential and live their lives fully. Ten years later, I founded a ‘social impact consultancy’ with the purpose of making a positive impact in the world.

Since Impact Consulting was founded, I have met many people with similar stories. They have been hard-working and quite successful at their jobs, when suddenly something has happened that has made such a big impression on them that they have completely changed their priorities in life. They show a passion and a burning desire to contribute to something more than increased shareholder value. They want to have an impact in the world, to make it better somehow – to contribute to solving the environmental and social problems we face.

You can see this in the ‘green movement’ and in the increasing number of sustainability and triple (economic, social, and environmental) bottom-line initiatives. It is also apparent in the quest for ‘purpose’ in work often attributed to the millennial generation.

But... in a world of increasing complexity, where change can happen in a blink and we know that the future is fundamentally unpredictable – how can we possibly know that what we are doing, with the best of intentions, will have a positive impact? What if, when we look back on our life, we realize that we ended up making matters *worse*?

Working for a noble cause can energize and inspire us to put in the extra effort needed to succeed. But at the same time, these high ambitions – in combination with a culture that idealizes determination and a positive and energetic attitude, and where conflict is avoided – may exhaust and deplete people, or lead them to quit or fire people for the wrong reasons, or lead to unethical behaviour and even the demise of the entire start-up initiative.

This is what I have paid attention to in my third project. And through sharing my journey and research with other visionaries and ‘do-gooders’, I hope that I can trigger reflection and enable discussions that are currently difficult to have.

Noticing that something is ‘not quite right’

When I started work on this research project, Impact Consulting had existed for nearly 4 years. Eric, my business partner, had joined me just a few months after the company was founded. The ideal of contributing to a better society, and the belief that we should use our personal abilities in the best possible way to promote this, was at the core of the company. Displayed on the wall of our main meeting room was a quote from Nelson Mandela: ‘There is no passion to be found playing small – in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living’.

For these 4 years, it had been just the two of us. We had primarily been doing project management and lean consulting, with an emphasis on the ‘people dimension’ – working with different facilitation techniques and creative visualization to contribute to shared understanding, energy, and motivation in our projects. Our core competence was to design and facilitate workshops, analytical capabilities, and project management. We had clients in the banking industry, oil and gas, shipping and transportation. We were quite successful, with good references.

After 4 years, Eric and I wanted to try to develop the business further. We could, and perhaps felt we should, make a *bigger* impact. This drive to grow and make a bigger impact is part of what I will explore in this project.

We started by establishing a board of directors with three board members and we hired employees with the help of a recruiting company. Being very busy with client work, family, and children, Eric and I were very clear in our communications with the recruiting company and in interviews that we needed people who would ‘carry their own backpack’ – meaning that they should be willing and able to find their own projects and to work independently. We were also looking for people who wanted to make a difference and ‘do good’ in the world.

Starting fresh with a sense of hope and an eagerness to make a real difference

The atmosphere in the first four strategy workshops together with our board of directors was full of hope and energy, people smiling and laughing. We were all extremely ambitious. We often used the expression ‘the sky is the limit’, and the workshops gradually defined our shared vision of a company with global impact. We decided, together with our board of directors, to focus on two areas: robotics, building on our lean consulting experience, and a leadership programme based on neuroscience.

The neuro-leadership programme had been my idea originally. Attending an executive training in neuroscience for leadership at MIT, I had been introduced to an innovative framework for optimizing brain performance and saw this as an excellent platform for helping people unfold their potential. And this idea captured the enthusiasm of our Chair and was later officially supported by our board of directors, as well as Eric. I started working with the South African company that had developed the framework. I immediately connected with the CEO of the company, a visionary who was keen to contribute to ‘the state of thriving in the world’ as he framed it, by sharing important insights from neuroscience.

Briefly told, the framework builds on a psychometric tool that maps your current life habits and compares them to what is recommended, according to referenced research, to support your brain to work at its best. The personalized recommendations range from nutritional advice, exercise habits, sleep patterns, mindfulness training, and emotional awareness, to how to train working memory and the ability to maintain focus.

The plan was to develop and offer a programme for leadership development based on this framework and Eric and I had agreed that I would resume and finish the doctorate studies that I had started in 2006–2007, in combination with developing the neuro-leadership business. Eric would take over as CEO. He was interested in becoming a professional board member in start-up tech companies and attended a course to lay the theoretical foundation for this. He then officially became the new CEO of Impact Consulting.

Fast forward 6 months: At this point, I had been in the DMan programme for a few months. We had tested the neuro-leadership framework with nine senior executives in two pilot groups. Gradually we had adjusted the concept, and the feedback was increasingly enthusiastic. We had a good enough concept, a business plan, and a one-page strategy that everybody seemed delighted with. We arranged a very successful ‘Brain Lunch’ event with potential clients, which was very well received.

But something was not quite right...

A sense of 'stuckness' or stagnation had slowly developed in the company – as if we were just wading around in the backwaters. With all our enthusiasm and energy, how could this have come about? We were in the business of optimizing brain performance, yet both Eric and I were experiencing brain fog – a lack of focus and motivation, loss of memory, exhaustion. On the surface, we were quite successful; but behind the scenes, in private, it felt different. It felt as though we were putting on a show, and it was starting to feel uncomfortable.

Over time, I had begun noticing that I felt a certain disappointment and frustration that Eric did not seem to be leading the company in the ways I had expected when he officially became CEO. But I hadn't told him. He was doing a wonderful job for the client and the project was paying well. He was working hard, and I didn't want to seem ungrateful. Besides, I had personally not produced the results I had aspired to with the neuro-leadership programme by then, so who was I to complain?

We had previously dismissed one of our employees. She did a great job with clients, but she did not want to do sales work. And now the same thing was happening again with a second employee. Nobody seemed to sense the urgency of our mission, or to take on responsibility. There was an increasing level of frustration and irritation.

Why couldn't we just maintain a high level of energy and get on with more projects?

On first acknowledging this discomfort, my initial reflex was to grit my teeth and work even harder. I tried different kinds of self-help – techniques to release stress from my body; various ways of escaping or getting rid of the discomfort and unease; and methods to renew my energy and motivation. I followed up with most of the recommendations from our neuro-leadership concept to 'boost my brain performance'. I thought it was my personal problem. I thought the anxiety and frustration were slowing me down and getting in the way. I thought I was being weak, and I resented myself for it.

Another way of dealing with my unease was to look for certainty and control in science. In my first few iterations of this project, I therefore read through many of the scientific articles the neuro-leadership framework is based upon. But even though the sources are from highly regarded universities and journals, all science can be discussed and contested. It does not provide a final certainty, simply because a final certainty is never attainable. I also found that the theoretical assumptions and ways of thinking that the neuroscience framework was built upon were situated in Strategic Choice Theory (Stacey 2003) – which I critiqued in Projects 1 and 2, concluding that this way of thinking might lead to burnout. Instead of the science providing me with certainty and

comfort, I felt increasingly uneasy about the gap between our public focus on ‘optimal brain performance’ and my own worries about contributing to burnout.

I moved on to find ways to ethically justify what we were doing with our new concept. There were useful insights in the neuroscience framework that could trigger new reflections and discussions. Could we use it in an ethical way? I read literature on ethics such as Taylor’s *The Ethics of Authenticity* (2008) and Griffin’s *The Emergence of Leadership* (2002) and wrote another iteration of Project 3 where I focused on ethics. But I didn’t link it to my actual experience – so the whole process became an intellectualization, and quite possibly another defence against my own anxiety. Since it was disconnected from my real experience, this abstract analysis didn’t help me to understand what was going on in a way that would enable us to move forward.

None of my strategies for dealing with my unease made any difference. Finally, after months of trying to grit my teeth and get on with it, I realized that I had to make new sense of what was going on. If I hadn’t been a research student and so heavily invested in the company personally, I would probably have escaped the situation altogether by getting another job, as I have done in similar situations in the past. Although this is difficult when you run your own company. But here I had the opportunity to investigate the discomfort, to try to make new sense of it in a way that might be helpful for other people in a similar situation.

On the surface, we were high achievers wanting to make the world a better place by helping people unfold their potential and by helping businesses become more effective. What we told our clients, and the vision we shared among ourselves, was that we were energetic, courageous, and knowledgeable – that we were expert ‘impact consultants’.

Behind the scenes, however, we were struggling to keep our heads above water. The pressure was on. We needed more sales. We needed to produce results. Everybody was getting impatient. Both Eric and I were tired and lacked our usual mental capacity. An additional pressure was that, since we were selling a concept for increased brain performance, we should be able to ‘walk the talk’. In the meantime, we were all too busy to talk about what was going on.

In the following, I will explore a narrative from one of our board meetings. With the help of my research community, I have then used different theoretical frameworks to gain a richer understanding of the dynamics in our company and to tease out some of the assumptions that might have got us into trouble.

Narrative

To make it easier to follow the narrative, I will introduce the people involved briefly:

24. Eric: Co-founder and partner. Holds a Master of Science degree from London and a Master of Technology Management from Australia. Has excellent analytical skills and is an attentive listener with the gift of helping people to feel good about themselves. Shies away from conflict and has difficulty saying no. Has three young kids, is building a house, and is training for a triathlon.
25. Susy: Employee/senior consultant. Holds a Master of Economics degree and a Master in International Management. Has worked 7 years for a large consulting firm. Very analytically skilled and rational. Comes across as a bit reserved. Is now working 40% for client.
26. Jack: Chair of the board. Analytically brilliant and a politically savvy strategist. Both Eric and I have reported to him when we worked together at a large consulting firm. Extraordinarily ambitious. CEO of a large shipping company.
27. Gabriel: Board member. Retired regional director of several banks, currently working as a self-employed consultant. Strong belief in focusing on each other's strengths and helping people unfold their potential. Has worked as a professional coach for many years, and as a mentor for female executives, helping them become more successful.
28. Cathy: Board member. Human Resources (HR) director of large company. One of Gabriel's previous clients and a very successful businesswoman. Passion for promoting diversity in business and for helping people reach their full potential.

The board meeting

At 4 o'clock, the board members started to arrive and take their places around the table. Compared with previous board meetings, the atmosphere was noticeably different: there was none of the usual enthusiasm and engaged conversation. I had decided to tone down my own presence, as I had got into the habit of taking charge and talking things through. I was probably motivated partly by being tired of assuming responsibility for leading the meeting and partly by a recognition that if I always took over, it left no room for others to do so.

Neither Eric nor Susy said anything, nor did the board members. For a while we sat in silence, just looking at each other. Then I glanced at Eric, raising a quizzical eyebrow, and he launched into an introduction. It was as if he had been waiting for me to start.

Eric started by being honest about being exhausted. He referred to a meeting he, Susy and I had had a few weeks earlier, where Eric and I discovered that we had lost our usual enthusiasm and motivation.

Gabriel's response to our openness was to normalize the situation. He said that it is typical for start-ups to go through periods of exhaustion where everything accumulates to the point of

being overwhelming. The key to success, he said, is to notice this and to make the necessary adjustments and prioritizations. Cathy too was supportive, smiling and saying that it was important not to take this as a defeat or setback. She praised us for being open. Jack was not saying much, but he was nodding. He seemed quite calm, and he is normally a person who is very animated and impatient.

I experienced the conversation as open, trusting, and constructively exploring around what we needed to do to change the situation, to regain balance. It was all practical talk about what to do to be able to move forward. I felt a sense of relief, as if a burden was off my shoulders and as if I was no longer alone in this. (Over the months that followed, however, nothing improved. Having experienced a temporary sense of relief at sharing our discomfort, we were simply back to business as usual. Our habits and patterns were strong.)

The second important conversation in the board meeting was about our new leadership programme, based on neuroscience.

Susy presented a one-pager she had developed and that Jack, in a previous meeting with Susy and me, had praised as having 'McKinsey quality'. For Jack, McKinsey represents brilliance.⁶

The response when Susy showed this one-pager to the board of directors was spontaneous applause. Gabriel and Cathy took a picture of the slide with their cell phones. I didn't quite understand all the enthusiasm, but I went along with it and applauded and smiled and said that Susy had done an excellent job with it. I believe I did this not to spoil the party. I was wondering if I was the only one disguising my hesitancy with a smile. Privately, I was wondering how to practically move forward with this strategy. It was so high-level and abstract that I couldn't really do anything with it. But everyone seemed happy with it.

After 10 minutes on this slide, there were 20 minutes left for the last agenda point – a critical review of the concept. At this point, I was assuming that the increasing anxiety I felt was because I was worried that the neuroscience for leadership concept might not be good enough or might not have the impact we were hoping for. I wanted to discuss this by looking at potential critiques or objections from clients. I had collected inputs from the pilot clients and wanted to discuss their doubts and questions. My previous research into coaching (see Project 2) had found that working with a client to unfold their potential can push them to exhaustion and shows a certain lack of ethical consideration. Were we risking the same with our new concept? What if what we were doing was not enhancing personal fulfilment, but contributing to burnout?

⁶ According to Wikipedia, McKinsey & Company is an American worldwide management consulting firm. Widely considered the most prestigious management consultancy, McKinsey's clientele includes 80% of the world's largest corporations; see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/McKinsey_%26_Company.

As I introduced the last agenda point, critiquing the concept, I noticed that Jack was physically shrinking – almost hiding, with his hands on his head leaning over the table. I found myself commenting on this in a light, jokingly tone, mirroring his body language: ‘You really don’t want to talk about this, do you?’. We all laughed and moved on, filling out post-it notes with our three most immediate objections to the concept.

I collected the post-its and handed everyone a one-pager where I had collected and sorted objections and critiques of the concept, summarized from notes taken when talking with potential clients and business partners. I invited everyone for comments.

Jack immediately took the lead.

He declared confidently that my ethical concerns about the concept being taken up in a way that potentially leads to burnout, and that the whole model might not be scientifically valid enough, did not pose a real obstacle and *would not prevent a decision to buy the concept*. He spoke slowly and deliberately, emphasizing ‘not’ and maintaining eye contact with me. In effect, with his determined tone and decisive gestures he closed this part of the discussion. He seemed rather annoyed. I felt disinclined to discuss this any further, even embarrassed to have raised the issue in the first place. I didn’t object or pursue the discussion further. It felt as though a door had been shut firmly in my face.

Jack probably saw it as his job, as the board Chair, to press on with urgency. The immediate sense I made of his response was that he was impatient for results. I was complicating things unnecessarily with my philosophical concerns; I should ‘get a grip and get on with it’.

I will begin my exploration into what is going on here by looking at the current way of making sense of what we are doing and should be doing together. I will look at potential consequences of taking this perspective, before I move on to explore alternatives.

The ideology and taken-for-granted truths at Impact Consulting

The core values of Impact Consulting are knowledge and analytical capabilities, courage and energy. Our ideal is to do good in the world by helping each other and clients to thrive. We believe in using our full potential to contribute to a positive impact in the world. By being brilliant, effective, and hard-working, we want to make change happen. I do a professional doctorate on top of running my own business, taking care of my daughter, and moving in with my fiancé; Eric, on top of working hard as a consultant, does triathlon, looks after three kids, and builds a house. We are both extremely driven to perform and excel – why?

Stacey and Mowles (2011) argue that the ideology of contributing to society by helping people, teams, and organisations to unfold their potential is within the paradigm of humanistic

psychology. Humanistic psychology takes an optimistic view on human beings and their perfectibility and is based on an expressivist view of the individual, where we all have an inner urge to self-actualize and fulfil our potential. I wrote about this in my Project 2 when exploring the ideologies and theoretical assumptions of coaching.

Many of the senior executives I have worked with have been driven by the ideal of using their full potential. They have always worked hard and are trained as they climb the corporate ladder to give their work their very best effort. They strongly believe in 'fulfilling their highest potential' and in enabling their employees to fulfil theirs.

The activities in Impact Consulting are focused on the development and discussion of plans and strategies. We assume that it is possible to set a goal and then work hard enough to make sure we succeed. This is again thinking in line with Strategic Choice Theory as explored by Stacey (2007), which I wrote about already in Project 1: strategy is the general direction in which an organisation changes over time. The prescribed way of making a choice is to first set goals and then identify the actions needed to achieve them. Having chosen the general direction, or strategy, the managers are required to design an organisational structure to implement it. And as in Project 1, the theory leads one to believe that it is possible to achieve success if one follows the pre-decided actions and if we help employees unfold their potential and it tends to ignore that other people (and organisations) are making choices too. When success doesn't happen, the response is to put more effort into achieving it. I knew this. I had researched this before. And still, 8 years later, we found ourselves entangled in lofty ambitions and our ideals of the 'good company' working for a sustainable future. I was in a state of 'brain fog' and Eric was exhausted; we had completely forgotten or weren't able to reflect upon the power dynamics we were a part of. We didn't talk about it other than complaining that we were exhausted. We were experiencing exactly what I warned against in my Project 2.

It was quite surprising to both myself and to my peer researchers that I didn't see this. Or quite possibly I saw it but did not fully recognize it. This is an important insight into just how strongly we are influenced by the dominant ethos, and how difficult it is to challenge our own assumptions and break free from habitual ways of thinking.

To further develop my understanding of the context we operate in, I visited Weber's work to explore the rise of Western capitalism and its consequences.

Weber (Tawney et al 2003) argued that Protestantism was a fertile soil for capitalism: a person does not 'by nature' wish to earn more and more money, but simply to live as they are accustomed to living, and to earn as much as is necessary for that purpose. Weber called this traditionalism. The opportunity to work less was more attractive than that of earning more. To

overcome this traditionalism, there had to be a shift in perception so that *labour became an absolute end in itself, a calling*.

The ability of mental concentration, as well as the absolutely essential feeling of obligation to one's job, are here most often combined with a strict economy which calculates the possibility of high earnings, and a cool self-control and frugality which *enormously increase performance*. This provides the most favourable foundation for the conception of labour as an end in itself, as a calling which is necessary to capitalism: the chances of overcoming traditionalism are greatest on account of the religious upbringing. (ibid: 63, emphasis added)

Today, the spirit of capitalism has become detached from religion. We no longer work hard and long hours 'in the service of God'. Weber writes:

If you ask them what is the meaning of their restless activity, why they are never satisfied with what they have, thus appearing so senseless to any purely worldly view of life, they would perhaps give the answer, if they know any at all: 'to provide for my children and grandchildren'. But more often and, since that motive is not peculiar to them, but was just as effective for the traditionalist, more correctly, simply: that business with its continuous work has become a necessary part of their lives. (ibid: 70)

The attitude that one is obliged to work hard, with mental concentration and self-control, is so ingrained in our Western society that we are not even aware of it. And I am beginning to wonder whether this sense of obligation is so ingrained in me, the drive so strong, that it is almost impossible to let go of it.

The Korean-born German contemporary philosopher Byung-Chul Han builds upon Weber's view of the Protestant work ethic, drawing on Foucault's theories of the development of a disciplinary society, to develop his argument for *The Burnout Society* (Han 2015), where he claims that we have moved from discipline to a *paradigm of achievement*.

'Should' has been replaced by the positive scheme of 'can'. The positivity of 'can' is much more motivating than the negativity of 'should'. The Obama campaign was a good example of this, with its slogan of 'Yes, we can!' – not 'Yes, you should!'.

Han claims there is a risk of burnout for employees who experience not measuring up, or who become tired of having to 'reach their highest potential'. He draws attention to the same risk of exhaustion and burnout that I noted in my previous projects.

Han's work can be said to be a staunchly anti-humanist philosophy. He draws quite a lot on Foucault, whose career was dominated by his interest in the ways in which individual subjectivity is moulded by social discourse, particularly discourses of alterity and power, into which we are assimilated and through which we perceive and value the world.

While Han draws attention to the dark side of capitalism, he seems to do so in quite an unbalanced way. In Han's account, technology is something that happens to people, almost like the weather. And the capitalistic air we breathe seems to turn us into self-exploiting robots. This ignores human agency. It also overlooks the fact that working hard for a noble cause, responding to a calling, can energize and inspire us to put in the extra effort needed to succeed. But we need to understand more of what we are doing and why we are doing it, we need to keep investigating our experience to tease out and reflect upon our assumptions.

Psychoanalytical perspectives

So far in this project, I have explored what I have called 'the air we breathe' – meaning the unconsciously accepted ideals that have influenced the development of our values in Western society, and specifically in our company. In the following I will explore the relational dynamics in the company – the very dynamics that our espoused thinking has rendered invisible and therefore, so far, impossible to reflect upon.

A classic way to seek an understanding of the relational dynamics in an organisation is by drawing on psychoanalytical theories and Wilfred Bion founded the psychoanalytic study of group life. He worked at the Tavistock Institute, which was established in the 1950s. The work of the institute has inspired the development of organisational theory emphasizing unconscious forces that shape organisational life. Bion studied his experiences in groups and described group therapy as a 'planned endeavour to develop in a group the forces that lead to smoothly running co-operative activity' (Bion 1961: II, emphasis added).

Bion argued that in every group, two groups are present: the work group, and the basic assumption group. When the work group functioning is active, we have the 'smoothly running co-operative activity' concerned with the primary task of the group – what the group is formed to accomplish. But there are tacit underlying assumptions – what Bion calls 'basic assumptions' – influencing the group's behaviour and interfering with their task. Bion specifically identified three basic assumptions: dependency, fight/flight, and pairing.

Basic assumptions

Dependency

A group where the *dependency assumption* is active behaves passively, expecting the leader to find solutions to their collective problems. The leader may be idealized into a kind of omnipotent 'god' or parent who can take care of the children – and some especially ambitious leaders (narcissists) may

be susceptible to this role. This can work well if the leader lives up to the expectations of the group and the group is successful.

The feeling of security derived from the dependent group comes together with feelings of inadequacy and frustration. Resentment about their dependency can eventually lead group members to overthrow the leader, then search for a new one who is better equipped to fulfil their needs.

A key symptom of the dependency assumption going on in a group, according to Bion, is that participation in it feels somehow 'lumpish' or 'dead' with a lack of motivation and a sense of hopelessness of accomplishing the group's tasks. Another is that group members expect the person they have appointed as leader to act with authority. A third symptom is that members of the group no longer have relationships with each other, but only with the leader on whom they depend.

This resonates with my current experience. There certainly has been a 'deadness' and loss of enthusiasm, and a sense of helplessness in moving forward with sales and developing our business. This could also help me to understand the silence at the start of the board meeting, perhaps waiting for me to take charge as usual. The leadership responsibility probably has been placed with me; and though I have not accepted it, neither have I made this very clear.

We have had a leadership problem. We have needed an initiative to come together and talk about our next steps, to coordinate and drive sales initiatives, to closely monitor the economic situation and communicate the findings, to follow up employees in projects and include them in our meetings. None of this has happened.

We've all been working in isolation on our own tasks, with minimal interaction compared to earlier. An example of this is the board meeting narrated above, where we all separately presented our own tasks and concerns.

I had expected Eric to take on leadership responsibility when he became CEO. This didn't happen. Why? What did *he* expect to happen? How have I been contributing to the situation? And why haven't we talked about this?

Both Eric and I are empathic listeners and are uncomfortable with conflict. I suppose we are both afraid of hurting people, and perhaps of being rejected. I believe we are both keen to avoid 'problematizing'. We have avoided disagreement and discomfort and entered 'listening mode' or just withdrawn – classic 'head-in-the-sand' behaviour, hoping that the issue will go away by itself if we just wait long enough.

Becoming aware of how we have both contributed to the situation is of immense value, especially since we have now begun to talk about this and to make changes in our company.

Fight/flight

The second basic assumption that Bion describes is that the group has gathered to fight or flee from a common enemy. In this mode, the group's primary aim is to preserve itself at all cost. If this requires fighting someone or something, the group may show aggressiveness and hostility. If it involves running away from someone or something, the group may become 'lax' – arriving late, gossiping, taking lots of coffee breaks and other activities that serve to avoid addressing the task at hand. The group then unconsciously authorizes a fighter to take leadership, using the appointed leader as a screen on which they can project their own feelings of anger (Bion 1961).

The enemy in our case could be conflict. If the members of a group shy away from conflict and sweep issues under the rug, a basic assumption dynamic could be the projection of anger onto a person who 'should take care of business'. Anger and hostility in our small company could have been projected onto each other – Eric onto me, and vice versa; experienced as passive aggressiveness. The projection of anger has also been on Jack. Eric and I have discussed our frustration with him and his 'political games' quite a few times. Jack's strategizing was particularly obvious in one board meeting where the input from him and another board member seemed rather orchestrated – revealing through similar choice of phrases, and exchange of eye contact, that the matter was something they had clearly discussed before the meeting, but not with us.

Now that I have taken the time to really reflect on this, I realize that I have felt ashamed for not achieving more with the neuroscience framework, for not being able to 'get my act together' or grit my teeth to do more sales, and to deal with what is needed at Impact Consulting. I have blamed myself for being weak, or for not doing enough, even though I have worked a lot. In shying away from conflict, I have projected my anger and disappointment onto others, and I am probably not alone in this. I have entertained feelings of anger and frustration towards Eric for not stepping up as the CEO, but not been very clear about this towards him. And I have explained some of his behaviour towards myself as passive aggressive, based on his body language (dismissive facial expressions) and sometimes terse responses when I have spoken to him.

This pattern of behaviour resonates with my experience working for different clients, as well – employees blaming management and doing nothing to contribute to solving the issues themselves. And management blaming employees, and thus redirecting attention from their own lack of action or anxiety.

Pairing

Bion's third 'basic assumption' in groups is the *pairing assumption*, whereby the group has come together to oversee a new and powerful partnership that will bring about miraculous change:

The air of hopeful expectation that I have mentioned is a characteristic of the pairing group [...]; that the coming season [...] will be more agreeable; that some new kind of community – an improved group – should be developed, and so on. (Bion 1961: 151)

In our company, the initial board meetings were sustained by an atmosphere full of energy and hope for the future, with people smiling and laughing. We were all very ambitious and wanted to ‘save the world’, and our strategy workshops all ended with us agreeing on very lofty goals.

Such wild optimism itself is a symptom of the pairing assumption in a group: ‘This feeling is characteristic of the pairing group and must be taken by itself as evidence that the pairing group is in existence, even when other evidence appears to be lacking’ (ibid: 151).

This certainly aligns with my own experience. And why is this a problem? Bion continues (ibid: 152):

In so far as it succeeds, hope is weakened; for obviously nothing is then to hope for, and, since destructiveness, hatred, and despair have in no way been radically influenced, their existence again makes itself felt.

Our diminished enthusiasm is not because we have achieved our goals; but it could result from disappointment at not having achieved what we had hoped in the time we have spent so far. And this decline in start-up energy could be weakening the partnership between Eric and myself, if we are unable to reflect upon and talk about what is going on. We have had no way of dealing with disappointment together.

Bion’s ‘basic assumptions’ have offered me some useful ways of understanding what might be going on at Impact Consulting and what my own contribution to this might be. And based on the responses in my community of inquiry, and in my previous experiences with clients, these insights can be helpful for other people who find themselves ‘stuck’ and unable to move forward with the tasks at hand.

Critiquing the psychoanalytical perspective by drawing on Stacey and Dalal

So far, I have used a psychoanalytical perspective to start making new sense of what I am involved in at Impact Consulting. This provided new insights. But it has its limitations and challenges, which is what I will look at next.

Stacey argues that a central concept running through psychoanalytic thinking from Freud to present times is the primacy it gives to the individual psyche, understood as an internal world that is separate from the social reality outside. This split between the inner and outer world is, with very few exceptions, a defining characteristic of psychoanalytic thinking (Stacey 2003).

Starting with Freud, Stacey works his way through different strands of psychoanalytical thinking, showing similarities and differences and critiquing them by drawing on theories of human beings as social through and through, with a key focus on relational processes and interdependencies, drawing mainly on the theories of George Herbert Mead and Norbert Elias.

The drive model, represented by Freud, understands mind or 'what goes on inside' as the transformation of original drive energies, primarily the repression of innate individual sexuality and aggression; while the relational model, represented by Mitchell (2000) and Ogden (1994), sees mind as a structure shaped through early interpersonal exchanges.

But even though the relational model moves to interpersonal relationships, it does so in a particular way. The notion of mind/psyche as an internal world of representations⁷ remains firmly in place. There is both an 'inside' (what goes on in the psyche) and an 'outside' (what goes on in the social field).

By focusing on a mind inside a body, psychoanalysis overlooks the historical and relational context in which a human being finds themselves, and thus neglects power dynamics altogether. With the theories of complex processes of relating introduced by Stacey, mind is the action of a body. There is no split between inside and outside, mind and body, thinking and acting. There is only action and process, interdependence and social relations. And in all this, power and politics are necessarily involved. This is what I will explore next.

Power

Power and ideology – understanding power as disciplining processes

In an earlier section in this project, I describe the ideology of Impact Consulting by referring to Stacey's (2007) interpretation of Strategic Choice Theory (Child 1972) and to an expressivist view of human beings.

What's the connection between ideology and power?

Dalal (1998) draws on the work of Elias and Scotson (1994) when he argues that the use of *ideology, praise, and stigma* contributes to status quo. It maintains power differentials. When we espouse an ideology, we tend to describe some things or behaviours as 'good' and others as 'bad'.

Praise is given when someone behaves according to the ideal, and those who don't are stigmatized. We influence inclusion and exclusion by praise or negative talk when gossiping. My understanding of 'gossiping', as Dalal uses it, is talking about people who are not present, helping to

⁷ Mind as the internal representation of an external world of reality.

shape a good or a bad reputation, thus influencing power differentials. Gossip and stigmatization are used in the service of maintaining (or challenging) power differentials.

Both Eric and I are naturally inclined to work hard in pursuit of recognition and praise. The ‘good girl/boy’ – clever, hard-working, positive, engaged, kind, unselfish – is an archetype that resonates with us both. We see hard work as an ideal, and since the traffic accident I have tended to see my own work as a calling.

Jack has always given us a lot of praise, often referring to our work as being of ‘McKinsey quality’. We give each other a lot of praise too, high fiving whenever we have performed well. I have sometimes noticed myself wondering whether Jack could be bestowing praise on us as a way of encouraging us to work even harder.

Using gossip as a vehicle to promote an ideology or to promote alliances is a way of explaining what has been going on that fits with my experience. In my private conversations with Eric, I have vented my frustration about Susy. I have been aware that some of the things I have said – such as my feeling disappointed with in her contribution to sales – are also true for Eric; so, when talking about Susy, we have also indirectly talked about him. I have also noticed this when talking with Jack: some of the things he has expressed frustrated about, regarding lack of engagement and follow-up from Susy, have also been tacit messages to me.

We have been disciplining each other, probably without being aware of it. The praise and the gossiping can be seen as a disciplinary process for all of us, showing us what is not accepted in the group.

Reflecting on this, and reading the comments from my peers, I begin to realize that I have used gossip to promote alliance with Eric towards our two employees, and to maintain my own position of power in the company. With Jack, I have vented my frustration about Eric’s lack of initiative; but I haven’t done so with Eric himself. This has had an impact on Eric’s position in the company and could have undermined his efforts to act as CEO. For all that I have complained about him failing to take leadership, I may have contributed to his reluctance to do so.

Power and silencing – understanding power as knowledge

I started by exploring Flyvbjerg’s view on power as knowledge:

Not only is knowledge power, but, more important, power is knowledge. Power determines what counts as knowledge, what kind of interpretation attains authority as the dominant interpretation. Power procures the knowledge which supports its purposes, while it ignores or suppresses that knowledge which does not serve it. (Flyvbjerg 1998: 226, emphasis added)

This view of the close interplay between power and knowledge is also expressed by Foucault (Rabinow 1991).

Looking back at the board meeting, perhaps an example of this dynamic would be to consider the one-page strategy for our neuro-leadership concept, which was greeted with resounding applause. At the time, it felt inappropriate to start questioning this; so I found myself joining the praise, masking what was going on in my private conversation – which was to wonder what all the fuss was about, since we couldn't really use the strategy to move forward.

My ethical concerns were effectively shut down by Jack, with a decisive tone and firm gestures – 'this would *not* prevent me from buying'.

Flyvbjerg (1998) offers the following explanation for such a scenario:

In an open confrontation, actions are dictated by what works most effectively to defeat the adversary in the specific situation. In such confrontations, use of naked power tends to be more effective than any appeal to objectivity, facts, knowledge, or rationality, even though feigned versions of the latter, that is, rationalizations, may be used to legitimize naked power. (1998: 232, emphasis added)

Here, Jack defeated his adversary (me) using self-assured body language, insistent words and a confident tone of voice, which I experienced rather like having the door shut in my face. Why did I not simply reopen the door and argue for my point of view? What is going on in the dynamics, and for me, that makes me accept being silenced in such a way?

With the help of my peers, I have become aware that when describing how I accepted his dismissal of my concerns, I suddenly started to refer to Jack as 'the Chairman'. This might uncover an assumption of mine that since he holds the position of Chair (and perhaps also because he is a man), he decides what can be discussed. It seems likely that I have an unconscious core belief that when men in positions of power speak, I do not question them – perhaps a patriarchal bias inherited from early childhood and reinforced through certain life experiences. In theory, I give little credence to this rule; but in practice, I wonder how often I allow myself to be silenced by it anyway.

Power dynamics between the Chair and the partners

In his theories of public and hidden transcripts in organisations, Scott (2009) draws on Hochschild's study of flight attendants (2012) and I find the section about 'paying respect' particularly interesting:

The deferential behaviour of servants and women – the encouraging smiles, the attentive listening, the appreciative laughter, the comments of affirmation, admiration, or concern – comes to seem normal, even built into personality rather than inherent in the kinds of exchange that low-status people commonly enter into.

This is a striking description of how both Eric and I behave. I have never thought of this as ‘low-status behaviour’.

Deborah Tannen, university professor in linguistics, has studied gender and discourse in relation to power. In a chapter on conflict entitled ‘You Just Don’t Understand’, in her book *Gender and Discourse* (1996), Tannen shows that *women’s inclination to avoid conflicts puts them at a disadvantage*: ‘Women who are incapable of angry outbursts are incapable of wielding power in this way. Far worse, their avoidance of conflict opens them to exploitation’ (ibid: 182, emphasis added).

To me, this is not about gender, but more widely about what is traditionally considered feminine behaviour, or low-status behaviour. For Eric and me, does our avoidance of conflict put us at a disadvantage? We both have the combination of being analytically clever, likeable high achievers. And perhaps we both show submissive or low-status behaviour and are easy to manipulate and exploit. Both Eric and I have reported to Jack working as consultants for the same client. Are we falling into old patterns of relating? In our political naïveté, we didn’t consider this when we asked Jack to be our Chair. Jack has always been engaged in our company, contributing our first business (the first project was for him) and valuable business advice. It felt as if we owed him the Chair’s role.

Turning back to Scott’s work on public transcripts, Scott claims that ‘on a daily basis, the impact of power is most readily observed in acts of deference, subordination, and ingratiation. The script and stage directions for subordinate groups are generally far more confining than for the dominant’ (Scott 2009, 28). His referral to ‘script and stage directions’ puts me in mind of an event we arranged for clients where Jack actually emailed us the script for our welcoming speech. It was served with a spoon of sugar (humour) in the sentence ‘Majken tilts her head, smiles and says thank you’. I remember laughing when I read it. Looking back at it now, I find that softly wrapped in humour there is a kind of suppression. Intended or non-intended, it renders me harmless.

The tilting of the head and smiling is not taken from thin air. This is obviously a pattern of behaviour that Jack recognizes. It is something I tend to do, and he speaks to it. Otherwise it wouldn’t have been funny. There is obviously something disconcerting showing up as I start to explore the power dynamics between Jack, Eric, and myself.

In *The Managed Heart*, Hochschild writes about ‘deference’ as respectful or courteous regard:

Deference is more than the offering of cold respect, the formal bow of submission, the distant smile of politeness; it can also have a warm face and offer gestures small and large that show support for the well-being and status of others. (Hochschild 2012: 168)

Both Eric and I seem to enter a pattern of submission in our relation to Jack. Being nice and doing good can seem to close the opportunity to speak up in situations. Are we 'losing ourselves' in some relations, allowing ourselves to be silenced? This seems to be an important theme for me to investigate further, and I will consider this for my next project.

Power dynamics between the founders and the new employees

When I wrote this section, we had recently dismissed Susy.

The rational explanation for letting Susy go is that Eric and I don't have what it takes, in terms of either capacity or personality, to follow up on employees who need to be followed up. Either we must hire a new CEO who can manage employees, or we must include more partners who can sell their own projects, self-manage, and contribute to the business. We were very clear about this when we hired. What else could be going on?

Taking the psychoanalytical perspective again first, I could draw on Dollard's Scapegoat Hypothesis (1939). The theory attempts to explain why people use others as scapegoats and suggests that when frustration cannot be expressed, it is displaced onto a more vulnerable target.

Seen from this perspective, the frustration that Eric and I have felt towards each other and ourselves, and all our accumulated guilty feelings for not having performed well enough, have not found a way to be expressed, and might then have been projected onto Susy with a focus on her lack of initiative. The explanation of what has happened from this perspective would be that by not talking about what frustrates us and what we feel guilty about, we have ended up excluding Susy from our group.

Again, this way of thinking assumes that individuals are separate from each other and that individual bodies 'contain' emotions, so that when the aggression cannot be given an outlet, it is projected onto someone else. It is a model of discharge, in line with Freudian instinct theory.

Drawing on Elias, the sensemaking would be different:

Attaching the label of 'lower human value' to another group is one of the weapons used in a power struggle by superior groups as a means of maintaining their social superiority. In that situation, the social slur cast by a more powerful upon a less powerful group usually enters the self-image of the latter and, thus, weakens and disarms them. (Elias and Scotson 1994: xxi)

Could it be that we have weakened and disarmed Susy?

Dalal (1998) contrasts how Foulkes has taken up Dollard's Scapegoat Theory with Elias's thinking:

When Foulkes says that within the scapegoat there is a 'need to be punished', he is in a sense explaining away and naturalizing the attack, implying that the person is born victim in some way, perhaps something to do with the endogenous instincts. In

contradiction to this, Elias is saying that if there is a 'need to be punished' (which is another way of describing the internalization of stigma), then it is a *function of the position one occupies in the power differential*. (ibid: 122, emphasis added)

Seen in this light, I wonder if Eric and I at some level have felt the need to protect our power base by ensuring – through various strategies, including the dissemination of ideology through gossip – that outsiders are excluded.

Working his way from the scapegoat theory, via Foulkes to the social perspective of Elias, Dalal (1998) concludes that the scapegoat phenomenon operates strongly in groups where anger and guilt cannot be expressed in the open forum. This is not because it is a projected emotion, but because gossip and ideology work to maintain the status quo and keep the powerful in their position. And this can all be rationalized with 'the person didn't fit it', or 'didn't live up to expectations'.

I am not saying that Susy had no part in this. When we first interviewed her, she did come across as somewhat passive and reserved. She has always maintained a professional distance, so I have no way of knowing what her experience has been. I do believe that we have done what we could in this situation to be nice to her.

Either way, I feel it is useful to be aware that when anger, guilt and frustration cannot be expressed openly, this can trigger scapegoating. It is also important for Eric and myself to become more aware of our own power and how we might hold on to our positions in our company – so that if we recruit a new partner or CEO, we can reflect upon the potential impact of our relational dynamics.

Summary and conclusion

In our dominating managerial discourse, rationality rules and emotions such as anxiety are seen as signs of dysfunction or maladaptation and labelled unproductive. Will, interest, emotion, and a particular point of view can all be subordinated unproblematically to reason. To quote Chris Mowles, programme director at the DMan: 'Organisations provoke very strong emotions in people, which do not disappear just because professional orthodoxy makes it difficult to express them or talk about them' (2015: 124).

It is so easy to believe that what we can't see simply isn't there. Nearly two centuries after Ignaz Semmelweis's discovery of bacteria, it is still hard to get all medical doctors and healthcare personnel to wash their hands. If the bacteria were visible, it would probably be a different matter. And this is what I have attempted to do in my project: to make the invisible visible.

In this project, I have investigated into the dynamics in our Impact Consultancy where the ideal has been to use our full potential to contribute to positive change in the world. My findings have further strengthened my conclusions from Project 2, where I noted that the ideal of unfolding one's full potential is rooted in humanistic psychology. Further, the moral obligation to work hard and see our job as a calling is at the core of Western capitalism, which pressures us to constantly improve our performance. As mentioned in Project 2, this comes at the risk of exhaustion and renders power dynamics invisible – especially when combined with a culture that idealizes a positive and energetic attitude, where conflict is avoided. I have begun to realize just how strong these influences are; even though I researched all this 8 years ago, I have still found myself repeating the same patterns.

Drawing on Bion's theory of basic assumptions in groups, I explored what we experienced as 'stuckness' or lack of business development in our company, along with frustration and anxiety. Basic assumption behaviour in a group can manifest as withdrawal, a sense of helplessness or deadness, and projection of responsibility onto a leader. This made me realize that we have had a leadership problem in our company that we hadn't been fully aware of or discussed.

Exploring power dynamics in our company, I came to realize that praise, stigma, and gossip have been used as vehicles to maintain alliances and positions of power in our company – and that I have participated in this. I have also found that the smile of politeness, the attentive listening, the warm face, and the support for others' well-being that characterizes both my business partner and myself may be a pattern of submission to power and that our inability to wield power through 'angry outbursts' opens us to exploitation (Hochschild 2012).

And finally, I have found that the scapegoat phenomenon operates strongly in groups where one cannot freely express anger and guilt, according to Dalal (1998); this has shed new light on the recent dismissal of one of our employees.

Conclusion so far

My conclusion so far is that working for a noble cause can energize and inspire us to put in the extra effort needed to succeed. But at the same time, these extremely high ambitions – especially in a culture where a courageous, positive, and energetic attitude is idealized, and where conflict is avoided because it is negative – block our opportunities to deal constructively with disagreement, conflict, and disappointment. Moreover, such an approach renders relational dynamics, and thus ethics, invisible and difficult to reflect upon.

Instead of taking our own experience seriously, we prefer to avoid examining it; instead, we try to escape our discomfort and anxiety, or start blaming ourselves or each other for not living up to

expectations. Some of us might become dependent on a powerful leader, taking less initiative and expecting the leader to fix the situation. Some might seek a scapegoat, or themselves become victims of scapegoating. And some keep working harder, trying to maintain a high level of self-motivation and a positive outlook – caught in an endless cycle of effort that can leave them exhausted and depleted.

All, of course, with the best of intentions.

Possible generalizability

Given the growing number of social impact companies wanting to ‘do good’ in the world, I believe it is crucial to become more aware of the potential risks inherent in a highly idealized work culture with ambitious goals and a lofty purpose, where everyone is expected to demonstrate courage, enthusiasm, and a positive attitude. Conflict, disappointment, discomfort, and disagreement are natural and necessary in any work environment; and in denying these vital aspects of experience, we become unable to engage in ethical reflections – so that ‘doing good’ can easily become ‘making worse’.

Postscript

We are no longer investing time in the neuro-leadership initiative. I have spent time talking this through with everyone involved, to maintain good relations. We are communicating a bit more openly about our disappointments and we no longer aim to make a big impact.

PROJECT 4

Disruptive change and the struggle for meaning: An inquiry into the lived experience of a venture closure (written in 2018/19)

Introduction

In all transitions, we are bound to experience endings, loss, and grief as well as new opportunities and hope for the future. Literature on organisational change has been largely silent when it comes to issues of loss and grief (Bell and Taylor 2011). While the focus on disruptive change, innovation and entrepreneurship has increased dramatically over the last few years, failure, endings and loss have, until fairly recently, remained an understudied aspect of the entrepreneurship process (Jenkins and McKelvie 2016: 176).

In this project, I will explore how we make sense of the ending of our business, how this is negotiated, and how this links to experiences of loss and grief. As an entrepreneur in the process of ending a business and as a research student for a professional doctorate exploring practice, I am in a unique position to inquire into the lived experience of the business closure. Ending a business that has been so important for my identity as a successful entrepreneur, and in which I have been so emotionally invested, has been – and still is, to a certain extent – a disconcerting and painful experience. And it is one that I share with many people, in a business landscape where turbulent transitions are commonplace. Yet it is almost taboo, in our Western world, to talk about this. We speak of the ideal entrepreneur as someone who is willing to take risks, embraces failure, does not take loss personally, and remains positive in moving forward. It turns out that even though this is the dominating story, it is not the only story. My hope is to contribute to further research and debate in the field of disruptive change, endings, loss and grief in organisational life in the hope that this significant aspect of human experience will become more widely acknowledged.

Experiences of endings

Eric and I started our business together when my mother was terminally ill and shortly after the death of Eric's father; and now, 5 years later, we are ending it following the death of my own father. For me, developing our own business became a crucial part of coping through a very difficult time in life. Most of us are used to thinking that the end of a life and the ending of a project or the closing down of a company are very different experiences. But in my experience, they are not. Both involve the loss of valued relations, making new sense of the future without some of the people we have come to care about, letting go of valued habits and ideas we have invested ourselves in, and possibly making new sense of who we are. One big difference between these two kinds of loss is that it is

socially acceptable to mourn the loss of a parent, but there seems to be little or no space for grieving in business.

Impact Consulting was founded to make a difference in the world, to contribute to the lives of others and to society. I had been involved in a fatal traffic accident many years earlier; having been so dramatically confronted with the frailty of life, I had sought ever since to make a positive impact in the world – perhaps giving me a sense of purpose to move forward, as I probably felt a certain guilt about being one of the survivors. The business lasted for 5 years and was quite successful in the beginning, with just my partner and myself. Then we started to grow the company, hiring employees and appointing a board of directors. We were highly ambitious, with grandiose visions for the future – and we fell short of our high expectations. Over the last year, Eric and I have had to fire our employees; we have ended our projects and initiatives and dissolved the board of directors. Eric has now moved on to a new job, which makes me the only one left in the company we founded. Luckily, there have been no financial losses; but I am currently without an income, which I find deeply uncomfortable. Being self-sufficient has always been important to me, having grown up determined to be more independent than my mother, who was totally dependent on my father's income.

When I started talking to my research peers about what was going on in my company, I initially framed it as a 'failure'. Cope (2011) defines failure as 'the termination of a business that has fallen short of its goals', and this is how I experienced it. I had felt it was my personal responsibility to ensure success – owing this to everyone else who had invested their time and effort in the company, believing in our cause. I had been willing to do 'whatever it takes'; and both Eric and I had put a lot of hours and effort into our business, sometimes very close to exhaustion. In my first iterations of this project, I felt disappointed, sad and even angry; and my research peers noticed this in my first writing. I was experiencing grief, and I was preoccupied with thinking about what I/we could or perhaps should have done differently; mulling over endless regrets. We had created a history together over 5 years, we had come to appreciate our offices, and we had high hopes for the future. This had changed; and I believe all of us were disappointed in one way or another.

The final board meeting

Journal in the morning at the home office

I am angry. Increasingly more so. The last conversation with Eric has been playing on repeat in my mind. Particularly one sentence that I think he said, is going through my mind over and over: that he would have been better off financially if he had worked on his own. Currently this makes me boil with anger, and accompanying this

anger is an urge to show how much I have done for the business, because it feels as if this has now been erased with that one stroke of a sentence. I have sacrificed a lot for the company. Just one example is that for one and a half years I worked on a project that required a lot of travel, and that was not particularly rewarding or challenging. It was our single largest project, and it made us quite a lot of money. It was a sacrifice I have been willing to make for the business. This seems to have been forgotten.

In the office with Eric before the board meeting

I was still angry when I arrived at the office. Eric was already there. I sat down, looked at Eric, and decided to be honest about what I was thinking and feeling. I said that one sentence had been going over and over in my mind, which was that he thought that he would have been better off without Impact Consulting. I asked him if he really meant this, or if I was mistaken. He said he hadn't thought about this a lot and looked like he was searching for words. He responded tentatively. He said that he had truly appreciated our conversations, how we could move between different levels of abstraction, make new connections, and build on each other's thinking. He compared it with how he had worked with his father on construction projects, where they hardly needed to discuss anything; they just sensed what needed to be done next and did it. He used the word 'flow'. Perhaps this was a reparative gesture to make peace so that we could move on together? Or a way of idealizing a working relation that expelled disagreement or conflict?

Then he came back to my question. It was not that he did not appreciate my work. It was rather that he had a different view of what was needed to build a company. He used an example of a friend of his who had built a company making a lot of money, but with no office or customer events. This company was selling software products; defending my own position, I said it was hardly comparable to a management consulting company. But still, what I took from this part of our conversation was a clearer understanding of our different expectations and motivations, and different understandings of what it means to be a partner and to build a company. Why had we never really talked about this during our 5 years in business together? I had felt that I was taking all the initiative for developing the business and Eric didn't really seem all that interested. But I hadn't said anything about this to him, because I didn't want to seem ungrateful for his hard work with the client. There was also never enough time to sit down and talk properly. We seem to have developed a dynamic together where we could not talk about disagreements and frustrations because 'this was not supposed to be part of an effective and good working relationship'.

In the office with the board members

Cathy was travelling and couldn't come to the meeting, so Eric and I had spoken with her on the phone prior to the meeting. She gave us her full support, saying that she had enjoyed working with us and that we were a 'well-kept secret' in Norway. She is looking forward to our continued relation.

Board member Gabriel arrived first at our office and came in smiling to give both Eric and me a warm handshake and a hug. All three of us standing, he immediately started talking animatedly and encouragingly about how important it is to leave things behind and move on. He referred to his own experience as a CEO and talked about how 'some people' almost fall into a depression and lose their energy and momentum, and how important it was to be able to change course without losing speed. He talked about people having left projects and companies in anger, and how important it was to maintain good relations. In my silent conversation with myself, I felt that he was sending a message to Eric and me; that we should not feel bitter or angry, and simply get on with it. I didn't say anything, but I noticed that I felt slightly uncomfortable, as we do when being disciplined or silenced. It was Eric who said that it was important to spend *enough* time to end things properly. He looked at me, as if he was inviting me to speak. But before I could reply, Jack arrived, smiling and in a very good mood. We sat down in the small library and as soon as Eric had opened with the first PowerPoint slide, Jack started talking. He gave what seemed like a warm and heartfelt speech of gratitude, saying how much he had learned from working with us. He said he was impressed by us; that what differentiates excellent consultants from merely good ones is their ability to make people think. And we had this ability. He spoke warmly about what we had achieved over the 5 years and said that not many companies are able to do this. He concluded by saying that ending Impact Consulting now was not a failure but a victory. It was all superlatives. I felt uncomfortable.

There were no objections regarding the buy-back of stocks, and Jack underlined that he had not been in this for the money. I was quite puzzled by that, since he had been quite eager to buy more stocks a while ago. After signing the necessary papers, Eric and I talked Jack and Gabriel briefly through the story of the company. I had hoped to get some reflections about our journey together. But Jack simply added more praise. He said we had integrity, style, elegance, trustworthiness, that we always delivered high quality, and that we were generous and warm. Both Jack and Gabriel took pictures of Eric and myself in front of the whiteboard where Eric and I had drawn a timeline of our company's history and our achievements. It felt odd, like being put on a pedestal and applauded. Then they left.

As the door closed, Eric looked at me and said that since he was not researching this, rather than questioning what had just happened, he could just take the positive feedback at face value and use it as a platform moving forward. Which would probably be what I would have done myself if I

had not been encouraged to research the subject of our business closure. I would have pulled myself together and moved on. Several months of research later, I am glad that I didn't. Although the process of investigation has been anything but comfortable.

Reflecting upon the narrative – emerging themes

The dominating discourse in our company, as played out in the office with the board members, seems to be assuming that we are moving forward to a better place, unfolding our business potential. We need to maintain momentum as we are moving forward, and emotional responses to loss – or time spent reflecting upon what has happened – would simply slow us down and get in the way of the real work. Negative emotions and dwelling on the past should thus be self-managed so that we can remain positive and forward-looking. People who are unable to do this, referred to as 'some people', seem to be stigmatized as depressed or angry. There is an urge to move on as quickly as possible, so the ending of our business is framed as a 'victory' in which we are entrepreneurial heroes.

Strong emotions of embarrassment, regret, anger, and grief have been glossed over and avoided in public. I have hidden (as I suspect Eric has too) my own feelings of disappointment, disguised any blame of myself and others, and concealed my disillusionment at having failed to meet our high expectations. Conflicting values and ambitions have not been discussed, perhaps in the interests of conflict avoidance or reparation (wanting to maintain good relations). All of us may have varying levels of emotional investment in the company. In our struggle to make sense of, and create a plausible story about, our 5 years in business together, we are also searching for recognition and acknowledgement of work done and trying to maintain a coherent sense of self.

I seem to be somewhat at odds with the dominating discourse in our company as it disintegrates. This might be because I am doing research, as Eric points out at the end of the narrative. If I had not been part of a research programme, I might also have been eager to move on, to hide my emotional struggle, to avoid the risk of stigmatization. Perhaps I might also have experienced less of an emotional struggle if I hadn't been analysing everything so closely for my research. Now, it may seem to me as if my own emotional responses are stronger than those of my colleagues. But are they? How can I possibly tell? The others may be far more emotionally engaged than I realize. What might happen if instead of 'getting on with it', we pause to inquire into our lived experience of the closure? And why are we so reluctant to do this?

Inquiry – exploring the experiences of closing our business

I start my exploration by focusing on what seems to be the dominating worldview in our company. What are the concepts and assumptions that underpin the predominant way of making sense of the closure and how might this influence our learning and sensemaking? And where does this worldview come from? In my earlier research projects, I have drawn on Strategic Choice Theory (Child 1972; Stacey 2007, 2011) to gain a richer understanding of the dominating discourse I have found myself participating in. In Project 3 I have explored Weber's (Tawney et al 2003) work on the development of Western capitalism and contemporary philosophers' critiques of the darker consequences of capitalism (Ehrenreich 2010; Han 2015). In this project, I have continued to examine the dominating discourse to deepen my understanding of how we make sense of what we are doing and what we think we should be doing when we close our business.

The expression 'organisational death' is used as a term to describe events including downsizing, site closure and business failure (Bell and Taylor 2011). Bell and Taylor have published a stark critique of the prevalence of stage models of grief and call for an understanding of organisational death as a socially constructed process. I draw on the theory of continuing bonds (Klass et al 1996) and on Neimeyer and Klass (2014) and argue why the shift in our understanding of the grief of business closure – from an individual problem to be solved, to a continuous social and thus political process of sensemaking – not only matters to me personally, but has implications for everyone involved in change.

Exploring the dominating worldview

At the very least, the risk of [our dominating] worldview lies in us not realizing [it] is just one way of looking at the world. One language. One set of concepts and assumptions. The risk lies in our not realizing that these assumptions have become transformed into realities that we take for granted in our thinking about the world, and in how we believe we should manage it. (Dekker 2015: 58)

There is an increasing focus on the need to 'fail fast and recover quickly' in business. The ideal is to see failing as an inspiration, and not to take it personally. In an article about how to turn failure to success in *Dagens Perspektiv* (Norwegian leadership magazine⁸), January 2018, the style is normative: don't allow failure to affect your self-confidence, but use it as a catalyst moving forward; learn to let go of your own valued ideas; learn to accept criticism, don't let business-related issues get to you; and, last but not least, 'nobody in a start-up has time for drama'. This fits well with the

⁸ www.dagensperspektiv.no/nyskaping/2018/slik-kan-feilene-dine-snus-til-suksess

dominating discourse in our company as described in the narrative; let go and move on, as quickly as possible, so as not to lose momentum. This is part of the grand narrative of the heroic entrepreneur.

An example of a heroic entrepreneur is Peter H. Diamandis, who is a serial entrepreneur in Silicon Valley. He has started 15 companies and is Chair and co-founder of Singularity University, a global community of entrepreneurs, investors, corporations, governments and academic institutions aiming to create 'a more abundant future for all' through social impact projects. In his book *Abundance*, Diamandis (Diamandis and Kotler 2014: 129) defines a social entrepreneur as an individual 'who combines the pragmatic, results-oriented methods of a business entrepreneur with the goals of a social reformer'. 'Ultimately, one must have passion and purpose in order to convince the world of anything – which is, of course, the first step to changing it' (ibid: 231). Passion and purpose are frequently talked about in relation to organisational development work in Norway. Having passion and a purpose is assumed to bring out the best in people. Diamandis asks the reader: 'Are you working on something that can change the world?' (73); he promotes Singularity University, saying that 'Each year, the graduate students are challenged to develop a company, product or organisation that will positively affect the lives of a billion people within ten years' (73). These are extremely high ambitions. What happens to the entrepreneurs who have developed a great passion, purpose and attachment to the cause, and to other people working for the same cause – one that has become an important part of their sense of self – who then fail to meet these expectations?

The way Diamandis deals with failure, according to his book, is to 'look at the silver lining', to use a colloquial term. In the chapter 'The Upside of Failure' (ibid: 229), he cites the well-known quote from Thomas Edison: 'I have not failed. I have just found a thousand ways that did not work', as well as Arianna Huffington: 'Fearlessness is like a muscle: the more we use it, the stronger it becomes'. He continues with 'Failure is not bad; it can actually be exciting' and goes on to insist that 'Learning to see failure as a building block of innovation rather than its anathema' is of great importance (235). This sounds uncompromising and hard and seems to discount the human side of business. What if you are at risk of losing your income, your savings, your home, relationships, things and ideas you value and care for? What if you are blamed for the failure, and stigmatized, and have a hard time finding another job? And what if you put your heart and soul into building the business to make the world a better place, sacrificing a lot – perhaps even your close relations and even your family – and then you must end the business? It is easy enough to tell other people to get a grip and move on if you're not paying the price yourself.

To summarize, the role of the heroic entrepreneur is very seductive. You may be the hero, making the world a better place, and become extraordinarily wealthy and successful at the same time. On offer is also meaning and purpose, something that we may all desire. The ideal

entrepreneur is the person who is knowledgeable, active and effective, courageous and willing to take risks, who learns from failure and stays positive to maintain onward momentum. Allow me here to remind the reader that the core values in our Impact Consultancy were knowledge, courage and energy; it resonates. At times of success, being the heroic entrepreneur can be very enjoyable. But when the highly ambitious goals are not met, or in times of difficulty, conflict, struggle and endings, efforts to perpetuate this ideal façade can be suffocating and destructive. As injuries are hidden, vulnerability denied, blame projected on other people or self, anger directed at other people who are considered 'lazy' or 'depressed', all of this affects our relations. And the energy required to maintain this façade grows by the hour – to cover up the increasing despair that may be experienced, but that cannot be expressed publicly. This resonates very well with the experience of a research colleague from Israel, a country where entrepreneurship is highly valued; putting forward very bold and ambitious goals and values and then dealing with (or not dealing with) the disappointment when the goal is not met.

The heroic entrepreneur is a creative destructor of the old. Schumpeter's concept of 'creative destruction' (Schumpeter 1942) is often referred to in entrepreneurship, with a focus on incessantly creating new and incessantly destroying the old. Sennett (1998) critiques this way of thinking:

Creative destruction, Schumpeter said, thinking about entrepreneurs, requires people at ease about not reckoning the consequences of change, or not knowing what comes next. Most people, though, are not at ease with change in this nonchalant, negligent way. (Sennett 1998: 30)

I agree with Sennett: on the surface, we are promoting passionate and tough entrepreneurs who shrug off failure. But my narrative shows that there can be a lot going on that is not talked about, such as regrets, disappointment, embarrassment and grief. The insistence on focusing on the future can be a way of glossing over this and thus avoiding the shame of sharing some of the responsibility for it.

The role of positive psychology – no excuse for failure

Seligman, the bestselling author of *Learned Optimism* and *Authentic Happiness* and considered to be 'the father of positive psychology', opens his book *Flourish* (2013) with the bold claim that reading it will, in fact, help the reader flourish. In the preface, he writes that the people he knows who work in positive psychology are those 'with the highest well-being I have ever known' (ibid: 2). Well-being, and apparently also 'flourishing', has five measurable elements; positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement. The promise of well-being is very attractive, and I have

been highly seduced by this narrative myself, running a social impact consultancy with the aim of increasing human fulfilment. Reading *Flourish* now, a few months into this research project, it seems strikingly obvious that positive psychology attributes success to the high-achieving, positive individual, at the expense of the less fortunate (Ehrenreich 2010).

Seligman does acknowledge the importance of relationships, so perhaps flourishing is not entirely up to the individual alone. But he mentions relationships in what I understand to be quite an instrumental way: 'There is no denying the profound influences that positive relationships or their absence have on well-being' (2013: 21). The goal here is individual well-being, and positive relationships can help you accomplish this goal. He introduces several exercises to increase well-being: be grateful, pay attention to what went well, and focus on signature strengths. It is all up to the individual and her work on herself. And in the same way that Diamandis argues for the use of technology to achieve exponential growth, Seligman quotes Tomas Sanders from Hewlett-Packard:

A necessary condition for large-scale flourishing, particularly among young people, is that positive psychology develops a delivery model for its well-being-enhancing interventions that scales up globally. Technology is uniquely positioned for assisting individuals with their flourishing in a way that is exponential. (Seligman 2013: 94)

In such a view, technology would be a vehicle to effectively propagate the narrative of Positive Thinking. Realizing that this is exactly what we were attempting to do, with the best of intentions, by investing in our neuro-leadership programme is uncomfortable. And it offers me a greater understanding of why I was feeling torn much of the time. I personally wanted to succeed with the initiative to contribute to 'flourishing' and to deliver on expectations, but I was simultaneously sensing that this was problematic. I found no way to talk about this and allowed myself to be silenced in my attempts.

According to Ehrenreich (2010: 8), 'positive thinking has made itself useful as an apology for the crueller aspects of the market economy'. If optimism is key to material success, and if you can achieve an optimistic outlook through the discipline of Positive Thinking, then there is no excuse for failure. 'The flip side of positivity is thus a harsh insistence on personal responsibility: if your business fails or your job is eliminated, it must be because you didn't try hard enough, didn't believe firmly enough in the inevitability of your success' (ibid: 8). Also, positive thinking wants us to get rid of negativity. This applies to all things negative. But eliminating everyone and everything that 'brings us down' cuts us off from important aspects of our reality, as we draw a veil over whatever might make us feel uncomfortable. And the attitude that we should ignore negative people leads to a 'massive empathy deficit; no one has the time or patience for anyone else's problems' (172). Positive

thinking absolves the well-off from responsibility for their actions and their potential consequences for the less fortunate.

Revisiting the narrative, the insistence on personal responsibility inherent in this ideology helps make sense of my tendency to blame myself and others when our results were less than anticipated, and explains the pressure I felt under to do whatever it might take to achieve success, even beyond the level of exhaustion. With all the superlatives of our 5 years in business and the insistent focus on moving ahead, there certainly seems to be an ideology of thinking positively and putting on a happy face in the company. We can see it in Gabriel's speech about the importance of maintaining momentum, and in Jack's declaration that the end of the company should be viewed not as a failure, but as a victory. This perspective glosses over what is difficult – like conflict, disappointment and grief – and helps us to preserve the unassailable ideology of 'success'. The overriding message is that we should learn from failure, let go, and move on quickly. It seems, though, that by remaining positive and moving on, we make it more difficult to learn from our 'failures'. Shepherd (2013), who I referred to earlier as an influential voice in research on entrepreneurship and failure, writes:

[Entrepreneurs'] narratives that consistently reported low negative emotions and high positive emotions (Feeling Good group)—those which displayed the greatest resilience – reported little sense-making about their failure experiences. (Shepherd 2013: 396-397)

In his earlier work, Shepherd (2003) argued that negative emotions obstruct learning; but in the extract above, he concludes that it is rather the stable positive emotions, which we misinterpret as resilience, that obstruct learning. It is interesting to see how some of the literature on resilient entrepreneurs (such as Corner et al 2017) keeps referring to the early work of Shepherd to emphasize the importance of resilience among entrepreneurs (since it enables them to maintain high functioning through traumatic events) when challenging 'the assumption that recovery is required after venture failure' (687).

The entrepreneurial self in neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is an expression used for ways of thinking and talking about business – worldviews that have developed since the 1960s, and that survived the financial crisis in 2007–2008 (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009: 2014). Central to this way of thinking is an emphasis on the value of the free market and a belief in sustained economic growth as a means to achieve human progress.

Scharff (2015) explores the ways in which neoliberalism is lived out on a personal level in contemporary Western society. She argues that within neoliberalism, the self is seen as a business, an entrepreneurial subject that is a continuous self-improvement project. 'Since there are no limits

to self-improvement, productive uses of time become paramount' (Scharff 2015: 6). The neoliberal ideal self is effective, active, and never wastes time. This is very similar to Weber's Protestant work ideal, as captured in Benjamin Franklin's famous expression 'Time is money' (Coe et al 2003: 48). There is an overriding sense of constant activity and a lack of time. The neoliberal ideal embraces risk, learns from failure, and stays positive. 'According to the neoliberal perspective, to prosper, one must engage with risk' (Gershon 2011: 540). In this view, the ideal entrepreneur survives difficulties and 'stories about past difficulties re-constitute the entrepreneurial self because they demonstrate that it has the capacities to tackle problems' (Scharff 2015: 8). Personal hurt is obscured, vulnerability denied, for fear that others might think such injuries could develop into something chronic and troublesome. Insecurities about the future provoke anxieties, but acknowledging such concerns would be to break with the entrepreneurial rhetoric; so they are avoided and concealed. Further, there is a tendency to blame, with a disdain for laziness and little empathy for the hardship of others (ibid: 12). Scharff argues that

the notion of abjection suggests that the entrepreneurial subject configures itself through the rejection of that which it is not. By presenting themselves as hard-working, they construct themselves as entrepreneurial. This construction simultaneously involves the repudiation of those who do not work hard and a lack of empathy if they do not achieve. (ibid: 13)

Stigmatization of others thus becomes a way of constructing self in the image of the heroic entrepreneur.

To summarize: an entrepreneur belonging to a neoliberalist thought collective would be socialized to believe that she is her own master, that she should focus on always improving her knowledge and skills, that she should be active and effective, that she should be courageous and take risks, learn from failure and stay positive. Any injuries or difficulties, she would hide in denial of vulnerability. If she really struggles behind her professional façade, she might also have a fear that it would become chronic. She probably finds herself talking about how she has overcome past difficulties with great resilience and gets frustrated and annoyed at people she perceives as lazy or weak; she might stigmatize or blame these people.

This is highly resonant with the dominating story in our company, invoked in our last board meeting. This is what we have strived to be: enthusiastic, hard-working, risk taking, courageous, strong, and positive. And if I saw Gabriel's story as stigmatizing of 'some people' as almost depressed and angry, I too have stigmatized by complaining about others' 'lack of initiative' rather than confronting this directly. With the best intentions of wanting to be kind and not seem ungrateful, I have perhaps been unkind and self-serving also.

I have now explored the dominating worldview in our company, how it accords with the wider social trends, and how this influences our sensemaking and behaviour towards ourselves and each other during times of endings and loss. In conclusion, our dominating ways of thinking mask a range of human experiences, such as emotions of failure and the experience of distress and grief. These experiences are what I want to explore further in the following.

Organisational death and bereavement studies

Marris (1974, 1996) argued that theories of grief and individual bereavement can be applied to understand responses to change and loss in organisational life. Shepherd (2003, 2009, 2015) draws extensively on psychological literature on grief and argues that the loss of a business may cause grief. Bell and Taylor write that the term 'organisational death' has been used in studies of change through downsizing, mergers and acquisitions, leadership, site closure, and project or organisational failure (2011: 2). In the following, I will explore the field of grief and bereavement to further make sense of the experience of closing our business.

Sigmund Freud's (1917) article, 'Mourning and Melancholia', has been significant to the study of individual bereavement, loss and grief, which is still seen as a relatively young discipline (Bell and Taylor 2011). For Freud, mourning was a process whereby emotional attachments to the deceased are severed so that the bereaved can become autonomous again and invest in new attachments. Freud defines mourning as 'the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on' (Freud 1917: 242). Notice that also Freud's definition of grief does not just entail the loss of a loved one, but also the loss of something valued and even intangible.

Attachment theory was developed by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth and Bowlby 1991), both of whom were influenced by Freud (Bretherton 1992). Bowlby argues that the way we interpret and behave in close relations as adults is influenced by our very first experiences of attachment, in particular with our parents. We are habituated to ways of behaving in relations that matter to us:

Many of our most intense emotions arise during the formation, duration, disruption and renewal of attachment relationships. The formation of a bond is described as falling in love, maintaining a bond as loving someone, and losing a partner as grieving over someone. Similarly, threat of loss arouses anxiety and actual loss gives rise to sorrow; whilst each of these situations is likely to arouse anger. The unchallenged maintenance of a bond is experienced as a source of security and the renewal of a bond as a source of joy. (Bowlby 2005/1979: 154)

Bowlby states that such emotions, referring to the extract above, are usually 'reflections of the state of a person's affectional bonds' (ibid: 155). This is worth paying close attention to. We have become accustomed to believing that emotions are contained within individuals and can be self-managed, and that 'negative' emotions – such as anxiety, anger and depression – are 'bad' or counterproductive and should be avoided or at least kept in check. If instead, as Bowlby suggests, these emotions are signals that something needs attention in our valued relations, then there might be a risk of separation or loss that we need to take seriously. Yet numbing such emotions is like trying to snooze a fire alarm.

In this light, my feelings of anger and anxiety as expressed in the narrative above could be made sense of as a response to the threat of broken relations. Or the loss of people, places, ideas or identities that I am attached to. Bowlby concludes that anxiety or resistance over an unwilling separation from something or someone we value can be 'a perfectly normal and healthy reaction' (ibid: 159). In my experience as a management consultant, this resistance is frequently referred to as 'resistance to change' – with a negative connotation tending towards a resentment and stigmatization of people who do not readily let go of what they value.

The sadness and physical exhaustion experienced by both Eric and myself during the latest months can then be made sense of as grief. The high levels of worry and anxiety that I (and, from my understanding, also Eric) experienced could be due to the threat of loss, or the anticipation of business closure. But at the time when the levels of anxiety were at the highest, I was unaware of this and made sense of the physical discomfort as stress and overwork. My approach to dealing with it was through physical exercise, positive thinking and meditation. This was all focused on myself as responsible for my own situation, a belief that was underlined by the dominating discourse explored above.

The ideal of the heroic entrepreneur urges us not to 'take it personally' when we close a venture. Paradoxically, business is encouraged to be a highly personal expression of our passion for a higher purpose; but when we face failure, we are expected to switch off the passion and disregard our heavy personal investment in the outcome. Somehow, we compartmentalize the death of a family member as something personal and separate from business life – and we can grieve the first, but not the second. Being one human being, how can I separate out my responses to the loss of my father from my responses to the ending of a business? Like two waves breaking simultaneously and affecting each other. This makes me wonder how many employees who lose their jobs or businesses are going through other major losses at the same time, such as a divorce or the death of a loved one. How much do we as consultants and managers know about what else is going on in people's lives when they are faced with an organisational death? I will leave this question for the reader to

ponder. Next, I focus on the most dominant models of grief in the discourse of organisational death: stage models.

Stage models of grief – working through grief to let go and move on

How we deal with grief in Western society has been greatly influenced by Kübler-Ross (1973) and her study of how terminally ill patients contemplated their impending death (Bell and Taylor 2011: 4). Kübler-Ross introduced five distinct stages the individual goes through before they accept death: 1) denial, 2) anger and resentment or blame, 3) bargaining for more time, 4) depression, and finally 5) acceptance with a sense of tranquillity. Stage models have been widely accepted by therapists and are commonly used to ‘assist’ the bereaved to ‘progress’ through the stages of grief. Deviation from this pattern is seen as dysfunctional, requiring therapeutic intervention (ibid: 2). Marris (1974: 27) argues that grief must be ‘worked out’, resolved and mastered, otherwise the person may ‘suffer lasting emotional damage’. Within the relatively limited field of management research on loss and grief, many investigators draw on stage models of grief to understand responses to organisational change (Bell and Taylor 2011: 4).

Using these five stages of grief to make sense of the experience of our business closure, I would explain it in the following way. We were ‘stuck’ for quite a while before we decided to close our business (see Project 3). This could be explained as the first stage of denial. The experiences of anger, self-blame and blaming others could be the second stage. My own resistance against moving on too quickly could be a bargaining for more time, followed by the sadness experienced by both Eric and me. And finally, as we gradually accept and come to terms with the ending of our business, and have terminated our projects and emptied the office, we might be getting closer to a sense of tranquillity. What is striking here, though, is that viewing individuals experiencing grief as going through predictable stages in the same process suggests that their progress can be measured against that of the ideal resilient person who deals with grief effectively. Perhaps this makes it tempting to judge some individuals as showing too much emotion or taking too long to get through the process. Some of the research on resilient entrepreneurs certainly seems to invite such comparisons.

Introducing new perspectives on organisational death, loss and grief in the *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, Bell and Taylor (2011) present a stark critique to the continuing and uncritical use of stage models in organisational change research. They see the dominance of stage models of grief in understanding organisational death as due to a managerialist focus on grief as a problem to be solved, to be handled effectively ‘so as to minimize its impact on organisational and employee performance’ (ibid: 5). The individual focus on grief – together with idealization of the resilient entrepreneur – encourages individuals to take responsibility for dealing with the

consequences of and reactions to endings/losses and discourages collective responsibility for the death of the organisation, project, or department. The stage models of grief form part of 'a dominant psychological discourse that serves to discipline people into appropriate behaviours', to 'police the passionate emotions associated with loss through bereavement' (ibid: 5).

Remembering the monologue delivered by Gabriel in our office, I find this uncomfortably interesting. Before Eric and I had any chance to spark off a conversation about how we were coping with the ending of our business together, or to ask about collective responsibility for the closure of the company, Gabriel took the conversational wheel and focused on the ideal of coping with endings in terms of letting go and moving on without losing momentum. My visceral experience of being silenced and disciplined resonates with a 'disciplining into appropriate behaviour' as described above. People with 'passionate emotions associated with loss' were referred to rather disparagingly by Gabriel as 'some people' who were angry or even depressed. Both Gabriel and Jack seem to be animated by the dominating managerial discourse. (And I have been, and still largely continue to be; it is not easy to 'let go of' the air that we breathe.) Bell and Taylor call for further research to understand how 'discursive demands to let go or move on may be resisted' (ibid: p5).

Bell and Taylor (ibid) also address cultural beliefs in modern Western societies that support the continuous dominance of the stage models of grief. The assumptions are: the separation of death from life, the separation of self from other, and the separation of negative emotions from positive. The notion of death as the end of existence calls for a letting go of emotional bonds to what is lost and opens for a pathologizing of prolonged grief, which is seen as unnatural and unhealthy. The view of self as an autonomous individual encourages an instrumental view of the value of relationships to the individual: 'When a relationship no longer fulfils a valued function, it must be severed in order to ensure the individual's ongoing health and wellbeing' (ibid: 6). This resonates well with Seligman's (2013) view on relationships, described earlier in the project. According to Bell and Taylor, this has been criticized for 'supporting a view on hegemonic masculinity which tends to pathologize stereotypically feminine grieving behaviours through promoting a masculine model of mental health that privileges independence and autonomy' (Bell and Taylor 2011: 6).

Finally, defining some emotions as negative and others as positive, and marginalizing the negative, is the third cultural belief that supports the continuously dominating use of stage models of grief, according to Bell and Taylor: 'Failure to display positive emotions is likely to be defined as abnormal within these cultural discourses' (ibid: 6). This resonated strongly with my research peers, who mentioned various experiences where they have noticed pressure to be positive and apparent policing or censorship of 'gloomy' responses.

Clewell (2004) explored the development of Freud's mourning theory throughout his work and concludes that 'Freud's later work registers the endlessness of normal grieving' (ibid: 43). According to Clewell, Freud suggests that grief work may be an interminable labour in *The Ego and the Id* (1923). Reflecting on the loss of his own daughter, Freud writes in a letter to Binswanger in 1929 that the mourning persists and 'Although we know that after such a loss the acute state of mourning will subside, we also know we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute' (Clewell 2004: 61). The theory of continuing bonds (Klass et al 1996) acknowledges this ongoing connection and presents an alternative to the dominating stage models. But the idea of continuing bonds with whoever or whatever is lost is largely neglected in management studies, according to Bell and Taylor (2011). They conclude their article by suggesting that a continuing bonds perspective could not only enhance our understanding of organisational death, but also transform our appreciation of what it is to be human: 'if loss and grief are understood as aspects of experience that lie at the heart of what it means to be human, their importance within management studies must be understood as a *fundamental aspect of meaning making*, rather than a problem to be solved' (Bell and Taylor 2011: 9, emphasis added).

To briefly summarize the project this far: it is clear that we participate in, and at the same time are influenced by, current Western worldviews when trying to make sense of the closing of our business with the ideal of letting go and moving on, not taking it personally and not losing momentum. Current dominating stage models of grief continue to support this ideal, viewing grief as a linear process to be completed by each individual (preferably following the ideal of the resilient human being), regardless of context. In the remainder of this project, I will focus on the theory of continuing bonds, introduced by Klass et al (1996), and how this has been taken up in a discourse that challenges the dominating entrepreneurial and managerial discourse around endings and loss. Neimeyer (2006, 2014) has written several articles together with Klass and contributes the introductory chapter to the book *Continuing Bonds in Bereavement: New Directions for Research and Practice*, where Klass and Steffen (2018) review the development of the continuing bonds theory over the last 20 years. Robert Neimeyer is Professor in Psychology at the University of Memphis and editor of the *International Journal of Death Studies*. He has published 24 books and more than 350 articles and is well renowned in the field of bereavement studies. Neimeyer started with a constructionist model of grief, with a more individual focus on the reconstruction of meaning (2006), and has developed this further to a *social* constructionist model of grief, with an emphasis on the social – and thus political – aspects of the meaning-making (Neimeyer 2014).

Where Neimeyer develops a social understanding of meaning and identity construction from the field of grief and bereavement studies, Stacey (2001, 2003, 2007, 2010, 2011) has arrived at

strikingly similar arguments, viewing human beings as radically social, coming from recent developments in complexity sciences in combination with the social constructionist philosophers Mead (1934) and Elias (2000/1939). In the following, I will introduce Niemeyer's and Stacey's theories and show the similarities as I draw on their thinking to make further sense of our experience of closing a business. Holding the theory of continuing bonds together with complex responsive processes of relating has the potential to provide us with new insights into what kind of long-term and widespread coherence, or patterns of interaction, our dominating way of making sense of endings and loss in business is producing.

Disrupted meaning and grief as a process of social reconstruction

A social constructionist theory of grief

The theory of continuing bonds was introduced into bereavement studies by Klass et al in their *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief* (1996) and has over the last 20 years become widely accepted in the field of loss and grief studies (Klass and Steffen 2018). The central message of the theory is that ongoing relationships with the deceased are normal, not pathological, and that the idea of 'finishing' grief is irrelevant. Grief is not a problem to be solved, or something to get over as quickly as possible, but an 'ongoing process in which people reorganise their lives following a significant loss' (Klass and Steffen 2018: 341).

If grief is an ongoing process of reorganising our lives, then it's not just the recent loss of my father that is influencing the experience of closing or losing a business and job. It also means that the loss of Eric's father is still impacting his effort of reorganising, reconstructing, and finding meaning in his life. And I continue to be affected by the loss of my mother 5 years ago and my divorce 3 years ago. As well as by the losses of our board members and previous employees. What we have lost is no longer present, but still influencing our sensemaking and actions.

In 2006, Neimeyer et al advanced a model of bereavement as an active process of meaning reconstruction in the wake of loss. They propose that as human beings, we 'continually author our own life stories as we reflect, interpret and reinterpret what happens in our lives, and we tell and retell our stories to other people and ourselves. Meaning is embedded in our life stories' (Gillies and Neimeyer 2006: 38). With endings and loss, this meaning is disrupted, and we can 'find ourselves thrown into a crisis of meaning' if the bereavement comes with a high degree of challenge to our self-narrative (Neimeyer 2014: 489). This triggers a process of reconstruction of meaning. Losses that make sense to us are easier to integrate into our existing worldview and come to terms with. But some losses cause ruptures or even breakdowns of how we see the world and ourselves in it.

When I read Neimeyer as quoted above, it resonated strongly. It made a lot of sense to say that I had been thrown into a crisis of meaning and reading this was a relief because it normalized my intensely felt emotions. With the death of my father, I had lost both my parents within a 5-year period. My father had been highly influential in the forming of my identity as a hard-working high achiever. I had struggled for his recognition my entire life. And now he was dead. And my business was dying at the same time. The same business that had probably kept me alive through the process of losing my mother and my family through the divorce. My identity was collapsing. 'Adaptation to loss frequently involves constructing a new reality, in which survivors' assumptive worlds and their view of themselves are forever changed' (Neimeyer et al 2006: 36). This process of construction is still ongoing, and I am beginning to realize that it will never end.

In 2014, Neimeyer et al focused increasingly on the *social*, and thus political, dimension of the reconstruction of meaning. They propose that grief or mourning is 'not primarily an interior and individual process, but one that is intricately social' (Neimeyer, 2014:485) and advocate a *social* constructionist model of grief in which 'the narrative processes by which meanings are found, appropriated or assembled occur at least as fully between people as within them' (ibid: 485). There is quite a big shift – migrating from our current Western understanding of human beings as separate individuals, and grief as a personal process to be overcome effectively, to one that sees us as interconnected and entangled, with continuing bonds to what is lost and grief as a co-construction and negotiation of new meaning where historical and cultural situatedness is central to the meaning-making. Before I unpack this further, I will bring in the theory of complex responsive processes by Stacey (2001, 2003, 2007, 2010, 2011) so that we may hold the theory of continuing bonds together with complex responsive processes of relating.

Complex responsive processes and a radically social view of human beings

Stacey bridges Mead's symbolic interactionism to Elias's process sociology by drawing on analogies from the complexity sciences to develop a theory of human action. In his theory of symbolic interactionism, Mead argues that meaning emerges in the social act of gesture and response in a 'conversation of gestures' (Mead 1934). Meaning is socially constructed, which is in line with Neimeyer's argument. You could say that Mead proceeds to explore and explain how this social construction of meaning happens in the microprocesses of human relating and communicating. Elias (1939) was also interested in the nature of human interaction. He concluded that the development of a society results not from long-term planning, but as a 'consequence of the interweaving, the interplay of the intentions and actions of many, many people' (Stacey 2011: 302). Stacey asks: 'How could continuous circular processes of gesturing and responding between thousands, even millions

of people produce the kind of long-term, widespread coherence that Elias talks about?’ (Stacey 2003: 65). Stacey draws on complexity sciences to offer important insights into this issue. The complex responsive processes perspective directs attention to how identity and intention emerge in local interaction taking the form of conversations between people:

Complex responsive processes of relating take the forms of bodies directing their communicative actions toward themselves, the process of individual mind, and bodies directing their communicative interactions toward each other as social relations. Individual mind and social relations are thus two aspects of the same process of bodily interaction and it is in this sense that the individual is social to the core. Identity emerges in the human communicative interaction and power relating so far described and it does so simultaneously in individual and collective forms as ‘I’ and ‘we’ identities. And as soon as one recognizes ‘I’ and ‘we’ identities, one sees that *identity is an aspect of inclusion and exclusion and thus power relating*. Identity is therefore closely interwoven with processes of anxiety, shame and panic. (Stacey 2011: 328, emphasis added)

To start unpacking all of this, I will make three assertions drawing on both continuing bonds and complex responsive processes; and I will show how this offers a radically different understanding of what is going on as we close our business. The three assertions are:

29. Meaning and identity is negotiated and socially constructed.
30. The historical and relational situatedness is crucial to how we make sense of and deal with closure and loss.
31. Emotions are signals in the network of human relations and central in the process of negotiating meaning and identity.

Meaning and identity is negotiated and socially constructed

In sum, ‘the work of grief’, in our view, involves reaffirmation or reconstruction of a world of meaning that has been challenged by loss, at social as well as individual levels, in a specific cultural and historical frame. (Neimeyer 2014: 486)

Seeing the closing down of a business as organisational death, as argued earlier in the project, would mean that our ‘work of grief’ is a struggle to render the ending of the business comprehensible to ourselves and to significant others. This requires us to develop a plausible story of what has happened. ‘The narrative processes by which meanings are found, appropriated, or assembled occur at least as fully between people as within them’, according to Neimeyer et al (201: 485). And from a Meadian perspective, these are the same processes.

What Stacey (2011: 328) adds to this is the notion that ‘identity emerges in the human communicative interaction’ and that identity is ‘an aspect of inclusion and exclusion and thus power relating’. In other words, we are not just making new sense of our experiences and our life stories,

but also of who we are; which means that who we are, our identity, is socially negotiated. Arguing for a radically social understanding of individuals, Stacey (2003) shows how negotiation for meaning, which happens in conversational processes, is closely linked to our sense of self and our identity and how deeply we are affected by threats to the continuation of identity:

Conversational processes having transformative potential, by their very nature *threaten the continuity of identity*. If a group of people have spent the past decades thinking and talking in terms of particular meta-psychological theories, for example, their individual and collective identities are inevitably closely tied up with that way of thinking. Conversations that challenge these theories hold out the potential for transformation but at the same time they threaten identity. In other words, *conversations with transformative potential inevitably arouse anxiety at a deep existential level*. Such anxiety provokes defences such as denial. Themes emerge in conversations that counter themes with transformative potential and so shut down further exploratory conversation. (Stacey 2003: 80, emphasis added)

We are in not talking about a mild discomfort here: the ‘deepest existential anxiety must be aroused by any threat of separation or exclusion since it means the *potential loss or fragmentation of identity, even death*’ (Stacey 2003: 130, emphasis added). The experience is akin to being in physical danger, where we risk losing our life. If I sense a risk of being stigmatized due to failure, or socially annihilated, I might actively and strategically resist this by ‘impression management’ and by attributing failure to external causes, to maintain my sense of self as a successful entrepreneur and businessperson. Kibler et al (2017) have explored this and their findings correspond to two impression management strategies outlined in the conceptual framework of Shepherd and Haynie (2011): ‘denying responsibility and defining failure in a positive light’. Or I might accept the stigmatization and internalize it as self-blame, in which case a different sense of self and identity is developed. The first response could be interpreted as highly resilient, while the second might be experienced or explained as a depression. What is interesting is how these are connected. The identity of successful and seemingly resilient entrepreneurs seems to be negotiated at the expense of others through stigmatization and an active closing down of competing alternative plausible stories. This could explain why highly resilient entrepreneurs don’t seem to learn from failure (Shepherd 2013): it threatens their identity as successful entrepreneurs, so they actively resist participating in conversations and meaning reconstruction that might challenge their story of who they are.

The potential for an exploratory conversation was shut down during Gabriel’s monologue in our office. It was shut down through the board meeting with the insistent praise by Jack, and by Eric’s comment when Jack and Gabriel had left – that we could take the praise at face value. Nobody was really interested in any kind of exploration at that point of time. I have commented previously

that there can be many different reasons for this. But no matter what the reason, invoking the story of the heroic entrepreneur seems to be an effective way of shutting down exploratory conversations that might threaten the continuity of identity during closure or after ending a project or business.

The importance of relational, cultural, and historical situatedness

Rather than seeing human beings as separate individuals and the dead as no longer existing, the theory of continuing bonds sees human beings, both present and absent, as woven together by 'the complex bonds individuals maintain with intimate others within the communities and the overarching narratives that structure the culture in which their lives and bonds are set' (Klass and Steffen 2018: 7). They continue their argument by saying that 'it seems that conceptualizing continuing bonds as individual phenomena are demonstrably misleading, because our ongoing relationship with the dead are elements in our larger social and cultural attachments, and form part of our personal and social identity' (ibid: 7) In other words, we are inextricably interconnected, entangled; we have grown together over time.

The pathological approach to grief is a distinctly Western phenomenon (Klass and Steffen 2018). Other cultures around the world construe loss and grief differently. It is extraordinarily difficult to become aware of these societal scripts and how they shape our experience, as I have addressed earlier in this project and in my previous project. Situated within a culture, we are also situated in the flow of events and relations in our lives. We develop habits of relating (Bowlby 1969, 1979) and the way we make sense of our experiences in relationships is highly influenced by our history of relations.

Klass and Steffen (2018: 11) define culture as 'how a people or group of peoples construe their world'. They argue that 'cultural guidelines and meaning systems are deeply embedded in larger cultural narratives' and warn therapists that if they do not understand the different cultural frames, 'they risk imposing their own unexamined frame on bereaved people who are using other frames' (ibid: 12).

Stacey (2003: 54) argues that 'the actions of individuals can only be understood in terms of their patterns of interdependence'. This is coherent with the argument of Klass and Steffen (2018) and together, they shed quite a critical light on the ideal that the individual experience of grief follows five universal stages and that people can be compared as to how effectively they move through their grieving processes before returning to 'business as usual'. Our tendency to 'decontextualize' or 'uproot' each other and compare with an ideal is a way of policing each other and ourselves. If we don't comply with the expected behaviour, we run the risk of being excluded or stigmatized, no longer belonging to the group. Marris (1974, 1996) wrote about loss and change, and

the struggle for meaning when facing uncertainty. He argued that we are making a fundamental mistake when we compare ourselves with others:

Just as I make a fundamental mistake by comparing myself with others, as if I could perceive myself as another person, so I make the equivalent mistake by comparing others' accounts of events to my own, as if they could perceive what I perceive. Then if their accounts disagree with mine, I accuse them of lying, stupidity or irrationality, because if they had experienced what I had experienced, and if it had meant to them what it meant to me, they would have to acknowledge the truth of my version. (Marris 1996: 23)

This shows how important it is to become increasingly more aware of our own cultural frames, so that we don't risk imposing them on others; and to see other cultural frames, so that we can resist being imposed upon.

This struggle for meaning and identity, where we more or less knowingly impose our cultural frames on each other, is not a disembodied and rational affair. As Stacey points out, identity is 'closely interwoven with processes of anxiety, shame and panic' (Stacey 2011: 328). This is a radically different way of making sense of our emotions than what is espoused by the dominating discourse. To view emotions as socially constructed is to 'spotlight the cultural settings in which emotions are learned and expressed' (Fineman 2003: 15).

Emotions are signals in the network of human relating

Stacey argued that 'conversations with transformative potential inevitably arouse anxiety at a deep existential level' (2003: 80). Later, he argued that 'identity is an aspect of inclusion and exclusion and thus power relating. Identity is therefore closely interwoven with processes of anxiety, shame and panic' (2011: 328). It is interesting to combine this with Neimeyer's view of the role of emotion in the process of reconstruction of meaning: 'there is a temporal relationship between the distress of grief and meaning reconstruction activities' (2006: 57). Neimeyer suggests that increased distress after loss acts as a 'trigger engaging meaning reconstruction activities, and when these activities have served the purpose of alleviating the distress, they lose salience to the individual who is then able to move on to other activities and goals in her or his life' (ibid). Based on the work of Stacey and Neimeyer, the process of sensemaking and reconstruction or meaning and identity is an inescapably *social* and thus political one, and feelings of distress are an inevitable part of this process. Emotions of discomfort and grief keep triggering a continuous search for meaning, which goes on until new meaning is created in such a way that we are able to move on.

Concluding argument

There is an increasing focus on entrepreneurship in our Western society, and entrepreneurs are more emotionally attached to their business and work than the average employee (Shepherd 2003). In the dominating discourse with its neoliberalist ideal of the heroic entrepreneur, passion and purpose are encouraged, since they have been shown to improve company performance and growth (Lee 1971). More often than not, new ventures fail (Shepherd and Haynie 2011); and with failure and disruptive change, there are endings and loss. The disappointment and grief experienced with the loss of something valued in business is very similar to the grief experienced with the loss of a loved one (Marris 1996; Shepherd 2003).

Having encouraged us to be deeply passionate about our business, when dealing with its ending the prevalent way of thinking requires us to switch our passion off and let go quickly, not take loss personally, and make our way as quickly as possible through the grieving process in order to move on without losing momentum. It is assumed that the negative feelings associated with grief are slowing us down and making us less effective in our jobs. Stage theories of grief that are most prominent in management literature normalize grief and may give hope to people who experience loss in that the notion of a linear progression is reassuring – eventually, we must get through it. Stage models also support neoliberal ideology, as they provide a method for managing grief effectively, and encourage individuals to take responsibility for dealing with the consequences of their own experience of loss, discouraging collective responsibility (Bell and Taylor 2011).

Contrary to the above discourse, I have argued in this project that grief is *not* an individually contained emotion to be managed effectively. ‘Traumatic events which rob us of the attachments and purposes around which the meaning of life has been organised – like bereavement or losing a career – provoke an anxious, intense and often despairing search to recover a sense of meaning. We experience that search as grieving’ (Marris 1996: 85). New meaning cannot be constructed purely outside of relationships, as it must be sufficiently plausible to significant others to not be rejected (Marris 1996). The reconstruction of meaning and identity is thus a social and political process.

‘Conversational processes having transformative potential, by their very nature threaten the continuity of identity’ (Stacey 2003: 80). The potential loss or fragmentation of identity triggers existential anxiety, fear of being exposed to shame and stigmatization can trigger panic and responses to shame and panic can ‘very easily take the form of aggression’ (ibid: 326). This aggression can manifest as resentment and stigmatization of others with whom one does not want to identify (Gammon 2013) and who do not live up to the heroic ideal, with a policing of emotions associated with grief (Bell and Taylor 2011) and a closing down of competing narratives and

attempts to make new sense and meaning. The demand to let go and move on can thus in some situations be somewhat tyrannical.

Some people internalize the social stigma and adopt a negative self-view; they come to believe the pessimistic stories about who they are. This is more likely to happen if there is a high level of identification with the business (Shepherd and Heynie 2011). Since we all have a need of social belonging, we might find others who can confirm our negative self-view (ibid). Emotions of discomfort and unhealed grief keep triggering a continuous search for meaning, which goes on until new meaning is created and we are able to move on. Then there is a shift in the emotional landscape from distress to a greater peace of mind, or from what Shepherd (2013) calls negative to positive emotions.

Resilient entrepreneurs who move on quickly live up to the heroic ideal but seem to close opportunities for learning and thus keep perpetuating this discourse in the interests of protecting the story of who they are; their identity. At the core of this approach is an *intolerance* of distress. This intolerance was clearly demonstrated in our final board meeting where the narrative of the heroic entrepreneur was evoked strongly together with the abjection of emotional responses to loss. Entrepreneurs who strongly identify with their business tend to internalize stigma as self-blame when the venture fails to live up to the expected goals. These dynamics together seem to close opportunities for learning and for collective responsibility for the ending.

By increasing our acceptance and tolerance of the distressing emotions associated with loss could allow us to work together to develop plausible accounts of our experience of it. This offers an opportunity to co-construct meaning in new ways, not only enabling us to move on with less stigma but also potentially transforming how we work together.

SYNOPSIS

Another reflexive turn (written in 2018/19)

The synopsis is a further reflexive review of my research exploring the movement of thought, which is at the same time an inquiry into the power dynamics of the figurations I have belonged to.

Appendix 2 summarizes in a table the movement of my thinking over the 10 years of research. This is done at risk of presenting the process as a linear development from the left column, representing a more positivist approach to sensemaking, towards a social constructionist approach. It is, however, *not* a linear development, and such a separation would be a simplification. As I have shown in my research, my learning has not been ‘continuous improvement’ but rather reflected what has been seen as common sense by the figurations I have belonged to. I now take a Neimeyerian social constructionist stance with an emphasis on embeddedness and embodied sensemaking. Yet I am still also an engineer, and the ways of thinking I learned as the scientific method will always have an influence. All this supports my argument about continuing bonds; change is not a moving away from and letting go of, but rather becoming aware of and coming to terms with, old espoused ideas and ideals, as well as acknowledging and experimenting with emergent new ones.

The process of writing this synopsis has been very hard work, and by no means linear. I have written what has felt like endless iterations. At times, the work felt so overwhelming that it was tempting to open new avenues of research. What has made it to the end has emerged through all the iterations and passed the test of plausibility, resonance, and usefulness among my research peers and supervisors. In the following, I first reflect on the four projects before I conclude my arguments in the ‘Conclusion’ and ‘Contribution to knowledge and practice’ sections.

Project 1 – Thinking like an engineer (2007)

Becoming aware of my ways of thinking through reflexive practice

The first project was an intellectual autobiography with the aim to begin a reflexive practice to become increasingly aware of espoused ways of thinking and acting at work.

As an engineer, I had been ‘importing the engineer’s idea of self-regulation and control into understanding human activity’ (Stacey 2011: 66). The simplification of a complex world as a system had become a blueprint that I was struggling to force-fit reality into, and I was frequently disappointed and frustrated. I was so dedicated, so driven, that there was no room for being a living, loving, feeling human being. I was treating myself harshly, feeling guilty if I took a break or ‘wasted time’ in my never-ending improvement projects. I was becoming increasingly exhausted and drained in the process but ignored the symptoms. I usually experienced most meetings as a waste of time.

The relational aspect of working together was 'getting in the way of the real work', as I thought of it then.

Re-reading Project 1 now, written 10 years ago, I feel compassion for this hard-working 'machine' of a young woman and all the people she was highly impatient with. I can see how she might have come across as intimidating and sometimes annoying and insensitive in her professionalism and goal-directedness. Having no language for emotions, nor for power games, I explained my struggles as personal and experienced them as shameful signs of weakness; and so I kept them to myself.

I was, of course, affected by all manner of subtleties in my day-to-day experience; but I was largely unaware of this, and thus also largely ignorant of my own impact on others and how I was in fact already playing 'power games' but couldn't see it. Through writing Project 1, I began to see more of my own role in the conflicts I found myself in. Having been exposed to Gestalt Theory (Perls et al 1994) and Narrative Therapy (White and Epston 1990), I gradually learned to become more sensitive to what was going on in the moment, and to pay attention to the narratives we tell and how they shape our sense of self, our identity. This started to influence how I worked as a consultant, being more curious and aware of what was going on when we work together. This made me less impatient. And when I later returned to the high-tech start-up, I was approaching work differently, with a greater sense of curiosity and a reduced drive to push my own impatient agenda.

Influenced by my coaching training, I then tried to expel conflict altogether, directing my efforts towards creating a harmonious workplace. I thought I had begun to see my own role in the everyday politics, but as I read the project now, I can see that I believed it was possible to 'step outside of conflict' and considered the 'private conversations' that I was having with the CEO as separate from the conversations where the conflict was discussed in public, believing that by avoiding the latter I was taking no active part in the conflicts. I now see this as quite naïve: through participating in 'shadow conversations' with the CEO, as Scott (2009) would call it, I was influencing the power dynamics in the organisation, even if I didn't realise it.

Being impatient and hungry for progress, I had never stopped to question what 'progress' meant, or where my ideals came from and how they were affecting me, until I started writing Project 1. I concluded the first project by writing that in my future research I wanted to draw on social constructionism to shed light on the ideals we construct in the workplace, and how this may affect the narratives we tell about ourselves and what we choose to reveal or conceal. This is very close to what I ended up doing 10 years later, in my Project 4, where I inquired into the political struggle for meaning in the process of venture closure, drawing on a social constructionist account of grief developed by Neimeyer (Neimeyer et al 2014). Although the theme of loss and grief does not figure

explicitly in the first project, the project shows an emerging awareness of the political struggle for meaning and identity in processes of change. Also, with the incessant focus on achievement and improvement, there is a distancing from, impatience with or even a loss of contact with important aspects of the human experience; all that is not directly related to achievement or improvement. And finally, surviving a traffic accident by chance was traumatic and triggered an existential search for new meaning in life; what Neimeyer et al (2014) explain as grief. At that point in time, I turned to coaching to find new meaning and I ended the first project by starting to explore my coaching practice, which I continued to do in project 2.

Project 2a – Ideologies and assumptions of coaching (2008)

I concluded my second project with the realization that the ideology of coaching, with its success imperative defined as 'living one's full potential', is risky because it implies that there is no end to the effort that could be made in attempting to achieve one's stated goals and it seems to neglect that other people's intentions and goals will have an impact too. When success doesn't happen, this is explained as because you haven't tried hard enough or don't believe strongly enough or haven't managed your negative self-talk, your 'gremlin' well enough. Not only may this lead to a never-ending struggle to live up to unrealistic ideals where exhaustion could be a consequence, it is also a path where inevitable disappointment and loss in life is blamed on self or other, or both. I also found that coaching seemed to mask over power dynamics and political struggles, which I noted was ethically problematic as it rendered it impossible to reflect upon what we were doing together.

Reading Project 2 a decade later, I am also struck with how I critique Carson's (2003) concept of a 'gremlin' and introduce an alternative way of understanding externalization as a process of increasing one's level of detachment. I show an emergent understanding of the importance of reflexivity and plurality when I write that small differences may propagate and become shifts in themes or shifts in the dynamics of my conversations with others and with myself, and thus shifts in power relations (what stories I experience as true). A more reflexive view combined with alternative ways of making sense may influence novel stories to emerge. A shift in what we experience as 'truths' about ourselves influences how we make sense of our experiences and thus our responses in our interaction (we 'have changed'). A change 'in me' is a change in the dynamics of my thinking, or what Mead (1934) called the 'silent conversations'. Considering the theme of loss, a shift in identity or sense of self also entails a loss. The memory of who I used to be or how we used to be together continues to impact the emerging new sense of self and relationships.

I had been seduced and swept off my feet by the coaching community and became a 'coaching evangelist'. The strong sense of belonging was new to me and I quickly became convinced

– I held as ‘true’ – that coaching could help both myself and other people to live our full potential and find meaningful and fulfilled lives. When I started to belong to the DMan community and engage with difference through reflexive practice, I started to make new sense of what was going on during coaching and what might be problematic. Then I entered 8 years of suspension from the programme and was no longer an active participant in the DMan community.

Project 2b – 8 years of suspension, and re-habituating to old ways (2016)

Having begun to achieve an increased intellectual detachment from the ideologies of the communities I was a member of during the first two projects, I went through an 8-year period of suspension from the DMan programme where I gave birth to a daughter, my father was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease, my mother died from cancer and I was divorced. These are all different experiences of loss that could make extensive research projects. What they all have in common is grief and a need to make new sense of a life and perturbed by loss and to renegotiate relations. A divorce can in this light be understood as a dramatic renegotiation of a close relation where the emerging identities make it impossible to go on living together. This is transferable to organisational life where disruptive change can trigger intense political negotiations for meaning and identity which sometimes result in ‘breakups’ where people are not able to go on together and thus chose to leave the organisation. These intense experiences of loss in my personal life had a big impact on my interest in the subject of loss and grief and how this relates to change in identities and relationships.

Before I returned to the DMan program, I had worked several years as a management consultant and had also started my own management consulting boutique. Believing at first that I had developed my thinking over the 8 years, as if this was a linear process of improvement, I gradually came to realize that during my absence from the DMan I had become re-habituating into the ways of thinking that I describe as Strategic Choice Theory, or the engineer’s worldview, and humanism. Loss, or socialisation in this case, isn’t necessarily permanent.

Reflecting on and becoming aware of our own assumptions requires us to discuss our practice with someone in an open and honest way. And even though I had kept up my reading and engaged with plurality in an intellectual way, I had not belonged to a community of inquiry during the 8 years of suspension. Rather, I had founded a consulting company where I wanted to make an impact in the world by contributing to ‘human flourishing’ – through the unfolding of potential. This very much exemplifies the ways of thinking that I explored in Project 2, and shows one of the two intertwined threads of inquiry in my research: the immense power held over us by dominating ‘truths’. The seductive and disciplinary powers of ideologies are massive, and it is surprisingly difficult to gain enough detachment to be able to acquire insight into the ‘figuration of which one is

a member' (Elias 1970: 165). In Project 3, I had become entangled in great expectations, striving to live up to them. I was persuaded by the ideology of the heroic entrepreneur at the same time as I unknowingly contributed to its perpetuation.

Project 3 – With the best of intentions: why having a social impact is not as straightforward as it may seem (2017)

I was highly enthusiastic about making a positive impact in the world when I reconnected to the DMan programme – in a very similar state to when I first joined it, freshly certified as a coach. Being strongly driven to have an impact in the world, and believing that use of our full potential was crucial to achieving this, I was enchanted by a concept for 'enhancing performance' and 'unleashing potential' that was based on neuroscience and technology. It was highly seductive in its promise of enhanced performance based on hard science rather than 'soft psychology'. The fact that it was used at MIT lent it credibility and kudos. We invested considerable time and money taking this concept to the Norwegian market. We developed a one-page strategy for how we would do this, which got excellent feedback from experienced investors and from our board. The passionate fire of engagement was fanned to a blaze by all the praise and encouragement. In light of loss, utopian ideas inevitably lead to disappointment or disillusionment with a possible loss of naivety and innocence.

Reading Project 3 now, I can see how my habitual pattern of being a high achiever wanting to do good in society made me susceptible to seduction by this kind of praise and encouragement. In the context of a wider social trend of neoliberalist ideals of unleashing one's full potential (Scharff 2015) and a rise of social entrepreneurship (Renko 2012; Carlson and Koch 2018), many of us are driven to work hard to have a social impact. And as I argued in my Project 2, this seems to come with a risk of exhaustion and a masking of power politics – which is arguably a social impact, but not the one intended.

Project 3 was written over a period of almost a year. Re-reading the first iteration now, what I notice is how my colleagues and I together constructed a very seductive façade based on what would eventually emerge as rather grandiose ambitions. The neuro-leadership concept was beautifully packaged with a highly professional website, impressive slide decks, and glossy brochures. And the language was steeped in the rhetoric of positive psychology: enhancing performance, unleashing potential, optimizing self-leadership, and 'providing a platform for the acceleration of the mastery of leadership and a foundation for the high-performing individual and organisation' (as one brochure put it).

Seligman (2013: 94) writes about human flourishing:

A necessary condition for large-scale flourishing, particularly among young people, is that positive psychology develops a delivery model for its well-being-enhancing interventions that scales up globally. Technology is uniquely positioned for assisting individuals with their flourishing in a way that is exponential.

This is exactly what we were doing. Our neuro-leadership concept, which linked high performance to well-being and thriving, was based on online questionnaires and automatically generated suggested well-being-enhancing interventions, very much as Seligman encourages. We developed a business case that at the time seemed realistic and expected to make quite a lot of money on this. Already in the first iteration of Project 3, I notice that I was starting to become ambivalent about the concept. I found myself privately questioning the golden façade, and worried that we were selling the emperor's new clothes. I spent a lot of time overcompensating for this by reading through the scientific articles that the concept referred to, so that we wouldn't seem glib and superficial when talking with executives about it.

From the very first iteration, I wrote about increasing levels of anxiety. Reading this now, I notice that I posed as having an easy-going attitude towards failing ('most things worth pursuing come with a risk of failure'), but in the same iteration I also wrote that 'one of my deepest fears as an entrepreneur is to fail and be seen as incompetent'. I was referring not to the fear of failure itself, but to the fear of being stigmatized; being exposed as not good enough. I also experienced a deep sense of shame for being weak and unable to 'get my act together' and 'fix things'. With all this ambivalence and anxiety, why didn't I just state clearly that I was doubting the concept and then end it sooner rather than later? Why were we pursuing such grandiose ambitions – what was driving us in the first place? And what was also going on in our company that was experienced as increased anxiety, lack of motivation, deadness, lack of sales initiative, and overanalysing the product endlessly in search of 'perfection'? I now see these as examples of avoidance. There was an emergent loss to the ideal about having a huge reputation and we were avoiding talking about this, we were avoiding renegotiating our relations and our future together.

The above questions animated me as I continued to explore the context I was operating in and the dominating ways of thinking. I explored how we think about performance and achievement in our society by drawing on Weber (Tawney et al 2003), Han (2015), and Ehrenreich (2010).

Driven to perform – the achievement subject

It has been eye-opening to gain increasing insight into the historical and relational context I am a part of. What has been invisible to me, in the air we breathe, is becoming clearer and my ability to 'read the air' is increasing. I can now see that the drive to continuously maximize and improve lies at

the core of the Western capitalist society. This has become so ingrained that we are not even aware of it. It is dominant in our Western thought paradigm.

Byung-Chul Han (2015) critiques Foucault when he develops his argument for *The Burnout Society*, where he claims that we have become achievement subjects who strive to use our full potential and perform in every arena. Anything is possible, so long as we want it badly enough and believe in it strongly enough. We push ourselves to the limit and beyond, in order to become the best versions of ourselves and we do so at terrible costs, which is loss. Ehrenreich explores American positive thinking and its symbiosis with capitalism. Her thinking corresponds well with that of Han (2015): that late capitalism depends on the individual's hunger for more and the firm's imperative of growth. She adds that 'Perpetual growth is of course an absurdity [...], but positive thinking makes it seem possible, if not ordained' (Ehrenreich 2010: 8). She quotes sociologist Micki McGee: 'continuous and never-ending work on the self is offered not only as a road to success but also to a kind of secular salvation. [...] The self becomes an antagonist with which one wrestles endlessly' (ibid: 90). This entails perhaps one of the biggest losses of all; the loss of oneself as a supportive companion and friend.

This resonates deeply with my own experience, from the very first project I have written, about my restless drive to perform and how harsh and strict I have been towards myself. It also resonates with my experience from coaching clients – such as Hugo, whom I write about in Project 2 and who was angry with himself for not being more effective as a sales consultant. Both my Israeli and American research peers confirm that it resonates strongly with them too, and their first projects are very similar to mine when it comes to the drive to achieve. There are powerful cultural narratives in play that seem to animate many of us to follow a similar performance pattern.

In my progression viva after having written Project 3, my examiner asked what drives me. I can now make much more sense of her question and see more of how my historical and cultural situatedness has impacted, and still impacts, both myself and many others to incessantly strive for achievement. And I can now say that I have experienced and seen several times how intensely seductive it can be to live up to our socially constructed ideals, and how hard it is to resist and to speak up against this tendency.

Silencing doubts and avoiding ambivalence and anxiety

The main narrative in Project 3 is from a board meeting where I tried to voice some of my concerns about our neuro-leadership concept. We had developed an impressive business case and strategy for the concept, and the marketing material was equally persuasive. The façade of well-polished plans was met with resounding applause in the board meeting; two board members even took

pictures of the one-page strategy as it was introduced by one of our employees. I found myself participating in the praise and applause, even after realizing that I was wondering what it was all about. When I raised my doubts about the concept later in the same board meeting, this was shut down by the Chair with very decisive body language and a firm voice; and I allowed my objections to be silenced. To make more sense of what was going on and why it was so difficult to talk about, I explored the relational dynamics first by drawing on Bion's (1961) work with groups, and then by looking into literature on power relations.

Exploring Bion's theory of basic assumptions

I found Bion's (1961) work on basic assumptions useful in making more sense of what was going on in our company, particularly reading about the basic assumption he called 'dependency'. A group where the dependency assumption is active behaves passively and expects the leader to be the one who solves the problems. This helped me make sense of the experience of 'deadness', lack of energy and motivation, and withdrawal in our company. In light of the theme of loss explored more deeply in project 4, this can also be symptoms of grief. Possibly we were sensing impending organisational death, or at least beginning to experience disappointment and loss of great expectations and ideals. According to Bion, a group may idealize the leader, and some highly ambitious leaders may fall for this and try to live up to their expectations. (Like me: I tended to internalize these expectations and blame myself for not living up to them.) Sooner or later the employees will be disappointed in their leader, and possibly also in themselves for being dependent, and this may lead the group members to 'attack' the leader and then search for a new one who is better equipped to fulfil their needs.

Gruman and Saks (2011) argue that contemporary challenges facing organisations have led many to focus attention on performance management, and that an important way to enhance performance in organisations is to focus on fostering employee engagement. One might argue that rather than focusing on how to foster engagement, it is helpful to make increased sense of why engagement is low. Bion's work (1961) is helpful here and so is the work of Neimeyer et al (2014) that I explore in project 4

In Project 3, I critiqued this psychoanalytical approach for its split between the inner and outer world, which is a defining characteristic of psychoanalytic thinking (Stacey 2003a). By focusing on a mind inside a body, psychoanalysis overlooks the historical, cultural, and relational context in which a human being finds themselves, and thus neglects power dynamics, which is also important to explore.

Exploring power and office politics in our company

Dalal (1998) draws on the work of Elias and Scotson (1994) when he argues that the use of ideology, praise, and stigma contributes to the status quo by maintaining power differentials. Dalal (1998) argues that when we espouse an ideology, we tend to describe some things or behaviours as ‘good’ and the opposite as ‘bad’. Praise is given to those who behave according to the ideal, and stigma to those who don’t. We influence inclusion and exclusion by praise or negative talk not only in public but also in shadow conversations, or what we call ‘gossip’. If we explain reputation as a socially constructed narrative about a person that we draw on as we try to make sense of our experience of this person, it is easy to see how a good reputation opens a different space of possibilities compared to a less good reputation. Gossip and stigmatization are thus used in the service of gaining power, limiting the opponent’s field of action:

Attaching the label of ‘lower human value’ to another group is one of the weapons used in a power struggle by superior groups as a means of maintaining their social superiority. In that situation, the social slur cast by a more powerful upon a less powerful group usually enters the self-image of the latter and, thus, weakens and disarms them. (Elias and Scotson 1994: xxi)

Reflecting on this, and reading the comments from my peers, I have come to the rather uncomfortable realization that the gossiping I have engaged in, venting frustrations about a perceived lack of initiative in my company, has contributed to the very same pattern of behaviour I was frustrated with: withdrawal and dependency. And in this, I was maintaining my power and status as a leader. It was not just ‘about them’ – it was co-constructed, and I played my own part in it.

According to Flyvbjerg (1998: 226),

Not only is knowledge power, but, more important, power is knowledge. Power determines what counts as knowledge, what kind of interpretation attains authority as the dominant interpretation. Power procures the knowledge which supports its purposes, while it ignores or suppresses that knowledge which does not serve it.

This is also what Foucault says in his work on power (Rabinow 1991). Referring to the narrative from the board meeting, what we could talk about in this meeting was the one-page strategy for our neuro-leadership concept. This was praised with applause, while doubts and worries were effectively shut down by an authoritative voice and decisive gestures of dismissal.

Concluding Project 3, I wrote that working for a noble cause can energize and inspire us to put in the extra effort needed to succeed. But at the same time, these extremely high ambitions – especially when combined with a culture where a courageous, positive, and energetic attitude are ideals, and where conflict is avoided because it is perceived as negative – close opportunities to deal

with disagreement, conflict, and disappointment in a constructive manner. All with the best of intentions.

Project 4 – An inquiry into the lived experience of a venture closure

When I first started to talk about the venture closure to my research peers, I initially framed it as a ‘failure’. Cope (2011) defines failure as ‘the termination of a business that has fallen short of its goals’, and this is how I experienced it. I had considered it my personal responsibility to ensure success – owing this to everybody else who had invested their time and effort in the company, believing in our cause. I had been willing to do ‘whatever it takes’, and both my business partner, Eric, and I had put a lot of hours and effort into our business, sometimes very close to exhaustion. In my first iterations of this project, I felt disappointed, sad, and angry. I was preoccupied with worry and regrets about what I/we could/should have done differently. Shepherd and Haynie (2011) propose that high levels of organisational identification in the face of failure is likely to result in the entrepreneur adopting a negative self-view.

In light of my research of grief as the negotiated sensemaking of loss I see the venture closure not simply as a failure. In some respect perhaps it was, but at the same time stopping that project when we did has enabled me to move on to more fulfilling work.

In the main narrative from our final board meeting, board member Gabriel came into our office beaming with smiles, giving both Eric and me a warm handshake and a hug. He immediately started to talk animatedly about how important it is to not lose momentum, how we must change course without losing speed and not dwell on the past. He said that ‘some people’ almost fall into a depression or leave projects or companies in anger. Letting go quickly and moving on was idealized, while responding with anger or sadness was disciplined by shaming. Our Chair arrived, full of superlatives to highlight all that we have achieved together – describing how we have style, elegance, trustworthiness, always deliver high quality, and are generous and warm. He concluded that the ending of our venture is not a failure, but a victory. When they left and we had closed the door behind them, Eric suggested that rather than questioning what just happened, we could take the positive feedback at face value and use it as a platform moving forward. I felt uncomfortable with all of this.

I started my inquiry by exploring the ideals evoked in this final board meeting. I asked which wider social trends they accord with, and how they influence our sensemaking and behaviour towards ourselves and each other during times of endings and loss. I explored the writings of Diamandis (Diamandis and Kotler 2014), a serial entrepreneur in Silicon Valley and co-founder of

Singularity University⁹ – a global community of entrepreneurs, investors, corporations, governments, and academic institutions aiming to create ‘a more abundant future for all’ through social impact projects. I looked at the role of positive psychology (Seligman 2013) and I explored the entrepreneurial self in neoliberalism (Scharff 2015).

In summary, what I found was the ideology of the heroic entrepreneur. This is the person who is knowledgeable, active and effective, courageous and willing to take risks; who learns from failure, and stays positive to maintain speed going forward. An entrepreneur belonging to the neoliberalist thought collective would be socialized to believe that she is her own master, that she should focus on always improving her knowledge and skills, that she should be active and effective, that she should be courageous and take risks, learn from failure, and stay positive. Any injuries or difficulties, she would hide in denial of vulnerability. By presenting ourselves as hard-working, we construct ourselves as entrepreneurial. ‘This construction simultaneously involves the repudiation of those who do not work hard and a lack of empathy if they do not achieve’ (Scharff 2015: 13).

Stigmatization of others thus becomes a way of constructing self in the image of the heroic entrepreneur. At times of success, this role can be very enjoyable. But when the highly ambitious goals are not met – or in times of difficulty, conflict, struggle and endings – maintaining this ideal façade can be suffocating and destructive. In keeping up appearances, injuries are hidden, vulnerability denied, blame projected on other people or self, and anger directed at other people or self who are considered ‘lazy’ or ‘depressed’.

This is highly resonant with the dominating story in our company, invoked in our last board meeting. We have all strived to be enthusiastic, hard-working, risk-taking, courageous, strong, and positive. In the act of performing his monologue, Gabriel was constructing himself as entrepreneurial through the rejection of ‘some people’ who show signs of depression or anger. His whole gesture is rather patronizing towards people who might experience grief or sadness about the ending of the venture, such as myself and perhaps also Eric. This might be why I felt uncomfortable. I certainly experienced grief and sadness, which perhaps could be construed as ‘depressed’. His monologue made it difficult to talk about this.

Reflecting on my own actions, I have stigmatized others too by complaining about a lack of initiative rather than confronting this directly. With intentions of being kind and not wanting to seem ungrateful, I have perhaps been unkind and self-serving also, construing my own sense of self according to the ideal of the heroic entrepreneur. This idealizing seems to conceal a range of human experiences and emotions such as grief, disappointment, regrets, and anger. Making more sense of

⁹ See <https://su.org/>.

these experiences could provide insights into processes of loss in organisations more broadly, so I turned to the field of bereavement studies.

Organisational death and bereavement

Marris (1974, 1996) argues that theories of grief and individual bereavement can be applied to understand responses to change and loss in organisational life. Shepherd (2003, 2004, 2009, 2014), a frequently cited contemporary within the field of entrepreneurship, draws extensively on psychological literature on grief and argues that the loss of a business may cause grief. Bell and Taylor (2011: 2) write that the term 'organisational death' has been used in studies of change through downsizing, mergers and acquisitions, leadership, site closure, and project or organisational failure.

If grief is a perfectly normal response to a lost valued attachment, then we need to understand the importance of attachments in our lives. To find out more, I turned to Ainsworth and Bowlby (1991), who are known for their attachment theory. They argue that how we understand and behave in close relations as adults is influenced by our very first experiences of attachment and close relations with our parents. We are habituated to ways of behaving in relations that matter to us:

Many of our most intense emotions arise during the formation, duration, disruption and renewal of attachment relationships. The formation of a bond is described as falling in love, maintaining a bond as loving someone, and losing a partner as grieving over someone. Similarly, threat of loss arouses anxiety and actual loss gives rise to sorrow; whilst each of these situations is likely to arouse anger. The unchallenged maintenance of a bond is experienced as a source of security and the renewal of a bond as a source of joy. (Bowlby, 2005/1979:154)

Bowlby states that such emotions, referring to the quote above, are usually 'reflections of the state of a person's affectional bonds' (ibid). This is worth paying close attention to. We have become accustomed to believing that emotions are contained within individuals and can be self-managed, while 'negative' emotions – such as anxiety, anger, and depression – are 'bad' or counterproductive, and should be avoided or at least contained. Bowlby concludes that anxiety or resistance over an unwilling separation from something or someone we value can be 'a perfectly normal and healthy reaction' (ibid: 159). This is in stark contrast to the approach taken with us by Gabriel.

Stage models of grief; working through grief in order to let go and move on

How we deal with grief in general in Western society has been greatly influenced by Kübler-Ross' (1973) 'stage model for grief'. Kübler-Ross introduced five different stages that individuals go

through before they have accepted death: from denial, through anger, resentment and blame, depression, and finally acceptance. Stage models of grief have been widely accepted by therapists and are commonly used to 'assist' the bereaved to 'progress' through the stages. An episode of US animated sitcom *The Simpsons* illustrates how pervasive this way of thinking is in our contemporary society.¹⁰

Introducing new perspectives on organisational death, loss and grief in the *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, Bell and Taylor (2011) present a stark critique to the continuing and uncritical use of stage models in organisational change research. They see the dominance of stage models of grief in understanding organisational death as due to a managerialist focus on grief as a problem to be solved, to be handled effectively 'to minimize its impact on organisational and employee performance' (ibid: 5). While stage models of grief may provide hope to people who experience grief (in that it is something they will eventually get through and they will find consolation), the individual focus on grief and the idealization of the resilient entrepreneur encourages individuals to take responsibility for dealing with the consequences and reactions to the endings and losses and discourages collective responsibility for the death of the organisation, or project, or department. The stage models of grief form a part of 'a dominant psychological discourse that serves to discipline people into appropriate behaviours', and to 'police the passionate emotions associated with loss through bereavement' (ibid: 5).

Reading the narrative again now, I increasingly find the gesture of Gabriel's speech highly patronizing. Bell and Taylor call for further research to understand how 'discursive demands to let go or move on may be resisted' (ibid: 5). I will get back to this in the concluding argument. First, I will reflect on insights from the theory of continuing bonds.

Continuing bonds and a social constructionist theory of grief

As mentioned in Project 4, the theory of continuing bonds was introduced into bereavement studies by Klass and colleagues in 1996, and over the last 20 years has become widely accepted in the field of loss and grief studies (Klass and Steffen 2018). The central message of the theory is that ongoing relationships with the deceased are normal, not pathological, and that the idea of 'finishing' grief is irrelevant. Grief is not a problem to be solved, or something to get over as quickly as possible, but an 'ongoing process in which people reorganize their lives following a significant loss' (Klass and Steffen 2018: 341). In our case, with our venture closure, this would mean *not* to let go and move on to the next project, but to make shared sense of our efforts together and to interweave this story into our

¹⁰ 'Homer goes thru all 5 Kubler-Ross stages in record time', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYN4ClIWuiM>

stories of who we are, our sense of self. But how can we do this if nobody wants to talk about it, when everyone is so keen to demonstrate their eagerness to move on?

Neimeyer and Dennis published an article in 2014 together with Klass, one of the authors of *Continuing Bonds*, where they argue for a social constructionist account of grief focusing on the narration of meaning. I have found this article tremendously helpful and have re-read it many times over the last year. It seems to trigger new insights each time I read it. The first time I read it, I was deeply moved by the opening story of a grandfather who lost both his son and grandson in a drowning accident, and his struggle to honour their lives and deaths and to restore a life of meaning that was devastated by the tragic loss. He didn't 'let go' at all but cherished their memories and rewrote 'the hoped-for script of his life in a changed family and a changed landscape of purposive action' (Neimeyer et al 2014: 486). I will come back to how my own hoped-for scripts and landscape of purposive action has changed over the last year when I write about contribution to knowledge and practice. In light of research methodology, I ask the reader to notice how reading someone's narrative and sensemaking can be helpful if it resonates.

Neimeyer et al sketch a social constructionist model of grief as a 'situated interpretive and communicative activity' (2014: 486). I have spent quite some time making sense of this single sentence. The way I understand this now is that mourning is forming and being formed by context, or situatedness; that it is a meaning-making process that is 'embedded in written, spoken and nonverbally performed exchanges with others'; and that it is an active process, not merely a series of states to be endured. The work of grief 'involves a reaffirmation or reconstruction of a world of meaning that has been challenged by loss, at social as well as individual levels, in a specific cultural and historical frame' (ibid).

Concluding Project 4, I made three assertions drawing on both Neimeyer's social constructionist model of grief and Stacey's perspective of organisations as complex responsive processes (i.e. Stacey 2003a) and I showed how together they offer a radically different understanding of what was going on during our venture closure in Norway than what the narrative of the heroic entrepreneur provides. The three assertions were:

32. Meaning and identity is negotiated and socially constructed.
33. The historical and relational situatedness is crucial to how we make sense of and deal with closure.
34. Emotions are signals in the network of human relations and central in the process of negotiating meaning and identity.

Meaning and identity is negotiated and socially constructed

What Stacey adds to Neimeyer's social reconstruction of *meaning* is how '*identity* emerges in the human communicative interaction' and how identity is 'an aspect of inclusion and exclusion and thus power relating' (2011: 328). We are making new sense not only of our experiences of a business closure, but also of who we are in this. Our identity is socially renegotiated. Stacey (2003a) shows how negotiation for meaning, which happens in conversational processes, is closely linked to our sense of self and our identity, and how deeply we are affected by threats to the continuation of identity. He argues that conversations with a transformative potential 'inevitably arouse anxiety at a deep existential level' (ibid: 80). No wonder the work of grief is 'typically deeply emotional' (Neimeyer et al 2014: 487).

If one senses a risk of being stigmatized due to failure, or socially annihilated, one might actively and strategically resist this by 'impression management' and by attributing failure to external causes to maintain a sense of self as a successful entrepreneur and businessperson. Kibler and colleagues (2017) have explored this, and their findings correspond to two impression management strategies outlined in the conceptual framework of Shepherd and Haynie (2011): denying responsibility and defining failure in a positive light. They argue that an assumption that has been adopted in impression management literature in general is that individuals take actions 'designed to bolster other's impression of them and maintain a positive self-identity' (ibid: 178) in response to threats to identity. In the same article, Shepherd and Haynie propose that with high levels of organisational identification (the more the entrepreneur has invested of himself or herself in the venture), there is a likelihood of adopting a negative self-view rather than engaging in impression management to maintain a strong sense of self.

Our Chair defined the venture closure as 'a victory, not a failure', and I engaged in self-blame. His response might be taken to be highly resilient and mine could possibly be explained as a 'depression'. What I find interesting is how these two are interconnected. The identity of successful and seemingly resilient entrepreneurs seems to be negotiated at the expense of others through stigmatization and an active closing down of competing alternative plausible stories. This could explain why highly resilient entrepreneurs don't seem to learn from failure (Shepherd 2013); it threatens their identity as successful entrepreneurs, so they actively resist participating in conversations and meaning reconstruction that might challenge their story of who they are.

My initial self-blame has changed through the process of my research, with a greater detachment and a richer understanding of the narratives in play. I believe I now have a more balanced view, where I can see more of how I have contributed to what emerged and how this may be framed as both a success and failure.

Historical, cultural, and relational situatedness (context) is crucial to how we make sense of endings

How we construe loss is also different in other parts of the world; the pathological approach to grief is a distinctly Western phenomenon (Klass and Steffen 2018). It is extraordinarily difficult to become aware of these cultural scripts and how they shape our experience, as I have addressed earlier in this project and in my previous project. Situated in a culture, we are embedded in the flow of events and relations in our lives. We develop habits of relating (Bowlby 1969, 1979) and the way we make sense of our experiences in relationships is highly influenced by our history of relations. Klass and Steffen (2018) argue that ‘cultural guidelines and meaning systems are deeply embedded in larger cultural narratives’ and warn that if we do not understand the different cultural frames, we risk imposing our own ‘unexamined frame on bereaved people who are using other frames’ (2018: 12).

Stacey (2003a: 54) argues that ‘the actions of individuals can only be understood in terms of their patterns of interdependence’. This is coherent with the argument of Klass and Steffen (2018) and together, they shed quite a critical light on the ideal that the individual experience of grief follows five universal stages and that people can be compared as to how effectively they move through their grieving processes and get on with their work. Drawing on Bowlby, Marris (1974/1986) also asserts the importance of paying attention to the relational context, or what he calls ‘patterns of attachment’:

[C]hanges which disrupt the specific patterns of attachment upon which anyone depends will disrupt their ability to experience life as meaningful, and plunge them into grief, however rational these changes may seem from the point of view of someone with other attachments. (Marris 1986/1974: ix; emphasis added)

Our tendency to ‘decontextualize’ or to ‘uproot’ each other and compare to an ideal way of grieving a loss is a way of policing each other and ourselves. If we don’t comply with the expected behaviour, we run the risk of being excluded or stigmatized, no longer belonging to the group. This ‘uprooting’ and policing of each other in constant comparison with ideals confirms and propagates those ideals, and thus contributes to the forming of the pattern. Understanding this tendency to uproot each other, and the importance of paying attention to embeddedness, would turn out to be very useful in making sense of and coping with endings in my experience of participating at the last DMan residential, as I describe at the end of this thesis.

Emotions are signals in the network of human relations and central in the process of negotiating meaning and identity

The struggle for meaning and identity, where we more or less knowingly impose our cultural frames on each other, is not a disembodied and rational affair. As Stacey points out, identity is ‘closely

interwoven with processes of anxiety, shame and panic' (Stacey 2011: 328). Anxiety signals danger (Hochschild 2012) and is a signal to seek attachment (Stacey 2003a). It is helpful to combine this with Neimeyer's view of the role of emotion in the process of reconstruction of meaning (Neimeyer et al 2006: 57);

[T]here is a temporal relationship between the distress of grief and meaning reconstruction activities ... [increased distress after loss acts as a] trigger engaging meaning reconstruction activities, and when these activities have served the purpose of alleviating the distress, they lose salience to the individual who is then able to move on to other activities and goals in her or his life.

The DMan has been a major part of my life for 10 years, and it has not been the continuous and linear process of learning and improvement that I assumed it would be. I have been formed and animated by dominating cultural narratives and have experienced, viscerally, the power of ideology and the social processes of praise and disciplining. The affective experience has at times been almost unbearable, but I can now see that this has been crucial to the learning. Reading about visceral experiences of grief and identity collapse is one thing; directly experiencing the intense anxiety that comes with the political processes of meaning and identity reconstruction, quite another.

Based on the work of Stacey and Neimeyer, the process of sensemaking and reconstruction or meaning and identity is a *social* and thus political one, and feelings of distress are an inevitable part of this process. Emotions of discomfort and grief keep triggering a continuous search for meaning, which goes on until new meaning is created in such a way that we are able to move on. Only then are we released from the emotional grip of grief. Where Shepherd (2013) argues that learning seems to happen when emotions change from negative to positive, I would argue that this is problematic as it seems to lead to a focus on managing emotions *before* being able to engage in learning activities.

I am making a case for renegotiating our public acceptance of, and capacity to stay with, emotions of grief and distress in the process of meaning-making, rather than hurrying to overcome them.

Conclusion to Project 4

I conclude Project 4 by arguing that resilient entrepreneurs who move on quickly live up to the heroic ideal, but in the process are sacrificing opportunities for learning – and keep perpetuating this discourse, in the interests of protecting the story of who they are; their identity. At the core of this approach is an intolerance and policing of grief. This intolerance was clearly demonstrated in our final board meeting, where the narrative of the heroic entrepreneur was evoked strongly together with the abjection of emotional responses to loss. Entrepreneurs who strongly identify with their

business, as I did, tend to internalize stigma as self-blame when the venture fails to live up to the expected goals. These dynamics together seem to close opportunities for learning and for collective responsibility for the ending, and they also seem to perpetuate the existing cultural narrative of the heroic entrepreneur.

Increasing our acceptance and tolerance of the distressing emotions associated with loss could allow us to work together to develop plausible accounts of our experience of it. This offers an opportunity to co-construct meaning in new ways, not only enabling us to move on with less stigma and greater dignity but also potentially transforming how we work together.

Reflecting on the use of Strategic Choice Theory

I wrote my two first projects, which is where I predominantly draw on Strategic Choice Theory more than ten years ago. At this time, I found Child's (1972) theory and the way it was taken up by Stacey (2016) incredibly resonant in making sense of what I was experiencing while attempting to manage change by implementing a strategy, or working as a coach to unfold individual potential. Strategic Choice Theory is built upon the theory of cybernetic systems and cognitivist theory of human behaviour (ibid.). It comes as no surprise then that I, educated as an engineer (cybernetics) and coach (cognitivist) found this very descriptive of how I was making sense of what I was doing at the time.

Strategic Choice Theory provides a partial and limited explanation of organisational change, focusing on the predictable and repetitive aspects of organisational life, which are indeed prominent and important, but not everything. There are many other theoretical perspectives for understanding change in organisations that challenge the linear view of Strategic Choice Theory. One example is through the lens of organisational psychodynamics in making sense of the surprising or disturbing experiences of unintended consequences of attempted change, which I draw on in Project 3. Another example is understanding the strategic development of organisations as arising in processes of learning and knowledge creation (i.e. Mintzberg 1994). And yet another is thinking about change from different systemic perspectives when attempting to make sense of ambiguity and uncertainty (i.e. Morgan 1997, Wheatly 1999). There are numerous of examples that challenge the rather simplistic explanations of Strategic Choice Theory. And still, it remains highly influential:

What is surprising, perhaps, is that despite the debate around it and the dubious evidence base for it, strategic choice theory continues to dominate most strategic management textbooks and features frequently in the ways in which practising managers talk about their organisation and its strategies (Stacey 2016: 97).

Critique of Complex Responsive Processes

Zhu (2007) examines mainstream complexity writings, present Stacey's work as a radical alternative and then offers a critical reading of Stacey. He concludes that mainstream management writers use complexity sciences to repackage the dominating control-paradigm, but he is also ambivalent to Stacey's wholesale condemnation and abandonment of systems thinking (p. 452). He writes that "I think his critique of systems thinking is less than open-minded, selectively ignorant and at times self-conflicting" (ibid.).

I entered the DMan program myself for the first time in 2007. When I joined for the second time in 2017, I experienced a much stronger emphasis on what a manager *can do* in the face of complexity, i.e. in Stacey's writings on practical judgement (Stacey 2012) than simply dismissing the dominating paradigm of systems thinking as unhelpful. There seems to be more of a balance between the rigorous and forceful theorizing and the concern for what is helping to make real, practical difference for managers.

What I believe is still underexplored, is the impact of gender, race, sexual preferences, disabilities or other triggers of potential stigmatization and marginalization on what emerges in the complex responsive processes of relating. The dominating voices are still those of middle-aged white men (dead or alive); sometimes homosexual but I have rarely seen this explicitly reflected upon in the program. Another is the role and impact of rituals and artefacts, or anything material more generally (poetry, art, architecture, music) in the complex responsive processes. Buildings are for example paradoxically formed by and forming relational dynamics and power struggles.

As previously stated, the perspective of organisations as complex responsive processes is built on four pillars, the process sociology or figurational studies of Norbert Elias being one of them. One of the most frequently heard criticisms of Elias' work, according to Goudsblom at the Norbert Elias Foundation¹¹, is that he concentrated on the secular upper strata and underrated especially the part played by especially religion in the forming of individual discipline and psychological makeup. In his work on the history of emotions, Boddice (2018) supports this critique of Elias, but argues that:

Even if we choose to discard Elias' theories about the ways in which such codes were appropriated, internalised and practised, the relationship between 'psychogenesis' and 'sociogenesis' – the central truth of his narrative – must stand: the way people feel is inherently tied to the way people practise (bodily and socially), and the way people practise is inherently tied to the prescriptions of the powerful (location 1936).

It is the 'central truth of his narrative', the forming and being formed, that I draw on.

¹¹ <http://norberteliasfoundation.nl/docs/pdf/GoudsblomDiscontents.pdf>

CONCLUSION and contribution to knowledge and practice

In the following, I will conclude my work that started more than 10 years ago. Working with ‘mystery as method’ (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011) or breakdown-oriented research (ibid), the aim of the research is not to fill a pre-identified gap in the research literature, but to take a pragmatic research stance and aim to increase the power to act in relation to an environment; ‘our understanding is not theoretical but aims at mastering a practical situation’ (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000: 83).

I did, however, perform a literature review, to get a sense of the discourses in contemporary research and literature around organisational death and failure and what is called for in further research (see review in Appendix 2). I found two main strands of thinking:

1. One thread that focuses on resilience, persistence, and confidence and how to cope effectively with failure to move on, influenced among others by Seligman’s (1998) work on learned optimism.
2. Another that focuses on gaining a richer understanding of the psychological, social, and interrelational costs of endings and of the process of learning and sensemaking as negotiated and relational.

My research critiques the first and contributes to the latter. I argue that the insistence on resilience, persistence, and confidence in order to ‘get on with it’ paradoxically seems to work against organisational change understood as shifts in existing power dynamics.

Researchers contributing to the discourse that focuses on the lived experience and sensemaking processes of failure call for further research on the narrative processes; ‘we need to explore the process by which entrepreneurs create plausible stories of business failure’ (Ucbasaran et al 2013). Cope argues that when it comes to learning from failure, ‘there remains a conspicuous paucity of academic studies that seek to articulate failure at the level of lived experience’ (Cope 2011: 604); and although entrepreneurial learning is increasingly seen as negotiated and relational (Cope 2011), how entrepreneurs react to and learn from failure is an understudied aspect of entrepreneurship (i.e. Yamakawa 2015; Walsh and Cunningham 2017; Cope 2011). More research is warranted to investigate the emotional responses to failure (i.e. Cope 2011; Shepherd 2013) and how this influences sensemaking and learning from failure.

My research contributes to knowledge by exploring the lived experience of a business closure, by inquiring into the power and politics in the struggle for the plausible accounts of the past and by showing the importance of taking the work of grief seriously for societal and organisational development.

Clarifying the arguments

In Western capitalist societies today, we are encouraged to be enthusiastic and passionate about our undertakings, because this inspires us to put in additional effort to achieve our goals and it has been shown to improve company performance and growth (Lee 1971; Ho et al 2011). Predominant ways of making sense of our experiences lead us to believe that we can achieve our pre-set goals only if we work hard enough and believe strongly enough. The assumed approach to achieve success and recognition is to release our full potential through continuous learning and improvement. The social trend of grandiosity (Alvesson and Gabriel 2016), in combination with the neoliberal ideal of the entrepreneurial self, seems to escalate this pattern to sometimes manic efforts to achieve unrealistic goals. Insecurities about an uncertain future provoke anxieties, but acknowledging the anxieties breaks with the entrepreneurial rhetoric – so they are avoided and concealed, driven by fears of social stigmatization for not being good enough and an urge to deny the ‘weakness’ of vulnerability. In the struggle for an identity that lives up to this ideal, stories about past difficulties construct the entrepreneurial self because they demonstrate that she or he has the capacities to tackle problems (Scharff 2015). Also, ‘the entrepreneurial subject configures itself through the rejection of that which it is not’ (Scharff 2015: 13). There is a tendency to blame, with a disdain for laziness, a repudiation of those who do not work hard, and little empathy for the hardship of others. With these grandiose expectations, life becomes an ‘endless quest for recognition from others’ (Sennett 1998: 105) and central to this endless quest is a more or less explicit rejection of otherness. We uproot each other from context, judging each other and ourselves against the ideal of the entrepreneurial self. We struggle to construct a coherent sense of self according to this ideal, and in attempting to do so we contribute to the perpetuation of the cultural narrative of the heroic entrepreneur.

When we have developed a great passion, purpose, and attachment to a cause or an ideal, and it has become an important part of our sense of self, the threat of loss can become severe. Threat of loss arouses anxiety, sometimes even panic (Stacey 2003a) and actual loss may trigger grief, while each of these situations is likely to arouse anger (Bowlby 1979). Anxiety and anger over the threat of an unwilling separation from something or someone we value is a perfectly normal and healthy reaction (ibid). In Western capitalist societies, however, there is little space for grieving in business and if experiences of loss are recognized, a managerialist focus on grief as a problem to be solved promotes letting go as a solution to loss. This is supported by a cultural orientation that splits life and death (with an avoidance of death), splits self and others, and portrays grief as an individual phenomenon – dividing positive from negative emotions, with an increasing intolerance of discomfort (Bell and Taylor 2011; Brinkmann 2018).

Any major ending in business, like venture or department closure or project failure, has been called organisational death, and theories of *individual bereavement* have been used to inform understandings of loss and grief at the *collective level* (Bell and Taylor 2011). Psychological stage models of grief dominate in literature on organisational change (ibid) and may provide comfort by normalizing it, for example as a process of natural stages. Such models also support the ideal of letting go with norms for grieving, allowing for a policing of grief with a disciplining (or sometimes even pathologizing) of 'inappropriate' grieving (which has gone on too long or been too openly expressed). They also encourage individuals to take responsibility for dealing with the consequences of organisational death, and thus discourage attribution of collective responsibility (ibid) and diminish or psychologize political resistance. In *Diagnostic Cultures* (2016), Brinkmann argues that we have witnessed the emergence of a culture where psychiatric diagnoses are utilized for more and more purposes; and defining grief as a psychiatric diagnosis is part of what Rimke and Brock (2012) call 'the shrinking spectrum of normalcy'.

During the past decade, research in the field of dying and bereavement has undergone a fundamental transformation (Klass et al 1996). Stage models of grief have been challenged by the theory of continuing bonds, which explores the complex and multiple ways people *maintain* relationships with the dead, or what is gone, in ways that evolve over time (Bell and Taylor 2011). The central message of the theory is that ongoing relationships with the deceased are normal, not pathological, and that the idea of 'finishing' grief is irrelevant. Grief is not a problem to be solved, or something to get over as quickly as possible, but an 'ongoing process in which people reorganize their lives following a significant loss' (Klass and Steffen 2018: 341). With continuing bonds, change and development is not a linear movement from past to future where we let go of the past, but a continuous process to make sense of our experience and of who we are. This has yet to find its way into mainstream literature on organisational change (Bell and Taylor 2011).

Neimeyer et al build on continuing bonds when he introduces a social constructionist account of grief as a 'situated, interpretive and communicative activity' (Neimeyer et al 2014: 486) that is 'typically deeply emotional' (ibid: 487). Meaning is negotiated, in a cultural context, as much between people as within themselves, because we need validation of our accounts from significant others as well as from ourselves.

Brinkmann (2018) takes up Tony Walter's (1999) claim that grief is a central mediator that connects past, present, and future in our lives and that it thus underlies the very constitution of society. '[I]f the dead are not integrated then society disconnects from its own past and ultimately from itself' (Walter 1999: 20). Brinkmann (2018: 9) argues that grief is fundamental to the

constitution of society and that ‘we should expect much struggle and power politics when the discussion becomes concrete about who should be mourned and how’.

Sensemaking predicts a more favourable coping with loss, ‘with fewer symptoms of complicated grief’ (Neimeyer et al 2014: 488) – and Neimeyer argues that sufficient sense is made either by assimilation of loss, which is an ‘alteration of situational appraised meaning to better align with global meaning’ (ibid: 490), or accommodation of loss, which is ‘the evolution of global meanings to better incorporate situational ones’. Neimeyer splits individual processes of change from social processes of change in his argument.

I argue that the relationship between individual and organisation is paradoxical in that they are forming and being formed by each other (Stacey and Mowles 2016; Elias 1987) and that:

Assimilation and accommodation of loss are *the same process*, and the change or evolution of meaning *and* identity *is* organisational change.

Post-traumatic growth, wisdom, and the paradox of continuing bonds

Continuing bonds are paradoxical: there is a coexistence of past and present, life and death, presence and absence. Engaging with paradoxes requires dialectical thinking, described as ‘the ability to recognize and work effectively with contradictions’ (Daloz et al 1996: 120). If you are able to hold the paradoxes and work through the contradictions of a loss, you may experience significant growth described as ‘having attained some degree of wisdom’ (Klass and Steffen 2018: 33), where ‘wisdom’ is theorized as two aspects of ‘knowing’ – a cognitive and intellectual component with the ability to think dialectically and an affective, experiential component. Through the process of weaving the loss into the life story, the bereaved individual may begin to experience one or more domains of post-traumatic growth – ‘a greater appreciation of life, developing closer relationships with others, having a greater sense of personal strength, identifying new opportunities, and experiencing spiritual growth’ (Klass and Steffen 2018: 33). One could argue that finding meaning and purpose, and a greater sense of agency and engagement – what seems to increasingly be missing in contemporary organisational life (Ho et al 2011) – are the same; and that rather than focusing on how to foster engagement and passion in organisations, it makes more sense to accommodate loss by taking the work of grief seriously.

Implications for disruptive change management

When those who have power to manipulate changes act as if they have only to explain, and, when their explanations are not at once accepted, shrug off oppositions as ignorance or prejudice, they express a profound contempt for the meaning of lives other than their own. For the reformers have already assimilated these changes to their

purposes, and worked out a reformulation which makes sense to them, perhaps through months or years of analysis and debate. If they deny others the chance to do the same, they treat them as puppets dangling by the threads of their own conceptions. (Marris 1974/1986: 155)

Marris' words here are quite provocative, which might be warranted in response to the prevailing discursive demands to let go and move on. Facilitating post-traumatic growth is a delicate process that 'requires a sensitivity to listening to the story of the bereaved person, especially understanding who the deceased person was and what relationship the bereaved person had to the deceased' (Klass and Steffen 2018: 37); and one might argue the same for 'post-disruptive growth' in organisations and society. The ability to hold paradoxes, and the capacity and sensitivity to stay with emotional distress and unease to listen to the negotiated stories of sensemaking, is at the heart of the DMan programme and of the perspective of organisations as complex responsive processes of relating. As leaders and consultants involved in what we may call 'disruptive change' involving 'organisational death', I conclude that we need to:

3. Increase our ability to tolerate the anxiety and distress that comes with meaning and identity reconstruction
4. Become aware that impatiently promoting 'letting go' can be tyrannical, and focusing on 'the silver lining' or 'fostering engagement' without accommodating loss can be insensitive and highly offensive
5. Practice becoming a fully present listener, and resist the temptation to impose our own frame of understanding onto another's experience
6. Resist discursive demands to let go and move on when appropriate
7. *In summary*: Exercise practical judgement in meeting the challenge of complexity (Stacey 2012: 107).

Crystallized

Assimilation and accommodation of loss are the same process and the change or evolution of meaning and identity *is* organisational change.

Accommodation of loss implies (1) awareness of social embeddedness, processes of political and highly impassioned negotiation for meaning and identity, tendencies to police grief and defend against anxiety; (2) capacity to endure the bodily felt expressions of grief such as anger, anxiety, and depression; and (3) ability to resist discursive demands to let go and move on when appropriate.

Put short, I am making a case for renegotiating our public acceptance of, and capacity to stay with, emotions of grief and distress in the process of meaning-making, rather than hurrying to overcome them.

Publication and contribution to practice

I have published one article from my research (Askeland 2009) in the Routledge journal, *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*. This has been cited in several articles and books, including the *SAGE Handbook of Coaching* (Bachirova et al 2017). I have recently been invited to co-author an article together with a faculty member at Oxford Saïd Business School, where I am now one of six tutors on the Oxford Strategic Leadership Programme that runs twice annually. During the week of the programme, I participate in numerous conversations with senior executives from very diverse sectors and geographical areas. Listening in to the themes of the conversations, I try to help participants notice the negotiations for meaning that are going on and challenge the discourse when I consider this appropriate and potentially helpful. I also currently do the session on complexity and leadership in this programme, where I take the perspective of organisations as complex responsive processes. The first time I did this was together with Chris Mowles, the program director of the DMan. The way he performed his role allowed me to take centre stage which gave me the opportunity to do the session on my own the next time.

I am exploring an opportunity to work with the Oxford Praxis Forum, a research centre established to develop knowledge for action through experiential work with global leaders. The current intention is to establish groups of senior executives and work together with leadership challenges based on the DMan methodology, establishing a reflexive practice with mystery as method (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011) and I have been invited to guest lecture for the Master's course in Organisational Development and Leadership at the University of Agder in Norway, where I will also be the external examiner.

Having closed my own company, I now work with a Norwegian foundation focusing on leadership and organisational development. We have consultants helping clients in crisis and conflict and I hope to contribute here emphasising the importance of recognizing our own and each other's

struggles and doing the work of grief together. An example of how my practice has changed from the heroic accomplisher to more relationally focused is from the very first meeting with my new colleagues. I had been asked to prepare a presentation of my research. I noticed how tempting it was to make a polished presentation and try to impress to come across as accomplished. But instead I chose to ask them for help. I was in the process of working with my concluding arguments above and I was struggling to make it clear enough. So, I took the opportunity to share what I had with my colleagues, which was unfinished and unpolished. I experienced this as risky, because I was making myself vulnerable and because they were new relations. Experiencing my colleagues' different responses to my arguments helped me focus and become clearer. After the meeting one of my new colleagues sent me a text message complimenting me for my approach – which made our relation a bit stronger already. I am more aware of how these relational bonds are in constant movement and sometimes need renegotiations.

In life and work in general, I find that I am becoming more of an activist, opposing what seem like insidious demands to remain positive and resilient – and that I am becoming more able to argue against this, sometimes even fiercely, based on my own research. This way, I am voicing an alternative to the dominating narrative of the heroic entrepreneur when I find it appropriate to do so.

ENDING NARRATIVE

The last DMan residential (written in April 2019)

As I locked myself into room 46 for my last DMan residential, I felt fine. A lot had happened over the last 3 months. At the previous residential I had been devastated, as my marriage had dramatically ended when I was there. I travelled home knowing I would have to turn my life around – find a place to live, find a job, and try to breathe some life into a self-confidence that had withered away to an undetectable level. There had been too much change going on in my life over the last year and although I was beginning to make more sense of it, the loss of my marriage hit me like a seismic shock.

Referring to ‘a collapse of identity’ sounds so abstract and rational. Returning for my last residential, the experience of a shattered sense of self had taught me just how serious this is – with physical exhaustion, high levels of anxiety, loss of sleep, panic attacks and nightmares, and an incessant rumination and manic thinking to make sense of what was going on. Now, as I sat down at the desk in my hotel room and looked at the green tree outside my window, I felt thankful. I really *had* turned my life around; the bonds to close friends and family had grown to thicker branches in the process, and my self-confidence was gradually increasing. The manic thinking and incessant preoccupation with my own situation had calmed down. This was on the Friday before the programme started.

On Saturday morning, a colleague opened the conversation in the community meeting by sharing that she had lost her mother to Alzheimer’s disease. I wanted to show compassion, and at the same time share some of the insights I had found helpful from my research and experience. This is when it started: I gradually turned into a ghost. It was as if people didn’t want me to talk. I became acutely aware of feeling like an outsider. Nobody told me directly to ‘get on with it’, but learned from the ‘shadow conversations’ that someone thought I talked too much. People seemed to avoid me and look away. A member of my learning set had his last residential this time, and he did an eloquent presentation of his work and received applause for it. He got a lot of compliments for his work, and people listened to what he said and referred to his wise words. I noticed feeling very conflicted. On the one hand, I really care about my colleague – he is not only extraordinarily brilliant, but also a lovely person who deserves all the recognition he can get. On the other hand, I was feeling envy, and guilt for feeling envy. I became preoccupied with my own thinking and withdrew, which made me even more of a ghost. This continued into the Sunday, and when one of my peers asked how I was doing I responded, ‘Fine’.

The learning set meeting started after lunch. I obsessed over a ‘missing piece’ in my research until my supervisor stopped me and asked what was going on. My peers wondered too. They were

all prepared to engage with making sense of what was happening. One of them said she had thought of me as a ghost that day – fading out into the background, disappearing. And she didn't want me to just disappear out of the programme. She had tears in her eyes, and I was deeply moved both by her concern and by the care from my peers and supervisor. We tried to make sense of what had happened over the weekend. It is difficult and delicate to talk about endings and loss – we tend to avoid it and withdraw. It is easy to look the other way, something most mourners have probably experienced. This seems to make the mourner or the one talking about grief invisible – a ghost. My peers in my learning set praised me for my work and persistence, and I started to become more socially visible again. It impacted how I thought about myself. They thanked me, and again I felt moved. My peer who had presented his work and received applause told us he'd felt embarrassed for all the recognition and wanted me to be recognized as well. My peers and supervisor asked if it would be helpful to talk about this publicly in the community meeting next morning. This is of course always a risk, because one never knows what might happen. It could become a mess. But I knew I had to. I wouldn't be able to live with myself having done my work on endings, loss, and grief without taking the opportunity for social reconstruction of meaning in the very last community meeting. My supervisor joked gently that I might want to consider wearing something more colourful at the community meeting. I noticed I was wearing all black, as though attending a funeral.

I wore red shoes next morning. At the community meeting, I sat next to the programme director at the front of the room and opened the meeting by asking for help to make sense of the weekend. I said it might get messy. I was open about my conflicting thoughts, about worrying that I'd take up space for others, about how hard it is to talk about grief, about how the whole DMan community had been my rock during a very difficult time in my life – so that this ending was another loss to me. I talked about feeling envious of the applause and attention my peer had received, while at the same time wishing him all the best; about how I had compared myself, and felt that I somehow should be calm and collected and not in the mess I felt I was in; and about how I had withdrawn, but at the same time was aware of the unhelpful tendency to 'uproot' each other and ourselves and compare against ideals.

Then, what happened had an extraordinary impact on my sense of self, my rumination, and my emotions. My peers started to find *their own struggles* in my story. It resonated for many. Making sense of it was helpful not just for me, but for many. It opened new spaces to talk about what had not been said before. I was given recognition not only for my work, but for who I had been as a participant in the programme. It meant the world to me. I felt connected, I felt appreciated, I felt accomplished. The rumination stopped, and I no longer felt anxious.

As I locked the door to room 46 the next morning to check out and leave for the airport, it struck me that I will turn 46 a few weeks after my DMan viva. I took a photo of the number, as a keepsake to remind me of this room, this weekend and the social nature of my final status as I leave the program. Although I know I will become entangled in new figurations and that there will be new losses, this experience is now an important part of who I am, and the bonds will continue.

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Appendix 1: Contemporary research on responses to failure

To get an overview of the current research on business endings, loss and grief, I searched the titles, keywords and abstracts at Scopus for the following keywords; 'organisation', 'enterprise', 'entrepreneur', 'new venture' AND 'disruption', 'ending', 'failure', 'closure', 'loss', 'bankruptcy', 'insolvency', 'liquidation', 'death' AND 'bereavement' or 'grief'. This resulted in 84 documents. As a comparison, the combination 'enterprise' and 'failure' yielded over 7.500 documents, mainly published after the financial crisis 2007/8 with the dominating focus on technology, economics and decision science according to Scopus search result analysis. Of the 84 documents concerning loss and grief in business, more than half was published after 2014 and 18 of them in the Journal of Business Venturing. Seemingly the interest in endings, failure and the response to this is strongest within entrepreneurship. Going through the 84 documents, I kept articles discussing the keywords in enough detail, focusing on the consequences of failure rather than the causes and that related to individual responses rather than company level consequences.

This search and review have given a first sense of what goes on in the academic field of organisational death. There are roughly two strands of thinking; one that focuses on resilience, persistence and confidence and how to cope effectively with failure, influenced amongst others by Seligman's (1998) work on learned optimism. Arguments here are that confidence and even overconfidence can create positive emotions that facilitate resilience by decreasing the emotional cost of failure (Ucbasaran et al 2013: 180). And another strand that focuses on gaining a richer understanding of the psychological, social and interrelational costs of endings and of the process of learning and sensemaking as negotiated and relational. My research critiques the first and contributes to the latter. In the following I will give a brief overview of both strands and show where my own research is situated in the current debate.

Resilience, persistence and confidence – getting on with it

Corner et al (2017) in New Zealand explore the emotional and psychological functioning of entrepreneurs after venture failure, focusing on the resilience of the entrepreneur defined as a stable functioning over time, despite traumatic events. They conclude that their findings 'challenge the assumption that recovery is required after venture failure' (ibid: 687) and that the majority of the 11 entrepreneurs in their study show resilience through stable levels of functioning. They have used a qualitative, narrative research design based on two-hour interviews beginning with the open question 'Can you tell me the story of your business and how it failed?'. They argue that the interviews ensure thick descriptions of participant experiences and that the responses to the opening question usually provide the comprehensive evidence needed to address the research

question (693). In my argument for research methodology, I assert the importance of thick descriptions as well, but I also argue that the researcher can never be an external observer, and this problematizes the use of interviews to gather data to generate thick descriptions.

Referring to Shepherd's (2003) suggestion that failure is akin to the loss of a loved one, Corner et al (2017: 688) are surprised at the lack of research investigating resilience in the context of venture failure. In his more recent work, Shepherd (2015) argues that it is the movement from negative to more positive emotions that facilitates learning and that resilient behaviour with mild or no emotional disruptions rather inhibits learning. I find it interesting that Corner et al refer to his early work, rather than his later research to build their argument for the importance of resilience and I argue against this 'stable functioning despite traumatic events' and the dismissal of needed recovery after failure based on my own research.

Hayward et al (2010) from the areas of business and psychology in the United States and Australia have published in the *Journal of Business Venturing*. The article outlines why highly confident entrepreneurs are better positioned to start and succeed with new business and therefore why overconfidence persists amongst entrepreneurs. They argue that greater grief intensifies negative thoughts and produces ruminations or 'passive and repetitive thoughts about one's distress' (ibid: 572). Drawing on amongst others Seligman's (1998) work on learned optimism, they argue that more confident entrepreneurs will experience greater emotional resilience from failed ventures and greater social support from founding team members and through this be better positioned to succeed with new business. The paper 'offers a framework by which more confident entrepreneurs are better able to emotionally, cognitively, socially and financially recover from their failed ventures' (ibid: 575) and thus more likely to form subsequent ventures. The aim here is quick recovery to move on to form new ventures.

Zhu et al (2018) from business and management schools and universities in China, US, Germany and Australia incorporate psychological ownership theory and adversity literature to examine the joint effect on entrepreneurial persistence. Using both experiments and a survey, they argue that psychological ownership to the venture is more relevant to persistence in times of high adversity. Psychological ownership is defined as 'the feeling that the ownership target, or part of it, is 'mine' and can be developed by investing oneself in the target of ownership, which then becomes an extension of self (Pierce et al 2001, 2003). Psychological ownership is thus connected to self-identity. In implications for practice, Zhu et al (2018) introduce a dilemma. On the one hand, strong psychological ownership and self-identification with the venture can help overcome difficulties as it increases persistence. But on the other hand, entrepreneurs with weak psychological ownership are more willing to exit a venture and let go in high adversity. This 'suggests that some entrepreneurs

may need to learn to distance themselves from their ventures' (ibid: 162). Referring to Shepherd et al (2009) they suggest separating venture failure from personal failure. The conclusion here seems to be to not take failure and loss personal, to let go through distancing and to move on.

Kibler et al (2017) from business schools and universities in Finland, Germany and UK, focus on impression management strategies following venture failure and conclude that the most effective strategy to minimize the risk of social stigmatization is a distancing from the failure and an attribution to external factors that are not under the entrepreneur's control (p. 145). Their findings correspond to two impression management strategies outlined in the conceptual framework of Shepherd and Haynie (2011): '*denying responsibility and defining failure in a positive light*' (Kibler et al 2017: 146). Drawing on Cope (2011) and Shepherd et al (2015), Kibler et al (2017: 146) theorize a lack of learning opportunities as a potential drawback of impression management strategies based on distance-taking.

Making sense of failure and loss

Ucbasaran et al (2013) have performed an extensive literature review of research that explores how entrepreneurs make sense of and learn from failure. They have developed a research agenda for future research and emphasise that 'we need to explore further the process by which entrepreneurs create/generate plausible stories of business failure' (ibid: 195). When it comes to entrepreneurial learning from failure, 'there remains a conspicuous paucity of academic studies that seek to articulate failure at the level of lived experience and ground theoretical discussions in rich qualitative accounts' (Cope 2011: 604). This can be a 'daunting prospect', according to Cope, due to fears of stigmatization and because one must 'face one's own culpability'.

Many of the articles explore the link between how the entrepreneurs explain the causes of failure (internal or external factors) and learning or motivation to start a new business venture (Kibler et al 2017; Walsh & Cunningham 2017; Mandl et al 2016; Eggers & Song 2015; Yamakawa et al 2015; Cardon et al 2011). There is a growing number of theorists critiquing the dominant perspective of the entrepreneur as a monadic learner, according to Cope (2011). Entrepreneurial learning is increasingly seen as a negotiated and relational process (ibid: 606). There has also been a movement from seeing failure as a more isolated event to a complex process with an accompanying 'learning journey' of sense-making (McGrath, 1999) and there is movement from a dominating antifailure bias towards an interest in what we can learn from failure (Cope 2011).

Yamakawa et al (2015) also argue that how entrepreneurs react to and learn from failure is an understudied aspect of entrepreneurship and similarly Walsh and Cunningham (2017) assert that 'there remains a dearth of research conducted at the individual level' to explore how the way

entrepreneurs explain failure influences future action and the likelihood of venturing again. Shing et al (2015) calls for more research on how stigmatization affects entrepreneur's actions, behaviours and decisions during and after failure. Cotterill works at the department of engineering at Cambridge in United Kingdom. Employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis with interviews, he explores habitual entrepreneurs' (USA, UK and Germany) attitude to failure and how this might influence learning and identification of new opportunities (Cotterill 2012). Amongst entrepreneurs from Silicon Valley there were recurring themes of toughness, tenacity and persistence with an emphasis on trust and learning through failure. 'However, the American interviewees shared with the other countries the intensity of the failure experience, its damaging impact on personal and family relationships, and the potential for learning from such intensity' (ibid: 110). In contrast with Corner et al (2017), Cotterill (2012) concluded that 'the emotional intensity of failure provides a stimulus for reflection and further knowledge acquisition' (ibid:106).

The late Jason Cope at the Hunter Centre for Entrepreneurship performed an in-depth phenomenological study with eight entrepreneurs who had directly experienced failure. He built on theories of grief recovery and illustrated that recovery from failure is not only about overcoming the financial and emotional loss but also the 'interwoven relational costs' (Cope 2011: 604). Cope defined failure as 'the termination of a business that has fallen short of its goals' (605) and argued that entrepreneurship theory often reflects an antifailure bias. The emotional and social cost of failure was emphasised by all the participants and Cope described in his article the emotions of failure as 'raw and painful' (613). Participants describe extreme levels of anxiety, feelings of guilt and physical exhaustion. Emotions of failure can 'exacerbate a sense of loneliness, heightened anxiety and increasing withdrawal due to an inability to share concerns with others' (611). The negative emotional impact of failure is inextricably linked to its complex social cost (611) - with strain on business relations, but also on personal and family relations. Cope concluded that there is a need for a richer understanding of how and what entrepreneurs learn from failure, in particularly the 'recuperative' process of recovering and moving on from failure.

Cope (2011) argued that Shepherd (2003, 2004, 2009, 2011, 2014, 2015) has been instrumental in clarifying that entrepreneurs need to overcome the loss of their venture and engage in grief recovery before they can learn from failure. Shepherd writes on entrepreneurship and is influential in the field, frequently cited in articles in management and entrepreneurial journals. Shepherd draws extensively on psychological literature on grief and argues that the loss of a business can cause grief. In his later research on how entrepreneurs make sense of business failure, he has explored the relation between emotions and sensemaking and concludes that individuals

who display the greatest resilience reported little sensemaking about their failure experience, whereas entrepreneurs starting out with high negative emotions followed by high positive emotions 'resulted in a cognitive process that facilitated sensemaking' (Shepherd 2015: 396). Shepherd welcomes research on ambivalent emotional responses to failure and the exploration of how ambivalent entrepreneurs make sense of their failure experiences (ibid: 397).

Mantere et al (2013) from schools of economics, communication and business in Finland and France examine how organisational stakeholders use narratives in their psychological processing of venture failure. They identify a range of 'narrative attributions', alternative accounts of failure, and argue that venture failure is a complex social construction and that different stakeholders construct failure in distinctively different ways (ibid: 459). Referring to Cardon et al (2011) as the initiators of research on entrepreneurial failure narratives, Mantere continues the exploration and argue that narratives are culturally available means for making sense of and dealing with failure. And since explanations of failure are affected by the social role of the actor, different stakeholders can be expected to use different types of narratives to explain the failure and cope with the implications (Mantere 2013: 459). They conclude that 'entrepreneurial failure involves a variety of narrative types which serve specific functions in making sense of and coping with failure' (460).

Singh et al (2015) from business, law and management schools in New Zealand take a narrative approach to investigate entrepreneur's personal experience of stigma associated with venture failure. They find that stigmatization is best viewed as a dynamic process rather than a label and that it begins before, not after, failure and contributes to venture demise. Further, the stigmatization ultimately triggered epiphanies or deep personal insights for the 12 entrepreneurs involved in the study, realizations about 'how they had contributed to their firm's failure through ego-based thinking and behaviour' (ibid: 151) and these insights transformed the view of failure from very negative to a positive life experience. It is this transformation that results in entrepreneurs distributing learning from failure to new ventures, even when ventures are not their own (150). This is coherent with Shepherd's recent findings (Shepherd 2015) that learning occurs with a shift from negative to positive emotions.

Exploring stigma themes, Singh et al (2015) find that during the anticipation of failure there was self-stigmatization amongst the entrepreneurs in the form of self-blame, with a continuous application of negative labels and descriptions to themselves. But 'although we report entrepreneurs' perceptions, this theme conveys social stigmatization because it indicates expectation of treatment by others' (ibid: 156). Identified behaviour to avoid stigma and 'loss of pride', to save face and protect ego; delaying decision to end the venture, covering up and even telling lies about the fact that the venture is at serious risk, even to close family, hiding vulnerability

and avoiding seeking help. 'Entrepreneurs also tended to shun personal relationships thereby missing out on social support when they faced the potential failure of their ventures' (157). 'Past studies suggest that entrepreneurs distance themselves socially after the failure of their ventures (Cope 2011; Singh et al 2007) but current findings suggest that this distancing begins before actual failure' (ibid: 157).

Using a qualitative approach with 21 serial entrepreneurs, Walsh and Cunningham (2017) from business schools in Spain and UK examine attributions for failure, responses to failure and learning from failure. They find that the entrepreneur's attributions affect their responses to the failure, which in turn affects their learning. 'When failure is primarily attributed to internal factors, the entrepreneur's response is affective, leading to deep, personal learning about oneself. External attributions (both firm level and market level) result in a primarily behavioural response, with learning focussed on the venture, and networks and relationships. Those primarily attributing failure to hybrid factors have a largely cognitive response and they learn about venture management' (ibid: 688).

Yamakawa and Cardon (2015) examine how failure ascriptions, or attributions for failure, impact perceptions of learning for entrepreneurs who have chosen to venture again in Japan. Their results suggest that, 'in particular, internal unstable failure ascriptions appear to enhance learning, especially when shorter time is taken to restart, while failure ascriptions to external stable sources alone and especially when combined with abandoning the domain of the failed venture appear to deteriorate such learning' (ibid: 817). They encourage additional research in this area. In another article, Yamakawa et al (2015) explore the question of how previous entrepreneurial failure influences future entrepreneurship and under what conditions the entrepreneurs who rebound from failure do better second time around. They draw on cognitive literature in attribution and motivation and their data is collected from a survey of over 200 new-venture founders with business failure experiences conducted in 2001 in Japan. They argue that what entrepreneurs 'learn about themselves from their reflection on internal attribution is more readily transferable and is more likely to impact subsequent venture growth - as opposed to some venture-specific knowledge that is likely to be associated with external attribution of failure but less transferable and applicable to the new venture' (ibid: 213).

The 27 articles – an overview

Of the 27 articles, I have written a short summary of the ones I was able to access, in total 18 articles.

Cardon et al (2011) – ‘Misfortunes or Mistakes? Cultural sensemaking of entrepreneurial failure’

Cardon, Stevens and Potter work at three different business schools in the United States and examine cultural views of venture failure through the lens of sensemaking in their article. They argue that several studies have examined what might enhance success and mitigate failure of new ventures, but that few have explored how the involved make sense of the failures that occur.

They found regional differences in the allocation of blame for failure, with Silicon Valley viewing failure as more misfortune driven, whereas Chicago, New York and Washington tended to attribute failures to entrepreneurial mistakes.

Cope (2011) – ‘Entrepreneurial learning from failure: IPA’

The late Jason Cope at the Hunter Center for Entrepreneurship, University of Strathclyde performed an in-depth phenomenological study with eight entrepreneurs who have directly experienced failure. He built on theories of grief recovery and illustrated that recovery from failure is not only about overcoming the financial and emotional loss but also the ‘interwoven relational costs’ (604). Cope defines failure as ‘the termination of a business that has fallen short of its goals’ (605) and argues that entrepreneurship theory often reflects an antifailure bias.

The emotional cost of failure was emphasised by all the participants and Cope describes in his article the emotions of failure as ‘raw and painful’ (613). Participants describe extreme levels of anxiety, feelings of guilt and physical exhaustion. Emotions of failure can ‘exacerbate a sense of loneliness, heightened anxiety and increasing withdrawal due to an inability to share concerns with others’ (611). The negative emotional impact of failure is inextricably linked to its complex social cost (611) - with strain on business relations, but also on personal and family relations.

Cope describes the recovery from failure as a ‘gradual healing process’ (613) that consists of three interconnected learning components; 1) a temporal and psychological distancing from the failure in order to heal; 2) determined and mindful attempt to make sense of the failure and; 3) moving on and pursuing other opportunities. The components are interrelated and help the entrepreneur to ‘gain constructive closure over a painful chapter of his or her life’ (615). Cope understands recovery as ‘inextricably linked to the communal context in which the

entrepreneur is embedded' and argues that 'rehabilitative sense-making can be aided by social reparation' (615). This provides a more social view of recovery from failure.

The negative experiences of failure appeared more pronounced for the one single female participant, who 'clearly seemed to experience higher levels of anxiety and depression than the other participants, but also felt completely isolated and unable to turn to others for support' (619).

Identified gaps in current literature

Having reviewed key contributions to understanding recovery and learning from failure, Cope concludes that it appears 'almost axiomatic' that learning occurs in relation to failure (606) but that 'there remains a conspicuous paucity of academic studies that seek to articulate failure at the level of lived experience and ground theoretical discussions in rich qualitative accounts' (604). Exploring the lived experience of failure can be a 'daunting prospect' (608) due to fears of stigmatisation and because one must face one's own culpability and this might provide some explanation of the appointed research gap. He concludes that 'failure warrants a much more prominent position in discussions of entrepreneurship' (620).

Corner et al (2017) – 'Entrepreneurial resilience and venture failure'

Corner et al in New Zealand explore the emotional and psychological functioning of entrepreneurs after venture failure, focusing on the resilience of the entrepreneur defined as a stable functioning over time, despite traumatic events. They conclude that their findings 'challenge the assumption that recovery is required after venture failure' (687) and that the majority of the 11 entrepreneurs in their study show resilience through stable levels of functioning.

Corner et al have used a qualitative, narrative research design based on two-hour interviews beginning with the open question 'Can you tell me the story of your business and how it failed?'. They argue that the interviews ensure thick descriptions of participant experiences and that the responses to the opening question usually provide the comprehensive evidence needed to address the research question (693).

Referring to the early work of Shepherd (2003) where he argues that negative emotions interfere with learning, they argue that 'resilience implies more mild emotional disruptions [...]. As a result, entrepreneurs may learn more than previously anticipated' (703).

Identified gaps in current literature:

Referring to Shepherd's (2003) suggestion that failure is akin to the loss of a loved one, they are surprised at the lack of research investigating resilience in the context of venture failure (688).

Cotterill (2012) – ‘Entrepreneurs’ response to failure in early stage tech ventures’

Cotterill works at the department of engineering at Cambridge in United Kingdom. Using a qualitative approach with interviews, he explores habitual entrepreneurs’ (USA, UK and Germany) attitude to failure and how this might influence learning and identification of new opportunities. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is employed in the gathering and analysis of interview-based case studies to reveal emergent trends.

Amongst entrepreneurs from Silicon Valley there were recurring themes of toughness, tenacity and persistence with an emphasis on trust and learning through failure. ‘However, the American interviewees shared with the other countries the intensity of the failure experience, its damaging impact on personal and family relationships, and the potential for learning from such intensity’ (35).

In the UK the perception of others in the social network was important, suggestive of a social construct of failure. The interviewees also drew analogies to grief when talking about recovering from the failure. In Germany, fear of failure seemed to be more prominent, with the role of stigma regarded as important and with a stronger pronounced likelihood of exiting the entrepreneurial world post-failure.

In contrast with Corner et al (2017), Cotterill concluded that ‘the emotional intensity of failure provides a stimulus for reflection and further knowledge acquisition’ (106). Cotterill proposes a conceptual model of how to analyse failure, hoping that it may contribute to improved preparedness of new entrepreneurs.

Eggers and Song (2015) – ‘Dealing with failure: Serial entrepreneurs and the cost of changing industries between ventures’

Eggers and Song work at New York University and Central University of Finance and Economics and explore behavioural concepts on attribution and learning from failure. In their article published in the Academy of Management Journal they theorize that serial entrepreneurs whose previous venture failed are likely to blame external factors and thereby change industries rather than change aspects of their previous business such as leadership, strategy, decision-making or planning style. This is ‘costly in that it invalidates potentially useful industry experience’ (1785) and often results in lower performance in the subsequent venture (1799). This is based on datasets from a survey of Chinese entrepreneurs as well as from American venture-capital backed start-ups.

Halko et al (2017) – ‘Entrepreneurial and parental love’

Halko and co-authors cover a variety of fields together; economics, business, social sciences, neurology, science, technology, entrepreneurship and innovation in Finland, Sweden, Switzerland and the USA. In their article published in Journal of Business Venturing they investigate why and how founding entrepreneurs bond with their ventures. The approach is built on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969). The authors extend this theory to consider the bond from founding entrepreneurs to their ventures. The authors develop hypothesis based on attachment theory and test them using fMRI data.

Performing a functional magnetic response imaging (fMRI) study of 42 subjects (21 entrepreneurs and 21 parents) they find that entrepreneurs and parents ‘show similar signs of affective bonding’ (1). This was supplemented by gathering behavioural data from founding entrepreneurs and parents to examine behavioural signs of bonding. The research indicates that entrepreneurs can be viewed as ‘caregivers to their businesses’ (3). It also affirms differences in bonding styles, as argued by Bowlby (1969), where entrepreneurs with an anxious-ambivalent bonding style are more likely to suffer from panic attacks, causing frustration.

The caregivers increase their venture’s chances of survival and positive development. But there are risks, and these are particularly pronounced when entrepreneurs ‘include their venture in their sense of self’ (16). This can cause workaholism and stress, but also impairs the ability to exercise social and moral judgement. ‘The advantage of fMRI is that it provides an objective measurement for understanding how stimuli affect profound psychological functions such as brain reward systems and judgement’ (2).

Hayward et al (2010) – ‘Beyond hubris: How highly confident entrepreneurs rebound to venture again’

Hayward and co-authors are from the areas of business and psychology in the United States and Australia and the article is published in the Journal of Business Venturing. The article outlines why highly confident entrepreneurs are better positioned to start and succeed with new business and therefore why overconfidence persists amongst entrepreneurs.

Hayward et al argue that greater grief intensifies negative thoughts and produces ruminations or ‘passive and repetitive thoughts about one’s distress’ (572). Drawing on amongst others Seligman’s (1998) work on learned optimism, they argue that more confident entrepreneurs will experience greater emotional resilience from failed ventures and greater social support from founding team members. The paper ‘offers a framework by which more confident entrepreneurs are

better able to emotionally, cognitively, socially and financially recover from their failed ventures' (p. 575) and thus more likely to form subsequent ventures.

Khanin and Turel (2015) – 'Conflicts and Regrets in the Venture Capitalist-Entrepreneur relationship'

In *Journal of Small Business Management*, Khanin and Turel explore feelings of regret in CEOs. They argue that there are two main types of conflict between CEOs and venture capitalists (VCs); conflict about the development of the company and conflict stemming from relationship issues and power relations. Further, they argue that conflict about the development of the company, 'process conflict', is not limited to strategic and operational issues, but also have emotional and personal overtones. Similarly, relational conflicts, or 'prerogative conflicts', cannot be reduced to the purely emotional and personal but 'rather are based in particular cognitions related to what parties believe to be equitable distribution of rights, duties, and responsibilities in the relationship' (963). Finally, they find that process conflict and prerogative conflict are closely related and that there is a strong link between the intensity of the development of the company and prerogative conflict (964). The CEOs feel both regret of action, leading to a change in financial intermediation strategy, and regret of inaction, or lack of initiative, leading to a change in collaboration strategy.

Kibler et al (2017) – 'Attributes of legitimate venture failure impressions'

Kibler et al from business schools and universities in Finland, Germany and UK, focus on impression management strategies following venture failure and conclude that the most effective strategy to minimize the risk of social stigmatization is a distancing from the failure and an attribution to external factors that are not under the entrepreneur's control (145). Their findings correspond to two impression management strategies outlined in the conceptual framework of Shepherd and Haynie (2011): '*denying responsibility and defining failure in a positive light*' (146). Drawing on Cope (2011) and Shepherd et al (2015), Kibler et al theorize a lack of learning opportunities as a potential drawback of impression management strategies based on distance-taking (146).

Mantere et al, (2013) – 'Narrative attributions of entrepreneurial failure'

Mantere et al, (2013) from schools of economics, communication and business in Finland and France examine how organisational stakeholders use narratives in their psychological processing of venture failure. They identify a range of 'narrative attributions', alternative accounts of failure, and argue

that venture failure is a complex social construction and that different stakeholders construct failure in distinctively different ways (459).

Referring to Cardon et al (2011) as the initiators of research on entrepreneurial failure narratives, Mantere et al continue the exploration and argue that narratives are culturally available means for making sense of and dealing with failure. And since explanations of failure are affected by the social role of the actor, different stakeholders can be expected to use different types of narratives to explain the failure and cope with the implications (459). They conclude that 'entrepreneurial failure involves a variety of narrative types which serve specific functions in making sense of and coping with failure' (460).

Singh et al (2015) – 'Coping with entrepreneurial failure'

Singh et al from business, law and management schools in New Zealand take a narrative approach to investigate entrepreneur's personal experience of stigma associated with venture failure. They find that stigmatization is best viewed as a dynamic process rather than a label and that it begins before, not after, failure and contributes to venture demise. Further, the stigmatization ultimately triggered epiphanies or deep personal insights for the 12 entrepreneurs involved in the study, realizations about 'how they had contributed to their firm's failure through ego-based thinking and behaviour' (151) and these insights transformed the view of failure from very negative to a positive life experience. It is this transformation that results in entrepreneurs distributing learning from failure to new ventures, even when ventures are not their own (150). This is coherent with Shepherd's recent findings (2015) that learning occurs with a shift from negative to positive emotions.

Exploring stigma themes, Singh et al find that during the anticipation of failure there was self-stigmatization amongst the entrepreneurs in the form of self-blame, with a continuous application of negative labels and descriptions to themselves. But 'although we report entrepreneurs 'perceptions, this theme conveys social stigmatization because it indicates expectation of treatment by others' (156). Identified behaviour to avoid stigma and 'loss of pride', to save face and protect ego; delaying decision to end the venture, covering up and even telling lies about the fact that the venture is at serious risk, even to close family, hiding vulnerability and avoiding seeking help. 'Entrepreneurs also tended to shun personal relationships thereby missing out on social support when they faced the potential failure of their ventures' (157). 'Past studies suggest that entrepreneurs distance themselves socially after the failure of their ventures (Cope, 2011; Singh et al, 2007) but current findings suggest that this distancing begins before actual failure' (157).

Identified gaps in current literature

‘Less is known about the microprocesses underlying these societal level relationships because there is limited research on how stigmatization affects individual entrepreneur’s actions, behaviours, and decisions during and after failure’ (150). ‘Entrepreneurial emotion is at present an important and growing topic in entrepreneurship research’ (164). ‘Future research is needed to further explore these different mechanisms whereby learning from venture failure is contributed to society’ (164)

Singh et al (2016) – ‘Spirituality and entrepreneurial failure’

Some entrepreneurs seem to engage deeply with failure to make sense of it, instead of engaging in patterns of denial or distraction and avoidance to distance themselves from the painful reality of venture failure. Singh et al examines how spirituality might explain this deep engagement with failure that seems to often trigger learning in form of epiphanies; increased self-awareness and strength in dealing with hardships along with realizations of how one has also contributed to the failure and thus being able to take responsibility for mistakes rather than blaming and being defensive. They end the paper by commenting that ‘there may be factors other than spirituality that also transform the negativity of venture failure into positive, long term outcomes and we hope the research reported here helps to stimulate future research that uncovers such factors’ (23).

Ucbasaran et al (2010) – ‘The nature of entrepreneurial experience, business failure and comparative optimism’

Ucbasaran et al from different business and management schools in the UK, Netherlands and Norway explore the relation between comparative optimism, the belief that one is less likely to experience negative events, and venture closure. Comparative optimism, or over-optimism, may be needed to engage in entrepreneurship, but can also be a factor leading to venture closure (541). ‘High new business failure rates can be attributed to this bias’ (554).

They find that repeat entrepreneurs who had not experienced business failure are more likely to report comparative optimism than novice entrepreneurs. Serial entrepreneurs who had experienced failure were as likely as novice entrepreneurs to report comparative optimism. But portfolio entrepreneurs (several businesses at the same time) reported less comparative optimism.

They suggest routines to challenge assumptions about the business and competitors as well as encouraging entrepreneurs to ‘participate in schemes that examine the nature of their prior mistakes (and successes) before embarking on a subsequent venture’ (542), because ‘practitioners need to appreciate that not all experienced entrepreneurs learn from business failure’ (553). Novice

entrepreneurs should be warned and advised about the potential problems associated with high levels of comparative optimism (554).

Ucbasaran et al (2013) – ‘Life after business failure: The Process and Consequences of Business Failure for Entrepreneurs’

Ucbasaran et al from the University of Warwick and Indiana University review research that explains how entrepreneurs make sense of and learn from failure and develop an agenda for future research.

Themes from their review:

- Self-imposed social distancing and withdrawal due to anticipated social stigma (Cope 2011; Shepherd & Haynie 2011; Singh et al 2007)
- Social attitudes toward failure are influenced by attributions that can vary by country, region and social group, thereby contributing to theories of stigma by highlighting the roles of institutional context and culture (178)
- Several negative emotions have been associated with business failure; pain, remorse, shame, humiliation, anger, guilt, and blame as well as the fear of the unknown (178)
- Common across these studies is the notion that business failure has parallels with the loss of something (or someone) important (178)
- Singh et al (2007) and Cope (2011) note that in the entrepreneurs they studied, grief was accompanied by anxiety, panic attacks, phobias, anger, and—in some cases— physiological symptoms such as exhaustion, high blood pressure, insomnia, and weight loss (178)
- There is a strand of thinking influenced by Seligman’s work on learned optimism focusing on entrepreneurial resilience. Arguments are that confidence and even overconfidence can create positive emotions that facilitate resilience by decreasing the emotional cost of failure (180)
- Shepherd (2003, 2009) and his work on grief is mentioned multiple times, where the focus is to effectively use grief recovery strategies to make sense of failure and quickly recover (180)
- Impression-management strategies to avoid stigma are explored by Sutton and Callahan (1987)

Identified gaps in current research:

We need to explore further the process by which entrepreneurs create/general plausible stories of business failure (195)

Walsh and Cunningham (2017) – ‘Regenerative failure and attribution’

‘This research is the first step to exploring the way in which failure attributions influence future action’ (702). Using a qualitative approach with 21 serial entrepreneurs, Walsh and Cunningham from business schools in Spain and UK examine attributions for failure, responses to failure and learning from failure. Their research fully supports Cope’s (2011) learning dimensions. They find that the entrepreneur’s attributions affect their responses to the failure, which in turn affects their learning. ‘When failure is primarily attributed to internal factors, the entrepreneur’s response is affective, leading to deep, personal learning about oneself. External attributions (both firm level and market level) result in a primarily behavioural response, with learning focussed on the venture, and networks and relationships. Those primarily attributing failure to hybrid factors have a largely cognitive response and they learn about venture management. ‘(688).

Identified gaps in current literature:

‘There remains a dearth paucity of research conducted at the individual level [and] no study to date has examined the processes that take place between attribution and learning’ (702). ‘This study provides a strong justification for future research to be focussed on the entrepreneur and their personal experience of the failure process, in particularly the psychological and emotional implications of closure and failure’ (703). ‘Future research that moves beyond the immediate aftermath of failure and explores the complexity of the experience as it evolves over time would also provide interesting insights. Such research would explore the long-term impact failure has on regenerative entrepreneurs as they progress with their entrepreneurial careers’ (703).

Yamakawa and Cardon (2015) – ‘Causal ascriptions and perceived learning from entrepreneurial failure’

Yamakawa and Cardon examine how failure ascriptions, or attributions for failure, impact perceptions of learning for entrepreneurs who have chosen to venture again in Japan. Their results suggest that, ‘in particular, internal unstable failure ascriptions appear to enhance learning, especially when shorter time is taken to restart, while failure ascriptions to external stable sources alone and especially when combined with abandoning the domain of the failed venture appear to deteriorate such learning’ (817). They encourage additional research in this area.

Yamakawa et al (2015) – ‘Rising from the ashes: Cognitive Determinants of Venture Growth After Entrepreneurial Failure’

Yamakawa et al explore the question of how previous entrepreneurial failure influences future entrepreneurship and under what conditions the entrepreneurs who rebound from failure do better second time around. They draw on cognitive literature in attribution and motivation and their data is collected from a survey of over 200 new-venture founders with business failure experiences conducted in 2001 in Japan. They find that ‘there is *no* relationship between the number of prior failures and new venture performance’ (224). They argue that what entrepreneurs ‘learn about themselves from their reflection on internal attribution is more readily transferable and is more likely to impact subsequent venture growth - as opposed to some venture-specific knowledge that is likely to be associated with external attribution of failure but less transferable and applicable to the new venture’ (213). They argue that ‘entrepreneurs who blame the cause of their failure on themselves are predisposed to look back upon what they might have done wrong and consider how they can do better next time’ (212).

But an increasing number of failures can be harmful with internal attribution of blame, ‘since the larger number of failures will eventually become a burden reducing one’s self-efficacy (226). In conclusion, Yamakawa et al advice entrepreneurs to:

1. Avoid blaming it all on external environment and luck, and instead find some aspect of the failure to attribute internally to facilitate effective learning
2. Be motivated intrinsically to facilitate the performance of the next start-up
3. Try not to fail too many times (reconsider career option)

Zhu et al (2018) – ‘An Investigation of Entrepreneurs’ Venture Persistence Decision’

Zhu et al from business and management schools and universities in China, US, Germany and Australia incorporate psychological ownership theory and adversity literature to examine the joint effect on entrepreneurial persistence. Using both experiments and a survey, they argue that psychological ownership to the venture is more relevant to persistence in times of high adversity. Psychological ownership is defined as ‘the feeling that the ownership target, or part of it, is ‘mine’ and can be developed by investing oneself in the target of ownership, which then becomes an extension of self (Pierce et al, 2001,2003). Psychological ownership is thus connected to self-identity.

In implications for practice, Zhu et al introduce a dilemma. On the one hand, strong psychological ownership and self-identification with the venture can help overcome difficulties as it increases persistence. But on the other hand, entrepreneurs with weak psychological ownership are

more willing to exit a venture and let go in high adversity. This 'suggests that some entrepreneurs may need to learn to distance themselves from their ventures' (162). Referring to Shepherd et al (2009) they suggest separating venture failure from personal failure.

Literature search on Scopus

Searching the titles, keywords and abstracts for the following keywords; 'organisation', 'enterprise', 'entrepreneur', 'new venture' AND 'disruption', 'ending', 'failure', 'closure', 'loss', 'bankruptcy', 'insolvency', 'liquidation', 'death' AND 'bereavement' or 'grief'. Resulted in 27 documents, listed below.

- Cardon, M.S., Stevens, C.E. & Potter, D.R. 2011, 'Misfortunes or mistakes? Cultural sensemaking of entrepreneurial failure', *Journal of Business Venturing* 26, no. 1: 79-92.
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Appendix 2: Movement of thought through reflexive practice

	Scientific and abstract practice (positivist)	Relational practice (social constructivist and pragmatist)
Human beings	Separate, autonomous individuals / radical individualism	Social beings, mind, self, and society continuously evolve together in interaction
Goals	Are predefined and actions needed to reach the goals are identified	Focus is on the continuous negotiation of intention between different individuals
Communication	Transfer of ideas and knowledge (sender-receiver model)	The embodied processes of negotiating meaning and identity, responsive acts of mutual recognition/misrecognition
Language	Descriptive of an already existing external/internal phenomenon	Constructive and shaping our experience, forming and being formed, enabling and constraining
Questions	Powerful questions direct the attention and the client holds the answers and the coach merely helps him/her find them	Are gestures and emerge in the interaction and influence the result. Are powerful rhetorical devices and thus highly influential in directing the conversation
'Gremlin' or 'Saboteur'	The 'gremlin' is the negative narrator in your head. You are not your gremlin; it is what is keeping you from being authentic and by becoming aware of your gremlin, you can manage your response to it	Is a metaphor that: can influence the perceived level of detachment and so help the client become more reflexive. Can help in creating alternative 'truths', and these diversities may propagate to shift the thematic patterning of conversation about oneself and thus influence how a person experiences him/herself
Emotions	Individually contained and to be managed in favour of rationality and effectiveness	Complex and social, signals in the webs of interdependent and entangled human beings
Organisations	Systems, bounded wholes, reified things to be moved around	Patterns of relating in which one can only participate
Change	Planned, managed and controlled	Evolves as a shift in the patterning of conversation and is a continuous movement/ transformation with inevitable feelings of loss
Loss and grief	Private, inner psychological process to be managed and gotten through effectively – can lead to avoidance or withdrawal in fear of stigmatization	Situated, interpretive and communicative activity – social reconstruction of meaning and identity – community and witnessing is important

Theory of time	Linear view of time where past is factually given, and future is yet to be unfolded in developmental stages and may be predicted with large amounts of data	Time as the living present where both accounts of the past and expectations for the future are negotiated, forming and being formed
Terms of recognition	The heroic entrepreneur; effective, creative, willing to take risk, courageous and resilient – comes with a risk of uprooting from context and comparing to ideals	The relationally responsive; virtuous and response-able, sagacity – context aware and responsive
Success (and failure)	Individualized and explained as due to hard work/achievement (or laziness)	Co-constructed and negotiated / situated
Power	Is reified and ascribed to a person or a system (or relationship) and office politics are perceived as ‘getting in the way of the real work’	Is a dynamic of inclusion and exclusion in human interaction, and an irremovable aspect. Office politics are where the work happens
Difference	Explained as “resistance”	Seen as natural and required for innovation. Context dependence/situatedness important. Suspended judgement, engaging with difference
Knowledge and expertise	Those who possess the knowledge to make something are identified as experts	Sagacity: There is nothing like a body of expertise that can be clearly pinned down beforehand, as the type of knowledge required becomes clear only in due course, that is, only as a result of being fully engaged with the particular situation at hand
Ethical action	Compliance with pre-existing rules. Context/situatedness irrelevant	Performing phronesis, practical judgement. The ability to apply judgment and exercise discretion in concrete and specific situations. Context/situatedness crucial
Responsibility	Outcome based, seen as accountability. Linked to the knowledge of causality – the outcome one is held accountable for should be known in advance. This concept is used in court	As care and responsiveness. Always attuned to the everyday on goings, that is, the here-and-nows, which connect back to exercising discretion and applying judgment