PIA VESALA

Caught in the middle?

Narrative identity construction of middle management in strategic change

ACADEMIC DISSERTATION
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UNIVERSITY OF TAMPERE
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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study is to describe and analyse how middle managers construct their identities during strategic change. The research started out from my interest in local branch managers, who were at the time going through strategic changes in my own organisation, Sampo Bank, a part of Sampo PLC. In this study, they are defined as middle managers. Middle managers represent a heterogeneous group of managers who function between operational and strategic tasks, and who both supervise and are supervised by others.

The theoretical framework of the study is built on multiple discussions: middle management, narrative identity construction and liminality as a possible aspect of the identity development process. Instead of emphasising a functionalist or managerial approach, focus is on the identity-construction process of middle management through co-constructed narratives. Strategic change of the bank provides the context for analysing the middle management identity construction. In particular, applying the concept of liminality as part of identity construction opens up new unexplored vistas for the middle management discussion. This research is based on a social constructionist orientation, which sets guidelines for both theoretical and methodological choices. This starting point also implies that socially constructed identity narratives are embedded emotionally. Liminality, which conceptually originates from anthropology, signifies a state in-between old and new identity. The liminal state can be either fixed-term transitional, or prolonged perpetual and it can be also emotionally loaded. Transitional liminality is characterised by comparisons between old and new, whereas perpetual liminality is characterised by self/other comparisons in identity constructions. Approaching the identity construction of middle management by applying the concept of liminality enables the study of identity construction in a systematic manner.

The empirical data for this study consists of interviews with 12 local branch managers in Sampo Bank. The interviews are considered on the one hand as narratives themselves and on the other hand they were analysed through narrative analysis. Methodologically, conversion stories, which conceptually originate from the religious discourse, were also applied to analyse, in parallel with liminality, the conversion of branch managers in the strategic direction of the Bank. These narrative identities were also analysed structurally as progressive or regressive. In the analysis, the narratives were categorised into five groups based on their narrated liminality, conversion, and structure: “busy businessmen”, “camel boots managers”, “cliff-hangers”, “senior survivors”, and “poker faces”. This analysis was carried out further with a theme analysis, which defined seven antagonists themes that signify sources of liminality and stability in the narrative identities: too much control/room to manoeuvre, compliance/rebelliousness, loneliness/belonging, lack of trust/trust, new expertise/old expertise, gender ignorance/gender sensibility, and value mismatch/value match. Underneath these antagonist themes, the narratives could be analysed along three dimensions — career phase, gender, and location.

The results indicate that the identity construction of middle management, although contextual, is connected to a middle manager’s career phase, gender, and location. Senior
branch managers found ways to manage demanding contextual requirements with no additional pressure. They already had prestigious careers, whereas the more junior managers were in the process of proving themselves capable of delivering what was expected of them. Gender was viewed in my study in a traditional manner, as the female managers struggled to balance work and family. Location also played a role in the deepness of liminality because the managers in single-branch regions, especially in smaller, rural towns, seemed to enjoy higher status in the area’s social circles. This seemed to have an impact on liminality in the narratives. A high sense of belonging to a specific local branch was emphasised in these narratives.

The results of this study have several implications for the understanding of narrative identities of middle managers and, in particular, the possible liminality they include in the strategic change context. Firstly, the nature of the narrated liminality can be transitional, perpetual, or a mixture of these. It is also possible that there are no signs of liminality in the narrative identity construction. Liminality does not necessarily depend on whether the strategic change is constructed as a conversion or a de-conversion narrative. Secondly, lack of clear rites of passage complicates identity transfer and can lead to expressed uneasiness in the narratives. Thirdly, easy-going relationships with one’s supervisor and peers can diminish the liminality.

Finally, this study brings new insights to the on-going and relevant discussion on middle management from the viewpoint of middle managers’ identities from multiple perspectives, through narrative identity construction and liminality.

Key words: middle management, narrative identity, liminality, social constructionism, strategic change, banks
TIIVISTELMÄ


arvojen samankaltaisuus. Näiden vastavoimaisten teemojen kautta narratiivit olivat mahdollista analysoida kolmen ulottuvuuden kautta — uravaihe, sukupuoli ja paikka.


Kokeneemmät seniorikonttorinjohtajat oivalsivat keinoja selvitä haasteellisissa olosuhteissa ilman ylimääräisiä paineita, koska heillä oli jo ollut menestyksekästä ura, kun taas nuoremmien konttorinjohtajien tuli pystyä näyttämään olevansa kyvykkäitä toimimaan heille asetettujen odotusten mukaisesti. Sukupuoli nähtiin tutkimuksessa perinteisellä tavalla, koska naisjohtajat kamppailivat työn ja perheen yhteensovittamisessa. Paikalla oli myös iso rooli liminaliteetin syvyydessä, koska yhden konttorin paikkakunnilla konttorinjohtajilla oli korkeampi status alueen sosialisissa piireissä, erityisesti pienissä maaseutu kaupungeissa, joka vähensi liminaliteettia narratiiveissa. Nämä narratiiveissa rakentui kiinteä yhteenvuuluvuuden tunne tiettyyn paikalliseen konttoriin ja sen henkilöstöön.


Lopuksi, tämä tutkimus tuo uusia näkökulmia meneillään olevaan ja relevanttiin keskusteluun keskijohdosta keskijohdon identiteettien kautta useista eri perspektiiveistä narratiivisen identiteetin rakentumisen ja liminaliteetin kautta.

Avainsanat: keskijohto, narratiivinen identiteetti, liminaliteetti ja sosiaalinen konstruktionismi, strateginen muutos, pankit
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Finally, this journey of mine has arrived at its destination, and it is time to express my gratitude to all those people who have supported me. At this point, I cannot resist confessing that although this target has been clear in my mind, the journey has been at least as important as its destination.

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In Pirkkala, November 2014

Pia Vesala
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“Instead of being led from the headquarters, things are nowadays decided in our local branches. Those branch managers in charge are our heroes. They need to realise that they are no longer traditional bank managers.” (CEO of Sampo Bank in Kauppalehti Optio, 2005)

This study describes and analyses the identity construction of the branch managers of Sampo Bank during a major strategic change after the former Leonia Bank merged with Sampo Insurance PLC in 2001. Sampo Bank was, at the time of the study, the third-largest retail bank in Finland, as measured by the balance sheet, after Nordea Bank and the Cooperative Banks. At the time of the study, Sampo Bank was getting a larger foothold in the markets and gaining market share as a runner-up. In addition, the top management of Sampo PLC and Sampo Bank were widely known among the public, especially due to their rather straightforward and bold comments. In the quotation above, the CEO of Sampo Bank strongly stated the importance of the local branch managers and their independence. At the time of this CEO’s interview, I was also in the middle of my own doctoral studies in which I concentrated on local branch managers. This particular CEO’s interview in one of the most popular Finnish business magazines caught my attention as he claimed that the merger also meant changes to the mindset of the local branch management besides strategic and operational modifications to be implemented.

The idea to become a doctoral student in 2001 was motivated by my personal interest in the role of the branch managers in the course of changes in Sampo Bank. I had been working at Sampo Bank (formerly Postipankki and Leonia Bank) since 1999 in different positions, and thus the initial impulse emerged from pure curiosity about “my own organisation”. The focus on middle managers, namely the local branch managers, was natural because I saw their position as something I aspired to in coming years. I had observed the branch managers from close range and wondered about the impact of the strategic changes following the merger for them. Hence, initially I was interested to know how they perceived themselves in the spin of these large scale changes. My curiosity turned this study towards identity construction and in specific to narrative identity through language use (Gergen, 1999). Putting it simple identity answers to the question: “Who am I”? Hence, the focus of my study is on the following question:

**How do middle managers construct their identities in the course of strategic change?**

I got the feeling that the impact of the strategic changes had been especially strong for the local branch managers, who were situated organisationally in the middle between demands coming from multiple directions. Postipankki was transformed from a government-owned bank into a market-driven company, which needed to function according new rules and competences. I had witnessed over the years many rounds of organisational changes that appeared to hit the local branch managers particularly hard.
Over the years just before, during and after the merger, I was able to feel the excitement and sometimes fear in the air. The changes usually meant that some individuals got promoted while others got sacked. Thus, the “game” appeared ruthless to me. Also according to Mattila (2006), the success of a change can be looked at in terms of two dimensions — firstly by taking into account the financial output and secondly, by the perceived outcome of the practitioners. In other words: Was it felt and experienced or in my case, narrated, as a real victory in addition to the financial outcome? Sampo Bank can be interpreted as a success story with multiple indicators such as growth in market share. Hence, my interest emerged from a practical concern and was accompanied by a theoretical perspective later on.

In 2005, I spent my free time reading literature and carrying out interviews with 12 branch managers. I did not even consider alternatives to interviews for collecting data. I was eager to hear how they perceived their past, present and future. I have always liked to listen to stories told well, and giving the opportunity to these branch managers to talk about the recent changes from their own perspectives seemed only natural. Analysing the data pushed my study forward, but at the same time, it felt difficult to rise above the practical level. Thus, the process circulated between literature and data, iteratively. I did not have a particular theoretical framework in mind in the beginning, which seems to be quite common when the focus organisation is one’s own employer (Kangas, 2006; Ranki, 2000; Siren, 2009) because the interest emerges originally from a practical perspective and transforms gradually to include a level of theoretical discussion as well. Therefore, the start of my research process was heavily influenced by my own pre-understanding based on my insider knowledge. Later on it was accompanied by theoretical readings which eventually shifted from a discussion of leadership to middle management identity construction. The research process will be described in more detail in Chapter 1.3.

In 2006, long before I completed my research, the acquisition of Danske Bank was announced. That seemed like a natural ending point for my study as it concentrates on the period of Sampo Bank as part of Sampo PLC (2000–2006). Contextually, Sampo Bank as part of Sampo PLC is a clear organisational phase in the Bank’s history and enabled me to write more freely because the changes took place several years ago and in an organisation that no longer exists. Despite the passage of time, the branch managers interviewed will remain anonymous, although large part of them are no longer working in the Bank (today Danske Bank) or have transferred to other duties in the Bank.

In situations of change, the most crucial question is: What does this particular change mean to me? From this, the approach of my study emerged: the identity of middle managers amidst strategic change. Because the branch managers were talking in their interviews about themselves, it was plausible to focus on their identity construction during this major strategic change. This was suddenly something now so obvious, which I had not realised at the beginning. Middle managers are in the middle, placed between conflicting demands, and this position is exaggerated when major strategic changes take place. On the one hand, they implement the strategic direction locally, while on the other hand, they are involved in daily operations management. The challenge arises from balancing these strategic and operational duties while being the buffer between front-line employees and top management.

My own position as an insider led me to consider my research approach and philosophical assumptions. My study follows a social constructionist approach with a focus
on socially constructed meaning making, instead of an individual sense-making process and “trying to get inside the heads” of the informants. Understanding the social constructionist nature of human actions was a turning point. It became a way to look beyond the pure interview data and acknowledge my engagement in the focus organisation. I came to perceive my position as one of strength instead of weakness. However, closeness to the studied phenomenon can be a source of blind spots. The development of my analysis has, at times, been demanding to report systematically since the research process has, on the one hand, been full of insights and, on the other hand, consisted of long chains of reasoning. In addition, something that may appear self-evident to me as an insider is possibly relevant new knowledge to readers of the thesis. I have tried to find a suitable balance between closeness to the studied phenomenon and not looking at the Bank through rose-coloured glasses (Alvesson, 2003). I have had easy access to various data besides the branch managers’ interviews, and I was able to comprehend the local jargon.

I participated in a qualitative methods course for graduate students in which I learned more about research methods originating from social constructionism. It was difficult to “find the mystery to solve” behind everything that appeared self-evident to me (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). I started to analyse the data using various methods, but finally narratives and language use proved to be the most suitable approach. I had to “kill my darlings”: letting go of cherished ideas such as of being a leadership scholar. The branch managers spoke about their ways of leading their branches, but a thorough leadership study would have demanded, for example, observational data from their branches. An interview data does not enable access to relational processes such as leadership, and hence, the study would have remained one-sided and incomplete from my perspective.

In 2007, after the Danske acquisition, I was appointed branch manager. Although this was in another organisation with another strategic focus, it caused me to reflect on the position of branch managers from a different perspective. I re-thought many of my interviewees’ comments from a new angle and at times felt as though they were my close colleagues, although they had told me about their joys and sorrows in a totally different context organisationally and market-wise. Being in charge of my own branch independently for the first time, I identified strongly with them and felt that I was better able to relate to their comments. In 2011, I transferred to working in the Business Development department, which again gave me a new perspective from which to analyse the past events and data because I was engaged in strategic and conceptual business-planning issues on a daily basis.

The reflection process has been an on-going element in my studies. Some comments made and things heard appear different to me almost 10 years later. This is part of social constructionism, which appreciates social processes in which knowledge is constructed. The main question is not “what” or “why”, but rather “how”. As I look back, I consider this thesis dear to me from two standpoints: Firstly, I was privileged to meet so many devoted branch managers, and secondly, I was able to learn from the best. I have reflected on their comments from multiple perspectives over the years. Some of them were deep and profound and others bold and sassy, but nonetheless thought-provoking for me.

I have read the interviews and the analyses repeatedly. After transcribing them, I spent hours just listening and brainstorming and pondering what the branch managers were saying (McCormack, 2004:222–223). I have also rewritten my text many times as my own understanding has developed. I took family leave in 2012, and that gave me the needed
distance from the Bank. I feel that the time spent and pauses in my research process due to the fact that my main priorities have been elsewhere at times have had a positive impact on this thesis. At times I wished for the possibility to focus purely on my doctoral studies, but for multiple reasons that proved to be impossible. The exact scope of the study remained in flux for a long time (Katila, 2000). The project started with an initial idea, which finally developed into the final topic. Hypotheses are often developed along the way in qualitative studies (Koskinen, Alasuutari, & Peltonen, 2005), although I had some initial hunches about them from the start. However, the branch managers have remained in the centre right from the start.

I have done my best to reveal right from the start my position as an insider. In preparing a thesis, it is crucial to clearly state the researcher’s own commitments, presumptions and positioning (Katila & Meriläinen, 2006). This statement sets the researcher free from doing objective research and acknowledges that language use always creates a particular version of reality (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000) in which the researcher is always present (Eräsaari, 2005; Richardson, 1997). It is up to me as the researcher to find a suitable way to write myself into the text (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) which is also aligned with the chosen philosophical assumptions. The researcher is always there regardless of being in the position of an insider or an outsider of the studied organisation.
1. INTRODUCTION

In this introductory chapter, I will describe the research phenomenon, explain the core concepts, set out the research problem and cover the structure of the study.

1.1 Research phenomenon and core concepts

The research phenomenon is the identity construction of middle management in the midst of a strategic change. This study focuses specifically on local branch managers of Sampo Bank after its merger with Sampo PLC. The merger is approached contextually as a strategic change because, in the merger, the different business divisions – banking and insurance – were kept separate for the large part. It is important to mention the organisational context of the study right from the start for at least couple of reasons: firstly, because the study arose from my practical interest, and secondly, because the organisational context of this study is unique and was left unexplored until now. Hence, besides the studied phenomenon, the particular organisational context deserves its moment in the spotlight as well. Somehow despite the establishment of the first financial house in Finland, Sampo Bank has stayed in the shadows in academic studies. Otherwise, the Finnish banking sector has gained its fair share of attention in organisational changes such as mergers (e.g., Heikkilä, 1998; Kangas, 2006; Myllys 1995, 1999; Ropo, 1989; Tienari, 1999).

However, regardless of the high number of studies on the Finnish banking sector, I position myself strongly to the identity and the middle management discussion. I was not able to find a common ground with the majority of previous studies related to Finnish banking sector beyond the ones dealing with prior mergers (e.g., Tienari, 1999), firstly due to the fact that most of them were conducted contextually in times of recession or banking crisis in Finland and secondly, because of different philosophical assumptions. I intend to bring new knowledge to the discussion of the Finnish banking sector, since my study was carried out during a period of economic growth.

The core concepts of my study are middle management, identity construction and liminality as part of the identity construction process. Whether middle management is needed more than ever or something that is not needed any longer has been a hot topic for some time (Thomas & Linstead, 2002). On the one hand, it has been questioned whether middle management has “lost the plot” (Thomas & Linstead, 2002) in the course of organisational re-structurings, and on the other hand, it has been stated that “they do not own their plot any longer” (Sims, 2003). The former has to do with the ambiguities of being in the middle, whereas the latter refers to the need to please multiple organisational parties such as top management and their own employees.

Middle management is a heterogeneous group of managers, and hence, it is challenging to make statements that can be generalised universally to middle managers. However, according to the studies and theories written on middle management, the challenges middle managers face have similarities across organisations and globally, at least on large scale. The
middle management discussion is two dimensional because, on the one hand, it focuses on the demanding organisational position of middle managers between top management and operational employees. On the other hand, there is disagreement and uncertainty about whether middle managers should have strategic duties in addition to the operational-level managerial duties of implementing pre-decided strategic actions. Whether there is enough room to manoeuvre is part of the on-going discussion (e.g., Laine & Vaara, 2007; Thomas & Dunkerley, 1999; Thomas & Linstead, 2002). Whether middle management has lost its importance or is needed more than ever has not yet been decided (Thomas & Linstead, 2002). Johnson, Balogun, and Beech (2010) and Rouleau (2010) emphasised taking middle managers and their identity construction as the focal point of organisational change. Rouleau (2010) stated that through telling their personal narratives of organisational restructuring, the middle managers at the same time also make sense and construct their perception of the changes identity-wise.

According to Saastamoinen (2006), identity has been of cross-disciplinary interest in recent years. The popularity of identity research is motivated primarily by its paradoxical and problematic nature. The concept of identity has often been taken for granted and left without a proper definition, although it is an elusive and contradictory concept. There is thought to be a need for multi-disciplinary and multi-dimensional identity studies in order to gain a holistic picture of the aspects of self and identity. According to Rautio (2006), the concept of “identity” has been popular in social sciences in Europe due to its collective focus, whereas the concept of “self” has been considered important in North American studies due to its more individualistic connotation. In my study, the concepts of “self” and “identity” are used interchangeably. Identity construction questions turn out to be even more relevant for people who encounter exceptional changes in their life course.

Identity is a familiar term to everybody in ordinary language; it refers to question “Who am I?” as already mentioned in Prologue. However, in academic circles especially its construction process is controversial topic. Identity has also gained its fair share of attention as well in business studies (Frantsi, 2009; Hytti, 2003; Kallio, 2014; Kuusipalo, 2008; Montonen, 2014; Sirén, 2009), in which it has been approached as a personal construction of an internal sense-making process or as a social construction made through identification with a certain group of people, for example, those who practice a certain craft. However, as will be explained later on in this study, the picture is not always so clear because the personal and the social are interconnected in many ways. Also, the philosophical orientations followed make identity studies different from each other and hard to compare with any new knowledge that is accumulated. Identity tells of the kind the person I am. This can be constructed also in comparison to external expectations (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008.) In my study identity construction is understood to take place in relations in other words in social interaction as socially constructed together according to the guidelines of social constructionism (Gergen, 1999).

The contribution of my study comes from integrating the concept of liminality and the middle management discussion. Beech and Johnson (2005) pointed out the need to study narratively constructed identities of practitioners such as middle managers, in change and to concentrate on the micro-level of change. They stated that time has passed by conceptualising change as an episodic or an incremental process and centring on the organisation instead of the people. Whether the focus is on identity or other issues that change brings, people usually tend to talk about the meaning of change for them and hence
enter into identity construction. The focus is on “What does this mean to me?” Vaara (2002) found that, after organisational mergers, people have a tendency to construct their own identities at the same time as they were describing the organisational changes. This was also the case in my study.

Consideration of middle management besides from a functionalist perspective (e.g., Wooldridge, Schmid, & Floyd, 2008) has been approached until now for example from a discursive perspective (e.g., Sims, 2003) with no additional theory to assist the multiple and controversial discourses that middle managers often construct by their language use. The concept of liminality approached through narrative identity enables a more structured and deepened analysis than purely stating that there are multiple discourses in the context of change through discourse analysis. Liminality refers to the in-between-ness in identity construction, which can by its nature be a short-term transitional state or a longer-enduring perpetual liminality (Beech, 2011).

There is an imperative to move beyond stating that middle management has multiple and even controversial discourses. The fuzziness of being in the middle can be studied in a more structured manner through the theory of liminal practices presented by Beech (2011), which points out and clearly describes the possible processes through which the transformation from one identity to another can take place. In other words, liminality enables us to look behind the curtains and give a name to this emotionally loaded space (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003) in which middle managers find themselves in their daily organisational encounters and in change situations in particular. However, I wish to emphasise here that the possible liminality of middle management is not something to be taken for granted, and it be expressed in a multiple of explicitly communicated forms as well more hidden ones. As Åkerberg (2002) stated, researchers might have initial ideas about remarkable changes that could have been those under study. However, narratives do not necessary support these initial hypotheses. Hence, something the researcher perceives as possibly critical, may not emerge as such from practitioners’ perspective.

LaPointe (2011) and Kumpula (2011) shared my understanding of the need to focus particularly on the role transitions taking place without changes in current organisational position, so-called “intra-role” transitions (e.g., Louis, 1980), as is the case with the local branch managers in my study. They were not appointed to new positions, instead, the changes took place in their current organisational positions. The most self-evident career transitions are the ones taking place with clear rites of passage to new roles such as a promotion or retirement. However, many transitions take place less implicitly and are therefore more challenging to study. LaPointe (2011:20) stated that these intra-role transitions can remain hidden, and thus it is important to gain knowledge on these processes – especially on the constraints and resources through which the individuals deal with their liminality. The relation of role and identity is close and this idea will be elaborated later in this thesis (chapter 2.3.2.4). According to my view, a role is something that sets guidelines and expectations for how a person with a certain kind of status, such as a branch manager, should behave. I regard identity as a construction of self (as socially co-constructed), hence something different than a role, although related.

The research data was gathered in interviews with Sampo Bank’s branch managers after the Bank’s merger with Sampo PLC. The interview data produced narratives since the branch managers proved to be great storytellers. In these socially constructed narratives (Gergen, 1999), the branch managers’ identities were constructed in a variety of ways. I
regard myself as a co-constructor of those narratives, which I end up calling narrative identities and therefore, the narratives turned out the way they did due to my presence. At times I asked additional questions, but for the most part, the floor was entirely theirs. Because the narratives were constructed in the context of change, they were emotionally loaded as well. Hence, I regard the emotional meaning making that took place in the interviews also as socially constructed, something done in collaboration and not as internal processes of the branch managers.

The identity construction of middle management amidst strategic change is approached in this study theoretically through narrative identity and, more specifically, through liminality, which can be divided into transitional and perpetual liminality (Ybema, Beech, & Ellis, 2011). In transitional liminality, the actor is “at the threshold”, as the old identity is no longer available and the new one has not yet been constructed. The focus is thus on the on-going change process in which a person is caught in the middle of two identities (Beech, 2011). In perpetual liminality, the being in-between is understood as a prolonged period of time and even a natural state in which to be (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003; Ybema et al., 2011). The concept of liminality is borrowed from anthropology (Turner, 1977 [1969]; Van Gennep, 1960 [1906]) and refers to identity reconstruction. The main idea of the theory is that the old identity is reconstructed, for example, after organisational change (Beech, 2011), as rituals and practices are altered (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003) and the individuals move into unclear liminal space before entering into a new identity.

Identity has gained a great deal of attention within the social sciences and business studies in recent years (e.g., Alvesson, 2010; Beech, 2011; Ybema et al., 2009). The concept of identity has been approached in various ways depending on the applied framework. In my study, identity is approached through narratives from a social constructionist perspective (Gergen, 1999) and is seen as a process of “becoming”, instead of a stable state of an individual (Chia, 1996).

1.2 Problem setting and contribution

The empirical material was gathered in 12 interviews with branch managers located geographically all around Finland and in different-sized units. Some of them worked in large cities and others in more rural areas. This will also be taken into account in my analysis. The interviews developed into conversational narratives within the interview context (Hytti, 2003) in which I was a co-constructor of the storylines. However, I was not applying any kind of specific interviewing method while gathering the narratives. The interviews naturally tended to take narrative form. I had a few themes in my back pocket, which were essentially used to direct the discussion towards getting them to tell me about themselves and their careers in the Bank. The nature of the data made analysis possible from multiple perspectives and eventually I ended up with narrative identity. Conversion stories (Ballis & Richardson, 1997; Bryant & Wolfram Cox, 2004), as a method to analyse the data, are able to also take into account the way the changes were constructed besides simply the identity construction. Hence, in the narratives were constructed: 1) the strategic change and the organisational changes originating from it and 2) branch managers’ identities in that particular context. Narratives were considered and appreciated as dynamic and in progress because the strategic changes were on-going.
The title of the thesis, “Caught in the middle”, refers firstly to the challenging position of middle management and secondly to the identity construction process through liminality, described as the phase in between, fixed-term or infinite. Thirdly, it implies that the transfers the branch managers experienced were intra-role (e.g., Louis, 1980) by their nature regardless how large the actual changes were and how much, for example, new skills were needed.

My study combines a rather new discussion on liminality in organisational studies (Beech, 2011; Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003; Ellis & Ybema, 2010; Ybema et al., 2011) and a discussion of middle management from the social constructionist perspective (Thomas & Linstead, 2002) in which the emotional aspects are also embedded (Fineman, 2000, 2003). The contribution therefore comes firstly from taking a fresh perspective on the study of middle management identity from narrative perspective and secondly from taking part in the discussion on liminality in organisational settings (Beech, 2011; Ybema et al., 2011). The novel nature of this study comes from giving the stage to branch managers’ narratives. However, I am not claiming to speak for them due to my orientation, which positions me as a data co-constructor instead of a neutral data collector. The concept of liminality enables me to approach the branch managers’ narratives in a systematic manner and to explore the depth of their liminality: whether it is transitional as they are entering into a new organisational role or perpetual, which has to do with the more profound challenges of being in the middle (Ybema et al., 2011). In particular, approaching strategic change from a narrative identity construction perspective enables the real-time construction of narratives in a cycle of change. The exact research question is stated as follows:

**How is middle managers’ narrative identity constructed in the course of strategic change?**

This question enables to scrutinise the dynamics between strategic change and identity construction and thus to describe signs of liminality in language use as well the interplay between the narrated change and identity. The focus is on the meaning-making processes of the middle managers as they construct the strategic change and their own identity “in the middle”. When an organisation is going through a major transformation in strategic focus and structure, there is usually a call for robust actions at all organisational levels. Success is usually explained by the strong communication skills of top management, whereas failure is seen to originate from poor implementation processes locally, regardless of the actual state of affairs (Vaara, 2002). Hence, putting middle managers in the spotlight is needed in order to gain deeper insight into change from a practical perspective, instead of focusing on the views of the strategic apex of the organisation, the top management (Rouleau, 2010).

The identity construction process of middle managers could have also been approached through multiple controversial discourses by using discourse analysis (Thomas & Linstead, 2002), but I sensed that narrative analysis as a primary method offered a more vivid and context-driven approach. Also, the organisational identification (Elsbach, 1999) generated from identity theory (Tajfel, 1981) appeared to me as too straightforward to be used because every sign of the importance of other aspects of life is considered to be negative and thus to interfere with identification (Kallio, 2014). Hence, it is related to managerialist orientation (Mankkinen, 2011) which refers here to the starting point that is set from the management’s perspective, for example, set targets and desirable behaviour that are
characterised by efficiency and high performance. The approach to narrative identification utilised in this thesis is a holistic one that takes into account all aspects of life as essential to identity construction (Watson, 2009) rather than only considering purely professional identities (Eteläpelto & Vähäsantainen, 2008). Whether the other areas of life enter to discussion is another issue.

I also craved a more profound conceptualisation of the narrative identity construction phenomenon through the concept of liminality, which offers an alternative perspective to for discourses. The temporal nature of the narratives enabled change to be constructed through a sharp separation between past, present and future (Ybema, 2004, 2010). Conversion and de-conversion stories are applied as an analysis method (Ballis & Richardson, 1997; Bryant & Wolfram Cox, 2004), which enabled me to categorise the branch managers’ narratives based on their narrated faith in the strategic direction. The converted managers were the “believers”, whereas the de-converted had doubts and longed for “the good old days” or otherwise had “lost their faith”.

The concept of conversion comes from the religious sphere, as it refers to a drastic transformation into a believer. It can also be utilised as a tool to study strategic change that organisational actors welcome differently: some with strong belief and others with strong disbelief. The application of the concept of liminality adds knowledge to the narrative identity construction discussion and enables a more systematic analysis of identity deconstruction and reconstruction, keeping in mind that this study still analyses language use from a social constructionist perspective and does not enter into the field of cognitive processes. Hence, the approach to identity construction in my study is two dimensional because the analysis is made on the one hand, with the possible liminality of identity construction and on the other hand, in the context of adherence to an organisation’s strategic direction. It is acknowledged that, for example, although a strong commitment to the strategic direction of the organisation is constructed, uncertainty and anxiety might also be constructed around identity.

Because the data consist of only 12 interviews, it is possible to deeply analyse the studied phenomenon. The focus is on the interplay between the narrated strategic change and narrative identity construction of the branch managers. Strategic change is understood in the context of this study as an integral part of the identity construction process. The branch managers wondered: “How do I perceive the changes?” and “How do these changes influence me?” Both of these are natural questions in situations of change. The presumption has been that the changes hit the branch managers hardest – in ways both good and bad.

Hence, the branch managers’ narratives are categorised by conversion/de-conversion and by the nature of the liminality – transitional or perpetual. In addition, other elements constructed in the narratives are analysed, such as the structure of the narratives also connected to whether expectations are met and future anticipations. I have rewritten the narratives and given them descriptive names. In my thesis, I call the narratives constructed in branch managers’ interviews “original narratives” and the analysed ones, “rewritten narratives”. In addition, the five rewritten narrative categories are labelled to illustrate the features they have in common: “busy businessmen”, “camel boots managers,” “cliff-hangers”, “senior survivors” and “poker faces”. These categories will be expounded upon later in this thesis.
The liminality of the branch managers’ narrative identities also emerged in their conflicting business-orientation versus people-orientation discourses. These two discourses were analysed thematically in more detail, and seven antagonist themes were identified. One end of the spectrum was the sources of liminality, and the other, the sources of stability: 1) too much control/room to manoeuvre, 2) compliance/ rebelliousness 3) loneliness/belonging, 4) lack of trust/trust, 5) new expertise/old expertise 6) gender ignorance/gender sensibility and 7) value mismatch/value match. Besides new expertise/old expertise, all themes deal with perpetual liminality. The needed transfer in expertise describes in more detail the new competences expected from the branch managers and hence the expected, ideal branch manager profile. These themes are regarded as the building blocks in the branch managers’ identity construction leading to liminality or stability.

In my study, strategic change was chopped down to smaller pieces to include structural changes in the organisation as well as demands for updating competences. The antagonist themes that were constructed demonstrated the ambiguity and controversial demands that the branch managers were facing. Some felt the changes to be more radical than others and in comparing the data; three relevant elements which have affected the narrated liminality could be identified: 1) phase in branch manager’s career, 2) gender and 3) branch location.

It appeared that seniority brought with it calmness and self-assurance, to language use. Gender was not originally regarded as an integral part of my study, but emerged strongly through female branch managers’ narratives in a rather traditional manner — how to balance between work and home. Also, the branch location seemed to play a role because branch managers described themselves rather differently depending on whether they were responsible for a single branch in that specific area or whether there were multiple branches located nearby that were led by their colleagues, which is the case in larger cities.

These findings contribute to the on-going middle management discussion with a fresh approach since liminality has not previously been applied to the middle management discussion and because liminality is overall a rather new theoretical approach in organisational studies (Beech, 2011; Ybema et al., 2011). The attention has been, for example, on temporary workers (Garsten, 1999) and external consultants (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003), which struggle to find their identity for reasons different than those of regular full-time employees.

The conversion of middle management to strategic change (Ballis & Richardson, 1997; Bryant & Wolfram Cox, 2004) gives the needed other dimension to the analysis. According to the findings of the study, the branch managers’ narratives differ in their construction of the change and their new role expectations in the new organisational structure with new focus areas. Even if the changes are narratively constructed as positive, the branch managers may struggle to find their own place. This “soul-searching” for a new identity can take a while, or it can be a longer-term feeling of being in the middle. The former describes transitional liminality, and the latter, perpetual.

The division between strategic and operational responsibilities of the branch managers was constructed particularly fuzzily due to mixed messages from senior management. On the one hand, branch managers were said to be banking business unit managers, but on the other hand, they were portrayed as though they were constantly being controlled. At times, the branch managers expressed that it is easier to simply “do as told” rather than be innovative. Another issue related to this was the branch managers’ ability to delegate
operational-level management responsibility to group managers (managers under branch managers’ supervision responsible for their own sales groups). These two issues are closely related, and the main challenge is thus: How does a branch manager delegate responsibility in a completely new role in which the mandate is unclear? These dilemmas have a strong impact on identity construction, as my study reveals.

In addition, the structural analysis of the narratives revealed the importance of clear future expectations and career aspirations. In other words, a strong belief in one’s own survival and success in the future seemed to diminish the narrated liminality. Liminality was there, but not as something gloomy or completely paralysing. Taking every aspect already mentioned into account, I state as the main theoretical contributions of my study four issues: Firstly, although a middle manager’s narrative identity is constructed as converted to organisation’s strategy, it is possible that he struggles in liminality, which can be either transitional, perpetual or a mixture of them both. It is also possible that there are no signs of liminality in the middle manager’s language use. Secondly, narrative identity and liminality of the middle management is closely related to: 1) seniority, 2) gender and 3) age. These all seem to increase or decrease the narrated liminality. Thirdly, lack of clear rites of passage to new identity can be signalled through liminality in middle manager’s language use. Fortly, close relations with one’s supervisor and colleagues can diminish the narrated liminality of middle manager in change. In addition, my study has also theoretical implications which are more closely related to the challenging position of middle management. They deal with three following inter-related challenges: 1) the strategic aspect of the middle managers’ duties, 2) the relationship of middle managers and their immediate supervisor and 3) the organisational position of the middle managers between senior management and front-line management.

The middle management discussion and narrative identity construction through liminality are my core theoretical starting points. The approach of my study is empirically loaded, and therefore it is justified that the concept of narrative is covered both in theoretical and methodological chapters. In the theoretical chapter, the focus is on describing the logic of identity construction through narratives, whereas in the methodological chapter, the focus shifts to the actual research process and narratives are covered as research method. The strategic change discussion is out of the scope of this study. Although the changes in the focus organisation take place on a strategic level, strategic change is understood as a contextual factor. Hence, the exclusion of the discussion on strategic change in general was intentional on my part.

In the next chapter I will explain in more detail the development of the study and the exact scope. However, it is crucial to mention at this point that although the process has been iterative, the exact research question emerged from reading the empirical data and figuring out “what is this about”? Hence, the start of the process can be well characterised as mystery-solving (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007).

1.3 Research process

In this chapter, I cover my research process, including the struggles I encountered due to my insider status in the Bank and the difficulties in finding a suitable discussion to which to contribute. My research process was not straightforward one and hence, I did not know in
the beginning where I would eventually end up and with what kind of results. The focus
was on branch managers right from the start, but the connection to the discussions of
middle management and identity construction came along much later in the final stages
because I had such a strong will to label myself as a leadership scholar. In the Figure 1 is
presented the development of my research process shortly.

Figure 1 Research process

I started my research process by reading literature, but things really began to progress after
conducting the interviews. Somehow I felt more secure to stick with the literature and my
theoretical ideas based on these readings. The empirical data lifted my research project to a
whole new level. Although the interviews were intriguing to read and transcribe, I had a
feeling of being lost. All the literature I had read beforehand appeared too abstract because
the data I gathered dealt with such practical issues. At the same time as I was analysing the
empirical data, I was reading more literature in order to find out more clearly what the
interviews revealed. I had spent many years reading leadership studies, and I was especially
mesmerised by the shared leadership (e.g., Pearce & Conger, 2003). However, I struggled
to connect the leadership theories to my interview data because the data were one-
dimensional from a leadership process perspective. In other words, I was not able to access
the socially constructed relational process with it (Hosking, 2011). Eventually, I realised
that the branch managers for the most part talked about themselves in their interviews.
After this “finding”, I decided to focus theoretically on middle management and their
identity construction. The narrative approach provided room to illustrate the vivid and
emotional language use in the original narratives co-constructed in the interviews. The
theory of liminality came along as the main element of my study much later on while I was reading studies on identity construction. It seemed like I had finally found the missing piece of my puzzle. I usually say that the idea of liminality came to me accidentally, but another way of putting it is that if one reads a lot, something interesting will likely come along eventually.

My research process can be characterised as iterative because I was simultaneously reading literature and analysing the data. Reading the interview data and being part of the every organisational interaction as a native in the Bank guided my attention to certain kind of literature and vice versa (e.g., Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008.) I tried to make a graphical illustration of my research process, but it proved to be impossible because of its “messiness” and long duration with multiple twist and turns. Therefore I decided to settle with Figure 1, which illustrates the major steps and decision points in my research process. Turnbull (2002) listed the steps of the research process but pointed out that although a step may appear as completed at one point of time, it most likely will be re-opened due to iteration. The basic ontological and epistemological assumptions of my study have remained the same from the start until the end. Social constructionism has enabled me to include my own voice in the text. However, the exact scope and research question were reformulated several times until they reached their final form (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004, 155).

My reflections have been on-going and are emphasised here in the final thesis. Sharing the logic of reasoning along the way hopefully enables my readers to follow the choices made along the way (Silverman, 2000). It is vital to be open about the chain of argumentation and to describe how the analysis is carried out systematically. I agree with Turnbull (2002) who strongly stated that research is always value-laden, regardless of the approach. Therefore, it is crucial to reflect on the choices made and one’s own beliefs and assumptions. This has been at times demanding for me because so many things seemed so self-evident. Luckily, presentations in research seminars have enabled me to broaden my descriptions and realise that I have to reveal more in order to make this thesis more easily readable. This reflexivity takes into account me as a researcher and as a cultural, historical and political being who carries around past experiences. Thus, I am not able to start from a clean slate, a “tabula rasa”, especially as an insider. I also feel that the time that has passed between the data collection and final analysis has had an impact. The research process became more complex as I familiarised myself with the phenomenon at hand. Constructing a solid base by argumentation took time. I also noticed that no construction is final because there are so many angles from which to choose. One description of the phenomenon justified with argumentation is always still “the best possible guess” (Alasuutari, 2001) – a “guesstimate”.

Gummesson (2000) clearly pointed out how the so-called understanding grows gradually. We all have our prior knowledge and pre-understanding from our own experience and from the experience of others that we read from books and other sources. Our understanding of the studied phenomenon develops through our personal involvement and from reading articles and books. Also, our past experiences influence our perceptions. In other words, pre-understanding is the input which helps us to solve the research problem, and understanding is the output of the research process. However, the process is hardly ever a straightforward one and hence consists of several phases in which the understanding grows. Gummesson (2000) claimed that it is important to take advantage
of one’s pre-understanding but not to become its slave. However, the description presented here by Gummesson (2000) differs from the social constructionist view in which knowledge and identities are constructed socially and therefore no method can be regarded as a door to someone else’s experiences. Although I am doing a narrative study in which memory plays a part, I am not attempting to re-collect authentic memories (e.g. Hytti, 2003); instead the focus is on co-construction, with the researcher as part of the process.

So where does my study stand from a theory-building point of view? Alvesson and Sandberg (2011) saw two distinctive ways to approach the research question and position oneself in the field of academic studies: 1) spotting gaps in the existing literature or 2) problematising the study’s phenomenon from a novel angle and hence challenging the basic assumptions in the existing literature. I see my study following neither of these, exactly; instead, it is a combination of the two. I am drawing together the existing literature on middle management, identity and liminality but also challenging the mainstream managerialist writings on middle management. My research question did emerge originally from the data as I realised that the branch managers were telling stories about themselves and hence constructing their identities. The contribution of my study comes mainly from further development of the theory of middle management and liminality from a social constructionist orientation. My research question is intentionally broad, labelling only the phenomenon under study. Hence, the process of identity construction through liminality is understood in my study as a lens through which I am revitalising the on-going discussion (Alvesson et al., 2008) on middle management.

1.4 Structure of the study

Chapter 1 starts with the objective and the expected contribution of the study and sheds light on my research process. In addition, the structure of the thesis will be described. Previously, in the Prologue, the starting points of my study were covered. The theoretical discussion of the study in Chapter 2 covers a discussion of narrative identity construction through liminality and of middle management. The middle management discussion deals with whether the middle management position is operational or strategic and then later on enters into the narrative approach on middle management identity. The focus is on narrative identity construction from a social constructionist perspective, and so the other approaches to identity construction will therefore be covered briefly. Some time is spent on the controversial issues surrounding identity: division between personal and social identity, need for coherence and integration, and the concept of role in relation to identity. The concept of liminality is central in the identity construction process and is thus explained in detail. It refers to “being at the threshold identity-wise” for a fixed (transitional liminality) or prolonged period (perpetual liminality). The concept of liminality as well the multiple approaches to self in identity construction are described in detail. Multiple selves refer to the authentic self, cast self, expected self and desired self. In addition, the emotions embedded in liminality are also covered, in recognition that identity construction is understood as an emotional process.

Chapter 3, on methodology, goes through in detail how the data analysis was carried out – from the interviews to the final report. Chapter 3 also includes a short description of the focus organisation. A lot of effort is spent on describing the choices made along the way
and explaining the concrete steps of the analysis. The emphasis of this chapter is on describing the chain of choices and reasoning behind the argumentation. Social constructionism guides the methodology as a philosophical orientation, but it is also part of the theory of identity construction as well, because identity construction is understood as a co-construction. In many ways, this study can be categorised as methodologically loaded. The narratives are analysed through conversion stories which take into account, besides the possible identity transformation, the commitment to the set strategic direction and the expressed emotions towards the large-scale changes taking place in the organisation. Multiple methods are used to analyse the controversial narratives of the middle managers in strategic change: structural analyses, rewritten narratives and antagonist themes based on theme analysis.

Chapter 4's five rewritten narrative identities – “busy businessmen”, “camel boots managers”, “cliff-hangers”, “senior survivors” and “poker faces” – on the one hand illustrate the research data and on the other hand are concurrently rewritten and analysed. Hence, the data illustration and analysis are presented simultaneously.

Chapter 5 separates the rewritten narratives according to conversion/de-conversion and whether the nature of their liminality is transitional or perpetual. In addition, other methods such as structural analysis are used in order to explain the division into five categories. The connection of the multiple selves is also discussed in relation to branch managers’ identity construction and liminality. Also presented are the controversial themes, the sources of liminality and stability in the narratives: too much control/room to manoeuvre, compliance/rebelliousness, loneliness/belonging, lack of trust/trust, new expertise/old expertise, gender ignorance/gender sensibility, and value mismatch/value match.

Finally, Chapter 6 presents the theoretical conclusions and the managerial implications of the study. There is also an assessment of the research process and evaluation of the outcomes. The last sub-chapter is reserved for possible future research directions.

Some remarks about the text: the interviewed branch managers were both male and female, but as I discuss interviews in general, I use the pronouns “he” and “him”. In addition, Sampo Bank, the context organisation, is at times called “the Bank” for the sake of brevity.
2. NARRATIVE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION OF MIDDLE MANAGEMENT

The objective of this chapter is to set up the theoretical discussion on middle management, narrative identity and liminality. This study takes a fresh perspective on the identity construction processes through narrative identity. The focus is on the potential liminality of middle managers in the course of strategic change. However, this chapter covers middle management, narrative identity construction and liminality conceptually, whereas strategic change remains as the contextual factor in my study and is therefore left out of the theoretical framework. Also the alternative approaches to identity are covered in this chapter. In the end of this chapter I will synthesise the theoretical discussions presented in this chapter as well summarise the theoretical framework applied in my study.

2.1 Middle management

In this chapter, I will describe the demanding organisational position of middle management in the centre between controversial expectations. I will also cover the prior studies which ponder the status of middle management on a strategic and operational level. Finally, I will set the scene for a narrative understanding of middle management after presenting the concept of narrative identity.

2.1.1 Ambiguous position of middle management

In this chapter, it is crucial to start with a definition of the middle management. According to Yukl (2010) and Wooldridge et al. (2008), defining middle management is not an easy task because in organisational reality it differs from one organisation to another. Characteristic of a middle manager is an organisational position in the middle: being at the same time a leader and a follower. Dutton & Ashford (1993:398) defined middle managers as managers who supervise supervisors and are supervised by others. This definition excludes top level management and first-line supervisors.

Combining these two, manager and follower, for the same person is demanding because he is expected to present and support the ideas of his supervisor and his own subordinates. Middle managers are supposed to implement large-scale, top-down changes successfully and at the same time encourage bottom-up initiatives in their own unit or department. It has also been stated that the middle management position is seen as a temporary position as the middle managers hope to soon be promoted to a senior level (Sims, 2003; Thomas & Dunkerley, 1999). A more exact definition of middle management is challenging because of the contextual nature of the position which is dependent on the organisation under discussion. This also makes it difficult to accumulate knowledge in the middle management discussion because constructing generalisations is demanding if not impossible.
Wooldridge et al. (2008:1190–1192) stated that although the discussion on middle management has gained interest over the past decades, the challenge lies in the great diversity of terms and methodologies that have been used. They also determined the underlying motivation behind the focus on middle management to be related to three factors: 1) the intermediate position of the middle managers between top management and operational employees; 2) the important role of the middle managers in today’s large and geographically dispersed organisations, which need robust management and leadership all around the organisation; and 3) the crucial angle of middle management to focus on capacity renewal and development instead of top management.

On the one hand, middle management is crucial in making the chosen strategy work in practice (Aaltonen & Ikävalko, 2002). On the other hand, Huy (2001) claimed that the value of middle management is not understood properly in change situations. Middle managers have the best possible place in organisations to “make things happen”, and they are used to operating under the pressure and tension between change and continuity. Huy (2002) also brought to light the important role of middle managers in large-scale organisational changes as facilitators, who balance the organisation emotionally during drastic change.

However, as Kilpimaa (2013) vividly described, middle managers may enter into an identity search during organisational changes, especially if the changes have consequences for the organisation’s social practices, such as the changing the dynamics of official meetings into more participatory formats. The question that may arise for them is: “What is my role in the current organisation if I do not necessarily have the final call?” Middle management’s role has been under a magnifying glass due to more participatory ways of managing and an emphasis on team work (e.g., Thomas & Linstead, 2002).

Thomas and Linstead (2002) summarised the main elements of the discussion circulating around middle management, which paints a positive and negative future at the same time for middle management. The majority of the literature states that middle management is becoming unnecessary, whereas some argue that it has been moving closer to the strategic apex in organisations and thus has an even more important role than before. Thus, the discussion is characterised by contradictory statements. On the one hand, middle management is valued as the “saviour” and on the other hand as the “source of everything that is wrong” in the contemporary organisations.

The middle management discussion has been intense and was especially so around the millennium. The organisational position of middle management has been stormy and unstable in recent years due to organisational restructuring and downsizing. Floyd and Wooldridge (1994) stated that in the 80s and 90s, several companies had started cost reduction programs by de-layering and cutting out middle management positions. However, in many cases this did not lead to the expected results as performance did not increase and, as a negative side-effect, for example creativity disappeared.

Thomas and Dunkerley (1999) stated that the commitment of middle management is mainly directed to the task at hand instead of the organisation because the assumption is that the organisation does not really consider them as anything other than disposable assets. This impression has been intensified by pressure coming from top management and the fear of being laid off if targets are not met. Many middle managers claim that organisational restructuring has relieved the feeling of “being stuck in the middle”, and

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their duties have in many cases transformed into more fulfilling ones. Paradoxically, these changes have also brought greater responsibilities and stress.

Laine and Vaara (2007) and Sims (2003) admitted that it is common for supervisors to ignore middle management. This behaviour is not necessarily intentional; it just happens because the achievements may appear too small to be noticed since top management has so many things going on at the same time. Top management can be a “prisoner of its past” in the discourses it uses and therefore unconsciously fail to notice the disempowering language they use or simply their silence.

Balogun and Johnson (2004) stated in their study on organisational restructuring that middle managers are as much the implementers as the recipients of change, although they may have had little say in the official strategic decision-making process. This widens the gap between senior and middle managers. In addition, many times the new, more de-layered organisational structures further separate these two actors physically due to geographical distance. However, although the relationship becomes remote, the senior managers influence implementation as “ghosts” in the sense-making process of the middle managers.

Luscher and Lewis (2008) illustrated in their study in the organisational change context how middle managers do their best to interpret, communicate and implement change, although they are surrounded by paradoxes of performing, belonging and organising. These paradoxes have to do with the different kinds of uncertainties they feel, such as the future, their own position and role in the new organisational structure, trust issues, lack of open communication and the dilemma between following centralised orders versus making decisions independently. Thomas and Linstead (2002) pointed out that middle managers do their absolute best to accommodate themselves to the demands of contemporary working life with long hours at the expense of family life and sufficient room to be themselves. They attempt to fulfil others’ expectations and be “more” or “something different” than before. At times, there is confusion about what exactly is expected from them and what kind of mandate they have.

Beyond a more general middle management discussion, there is a clear line separating the traditional functionalist perspective and the post-modern approach. The former highlights performance and efficiency from top management’s point of view and links the possible improvement of performance to middle management’s involvement in the strategy process (Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990). The latter gives the stage to the middle managers themselves to tell their stories about their sense making and identity construction in the middle (Thomas & Linstead, 2002).

In my study, the focus is on the stories middle managers themselves tell, but before entering into that perspective, a discussion surrounding the role of the middle management in the strategy process.

2.1.2 Strategic and operational focus of middle management

In this chapter, the controversial discussion of middle management’s duties and organisational position is presented. Should middle managers have a role in the strategy process itself or be purely responsible of the implementation part? Wooldridge et al. (2008), in their broad review of earlier studies on middle management and strategising,
pointed out the fragmentation of the studies on middle management and strategy and called for approaches which would provide knowledge on the roles of middle management in the strategy process.

Westley (1990) stated that middle managers feel mostly dissatisfied being excluded from the strategy process. However, inclusion does not immediately create increased satisfaction. The main point seems to be having a significant say in the conversation and access to the actual strategy processes. Floyd and Wooldridge (1994) claimed that the active involvement of middle managers in the strategy process will improve the strategy itself and also have a positive impact on the implementation process. Thus, it is important that middle managers take part in the “thinking” as well as in the “doing”. Rouleau (2005) portrayed in an ethnographic study how, after strategic change, middle managers cleverly mingled with various external stakeholders such as clientele and sold the new direction to them. At first, the activities they engaged in during their day-to-day duties did not appear to be strategic, but a closer look confirmed them as such.

According to Santalainen (2009), operational management can be so concentrated on daily activities that strategic issues seem too distant, although they have gathered a huge amount of knowledge that might prove useful in strategy building. Floyd and Wooldridge (1997) saw that particularly middle managers in boundary-spanning positions such as marketing and R&D have a lot to contribute in strategic processes due to their exhaustive knowledge because they mediate between internal and external constituencies. Pappas and Wooldridge (2007) noted that regardless of their official position as boundary-spanners, middle managers should widen their horizons and enter into conversations with external and internal actors in order to construct divergent strategic information. The findings of Pappas and Wooldridge (2007) suggested that including middle management in the strategy process is probably not enough to reinforce the desired strategic behaviour. Therefore, learning by doing and these boundary-spanning relationships are needed. However, Besson and Mahieu (2011) stated that it is not an easy task for middle managers to rise to the strategic level after many years of being regarded as operational management. The transformation does not take place instantly after, for example, participating in strategy trainings.

Dutton & Ashford (1993) and Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, Hayes, and Wierba (1997) examined the selling of strategic issues to top management by middle managers. Dutton & Ashford (1993) saw the middle managers having important role in strategy process due to their practical view point from front-line. Also, involvement to formal strategy process had positive impact to middle management’s commitment. Dutton et al., (1997) stated that before entering into the selling process, the middle managers tried to evaluate whether it was the proper time and place to make suggestions and show initiative to top management. Being included in the strategy discussion and accepted in the eyes of top management created a sense of credibility and competence and thus had a positive impact on the overall reputation of the middle managers. However, if the selling was perceived negatively as inappropriate and the top management appeared uninterested, there was a chance of being stigmatised as having failed in the selling. Middle managers were aware of their own status in the middle and did not regard themselves as fully autonomous; thus, reading the context before entering the stage was necessary. Rouleau and Balogun (2011) further developed the strategic selling just mentioned (Dutton et al., 1997). They stated that because middle managers on many occasions lack the formal authority to act
strategically, the effectiveness of their actions relies on their discursive competence to craft messages and make them meaningful for others. This process, besides language use, also includes taking into account the surroundings in which the strategic conversations with other relevant stakeholders take place and orchestrating the selling process in such a manner that it interests the recipients as well. This means getting into corporate politics, having informal conversations, getting to know relevant people and positioning oneself in a conversation in a credible manner. Hence, Rouleau and Balogun (2011) divided the strategic sense-making process of middle managers into performing the actual conversation as well as setting the scene for the conversation, which both call for discursive competence.

The study by Floyd and Wooldridge (1992:154) categorised the activities of middle managers in influencing strategic issues. Firstly, middle managers are able to report to top managers relevant information from the field, which can have an impact on strategic direction. Secondly, their closer connection to the organisation’s practice makes them capable of proposing initiatives. Thirdly, middle managers also have a crucial task in facilitating the process of their subordinates getting on board with the change; and fourthly, they are actually responsible for the implementation of the new strategy.

Mantere (2008) continued the discussion of middle management and strategic agency by utilising in as the starting point of his study the theory of Floyd and Wooldridge (1992) just presented. He saw this theory as functionalist based on the expectations put on middle managers. In order for middle managers to succeed in these four strategic activities (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992) the activities have to be transformed to reciprocal. Hence, middle management also has expectations for top management in order to succeed in these activities and these expectations have to be acknowledged. This means, for example, an implementation perspective that includes the middle managers in the strategic planning process and provides them the background and rationalisation behind the chosen strategy. This participation will transform the future more predictable for middle managers. All of the four activities were looked at from middle management’s perspective.

Floyd and Lane (2000) constructed the roles of middle managers in an organisational renewal context and built upon the activities of Floyd and Wooldridge (1992) mentioned previously. Some of these roles are clearly described in their job description as primary roles, whereas others are characterised as secondary ones, rising to the surface when needed and thus not part of day-to-day activities. A possible role conflict can arise due to, for example, expectations posed by top management that are incongruent with current competencies. In addition, environmental changes can cause questioning of which role to follow. Middle managers act as filters because they can decide what kind of information they will pass through to top management from the operational level depending on their own views of the state of affairs and personal agendas. Therefore, a position in the middle demands an understanding of operational-level processes and strategic issues.

Balogun and Johnson (2005) stated that no matter how hard senior management attempts to guide and watch over those lower down in the organisational structure in implementing a strategy, they cannot achieve full control. They also pointed out that managing change is more about facilitating the change than controlling it. Balogun (2003) suggested that changing the mind-set from blaming the middle managers for everything that goes wrong in strategic changes to appreciating the mostly unused potential in them. Hence, middle managers should be recognised as intermediaries of change; instead of implementers or recipients. Their duty is to keep the business going and to implement the
needed changes. Their personal sense making in change is the key because if they see themselves as crucial participants of the change process, the change will be more likely to be carried out successfully.

It appears as though the trend would be to replace traditional ways of talking about management with more strategic direction. However, in the studies of Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a, 2003b) and Carroll and Levy (2008), these “new strategic discourses” most likely break down when managers are asked about their actual daily activities; instead of talking on more abstract levels about the definitions of management and leadership. Management seems to be the default identity and leadership as the desired one, but hard to obtain in practice (Grint, 2005). This might be especially the case with middle management, which has for many decades been expected to take care of the implementation of changes and not so much of planning on strategic level. In my study I am not going into the discussion between leadership and management as processes. However, this discussion exemplifies the difficulties related to moving to “strategic level”.

In the next chapter, the focus shifts to narrative identity and is followed by the middle management’s perspective and how they experience their position through narratives.

2.2 Narrative identity

In this study, the identities presented in interviews are seen as being co-constructed in a socially constructed process. Narrative identities describe how we construct ourselves with others and in relation to them. Narrative identity is regarded as a constantly on-going, never-ending process. In narratives that are generated in a specific moment, we answer the question, “Who am I?”

Åkerberg (2002) pointed out that the narrative approach to identity puts language use in the centre as a way to construct ourselves. Narratives are especially suitable for studying identities because identities are not taken as “possessions” or as humans having a portfolio of multiple identities to choose from. Rather, different aspects of identity rise to the surface depending on the time, space, meaningful associations and relationships in which the storytelling takes place. Thus, anything appearing stable is purely a discursive construction. Alvesson et al. (2008) also identified five different views regarding when identity construction take place. It is understood as 1) an on-going process, 2) a result of critical incidents, 3) a result of major changes such as transformational shifts in, for example, occupation, 4) a result of reoccurring micro incidents such as something taking place in day-to-day work and 5) irrelevant because identity is more or less stable. My approach views identity construction as an on-going process, which is intensified through critical events co-constructed in narratives.

The biggest focus in this chapter is on narrative identity and how it is constructed in according to the guidelines set out by social constructionism. For me, social constructionism and the narrative approach to identity are understood broadly as the orientation of the study rather than purely the methodological tools which I am using. I also make clear my understanding of the differences between the concepts of identity and role, which appears to present especially in everyday language. However next will be defined the relation between the concepts of narrative, discourse and story as understood in this study.
2.2.1 Defining narratives, discourses and stories

Stories have been a natural way to pass knowledge to younger generations and make sense of our lives and social relationships; therefore, using stories is an excellent method to study identity construction as well. However, as will be explained, I also consider narrative identity to be a specific form of identity construction. Thus, I feel that it is crucial to define the concept of narrative as well as story and discourse as part of my theoretical framework.

The narrative form dates back to Vladimir Propp and the release of his book “Morphology of Folktale”, in which he analysed Russian folktales (Propp, 1928). The interest in narratives started out originally from literature studies in which the focus was on the text as such, not on the writer’s (or speaker’s) intention or contextual factors, as is the usual case today. Later, the attention to narratives also emerged in the humanities and social sciences. In the 1990s, it became a common approach, and thus, “the trickle became a stream”. In management studies, narratives gained a larger foothold in the 1990s, and the development has gained speed ever since (Czarniawska, 2004). Narratives have roots in social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), and “narrative knowing” (Polkinghorne, 1995) is accomplished through written and oral language use. However, there are considerable diversities and disagreements between the various narrative approaches, mainly depending on the underlying philosophical assumptions. The historical roots of narrative theory can be traced back to philosophy, literature, communication studies and languages (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Hänninen (2004:69) pointed out that narrative research has exploded and currently serves as “a huge buffet” to which each discipline has brought their flavours. Everything is available for everybody and all flourish together as a one happy family.

The terms “narrative” and “story” are used interchangeably in this study (Kohler-Riessman, 2008), although it is common to differentiate between them by understanding narratives as chronologically ordered events and stories as more advanced forms of narratives with emplotment (Czarniawska, 2004; Watson, 2009). However, traditionally a narrative is taken as more “truthful” if it meets all four following criteria: 1) it has a valued endpoint (a goal), 2) important events considering the endpoint are told, 3) the important events are presented in linear order and 4) there are causal linkages between the events (Gergen, 1999). Ricouer (1984) emphasised uncompromisingly the emplotment constructing a temporal and coherent narrative with clear cause–effect linkages. Polkinghorne (1995) stated that there does not seem to be a clear vision of how to define stories and narratives and whether to use the term “emplotted narratives” instead of “stories” because, somehow, the term “story” seems less valuable: “It is only a story”. He called this process in which the events are put together into an emplotted coherent whole “narrative configuration”. It is also fair to say that not everything communicated orally can be categorised as a narrative, although the concept has become popular in academic circles and common language. This diversity of definitions makes the concept of the narrative remain rather controversial. Some demand coherence and temporality, whereas others accept more or less fragmented tales as narratives as well. For the sake of simplicity, I will not make a separation between these two concepts: narrative and story in this study. Therefore, they will be used interchangeably.

Narratives can be approached from different levels. Meta-narratives or grand narratives are global and culturally loaded with beliefs and habits to explain and understand the world.
These are in a way the universal truth of the state of affairs at that particular moment, which is self-evident for everyone sharing those beliefs. Personal narratives, on the other hand, take into account the uniqueness of each narrative, the contextual factors and the emotional side as well. In between these grand narratives and personal narratives are the collective stories shared among certain communities (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). In addition, there is a genre of completely fictional or semi-fictional narratives (e.g., Rhodes & Brown, 2005) that are also used in academic studies to make deep descriptions of potentially sensitive issues that would otherwise be impossible to reveal.

What then, is the relationship between narrative and discourse? Grant, Hardy, Oswick, and Putnam (2004) categorised narratives as a type of organisational discourse that put more emphasis on context and use more rhetorical devices in their construction than do other discursive forms. I use this definition in my study since I emphasise meaning making through language use and value the branch managers’ narratives due to their vivid descriptions. Hence, I see no contradiction in using at times the terms “discourse” or “discursive” as I go along, especially in the final analysis and the presentation of the controversial themes constructed from branch managers’ narratives. Furthermore, Koskinen et al. (2005) pointed out that the impact of rhetoric in narratives transforms them into artistically flavoured data. This was also recognised as a factor in my research data because the branch managers’ narratives differed a great deal in many ways, including structure and pace. Some branch managers used more versatile language, and others were more reflective and careful in choosing their words.

2.2.2 Socially constructed narrative identity

The socially constructionism refers to the ontological and epistemological questions: “What is out there?”, “How is the reality constructed?” and “How can we know about it?” These are the basic questions that every researcher has to be able to answer. The chosen assumptions will guide the researcher all the way through, and, as Morgan (1986) stated, the researcher becomes a prisoner of the chosen path because the researcher is forced to follow the guidelines of a certain perspective and to ignore other possibilities. I feel that familiarising myself with also alternative philosophical assumptions has enabled me to stay true to my own commitments.

The social constructionist orientation in this study abandons the assumption of seeing identities as personal properties that people have. According to Burr (2003 [1995]:9), the focus turns from perceiving humans as separate entities with, for example personality traits, to social processes in which identities are constructed together. Social constructionism does not rely on the existence of an absolute objective truth. The idea dates back to the 1960s and to the ideas of Berger and Luckmann (1966) and has roots even further back in symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934) and in phenomenology (Schultz, 1970), which highlight the social nature of existence and meaning making. According to social constructionism identities are negotiated in relations with other as Gergen (1999:82) stated:

“Thus, who I am and the nature of my actions come to be negotiated and defined within relationships.”
Also Czarniawska-Joerges (1996) pointed out, identity construction can be understood to take place in the act of narrating as a co-constructed process in collaboration with the narrator himself and the audience. Hence, the audience is not used here in the traditional sense as composed of observers and listeners; instead, it is an active participant in the process.

“It is useful to treat identity as a narrative, or more properly speaking, a continuous process of narration where both the narrator and audience formulate, edit, applaud and refuse various elements of the constantly-produced narrative.” (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1996:160)

Burr (2003 [1995]:2) stated that there is a wide range of approaches that claim to belong under the umbrella of social constructionism. The approaches have similarities, but there is no single element these all have in common. However, for her it is enough that at least one of the elements listed below by Gergen can be found within the underlying assumptions. Gergen (1985:266–269; 1999:46–50) set the cornerstones of social constructionism:

1) There is criticality towards taken-for-granted knowledge. This refers to reflexivity and the ability to “suspend the obvious”, because our way of understanding is highly related culturally and historically. Hence, the way we see things is tied to certain époque in history. Thus, our understanding is not claimed to be better than others. This kind of critical reflection calls for giving legitimacy to other standpoints as well. There is an unlimited number of possible explanations available.

2) Knowledge is seen to be constructed in social processes and not as a possession of individual minds. Hence, what we regard as the truth is an accepted understanding at that particular moment. Therefore, what we consider to be true about the world and the self is a construction of coordination in social relations with others.

3) Knowledge and social action are bound together, and thus the constructions of the world define, for example, acceptable behaviour. These so-called “forms of life” are needed in order to interact, explain and describe things through meaning making. This also opens the door to transformation because through language it is possible to create something new as well as to challenge the existing ways of doing and thinking and present novel and fresh ideas.

. . . language is a major ingredient of our worlds of action; it constitutes social life itself. (Gergen, 1999: 49)

4) Language is seen as an action in which the world is constructed. The focus moves from the entities, such as personal traits, in studying identity towards the processes in which identities are co-constructed in social processes. The focus is on the language use by which the identities are co-constructed. Social constructionism and its derivatives have been sometimes accused of being too relativistic, referring to the idea that “anything goes”. However, the local culture sets the limits on what is accepted as a way to behave or react in interaction.

Hence, narratives are understood as dialogic in nature, which also has an impact on the analysis, as will be discussed later on. In addition, emotions are part of narrating, which can
cover a whole life or simply certain periods or episodes. In this study, identity is seen as a verb instead of a noun, because it is constantly under construction. In brief, I am not asking what a branch managerial identity is; instead, I am approaching identity construction through language use and inviting managers to share and co-construct their stories with me. Identity is taken as a process made to happen by language and not described as a stable state. The focus is on the “becoming” ontology (Chia, 1996) which highlights the identity construction as a constantly on-going never-ending process. According to social constructionism, self-reflection is seen as a social process in which a person evaluates and reflects on himself based on his cultural, social and historical background. Therefore, my own role as an insider and writing myself into the texts is perfectly acceptable.

Attention will now be turned to the middle management discussion from narrative perspective.

2.2.3 Narrative approach to middle management

According to Thomas and Linstead (2002), research questions should be rephrased from “What is happening to middle management?” stated by Dopson and Steward (1990) to “How is the identity of middle management constructed in discourses through meaning-making?” This kind of approach gives space to middle managers and takes them as active agents in their identity construction and reconstruction in organisational changes; instead of being purely passive recipients and accepting whatever comes their way. In addition, the approach enables researchers to move beyond the constant competition between the binary views on the status and future of middle management, which seem to lead nowhere.

Rivalry over whose claims are the most truthful about the status and future of middle management can, according to Thomas and Linstead (2002), be fruitless because it will be a never-ending discussion; there is always the possibility to claim to have, for example, better data and deeper analysis. The challenge lies in the epistemological assumptions behind the studies, which are for the most part traditional functionalist and positivistic. This creates at least two issues to be tackled. Firstly, middle management is understood in these discussions as a passive underdog who has no say in the changes. Secondly, middle management is approached as a more or less coherent unit, although defining middle managers is not an easy task and depends entirely on the organisation under study. Costas and Fleming (2009) stated that middle managers do not any longer know who they are due to self-alienation or at least dis-identification because they feel forced to “keep up appearances” in many organisations. In other words, middle managers are forced to behave in a certain kind of manner which may not feel natural for them.

The narratives of middle managers have to be plausible to both their superiors and subordinates. The stories targeted to these two audiences are not similar, which causes challenges. As stated, middle managers have at times difficulties manoeuvring in the middle and pleasing these two groups. The subordinates can perceive them as more powerful than themselves, and the superiors can perceive them as future competitors to be watched – but “harmless” for the moment, being lower in the organisational structure. This situation puts pressure on middle managers to appear competent in the eyes of their superiors. A problem also emerges from the fact that each of these two audiences can hear stories which were meant purely for the other one. This obviously causes inconsistencies because,
for example, middle managers tend to tell senior managers stories that paint a prettier picture than reality. However, the most demanding audience is the middle manager himself. At times, he is forced to tell stories he does not believe, which can cause an inner struggle (Sims, 2003).

Thomas and Linstead (2002) wondered if “the middle managers have lost the plot”, whereas Sims (2003) stated that problem more likely is that “the plot is no longer their own”. These two statements refer to the same issue from different angles. The former saw that middle managers are struggling to have their voice heard and make themselves needed, whereas the latter saw that middle managers are in a demanding position because they are involved in “corporate politics”, and they have to act according to certain rules and speak a certain kind of way. Whether the senior management position is something middle managers desire as a given will also be covered in this study. Thomas and Dunkerley (1999) stated that the restructurings have had both positive and negative consequences for middle managers. Due to de-layering, middle managers have also been feeling more job fulfilment as the responsibilities have been broadening, and their impression of “being stuck in the middle” has been diminishing. In the study by Thomas and Linstead (2002), middle managers from different industries were making sense of their identities through a variety of discourses: balancing work and family life, being the “peace-keeper” in the middle between the operational personnel and top management, feeling unvalued and disposable, being “on hold” in a temporary position during organisational changes, struggling over the role of expert/manager and being somehow unique compared to others.

The already mentioned status between the strategic and operational level has also been approached from status downgrading perspective. In my study, the middle managers gained new organisational status and were upgraded to profit centre managers. However, in Sirén’s (2009) study on managers’ narrative identities, the managers studied lost their positions in the organisations as strategists but still continued to regard themselves similarly, regardless of the organisational changes that downgraded them to be structurally closer to middle management.

In the next chapter the focus will be on the key tensional elements going-on in the identity literature in organisational studies.

2.3 Versatile approaches to identity in organisational studies

In this chapter the focus is on first on the alternative approaches to identity construction applied in organisational studies. Secondly the pivotal elements surrounding the concept of identity are addressed. Thirdly the focus is set on the multiple selves which are also applied theoretically in this study. They are presented part of this chapter for the sake of clarity after covering the controversial discussion on identity.

2.3.1 Alternative approaches to studying identity in organisations

Alvesson et al. (2008:6) stated that identity emerges as a lens through which all kinds of organisational phenomena are being approached today, and hence, the concept of identity can be linked to almost everything. They categorised the three main approaches broadly in
organisational studies on identity as follows based on their philosophical assumptions (Habermas, 1972): 1) social identity theory (SIT), 2) identity work and 3) identity control. Social identity theory is currently the most commonly used. Neither of these is the approach I chose, but I feel that is essential to briefly describe the alternative approaches used in the field of identity studies.

**Social identity theory** is based on the dominating functionalist understanding of the pursuit of effectiveness in organisations. It focuses on how people understand and position themselves as members of certain social categories, and how they define themselves through these categories. Overall, in a functionalist approach to identity, the demarcation between social and personal identity is strong. On the one hand, personal identity is connected to personal attributes and inner sense making. On the other hand, social identity refers to how a person sees oneself as a member of a group. However, as Alvesson et al. (2008) stated, the boundary between personal and social identity is indistinct because there are multiple social identities available from which to choose, for example, being both a manager and a mother.

Social identity theory focuses on the identification with a certain group and is originally based on the writings of Taifel (1981). In the first phase, individuals categorise themselves as well others to certain groups of people. In the second phase, individuals start acting as members of that particular group of people and thus identify themselves as part of it – for example, based on their profession. Individuals also begin to follow the behavioural rules of that group. In the third phase, as individuals have categorised themselves into a group and identified themselves strongly as members of that group, they start to compare others to themselves. The emphasis is on the superiority of one’s own group. (Tajfel, 1981.)

Ashforth and Mael (1989) introduced SIT to organisational studies, and it has been popular ever since. Kallio (2014) applied as a starting point in his study on middle management’s organisational identification a widely used theory from Elsbach (1999), which divides the individual’s organisational identification into four categories: positive identification, dis-identification, ambivalent identification and neutral identification. In Kallio’s (2014) study, the middle managers’ stories of their own identity construction in the organisational change context were mirrored against the officially stated ideal identity in that specific organisation. Positive identification and dis-identification were rather obvious and clear, but ambivalent and neutral identification required more explanation. Ambivalent identification took place when there were simultaneously strong positive identification and dis-identification. Hence, it was instrumental by its nature – for example, the focus was directed strongly on the personal development that a specific job offers and not as strongly on the organisation and the direction in which it was headed. Neutral identification was passive, and the current organisational position represented just a phase in life.

Organisation has been the main object of identification, but other groups, such as occupational (e.g., Eteläpelto & Vähäsantainen, 2008; Kirpal, 2004a) ones, have also gained ground. Watson (2008:131) categorised different social identities which can be adopted in social interaction: 1) social categories, such as nationality, gender or sex; 2) formal social roles, such as occupational position; 3) local-organisational categories, such as an old-school paternalistic manager; 4) local personality roles based on characterisations identified by others, such as the clown of the organisation and 5) cultural stereotypes, such as the boring accountant.
According to Mankkinen (2011), the challenge in making intra or inter-vocational identity comparisons is that they end up supporting the existing default understanding of a certain identity, such as nurses being caring. On the one hand, it has also been concluded that certain elements in professional identities appear to remain rather stable, regardless of the passage of time (e.g., Kirpal, 2004a). On the other hand, Kuusipalo (2008) stated that identities are not constructed in relation to an organisation’s values, and there are no signs of commitment towards a specific social category; hence, individuals do not seem to have a shared professional identity. This study was based on information and communications technology (ICT)-workers, and perhaps this rather new professional category compared to many others influenced the results. However, Palukka (2003) made interesting remarks on the identity construction of flight traffic controllers, whose professional identity could be characterised as “being in search for its legitimacy and status” with no implicit educational requirements, having an unstable position in the labour market and having important tasks to handle as well as much negative publicity in the media on their demands for better compensation and benefits.

Identity work focuses on the identity construction of individuals, for example, through narratives. This is the so-called native’s point of view and commonly used in narrative identity studies. The target in studying identity work is to interpret individual’s identity construction, for example, through personal narratives told in interviews (Alvesson et al., 2008). However the focus is on the internal mental activity in which an individual narrative is crafted and to deliver the native’s view to others. Individuals draw from their memories and desires as they construct themselves (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Watson (2008:130) claimed that identity work combines internal self-reflection and external interaction in identity construction. Identity work has similarities to my approach because its interest is in narratives and because identities are more characterised as “becoming” than “being”, as is the case in social identity. However, identity work emphasises individuals’ on-going mental activities and encounters with others and understands them as a chance to challenge one’s perceptions of self (Alvesson et al., 2008). Thus identity is not considered as co-constructed.

Regardless of the differences, I found intriguing the study by Montonen (2014) on the identity work of university start-up managers who constructed their identities as something in between an academic researcher and entrepreneur. Although the concept of liminality was not used explicitly in that specific study, it was conceptually implied implicitly. Originally, they were researchers who ended up transforming themselves into managers as well. The demands of doing both distinguished research and commercialisation were at times contradictory. The branch managers’ narrative identities in my study have similar kinds of contradictory features.

Identity control is based on a critical orientation in which organisations are seen to do their best to control the identities of their employees in the desired direction. This approach attempts to answer the question, “How identities are controlled?” (Alvesson et al., 2008). According to Kärreman and Alvesson (2004), organisations support through various actions the ideal identity construction, such as through internal management training sessions. These events can, for newcomers, be at the same time helpful as well as a cause for anxiety. It might be that even though visible control has diminished, it has been replaced with less obvious forms. Hence, although the structural cage has been loosened, it
has been accompanied with a stricter mental cage. This perspective on identity construction scrutinises the power issues and possible power asymmetries in organisations.

I have chosen to apply narrative identity construction from a socially constructed view because it gives space to approach narrative identity broadly and not to take as a starting point identity based on membership within a certain social group (SIT). This is justified in the context of my study, in which the branch managers are in the process of their identity construction in intra-role transition in strategic change. Moreover, organisational identification felt too restrictive and managerialist since the emphasis is on how individuals identify themselves with their organisation, including its strategic direction. Although the concept of organisational identity has roots in the same discussion as that of my study, it approaches identity construction differently. It appears to focus on positive and strong identification with one’s workplace and excludes or at least regards as negative other spheres in life such as family, whereas I have chosen to approach identity construction as a holistic phenomenon.

In the next chapter, I will continue discussion surrounding the concept of identity from several angles based on the three theories presented in this section and my own approach, the narrative identity.

2.3.2 Pivotal elements surrounding identity studies

This chapter approaches the key aspects that cause tension in the identity literature set by Alvesson et al. (2008); for the most part, they are generated by the different philosophical frameworks used — personal/social identity, coherent/dynamic identity and integrated/fragmented identity. These three controversial aspects will be covered in this chapter. I have also added one additional pair, identity/role, because the concept of role has been discussed broadly in the literature.

2.3.2.1 Personal versus social identity

Putting it simply, personal identity answers the question, “Who am I?”, and social identity refers to a certain group of people to which I belong, in other words, collective perception of self as a member of a certain group (Alvesson et al., 2008.) Personal identity is at times also called the “personal self” or “internal identity” and social identity the “discursive persona”. To make this even more confusing, the terms “internal self-identity” and “external social identity” are often used interchangeably (Watson, 2008.)

According to Watson (2008) these two notions of identity, personal (internal) and social (external), are mutually constitutive and linked by the discourses people use in constructing social identities or “publicly available personas”. Hence, these external, social aspects of identity are crafted alongside the internal, personal identity. However Watson (2008) saw a clear difference between these two notions, where personal identity (self-identity) refers to the notion of who someone is, whereas social identity is connected to cultural, discursive and institutional aspects of who a person could be. Social identity was already covered in the previous chapter from social identity theory’s perspective and therefore, the focus here is more on personal identity.
Hänninen (2000, 2004) used the term “inner narrative” when talking about the inner sense-making process; making fractions of it available to others happens through language use or other culturally familiar symbols. She stated that telling a narrative is never the same as the inner story, and parts of it will remain hidden. Hence, what takes place in inner sense making is partly made visible for others in social interaction, but not entirely. Also, as Kohler-Riessman (2008) stated, it is evident that the narrative is not the same as the actual experience because there is always the awareness of an audience to whom the narrator wants to give a certain kind of image of oneself, most likely a positive one.

Hänninen (2000, 2004) divided the narrative forms into three categories: told narrative, inner narrative and lived narrative. Told, external narrative is the most obvious one, because it comes out in the open. The inner narrative is the narrative that we tell to ourselves and through which we organise our experiences. The lived narrative refers to notions of human life as a narrative and, as such, is filled with episodes entailing beginnings, middle parts and ends. Told narratives make the inner narrative partly external and serves as a validation process. This has a close connection to the perceived identity confirmation process that takes place in social interactions and which will be discussed later on in the chapter dealing with the difference between identity and role (chapter 2.3.2.4) (Down & Reveley, 2009).

Watson (2008) encouraged taking into account the social context in which identities are constructed in order to avoid the danger of falling into the trap of engaging in an overly reductionist approach, which purely concentrates on the “inner” aspects of identity construction, leaving the social structures, cultures and discourses totally unexplored. In addition, Watson (2008, 2009) saw it as crucial to broaden the identity perspective from focusing purely on work identity into a holistic view of identity because people have their private selves in addition to their public selves, and being, for example, a manager is only half of the story.

As previously discussed, from a social constructionist perspective, social identity theory is problematic. Also, the personal, internal identity is related to an individual’s sense-making process and in constructivist studies, the researcher makes an effort to give an authentic voice to those under study. In social constructionist orientation it is acknowledged that narrative identity is always a co-construction and not a vehicle to inner self.

2.3.2.2 Coherent versus dynamic identity

Narrative coherence has been a hot topic in recent years because it has been traditionally considered a virtue and a sign of the healthy life of the narrator. Coherence implies three factors: 1) a narrative is considered as coherent if it proceeds chronologically, having a beginning, middle and an end; 2) experience is regarded as formless, and thus the narrative creates the coherence for it and 3) humans are supposed to live a better life if their life-story is constructed as a coherent narrative. When the narrative approach was adopted into social inquiry, it was regarded that good narratives were coherent and complete, and the possible ambiguities, complexities and undecided features were left aside (Hyvärinen, Hydén, Saarenheimo, & Tamboukou, 2010). Alternative option is to understand identity as temporary and context-driven constantly on the move.
Coupland (2001) pointed out that the Western conception of humans has relied heavily on an essentialist conception of the self, which may explain the discourse of “no change” in people’s talk in change contexts. Admitting that change has taken place would imply the possibility of incoherent self, which would be against the stable image of the self. Hall (1999) stated that earlier on identities were more distinct and based, for example, on religion, race, gender or nationality, whereas today these features are becoming more fragmented. However, Hall (1999) saw contemporary post-modern individuals as being constantly on the move and thus as constructing less coherent and more fragmented identities. Hence, post-modern individuals are seen as having multiple and even conflicting identities, whereas, for example, during the Enlightenment, identity was more stable. In addition, sociologists, who see identity construction taking place in relation to others, have nonetheless assumed a stable inner self. Watson (2009:432) stated that internal self-identity demands at least some degree of coherence in order for a person to remain sane and have a clear perception of self. In addition, Ybema et al. (2009) stated that it is common that people want to present themselves as “an essentialist self” with a coherent narrative through language use.

Hänninen and Koski-Jännes (2010) stated that an unconventional narrative allows for the possibility of leaving the past behind without yet committing to the future. A narrative may thus have loops backwards in time. This refers to the so-called anti-narrative which points out that there is no need to follow the chronological order in storytelling. Kohler-Riessman (2008) asserted that particularly people who have gone through large-scale changes or are possibly highly traumatised by past events might not be able to make a coherent storyline.

Comparing narrative identities in a change context through the lens of temporality and coherence can bring interesting insights, such as in the study by Peltonen (1999) about expatriates’ reflections on their stay working abroad. On the one hand, college engineers did their best to construct a coherent storyline with cause–effect reasoning, but somehow their narratives revealed large-scale disappointment and insecurities. On the other hand, university engineers constructed more mature storylines as they did not attempt to make the stay appear to be more than it was — a natural phase in their career with no special expectations — whereas the college engineers had high hopes beforehand and were not able to fit into the work environment as expected. Hence, the more incoherent stories of the university engineers proved to be more mature. Both of the narratives had discontinuous features in identity construction, but it was more apparent with the colleague engineers due to the gap between expectations and reality.

Lindgren and Wåhlin (2001) stated that individuals have constructed some kind of a profound underlying identity with consistent elements in their identities, although the discursive identity is on the move in social relationships. The profound identity can be understood as something with which people work their entire lives. This relates strongly to Cartesian essentialist understanding of somewhat stable self, which remains the same from beginning till the end. Watson (2009) found that it is common to construct a dynamic plot in which one transforms, for example, from a shy boy into a senior manager after several twists and turns. Hence, the basic storyline stays to same kind progressive although there are multiple events and incidents along the way. Söderberg (2003:11) also stated that although narratives are co-constructed, it is highly unlikely that the story will differ a great deal according to the audience (cf. Linde, 1993). Hence, if people construct a story of
themselves, it will not result in something totally different depending on the co-
structions and the context, although there is variation. However, I acknowledge in my
study that I am not able to gain access to this possible profound self; I may only get
glimpses of it through socially constructed narratives. Because my focus is on narratives
constructed by language use, this stable perception of self with possibly some profound
elements in identity is outside the scope of this study.

Ybema et al. (2009) saw identity construction as a temporal and dynamic social process:

“Thus, we suggest, identity formation might be conceptualized as a complex,
multifaceted process which produces a socially negotiated temporary outcome of the
dynamic interplay between internal strivings and external prescriptions, between self-
presentation and labelling by others, between achievement and ascription and
between regulation and resistance.” (Ybema et al., 2009:301)

On the one hand, there have been reflections on whether the search for coherence has
become too over-emphasised as life has been understood to take a narrative form (Watson,
2009), and on the other hand, we are seen to be participating in a storied world as we live
our lives with ups and downs as “narrative selves”. This refers to considering people as
storied characters who identify themselves through narratives (Gergen, 1999), as “homo
narrans” (Ricouer, 1984) and who live “life as an enacted narrative” (MacIntyre, 1990
[1981]). The danger that I see in all of this is that it may even increase the pressure to
construct a perfectly coherent narrative as a sign of having lived a good and successful life.

Davies and Harré (1991/1992) made a distinction between the lived and told narrative,
which can be characterised as a circulating process. There is an attempt to move on from
the complex lived experience into coherent and unified stories told to others. The
coherence can be taken purely as a discursive construction in which the character (self) is
presented as continuous and predictable because the story has a clear beginning and
ending. I see that it is only natural to take a plotted narrative as a starting point to guide the
reconstruction of lived experience and identity. We have been hearing stories all our lives,
and constructing narrative structures is understood almost as a default.

Narratives are not purely looking back because they also have importance in decisions
concerning the future. We are constructing our own and others’ understanding of the
world and our part to play in it. The history does not guarantee the future because the
construction of reality is constantly going on (Gergen, 1999). If people are asked to tell
their story up to the present, they usually choose a narrative form wrapped around
episodes or meaningful events. The temporality of the narratives enables the presentation
at the same time of the reconstructed past and anticipated future. These are both
influenced by the present and the context of the storytelling. Narratives are seen as a
suitable “tool” for studying change in organisations because they are filled with turning
points. The special features in narratives enable restoration of the temporal nature of the
changes (Koskinen et al., 2005).

Identity construction in narratives according to Clarke et al. (2009) and Peltonen, (1999)
is seen as an on-going, never-ending in-progress process in which the identity remains
eventually unattainable and provisional. Thus, there is an on-going, constant identity
construction as one is in a search for himself — a project that is never finished. The
unattainability (Peltonen, 1999) does not change identity construction into a frustrating
process; it purely suggests that identity is never completely finished because we enter into
different situations with different people and continue the process. I see this as one factor which transforms the narratives at times complicated ones. There are also the possible desired futures involved in these narratives.

Freeman (2010) reflected on whether there is the possibility to move beyond coherence because a too coherent and crafted narrative may limit the narrator’s options in the future as he gets trapped into trying to follow a coherent storyline. A narrative approach should, according to Freeman (2010), appreciate more the complexities of the human “messy stuff” of life. One option would be to retain the binding function of the narrative without emphasising too much coherence. Hence, it could be accepted that narratives could move beyond chronology and linearity. Hyvärinen et al. (2010) commented that the stress on coherence has been in contradiction with the multiplicity of the real lived life and turns the possible creative narrative of one’s history into something linear and conventional.

The emphasis on coherence may marginalise certain narratives due to their unfinished structure and cause the following problems: 1) scholars may be tempted to leave out challenging cases and focus on the more conventional narratives, which will be easier to analyse; 2) scholars may conduct a biased reading in order to “find” a coherent narrative; 3) narratives may be reduced to mere representations in order to construct coherence and 4) the performance of telling something urgent will be ruined by the focus on coherence instead of the actual narration, which can be contradictory and resistant to chronologic order (Hyvärinen et al., 2010).

In my study, socially constructed, dynamic and incoherent narratives are as welcomed as the traditionally appreciated narratives that have a solid structure from beginning to end. In the next chapter, my focus is on the fragmented nature of identity, which is referred to in my study as discursively constructed, shifting notions of self. I share the description made by Sirén (2009) about identity construction in which identities are regarded as changing but admitted that the social context in which identity is constructed is transforming faster. Therefore, narrative identity constructions also contain elements from the old environment. Sirén (2009) claimed that the key point is not the stability of identity construction; instead it is the slow pace of identity reconstructions.

2.3.2.3 Integrated versus fragmented identity

This chapter approaches identity yet again from another perspective: whether in narrative there is present one unified identity construction or multiple and shifting depending on a specific issue under construction. Hyvärinen (1998a) stated that a life story is like an onion, which has multiple layers to be peeled off and has no centre. Therefore, the peeling process can continue forever. Thus, every reading gives new knowledge and increases understanding. Boje (2001) and Gabriel (2000) saw the requirement of narrative coherence as destroying the authenticity and speculative nature of human storytelling. According to Boje (2001), narrative forms used can include multi-voiced elements in addition to non-linear aspects. I consider this kind of narrative, which has not yet committed to certain structure, as an intent to find oneself a new self-narrative while being on the move with multiple possible directions and selves. Beech and Johnson (2005) acknowledged the possibility of a coherent narrative but doubted its realisation in a changing setting, which more likely entails polyphony, contradictions and uncertainty. Although they referred to
coherence, I see their comment as being more directed towards the discussion on narrative integrity/fragmentation.

Alvesson (2010) doubted whether individuals are able to produce a coherent and credible story of them. He reflected on the possibility of drawing from multiple, even contradictory and disrupted stories of self instead of narrating one coherent story. This kind of perception can also be taken as a possibility to draw from multiple identity theories, as the person is seen in addition to “the storyteller” also as “a struggler” between contradictory demands or a “self-doubter” in uncertain situations. Alvesson (2010:212) saw the storytelling image as overly romanticising the human capability of storytelling including exaggeration of language-skills and creativity.

It is claimed that identity construction not only lacks coherence as a natural feature, but also that the construction shifts from one antagonistic discourse into another, depending on the perceived situational factors and “reading” of the other, which signals the right kind of discourse to choose (Clarke, Brown, & Hailey, 2009). However, I do not feel that identity construction is such a conscious process in which the participants are able to read others constantly. Hyvärinen (2006) concluded that identity construction and living have elements that escape the narrative form: large entities are captured easily in narrative form, but smaller episodes are trickier. One narrative cannot cover all the controversial aspects of human identity because individuals do not have one coherent identity. For this reason, narratives are versatile, ambiguous and controversial constructions that are sometimes hard to follow.

2.3.2.4 Identity versus role

In this study, the focus is on socially constructed narrative identity. However, the concepts of role and identity are close to each other. This closeness or fuzziness of the exact differences between these concepts has been confusing. Simpson and Carroll (2008) have noticed that although role as a word is used in day-to-day language as well spontaneously in academic articles on identity (e.g., Thomas & Linstead, 2002), it has not been conceptualised thoroughly in relation to identity. The target here is to make clear the differences between these two concepts as well show their interconnection in some theoretical approaches and briefly discuss their philosophical assumptions.

Vaara (2001) stated, there is confusion and ambiguity circulating around the concept of “role” as it has been explained around “identity”. He separated structuralist and interactionist approaches of role. The former highlights living up to the expectations of others as the actor attempts to play according to role expectations. The latter perceives that roles are created in specific situations in interaction with others. Hence, the structuralist approach sees roles as a play and the interactionist as a game. These comments are in line with the statement made by Simpson and Carroll (2008:31): symbolic interactionism sees a role as a performance and systematic approach as a tool which sets the requirements for what is needed in a specific identity. Hence, it also seems to be a bridge between identity and role. However, Simpson and Carroll (2008) criticise these rather functionalist definitions for lacking discursive, social and cultural elements.

This has similarities with Kunda’s (1992) statements related to the understanding that people have ready-made roles available to them that provide guidance on how to conduct
oneself in a suitable manner. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) also saw roles as guidelines for how to behave in social interactions. These perceptions have similarities with the definition of role in system theory that is based on expectations set by others (Katz & Kahn, 1966). However, according to Simpson and Carroll (2008), these kinds of perceptions are troubling in a constantly changing world in which the set expectations such as job descriptions are dynamic and constantly altering.

Down and Reveley (2009) shared similarities with Hänninen’s (2000) “inner self” discussed earlier on in their understanding of identity construction, which is seen as a combination of reflection though self-narration and interaction with others. Hence, the face-to-face interaction with others is used as identity confirmation through dramaturgical interaction and sensing the reactions one receives in case of discursive confusion in identity construction. The earlier role theories greatly emphasised the assumption that the adoption process for a certain role, for example, a certain social position or new occupation, is a formal process with multiple phases of acquisition.

Down and Reveley (2009) relied on Goffman’s idea of the “idealised version of self” (1990 [1959]:56), which is tested from time to time in relation with others in dramaturgical encounters in which one is put on display. It is therefore possible to comprehend narrative as a show in which the narrator attempts to preserve one’s “face” and hence approaches the construction of the narrative as a piece of drama (Goffman, 1981). This perception of role has been criticised for taking the concept of a role as purely as something that is prescribed and comes with a certain position. Hence, role has been interpreted as a facade and charade (Wilshire, 1982.)

According to Goffman (1990 [1959]), people tend to take social roles in interaction with others. Firstly, they try to deduce, for example, the social and economic status of others, and then secondly they test whether they have reached the right conclusion by making certain stereotypical remarks which supposedly fit this other. This will help one to interact with others and to make suitable comments. The interest in this process emerges from the individual’s need to control the behaviour of others and their perception of him/her. In this view, interaction is understood as a conscious process in which the individual is fully aware of his role-taking. This approach resembles theatre because individuals (called actors) act with each other on the front stage and rehearse on the back-stage. Beech and Johnson (2005) also used the terms “back-stage” and “front-stage” but more in a sense of describing the back-stage as a trusted forum to discuss worries and to test ideas. The strict division between front-stage and back-stage portrays the individuals in an overly instrumentalist manner to be applied in a socially constructed research orientation. Gergen (1999:77–78) criticised this kind of dramaturgical understanding of human behaviour as a performance that is too calculative. It makes it seem as if every encounter is based on pre-thinking and attempts to manipulate others to believe the charade of being something that one is presenting “on stage”. This also emphasises the distrust and distance between actors, which is not the starting point in social constructionism.

Simpson and Carroll (2008) took a different kind of approach as they stated that role functions as an intermediary in identity construction. This means that role is located in between the actors and facilitates the identity construction process by translating meanings to both directions. Hence, a role is a vehicle in the process, a “boundary object”, which is a term borrowed from the sociology of science and technology literature (Star & Griesemer, 1989). Simpson and Carroll (2008) stated that roles are devices in identity construction and
in no way will ever replace identities. As I carefully read through the writings of Simpson & Carroll (2008) about the relationship between identities and roles, I got the impression that roles were actually meanings made to exemplify one’s “real” identity or use a fake identity which will be discussed in detail in the following chapter 2.3.3. For example, one head teacher struggled between administrative tasks and teaching and explained how she behaved against her true self in official meetings due to her role as a head teacher, whereas with children, she was able to be more relaxed and behave according to her “real” identity.

I agree that demands come with certain roles, such as a manager, whereas identity is something socially constructed. The role approach presented by Carroll and Simpson (2008) also has similarities with positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1999) because it clearly points out the difference between subject position and role through the positioning of these two complementary concepts, which are both needed in identity construction in their theory: subject position attempts to position individuals in relation to discourses, whereas role attempts to position individuals in relation to each other.

I state that the major difference between role and identity comes from the socially constructed nature of identity in my study as opposed to the more calculated and personal nature of the roles. Davies and Harré (1999) perceived roles as static, formal and focused ritualistic aspects of social encounters. Also, the suggested intermediary position of the role as part of identity construction (Simpson & Carroll, 2008) does not fit into the socially constructed orientation, although it is suggested to be used as a vehicle to gain more knowledge on identity construction. Vaara (2001) used the term “identity role” in his study on organisational mergers from top management’s perspective. He focused on the enactment of senior management role identities in organisational change and concluded that the managers were more like actors who were bounded by their roles.

Role taking seems to have similarities with discourse usage. Iedema, Degelin, Braithwaite and White (2003) and Ellis and Ybema (2010) stated that the same person can construct his identity from multiple identity discourses depending on the situation. This has similarities with roles, but the difference seems to come from the fluid shift from one identity discourse to another. At times, the shift becomes demanding if the different discourses are driven, for example, by contradictory values such as care and money (Iedema et al., 2003). However, in those demanding situations individuals have also been able to move from one discourse into another skillfully (Ellis & Ybema, 2010).

Hence, it appears that there is a fine line between identity and role. However, identity is seen as something that is constructed together and something more holistic than roles. The branch managers interviewed in my study used the word “role” on many occasions as they spoke about themselves, but in their interviews, the word “role” is understood and analysed either as part of socially constructed identity or as a set of role expectations to guide the ones in branch manager position. Putting it simply: On the one hand, a branch manager with a family is approached in this study holistically, and the family-relationships are taken into account as well if they are portrayed as important. On the other hand, branch manager position is understood in my study as a role with certain responsibilities and expectations. The change from traditional branch manager to banking business manager is perceived as a change in the branch manager role.

Next the focus is on the multiple selves also applied in this study.
2.3.3  Multiple selves in narrative identity construction

As one constructs his identity, there are present at the same time 1) the real authentic self, 2) the identity that others “cast” on him, 3) the ideal demanded externally and 4) one’s own desired ideal. In this chapter, the multiple ways people construct themselves through meaning making is discussed theoretically because they are lucidly present in the narratives as the branch managers construct themselves in liminality. Although I am writing about the different versions of self, I am using conceptualisations in the spirit of social constructionism, which implies that the identities and different versions of them are constructed in social processes. I propose that all kinds of phenomena can be approached through language use, regardless of their nature. By this, I refer also to issues that are traditionally regarded as taking place in internal sense-making processes. The questions related to each version of self are listed below.

- “Who am I?” (authentic identity)
- “What am I supposed to be?” (expected identity)
- “How do others construct me?” (cast identity)
- “What would I desire to be?” (desired identity)

Iedema et al. (2003) found in their study on doctor-managers (the same person holding a dual position) that it is possible to draw simultaneously from multiple identity constructions; instead of settling with one when a person circulates around the organisation and meets various members. The transitions into another “persona” take place in a second, and they are mastered skillfully, although the own deep expertise comes from medicine. The challenge comes from contradictions between medical and managerial constructions—in other words, care and money. In addition, Ellis and Ybema (2010) concluded in their study on managers in inter-organisational relationships that they draw on different identity discourses depending on the situation and other actors involved.

The image of the real and true authentic self has to do with authenticity and being able to live according to one’s own values and what feels like the right thing to do morally. As already mentioned, this concept is challenging from a social constructionist perspective and hence is approached as well as being created socially together with others and not as an inner process of an individual. Moreover, the reflection processes are understood to be social by their nature and not taking place as cognitive sense making.

Ashforth and Tomiuk (2000) defined authenticity as the ability to act according to what one perceives as the true and genuine self. The impact of authenticity can become so powerful that everything belonging to the inauthentic is regarded as bad, even though it may be re-enforced, controlled and rewarded in an organisation. Ashforth and Tomiuk (2000) stated also that authenticity may differ between, for example, home and workplace, and thus they separate the private and public spheres of life. However, in the study of Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003), the more “domestic” authenticity also entered into working settings.

Discussion about the authentic self is strongly connected to a context of change. LaPointe (2011) discovered three types of narratives in her study on career change: 1) disruption, in which a career has broken down due to reasons outside of the narrator’s control; 2) life renewal, which refers to change due to personal reasons and 3) mismatch,
which has to do with authenticity and finding an authentic career and identity. Conflicts can arise if a person starts to act within a position that he finds incompatible and thus in contradiction with his “true self”. He might also be forced by others or might feel obligated without someone actually explicitly demanding that he act in certain way.

Costas and Fleming (2009) used the term “self-alienation” as they moved conceptually beyond self dis-identification in their discursive study on identity construction. This discussion belongs originally to social identity theory (SIT), because the focus is on the organisational identification. Self dis-identification means that the imaginary authentic self is visualised but cannot be realised, whereas self-alienation deals with the problem when an individual realises that he has transformed into something he does not want to be, for example, the fake corporate self. This can take place in the work place when one acts week after week in a way that is against his “true self”. The paradox comes from the realisation that the authentic self is actually felt as inauthentic and as a stranger to oneself. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) utilised the concept of “anti-identity” as they talked about organisational dis-identification, which relates to when someone is forced to do something he dislikes and for that reason has no other choice than to identify him negatively. Thus, identity construction takes place through pointing out “who I am” and “who I am not” as being close to ideas of the understanding of Ybema et al. (2009) of identity construction as a self-other process.

This notion of cast self emerges from the identities others cast on us in social encounters. As we “profile” others and identify them in a certain way, we also receive similar treatment. Beech, MacPhail and Coupland (2009) conducted a study on identity construction in a finance sector organisation after organisational change. They interviewed three groups which identified themselves and others. It is interesting how a certain group identified themselves negatively mainly due to the identity they perceived others having of them. As they told narratives about themselves, the other actors were also part of the storytelling. However, in actuality, the groups had practically no interaction with each other and could be characterised as isolated. Thus, the identity cast on another group was based more on the imagination of the other than on actual social encounters and can be labelled as anti-dialogic. Watson (2008) talked about the company of the “imaginative others”, which makes us present ourselves in a certain way. Those imaginative others will not engage in reading some document we have just finished, but we still imagine that they might do so.

Beech et al. (2009) perceived that identity can be constructed by expressing or impressing. Expressing refers to talking to others about oneself, whereas impressing has to do with stunning others through one’s talk. However, attempts to overly express or impress oneself may backfire. For example, one may appear to be narcissistic in the eyes of others if one talks too much about oneself. In addition, attempting to overly impress others can lead to over-adaptation as one tries to please others. Both of these ways of telling take place in social encounters in which people tend to evaluate how others perceive them. For me this seems almost like playing poker, when before making a move one tries to figure out what others might expect him to do next. The difference is that in the card game, the player makes a contrary move in relation to what he thinks the others are possibly expecting him to do next.

Beech and Johnson (2005) found in their study that people have adopted cast identities which they may try to fulfil, even though they do not feel comfortable with them.
difference between back-stage and front-stage exists, identity gets constructed as controversial. In Beech and Johnson's ethnographic study, a new CEO was originally considered to be a “tough guy”, but the image melted bit by bit, which eventually made everyone around him feel insecure and doubt his capabilities in handling his duties. This melting took place due to his engagement with more sharing ways to manage, which belonged more in the backstage, such as management coaching sessions he participated in, than in, for example, board meetings and unofficial meetings with other managers. Later, attempting to change his behaviour back it did not work either because he had lost his “tough guy” status.

In this study, the **expected self** is understood as the ideal – for example, the ideal branch manager. The cast identity, on the other hand, deals with the identity cast on a certain person, for example, as someone who fits or does not fit the expected identity. Conflicts can arise if a person feels unable to fulfil the expected ideal identity or otherwise come to terms with it, for example, due to conflict between his own and his organisation’s values. The expected identity can be stated explicitly, for example, by top management, or it can be constructed by the actor himself from various bits and pieces in social interaction.

Löytyniemi (2004) asserted that the expectations of others also shape our identities. Watson (2008) stated that people seem to transform themselves into “corporate personas” in organisational settings because they are aware of what is expected from them in that particular context. For example, managers cannot be purely themselves at work because they represent the company’s voice to employees. Watson (2008) also discovered that there were attempts to stay inside the boundaries of “acceptable behaviour” defined for each group of actors. When someone broke free from the boundaries, these exceptions were explained away by identifying the boundary-breaker as someone who did not actually share some common characteristics with other members and therefore did not actually count (Beech et al., 2009). He had not been a “real” member of group to begin with.

Tracy and Tretheway (2005) identified three processes in which people attempt to construct preferred organisational identities for themselves and somehow manoeuvre out of the woods of the struggle between real and fake selves: 1) engaging in strategized subordination, 2) crafting perpetually deferred selves and 3) practicing auto-dressage. The first means the voluntary pursuit of organisational goals and engaging in self-surveillance without needing actual management to do it. The second, on the other hand, refers to the perpetual future, which will probably never become real. For example, family is sacrificed for work or having children is postponed due to being so busy at work. The work duties are considered more important than family life. The third one implies self-evaluation as people reflect on their identities against the managerial discourse they feel suitable for them. The work self is present in private spheres of life as well as through constant self-control and evaluation, although there is no one from the work organisation to act as an audience besides oneself. The work organisation thus intervenes in all aspects of life, and life is sacrificed for “higher” organisational purposes. All the aspects presented here seem to have a close connection to identity control in which the organisation sets guidelines for acceptable behaviour and language (Alvesson et al., 2008) and hence were again approached through meaning making.

The **desired self** deals with a dream or possible future self because it can be reachable or unreachable for several reasons. Driver (2009) uses the term “true self” as she describes the constant chase after the normative image of self that people have. The true self is closer
to the desired self than the authentic self because it is something unattainable (Peltonen, 1999) in other words something we are lacking (Thisted and Steyaert, 2006). The desired self is someone we would like to be, whereas the authentic self is more about who we are. Thus, these are closely related concepts and especially the line is narrow from social constructionist orientation in my study in which the identity construction is approached through meaning-making.

Ybema et al. (2009) stated that identity studies ought to focus simultaneously on self–other definitions because, in large part, the discourses of identity construction happen through positioning in relation to others. The identity construction process is about stating similarities and differences (Garcia & Hardy, 2007), separating self and others and creating a sense of sameness and otherness. By their language use, people are able to attempt to be included in certain groups of people, for example, with more prestige. This might mean trying to impress others. A certain kind of “language code” can be used as a resource to intensify one’s own expertise, or it can be a source of contradiction if it does not match the reality just constructed. This happened in the study of Peltonen and Lehto (1999) on business scholar graduates as they talked about their expertise. However, at times emphasis on their own expertise turned into wondering about their own potential in competing in the labour market with engineers.

Wolfram Cox (2007) also found controversial reflections in her study on web managers as a new profession. They drew on multiple discourses and at times distanced and separated themselves from other professions in their identity construction processes. For example, some identified as marketers, and others distanced themselves from marketers. Hence, language use can distance a person from non-experts and can position the person strongly as an expert in his field (e.g., Dyer & Keller-Cohen, 2000). By emphasising, for example, the strategy and models that have come along with it, there can also be a will to construct oneself as fitting into the new situation and be identified as committed to the organisation’s goals and culture as a “believer” (Garsten & Grey, 1997). In uncertainty and change, it is also normal and human to construct oneself as “fitting” into that particular organisation’s values, culture and way of doing things (Coupland, 2001). This kind of usage of the dominant rhetoric in a particular organisation is a “tool” that enables the construction of a sense of belonging (Carroll, 1995). Hence, here the concepts of expected and desired self got interconnected. They are also related to organisational and occupation identification as well identity control as individuals attempt to reach the expectations.

### 2.4 Liminality in identity construction

Liminality is one of the key processes in identity construction in this study. It assists in explaining the identity reconstruction in a change context and moving beyond purely stating that there is a possibility of multiple identities in socially constructed narratives due to discourses, positioning and embedded ambivalence in change processes. Conceptually, liminality refers to a state of “being at the threshold” and in a transitory state as a person moves from one position, status or identity to another. Roots of liminality are in anthropological studies, which will be explained briefly.

In this chapter, I begin with the origins of liminality and then explain the modest but growing interest in it in organisational studies. Then I move into describing how it has
been understood in the organisational change context as well explain two dimensions of liminality: transitional and perpetual. In addition, the emotions embedded in liminality are discussed briefly. Emotions are seen to be constructed in controversial situations as a natural part of the identity construction process. Hence, the emotions are there and acknowledged but not given central stage.

2.4.1 Origins and applications of the concept of liminality

The focus in this chapter is to present the roots of liminality and exemplify the concept of liminality through some applications used recently in social sciences.

Liminality is about identity reconstruction and specifically about the transitory state from which the actor will eventually move into a new identity. The transfer from the old into the new identity is defined clearly through liminality in a study by Beech (2011) in which he described liminality through a dialogical perspective as a transitory state in which a novel identity is reconstructed. In liminality, the individual is no longer the same identity-wise as he was in the pre-liminal state but not yet in the post-liminal state and transformed into a new one. The way identity is reconstructed in change has been explained as a clear shift from one identity into another or as a fluid process in which an individual has multiple identities. Hence, liminality brings new insights into the identity construction discussion by taking the state in between the old and new identities into account.

The concept was originally developed by two anthropologists, Van Gennep (1960 [1906]) and Turner (1984). Being “at the threshold” implies the ambiguous emotions and disorientation that take place in the middle of rituals. The book “Rites of Passage” (Van Gennep, 1960 [1906]) describes how through rituals, such as from-boy-to-man or marriage, the person no longer holds his previous status, yet he has not started the transition into the status he will hold afterwards. The ritual is the transferring phase in which the liminality takes place. This process can be divided to three separate phases according to Van Gennep (1960 [1906]): 1) separation, 2) transition and 3) incorporation.

The first phase is the pre-liminal, in which the person separates from his previous status and enters into a transformation phase — liminality. Hence, here “the old is left behind”. Here, all previously existing, taken for granted notions are erased. In the second phase, the person is “at the threshold” — in other words, at the boundary of two phases, which can cause anxiety. In the post-liminal incorporation, the person enters into the “new being”. In this process, the change can alter the status of a single individual or a group of people. In addition, the time frame can range from short to rather long, depending on the situation. Liminality is described as a movement from one space into another, from the old state into the new state, through rituals on both ends of the continuum (Van Gennep, 1960 [1906]).

Turner (1984) continued with the concept development and took liminality as a “betwixt and between” position at the points of separation and aggregation. This inter-structural position in the middle as “betwixt and between” is at least socially if not physically invisible. Thus, in a liminal state, the actor in male puberty rite is a novice who is “no longer a boy, but “not yet a man” either. The liminal actor is also considered structurally motionless and non-existent and therefore to be an outsider having no equal rights, such as a young man obeying elders without a say. Through liminality, the actor finally transforms into a full member of the community after not belonging.
More modern examples of liminality and rituals are, for example, marriage and graduation. In certain cultures, a wedding ceremony can last for days, if not weeks. Before the long ceremony has started, the young couple have gotten engaged and are promised to each other (pre-liminal phase). Before the actual “I do” and wedding vows are said, they are in a liminal phase; “not married, but not single either”. After the ceremony, they enter into the post-liminal phase. Before graduating, the student has passed all his exams and written the thesis, but he has not received the diploma yet or participated in the graduation ceremony. This also involves a liminal phase and being in-between in other word waiting the rite of graduation (Turner, 1984).

Liminality has gained ground in social sciences in recent years in studies on uncertain situations in life which have been constructed as major turning points. Backpacking journeys can be seen for example in younger years as a rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood or after life changing events such as divorce a transition phase and possibility to reflect (Adkins & Grant, 2007). Adkins and Grant (2007) also noticed in their study strong sense of solidarity among the backpackers, “the spirit of communitas” stated by already Turner (1977 [1969]) in his writings on liminality. Recently Brennan (2014) has studied the working holiday makers which combine holiday and working in Australia. However, because their status is unclear, they circulate between work and holiday. Their original reasons for becoming a working holiday maker are for example: to discover oneself, to travel and to practice new languages. However, most of them are financially dependent on finding a job and hence accept whatever is offered and find themselves in precarious work which is most likely even underpaid.

According to Urry (2002) pilgrimage, that started out in thirteenth century, represented also a rite of passage; there was a clear separation phase from the mundane daily life to liminality in which the person is not integrated into normal structures or activities. Then finally after the pilgrimage experience the person re-entered back to his normal circles of life, most likely as a more respected person. I find both of these just presented examples: the backpackers as well the working holiday makers as modern forms of pilgrimage. Obviously not in a religious sense, but as a rites of passage which enter into incorporation of new identity though reflection. Backpackers and working holiday makers take a break from their normal life and enter for a fix-term state of liminality.

Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) referred in their study to the study of Rottenburg (1990) in which liminality takes place in a physical place: in a small-town bar at the Polish and German border. The atmosphere in that particular bar is unique, and it made the researcher wonder who the other customers were and what their stories were. In that town, no visas are needed, which makes it exceptional. The people felt no sense of belonging to that place. In other words, liminality can also mean, in addition to an abstract space, a genuine physical place, but the actual feeling of liminality seems to emerge more or less internally.

Hence, change is in the centre of liminality. In these examples the changes were either explicit ones taking place in official ceremonies such as graduation and wedding or in implicit ones taking place through internal reflection.
2.4.2 Liminality in organisational settings

In organisational studies, liminality has been studied, for example, on identity reconstruction in organisational settings (Beech, 2011), on temporary workers (Garsten, 1999), on consultants which are working on projects (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003), regarding the fluid nature of work life and private life (Sturdy, Schwarz, & Spicer, 2006), in academic circles on the effects of implementing audit culture (Keenoy, 2005), on the implications of studying abroad identity-wise as an outsider (Simpson, Sturges, & Weight, 2009), on organisational newcomers through trainee programmes from a gender perspective in the socialisation process (Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2002) and from organisational and individual learning perspectives on organisational restructuring into a more flexible one (Tempest & Starkey, 2004).

Thus, liminality has been mainly used to describe the fuzziness of organisational boundaries from an individual’s perspective, whereas the studies of Beech (2011) and Keenoy (2005) focused on liminality in fairly structured organisational settings. According to Beech (2011), liminality has been used to describe changing situations to point out the multiple identity discourses present at the same time and the possible negative psychological consequences they bring, such as ambiguity, uncertainty and anxiety. Some of the studies on liminality presented here explicitly utilise the concept of liminality, whereas others I have included due to their close connection to liminality.

Studying liminality of organisational boundary-crossing workers such as consultants has become popular maybe because liminality is a rather obvious element in their status since they are not official members of the client organisation. According to Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) liminality pushed the consultants to work long days and take ad hoc assignments. The constant need to prove oneself as capable and committed to the project was evident. In addition, the comments coming from the members of the client organisation emphasised liminality, although at times the consultants acted as if they were members of the client company. The phases of liminality from separation to transition and finally to incorporation were apparent in the official rites that took place in the client company from the project start until the end (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003). Lindgren and Wåhlin (2001) used the concept of reflexive identity in their study on boundary-crossing individuals (people who change job frequently) and used a metaphor of making a journey in space and time in order to understand oneself better. The journey in space and time can be a real or abstract one, including, for example, feelings and moral aspects. These journeys are common particularly for boundary-crossing individuals due to insecurities caused by constant change situations.

In addition, being an expatriate may share similarities from an identity construction and liminality perspective. Peltonen (1999) studied engineers’ expatriate experiences through biographical narratives. For college, engineers constructed their experiences as a self-development period due to the uncertainty and loss of identity as they felt otherness in a foreign culture, and their prior expectations were not met. For university engineers, the time abroad was more positive as they took it as a place for reflection and taking a step back from normal life prior to leaving as a natural next step in their careers. The expatriate time can be understood as a space of liminality, in between two countries and not actually belonging to either one of them. Thus, these students used multiple discursive ways to give meanings to transitory phases in their lives.
Eriksson-Zetterquist (2002) found in her study on organisational newcomers in corporate trainee programme clear signs of liminality. Intense recruitment to the program was a clear separation phase from the old student status to that of a trainee. Transition took place when the trainees actually entered into the programme. However there was no clear ending phase, and thus they remained “at the threshold” for prolonged time. Also in Hägg’s (2011) study, on entrepreneurial training, the training sessions functioned as a rite of passage for new entrepreneurs. In her study, the training served also as an opportunity to share thoughts and to reflect. Various identities emerged through this training, some towards stronger entrepreneurial identities and others towards an entirely non-entrepreneurial direction or something in between. In organisational settings, rites are mainly developed to intensify the commitment to an organisation’s strategic direction through conversion, which will be discussed in the methodological chapter of this thesis (chapter 3.3.2).

Garsten (1999) concluded in a study on the temporary work force that liminality made workers feel extremely individualised, and they lacked a sense of belonging because temporary workers form a fragmented group. It can be challenging to attach oneself to a temporary workers’ agency because it is not the actual work place. Also, identifying oneself as a member of the client company may also be difficult for several reasons. One of the biggest is the decision not to become too emotionally involved in the client organisation because the assignment is temporary and there will be another assignment coming. Garsten (1999) pointed out that the findings are in contradiction with the earlier statements of Turner (1977 [1969]), which emphasised the sense of community, equity and togetherness because liminals feel being in the same situation. However Garsten (1999) found that the temporary workers (temps) regarded other temps primarily as their competitors for suitable future jobs. The organisational position as an outsider in the client organisation and possible rare encounters with other temps are more likely sources of loneliness rather than creating a sense of belonging, although the clients and agencies constructed ways to include them. This can create simultaneously a sense of freedom and of being marginalised. Leinikki (2009) concluded in her study on fixed-term employees that these employees felt the space in between their hopes and fears as they did their best to cope with working on the edge and not actually belonging.

Ellis and Ybema (2010) described how managers in industrial supply chains deal with inter-organisational relationships outside and inside organisational boundaries. The managers draw on contrasting discourses as they oscillate between insider and outsider positions depending on the actors. Managers’ identity construction seems to be based on “tensile” positioning as they flexibly move from one discourse into another. It also becomes apparent in their study that these managers in liminality do not clearly perceive the boundaries between the “others” and “themselves”. They make fast decisions to position themselves by broadening or narrowing the circle for identifying themselves depending on the other part. This special position as “boundary bricoleurs” enables them to interact smoothly in inter-organisational relationships. Therefore, the liminal status does not cause them anxiety; instead, they use it as a resource as they jump from one situation into another. Liminality is a natural, inescapable element in these managers’ duties. This study gives a different kind of perspective into liminality as it considers it to be a positive and normal space.
Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) made an interesting remark concerning liminality as a contemporary phenomenon: It has been transformed into a stable state for many actors. Their acceptance of it ends the actual liminality for them. In addition, those who work in a temporary or cross-boundary position seem to take it more as a normal situation and part of their lives. Thus, the degree of liminality depends on the perception of each actor and not on the official organisational position on a temporary versus continuous basis or outside or inside official organisational boundaries.

Almiala (2008) used the concept of liminality close to my understanding of it in a study on primary and secondary school teachers who eventually entered working with adults in one way or another. According to Almiala (2008), liminality takes place in three phases: initial, liminal and final periods in which the new identity is adopted and the old one left behind. The process starts with a personal crisis, frustration or on intuitive choice. In liminality, the actors are, for example, in temporary jobs or on sick leave, which enables career reorientation and identity reconstruction to take place in the final period.

Attempting to compress these understandings and the definition of liminality, it becomes evident that liminality is conceptualised in many ways. It is understood as a psychological state of identity disruption (Noble & Walker, 1997), which can be approached through discourses (Beech, 2011) in which the liminality can be divided into two kinds of manifestations: transitional and perpetual (Ybema et al., 2011). The disruption does not have to be revolutionary; it depends on each storyteller how the possible identity is reconstructed. Liminality can be defined as a space (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003), which is or is not connected to an actual physical place (Rottenburg, 1990). Transitional liminality takes place in identity reconstructions (Ybema et al., 2011), whereas in some professions liminality can turn into a constant companion and become a natural part of duties with which one has to cope (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003). On the other hand, in some highly dynamic duties in which actors manoeuvre to fulfil multiple expectations and obligations, liminality can be seen as mastering language use as the actors oscillate between discourses depending on the audience (Ellis & Ybema, 2010).

The next chapter deals with liminality inside organisational boundaries and in the context of change and therefore, leaves aside discussions concerning liminality in other circumstances such as in temporary employment situations or in duties crossing organisational boundaries.

### 2.4.3 Liminality in organisational change context

In this chapter, I focus on theories on liminality in the organisational change context. The focus is on theories that take part in the discussion on liminality regarding permanent employees who work mainly with other internal organisational actors. Hence, although the studies on liminality in consulting, boundary-crossing and with temporary workers are intriguing, the starting point of liminality is different in those because it is more out in the open and obvious, whereas in my study, the possible liminality takes place without changing jobs or organisations and rather is due to strategic change. Hallier and James (1999) questioned whether it is always possible to compare the rites used in tribes to organisational rites in an anthropological sense, especially if the rites mean change in role or understanding, as is the case in my study. Changes in status are more obvious, such as
an appointment to new responsibilities. Sometimes the rites of passage are completely missing in the organisational context (Trice-Beyer, 1999), which has led to the liminal stage and the final incorporation into the new self to run parallel for a while (Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2002).

Beech (2011) used features from organisational and anthropological origins and emphasised the dialogical nature of identity construction. This approach is social constructionist, and thus it perceives identity construction as taking place in language use through meaning making. The focus in Beech’s (2011) theory comes from the liminality practices through which the identity is reconstructed in dialogue. The definition of liminality crafted by Czarniawska and Mazza (2003:353) also works well, considering my focus. It emphasises the changes in the old routines and ways of doing and thinking that come through liminality. They also defined liminality as a condition, or a space as I like to call it, instead of defining it as having to do with official organisational structure. The conception of liminality therefore shifts from previous definitions to a “space in between” the old and new identity.

Liminality can also be perceived as an unstable transitional space that exists in parallel with the formal organisational structure. This does not refer to an ad hoc structure; instead, the actors can be fully aware of their roles because in liminal space actors share an unwritten code of suitable behaviour. If, for example, senior management and middle management share dinner after working hours, the topics that can be brought into discussion are known implicitly by the participants (Sturdy et al., 2006). Each of the actors is fully aware of how to behave correctly and what topics are suitable to bring openly into discussion.

Beech (2011:287) narrowed the original liminal process (Van Gennep, 1960 [1906]) to one phase instead of three and constructed a model to theorise the identity reconstruction process. The contribution of his study comes mainly from conceptually defining the liminality practices through which a person constructs a new identity in organisational settings. According to Noble and Walker (1997) the main ingredient in liminality is identity disruption, which leads eventually to identity reconstruction.

Liminality can take place through three practices in organisational settings presented in Figure 2: 1) experimentation, 2) recognition and 3) reflection. These practices are seen to happen in dialogue as inside-out, outside-in or from a two-way perspective. In experimentation, a new identity is tested by temporary attachment – for example, a middle manager acting as if he were a senior manager if the senior management identity is seen as a desirable one. This process starts from an internal push towards a possible transformation. Upon reflection, the actor notices not being the same any longer and questions himself in the changing situation — for example, wanting to move from a blue-collar position into a white-collar position, when a suitable position becomes available. This process is thus enabled by the external circumstances and the inner drive. In recognition, the person acts upon the new identity — for example, getting appointed to a new position – and reflects on the possible new self and whether he sees it as possible. The focus is on reflection on the views of others and a person’s own self-perception. In the recognition phase, the so-called “epiphany” refers to a rare revelation in which the new self emerges and the “dawning” to seeing something for the first time. The liminal process can include one or all of these practices (Beech, 2011). I regard that all these practices can be taken as social constructed no matter how the process has started.
Liminality can be defined either as a temporary transition state or a longer experience of being in between in a context of change. It is created by changes in the context, which further lead to ambivalence, insecurity and multiple meanings. Hence, liminality is closely connected to emotions as well; one either enters into a new identity or sees the possible mismatch between the current and offered identities as too great and decides to leave (Beech, 2011).

According to a longitudinal study by Beech (2011), liminality can take place, for example, when a part-time employee is not accepted in the social circles in his work place and the supervisor demands more hours by indirect comments and delays departures in the evenings. Another example is an employee who remains a blue-collar worker despite having attained a high level of education and the skills needed for promotion into a white-collar position due to the perception of him as a blue-collar worker by top management. In both of these cases, the final outcome was resignation because their old identities were disrupted, and they were not comfortable with the replacement identity offered to them. However, Alvesson and Robertson (2006) acknowledged a certain kind of behaviour as a way to the desired new identity recognition in practice or as a possible way to try it out/experiment without actually taking a step to change one’s position in reality. If it feels right and others give positive feedback, it might lead to a possible transfer in career. An example of this can be carrying out our current duties with a more professional perspective and showing the inner drive to others as well.

Thornborrow and Brown (2009) found in their study on paratrooper regiments that an organisation can powerfully use discourses as tools to construct desired identities for its members to pursue. People can be characterised as “aspirants” who seek to construct desirable selves in narrative storytelling or in other ways by language use. However, although one will be accepted and recognised in the regime, it may also require self-reflection and revelation through identity re-enforcing to be reconstructed to transform from the “wannabe” identity into the “real”. Hence, although the organisation already acknowledges someone as a real professional, the person may still need to accept that identity as well through reflection.
Beech (2011) added that liminality in identity reconstruction starts with social constructionist premises. It takes into account the challenges deriving from multiple meanings constructed and positioning depending on the audiences. It follows the guidelines of social constructionism and the becoming ontology (Chia, 1996). For me, the reflective nature of the liminality is closely attached to narrative identity as well as to the understanding of identity construction as something that takes place in dialog with others and does not proceed straightforward; instead, it most likely gets constructed by multiple, even contradictory, discourses.

In the empirical study by Beech (2011), this theory of liminality was developed further and five characteristics of liminality were established: 1) the triggering events, such as downsizing or organisational restructuring, are recognisable both to the liminal as well as to others in the organisation. 2) The liminal moves into the space of “in between”, having a paradoxical identity with features from the old and new at the same time. For example, one can be “one of the team” and “not one of the team” at the same time. 3) The social separation that comes along with liminality points out how one’s own perception of identity differs from those of others, and, for example, one is not regarded as a professional by his colleagues and is excluded from social circles at the workplace. 4) The liminal has fewer rights than others in the organisation, which can be felt by, for example, not being able to challenge decisions made concerning oneself. 5) The liminal enters into the new identity as the old one gets disrupted. However, the rituals are not always present in organisational settings, as in anthropological studies as “rites of passage”, which give comfort and ease anxiety. In my study, all of these characteristics seem to never exist in one narrative, and the social separation and lack of rights are rare. This comes from the nature of the liminal phase in my study in a transfer of responsibilities in one’s current position.

In the study by Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) about project consultants, the various stages of the project from orientation to finishing illustrated the different phases through an anthropological usage of liminality. Beech (2011) did not find traces of all the liminal phases (separation, liminality, aggregation) in an anthropological sense. It is also possible that the aggregation does not take place, and the liminal never quite gets an identity reconstructed. In liminality, the peer support and presence of a mentor have been acknowledged as facilitating factors as the actors try to cope with the uncertainty.

At times, experimentation in a senior position as a liminal practice can be an official one and initiated by the organisation (Ibarra, 1999), and the experimenter then receives feedback on a continuous basis for his actions and is able to evaluate how he manages in a new possible position. On the one hand, Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010) described identity play in an organisational setting as the possibility to try out a desired identity, for example, in strictly monitored spaces such as workshops. On the other hand, there are multiple opportunities outside organisational boundaries to test a desired identity, such as by participation in evening classes or different associations. This identity play is connected with liminality and Turner’s notion (1977 [1969]) of curiosity, “joie de vivre” and exploration without fear of being punished, if the experiment does not turn out successfully. Earlier on covered identity work on does not include the speculative elements, which are present in identity play.

However, progressive development aiming to transform oneself into someone else is not playing with identity because it has lost its flirtatious nature and “no strings attached”
attitude. From childhood, playing is an important part of our lives, and, for example, playing a “mommym” (a mother) according to Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010) is actually a rehearsal process for the future. To be able to engage in imaginative play, children need a “safe zone” as a protected and comfortable space that their guardians provide for them. Later, the guiding figure can be, for example, a peer group. Although the concept of identity play is not a key concept in my study, I perceive it as having a close connection to narrative identity construction, especially in relation to middle managers’ aspirations for themselves, their organisational position and to their identity construction more broadly. It also has similarities with one of the liminal practices, namely experimentation.

2.4.4 Transitional and perpetual liminality

Ybema et al. (2011) in their study combined liminality, discursive practices and identity construction. They stated that liminality in organisational studies differs according to the time frame of the liminality, whether the liminality has been 1) a transformation from one identity position into another within a certain time frame or 2) a longer period of time in between. It has been observed that liminal actors seem to abandon the old identity and enter into the new one in their language use at a fast pace in transitional liminality (first case), whereas in perpetual liminality (second case), the liminal actors seem to switch from one position into another in their language use as they manoeuvre in social situations and attempt to balance their identities. The perpetual liminality presents both problems and opportunities because there is the possibility to reconstruct oneself, but there is also the feeling of being caught in between due to two or more professional roles to fulfil, which may pose conflicting demands and loyalties.

“Transitional liminars may define their current identity as “on the move”, away from an abandoned identity and towards anticipated future; perpetual liminars know instead that being in-between comes with the job. For them there is no end of it.” (Ybema et al., 2011:28)

There is also difference in the way which actors describe their liminality. In transitional liminality, there is a clear separation between the old and the new, and the focus is on identity construction. In perpetual liminality, the actors identify with no one in particular and/or many people or groups simultaneously depending on the audience. This calls for rhetoric code switching as they have multiple loyalties and obligations to be taken into account. This transforms the actors into oscillating smoothly between various forms of self–other talk by switching the rhetoric “code” from one into another by including and excluding the self and others through language use. In transitional liminality, there is a temporary state of in-between-ness, a “limbo”, whereas in perpetual liminality the sense of not belonging comes with the territory and is hence a default companion. An example of transitional liminality can be transformation from expert to manager and of perpetual liminality being an expert and manager simultaneously for a prolonged time. The perpetual liminality deals with who the person is to others and hence, the self–other constructions are handling distance/closeness with other actors made by comparisons (Ybema et al., 2011). Beech (2011) defined the duration of liminality in the anthropological sense, which is also an applicable way of considering organisational studies.
“Therefore, liminality can be understood in the anthropological sense to be a temporary transition through which identity is reconstructed, and/or it can be thought of as a more longitudinal experience of ambiguity and in-between-ness within a changeful context.” (Beech, 2011:288)

However, it is also possible that an organisational actor experiences both versions of liminality, for example, sequentially as in the study of Ybema et al. (2011) in which an expert transferred into managerial duties after long pondering his identity. Later in the managerial duties, he found himself in an awkward situation as he noticed he was being abandoned and criticised by his former friends due to organisational politics. He felt a sense of in-between-ness and belonging nowhere: neither in his current new organisation nor in his circle of former colleagues and friends. The social positioning of the liminal actors is in “no man’s land” which implies to earlier on mentioned possible social separation as a typical sign of liminality (Beech, 2011).

2.4.5 Liminality and emotions in identity construction

The identity construction process is emotional, including power games, social manoeuvring and moral judgments. However, identity studies have not concentrated much on moments of instability filled with negative emotions such as self-doubt or antagonism. One reason is obviously the attempt to present oneself as “a good and decent person” and in a positive light. Those inconsistencies in coherent narratives, which I call “break-downs”, can be studied as signs of reflection and taken seriously (Ybema et al., 2009:313–314). These reflections in general do not necessarily have to do with immaturity; rather, they can be made out as quite the opposite (Peltonen, 1999).

According to Fineman (2003), changes may require adopting new duties, which may demand new skills, and this can cause anxiety at the same time as it is seen as thrilling. Sometimes new skills increase knowledge, and it can be an accumulative process, whereas other times change means displacing familiar routines and duties with new ones. The anxiety can arise from a fear of not being able to live up to expectations and failing compared to others, which can lead to exclusion from, for example, a colleague network. In addition, past failures will most likely rise to the surface. Hence, change situations typically make individuals wonder about their own identities.

Our emotional identities are negotiated through social discourses with, for example, family, friends, colleagues at work and the media. For us, these emotions are as real as they can be. If we do not have the words, we tend to improvise meanings. This will eventually, on the large-scale, lead to a change in the privileged discourse in certain areas – for example, how we perceive and value certain emotional displays, whether they are positive or negative (Fineman, 2000). Thus, the narratives of identity construction are self-evidently emotionally loaded by their language use. Emotions are part of cultural life and loaded politically and socially. We are constantly aware of the appropriate ways to behave in certain situations. Keeping a grip on the emotional side has been regarded as a sign of being a real professional (Gergen, 1999).

There is no way I could escape taking into account emotions as a dimension of narrative identity construction. If individuals are being asked about one of the most important aspects of their lives, work and career, it is likely to be emotionally narrated. Keeping
emotions inside can also be considered to have a negative impact on our well-being (Gergen, 1999). In my study, the emotionality of the narratives is seen as central and an ordinary part of telling one’s story. Fineman (2003) claimed that telling stories and narratives enables individuals to justify and to rationalise events and emotions. Narratives are not purely descriptions of events, they are in large part emotionally driven as well, because we are telling about ourselves and how we have experienced our past, evaluate the present and predict the future. According to Fineman (2000:2), in its extreme form, the social constructionist view of emotions focuses on how emotions are displayed and named in interactions; instead of treating them as possessions and “mind stuff”. The cultural and social settings provide us the rules to be followed and the words to be used.

Pratt and Doucet (2000) stated that mixed emotions in change, or, in other words, emotional ambivalence, entails both positive and negative feelings and is always relationally constructed because it is towards something or someone. Therefore, it is necessary to take into account the context of the relationship as well. Workplaces are especially filled with self–other relations containing ambivalences. In their study of call centre workers, Pratt and Doucet (2000) noticed the managers putting conflicting demands on the employees while giving them support. Hence, the managers were seen simultaneously as being tough and caring.

Life stories can entail a wide range of emotions, both hidden and openly expressed. Nostalgia encompasses a variety of emotional orientations. According to Gabriel (2000) and Garcia and Hardy (2007), nostalgia sees the past as “the golden ages” and contradicts it with the present state of affairs. Nostalgic feelings affect our construction of the present-day and our emotional attitude towards it. The central feature of nostalgia is that the past triumphs the present. Comparisons between past and present, on the other hand, enable us to tell stories and highlight the most important issues for us.

Garcia and Hardy (2007) found in their study on organisational reform that nostalgia can also evolve into resistance through taking the position of victim. Actors feel a lack of control over the changes and also feel entitled to moral indignation due to a lack of support. However, in an organisational setting, there is no time for longing for the old days; the grieving time and managerial time (the need to produce results fast) are not synchronised. Instead, the changes have to be implemented most likely as soon as possible, if not before (Fineman, 2003). Ybema (2004) used the concept of “postalgia” to refer to the possibly heavenly future which has not been realised yet. This kind of talk of a better future is a common feature of managerial talk in the change context. It is a common element in change narratives to move temporally between the past, present and future and to make comparisons between different stages and construct the storytelling with nostalgia, longing for the past or postalgia – longing for a better future coming up. The “home base” for both of these is the present state, from which the projections are made in these diverse directions (Ybema, 2004). Ybema (2009) described a clear line between the old and new identity as a temporal discontinuity in which the old and new are clearly separated by language use.

Resistance to change is a common and emotional process in organisations. Fineman (2003:125) defined resistance as “an expression of opposition by members of an organisation to official or unofficial forms of control”. From management’s perspective, resistance can destroy the successful implementation of change plans completely. Resistance can be conscious/unconscious, organised/unorganised and
continuous/occasional. As a power-related issue, resistance is constructed as emotional, for example, though anxiety, frustration and even fear in meaning making. This makes it an essential and self-evident element in my framework as well. According to Huy (2002) regardless of its form, resistance represents a challenge to management, and solving it requires “softer” methods than command. Beech and Johnson (2005) also highlighted the need for openness to different views to coexist instead of management using coercive powers to beat the resistance in seeking uniformity. In practice, this kind of approach might take the form of something more like a family, in which members do not have to agree on everything. There can be created an understanding of “umbrella” constructions, but smaller sub-groups would have room to make alternative ones.

2.5 Synthesis of the theoretical discussion

In Table 1 presented below I synthesise the theoretical discussions represented in this study and present the discussion, which I regard as the main orientations surrounding each discussion: middle management, identity and liminality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical discussion</th>
<th>Research direction</th>
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<tr>
<td>Middle management</td>
<td>Middle management’s efficiency (Wooldridge &amp; Floyd, 1990)</td>
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<td>Middle management’s activities (Floyd &amp; Wooldridge, 1992)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Selling issues to top management (Dutton &amp; Ashford, 1993; Dutton et al., 1997)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Middle management’s roles (Floyd &amp; Lane, 2000)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Social constructionist perspective to middle management (Thomas &amp; Linstead, 2002)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Middle management’s sense making (Balogun, 2003; Balogun &amp; Johnson, 2004)</td>
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<td>Middle management’s activities as reciprocal with top management (Mantere, 2008)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Discursive competence of middle management (Rouleau &amp; Balogun, 2011)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Narrative identity as socially constructed (Gergen, 1999)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Identity work (Sveningson &amp; Alvesson, 2003)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Identity control (Kärreman &amp; Alvesson, 2004)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liminality</td>
<td>Original conceptualisation of liminality in anthropology (Turner, 1977 [1969], 1984; Van Gennep, 1960 [1906])</td>
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<td>Liminality as identity disruption (Noble &amp; Walker, 1997)</td>
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<td>Liminality in temporary work (Garsten, 1999)</td>
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<td>Liminality as a default space (Czarniawska &amp; Mazza, 2003)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Liminal practices in organisational settings (Beech, 2011)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Perpetual and transitional nature of liminality (Ybema et al. 2011)</td>
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</table>

Table 1 Synthesis of the theoretical discussions

Wooldridge et al. (2005) claimed in their synthesis of middle management that the discussion is too complex because of a multiplicity of terms and methodologies. However, for me the discussion seems to be dominated by top management’s functionalist perspective on efficiency and performance. Thomas & Linstead (2002:73) call this “locking
with positivist epistemology”. Hence, it appears that the discussion in the field of middle management studies is characterised by controversial approaches and the inability to accumulate new knowledge. I suspect that regardless of whether the studies used similar research orientations, the results would be hard to generalise. The reason for this is the heterogeneous nature of middle managers’ responsibilities and organisational context that ranges from managerial administrative tasks to operational shop floor and customer front line tasks.

Hence, the focus has been on the demands put on middle management. The role of middle management has focused on the implementation of strategy. Thus, middle managers have been invited to take part in actual strategic processes in rather instrumental way, for example as a task to deliver knowledge from the front-line (Floyd & Lane, 2000). However, this traditional approach has been questioned by inspecting middle management’s sense-making processes (Balogun & Johnson, 2004), which concentrate on internal schemas. The social constructionist perspective presented by Thomas & Linstead (2002) shifts the focus to the middle managers and their own construction of themselves instead of investigating how they are constructed by others. Also later on the discursive aspects of middle management were brought to surface from the competence development perspective as Rouleau and Balogun (2011).

Alvesson (2008) made a clear description of the main discussions and approaches used in identity studies, ranging from personal identity to social identities. However, these were only skinned through briefly as they are not part of my theoretical framework. The social constructionist orientation was already presented here as the guiding star of both my theoretical and methodological orientations in which I regard identities as socially constructed narratives (Gergen, 1999).

The origins of liminality are in anthropology and were later developed for organisational studies, especially in recent years (Beech, 2011; Ybema et al., 2011). In the theoretical chapter, I covered the original idea of liminality in anthropology as well the steps taken to make it relevant to organisational studies. After its development from early applications in anthropology (Turner, 1984; Van Gennep, 1960 [1906]), the theory of liminality was adopted in organisational studies to approach unusual work relations, such as those with temporary workers (Garsen, 1999) and external consultants (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003). In particular, further developments of the concept of liminality in organisation studies include those on liminal practices (Beech, 2011) and on the nature of liminality as either fixed-term and transitional or long-term and perpetual (Ybema et al., 2011). Liminal practices include experimentation, reflection and recognition that enable the liminal to get past the in-between state at the threshold and to enter a new identity.

### 2.6 Theoretical framework of my study

Here, I will briefly summarise and narrow down the main points from the theoretical discussion that guided my research project. My study takes part in the discussions about narrative identity construction and liminality. In addition, these are connected to the ongoing discussions of middle management.

Understanding identity as a social constructionist narrative co-construction process has also multiple theoretical implications for my study. I have positioned myself in the field of
identity studies as a participant in identity creation in a specific point of time and context. Understanding myself as a co-constructor of the narratives is a key element in my orientation. Identity construction is understood as a process of becoming (Chia, 1996) and not a coherent one. In my study, narrative identity is constructed in relation with others through meaning making (Gergen, 1999). Narrative approach is regarded in my framework as including both theoretical and methodological choices.

Because identity construction takes place in social relations, the multiple selves that people construct are also scrutinised in this study, including the authentic self, the expected self, the cast self and the desired self. This dimension is brought into the framework to clearly portray identity construction as a dynamic process due not only to expectations set or assumed to have been set by others, but the expectations one sets for oneself. The description of multiple selves was constructed as I got inspired by the self–other constructions in liminality (Ybema, Beech & Ellis, 2011) in which multiple selves are also vividly presented depending on the perspective adopted. The idea originally rose from the expected identity, which in my study, was constructed by the branch managers.

In my study, I use the concept of liminality, which originates from anthropology, to illustrate the demanding phase in the context of change in which the new identity is not yet constructed and the old has not yet been abandoned. This kind of process can be understood as a kind of “soul searching” during which new narrative identities are constructed. Liminality enabled me to describe and analyse in a more conceptual manner the transition from an old identity to a new one and the demanding nature of that process. Liminality is described as the in-between state of identity reconstruction: one has not yet left the old identity behind and entered into the new one. Liminality can be either short-term and temporal or long-term, with no fixed end point (Ybema et al., 2011). In general, identity construction, especially one with features of liminality, can be an emotional experience. Therefore, emotional aspects are also taken into account in my theoretical framework as being embedded in a socially constructed orientation (Fineman, 2000.) Besides the possible nature of liminality, the description of liminal practices is integral part of the framework and as described by Beech (2011), includes: 1) experimentation, 2) reflection and 3) recognition.

Branch managers are understood in this study as being middle managers, which connects my study to a discussion of middle management. The largest challenges come from the different philosophical commitments in most of the middle management studies. In my study, the attention has been turned to middle managers themselves, whereas the traditional managerialist and functionalist focus has been to start from top management’s demands and the possible gap between expectations and outcome. In the discussion on middle management, the hot topics have been the actual need for middle management and whether part of its main role and responsibility is in strategic planning and decision making or implementation. (Thomas & Linstead, 2002.)

In the Table 2 are summarised the approaches to key concepts of this study.
Concepts in this study

Identity
Socially co-constructed narrative identity

Middle management
Middle managers active in their identity construction

Liminality
Transitional or perpetual liminality as part of identity construction in change

Table 2 Approaches to key concepts in this study

In the next chapter, the methodological choices of this study are covered.
3. METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES

The target of this chapter is to describe and to make explicit the underlying assumptions guiding this study from a methodological point of view. The big decisions behind the research process deal with ontology and epistemology, which also influence the choices made concerning methodology (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008; Keso, Lehtimäki, & Pietiläinen, 2006). These can also be called the framework or paradigm of the study (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

Keso et al. (2006) clearly point out the differences between various research orientations and how they have an impact on the whole research process. In my opinion, the main difference becomes apparent in the role of the researcher in realistic, critical, constructivist and socially constructionist studies. In realistic studies, the researcher is the one who reports the results by mastering analytics, whereas in critical studies, the researcher can act as a change agent and an emancipator. In constructivist studies, the researcher attempts to access the interviewee’s reality and construct as authentic a description as possible. However, in socially constructionist studies, such as mine, the researcher is herself part of the knowledge construction and enters into reflective acts as she also questions her own starting points. Hänninen (2010) pointed out two different ways to approach narratives constructed in interview situations, understanding that: 1) prior to the interview, the interviewee has already constructed his story (constructivism) or 2) the story gets collaboratively co-constructed during the interview.

This study follows the guidelines of social constructionist narrative research from beginning to end. This was already explained from the theoretical standing point. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) set out some quality-related criteria for narrative research. They stated that the research report should be emplotted, which means that the researcher guides the readers through the research process with a clear focus. The researcher should also be present in the report instead of attempting to pursue an objective approach. Studies should not concentrate solely on the explicitly spoken words; there should also be space for the silent, not so apparent voices, which many times are left unheard. From me, this called for multiple readings of the interviews (original narratives).

Because knowledge is regarded as temporal and situated in social constructionism, I find it important to set the scene for my study. Next, I will begin with a short description of the context and end with a reflection on the ethical issues related to my study. In between will be presented the interview data, methods used in the data analysis and description of the analysis process.

3.1 Empirical context of the study: the Bank in continuous change

This chapter briefly covers firstly the history of the focus organisation of this study and then secondly explains the main changes that have taken place on local branch level in this particular organisation. This is important in order for the readers to be able to follow the
empirical analysis presented later on. The usage of the real name of the focus organisation, “Sampo Bank”, enables a rich description of the studied phenomenon and makes it more understandable and unique (Koskinen et al., 2005).

I am in no way an objective researcher of this specific subject because my years working at Sampo Bank have proved to be some of the best years of my career. I was young and ambitious, and the Bank offered me challenging managerial positions in the branch line. Being part of making something new in Finnish financial market was exciting and challenging. Part of the issues presented here are based on official documents, but they partly rely on my personal knowledge and experience as an insider in the Bank, especially chapter 3.1.3, which deals with the impact of the strategic changes on local branch management.

The Bank developed into a serious player in the banking industry: in 2004, Sampo (Sampo PLC including Sampo Bank) was the market leader or runner-up in the most essential savings and investment services. In 2005, every fourth mortgage in Finland was granted by Sampo Bank. Hence the Bank was on a fast track to transform into something totally new.

3.1.1 Finnish banking industry at the time of study

This study was conducted during a time of growth after many challenging years that included a banking crisis and a recession. Overall, the Finnish banking industry witnessed the start-up of large-scale changes just prior to the time of study. Because deregulation started in the 1980s (Lähteenmäki, 2006; Ropo, 1989), Finnish banks began to operate in open markets, and later on shareholders appeared with demands to increase profits. More competitors in the market forced banks to be organised. Mergers and alliances between insurance companies and banks were one way of taking action. At the same time, banks decreased their capacity and increased their profitability (Mörttinen & Virolainen, 2002.) According to my view, based on academic reports, official reports of Sampo PLC and Sampo Bank and my own knowledge as an insider in the industry, these changes can be categorised into three interrelated categories: 1) structural, 2) business logic-related and 3) customer behaviour-related changes (Andersen, Hyytinen, & Snellman, 2000; Vauhkonen & Pylkkönen, 2002; Lähteenmäki, 2006).

Structural changes are due to consolidation processes (Andersen, Hyytinen, & Snellman, 2000; Vauhkonen & Pylkkönen, 2002) which have been both domestic and international. For example, the merger between Kansallis Bank and Union Bank of Finland to Merita Bank was followed by an international merger with Nordbanken to MeritaNordbanken and finally, to Nordea, after further international mergers in the Nordics. Besides mergers also looser alliances between banks and insurances companies have also been common in the industry (Voutilainen, 2006). I call business-logic-related changes the ones which have forced the banks to seek additional profits due to lowering interest rates. Traditionally, the majority of the banks’ profits have been generated by the balance-sheet products. There was suddenly a window opened that changed the emphasis in locally offered services towards ones regarded as demanding more professionalism, namely investment-related products. Insurance-related investment products in particular offered a new revenue source as off-balance sheet products with low capital intensity. Also, trends in customer channel
usage started to shift more intensively towards online channels in daily banking, which pushed the banks to re-evaluate the service variety offered through local branches. Complicated consultative advisory services concerning savings, investments and financing as competitive edge were offered in branches, although a movement can also be seen towards online channels for these services (Lähteenmäki, 2006).

However, public opinion has not always been on the banks’ side in Nordic countries; especially in Finland, banks have been regarded as national institutes and not as market-driven business organisations, regardless of their ownership profile (Jordan, 2001). It is maybe due to this fact that banks’ actions have always gained the attention of the large public, whether or not they have been pleasant from a customer’s perspective.

3.1.2 Sampo Bank as part of Sampo PLC

This study closely looks at the strategic reorientation and reorganising that came along after the merger of Sampo Insurance with former Leonia Bank from the perspective of local branch managers’ identity construction. Although the context of this study is the changes that took place in the aftermath of the merger between a bank and an insurance company, the changes are approached contextually as strategic changes. The reason for this is that organisationally, these two business areas were for the most part kept separate. The focus of my study is therefore on the strategic changes the merger brought to the local branch managers.

In 1997, state-owned Postipankki and Finnish Export Credit Ltd. merged under the name of the Leonia Group. At the end of 2000, Leonia and Sampo Insurance Company merged into Sampo-Leonia. In 2001 Leonia Bank was renamed Sampo Bank and the parent company to Sampo PLC. In 2002, the property and casualty insurance business within Sampo PLC merged with If Insurance, which became fully owned by Sampo PLC in 2004. Sampo Bank was the third largest bank behind Nordea Bank and Cooperative Banks at the time of empirical data gathering, as measured by its balance sheet (Annual Reports and Reviews of Leonia Bank, Sampo Bank and Sampo PLC 2000–2007). Because Sampo Bank as part of Sampo PLC represents the context of my study, only the development of Sampo Bank is presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3 Formulation of Sampo Bank

The strategic direction of Sampo PLC at first emphasised a customer-orientation and then gradually moved towards shareholder maximisation. This transformation from state-owned institution to part of the market-driven company was a huge leap for the Bank in many
ways, which is covered in my study from the perspective of branch managers’ identities. Here are listed shortly the strategic directions taken in Sampo PLC during the context of this study:

- Most customer-orientated and competent financial services group in Finland (2001-2003)
- We take care of your assets (2004-2005)
- Shareholder value maximization (2006-)

The business divisions of Sampo PLC (Sampo Bank, Sampo Life and If Insurance) were independent and non-collaborative besides Sampo Bank’s branches, which brought together traditional banking services (deposits and loans) and long-term savings products (unit-link insurances, pension insurances and mutual funds). There was also a short period of time, right after the merger, when a matrix organisation combined the local insurance and banking management. However, it was hardly discussed in the branch managers’ interviews and thus, this time period can be regarded as a transition phase.

The movement in strategic emphasis from traditional banking and insurance to long-term savings (unit-linked insurances, life insurances, mutual funds and asset management) was done firstly, because this was seen as a promising market segment and secondly, because the capital intensity was estimated to be low in the products related to long-term saving and thirdly, because the growth rate was considered high due to the increased wealth of Finnish households and an aging population. The formation of the financial house was seen as creating a basis for combining the expertise in banking and insurance in order to better understand customer’s overall financial position (Annual Reports and Reviews of Leonia Bank, Sampo Bank and Sampo PLC 2000–2007).

Today, in 2014, Sampo Bank is part of history – both the name and the Bank, as such. CEO Mika Ihmuotila stated in Kauppalehti Optio in 2005 that Sampo Bank is able to succeed on its own without any alliances with other actors in the market besides the current one, Sampo PLC. However, the acquisition in which Sampo PLC sold Sampo Bank Group to Danske Bank A/S was announced in 2006 and confirmed in 2007.

3.1.3 Impact of the strategic change to branch management

At the time of data gathering, in other words, while the narratives were being co-constructed, I was a regular participant in the branch managers’ regional meetings. I did not hold the title of a branch manager; instead I was a sub-manager in a satellite branch. I was managing my own unit, which belonged to a larger branch group managed by a branch manager. The regional manager wanted to keep me in the inner circle due to the fact that I was managing a branch that was located in growth area in a large city. For this reason, I was also involved in the discussions taking place in regional meetings and handling the profit centre logic and everything that went along with that.

Sampo PLC’s change in strategic direction also meant radical changes for Sampo Bank after the merger. There was a demand for skill development in local branches towards expertise in savings and investment services. It had been an integral part early on, but had then become the centre of the attention in terms of competence, regardless of the job profile. The most obvious changes affecting branch managers were: 1) the new strategic
direction, 2) the profit centre logic and 3) the new organisational structure with submanagers responsible for their sales groups which will be called “group managers” in this study.

On the local level, Sampo Bank’s branch network consisted of six geographic regions managed by regional managers, each of which was responsible for approximately 20 branches. Branches were modelled through a profit centre structure and managed by their own branch managers, who were accountable for performance. In practice, branches had their own profit and loss statements and balance sheets. Hence, there were new features in the performance indicators in addition to sales, which demanded new competences to be learned and adopted by the branch management. Some of the branches only had personal banking services, whereas others also had expertise in corporate banking. At the time of my study, the process of unifying the personal and corporate banking branches had started.

Branches also went through a major reorganising with a new operating model in 2003 that moved them into a sales group structure. In practice, this meant dividing the employees into groups based on their areas of expertise. Thus, daily banking affairs were dealt by the customer service group, more extensive customer service advisory services by the customer relations group, and the customer acquisition group’s main responsibility was to serve new customers. Customer relations group members took care and met with investment and savings as well loan customers. Customer acquisition group also entailed the same service variety but purely focused on the needs of new customers.

The new organisational structure also brought a new managerial level between the sales advisors and the branch managers called “group managers”. This new managerial level was responsible for its own satellite branch (a branch geographically distanced) or its own sales group of advisors working in the same branch premises. Earlier on, branch managers were the immediate supervisors of all employees in their branch, besides those who were in satellite branches geographically located for example in another town or suburb. Therefore, before implementing this new organisational structure, the other supervisors in the branches did not have such clearly stated managerial duties because their main responsibilities were, for example, administrative tasks, marketing or judicial matters.

3.2 Interviews

How did the local branch managers portray the changes overall? How did they describe themselves in the course of change in 2005 when I sat down with 12 of them and gave them the opportunity to tell their story? In this chapter I am focusing on the interviewed branch managers: who they were and how their interviews turned out to be.

3.2.1 Interviewed branch managers

I carried out the interviews with the branch managers between January and April in 2005. At that time, I had not yet set a method for how to proceed in the interviews or even how to analyse the material afterwards. I had been postponing the interviews because I thought I was not qualified enough to conduct them yet. That was unnecessary since I was warmly welcomed. Information on the interviews with the local branch managers, including the
dates and duration of the interviews, are presented in Table 3. I conducted the interviews sequentially in spring 2005, which helped enormously because I was able to “keep touch” with the process. Most of the branches led by the interviewed branch managers were medium-sized. This was not planned because I had no specific criteria for the branch managers to be interviewed. Seven of these branch managers operated in multi-branch areas which were larger cities and five in smaller towns. All of them had sub-managers (group managers) in the same physical location where they normally located or in so-called satellite branches which were separate branches in a different physical location. I ended up with 12 interviews for no particular reason. At that point it seemed to provide a sufficient amount of data. I felt that the data presented the changes for the branch management from multiple perspectives and enabled me to make a deep dive into the relatively “small sample” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Branch manager</th>
<th>Date of the interview</th>
<th>Duration (approx.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>January 2005</td>
<td>3,0h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>February 2005</td>
<td>1,5h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>February 2005</td>
<td>1,5h</td>
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<td>4</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>May 2005</td>
<td>1,5h</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 Interviews with the branch managers

Most of the branch managers had started their careers in Postipankki and a couple in Leonia Bank. Many of them had heard about my doctoral studies and gladly volunteered to be interviewed when I contacted them. Some of them also recommended other colleagues to participate in my study. Only one manager declined, for personal reasons. I conducted 12 interviews, which I tape-recorded with consent from the interviewed managers. I made only a few notes and was therefore able to concentrate and commit fully to listening. The interviews lasted from one to three hours, depending on the interviewee.

Most of the interviews were conducted in the branch managers’ offices during opening hours. The managers usually introduced me to their staff and talked openly about their participation in my study. Some of them simply said we were having “a meeting as colleagues”, although I did not have branch manager status at the time. Only a couple of interviews were held in my office after working hours. In my interviews, no one appeared to try to give me an impression of being superior or having a higher status (Keso, 1999; Tienari, Vaara, & Meriläinen, 2005). However, at times it felt as if some of the comments they made were signs of the speaker taking an advisory position (Peltonen & Lehto, 1999)
as the more senior branch managers were telling about the difference between themselves and the younger generation, to which I belonged.

Some of them were also keen to know what their colleagues had told me in their interviews and whether they had a similar mind-set. I usually dodged these questions and directed the discussion onto other subjects. My interviewing method was relatively unstructured. I had prepared three themes which I hoped to be covered:

- each interviewee’s work history at Sampo Bank and in the Finnish Banking industry
- major organisational and business changes that had affected them
- their biggest challenges at the moment

I had also prepared some clarifying questions beforehand, which I used if I felt it necessary in the first couple of interviews. These interview themes did not cover the identity construction process as such because at that time my focus was entirely on another topic as mentioned.

### 3.2.2 Carrying out the interviews

I would afterwards label the interviews as conversational narrative interviews (Hytti, 2003) due to the cozy atmosphere and fluid dialog (Gergen, 1999). At times, I was more active in dialog if necessary in order to “keep the story going”. Sometimes, the branch managers also asked my opinion on the theme being discussed (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

At first, I asked the branch managers to talk freely about their history at the Bank. I did not force the interviews to take a certain course. On some occasions, the interview started with a discussion of “the hot potato” in their branch or in Sampo Bank in general. I wanted give them the opportunity to talk about the things and incidents that mattered to them. My approach puzzled the interviewees from time to time. They wanted to have a more detailed starting point, as these following questions reveal:

“Will you tell me about your research subject first?” (Branch manager Iris)

“Do you have a certain time perspective in which you examine these changes?” (Branch manager Simon)

Some of them expected me to take an active role and guide the interview. One branch manager expected me to have a prepared questionnaire from which I would “shoot” the questions.

“Okay. I promise that you can interview me, and I will not interrupt.” (Branch manager Ben)

A few wanted to demonstrate that they had academic degrees. As I was trying to create common ground with them as an insider, they were also attempting to do it with me being an academic scholar. The chitchat about Sampo Bank and talking about my own job and post-doctoral studies helped to break the ice (Kortteinen, 1982, 1992) in the interview situation. Trust was built in the beginning by looking for mutual interests and experiences as a starting point.
“I graduated from Business School many years ago. The most suitable definition for an organisation in my opinion is an integrated concept of a socio-technical system. Socio refers to leadership and technical to management.” (Branch manager Ian)

“The idea to come to work in banking industry started from my summer internship . . . after that summer I figured out that Business School would be right for me . . .” (Branch manager Henry)

The advantages of a conversation-like narrative interview are that it is individualised and context-based and the topics discussed are relevant to the participants. As Kärreman and Alvesson (2004:155) put it:

“The fairly open approach means that we were not restricted to a rigid interview protocol. Instead, we based interview questions on common themes, which were consequently adapted to the stage in the research process and the particular developments of each interview, related to the interviewee’s specific work situation, seniority and experiences”.

In this way, I was not offering the interviewees my own conceptual map to use, although I was able to speak “their language” (Hyvärinen, 1994). Needless to say, this kind of data collecting required “unlearning” in order to pay attention to every detail discussed. I had some ideas or hypotheses in advance about the most important topics or events which I abandoned immediately as useless and gave the stage to the branch managers to tell their stories freely (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The majority of the branch managers’ interviews turned into personal and rather spontaneous narratives about the interviewees’ history at the Bank, although the group of branch managers comprised different kinds of storytellers: some experienced ones who have told their stories many times, whereas some were making sense of it for the first time out loud.

At first in the interview situations, we were getting to know each other and figuring out how to act and speak in that particular situation with that particular person – in other words, how to present oneself. Interview situations can also be portrayed as a power game that cannot be changed (Hyvärinen, 1994). The interviewee is able to ignore questions or refuse to answer them without explaining why. This can be described though metaphor as “a cultural dance” (Gergen, 1994) in which one may invite other to dance. The other may accept or refuse the invitation. After rejection, one has to figure out new ways to proceed. An interview situation can therefore be seen as a relational game in which what can be told and what is better left unsaid is tested in the first few minutes. Sometimes I was ready to jump to the next topic and did not realise that the interviewee was still pondering the previous one. Silence meant reflection, not a refusal to answer. According to Elliot (2005:28–35), it is important to stay alert to the slightest hints of relevant issues – little stories that people tell spontaneously. Many branch managers made detailed descriptions about specific incidents that they regarded as significant for them.

I agree with Mishler (1986) and McCormack (2004) that an interview is always an interview and takes place in a formal context, which should be taken into account in the analysis as well. Hence, the situational factors should not be lost along the way in the analysis. In addition, the search for mutual understanding between the interviewer and interviewee can be demanding, if not impossible. An interview situation is an institutionalised form of interaction (Tienari et al., 2005) which limits what can be said and
what is better left unsaid. Research interviews have a particular meaning, and the participants have particular roles (Ruuuvuori & Tiittula, 2005). The interview has been arranged at the request of the researcher, who leads the discussion on certain topics. The recording of the interview emphasises the institutionalisation of the situation. At first, there is usually a short discussion about the “script of the interview”, covering the main themes. Many branch managers wanted to discuss my research more specifically, and some of them even wondered whether they were talking about “the right stuff”.

I had to be adaptive to their articulation and even ask “stupid” questions in order to understand and to get to the bottom of things. According to Pöysä (2010), the parties in the interview situation should be unfamiliar with each other because acquaintances can develop “as you already know” assumptions. I felt my insider status as an advantage because I was able to create intimate discussions with the branch managers. It is important to include “what gets unmentioned” because “it is apparent without saying”. This refers to issues that are culturally taken for granted and thus left unmentioned in certain situations (Suoninen, 2001). In the branch managers’ interviews this meant sometimes getting straight to the point with no further elaboration due to my background in the Bank. The branch managers were most likely under the impression that I was familiar with all the concepts and processes applied in the Bank. However, if that was not the case, I asked additional questions. McCormack (2004:225) stated that it is crucial to be attentive to things besides what is being said and also to how it is said and what is not being said. Usually, the silent parts are expressed in the narratives as hints of highly emotional comments. Silence can for example be a way to express resistance towards change (Tiittula, 2007). Also unwillingness to comment was present in one interview in which the branch manager remained rather distant to me.

Interviewees can totally surprise the researcher and guide the whole study in a new direction. Some of the branch managers commented that these sessions were therapeutic for them (Kvale, 1996) or opened up new ideas. An interview situation is a win-win chance for both parties: The researcher has the opportunity to gather data and the interviewee can make sense of his thoughts, perhaps for the first time (Hyvärinen & Löytyniemi, 2005) and reflect on past incidents in a safe space (Söderberg, 2003) and then finally co-construct them with the interviewer. The research interview was an opportunity for the branch managers to speak their minds without practical consequences (Czarniawska, 2004). The researcher can be regarded as a fellow traveller who gets emotionally engaged and shows genuine interest and empathy (Boje, 2001). At the same time as the interviewee is constructing his own story, the listener is also constructing the story as well in collaboration. The interviewer affects the telling with questions and comments intentionally or unintentionally. Therefore, it is a co-construction. According to positivist orientation this kind of interview set-up would be taken as highly biased one.

The interviewee wishes to present himself in a certain kind of light (Davies & Harré, 1999) — for example, as an experienced branch manager who is used to many changes and does not get confused easily. Usually, people have a tendency to present themselves positively, whereas the context is approached more critically (Åkerberg, 2002). There is also the chance that giving a good impression becomes even more important than actually constructing a meaningful narrative (Koskinen et al., 2005). Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) stated that narratives are not a gateway to experiences; instead, they describe how people tend to construct “favourable truth” by their language use in interview sessions. Söderberg
(2003) noted it being only natural that narrators want to give an impression of themselves as heroes and survivors and as someone with high moral standards — in other words, as someone worth empathy. I acknowledge this and regard it as a natural element in narrating.

The narratives constructed in the branch managers’ interviews followed mostly the traditional guidelines of narratives, having a beginning, middle and ending. At times, there were loops back and forward. The focus was mainly on the present situation, because the changes were in progress. Leonia and Sampo-Leonia were at times mentioned, but the centre of the focus was Sampo Bank and the changes it brought. Leonia Bank and Postipankki periods represented “the past”, whereas Sampo Bank represented the current situation.

One rather unorthodox narrative may have resulted partly from my inexperience in interviewing. Branch manager #3 contacted me himself because he had heard about my study and wanted to participate. Surprisingly, he was rather reluctant to speak and was defensive. I got the feeling that he could have used the narrative form if he wanted, but for some reason, he refused. He answered my questions with only a couple of sentences. In addition, his narrative included more contradictory elements than the others.

Some of the narratives were emotional and, for example, filled with positive excitement or anxiety and criticism, whereas other narratives were told in a factual manner, and thus the narrators also remained distant and cold (Soderberg, 2003). The narrative of branch manager #6 gave the most complicated interview. It seemed to me that he was trying too hard to give a good and professional impression. The narrative of #8 was also atypical because although he was eager to speak, I was not able to make him feel totally relaxed so that he could speak freely, which probably made the narrative rather superficial. However, I did not exclude these three interviews from my analysis to make the analysis easier for myself (Hänninen & Koski-Jännes, 2010). Rather, I saw these narratives as being “under construction” (Ochs & Capps, 2001) and acceptable ways to tell one’s story. In addition, according to Gabriel (2000:136), researchers must do their best to show the controversies and the emotional aspects of “real life” and not to leave them aside or undermine them.

### 3.3 Method: narrative analysis to narrative identities

In this chapter, I make an argument for my narrative analysis. The definition of narratives was already covered in the theoretical chapter. In this chapter, narratives are approached from the methodological perspective and as a way to analyse the data in organisational change. Whether the expectations are met, exceeded or disappointed plays a large role in an individual’s identity construction. I also describe the conversion and de-conversion stories and how they can be utilised as a method in management studies and especially in organisational change context.

#### 3.3.1 Narrative analysis in the context of change

In this chapter, the narrative approach of this study is discussed in more detail from a methodological perspective. I have chosen the narrative approach to analyse the empirical data because it enables a rich and full description of the data and because the temporal
nature of the studied phenomenon stays alive in rewritten narratives. A narrative approach is suited especially well to studies that cover change situations from an individual person’s point of view (Koskinen et al., 2005). In my opinion, this works well even though in a socially constructionist approach, identity is not based on an individual’s input; instead, it is understood to be co-constructed. I chose the narrative approach to gather, analyse and present the data because the other option I had had in mind, namely discourse analysis, might have appeared too disconnected from the context, whereas narratives are strongly tied to a certain time and place and people (Grant et al., 2004). Thus, being able to reconstruct the full narratives of 12 branch managers made it possible to tell more. I actually made an initial discourse analysis before I was certain as to which method to choose. This preliminary discourse analysis served as a starting point for the antagonist theme analysis, which is also presented in my report as signalling the sources of stability and liminality. However the discourse analysis made years ago is excluded as such from this final report.

In addition, the description of liminality by discourse analysis would have most likely turned out less descriptive because narratives are as a method more vivid, context-driven and also able to include the emotional side (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). I feel that in order to be able to tell something essential about liminality, there also has to be a clear description of the context of the person going through liminality. These narratives thus enabled me to talk about the changes in a feasible manner. According to Fineman (2000), by concentrating on detailed accounts it is possible to follow shifts of emotions in storytelling. This calls for sensitivity and understanding from the researcher, being also a co-constructor and part of the storytelling setting. In addition, the possibility of reporting the emotional aspects demands imaginative illustration. The rewritten narratives and multiple quotations in them are able to reveal the emotional nature of identity construction.

There seems to be disagreement about what a narrative analysis and an analysis of narratives (Polkinghorne, 1988) entails. I acknowledge that a narrative analysis is also a rewritten narrative of someone’s major life events since there are always choices made what to excluded and include in the analysis. Therefore, I state that there is no possibility of writing something that is completely neutral (cf. Frantsi, 2009) by which I mean that it is not possible to refer to a text written as a neutral description of someone’s major life events without entering into socially constructed meaning-making processes. McCormack (2004) labelled this kind of methodological approach, which combines analysis of narratives and narrative analysis, as “storying stories”. As mentioned earlier, I do not make a strict division between the concepts of “story” and “narrative” in my study because I do not consider it to be an important factor whether someone’s oral construction of life events follows certain rules set by others beforehand, especially in terms of the narrative’s coherence and integrity.

I emphasise that in narrative identity construction, the past is co-constructed in a manner that is precisely tied to a specific context. The narrator and the writer make choices based on their socio-cultural backgrounds. According to Gergen (1999), generating meaning is a continuous process and the limits set for us are derived from our surroundings. This point is relevant since my research process has taken so many years. The changes in my surroundings and relationships have changed the analysis. As I have read the interviews, the narrative identities have been constructed differently due to my current and past life situations.
The social constructionist methodology behind my analysis consists of 1) the division between past and (present and) future and whether one’s own expectations are met and 2) the identification of narratives as conversion or de-conversion stories based on the interviewees’ language use. The difference between the past and present was clearly present in the original narratives. According to Gergen (1994), narratives are constructed in the course of change, making comparisons between the past and present and wondering about the future. Therefore, I state that the possible signs of liminality can be grasped freshly in the context of “in-between” in my interviews. This approach enabled me to identify liminality also from emotional perspective in the branch managers’ meaning making, such as frustration, uneasiness, ambiguity, excitement and disappointment. The incoherence and narrative temporality of making loops back and forth is taken as a natural feature of storytelling and reflecting ad hoc along the way, involving “revelations” of self and others. The possible incoherence, speculative elements and multiple discourses in narratives are regarded as a possibility to get hints from the liminality of identity construction.

It is understandable that individual’s language use varies tremendously in describing the impact of changes for themselves. Thus, in this study, the slightest hint of a possible implication of liminality is also taken into account. Some use more dramatic language, whereas others want to keep up the “cool image” and are careful about how they present themselves. Identity construction is approached through the lens of liminality, taking both possible expressions, transitional and perpetual, into account (Ybema et al., 2011). I also understand that an unstructured narrative may be due to the fact that it may be the first time that someone is orally constructing things that happened in their career. It is hence too simplistic to draw a conclusion that a lot of reflection and pondering is a direct sign of liminality. Therefore, the analysis needed multiple readings to see beyond the obvious.

Also, initial hunches cannot determine which incidents have been significant for others. Some periods of change are more meaningful to identity construction than others and thus have a greater impact on life’s course (MacAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2001). Hyvärinen (1998b) used the term “thick description” (Denzin, 1989) to describe a moment of revelation in narratives. This does not necessarily imply a turning point in the storyline. These smaller critical incidents and reflections are approached as “mini narratives” (Vaara, 2002). According to Löyttyniemi (2004), small “inner” changes may be expected or pure surprises. Some of the changes do not require anything major to happen externally, although the impact for an individual can be remarkable. Sharing these life-change experiences with someone solidifies them as part of one’s narrative identity.

The same on-going, larger changes can be constructed differently, depending on the narrator. Åkerberg’s (2002) study on identity transformation from unemployment to entrepreneur determined that although the impact of the economic crisis in the beginning of the 1990s cannot be argued on the macro-level, on the micro-level, the language use of it varied a lot. Temporary unemployment was not necessarily seen as a personal crisis or employment as the best possible solution due to particular life situations. Therefore, whereas the researcher sees a specific incident as a remarkable and meaningful change for the individual, it might not actually be an upheaval for him.

In my opinion an identity study does not have to be a longitudinal one in order to be able to show the processual nature of identity construction because, according to Gergen (1994, 1999), identity construction always takes place relationally and in social processes in a social constructionist orientation. Narrative identity construction is a process of itself,
and although it takes place in one specific context, it is able to tell us something about the changes identity in that specific time and place.

3.3.2 Conversion and de-conversion in narrative identities

Change narratives can also be regarded as “conversion stories” (Bryant & Wolfram Cox, 2004) in which organisational actors describe an organisational change. As mentioned earlier on I will not make any separation between the usage of “story” and “narrative” in my study. The main elements in these conversion stories are the transfer from the “old” into a “new and better” organisational life after the change. The change can be characterised as an “awakening” and a change in the value base leading to self-transformation (Hänninen, 2010). Bryant and Wolfram Cox (2004) adopted the use of conversion stories from religious circles (Ballis & Richardson, 1997) as the term “conversion” means turning into a believer. I liked their “recycling” of the concept into organisational studies and saw it as useful method to be applied in my study as well.

The official story of change in organisational context is usually initiated by top management. Concept of conversion has a strong religious connotation, which refers to a change in direction or a turning to God. The perception of radical discontinuity, separating the past and present as an “epiphany” or as a result of a long soul-searching process, is powerfully present. Conversion stories favour the present and the future at the expense of the past. It is common that the converted continues to move the process forward and do their best to convert others as well (Ballis & Richardson, 1997). Ybema (2010) conceptualised identity change with temporal discontinuity and a clear division between the old and new, legacies from the past and plans for the future. In the article by Ballis and Richardson (1997), it was apparent that the focus was on the improved present state, and the past was characterised mainly through what was lacking.

Bryant and Wolfram Cox (2004) stated that these conversion stories tend to be overly positive and to be silent about the negative issues that come along with change. The conversion stories they studied all had in common, firstly, a dramatic telling of the organisational change, secondly, a clearly stated difference between the past and the present and thirdly, managerial support for the decision making all the way through. Conversion has to do with personal change as one identifies with the values of a certain group of people. However, they also pointed out that, conversion stories can be attempts to live a comfortable life in organisational settings rather than actually transforming into a true believer. There might be a will to please top management in hopes of promotion or other benefit, which makes people construct phoney stories.

McKenna (2010) discovered in a narrative study on managers that they position themselves according to the dominant managerial discourse, which defines how a manager should be, such as positive towards change, entrepreneur-like and “can do” organisational actors. Although there is room to narrate an alternative version, it is not commonly done. This is in line with the study by Bryant and Wolfram Cox (2004) in which the individuals remained completely silent about negative issues. All of this indicates a natural need to present oneself in a good light and to blame others if there is a need to blame someone.

According to Söderberg (2003) and Vaara (2002), in organisational mergers and acquisitions, it is human to emphasise one’s own actions as successful, whereas failures end
up on someone else’s shoulders. The “adversary” is needed in order to glorify oneself and avoid the responsibility for failures. One’s own role can be presented as modest or totally bounded in failure situations. Vaara (2002) also stated that success stories are straightforward, whereas failure stories require more explaining and hence turn out to be more complex. Sampo Bank proved out to be success measured by performance. However success can be evaluated with alternative measurements such as having concern for people which will be lively present in the branch managers’ narratives.

Bryant and Wolfram Cox (2004) emphasised that at times the personal experiences and the organisational perspective of change were mixed as the actors commented, for example, on how the management would appreciate their positive accounts of the change. Hence, some people felt and expressed uncomfortable with the changes that had taken place but remained silent about the negative issues. Ballis and Richardson (1997) also stated that conversion stories are more rhetorical devices than descriptive narratives because they are targeted mainly at moving hearts, not minds. However, is not every narrative a rhetorical construction? They also pointed out the possibility of de-conversion stories as someone experiences a similar kind of revelation to conversion, but in the opposite direction, referred to as “losing the faith” in the religious context.

Reissner (2011:594) categorised personal stories in organisational change into 1) stories of “the good old days”; 2) stories of deception, taboo and silence and 3) stories of influence. In the stories of the “good old days”, nostalgia is present, whereas in the stories of deception, taboo and silence, negativity rose to the surface as the actors expressed their dissatisfaction, in this case, towards the employment policy of the organisation. The stories of influence were enthusiastic after the change and even the negative issues, such as rules dictated by the manager that appeared to be unfair were regarded as sense making. For example, a female manager was eager to participate in trainings which the CEO saw as unnecessary for women over the age of 40. Strangely, the female manager was so committed to the organisation that she accepted this with no complaints. Hence, she seemed to accept the identity cast on her, even though it was a negative one (Beech et al., 2009). These negative and positive stories of change classified by Reissner (2011) have a lot in common with the conversion stories (Bryant & Wolfram Cox, 2004).

Beech et al. (2009) used the term “contested stories of change” in their study on organisational change. The way different actors engage in storytelling will have an impact not solely on these actors themselves, but also on other actors as well. In storytelling, actors construct themselves in a certain kind of way as well as others referring to cast identities. Their study was carried out in finance sector organisations facing radical reorganisation. For example, the managers perceived themselves as indispensable, but others constructed them purely as an expense in a counter-story. This story of management can be regarded as typical because they were “pro change” and saw it to be a success. They were the initiators of the change and therefore had to keep the spirit up and at least appear like strong believers in the chosen path. Two other groups of actors constructed themselves as actual business-makers or being at the mercy of others.

I have acknowledged that one possible criticism may emerge from using methodologically conversion stories. They may be interpreted as a way to map the narrative identities against the Bank’s set of strategic directions and hence be closer to the concept of organisational identification theory discussed in the theoretical chapter. However, I wish to emphasise that although the narratives in my study are also evaluated based on their signs
of strategic commitment (conversion), I am not in any way pointing out that high commitment is taken as a target in my framework. There were narratives in which a branch manager stated that he is committed, but a short while later, the same manager stated unwillingness to implement the procedures and new organisational structure that come along with the strategy. Thus, getting to the bottom of conversion was no easy task.

Another criticism that may emerge is whether it is possible to learn something about the conversion of these branch managers based on these narratives. I claim that these narratives are able to say something about the conversion. The conversion stories (Bryant & Wolfram Cox, 2004) are understood as being alternatively de-conversion stories (Ballis & Richardson, 1997) describing an actor losing his “faith” in the organisation, the direction it has taken and the procedures. The conversion has been understood as emerging from excitement and a strong identification with the Bank through language use and not through strong persuasion (e.g., Akselin, 2013).

3.4 Data analysis: a deep dive to the practical level

In this chapter, I describe the data analysis systematically from the beginning to the final analysis. Making the analysing process transparent is a demanding task since the analysis had started already in the interviews with branch managers in 2005 and continued up until 2014, when I finished my thesis. A lot has happened; analysis has been multidimensional and I have used versatile methods to figure out the best solutions. As I already mentioned in the chapter 1.3 that deals with my research process, I had a completely different topic in mind when I started doing the interviews. I will explain here the phases of my analysing process that have ended up being part of the final analysis, at least to some extent. Looking back my analysis can be divided into three phases: 1) familiarising myself with the data, 2) preliminary analysis and 3) final analysis.

In Table 4, the three phases of my data analysis are described. Getting familiarised with the data took a long time. Preliminary analysis began by focusing on the most important relations of the branch managers which included their supervisor, group managers, advisors in their branches and colleagues as the most important ones. This stage was due to my original research scope: leadership processes. Hence, identifying the most significant participants present in the branch managers’ narratives seemed like a clever starting point.

The analysis continued by organising the data chronologically and carrying out structural analysis. I will call the narratives constructed in interviews as “original narratives”. I was found the classical people versus business discursive constructions which acted out as a starting point for deeper thematic analysis (antagonist themes) in the final step. In addition, I identified the ideal branch manager profile of each organisational phase in this early stage of my analysis. The ideal branch manager profile directed my attention later on to multiple selves which are part of the co-constructed branch managers’ narratives and connected closely to identity constructing in liminality.

The rewritten narratives form the core of my analysis because in them, I am representing how the branch managers were identified in the spin of strategic change as part of middle management. These rewritten narratives also include the conversion or de-conversion to the strategic direction of the Bank. Liminality as part of identity construction is analysed from multiple perspectives — the nature of liminality (transitional and
perpetual), liminal practices, possible characteristics of liminality and rites of passage. These rewritten narratives are supplemented with the antagonist themes which describe the sources of liminality and stability.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase of the analysis</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Familiarising myself with the data</td>
<td>Reading the data open-mindedly: what is this about?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preliminary analysis</td>
<td>Identifying significant relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identifying chronology and time frame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Constructing ideal branch manager profile (and other selves)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Making structural analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identifying controversial discourses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final analysis</td>
<td>Identifying liminality and conversion in narratives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Re-writing narratives with conversion and liminality</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Constructing antagonist themes</td>
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Table 4 Phases of the analysis

The process is best described as iterative and cumulative because something discovered in the early stages also remained as part of the final analysis. Hänninen (2010) stated that it as useful just to read with an open mind and to try out multiple methods. I “tested” several methods before choosing the one, which gave justice to the richness of the descriptions in my data and enabled deep analysis. Hence, the main criterion was not to apply a certain method “by the book”; instead, the target was to create a deep description of the studied phenomenon. Not a single step taken was in vain because they all made possible the “deep dive” into my data and liminality approach from multiple angles. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) classified four alternatives to analyse narratives: 1) meaning, focusing on content such as themes in narratives; 2) structure, focusing on how the story is narrated; 3) context, focusing on how the narrative is co-constructed in a specific context and 4) performance, focusing, for example, on the gestures and words used to deliver a certain kind of outcome in storytelling. Looking back, I see that my analysis entails features from all these four categories: 1) I have made a theme analysis of the antagonist themes and concentrated overall on meaning making, 2) I have analysed the structure of the narratives, including conversion and future anticipations, 3) I have emphasised the relevance of the context and 4) I have focused on the ways in which the narratives are co-constructed, including the emotional aspects that are embedded in narrative identity construction.

3.4.1 Familiarising myself with the data

Conducting the interviews, transcribing them and reading them over and over again were the most enjoyable parts of my research process. Although I am calling this phase “familiarising myself with the data”, I agree with Kallio (2014) that transcribing the interviews is actually part of the analysis phase. From my perspective, the analysis phase
started as early as during the interview sessions. After every interview, I wrote the “highlights” in my notebook. These included comments from the interviewee and my own feelings from the interview situation. Usually, I travelled by train to these interviews, so the journey back home was a good opportunity to reflect on my thoughts.

I transcribed the interviews myself, because I saw it as an opportunity to reflect the data at the same time. After the transcription was made, I printed the text and began to underline branch managers’ comments dealing with change and made my own remarks in the margins of the pages. Change was at this stage understood broadly to signify all kinds of changes; larger or smaller and on strategic or individual level. It was an attempt to familiarise myself with the data. I did not use any coding programs in the process because manual coding suited my small amount material well: transcribed and printed material made up of approximately 300 pages of text (Arial, single-spaced). This was in no way a systematic analysis at this point.

There were clearly constructed separate organisational phases: Postipankki, Leonia Bank and Sampo Bank. Of course I was intrigued by the characteristics of these phases, since the focus of my study was on the change context. I also noticed right away that the narratives told mainly about encounters with other organisational actors and how they had a positive or negative impact on the branch managers. This led to the next phases of my analysis.

3.4.2 Preliminary analysis

This phase in my study can be divided into three parts: 1) identifying significant relationships, 2) analysing the chronology and time frame of the narratives, 3) analysing the structure of the narratives and 4) constructing controversial discourses from the narratives.

3.4.2.1 Significant relationships in the narratives

I was still figuring out what the interviews were actually about and to which direction to go with my analysis. I decided to focus on the interactions with the most significant organisational actors described in the branch managers’ narratives: 1) their supervisor, the regional manager, 2) the group managers, 3) the advisors and 4) other branch managers, colleagues. I use the term “significant” because particularly these organisational actors and the social encounters involving them were part of the discussion in every narrative. Also my own view has played a role here and making this decision to pick the important ones was an easy task. Although this appears as a simplistic an analysis, the ones identified here are the key actors in the final analysis and are present in the final rewritten narratives.

In order to gain a better understanding, I once again read the interviews, but this time highlighting comments covering the comments made in the original narratives on specific organisational actors with same colour using four different coloured pens: green four regional managers, red for group managers, blue for advisors and yellow for colleagues. There were also mentioned multiple external actors and cooperative relationships. However, I decided to exclude them firstly, because these descriptions covered so much discussion close to commercial secret and secondly, because my focus was then on leadership processes inside organisational boundaries. At this stage, I acknowledged how the recent changes had affected the branch managers, especially the new organisational
structure in branches that brought along the additional managerial level: group managers. Therefore the natural next step was to analyse the data chronologically.

3.4.2.2 Chronology and time frame of the narratives

The narratives co-constructed in the interviews were about the branch managers themselves and their identities. In other words, their narratives told about their journey from Postipankki to Sampo Bank. Figure 4 presents the focus and content of the narratives constructed in the branch managers’ interviews. The curve in the figure does not end with the interview session since many times the time frame of the branch managers’ original narratives included remarks concerning the future as well as the past and present. Although the focus of the narratives was on the recent strategic changes, there were comparisons made in each of them with the past regardless of whether it was seen positively or negatively.

Figure 4 Research focus and the time frame of the interviews

Chronology here refers to the actual organisational phases that branch managers narrated — Postipankki, Leonia Bank, Sampo-Leonia and Sampo Bank. In practice, chronological analysis meant extracting direct quotations firstly, about the characteristics of different organisational phases and secondly, about relationships and interaction from the original narratives from those previously mentioned most significant organisational actors. Those quotations regarding organisational phases and relationships were in many ways connected. It became apparent that the changes were constructed mainly through descriptions of relationships and interaction with others.

These quotations were written on post-it notes and placed on cardboard according to the specific organisational phase. Interestingly enough, at times the Leonia Bank phase was left out and the focus was on making comparisons between Postipankki and Sampo Bank. In the photos (Picture 1) below are presented the cardboards, as they were an intense phase of my analysis. This was the most hands-on phase of the whole analysis and felt energising after so many years of reading literature and pondering my next move. This rather old-
fashioned method of “pen & paper” enabled me to clearly see the differences in and development over time. Koskinen et al. (2005) called this kind of approach, in which the researcher intuitively categorises the data, “visual grounded theory”. Eventually the cardboard looked like a matrix with comments on post-its positioned under each organisational phase.

Picture 1 Chronological analysis on practical level

Perhaps Sampo-Leonia did not gain much attention since it had been a short phase and many of the branch managers categorised it as part of Sampo Bank. Therefore, it was not even a separate phase in my analysis. The transformation to Sampo Bank was the hot topic, partly because those changes had just happened prior to the interviews or were on-going. This primary analysis enabled me to also decide the exact context of my study: Sampo Bank as part of Sampo PLC. This can also be seen on practical level from the number of post-it notes on the cardboard in each organisational phase. For example, these kinds of comments were made regarding the phases on my post-it notes:

“Postipankki was not a real bank.” (Branch manager Henry)

“Leonia Bank was a sales organisation tuned to its finest form.” (Branch manager Simon)

“In Sampo Bank it’s all about profit-making.” (Branch manager Charles)

As it appears from the direct quotations above, the focus in the branch managers’ narratives was to make a separation between the organisational phases. The difference between Postipankki and Sampo Bank periods was constructed especially large and on many occasions Leonia Bank phase was left out and comparisons were made solely between Postipankki and Sampo Bank. This phase of the analyses was useful later on when I constructed the identity of an ideal branch manager for each phase. Thus, from the beginning, I was highly interested in how the branch managers constructed themselves but was not yet able to see myself as focusing specifically on identity.
3.4.2.3  Ideal branch manager and other selves in the narratives

Analysis of multiple selves employed a supporting analysis of 12 rewritten narrative identities and antagonist themes. There were in the branch managers’ narratives wide circulation of selves: How do I construct myself? How do others construct me? How should I be? How should I want to be? Because my study followed the guidelines of social constructionism, all these selves were constructed through meaning-making and, at times, were intertwined. However, my attempt was not to get “inside the branch managers’ heads.” Instead, the centre of attention was how these selves are co-constructed by language use.

This analysis took place in parallel with other phases of the analysis, and was intuitive by its nature. At first, I identified those organisational phases with distinct characteristics (discussed in the previous chapter) and, secondly, I identified the “ideal branch manager” profiles in each of those phases. The other constructions of selves (authentic, cast, and desired) were also present in the data, and I set down comments regarding these as I was browsing through the data. I collected once again direct quotations to a timeline made on cardboard and put post-it notes on it. I could have used more advanced methods such as excel, but I consider myself a visual person and this old-fashioned method worked for me. It was also effortless to glimpse at anytime these cardboards on the floor of our apartment. This identification of multiple selves became crucial as I familiarised myself with the concept of liminality and how it contributes, in relation to others, to self/other constructions. Hence, although the analysis of multiple selves is presented as a separate chapter (Chapter 5.2), multiple selves are an essential part of the rewritten narratives as well.

This phase of the analysis can be characterised as a straightforward one after the identification of how the Bank was constructed in each organisational phase from branch managers’ perspectives (Postipankki as an institution, Leonia Bank as a sales organisation, and Sampo Bank as highly business-orientated). Obviously, the “ideal branch manager” description was aligned with these. However, it was interesting that the consensus was unanimous and uniform throughout on what was expected from them in each organisational phase, especially because the original narratives turned out so diverse otherwise.

3.4.2.4  Structures of the narratives

The structural analysis of the narratives deals with the narrative structure from identity construction perspective. This particular step in the analysis process clarified the exact focus of my study: the narrative identity construction of branch managers in strategic change. I suddenly realised that in the narratives, the branch managers were for the most part, constructing themselves in the face of something new. There was variation in the way the branch managers received the changes. Some saw them as huge and even unbearable, while others saw constant change as part of banking. Some of the changes I presumed to be the most meaningful for them were constructed at times as insignificant. For example, three branch managers felt that the recent changes were not anything special. In their narratives other changes in their careers had been the major turning points.
I had the urge to move beyond purely stating that there are multiple discursive identities of the branch managers. Looking into the structure of the narratives offers another kind of solution. The strategic changes that came along with the merger can be approached as a breaking point of the narratives into two pieces: pre- and post-changes. Gergen (1999) presented two rudimentary narrative forms: the progressive (with a positive ending) and the regressive (with a negative ending) (Figure 5) which I ended up applying.

Figure 5 Progressive and regressive narratives  
(Gergen, 1999: 71)

In a two-dimensional space, the narrative development is evaluated in time. There are also many more advanced narrative structures (e.g., Czarniawska, 2004; Gergen, 1999; Polkinghome, 1995) that describe in more detail the emplotment development, such as romance, tragedy, comedy and satire. However, Gergen and Gergen (1986) saw these more advanced categorisations as too complex and stated that they take too much space from the possible multiplicity in human storytelling. Gergen (1999) also categorised the narrative structures to two from the original three, excluding the neutral structure in the original theory (Gergen & Gergen, 1986). I wonder if a neutral narrative identity is possible, because the storyteller wants to guide the narrative in a certain direction. The personal stories of organisational change reveal on the one hand how the individuals’ positive identification in a changing situation enables the formation of an ascending storyline that would highly please top management (Reissner, 2010). On the other hand, negative stories have a descending storyline due to a lack of perceived personal opportunities. Reissner (2010) used the ascending and descending storylines as analysis tools borrowed from Browning (1991), which are closely related to progressive and regressive narratives (Gergen, 1999). My analysis was made based on language use in the narratives and how the plot developed along the way. Whether there were dramatic “ups and downs” depended on each narrator and the way the changes were co-constructed in the interview context. I did not analyse the interview data word-by-word as in linguistic studies. For me, it was natural to reflect on the way these narratives were constructed. There was a starting point in each of them, and every branch manager was eager to emphasise a certain period as meaningful
during his career. I acknowledge that these narratives were still in progress as they were constructed in the course of change. It is demanding to place a narrative as straightforwardly as a progressive or regressive one (e.g., Leinikki, 2009), but with thorough explanation, I see this as possible.

Although this part of the analysis is presented here in the preliminary phase, it remained an integral part of the analysis until the end. Through narrative structure, I have been able to differentiate between the narratives, which otherwise had similar elements such as de-conversion and perpetual liminality. The way that the storyline developed and how the narrator described the future varied a great deal. I approached the narrative structures from the narrator’s perspective not from the top management’s, placing the focus on how the branch managers saw their future regardless of their possible career development in the Bank. Another option would have been to approach this from the organisation’s perspective, and the progressive narratives would have been only the success stories in which the branch manager is able to reach the targets and align his behaviour with the expected identity of a branch manager. Here I wished to emphasise that other kinds of emplotment can turn out successfully, for example, if the narrator as the protagonist is able to live up to his morals due to the choices he has made. Next I will present a short description of the analysis in practice. This illustrates the differences between the narrative structures and how a challenging situation can be crafted through progressive or regressive narrative depending on other contextual factors such as age, stage in career and family situation. I evaluate the whole narrative, but focus especially on how the speculative future is constructed in them in terms of the spin of change.

An example of a progressive structure is constructed in Charles’s narrative. He is fed up with the emphasis put on profit in the Bank. He longs for care for the people and a more humane touch from top management. He has made a prestigious career in the Bank and would soon be able to retire. He states strongly that should there be layoffs, he will leave the Bank. He feels strongly about his staff and gets constructed as a paternalistic manager.

In the first quotation, Charles tells about how his new supervisor is pressuring him hard. This is constructed in his narrative as being annoying.

“I have to report to the regional manager and invent all kinds of reasons if we have not reached the set targets or are lacking behind. This is so tough nowadays, because I have a new supervisor who wants to prove himself capable. We have most certainly noticed the difference compared to the previous one.” (Branch manager Charles)

Charles appears as a people person with an old-school manner. He states multiple times how much his employees mean to him. They occasionally spend their free time together, which has transformed their relations even closer. This is also most likely the reason why profit-making and other hard business-related issues seem so challenging for him.

“We should invest into the people, but we are moving too fast.” (Branch manager Charles)

As he states in the third quotation, he will leave and stay true to himself rather than fire anybody, if that is required.

“If there will turn up new layoffs, I will leave. I have no intention to go them through any longer.” (Branch manager, Charles)
Hence, although Charles is not signifying commitment to the strategic direction of the Bank, his narrative can be constructed as a progressive one structurally. He gets portrayed as determined and someone with integrity and high moral standards.

A different kind of example is the regressive storyline constructed in Iris’s narrative. She gets portrayed in her narrative as someone who has given everything to the Bank and at the time of the interview, sees her future as rather hopeless due to multiple issues. She works longs days and missed spending time with her family. She also disregards the new procedures that are to be implemented. In her first quotation, Iris states how she is irritated by following all the arrangements and procedures that came along with the new strategy.

“I think that this new organisational structure is much easier in larger branches. In a way these are ridiculous things that we have to implement at times.” (Branch manager Iris)

Family, especially children, are present in her narrative as she explains the long hours and inability to spend sufficient time with her children.

“How come it is so that I am here in the evenings and my small children are at home and I could do all possible things with them. I do not even dare to admit how late I was here yesterday.” (Branch manager Iris)

Hence, these two narratives turn out differently for multiple reasons. Probably mainly, because these branch managers all have unique backgrounds and career phases. The narrative structure has interconnection to the depth of the liminality as well. I will discuss this in more detail in the findings (chapter 5), but it is fair to state now that the progressive nature of the narrative identities seems to diminish the liminality. This is most likely because these branch managers feel that they are on top of things regardless of their conversion or de-conversion. These branch managers, like Charles, may also see an optional way out if needed.

### 3.4.2.5 Controversial discourses in the narratives

The next step led me to ambiguity in the narratives. The branch managers talked about the same issues but from different perspectives. Watson (1995) stated that social actors draw on different discursive resources to achieve certain purposes. Hence, these multiple and contradictory resources or repertoires enable the managers to “keep their sanity” and to maintain balance as they meet controversial demands.

Right from the start, I struggled with the mixed messages in the narratives. There was a business focus in them as well as a care for people. These are not necessarily controversial, but in some narratives, the branch managers constructed them as such. A lot happened at the same time: branches turned into profit centres, and branches were re-structured with an extra managerial level (group managers). Many of the interviewed branch managers had also been appointed recently to a new branch or had taken on greater responsibilities. Also the new strategic direction brought along new procedures. In addition, the emphasis was on financial performance and not solely on sales because the profits and the development of the balance sheet were also taken into account. Several branch managers had a new supervisor, and due to the new organisational structure in the branches, the group
managers were responsible for their own sales groups. Hence, the branch manager was no longer the direct line manager for all employees in the branch.

In his own research on organisational change, Watson (1995) was able to construct two controversial discourses: 1) empowerment, skills and growth and 2) control, jobs and costs. The first is used to refer to the winning culture of the organisation and caring for the people therein, whereas the latter is tougher and accepts “losing heads” if it is necessary to reach the financial targets of the organisation. In Watson’s (1995) study, there were managers who were keen on using the softer discourse and others, for most part the more junior managers, on using the tougher one. However, at times the promoters of the softer and more humane discourse were forced to operate under the tougher discourse. It is natural for individuals to circulate between controversial discourses, especially in organisational change, as Watson (1995) noted. I regard this kind of circulation through meaning-making as “coping” by language use.

Branch managers counterbalanced the pressure to perform and reach targets with care for people in their meaning making. This came through strongly with the more senior branch managers’ and some females’ narratives. The younger males seemed to place more emphasis on the financial results, and the people perspective was portrayed more as a challenge of leading people because analysing the figures was an easier and more comfortable part of their duties. Some branch managers commented that although they care for the people and like a good discussion, in the end they are responsible for the business, and there is no room for being too soft. The business focus and care for the people were for the most part regarded as in opposition. The dichotomy of business-orientation versus people-orientation served as a starting point for a more detailed analysis of the antagonist themes.

It cannot be stated that any of the branch managers was either totally a people- or business-orientated. For example, Tina struggled to balance this at times, as is apparent in her narrative when she explains how she has to make tough decisions at times and how at other times, her employees pour their worries out at her and she gets emotional.

“I know these people well...and I am maybe able to support them as well (with their personal worries)...but I have noticed that it is demanding and agonising for me if I have to make tough calls.” (Branch manager Tina)

Thus, on the one hand, Tina gets portrayed as someone likable and empathic. However, on the other hand, running her branch includes tasks that force her to make unpleasant decisions. Although this dichotomy between people and business is a classical one, it is a relevant one.

3.4.3 Final analysis: rewritten narratives and theme analysis

The final phase of my analysis consisted of the reconstruction of the 12 narratives and 7 antagonist themes. This phase of the analysis has elements from the preliminary structural analysis as well from the initial discursive analysis of the original narratives. However, I did not want to leave the analysis there yet. Therefore, the initial discourses of business/people-orientation were also analysed further on. The seven antagonist themes
(Clarke et al., 2009) describe in more detail the ambiguities of being in the middle in organisational structure and in identity construction.

Re-writing the original narratives took place in 2012, right before I returned back to work from my parental leave. I had time to reflect on them and finally sitting down and writing did not consume as much time as the preliminary analysis. It is hard, if not impossible, to describe how the writing process proceeded exactly. I did not reconstruct one narrative from the beginning to the end and then start a new one; instead I wrote multiple narratives in parallel. How was I able to reconstruct narratives and the place them neatly into one specific category if I saw that there are contradictory meaning making? I had to read the texts several times to get to the bottom of things. At times, my categorisations were based on strict analysis and sometimes more on gut feelings, which I tried my best to justify afterwards. For example, taking Ben and Amanda as converted ones puzzled me for a long time due to their criticism. Finally, I decided to take their both being fast moving and active managers as a sign of conversion and willingness to develop things further.

3.4.3.1 Liminality and conversion in the narratives

The most important phase in the analysis combines the search for liminality and conversion/de-conversion in the original narratives. Whether the liminality has to do with transitional or perpetual or there is no sign of liminality whatsoever, large-scale strategic change will be the starting point of the possible identity reconstruction. Therefore, the approach is dual-dimensional as I analyse on the one hand, the overall the description of the changes and on the other hand, the description of one’s own identity in these changes constructed in the narratives. This kind of analysis makes it possible to shed light on liminality in identity construction and to describe the ambiguous nature of narrative identity construction. It was apparent that the narratives differ by how the changes were taken: positive or negative. I also wish to point out that the expressed negativity or criticality does not necessarily imply a regressive storyline. It can be a sign of organisational dis-identification or strong commitment, depending on the particular narrative.

The way the sense of liminality is constructed by language use can be a source of anxiety or a thrilling experience as one enters into something new and the old ways of doing things are about to change. At the same time as I was classifying the narratives, I also searched for the exact practices of liminality from the narratives: experimentation, reflection and recognition (Beech, 2011). I wanted to find out how the branch managers found their way — if they did — from the liminal space as we co-constructed their narratives. At times liminality could be hard to perceive because showing one’s insecurity and worrying for the future is not perhaps something people want to express to others voluntarily. As mentioned earlier, people have a tendency to present themselves in a positive light — for example, as a hero or a survivor who is able to reach the victory after tough battles. From one narrative to another, the depth of the liminality differs in my study. In some, there is hardly any sign of it, whereas others are full of paradoxical identity constructions in liminality. I wanted to approach all the narratives through the lens of liminality to point out that in large-scale strategic change, the level of liminality differs from one actor to another constructed in their language use. There were differences in the narratives how the possible
liminality was described. The 12 rewritten narratives enabled me to describe the change in
time that took place in the branch managers’ identities in a particular context
comprehensively and to illustrate the contradictory discourses and antagonist themes the
branch managers used in legitimising themselves in uncertainty and insecurity as they
attempted to construct their identities and seek status and purpose for themselves.

Although I am giving room to co-constructed narratives, the format of this final report
is my construction influenced by my background and experiences, which is still in line with
the assumptions of social constructionism. The passage of time has developed my analysis
and reflections have been on-going. The social construction can also take place, for
example, when I am reading someone else’s writings: my own understanding of my
research topic develops (Gergen, 1999). In the end, I decided which parts of the data to
include and which parts to exclude (Gergen & Gergen, 2003:581), for example, the
quotations. After multiple re-readings, the research focus concentrated on this specific time
frame — Sampo Bank as part of Sampo PLC — and on narrative identity construction
processes excluding other elements for future studies. This research report is thus a “twice-
constructed text”: first, co-constructed together by both the narrator and the researcher
and then later reconstructed for my research purposes (Thomas & Linstead, 2002:77). The
construction of the interview texts is seen to continue in the analysis as being influenced by
my local culture, such as my gender, age and profession. This process keeps going as my
readers pick up the thesis (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).

3.4.3.2 Labelling the narratives

I wish to emphasise that the 12 short narratives that will be presented in the next chapter
are shorter versions of the original narratives. The narratives are categorised as conversion
and de-conversion stories and as entailing temporal or perpetual liminality or no signs of
liminality. Additionally, I have placed the narratives into one of five categories which
describe them more profoundly: “busy businessmen”, “camel boots managers”, “cliff-
hangers”, “senior survivors” and “poker faces”. The labels of these five categories were not
discussed in the interviews in any way (cf. Frantsi, 2009); instead, I constructed them after
several readings based on how the branch managers were constructed by their language use
in their narratives. For me, the labels illustrate the essence of each the categories.

Busy businessmen saw the profit centre model as the driving force of their actions.
Moreover, they all presented themselves as busy and ambiguous people. All three of them
were rather young male branch managers leading their first or second branch. In their
narratives the excitement was strongly present since they were facing something new.
Although they also appeared somewhat uncertain, their narratives turned out positive. I
named them “busy”, because they all were constructed as busy and struggled to find
sufficiently time to carry out all their duties.

The camel boots managers were the boldest ones in their language use in not hiding
their opinions. They appeared as independent and not afraid to take responsibility. Actually
both of them longed for larger decision-making mandate. They constructed themselves as
straightforward people who did not always do everything by the book but still had the
Bank’s best in their heart. If they did local alterations to the processes, the reasoning
behind was for example to increase sales and become more successful branch manager.
They were also the most critical, but the criticality can be constructed as a sign of commitment instead of disobedience.

The cliff-hangers’ narratives were reflective as they pondered their current status and the needed new mindset and competences they found themselves lacking. There were also other issues expressed such as sacrificing family life for work. These narratives entailed softer feminine values which were in contradiction with the more tough male values. The name “cliff-hangers” illustrates the willingness of these branch managers to hang on and find solutions to cope with the changes. According to them, this meant changes in their behaviour and the need to learn new skills — in other words, becoming “more of a numbers person” and not always relying on their gut feeling after discussing things with their employees: group managers and advisors. Overall, they appeared as they were hanging on the edge of a cliff.

The senior survivors had a lot of similarities with each other because they had transferred to the Bank though a merger many years back. They were also the oldest and enjoyed senior manager status. Both branch managers in this category longed for the past in a nostalgic manner and made a lot of comparisons between the present and the past. I see them both as survivors because that had a strong value base and due to their seniority they were not “searching for themselves” like their younger colleagues. In addition, they were not trying to hide their opinions in any way.

The poker faces were the most bizarre ones, because they constructed the changes as more or less “business as usual”. They all had witnessed multiple changes over the years, and the latest was just another one to be handled. This could be all just a show, but because my analysis is mainly focusing on meaning making, I cannot go deeper into speculating on their statements. One of them was holding back in our meeting, and the atmosphere was rather tense, whereas two others appeared to be open and revealed many challenges they had tackled.

In each rewritten narrative, I decided to also include the analysis; instead of writing an additional discussion chapter after each of the 12 narratives. This removes some repetition and makes the extracted direct quotations more vivid. I also felt the need to give the readers a clearer picture of my reflections and the logic that I followed in my empirical analysis. After each individual rewritten narrative, there will be a short summary which draws together the main elements on liminality, conversion and overall being in the middle, part of middle management.

After a presentation of all the five categories, there will be a discussion on the liminal practices that took place discursively and on general identity construction. As mentioned, I have also decided to include to my final analysis elements from my preliminary analysis: progressive/regressive structure and language use as positive/negative, which are closely related to whether expectations have been met, exceeded or disappointed in regard to the changes taken place and on-going.

3.4.3.3 Antagonist themes in the narratives

The final step in the analyses was to formulate the antagonist themes, which mean the controversial themes in which the ends of the spectrum represent the opposite constructions. These were constructed as the sources of liminality or stability in the
narratives. The construction of these antagonist themes was inspired by business-orientation/people-orientation discourse and desire to deepen that analysis. Reading “against the grain” (Lehtimäki, 2000) enabled me to find the discursive ambivalences inside the original narratives and eventually construct the antagonist themes. It took time to see beyond the things that were so obvious to me and what could be of interest and possibly bring new insights to the discussion. Reflecting long and hard, I finally ended up with these seven as the most crucial themes. The ones I am presenting are not chosen to be dealt with here by their frequency; instead, the criterion was either emotional language use, which highlighted the significance of these dimensions, or on the contrary difficulties expressing these issues in a straightforward manner. The stabilisers share the same connotation as the career anchors, which Almiala (2008) borrowed from Schein (1993). These anchors are something fundamental which a person wants to hold on to and not compromise, such as having a certain level of freedom and room to act independently. The antagonist themes of my analysis are listed here:

- too much control/room to manoeuvre
- compliance/rebelliousness
- loneliness/belonging
- lack of trust/trust
- new expertise/old expertise
- gender ignorance/gender sensitivity
- value mismatch/value match

They all share the same logic besides theme compliance/rebelliousness in which both them were utilised as sources of liminality and stability depending on the branch manager and topic under discussion. On one hand compliance can bring a sense of stability, whereas on the other hand it can appear as restrictive demand. Also being rebellious can on the one hand bring the needed sense of independence and on the other hand be a source of liminality not acting by the book. Hence, in this particular theme, both parts can be understood as sources of liminality and stability, depending on the branch managers’ narratives. Some of these themes will be covered here in detail, whereas others will be covered more briefly. All of them make up a massive academic discussion, and therefore, with a few exceptions, they are approached purely from a discursive perspective. For example, trust emerged in almost all narratives, but the concept of trust has not been conceptualised in this study, and thus it is discussed only from language use perspective (e.g., Koivunen, 2003) with no comprehensive connection to the larger theoretical discussion on trust. These themes can also be understood as the building blocks of the narrative identities (Hytti, 2003). Presenting them as antagonist themes intensifies their significance being at the threshold as one enters into liminality and whether the experience is constructed as an unpleasant or pleasant one.

The strategic change that took place is obviously the large-scale triggering event (Beech, 2011) which put other changes in motion, such as the restructuring of the supervisory duties in the branches and the implementation of the profit centre structure. However, it seems as if the smaller incidents that took place in social interaction among various organisational actors, such as with the supervisor, have been more dramatic in the branch managers’ identity construction and have initiated the liminality.
In Table 5 are presented some examples of each theme in the original narratives in order to illustrate the two-dimensionally constructed themes. I extracted comments from the original narratives to this table in order to describe my analysis. These comments are not linguistically in the exactly same form as in the original narratives and hence are not direct quotations, but close enough to get the point in a simplified manner. This kind of method was used in multiple phases of my analysis to speed up the process. Later on in the analysis I focused on the language use in more detail.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Antagonist theme</strong></th>
<th><strong>Source of liminality</strong></th>
<th><strong>Source of stability</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Too much control/room to manoeuvre</td>
<td>I have no real possibilities influence anything as promised</td>
<td>We have permission to decide ourselves how to implement this in practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compliance/rebelliousness</td>
<td>I usually inform my supervisor beforehand and get his approval</td>
<td>I decide myself what procedures to implement and which ones to leave out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loneliness/belonging</td>
<td>When I have to make tough decisions, I am on my own</td>
<td>There is a feeling of togetherness when we go through the latest results together with my staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of trust/trust</td>
<td>I cannot help myself checking everything. Delegating is not my strength</td>
<td>The better your branch performs, more independence you get</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New expertise/old expertise</td>
<td>I am not a wizard with numbers and excel</td>
<td>How to balance my time with my old and new tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender ignorance/gender sensitivity</td>
<td>Having a life outside the Bank is a taboo</td>
<td>(No comments on gender)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value mismatch/value match</td>
<td>People have been forgotten in the expense of profit</td>
<td>Everything gets down to profit centre logic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5 Initialising the antagonist themes**

However, it is not simple to easily categorise all that is said. For example, comment such as:

“Everything I present something to my employees, they are presented as my own decisions regardless who has originally made them” (Branch manager Ben)

Especially for Ben, his position in the middle caused a struggle in his identity construction. However, he has figured out clever ways to manoeuvre this challenge as he claims to make all decisions concerning his branch. His narrative made me wonder whether he actually even had ideas in his mind that contradicted or objected to top-down decisions. He told of how he spends time in his branch after closing and makes all sorts of estimations. Maybe those private hours also give him the time to digest the procedures to be implemented and construct a convincing storyline to present to his employees as well to himself.
3.5 Ethical issues of my study

In this chapter, I discuss my study from an ethical point of view. The emphasis is on the guidelines set by Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) regarding my responsibilities to my respondents (the interviewed branch managers) and on professional integrity, which refers to my chain of choices. They also list other dimensions such as giving other researchers credit for their work and not losing integrity by plagiarism, which I take as given as a researcher. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008:65), research ethics are not involved in just some aspects of the study; instead they should be kept in mind throughout the whole research process. My research process was explained in the Introduction and analysis process in this chapter in order to emphasise the transparency as much as possible.

I approached the regional manager in the area where I was working at the start of my research process in 2002. We had a long and friendly discussion, and he encouraged me to conduct the interviews and also suggested possible participants. It was relatively easy for me to find willing interviewees. The interview situations turned out to be fairly intimate and lots of topics were covered, including rather personal ones. I have left aside the highly personal comments related, for example, to personal life, firstly due to respect for the participants and secondly because revealing them would not have added any value to study academic-wise. I felt that it would have been unfair to take advantage of their openness. I had discussed with them that the topic was about the recent changes that had taken place in the Bank as well their personal careers at the Bank and the impact of those changes to them. One branch manager asked me to turn off the recorder for a while because he wanted to tell me something confidential. The matter he revealed is not discussed in this study.

Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008:66) pointed out the importance of guarding anonymity and not violating a trusting relationship. I have all along kept in mind that I would not have been able to proceed in this study without the branch managers’ assistance and time. Saying all this, it should be more than obvious that one of the most challenging tasks in my research process has been to present my interview data and the analysis. On the one hand, without reconstructing the narratives, I would have lost the temporality and the change factor that was so vividly present in the branch managers’ narratives. On the other hand, I had to leave some comments out of the analysis to keep my promises. Thus, I have done my absolute best to protect my respondents from any kind of harm. As Eriksson and Kovalainen (2005) pointed out, the informants/respondents are not a means to an end in the research process, and hence, they should be treated with respect. Furthermore, the relatively large number of branches and branch managers in those days in 2005 enabled this study. Someone might think that the branch managers were all my close acquaintances, but most of them I met for the first time in the interviews. It was common for an interviewee to suggest a colleague to be interviewed as well. It is also fair to say that the exact scope of my study was in progress at the time of the interviews and later on turned out to be the identity construction of the middle managers.

Siren (2009) constructed in his study a caricaturist narrative identity, which entailed features from all the narratives constructed in data gathering interviews. Almost all his respondents found bits and pieces of them in that rewritten story. I am certain that the 12 narratives in my thesis will also ring a bell with some branch managers who did not even participate in my study. I could have also given the interviewees the opportunity to read the
rewritten narratives, but I decided not to for two reasons. Firstly, because the Bank does not exist now as it was during that time (there is a different owner and there are different strategic focus areas) and none one of the interviewees is thus in the same position. Actually, most of them are no longer even employed by the Bank. Secondly, the narratives are first and the most constructed at least twice: first in the interviews and later on during the years I have spend in analysing them. If my constructions have developed along the way, so have theirs as well. My own career changes and changes in life in general have had an impact on my analysis, as mentioned. Hence did not feel the need to verify the accuracy of the narratives from them.

Although I have been working at the Bank during my studies, I have not received any kind of financial compensation from my employer, which may have influenced my thoughts (e.g., Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). I have, however, gotten encouragement and mental support, which I do not want to undervalue. I took unpaid leaves of absence for short periods when my work allowed it, especially in the last stages of my research project. The passage of time has provided some liberties, and I was not forced to create a pseudonym for the Bank, although as Koskinen et al. (2005:284) stated, academic studies on organisational changes from the employees’ point of view hardly ever reveal anything that could possibly harm the organisation. Moreover, before entering into the pre-examination stage, my manuscript was read by my supervisors at the Bank, who confirmed that there was no reason to hide the name of the organisation. Koskinen et al. (2005) also highlighted that issues that rise to the surface may seem dramatic at the time of the data gathering but do not seem so any longer as the years pass by — as happened in my study. However I have acknowledged that although some issues have lost their relevance on a practical level, they still have tremendous value academic-wise. I have spent much effort in explaining my chain of choices and the logic behind my actions, although some choices have been rather intuitive.
4. NARRATIVE IDENTITIES OF THE BRANCH MANAGERS

In this chapter I present the 12 rewritten branch managers’ narrative identities. They are divided into five categories: 1) busy businessmen, 2) camel boot managers, 3) cliff-hangers, 4) senior survivors and 5) poker faces according to the analysis explained in the previous chapter. In the end of this chapter after presenting the rewritten narratives, there will a short summary which covers the main elements of the branch managers’ narratives: possible liminality and the nature of it, conversion/de-conversion and overall the organisational position in the middle in change context.

I wish to point out that the rewritten narratives are written intentionally in the present tense to emphasise the on-going nature of the changes at the time of the interviews. In addition, I use the terms “sense making”, “understanding” and “interpreting” in the spirit of social constructionism. This refers to co-constructive processes in narrative identity construction and not to internal cognitive sense-making processes or a possibility of gaining access to someone’s inner world or understanding it completely. I also use the first singular person “I” referring to myself in many occasions in my analysis because social constructionist process can take place also without physical encounter with another person for example via reading some else’s writings or listening. Hence, the rewritten narratives follow the social constructionist orientation as well. I am not constantly repeating how the narratives were co-constructed; instead I am using frequently third singular person of the verbs such as “Simon states” or “Iris comments”. This is aligned with also other social constructinist identity studies (e.g, Hytti, 2003).

4.1 Busy businessmen

These three following narratives of Simon, Ray and Ian are categorised as conversion stories due to their positive meaning-making about the strategic changes that took place. Both Simon and Ray energetically expressed how glad they are to be part of this new bank in which their expectations have been met or even exceeded. Ian does not show as high a level of enthusiasm but enjoys the new profit centre model. He has background in corporate banking and hence, he is used to working with numbers. Although the narratives were still in progress as they were constructed and the branch managers were in the middle of experiencing liminality, I dared to categorise them as transitional. The transitional liminality shines through mainly from reflections of becoming something else in a changing situation.
4.1.1 “This is hard-core business” (Simon)

Simon started in Postipankki as a deputy manager right after graduating. Today, in his forties, he is responsible for his own large branch in urban area with multiple branches nearby. The liminality of Simon can be discursively constructed as transitional as he makes comparisons between the old and the new, seeing the future as brighter. He is comfortable being in the middle in terms of being in charge of the local implementation and does not long for a wider mandate.

A typical feature in his narrative is identification through expertise. He is also capable of shifting smoothly from explaining one of his areas of expertise into another: 1) making sales and coaching his staff and 2) understanding the business logic. This dual-expertise also creates for him his greatest challenge, as will become apparent. His way of narrating was one of the most “rational” ones, and it appeared as if this was not the first time he reflected on these issues. Simon takes his time and reflects as he constructs a logically proceeding narrative from the past up to the current situation in the Bank. His identity is constructed mainly through comparisons between his duties pre and post the latest changes as well as between him and others referring to identity construction through “otherness”, stating clearly what he is or what he is not and others are or are not.

Simon is able to clearly see the development process that took place from Postipankki and Leonia Bank to the present situation from his own perspective: His role used to be the best salesman in his branch, and he led by his own example, whereas now his main responsibility is to certify that his branch is performing well and heading in the right direction. The third big issue for Simon is the group managers, who are the immediate supervisors of the other sales groups in his branch because Simon is responsible for only one sales team directly. This has meant he has had to learn to step back and give room to his group managers to do their jobs. However, the new organisational structure with group managers does not appear to be a negative change; on the contrary, Simon simply states that now he has to find time to have a dialog with the group managers in order to be aware of the status of their teams. He can see the sales numbers from the reports, but because the group managers are the operational daily managers of the other teams, he does not know about the “hot topics” discussed there. He states that he mainly meets with the members of the other teams on coffee breaks. Simon talks a lot about how seriously he has taken his role as a coach and how much time these weekly meetings with the advisors take from his work time. He does not complain, though, because he enjoys this part of his tasks a great deal. The challenge comes purely from the lack of time to accomplish everything that needs to be done. Hence, he seems by his language use to be pondering how to divide his time in the future.

“I have been getting these new roles. I have to spend more time on making analyses and planning. Then I also have to find time to spend with my group managers. Therefore, for example, 2004 was extremely difficult for me because I also met with a lot of customers. When I started to meet with fewer customers, I was able to manage my time better. . . Now I have promised to have more official discussions with the advisors from my team. This has again put more pressure on me and I must admit that I am hard pressed here.”

Simon recalls that in Postipankki there were some evaluations made on the capabilities of the branch managers entering into this new role he calls “player-coach”. The lack of the
business aspect in the old days did not seem to bother him because the ideal profile of a sales-orientated branch manager suited him more than well. He constructs himself as a practical “hands on” manager. He tells in detail how he has trained his sales advisors to close deals. He likes the excitement of being in the customer front-line where the action takes place. Simon admits that he has continued to meet with customers because he is certain that it will bring extra value for the customers and also keeps him aware of what is happening at the front-line and in the markets. This also enables him to be a more credible sales manager in the eyes of his employees.

Simon gets rather excited as he explains how after the merger business logic and profitability emerged as the top priorities in the Bank. Since then, no one has demanded him to be the top salesman, although he sees it as crucially important to carry on with customer meetings. He justifies this by being capable of coaching his sales personnel. However, Simon admits that he has not had as much time to meet with customers as before, and he is quite certain that he will have to give it up completely soon. This seems to make him puzzled and a bit irritated because it has been an important part of his duties for such a long time and the basis of his expertise. He says that it might be theoretically possible to manage sales without meeting customers personally, but he wonders how it will turn out in reality. The ability to leave some duties behind as one enters into a new position can be tough at times. Simon is obviously a bit doubtful about whether he will remain credible in the eyes of his sales force. The following quotation is hence intentionally long, illustrating the struggle that Simon displays as he reflects on the relation between sales management and customer meetings versus the banking business management needed in managing his branch as a profit centre.

“Talking about these changes, the player-coach, sales management and supporting the sales advisors were headed into crucial roles in Postipankki. Today they are still important, but only as one of the many duties in addition to analysing. They are still there and have not disappeared, or at least I feel it is important to meet with customers and make sales. It enables me to have discussions on a very practical level with my advisors. I cannot give (customers) much of my time; it has to be less than it used to be. It has gradually been becoming a smaller part of my tasks. I feel that I am going to keep it as a small side-duty because I feel that these (business-orientation) demands require more time.”

Simon recalls the time after the Finnish banking crisis when he felt embarrassed to admit being a branch manager because the hatred of the people was so strong. He is sure that had he been more qualified, he would have resigned immediately. However, he figured that his competence level might have been too modest at the start of his career, by which he implies that the situation is different today. At the beginning of his banking career, he was able to quickly learn the needed sales skills, which gave him leverage to beat his colleagues at something. This “at something” refers to how he felt being treated as a novice in the branch managers’ social circles as a newcomer. Here he compares himself with the other branch managers as he claims to be superior in his sales skills and proving himself to be branch manager worthy of being taken seriously. Although he even jokes a little bit, proving himself capable has been important for him. By not saying it out loud, he also constructs his senior colleagues as less skilled in customer-orientation in practice. Also having practical knowledge about the customer interface is one of the key factors for
Simon. He admits that he has this constant need to prove that he is competent, which derives from the early stages of his career when he wanted to show off.

“If I exaggerate a little bit, of course the player-coach model suited me perfectly. I was able to “kick ass” and show my senior colleagues that the business was going well in my branch. . . . I am still partly on that road; this (my past) still influences me.”

Simon is a “true-believer” of the business perspective, which was relatively new to him at the time of the interview. He mentions on many occasions how the Bank has been a success story and how the new top management has really made large-scale changes to happen. Simon sees clear phases in the development of the Bank and speaks about top management with respect in his voice.

“In Sampo-Leonia, the strategy was implemented for the first time. . . . It was at that time stated clearly that this is the strategy and the steps to be taken. We have to follow the strategic guidelines such as the long-term savings focus. Also, the profit centre model was strongly stated as the responsibility and accountability of the local branch managers.”

For Simon, everything that has happened can be traced to the new top management. He seems to have absorbed their statements as almost holy words. He claims that he and his colleagues were not even aware of the business logic before the new strategy was released.

“I really feel that what we are doing is smart. I have to take a bow towards top management.”

He also elucidates to me in detail how they have been able to make huge improvements in his current branch. He explains how long it actually takes to realize the outcomes of the actions taken, which makes it even more worthwhile because there are no quick fixes. He gets energetic and excited as he narrates in detail the outcome of the prior changes, although their impact on the numbers took many years. Simon states that banking is a balance sheet business and not about quick wins.

“Making changes to it is a long and winding road. Nothing can be done in a month . . . this is really slow. We have to work constantly . . .”

He gets a kick from the fast pace and the need to really push himself to the limit in order to get all the needed tasks done in a reasonable time frame. Sometimes he wishes he had more time and the possibility to really concentrate on one thing at a time. Many times there was a knock on his door during our interview, and he got several phone calls, which reflects the hectic atmosphere in his branch. I wonder whether it would really be something that he would genuinely enjoy, because he seems at home in the hustle and bustle.

He gets a glint in his eyes as he explains the transformation from branch managers into banking business managers. He tells how suddenly after the merger he and his colleagues were called bank managers and became responsible for their own profit centres. This incident portrays the recognition as a revelation taking place at fast speed. It meant more than purely changing a title on calling cards. Being a bank manager had a different tone than being a branch manager. Simon is quite sure that the Bank would have entered into
the profit centre structure even earlier if the competence of the branch management had been trusted. Simon states that the delay in implementing the new structure earlier was due to a lack of competence among the “old school” branch managers. Here he constructs himself as one of the first absorbers of the new ideas and the opposite of his older colleagues. Hence, again he identifies himself through otherness as he claims to have more business intelligence than his senior colleagues. Maybe because he entered the Bank at such a young age, he still suffers from his history of being the “young gun” and has a constant need to prove himself capable. He constructs the nature of his relationship with his colleagues as competitive from his side. He perceives himself for some reason as an underdog who has to constantly prove his skills. Even in our discussion, he feels this need to “show off”. Maybe this comes from my position as a deputy manager and possibly his future colleague.

He sees that the development in understanding the meaning of these figures has been fast at the Bank. He talks about trainings and meetings focusing on teaching banking business logic and cause–effect chains in which he has participated. He spends much time with his computer working with Excel but is certain that he is by far not the keenest in making these calculations. This is something he wants to emphasise because he seems to be aware that his calculations are known around the Bank. These trainings in a deeper understanding of business logic can be portrayed as intensifying the change, and although their intention was to educate, the other target was to act out a rite of passage into the new bank after the merger. For Simon, it seemed to work as planned because he got excited about the new responsibilities and has continued making analyses ever because, even on his own. There have also been additional trainings available, but Simon has not had time to attend them.

“Experts from the headquarters often visited in our regional meetings and taught us to understand the business logic, cause–effect chains and understanding which parts influence the bottom line and balance sheet. For example if we make a certain change, how it will affect the bottom line and other really practical simulations.”

Simon obviously struggles with whether to be an expert or a manager because he voluntarily, without me posing the questions, tells how he enjoys being surrounded by people in his branch and organising things. He assures me that it has nothing to do with power. Keeping up the expert/manager identity is time consuming, which he clearly understands, but at the same time, he is confused over it Giv...
“It is obvious that we were not taking part in strategising here. I don’t even believe that someone would seriously think that at the branch management level. The strategy is formulated somewhere else, and then we implement it. The strategy is extremely logical and sensible and hence, it’s easy to commit to. If it was a nonsense strategy or if I considered the direction to be wrong or if I could not understand it, it would be a problem. I see no problems or contradictions with this. I genuinely think that we’re doing the right things here.”

He believes that if he just continues patiently explaining the logic in banking business to his personnel, they will eventually realise it and find their own tasks more motivating. It is obvious that he wants to believe that his staff will also share his mind-set after things have been explained thoroughly.

Suddenly, Simon jumps into explaining how he at times understands those branch managers who do not meet with customers at all. He states that he does not understand them totally, but portrays them as “project branch managers”, who enter into a particular branch to fix it from shaky grounds to outperforming. The deeper meaning behind this comparison in identity construction is to point out at the same time the importance of the business skills in branch management and contrast the project-like managers’ distance and lack of attachment to their branches, which is the bottom line for Simon. He is emotionally close to his branch, and hence, that kind of approach to branch management feels totally strange and non-functional to him, although he admires the business skills of those managers. He therefore identifies himself by using a “not me” discourse about the project branch managers.

“I have started better to understand these branch managers who do not meet with customers at all. I don’t understand them completely, but I understand them better. They seem to take a project and manage it from the start to the end. They spend their time on making analyses, turn the whole branch upside down and then move on to new challenges. They are extremely profit centre-orientated, but their approach doesn’t work in the long run because we all cannot be shifting branches all the time. It is not in line with long-term approach.”

It is important for Simon to justify clearly the competence needed in managing branches. He recalls how after the merger, the insurance and banking business managers were mixed across the branches for a while, which proved to be a total disaster. The reason for him was the lack of banking business skills of the insurance managers. He states that these skills have turned out to be even more critical than earlier on because now it is possible to make “wrong decisions” and be reckless, whereas in the old days being a branch manager was a rather laid-back position. Although this matrix organisation, which mixed banking and insurance, did not last long, it left a mark in Simon’s memory as a negative incident. On the other hand, it was also a moment when he realised more clearly the difference between his old and new responsibilities after the merger and the new skills he needed in order to succeed.

“In Sampo-Leonia there was an attempt to mix banking and insurance managers into the same units. However, it was instantly recognized that in the same unit there has to always be both managers with a banking background and those with insurance backgrounds. There could not be a unit which was led purely by a manager with an insurance background. He could not carry the banking-related responsibilities. It was
a mess. It just does not happen like that because the chains (of the business logic) are hard to understand.”

He admits that the sales management part could be delegated to a talented consultant, but becoming familiar with the business side requires years of work and practice. He goes on chopping his duties into pieces and talks of which ones could be taught to these consultants and which require higher competence such as his. He states that part of the process is, for example, like selling sunglasses, could be learned, but the risk management and the rules of the banking business require a deeper understanding which cannot be learned in a second or two. Again, his self-superiority compared to others rises to the surface. Surprisingly, his language use and the constant self–other comparisons do not feel overly indulgent at all; instead, he is able to construct himself as enthusiastic and devoted. I cannot help myself wondering why his bragging seems to be more of a sign of commitment.

Simon was sure that something important had been left untold and wished he had had an opportunity to prepare himself for this interview more properly. He was not sure if he had remembered all the phases that had taken place over the years. He stated that his narrative had turned into more of his biography with small details instead of describing the larger trends. Hence, I got what I sought, but he wished he had been able to give a more objective account of the changes instead of his own history.

“These are my feelings and someone else may emphasise other issues.”

He does not talk much about his relationship with his supervisor, the regional manager. He makes only one short remark, stating that understanding the numbers and the business logic is the basis of everything because otherwise one can be reproached for lousy results by the regional manager. In other words, one has to know the numbers in order to be able to explain causes and effects in the reasoning behind the current status of the branch, whether it is good or bad. I guess he has been involved in tough discussions and learned from practice. He also jokes about how the next morning will be ruined by the visit of the regional manager, but I guess he is not actually too unhappy to meet with him. On the contrary, he gives the impression of anticipating the meeting with a positive attitude. Some of his colleagues will spend more time honing their relationships with their supervisors, whereas Simon just mentions his visit briefly.

“I am not that busy at the moment. X (certain reports) have to be finished in a couple of days (laughter) and the regional manager is coming to meet me tomorrow . . . so no rush. I mean it, no problem.”

Although the dilemma of being a business manager and sales manager at the same time will be difficult for him to solve, he did not look nervous or stressed, maybe because he felt like an expert in both fields.

To summarise, Simon’s narrative identity can be categorised as a conversion story because although he struggles with how to proceed, he is a true believer in the changes taking place. He applauds the decisions made by top management but is uncertain whether he will be able to fulfil all his current tasks in addition to the new ones demanded from him. For Simon, it is perfectly clear that his role was to implement the new procedures. Hence, the position of being in the middle is not disturbing him; his struggle is more about
the demands to divide his time differently and to let go of some of the tasks that are so
dear to him. Simon is proud of his position as a branch manager, which he exemplifies in
his comparisons to other professions.

The signs of liminality are somewhat present because he ponders his own role between
expert and manager. It was self-evident that he is not the same any longer and is on his way
to detaching himself from the old. Hence, he is constructed in the middle of transitional
liminality. However, he has already started to reflect the needed changes he is forced to
make to manage everything. This realisation appears to me as a way forward. Maybe for
that reason, this narrative is one of the most positive and energetic ones.

4.1.2 “Finally the Bank is on the right track” (Ray)

Ray started his banking career some years back and is now in his forties with broad
experience in various tasks. He is a branch manager of a medium-sized branch in urban
multi-branch area. Ray constructs the changes as something he has longed for and
expresses contentment that top management has also seen the light. In his narrative, the
liminality comes from the challenges in interacting with his group managers, with whom he
has no troubles, but he is unsure whether he is being systematic enough. His narrative is
full of self–other identity constructions that highlight his superiority in business logic.
There are no signs of desire to move up to a more senior level because he genuinely enjoys
his current duties and hopes that the organisational structure and the profit centre set-up
will not soon be altered.

He talks about his prior duties in detail and how he has been able to develop his
expertise in banking along the way. It also made him realise that, although in branches the
impression normally is that new procedures are pushed into implementation too hastily, in
actuality, they are planned thoroughly beforehand. Ray also points out how the new top
management was needed to change the direction. He spends quite some time explaining in
detail how the arrival of the new top management team and the measures taken will bear
fruit. He states that someone “up there” finally understood that this (banking) is more than
just selling and looking busy.

“The turning point is the stepping forward of the new top management. They have
turned the course of this ship . . . there were enough people who understood that the
well-being of many people depends on how well the Bank is performing.”

For him, it is important to paint a picture of himself as someone who has known what the
missing link was all along and finally the management also noticed it. In the following
quotation, Ray constructs the changes as expected ones and for which he was prepared
beforehand as one of the first absorbers. Also some ideas he had not thought about were
not an issue for him.

“The new organisational structure did not mean many changes in my branch because
we had already decided to make similar kinds of alterations. (He tells in detail about
the groups divided by job descriptions based on expertise areas.) It has been easy for
us to adjust to this and it sounds sensible. There have been a few revisions compared
to my own thoughts, but nothing major that went against my own ideas.”
Being in charge of his own profit centre is the key issue for him. He explains carefully the way certain performance indicators were calculated earlier on and today. He also recalls how he and his colleagues made a fuss in a branch managers’ regional meeting when there was a discussion about whether a branch manager should have such a broad mandate to decide on issues concerning his branch. In his opinion, the underlying source of disagreement was the perception that all the wisdom lies only from the headquarters. Today, the situation is totally altered, and branch managers are respected as profit centre managers. He also states that the procedures and concepts handed down to be implemented locally have become more sense making, partly because there are also branch managers in the development projects that head towards developing new products, concepts and procedures. Here, he clearly wants to emphasise that the reason behind the improvement has been the active participation of his colleagues, not the growing wisdom of the headquarters. Thus, there is a clear separation between those in the headquarters versus the ones in the branch network in his talk.

Ray states that the main change has come from the acknowledgement of his being truly responsible for everything that goes on in his branch. He talks about now being genuinely accountable for what’s going on. He tells about a small incident that took place some time ago over the phone when he called to ask for consultation from the headquarters. The reply was simply: “You are in charge of your profit centre, and therefore it’s your call”. This incident exemplifies the struggle to know one’s mandate. In the following quotation, Ray reflects on the past versus today, as he explains the mandate of branch management in decision making.

“I have seen the Postipankki-phase as well and witnessed how even the smallest details had to be discussed with someone and that someone else had already made guidelines to be followed in a particular kind of situation . . . branch managers did not have real power then, maybe there was enough mandate to order coffee and Danish pastry without asking permission or looking at the official rules to be applied. Of course there are still these guidelines.”

Ray sees that the problem is not whether branch managers have the mandate to decide on things concerning their branch independently, but that it is more about their ability to use the mandate. Here he refers to the possibly insufficient competence level of some of his colleagues. He also talks about the “fast-moving capital city branch managers” who do not have slightest business intelligence. With this kind of language, he constructs himself as more competent, whereas the “fast-movers” are understood as simply appearing busy but lacking any real understanding of what it means to be in charge of one’s own branch. He constructs himself as someone who worries over the lack of competence of some of his colleagues. Ray portrays a clear understanding of the change from pure sales management to profit-centre management but is certain that some of his colleagues lack this perception of the change. It becomes apparent that he likes to exaggerate and joke:

“It didn’t matter in the earlier days, whether our activities made sense or not. We just appeared busy and no one questioned anything. It was a huge event if someone for example was handing out balloons in the market place for six days for no particular reason.”
Through a “not me” identity construction, he portrays himself as business-orientated and having the skills to focus on the most important issues instead of running around like those “fast-movers”. Ray states that every branch can be a genuine profit centre if the manager has the will and the needed expertise. On the other hand, it is also possible just to drift with the flow. Here Ray points out how the profit centre management actually has everything to do with the mind-set, will and competence. Thus, it is up to each branch manager to step up and take the role.

He takes his position in the middle calmly and adds that of course certain concepts and procedures are decided in the headquarters and implemented locally. This is only natural for him, because, as he says, he cannot decide to start selling lollipops one day as he could as an entrepreneur. Ray seems to share the same respect towards the new top management as Simon as he states in the following quotation:

“Year 2001 was the major turning point, because then the CEO introduced Program X. The best part of that program was that the target was set and we were going to reach it. . . . I have no doubt that this target-orientated approach will continue.”

He also gives credit to the people in the headquarters (in his harsh manner) because their efforts are directed to enable branches to meet their targets.

“There is not so much crazy stuff coming from the headquarters any longer.”

Overall, he states that the process of adjusting to this new world has been easy for him and his colleagues. He has not come across anything that has gone against his thinking. Although he was not a branch manager in the 80s or 90s, he paints a picture of those older and experienced branch managers as less competent and less interested in business than himself.

He goes in circles as he keeps on emphasising the importance of mastering banking business logic. He is certain that he would not last as a branch manager for long without the profit centre structure. He also points out that everything is about the profit centre and profit-making in the end. He characterises himself as a carpenter which portrays himself as the one who puts forth all the effort business-wise without any input from others. This appears paradoxical to me. Maybe the personnel were forgotten due to his passion for the profit centre.

“As funny as it seems, I feel like a carpenter looking at my own handicraft. Without the business angle, I would experience this to be too narrow for me professionally. I would lose my motivation for sure.”

He does not need support in particular from his supervisor because his most important discussion partners are his closest colleagues. Having open discussions with the regional manager is difficult because he does not want to make himself look like a fool. For him it would be embarrassing to ask for help because the focus is on looking like a competent branch manager. Ray claims to have an easy-going relationship with his supervisor, but he never asks for advice from him; instead, he makes presentations that need his supervisor’s approval. In addition, especially in the early years, he enjoyed the discussions with his group managers because those discussions had a practical impact on various important issues in the branch.
Finally, he enters into a discussion concerning his personnel and especially the group managers. He tells about the massive training the branch managers have held in order to manage their advisors (operational personnel). However, nobody has paid attention to training him and his colleagues on how to manage the employees in supervisory positions, namely the group managers. He reflects that on one hand, he uses a more straightforward style language with these group managers, but on the other hand he is quite certain that he has not been able to demand enough from them. This problem in communication arises from frequent and informal interaction on a daily basis. He explains how he has done his best to somehow conceptualise these meetings but has not found the solution yet. This is something to be tackled because he sees that the challenge is even tougher in larger branches with several group managers.

Ray is confused about how to proceed with his group managers because he has not figured out a comfortable way to discuss business with them and to be a real supervisor for them. He is uncertain whether he talks overly openly about the business and whether he uses enough pressure in clearly demanding more results. He seems to be in need of guidance here but does not know where it can be found. He also states that these unofficial ad hoc meetings diminish the efficiency of the branch a great deal because there is no pre-planned agenda or structure. Ray reflects on the hardships he has in managing his group managers and ponders whether it results from a lack of training organised by the Bank or his own lack of initiative in “taking the bull by the horns”. Hence, the big issue causing transitional liminality for him is the group managers. Although the branches have the official organisational structure, making it work smoothly in practice is puzzling from a communications perspective. However, there were not any signs of a possible solution yet. He struggles with this challenge on his own because admitting being in need of assistance and guidance would signal incompetence, which is not an option for him.

“We have been trained to manage the advisors and maybe I have not put enough effort in on that side (managing group managers). The bigger the branch becomes, the more heavily success depends on the ability to manage the group managers. This is the largest challenge.”

He talks constantly about the profit centre and profit making and finally admits that it does not even matter what I ask because his approach will be the profit centre perspective anyway. The profit centre structure is basically everything to him because that is where he gets his joie de vivre in branch management. However, he also wants to point out that he is not all about numbers and does not preach about them on every occasion to his employees.

He also talks about how he is there for his employees and hardly ever talks to them about numbers. Instead, he tries to be available as much as possible, although he also meets with a customer or two each day. For him, this has to do with being in touch with the business and markets as well with what is going on in the customer front-line where his personnel are working. He wants to be taken as a serious banker, but also as a warm person who cares for his employees.

“I try my best to be available for my personnel here in my branch and avoid being booked into meetings for a whole day. There cannot be anything that important that I will become so fully booked that my personnel will have to make an appointment to meet me on daily matters.”
To summarise, Ray is satisfied with his current position and does not long for further career development. Ray tries his best to manoeuvre in the new situation in which the challenges take place outside the official structure because there is no one to talk to about these struggles; especially not with regional manager because Ray wants to taken as competent branch manager. Ray has trouble managing his group managers in the new organisational structure. This bothers him a great deal. He is on his way to reconstructing himself; the reflections can be taken as separation of the old from the new. The at times strong and even indulgent self–other constructions are repeating the same issue, banking business logic and his high level of competence in it. However, Ray is converted to a believer and appreciates the new direction taken. Hence, his liminality gets constructed as transitional and rather light through meaning-making. The balance sheets and profit and loss statements have altered his world. He likes to browse them and figure out reasons behind the numbers. This profit centre logic is the key word in his narrative.

4.1.3 “Banking business requires expertise” (Ian)

Ian has been in high profile expert positions in corporate banking for years, but as it became possible, he decided in his forties to step into managerial responsibilities. He is at the moment managing a small branch in rural area. The main issue bothering him in his narrative is the more challenging nature of managing people compared to being responsible solely for his own actions as an expert. He gets constructed as an analytical person as he reflects on the difference between managing issues and leading people.

His background in corporate banking has given him the skills needed in branch management number-wise, but leading people seems to be a source of anxiety. The transitional liminality becomes clear in Ian’s story as he attempts to transform himself into a “people person”. In addition, the uncomfortable relationship with his supervisor makes the situation difficult for him. He has been used to being a free agent and not under constant monitoring. At the point of the interview, Ian is right in the middle of liminality.

Although he has been puzzled by the “human factor”, he is pleased with all the support he has been getting from the headquarters through conceptualising. By this, he implies various systematic tools provided to assist the sales management process. For him, these more structured approaches have meant speaking the same language as his employees, because everyone is familiar with the procedures. He talks about the progress he has made in leading people as well. He says that after treating everyone similarly for a while, he realised that he had to face everyone as individuals instead. This reflection on leading people happens behind the scenes in liminality outside the official structure. He has no one with whom to share his thoughts. This topic seems sensitive for him.

The conversation quickly turns to performance indicators and the business perspective he enjoys at the moment. He is eager to talk about the new reporting data available. Ian constantly uses the term “systematic” as he portrays the current reality. For him, banking is all about understanding the balance sheet and profit and loss statements. However, he does not consider branches as independent profit centres yet. For him, the new structure is more about budget accountability. In the following quotation, he constructs his dilemma: He spends more time with figures because they are easier to understand and handle than people.
“Leading people is more demanding than checking and analysing the figures. Of course, one spends more time on something that is familiar and easy to understand. I hardly even notice how much time I have spent on the reports.”

Being organisationally in the middle suits Ian well, and he positions himself as the local implementer, who is the one to bring the chosen strategy alive locally. He calls the top management “generals” and his role as coming up with the most effective “attack plan”. He makes many comparisons to the military and to a famous Finnish novel by Väinö Linna, and explains how he also leads the troops from the front through his own example like Koskela.

“This is my own playing field, and I have started the actions, after receiving the command from the generals, to make the attack.”

He calls himself the local expert, the one who has the best knowledge of the area. His role is to locally adjust and implement the strategies decided at the top. He sees himself working in a retail chain organisation in which there is naturally certain rules to be followed. His overall perception is that he now has more room to manoeuvre than before the changes. He makes a comparison to a “camel boots man”, one who walks his own path, which is not something he longs for.

However, the situation has gotten a bit tighter after he was assigned a new supervisor. The previous one gave lots of liberty, whereas the current one is constantly checking up on him. In general, Ian sees this kind closeness a bit dangerous because there is the possibility of burning out. He describes himself as a buffer between the senior management and his employees. The challenge comes from not being able to reach the expected results in the time given. He sees as his main role making sure that his branch is going in the right direction as well as blocking the impatient demands coming from the “ivory tower”. His new supervisor puzzles him quite a bit because he does not know how to relate to him yet. In the following quotation, he makes strong remarks concerning his new boss and considers his own management style. However he is also able to joke about it.

“We have not yet formed (with his new supervisor) an informal way of communicating, whether there is even a need for it, because we have these informal meetings three times in four weeks. I cannot ask him about every little detail . . . for example, can I go to the bathroom or not, but our relationship is in the construction phase and I have no clue how it’s going to turn out. The style has changed a lot (compared to the previous supervisor). I don’t know what will happen to my management style . . . shit comes down!”

He says that he has to make sure not to enter into a similar kind of relationship with his employees as his supervisor has with him. Ian separates himself from his supervisor, whose conduct is unpleasant for him as becomes apparent from his comment “shit comes down”. For him, it is crucial to recognise the fine line between being close and supporting and being too demanding and causing unnecessary pressure. He wonders whether he has been able to remain supportive or whether he has changed also.

He started reorganising the branch six months ago together with his personnel. He admits that it is still in progress because these things take time. He gives an image of himself as a participatory manager who wants to get insights from his employees. However, he is not certain whether they see it the same way. When it comes down to recruiting, it
becomes totally his responsibility. Here in the next quotation Ian gives an example of his efforts to take his staff more into consideration. His actions seem intentional and hence, he is claiming to be doing the best he can.

“Although there was not yet a clear plan and the regional manager had not approved it, we had a discussion all together within our branch and they (staff) also had an opportunity to share their opinions. It’s hard to say how they thought about this gathering: Was it a true discussion or just the branch manager talking by himself?”

For Ian, the close relationship with his colleagues provides a way to discuss the business in a relaxed manner. He says he needs to have a forum in which he is able to test his ideas. He also likes to discuss the practical issues going on with his group manager in detail. Often, these two stay at the branch after hours to share their ideas in peace and quiet because during daytime there is just too much going on. Their division of duties is basically ad hoc, and they decide whose role is to pick up a certain task as it appears. Usually they think alike, but if disagreements arise, he points out that his opinion rules. Luckily, these incidents have been rare. Ian explains in more detail the reasoning behind this kind of arrangement instead of following the official organisational structure. He thinks that his branch is so small that he has to be involved in just about everything. In the following quotation, he admits that there is no clear division of duties. This multitasking leads to long evenings in the branch because the evenings seem to be the only time available to have longer conversations with the group manager.

“I constantly alter the division of the managerial duties with my group manager . . . there are no strict rules.”

Maybe due to his background as an expert, he also meets with customers every week, personal and corporate. For him this is an absolute must because he wants to take part in making the branch successful. He also sees that his contribution makes a difference because they have to use all possible means to reach the set targets. From this particular comment, it is possible to sense his drive to meet with customers and make deals, which were his tasks as an expert.

To summarise, through his language use, Ian can be constructed as someone who enjoys an expert position, and having to interact with people as a middle manager is not something with which he feels at ease. As he talks about his love of numbers, it appears as if his desired identity rests somewhere other than in branch management. However, he has a strong will to become more of a people person and find the balance. Ian knows the set expectations and wants to move in that direction besides implementing the new organisational structure. The division of responsibilities between Ian and his group manager seem unclear and also possibly causing long work days. However, he also realises his limitations and room for improvement. In other words, he knows himself well. Ian compares himself to a retail chain store manager in a positive sense, which implies that he has settled into his position in the middle. He is also converted to the strategy and the elements of change with which it brings. Challenges seem to come to him in the form of people, namely a new supervisor and own employees. However, he does not appear desperate, although he is not as energetic as Simon or Ray in his language use.
4.2 Camel boots managers

Ben and Amanda are given their own category, because their language use resembles one another. They both are bold and do not hesitate to speak about what is going on in their minds. These two narratives can be characterised as conversion stories, although at times these two do what they please regardless of the set guidelines. Despite the criticality in their language use, they appear committed to the Bank. Their liminality is perpetual in many ways because the whole feeling of being organisationally in the middle and not being able to make all the decisions independently bothers them. Both of them also make many self–other comparisons in which the target seems to be to construct themselves as superior to their colleagues, the headquarters experts and their group managers.

4.2.1 “The bottom line is credibility” (Ben)

Ben, now in his fifties, has spent his entire career in banking, and he has been holding his current position in a medium-sized branch in a small town for several years. The rewritten narrative identity of Ben is the longest one as it also was originally the longest. At first, I saw no signs of liminality in the story of Ben because he praised the new strategic direction and the new structure. He claims that getting accountability for the profit centre was something he and his closest colleagues had been waiting to happen for years. He constructs the change as a dramatic one: If he does not deliver what is expected, he will be sacked immediately. For him, this is electrifying, and he gets a kick out of it.

Ben is vivid in his language use as he starts by summarising the main changes that have taken place as the Bank has transformed to its current form. The biggest change from his perspective is the focus on the profitability in banking and approaching banking as a business instead of a public institution. He totally disliked the fact that in Postipankki he was not on track about his branch’s performance level, because there were no clear targets to be reached.

“I have been a branch manager so long and have seen many phases. Some of them have prevented me from doing my job properly, and that pissed me off tremendously.”

Ben states that his main responsibility is now the strategic planning in his branch. For him, this means in practice figuring out ways to improve the business in his own branch, and hence, he sees strategic issues taking place both in top management and at the practical, local level. He makes calculations late at night after operating hours, which he calls his hobby. He describes how he calculates possible futures and plans alternative scenarios. He compares this hobby to tennis or some other leisure activities people do after work. As he describes these evening tasks, it becomes apparent that they are also his way of relaxing and getting perspective on things going on in his branch. Ben wants to call himself a strategist and seems to enjoy the reputation he has gained over the years as a numbers wizard. He explains how he cannot comprehend the branch managers who do not do any extra analysis on their own and build scenarios for the future. Hence, he creates a strong self–other identity construction in wanting to look more competent than his colleagues.
“I get quite a few requests to make calculations. I have learned to make them rather fast. I spend a lot of time making these simulations and estimations. . . A huge part of our (branch managers) duties is this strategic planning, both in short and long term. We should spend our time on it and that’s why we have these group managers to run the daily operations in the branches.”

In the following quotation, Ben brings to light how he turns the final local adjustments into strategy and decides how to proceed on practical level.

“The course I have to act according to certain rules and according to the strategic direction set in the Bank, but the practical procedures and activities have to be done here. There seems to be less and less instruction on how to act, which is crucial because the localities of the branches are different.”

Ben comments how things were in the 80s when branch managers were respected and the pace was slow, without any rush. For him, the emphasis on business has brought with it speed, but also meaningfulness. Ben is glad about the changes that have taken place and is certain that he and his colleagues would have been ready to enter into the new business model even years back, but firstly, they were not appreciated, and secondly, they were not expected to have the needed competence.

“We have wanted this change to happen for years. We have been wanting to get indicators to measure our performance. . . the truth is that what is the most dangerous and painful for us is if we are not able to deliver what is expected . . . we have wanted this and at the same time we realise that this like gambling for us because we have taken a huge risk, but at the same time it is nice to see how the branch is performing as long as it is performing well.”

He compares his branch to his own enterprise, and he has to make sure that things are developing as they should. He also admits that the branch managers may be fired faster than in the old days if the business is not rolling along as expected. He appears proud as he talks about his branch’s success in recent years. He is certain that this has made it possible for him to get more room to manoeuvre as well. He likes the current freedom and the fact that his supervisor does not contact him often. This gives him a sense of autonomy, which is stated explicitly and implicitly multiple times in his storytelling. He likes to be like “the king of his own castle”

In his branch, the daily sales management has been delegated to his group managers. The cornerstone of his management philosophy is the absolute necessity for like-mindedness; the group managers have to share his mind-set. He explains that his duty is to lead the branch forward as one branch, whereas the group managers’ duty is the day-to-day operational sales management. He justifies this from two perspectives: He does not have time for it or the needed expertise. He negotiates with customers from time to time but has no skills to use the technical applications. He tries to stay in the shadows and not intervene because he does not want to sabotage the credibility of his group managers. Ben enjoys dealing with the numbers but with people as well. For him, this new structure means that a huge part of the operational responsibility is handled by his group managers, although he is personally accountable for the outcomes. Although it is a “must” that his group managers think likewise, he could not bear to follow strict procedures personally. For him, it is important that the branch managers are not “cloned” and that their own personalities are
at stake. In other words again he likes the fact that he does not have to follow too strict
guidelines in his management style. Here he makes a clear status separation between
himself and his group managers.

“If we (branch managers) are to be put into some kind of mould, we will lose our
credibility. We are putting our personalities in line here. One may achieve results
different through means than the other one.”

He has also participated in his advisors’ customer meetings to show that he still knows a
trick or two. He explains how he brings the whole customer meeting under his control and
thus demonstrates to his advisors how the deals are done in practice. For him, this
represents “walking the talk” and being credible, although sometimes his employees state
that it is easy for him to say because customers believe him due to his branch manager
status. He used to meet with more customers because his job description enabled it. Today,
the business side takes almost all of his time.

“In the old days, customers at times wanted to meet with the branch manager, and I
kind of also regarded customer meetings as interesting. In those times, the branch
manager’s responsibilities made it possible because the focus was purely on meeting
customers and making sales. I was like one of the sales advisors and met with
customers. In Sampo Bank, the focus has shifted to the business side and the
number of my customer meetings has decreased.”

His interventions in his advisors’ customer meetings bring an opposite side of him to light.
He states firmly that nothing is more stupid than intervening and tearing down the
credibility of his group managers. It may appear as if he is simply interested in what is
going on, but it would backfire because he just does not have sufficient time to handle his
group managers’ duties, nor the desire. He tells about a particular incident from the
beginning of his career in which his own supervisor destroyed his credibility completely.
From this example, he can be constructed as someone who tries his best to learn from the
past and not follow in the footsteps of his former, poorly behaving supervisor.

“I had a manager who always told my staff, while I was out of office, that I had
given them false information and that he wanted to set the record straight. Finally I
had had enough and confronted him by warning that I would “kick his ass” if he
even once more steps on my toes.”

Ben also talks about how he has been selected to manage this particular branch five times
during various organisational restructurings. In the latest reselection, he was appointed to
manage the corporate banking side as well. This was obviously a huge triumph for him
because he hated the fact that he was not the only bank manager in town. Sometimes he
had to take customers to meet with the corporate banking manager, which irritated him
quite a lot. He reveals that he was not the best of friends with the corporate manager. He
likes to joke around as he talks about the latest incident, which took place while he was on
holiday. He was on a golf trip in Spain, and at the golf course he received a phone call from
the regional manager concerning the decision to be made between Ben and the corporate
banking manager.

“You decide as you please, it’s my putting turn now.”
Although he laughs as he tells this, this was a tough call for him. He admits that the reselections have given him more confidence and motivation. If good colleagues give praise it feels good, but hearing it from one’s supervisor carries extra weight.

He has many close colleagues with whom he talks on regular basis. They have even gathered in “semi-official” meetings for discussions. In addition, their supervisor, the regional manager, has been invited, but his role has been more that of an observer according to Ben. He wants to point out that the regional manager is not there in his normal role as their supervisor; instead, he is there to listen and to learn. He says that the regional manager “forces his company on them” and that it has been interesting that he has gotten new insights from these meeting. He uses quite provocative language as he continues to say that if the regional manager does not come up with anything meaningful or sensible to say, it is better that he “keeps his mouth shut”. However, his way of talking does not appear so harsh when I am sitting in front of him. He has a grin on his face, which implies that he likes to exaggerate a little bit. He talks about how his branch has been successful and how he enjoys having a good relationship with his supervisor. However, he seems to dislike the fact that they are in a supervisor–subordinate relationship because he hopes to have more equal relationships.

“We gather in these local meetings on a regular basis, and we tell our regional manager that we are having the “local board meeting” next week and that he is welcome to join in as well. It has been intriguing to notice how he absorbs certain ideas from our meetings and notices that we are discussing important issues.”

Ben frequently keeps in touch with his closest colleagues over the phone. He describes how together they have been able to come up with new ways to do business, and getting new ideas from others has saved time because there has not been a need to reinvent the wheel. He does not feel comfortable having the same kinds of discussions with his group managers as he has with his colleagues. The main reason is their lack of ideas and their lack of understanding of the business logic. He and his colleagues have come up with new procedures together and implemented them simultaneously in their units. He enjoys coming up with something new – something that is maybe even considered a bit unorthodox in the headquarters.

“Colleagues from nearby branches and I decided to use the same kinds of tables to follow-up on (issue X) in our branches. We are aware that the collegial way of working doesn’t end with us. I am certain that, for example, an advisor from my branch will contact his colleague from the neighbouring branch in order to find out if the same table had been implemented there as well. Many times I hear through the grapevine that personnel from more distant branches wonder why a certain procedure has not been implemented in their unit.”

In the following quotation Ben even claims that the concepts have to be invented locally, whereby he constructs himself even more as a strategist. Being more self-directed and a bit rebellious probably gave Ben the feeling of freedom he needed.

“My reply to these comments and questions is that every unit and their managers make their own decisions. Not everything has to be done in a similar manner; but because the ideas don’t come from elsewhere, it is wiser to cooperate with close colleagues.”
Ben reminds me that it is an option to manage solo, but it would be risky. He says that some of his colleagues want to give the image of managing everything on their own, but it is almost an impossible mission. For him sitting in an office behind closed doors is not leadership or management; it has to do with commanding. He is certain that leadership cannot be based on fear and giving orders; instead, it has to be earned by credibility and respect. Here he makes reference to an imaginary other who possibly leads through fear. He explains how he has done his best to remember to take everyone into account equally and by showing interest in whether the results have been good or are in need of improvement. He talks about his colleague who likes to be left alone and who finds all the concepts and ready-made models helpful. For Ben, all ready-made models seem more or less ridiculous because he is convinced that he is able to come up with more usable solutions himself.

Ben also constructs himself as a frequent member in various development projects. Through participation, he gets prior information on what is going to be implemented soon. He also feels it is an important detail to mention that he has an excellent reputation in the headquarters. He is certain that these good and trustful relationships have made his communication with the headquarters easier, whereas some of his colleagues have complained about difficulties in getting their points through. Thus, on the one hand, he is at times overly independent and critical, but on the other hand, he enjoys his trusting relationship with the headquarters and chance to participate in development as well. He constructs his self–other identity discourses, and by talking about the hardship of others vividly makes his case as that he is a smooth negotiator in social circles. On another occasion, he criticises the lack of having a say.

“Unfortunately the situation has not changed in a way that we can communicate issues from the bottom up because the reception ability up there is rather weak. There is a strong belief that all the knowledge resides there.”

The credibility issue is raised again as he talks about communicating something negative that has been decided by top management to his staff. He is persistent in claiming these as his own ideas or ideas that have his buy-in. He does not want to hide behind anyone’s back because for him that would mean losing his credibility. He explains how he wants to know the solid argumentation behind every decision because then it will be easier for him to communicate the message to his own staff. This is important for him because he is afraid that by acting otherwise, his employees will feel sorry for him because he would be made out to be simply a messenger. Hence, he wants to appear in the eyes of his personnel to be a more powerful decision maker than he is in reality. Keeping up credibility is hard work because he has to show himself as being capable of mastering customer meetings and being able to appear decisive and powerful in front of several different audiences, such as his staff, group managers, colleagues, customers, the regional manager and the local community. Ben states firmly that he is the local incarnation of the Bank.

“If I am presenting something dropped top-down to my staff, I need to know the argumentation and reasoning behind the decisions. If I just deliver the message of the top management without any reflection, my staff will feel sorry for me and perceive me as nothing more than a messenger of the top management. . . . I always present the decisions as my own even if they have been made elsewhere.”
He is disappointed how the bottom-up vertical communication does not seem to work. All sorts of obstacles get in the way. There have been exceptions such as the representatives from the branches in development projects, but he is sure that the majority in the headquarters are certain that they have the best knowledge, and the representatives are purely used as information sources. However, if things go wrong, the branches get the blame. Ben portrays himself as a man who is full of new ideas but has learned that they are not always embraced in the headquarters.

“In the regional meetings, many of my colleagues have the habit of criticising the ideas coming from the headquarters. I do it as well if I feel the need, but I have to always have an idea on how to improve them as well. I get really irritated by constant complaining without any improvement suggestions. I am glad that I have never given in to that kind of behaviour. I want to keep on developing and formulating ideas. Not every idea gets approved, and everyone has come to terms with that. Sometimes my ideas have been accepted.”

Only after reading his story through several times, the liminality started to reveal itself. Reflecting on everything he stated, it becomes obvious that Ben daydreams of having a higher position in order to erase the irritation he feels when thinking about his position in the middle. He totally dislikes all the ready-made models and is not willing to operate according to them. Ben struggles in the middle despite his talk of being full of self-confidence from active participation in the various development projects and having credibility in the headquarters. As a counterbalance to centralised models, he and his closest colleagues have come up new procedures that they have implemented in their branches.

Ben seems to experiment more with his senior management position through a certain kind of identity play, which has no deeper meaning. It seems unlikely that he would leave his current branch and the local community because the membership and status mean a lot to him. The identity play entails real actions taken (semi-official branch manager meetings, development projects, coming up with new procedures with colleagues, making calculations and scenario-building) and day dreaming, which can also be called self-deception, because he wants to erase all the signs of not having the final say due to his organisational position in the middle. This identity play is harmless and gives him a sense of not being an average branch manager.

To summarise, Ben’s narrative was the most intriguing because of his straightforward language use. Ben is not satisfied by his position in the middle, but he has figured out ways to cope with it, such as acting as if he would if he was in a senior management position. Ben enjoys his high status in the local social circles, and it appears that he is also in other ways tied to that specific town, which prevented further career aspirations. Despite its criticism, Ben’s narrative shows him as converted and narrative structure as progressive. Ben has also found ways to handle additional tasks such as making scenarios and plans, which make him happier about being in the middle. However, the liminality constructed in his narrative is rather deep and perpetual because it has to do with the whole challenge of being in the middle. It is brilliantly hidden in his narrative behind straightforward language use.
Amanda is in her forties and she started out her career in the Bank some years back. She is currently responsible of a medium-sized branch in a small town with no other Sampo Bank branches. She uses language colourfully and is a fluent storyteller. She is excited but does not want to appear nervous at all. Through her language use, she can be constructed as a self-assured person who does not easily take orders from others. At least, this is the impression she wanted to give me.

This narrative was at first hard to categorise; I was not sure whether this was a conversion story or a de-conversion story. What makes this narrative unique is also the fact that Amanda does not say much about the strategic direction taken by the Bank; instead, she criticises the procedures that came along with it. However, she is satisfied with her own career development and new responsibilities she has been appointed to manage. She likes to tell in detail how she does not follow the official guidelines.

Although Amanda’s own career has been progressive, as she has been appointed to manage a larger branch and has also been asked to take on corporate banking responsibilities, she does not appear to be a strong believer in the strategy, not at least on practical level by which I refer to processes to be implemented and guidelines to be followed locally. There are multiple discursive constructions regarding liminality such as a need to build up new expertise, hardships in delegating to group managers, a lack of trust and disappointment in the profit centre structure. In Amanda’s narrative, their mixture gets close to something overbearing. However, she is determined to do things her way and succeed. Hence, she gets constructed as a determined person.

Amanda tells how her first branch developed wings in no time, and they achieved excellent results. This phase is something from which she seems to get strength. After covering this successful event, she begins talking about her arrival in her current branch and how it was the same all over again as they started to build the branch from scratch. Once again, after a while, things started to improve, and things were flowing. However, after things settled down and the good results continued, she started to feel frustrated and in need of something fresh professionally.

“Everything was the same day after day . . . I thought that my time as an educated person was going totally waste here and that I had the capacity to handle much more demanding duties . . . suddenly I got this feeling.”

She mentions many times her academic degree and how a highly educated person should not waste time doing simple tasks. She paints the responsibility of corporate banking mainly as an expert’s task, although she is the immediate supervisor of the corporate bankers. It appears that her main focus is at the time of the interview to develop in corporate banking and later on as a supervisor in corporate banking.

“As branch managers, our main duty has been to take care of the well-being of our employees. I think it’s not enough for me. I want some real responsibilities as well because I have a high level of education. Now I am confronted with a new situation, and this corporate manager task is a genuine expert position.”

In addition, the freedom to act independently without constant surveillance is vitally important for her. Luckily, the corporate and personal banking branches were merged, and
she was chosen for the manager’s position, which can be taken as recognition from the top management. For her, it meant new challenges in several ways: becoming more acquainted with corporate banking as well being the supervisor of the corporate banking team. However, she states with relief in her voice that luckily the corporate bankers are all rather newly-hatched, and hence, she does not feel too much pressure to show off. Still, the nomination of recognition from the top management puts her in the spot light once again. She is thus moving into another kind of role: from manager into expert/manager, because her way of thinking starts from building authority in the eyes of her staff by solid expertise.

She has rolled up her sleeves and gotten down to it as evidenced by her explanation of the upcoming corporate banking trainings she has organised in her branch. She talks a lot about how she has invited high-status corporate banking experts from the headquarters to train her and her corporate bankers. It almost appears as if this special event is a way for her to show her commitment to her new subordinates. The change also means building up her credibility as a corporate banker in the eyes of her personnel. Amanda has been used to earning her authority through expertise and wondered how she would do it now. She describes herself as an incomplete supervisor because she is not an expert in her personnel’s field. At the time of the interview, she was studying a degree in corporate banking to gain the needed basic knowledge as fast as possible. She also states that discussions with other branch managers in the same situation have been fruitful. These training sessions have represented rites of passage, and discussions with colleagues have been an important source of support for her. She sees that they all share the same joys and sorrows.

“This is a tremendous challenge for me because I am facing something totally new as a supervisor. I am in a new situation; because I am accustomed to that a supervisor has to gain authority by her own expertise. I strongly feel that authority is based on expertise. I have to have authority in the branch; and now in corporate banking, I do not possess that kind of authority at all, you know? I am just learning it, so the challenge comes from gaining authority in the eyes of my employees and with customers as well. To be able to speak firmly and with credibility is part of this learning process. It is exciting thing and a huge challenge as well for me.”

However, she is also aware of the fact that top management will not give her time to settle in as a novice; she was nominated to these new responsibilities and is expected to perform. Therefore, she finds herself in liminality outside the official structures as she tries to appear more competent than she is. She is on her way moving into the new identity and separated from the old, but there are still too many unsolved issues, and hence, it is too early to say that more than that identity reconstruction is in progress.

She characterises herself as someone who demands a lot from herself and others. She gets down to work fast and expects others to follow her example. She describes herself as a supervisor by nature because she is willing to take responsibility and use the power she has been given. At the same time, she sees herself as humble and not in a need of someone boosting her ego. She talks about how she has seen women dress and act like X (member of the senior management). She finds it ridiculous because it is so apparent to others. She explains how it is not possible to learn to become a good manager; it is something one is born with. It does not come with clothing or by imitating gestures. Although she does not state it aloud, she constructs herself through these sentences as a natural-born manager who is not afraid to act authentically. This is constructed through “not me” identification
as she talks about how she finds it comical that some of her female colleagues try to imitate their superior. For Amanda, it appears to be important to stay true to herself and to take her place as the manager. In the next quotation, it becomes obvious that it’s not easy for her to “be one of the others” and take a participatory approach because she eventually has to have the final say.

“I follow the same rules as others in my branch. For me it’s important that I am the manager and no one else. When I have to take the manager role, I take it firmly and I don’t let anyone else boss me around. I cannot give slack and appear indifferent. When something demands a managerial approach, I take that role and no one else. I don’t listen to advice, and I don’t accept any shadow organisations.”

Amanda is not a big fan of the profit centre structure because there are so few issues that can be influenced. She takes quite a lot of time as she describes the unjust measurements used to evaluate the branches. She sees that the direction that has been taken is actually opposite from what she expected because in the big picture, the grip from the headquarters has gotten tighter. Amanda gives many examples of how the profit centre structure has worked in practice from her perspective. She had high hopes for the new structure and expresses her deep disappointment. Her expectations were higher than what the reality was concerning her room to manoeuvre. Therefore, the latest changes appear paradoxical to her because the promise was to give more local power, but in reality there is less room to act freely. She liked the freedom she had in her first branch, and is therefore now looking forward to setting up the corporate banking model in her branch. She is convinced she will have the liberty to organise it independently instead of following the centralised guidelines.

“Maybe this is a bit of an exaggeration to say, but we were led to believe that we would actually have an impact, but in the end, there was not any way to have a say whatsoever.”

“We have been told a lot that we will have the liberty to design the concept ourselves (in corporate banking) and that we won’t be given any strict guidelines. Person X from the headquarters won’t come to give instructions. We have the responsibility to come up with our own ways of doing in our local environments”.

Amanda talks in detail about the performance indicators and how the costs are split between the branches and what kinds of drivers are being used. She seems frustrated with the situation; although she admits that the reported figures enable her to see the direction the branch is heading and make the needed changes in time. Hence, for Amanda the problem with the profit centre structure is the centralised top-down model in which the local branch managers have no say. She feels that some of the processes they are supposed to follow seem quite childish and ridiculous. In the following quotation, her disobedient side comes out as she talks about refusing to follow all the top-down implemented processes.

“I really respect my advisors, and I am willing to do all there is in my power to enable them to fully concentrate on their work. I am aware that they are all top salesmen and experts. Applying procedure X is like being in a kindergarten. I have not bought these ideas, and I am not pushing them forward in my branch either because I am sceptical of their impact on my staff.”
She sees that the problems arise purely from the unfairness of the figures presented in the reports. She considers rules and control unnecessary as long as the business is going well. She states that she will not implement anything she does not think is a smart thing to do. Her reasoning behind these claims is her respect for her staff; she does not want to demand they deliver something if she does not believe it is useful. Because she dislikes orders and control, she is glad that her supervisor does not contact her often. It would feel like putting pressure on her. Although she is demanding, she underscores not being a tyrant and wants to give her staff the impression of being able to have a say. She has been used to being a “rebel” and likes to tell small stories about her way of managing, which she appears to perceive as different from that of her colleagues. She, for example, talks about how she at times she delivers the mail as a sign of being “one of the others”, which she probably can never be.

The sales management is currently delegated to her group manager. She admits that she has to watch herself from time to time not to step on the group manager’s toes and to let him carry on his duties without constant interference. This demands conscious effort from her because she has trained him for the group manager’s duties. At times, she has thought about whether she gives him enough space to step up and really take his place as a manager. He does not always act as promised, which has deteriorated her trust. However, she realises that she does not have any other choice than to trust him because she has to put more effort into her new responsibilities. Here, Amanda reflects and puts her realisation into words: On the one hand, she cannot follow her old ways any longer and keep the rope as tight. On the other hand, she states firmly that she is the one managing that branch and nobody else.

“I have to do my absolute best and make sure that I don't bulldoze him (group manager X), but because he has such little experience in a supervisor position, it is quite easy for me to do so. I have been teaching him to do his job.”

She talks about being like everyone else in her branch, but at the same time she is the one who makes the final call. She explains how she has attempted to transform to being a bit softer in her language use. She also reveals how her employees come to her office when she is available and pour out all their worries on her lap. She has learned to cope with it but also comments that she does not have many people with whom to share her worries. She describes herself as a strict, controlling manager and a caring manager at the same time. In the following quotation, Amanda explains her carefully considered language use with her employees as she balances between talking straight about difficult issues or giving negative feedback and remaining respectful.

“I always have to consider the language I am using in my branch because people take what I say seriously and reflect on the meaning behind my words. During the years I have learned to use the right kinds of words in front of my staff. I am able to control myself and not say things which would be fine among friends or family, but not here. I have learned to use the “language of angels” in explaining difficult issues. It can be learned, although it means falling into a trap a couple of times.”

On the other hand, she wonders who will listen to her worries because she has to be able to “filter” everything and carry the worries of her staff on her shoulders.
Amanda can be constructed as a controversial person in her language use. She wants to be on top of things herself but totally dislikes any kind of control; hence, she does not live as she teaches. At the time of the interview, she drew heavily on the expert discourses to construct herself. She also wanted to say clearly that she had wanted this change to take place. Maybe this was due to her excitement and nervousness about how to turn into a corporate banking expert in the eyes of her employees. She is in between as she constructs herself as a manager who will have to give up her management duties at least for a while and become a “wannabe” corporate banking expert. There is no other option because she is not able to transform into an expert overnight. Although she does not see the profit centre structure as plausible, she accepts it because there is nothing better available.

Amanda can be constructed as a critical person, but there is positive energy in her besides her rebellious side. In Amanda’s case, the criticism signals something deeper as she pours out her disappointments. The biggest challenge is Amanda’s ability to let go and genuinely delegate sales management to her group manager. She reflects on the needed changes in her behaviour and balances between controlling and watching from a distance. Amanda is entering into unknown territory in which she cannot yet act as an expert in corporate banking. She constructs herself as self-aware and someone who wants to have full knowledge about everything going on in her branch. It will get more demanding as the size of her branch increases. Although she is critical, she is also committed to making her branch successful.

To summarise, Amanda is constructed as someone who is not afraid to speak up and talk straight. Being in the middle is demanding for her for several reasons, but mostly because she does not like to take orders and dislikes following strict guidelines. However, although Amanda’s narrative is controversial, I categorise her narrative as converted because she shows so much devotion to her branch and on the strategy on higher level. Of course, one could argue that conversion is necessarily connected to commitment to the Bank’s strategy on practical level in her branch. Amanda is ambitious and her career development had been fast. Therefore, her narrative can be labelled as a progressive one.

Liminality in Amanda’s narrative is perpetual in nature because it has to do with her whole position in the middle and hence not something that can be passed quickly. However, the new challenges in corporate banking have turned her attention in a new direction and there is genuine excitement in the air. If she gets more room to manoeuvre, she might get passed her liminality.

4.3 Cliff-hangers

Tina and Iris have many similarities in their narratives. They both entered the Bank from another company in the financing sector. Tina and Iris state how they are pleased with the new strategic direction, but they are unwilling to implement locally the new procedures or follow the guidelines: in other words, to follow the set direction decided by top management. These two narratives are hence de-converted. The label “cliff-hanger” symbolises their current state as they try to hang on and not to fall. Tina and Iris have many challenges to tackle before they will feel comfortable. They also compare themselves to others the most in all the narratives and hence maybe put pressure on themselves unintentionally.
Tina entered the Bank right after the merger with Sampo PLC. Before being appointed to branch manager, she headed a small group of experts. At the moment, she is rather fresh as a branch manager in her early forties in a large branch in urban area. Tina is the single branch manager in that particular city. She characterises her current role as general management, whereas previously she gained her authority by her expertise. Tina is exceptional in the way she jumps right into the business and talks openly about the topics that are crossing her mind at that particular moment.

Tina’s narrative tells how a young woman enters the Bank full of energy, creativity and enthusiasm for making things happen, but soon realises that she is not able to be fulfilled and loses heart. She reflects her role in the new situation and perceives that she has to transform in many ways. This narrative vividly represents perpetual liminality because, although Tina changes, certain issues will remain the same, and she will not have a say because she is in the middle. Whether she will come to terms with this is another story.

The biggest change is managing the group managers, who are responsible for their own groups. At first, she tried to continue her old ways of leading in her new branch, but she soon realised that she does not have enough time to discuss in detail with all her employees their daily activities. She reflects on how she was not able to give the needed space to her group managers and simultaneously demand the needed results from them. She talks in detail about the group managers and how they differ: Some of them need more support, whereas others are rather independent. She likes to support them in certain limits because, for her, it seems that some of them are not willing or able to take the responsibility they are given. This becomes apparent especially when they are faced with uncomfortable situations.

“It appears as if taking responsibility is at times demanding for them (group managers), and of course they need support in tough situations when they are forced to make difficult decisions. Then they need back-up from me before entering into discussions with their group members.”

Tina gives an example from the previous week in which she was a bit stricter than normal as she demanded results soon. She talks happily of being unaware of the actual actions taken but the results have been improving.

She says that she is doing her best at improving the atmosphere in managing her group managers. She states that the approach should focus more on future activities rather than on looking back and evaluating possible mistakes and tasks left undone. She gives numerous examples of how she tries her best to assist her group managers in their challenges and how she uses different kinds of methods with each of them. However, if the agreed-upon actions to be taken are not taken immediately, she explains how she cannot help interfering, although she knows that it is not the right approach.

“It is my way of showing that things are not working out. Instead of acting like this, I should be able to explain more clearly my expectations.”

She wonders whether she has become too negative by accident or by her own stupidity. She tells how her supervisor delivers her a note every week about the tasks left undone. She states that the process starts completely from the wrong end. She also wonders
whether she has also been hiding behind Excel instead of openly discussing with her employees as she used to. She knows that the focus should not be on being afraid of making mistakes; instead, they should concentrate more on being genuinely happy as they see improvements taking place. She has organised smaller groups in her branch to work as think tanks in order to improve the atmosphere even more and create a feeling of togetherness as they solve the challenges together. She proudly talks about the progress they have made. She states that her predecessor created a totally horrible atmosphere in the branch. Here she makes a clear division between herself and the previous branch manager and by this self–other separation constructs herself as a more humane manager.

“I have succeeded in bringing this new drive in to my branch, which used to resemble a public institution. From the moment of my arrival, the pace and rhythm changed here. We are more customer-orientated, we are active and glad when we succeed and we are not afraid of making mistakes all the time.”

She calls herself a “lonely wolf”, who hardly ever contacts her supervisor, and she does not like to be constantly forced to report to him either. Fortunately, he has, most of the time, stayed back. However, she has been missing feedback because she describes herself as someone who gets turned on by positive and gets extra drive from negative feedback. Tina explains that she likes to make rather short-term plans, shorter than she presumably should, because she thinks that she has to take a stand many issues rather ad hoc without having time to reflect properly. She says that she is unable to make the long-range plans that the senior management expects from her.

The way Tina describes her approach seems rather unsystematic as she “senses the trends” in her hometown. She describes herself as different from the others, which makes her proud; she does not analyse the numbers; she talks to her personnel instead. However, she has started to feel the pressure to transform her management style into something similar to that of her colleagues because she does not want to stand out too much.

“Maybe I am an odd bird who has her own ways of doing things. I am not saying that my approach is better than others because there are so many possible styles by which to lead. My way is trying to sense the trends and walking around.”

Tina seems to suffer because she is not able to lead through her own example, the way she knows how. She talks about how she is forced to lead through numbers, of which she is not a huge fan; instead, she would like to search for reasons for changes in performance indicators of her branch from the actions taken there. Therefore, she walks around and discusses with her employees. She calls herself a “weirdo” and explains how she has made efforts to analyse the numbers because she knows that it is expected from her. It is not a natural way for her to operate, although she is aware of how her close colleagues use the numbers. Here, she constructs herself through self–other talk using the “not me” position as she compares herself to her colleagues. For her, the most important knowledge is that which tells the direction the branch is headed towards.

“I try my best to learn this Excel-management which is thought so highly of in this culture.”

Tina is not eager to benchmark with her colleagues on a regular basis because she does not want to tie her hands in any way. One of her closest colleagues has tried to get her to agree
to try things together in their branches, but she has usually refused. She mentions some colleagues with whom she likes to interact at times. She defends herself by pointing out that everyone has a personal way of leading. Tina explains how she manages a "controlled chaos" in her branch because she wants to be aware of everything that is going on in her branch. She is certain that many people do not understand the ways she spends her days.

“I am really poor in delegating and saying no. One of the cornerstones of my management style is real-time information on even the smallest details that are going on in my branch. I am aware of what each individual advisor is working on. Of course, I understand that this is poor delegating. I should be able to trust my group managers' assessments more.”

Tina reveals the tendency to go too deep into people’s worries as her challenge. She talks about how her employees come into her office to sit down and tell her about their worries at home or at work. For her, this provides an opportunity to support them but also makes her job demanding if she has to make tough decisions. She constructs herself as torn between hard-core business values and empathy. This closeness with her employees also creates other kinds of problems as they bypass their direct supervisors and come to meet with Tina instead. The employees also tend to ask for her assistance in customer meetings rather than going to their group managers. For Tina, the reasons for this are obvious: firstly, her background as an expert and secondly, the obvious reluctance of the group managers to engage in customer meetings.

One source of struggle is her loss of her position as an expert in her new role. She enjoyed her status as an expert, and now she calls herself a general manager. However, according to her narrative, she has not given up her expertise in practice yet because she takes an active part in customer meetings and consults her employees. Her way of wandering around ad hoc and having conversations with the advisors makes her more approachable. Tina talks about how she is often asked to participate in customer meetings due to her known expertise and due to the group managers’ dislike of doing so. Tina justifies her need to interfere in pointing out her superior competence level compared to that of her group managers. However, her branch is so large that she has no time to handle operational duties in addition to her other responsibilities. She also compares herself with her group managers and, by placing herself as superior; she downgrades them, although her feelings are ambiguous.

“The customer meetings are a good example. Their own supervisor won’t engage in them, and so they ask me instead. This comes from the fact that they are aware of my background. Other supervisors don’t like to participate in customer meetings; it’s not natural for them and that negative feeling can be sensed in the meeting.”

She describes herself as a “people person” and mentions that one of her group managers is keener regarding numbers. She sees that he complements her pretty well because he has such strong analytical skills. They usually end up at the same conclusions using different methods. Here, Tina constructs herself through using a self–other comparison, saying that she is a more humane manager and excuses her lack of analytical skills again by this same self–other identification. She gives an example of attempting to take a more analytic approach in a meeting, which appeared to her to be hiding behind the numbers.
“The same goes with this X (problem that needed solving in her branch). I showed Excel sheets to people and explained what activities are being followed-up on, and I got the feeling that this approach does not help us at all. Showing these Excel sheets does not help us make any progress.”

Finally, through many twists the narrative breaks down as Tina first admits that she has tried to learn to analyse the numbers and secondly reveals her lack of analytic skills. She is no doubt a people person, but it is also used here as a way to distract the attention away from the numbers side. However, she has a group manager who is a numbers wizard and who is able to deliver the needed analysed numbers for her and hence free her time to take a softer approach.

When I ask about her thoughts about being in the middle, she states that it is not her job to question the strategic direction taken. When we enter into discussion on the profit centre structure, she says that she does not have much room to act independently, and the time frame in which the results are measured is too short. She also feels that the concepts and models to be implemented are restraining. She would like to push through changes faster, but says that she has been taught by older colleagues that there is no point in rushing things. She says rather laconically that her role is to do as told. She finds this non-motivating. However, she is certain that the room to manoeuvre will increase as the performance level rises. She describes in detail how her branch has made a huge turnaround and is now more successful and that their image with the customers has also improved.

“I feel that my feet are not yet firmly on the ground, but I have a little bit more room to manoeuvre.”

Tina knows what is expected from her and has made an effort to act accordingly. She also stated during our conversation that she has new ideas on how to move forward with the challenges concerning her group managers. She has also started to spend some time looking deeper into the indicators and drawing conclusions there. For Tina, our encounter offered a chance for her to say her feelings out loud and to come up with possible solutions. She has realised that she is no longer the same, but not yet entered into her new self either as she tries to figure out which way to go.

So summarise, Tina’s narrative was somehow a sad one because she has entered the Bank as energetic, but appears to be losing that energy. She is not converted and sees her position in the middle as challenging, especially due to the demands coming at her constantly from her supervisor. Tina likes working with people, but the new profit centre logic with its new reports is not something she is comfortable with. This narrative can be categorised as regressive due to large negativity and no signs of changing the situation for the better. The liminality in Tina’s narrative is constructed as a perpetual one. She makes comparisons between herself and others as well between old and new, although the old signifies here her former employer and not the prior organisational phases of the Bank.
4.3.2 “No praise nor appreciation” (Iris)

Iris is in her forties and entered the Bank from another banking group. She recalls how her former colleagues stated that she had lost her mind when she announced she was leaving to Postipankki. She wanted to talk about her background and experience right from the start because, according to her, it brings perspective to discussions. Her career as a branch manager has not always been a walk in the park for Iris, and she talks in detail about hardships and how she has tried to act as humanely as possible in difficult situations. Iris is currently responsible of a small branch in urban multi-branch area.

Iris has experience from another banking group but does not make many comparisons between her old and current employer. She wants to make it clear right from the start that she belongs to the successful branch managers but as she goes along, the narrative becomes controversial. There is a strong sense of liminality, of being in the middle and getting on with multiple parties while having contradictory demands placed on her yet with no one to offer a shoulder or gives her praise.

“We (her branch) succeeded last year, but this year has been more or less a struggle. I reckon that top management does not understand what it takes to manage a branch.”

The practices of liminality in her narrative are multiple reflections as she sees the need to change in order to fit the image of a branch manager. She has gotten recognition from her supervisor as an independent actor, which does not please her because, for her, it means an excuse not to keep in touch on a regular basis. Although Iris has started to wonder about her new role, she is deep in the state of liminality, which becomes noticeable from the multiple conflicted comments she makes. In her narratives there are self–other identity constructions explicitly present, such as the comparison between herself and her ignorant boss, and some in which the other is not implied so clearly, such as the other branch managers in her region who demand more attention from her supervisor.

“When I talk with him (with regional manager), I can get answers, but he doesn’t know that there are so many unused resources in me. Partly, this stems from his large region with over 20 branch managers and in which some are rather new and require more of his attention.”

She describes her start in Postipankki as a cultural shock, whereas today she is pleased to be exactly where she is. She uses a lot words like “professional pride” and “self-confidence”. Iris wants to talk about all her previous positions in the Bank in detail before entering into a discussion on branch management. For me, it appears as if it were important for her to construct herself as a true banker and a professional right from the beginning of our discussion. She wants to point out that she was not quite aware of what she was getting involved with when she was appointed to branch manager position. Through this introduction, she paved the way for telling a success story of how she was able to transform the branch completely.

Iris states that she is committed to the Bank and feels herself proud to be working in the Bank. When she started in Postipankki, she wondered at the lack of professional pride in the Bank, whereas today the pride is self-evident.
“... luckily, the CEO won’t let people get into these kinds of (negative) thoughts and has really pushed us forward. I get distressed if people are not proud of their employer and work in general. In order to be able to sell one's own ideas to work colleagues or customers in a convincing manner, one has to be proud and confident. . . .”

Iris explains how she is at the moment coaching her new group manager, who has no prior managerial experience. She acknowledges that the biggest dilemma is her ability to give space to her group manager. Iris constructs herself as a dominating person who easily leaves others in the shadows. She also points out that her group manager has to step up herself and take charge. On the other hand, she states how she will always be involved with the daily sales management because she has no idea what she would do if that responsibility were delegated completely to someone else. Here, she constructs herself as contradictory because she struggles with the new organisational structure and her ability to give the necessary room and support to her group manager. She does not consider her new group manager as a suitable discussion partner yet due to her lack of experience and their rather new relationship. Here she justifies not giving room to her group manager because of her insufficient skills.

“...It will be challenging to find suitable roles for us both to be happy.”

Iris describes how she talks with almost all her employees many times a week as they come to sit in her office. It is important for her that they feel welcomed and are able to talk about what is bothering them at work or at home. She speaks in detail about the arrangements she has made in her branch in order for her staff to feel welcome and to work more conveniently in times of personal troubles. She hates too much conceptualising and the “McDonald’s culture” and wants to implement only the models she believes in. This has been possible so far because her branch has performed well. However, she points out how good these models are for new branch managers, but she describes herself as much more experienced and one who knows best herself how to proceed. She constructs herself as so competent that there is no need for her to follow the set guidelines, whereas they are good for new branch managers. This is in contradiction with her statement about her respect for the current management and the strategic direction.

I wondered whether I should put this narrative into the conversion or de-conversion stories. Iris makes positive remarks about the top management on many occasions and about the direction taken. By this, she is referring to the “big picture”, but she does buy the conceptualisations on a practical level. The next quotation is taken from a rather messy part of our discussion in which she wonders about the pros and cons of concepts from her perspective and from the perspective of her younger and less experienced colleagues.

“Conceptualising kills creativity. It has both positive and negative elements. It is a support for new branch managers, but it can also be distressing. . . . I don’t believe them (concepts) to be miracle makers. . . . I have to be committed to the management style of the Bank. Otherwise, I couldn’t be here and get paid.”

Iris sees that there is not enough understanding that the branches are in different phases and that they are not getting much support to make things happen. The regional managers are busy most of the time and, at times, not even interested in issues going on in the
branches. After making this statement, Iris comments that she is talking on a general level and not about her experiences. Then she goes into wondering about the role of the regional management and their possible lack of taking responsibility. When the discussions turn back to Iris, she says that she has not actually wanted support and is a rather independent actor. However, at the end of our conversation she tells that she has missed discussions with her supervisor because there are not that many people she can share her thoughts with like with him. She wonders whether she is now paying the price of appearing independent and is thus left alone. These ambiguous comments make her story contradictory.

“I hoped for an independent job and he (the regional manager) also noticed this right from the start. He noticed this characteristic in me and stated that I am that sort of branch manager who does not need much of his support and that I am able to make decisions on my own.”

She wants appreciation from regional managers and doubts their competence. She is not sure about their input business-wise, and she does not receive positive feedback when she achieves good results. She explains how her branch reached number one in national rankings, but her supervisor did not react to this at all. She complains about her supervisor’s lack of giving praise and congratulating. She is certain that he does not understand his role as an example in showing how to manage and lead people. This makes her wonder how the regional manager expects her to be able to be supportive and manage with her own example when she is being led like this. Then she thinks that maybe he does not contact her because he is aware that everything is in order. She constructs herself as opposite to him as a supervisor: an empathic and warm person who takes care of her staff like a mother lion of her young.

“The branch managers have to be independent these days. If for some reason someone was in need of support from the regional manager, it could be the wrong time because he might be busy or not interested at all.”

Iris sees the profit centre structure as artificially built, and she keeps giving multiple examples about how it is not working in reality. She then compares herself to entrepreneurs and sees a huge difference there because she does not have nearly as much freedom. Iris says that it is about time to discuss the profit centre structure really honestly and to find suitable ways to measure the performance of the branches. She admits that she is lazy and does not even have time to analyse the figures. Sometimes she checks them, but she describes herself as being out of her comfort zone with these numbers indicating performance. Iris masters her language use and finds ways to go around the new skills needed in order to manage the profit centre. She describes her close connections with her employees. However, as the narrative proceeds, it breaks down eventually into the lack of competence needed in this new situation. She admits that she should develop her skills to become stronger number-wise. She likes making sales and suddenly also characterises herself as an entrepreneur in spirit. For her, it is about the commitment to the Bank.

“We all have different kinds of backgrounds and everyone has strengths and weaknesses. I have to develop myself in the banking business logic and become more interested in numbers.”
She does not have much time to keep in touch with her colleagues. She also mentions how she knows many people from the headquarters and thus has a direct connection to the “nerve centre” if she is in need of consultation. She tells how at times she bypasses her supervisor and contacts the headquarters directly. She sees this kind of behaviour, boldness and the ability to take responsibility, as justified because it is expected from her as a branch manager. She sees herself as being under a lot of pressure because the management demands results as soon as possible while she is at the same time balancing trying not to exhaust her employees completely in delivering the results. She points out that they all have personal lives as well; she also has a family at home.

For her, it seems that branch managers are expected to have super powers because the job is demanding in so many ways and one may be sacked just like that. She has witnessed many of her colleagues being laid-off and is thus genuinely worried about how ruthless the game is. She portrays herself as “holding the fragile house of cards together” and possibly being sacked at any time without prior warning. This kind of position shows signs of perpetual liminality because there is a constant fear of the future. She enjoys her work, but wonders about the price she is paying not being at home with her children earlier in the evenings. However, she adds that these softer issues are taboo and not discussed openly. She wonders whether she is a fool for working such long days.

“The game is quite ruthless in the sense that I am giving 110% of myself and the price of it can be that it wasn’t enough. ... This is tough business, actually the toughest one at the moment.”

She justifies the late hours to herself through describing banking as a tough business in which everything one has is needed in order to succeed.

To summarise, Iris’s narrative identity, she get eventually constructed as de-converted. She on the one hand, states explicitly out-load being converted, but on the other hand, does not want to implement the actual changes that come along in practice. For Iris, the new organisational structure and procedures are annoying. For the most part, the focus in her narrative s on things that should have taken place but did not, such as praise from her manager. Being in the middle and taking orders is not easy for her. Hence, there is a lot of negativity in the air. Liminality is constructed deeply in her narrative and due to unsolved situations; the storyline appears to be regressive. Iris seems to be in search of herself as a branch manager at the moment in many ways as she attempts to become the branch manager that is expected – one who understands the business logic solidly.

4.4 Senior survivors

These two narratives have more pessimistic and negative attitudes and feelings towards the strategic issues. For senior survivors, the realisation of the current situation has happened through revelation or dawning, but the direction is the opposite than in the previous ones as the actors long for the past, dislike the present and have even more concerns for the future; hence, they are de-converted in their narratives. The longing for the past and disliking of the current situation and the possible future ahead are the building blocks of these narrative identities. The liminality is thus deeper than transitional, and hence, the perpetual nature of it derives from multiple sources.
However, despite of the de-conversion and perpetual liminality these narratives are progressive: Charles is going to follow his morals regardless of his career, and Henry has been given more room to manoeuvre due to his seniority. Henry also copes with constructing himself superior to his supervisor and headquarters experts, which gives him the needed drive. Neither of them respects their supervisors, which makes them nostalgic and long for “the good old days”. However, particularly Henry makes many comparisons between him and others and centres himself in the middle of liminality. I call them survivors, because they have been involved in multiple organisational and strategic changes in their careers and they have been able to keep up with the younger ones, such as the busy businessmen, who at times even ridicule and downgrade them.

4.4.1 “There is a mismatch between values” (Charles)

Charles has a long career in banking, although in another banking group. Charles is not far from retirement, which obviously influences his storytelling. He has worked in the same medium-sized branch for several years in urban multi-branch area. He begins the interview by bringing his background to light: “I am from Bank X originally”. He has had a long and prestigious career in banking. The biggest issue turning this particular narrative into a de-conversion story is the emphasis put on profit-making in the Bank. Although Charles enjoys making sales, this is constructed as unnecessary greediness to him. The mismatch between his and the Bank’s values could also be understood as transitional liminality: the profit-making mind-set as part of his new responsibilities. However, the consequences go deeper than this and the whole strategic direction and emphasis on shareholder value is too much to take. In other words, Charles likes meeting customers and making sales, but somehow the business side with profit-making demands is too much for him. He constructs himself as someone with higher morals than the senior management, who has set the targets and the direction.

His long career gives him perspective to look back and make comparisons. However, he does not make comparisons between Postipankki and Sampo Bank; instead, his focus is on comparing the Bank and his former employer. Although there are comparisons made between the old and new, this narrative belongs to perpetual liminality. The contradictions started out such a long time ago, and he states that he has felt his role inconvenient in the Bank from the start. In addition, the self–other comparisons made between him and the Bank through moral statements can be interpreted as signals from deeper perpetual liminality.

“There is a mismatch between values. If we reach a set target, a new one will be set immediately. This has gotten harder for the employees. We are under constant surveillance and we must deliver results. The supervisor’s duty is to keep the spirit up... This means creating a positive atmosphere and at times showing appreciation. In the old days, it was possible to gather around a table to chat for a while, but not any longer.”

As Charles reflects, he states that almost his entire career has been a constant change, which has made him hardened to changes. He has not liked many of the changes because they have created in him a feeling of inadequacy. For him, it appears as if the people have been forgotten completely in the pursuit of maximising profits. In the following quotation,
he shares his feeling about the changes, but almost proudly states that he is still here regardless of all the hassle.

“At times it feels that nothing is enough and changes come one after another. I am not able to analyse the impact of the changes to my management, but the organisational system has been bouncing back and forth. Sometimes I feel like this, but I am still hanging on.”

Still, he feels that there is not enough time to reflect and analyse because the pace is so fast. For Charles, it seems as if the Bank would be “trimmed” in order to be sold soon, if someone were to pay a suitable price.

“The pace is so fast that at times it feels that people are not appreciated because everything is targeted to profit maximizing. In my opinion, there should be at least some amount of humanity involved. This business is rather tough these days.”

The profit centre model is already familiar to him from his previous employer. The transformation to the profit centre model does not for some reason make him feel more at home at all. He simply states that “I know the drill already from Bank X.” He portrays himself in the middle as “just a pawn”. The title is the same as before, “branch manager”, but he sees himself as “just a shop manager”.

His supervisors have been coming and going, and for the most part, they have all been distant and mainly focused on giving negative feedback. He has at times wanted more support, but luckily, he has been able to turn to his closest colleagues. Charles dislikes the accountability he has to the regional manager. He explains how he has to report to him on regular basis and come up with reasons if his branch has fallen behind. The situation has gotten even tighter because his new just-appointed supervisor wants, according to Charles, to “show what he is made of”. For him, all the talk about independence is empty words because the targets are given and he has no say. Charles would like to have a say in target setting, but that does not belong to the duties of middle management. However, when we enter into the discussion on the actions taken in order to meet the targets, he admits that there is a lot of room to decide how to proceed.

“My supervisor has changed almost every second year over the last 10 years. If I had needed support, I wouldn’t have gotten it from the regional manager because they have always been so distant . . . sometimes I would have wanted some support and discussion, but I felt that we certainly can get the blame (if targets are not reached), but not support. I have not experienced that.”

Overall, it appears that not everything is wrong. On the one hand, he sees himself as “just a pawn”, but on the other hand, he sees that he has some flexibility to organise things locally. It seems to depend on the exact issue under discussion. In other words, he does not feel he has a say in target setting, but he sees that he has some independency to choose the actions by which to reach the set targets.

Charles talks a lot about his employees and sees his role mainly as a leader, whose role is to show the right direction in which to head. His main duties are training his sales advisors and making sure that the atmosphere stays positive. He talks about how he walks around in his branch and has several unofficial discussions every day in addition to the official pre-scheduled weekly meetings. He characterises himself as a “natural born salesman” and says
how sales skills cannot be learned. He also talks about his approach to sales management and how it is his duty to demand results, but he tries to be as positive as he possibly can. The deputy manager’s responsibilities are mainly HR-issues and the functioning of the daily operations. Hence, they have not entered yet into a new organisational structure in which he should delegate part of his sales managerial duties to his deputy manager.

His employees are everything to him, and as he talks about their get-togethers in private time, it becomes obvious how deeply he cares for his employees. Sometimes they go to the theatre and other times bowling. He says proudly that usually almost everyone participates. Charles therefore gives the impression of an old-school paternalistic manager, firstly because he has tight control over his branch, and he has not delegated any power, and secondly, because his concern for the well-being of his personnel reaches way beyond what is expected.

“We have gathered together informally at the race track, bowling and so on. Then, once month we do something fun together such as go to movies. Someone always comes up with something to do together. Then, once a year we do something bigger and sometimes the spouses have also been invited.”

Charles wants to point out how everyone’s input is needed for success and how they all are in it together. The closeness of the employees and the warm atmosphere is especially important for Charles. He talks of how he enjoys coming to work and being surrounded by people: his employees and customers. There are two dimensions in his narrative: the “evil” business side and the “good” people side, which are separated sharply. It appears that he is able to leave the profit-making aside and concentrate on people on a daily basis. It is the people and the close ties with them that keep him ticking.

“... I like to go to work in the mornings and also leave in the evenings. Being surrounded with people gives me a lot of pleasure, and I have liked this lot.”

He wonders why he is still standing, because so many of his colleagues have already fallen due to the changes and demands. As I listen to Charles, it seems that he is at the same time disappointed with the current emphasis on profitability and happy to be working in his branch with the people he likes and thinks highly of. He contradicts his own values and the values of the Bank in his language use indirectly as he criticises the need to bring shareholder value. He portrays himself as Don Quixote who fights against the windmills, which is an impossible task. He says laconically that if there comes a time when he has to lay-off people, he will leave the scene. Charles seems to be able to pull himself off as a survivor stating that if things get too tough, he will leave on his own initiative. He could be well characterised as a man of honour whose words can be trusted.

To summarise, Charles’s narrative identity constructs as him being uncomfortable in the middle. His uneasiness has continued ever because he entered the Bank and the changes started. He has not felt at home in the Bank at all because he sees the focus as being too much on profit. Hence, this narrative has multiple implications of de-conversion. The possibility of working with people, both customers and employees, has been a positive side for him and remained so over the years. Being a part of middle management does seem to be an issue, aside from the reporting duties to his new supervisor. This narrative is different from others because although Charles is concerned, he is near to retirement and can step out from the game soon. Charles is committed to his morals, and hence, this
narrative can be taken as progressive due to its decisive nature. Unique in the narrative of Charles was a strong identification with the organisation in which he had worked such a long time ago. For him, keeping his integrity and being able to follow his morals appears to be everything. He is fully aware of the expectations put on him, but he will not be able to fulfil them if he wants to remain true to himself.

4.4.2 “Things are getting too fragmented” (Henry)

Henry, in his fifties, has had a long career in banking, but he comes originally from another banking group, which constantly comes up during our discussion as he makes comparisons between the Bank and his previous employer. Now he is managing a small branch in rural area. When we enter into the discussion about various organisational phases, he comments right away that Postipankki was not a real bank or a competitor at all. He tells as an example of how other local branch managers gathered into a meeting on regular basis, but no one from Postipankki was invited to join. He also points out that in the eyes of the customers, Postipankki was not considered a bank either. For him, an important part of duties comes from being active in local networks and representing the Bank, which he has continued as a branch manager in Sampo Bank and its processors. This and the local politics is something he likes to talk about in detail. It seems that the branch managers belong to the local elite in his hometown.

“Postipankki was never a bank because it did not function as a bank is supposed to function. . . . But the argumentation for Postipankki not being a real bank was mainly in my own head because before entering into it, I did not have prior experience with it, and I did not have to compete with it (while working for the former employer) in any kind of real way. At first I got the feeling that it was not a real bank.”

The main theme in his storytelling is how he sees his duties becoming more and more fragmented. He describes how he handles a dozen duties simultaneously, and the process is like sitting on a “merry-go-round”. Henry states that the idea seems to be that doing multiple small tasks will eventually lead to a bigger unit as a result. Earlier, in his old duties, it was the other way around for him because he was responsible for the “big picture”. He had the liberty to decide what steps to take to get there. In recent years, there have been more and more duties added onto branch managers’ shoulders, and nothing has been taken off to balance the situation. Henry says that he can feel the pressure coming from above, although it is officially stated otherwise.

“I have always tried to prioritise and concentrate on the most crucial issues and see what it takes to reach the set targets – in other words, what to focus on and what to leave out.”

However, Henry sees that he has room to manoeuvre due to his long experience because he does not always do as he is told. He explains how he does not follow all the top-down procedures and only follows the ones that suit him. This kind of behaviour has made him see himself as a bit more independent. In addition, the years of experience have taught him not to believe everything coming from above. He makes comparisons between himself and
younger branch managers, who as novices are not able or courageous enough to make independent decisions and therefore act as dictated.

However, he cannot say whether his duties are more demanding or less demanding today because there have always been challenges to be tackled. He constructs himself as “swimming upstream” because he still wants to know the bigger picture and figure out what it demands before getting into smaller details. He quite clearly states that the experts in the headquarters are not fully aware of the daily practices and situations in the branches. For him, this creates stress and tension because he feels that he is expected simply to implement and not question anything.

Henry has been an active member in the development projects, and through this, he constructs a different image of himself. His voice is filled with pride as he tells how some of the just-implemented models and reports have been “their insights” from the project groups. For him, these projects have been opportunities to broaden his horizon and have assured him even more that the people in the headquarters totally lack practical understanding. He says that he is now able to speak their language fluently, which constructs them as being from another planet. However, the situation has been improving a bit since Postipankki. His participation in the development projects has thus a dual meaning for him: the possibility to have an impact as he proudly says and to be able to witness the ignorance of the headquarters experts concerning the day-to-day practicalities in branches.

“They (the projects) have been eye-opening for me because they give perspective to comprehend the language used and the background of the people (from the headquarters). Due to these projects which I have been involved in, I am able to understand what is important and leave out what is not. At times I have gotten the feeling that my younger colleagues are being bossed around because they take everything for real . . . no matter how open-minded I try to be, I see that certain procedures do not work and never will.”

He feels that the best way a supervisor can support branch managers is to give them freedom because the regional managers are not in touch with the daily operational business. In his former duties in another bank, the situation was totally different because everyone followed the same career path — even the top management. Today, discussions with one’s supervisor can be frustrating if the supervisor persistently wants to pursue certain concepts and models designed to work in average branches. Henry feels that it depends purely on luck whether they work or not. From time to time, he looks at the numbers and understands the logic behind them; in his opinion, they have been invented to motivate the branch managers to take on more responsibility.

Henry has a group manager who has needed quite a bit of assistance, especially in the beginning, managing a satellite branch in another city. He has been giving her support, but things have started to flow without his constant follow-up. Mentoring and teaching his group manager the needed skills has been a real eye-opener for him because his new group manager entered the Bank from another industry. Henry is the only supervisor in the branch in which he is physically situated on a daily basis. He wanted to hire a group manager, but his supervisor stated that Henry has the needed skills himself. He feels that he has a bit too much responsibility on his shoulders as he tries to manage to get everything done.
“In reality, I would have liked to have hired a deputy manager, which should have been recruited from outside and then he (regional manager) commented that I can do it by myself because all the advisors are really experienced ones and do not need so much managing.”

The relationship with his supervisor is not easy because, although Henry enjoys senior status, he has not been able to convince his boss to give him the liberty to recruit a deputy manager to assist him. Because his branch is situated in two different geographical locations, and his group manager is physically situated in another branch, he attempts to manage everything in his main branch alone. This “merry-go-round” situation makes him feel uneasy and a bit frustrated because he is not getting buy-in for his ideas. Somehow, the attitude of his supervisor is understandable for him because his boss has had diverse career development and has not ever occupied the role of branch manager, which was the case with his former employer. In the good old days, he was able to have a decent conversation with his supervisor due to similar kinds of backgrounds.

“In X Bank (former employee), the colleagues were professionals and the supervisors have all previously been branch managers as well. The discussions were about mundane daily activities, and there was no need to explain every minor detail because they had been there as well. . . . No one followed up on the actions taken if the business was going well.”

In Henry’s narrative, the past is constructed as a much better situation in many ways. He feels that he had to construct his image all over again as he joined the Bank. The source of the trouble is his perception that things could be better. Henry is portrayed as critical towards the Bank as well towards the expected role of the branch managers in the current organisation. The so-called ideal branch manager role, which was constructed in his narrative, is not sufficient for him because he wants to be more than someone who is in charge of local implementation. Although he reflects, I am not sure whether these reflections are able to help his uncomfortable situation.

It is interesting how Henry speaks of how his duties would have gotten more fragmented if he had not been so alert. He paints a picture of himself as someone who is not willing to accept knowledge that is too pre-digested; instead, it is crucial for him to comprehend the big picture. The profit centre structure is familiar to him from another bank and does not raise any particular feelings of excitement in him, and he sees it purely as a tool targeted to motivate branch managers to working harder almost as a “conspiracy within top management”. He paints himself smarter and more experienced than his supervisors and the experts at the headquarters. He claims that his and his personnel’s jobs are more complex than is understood.

“This is not an insurance organisation as X (from the headquarters) thinks, in which the advisors are purely salesmen. Instead, this is a much more complex business.”

To summarise, Henry’s narrative identity, he seems to have a calm attitude towards changes as they come and go. However, overall his narrative appears as de-converted one. This narrative is characterised by perpetual liminality of being in the middle. However, he has invented “tools” to come in terms with it at some level. He decides which procedures to implement and which to ignore. Henry has, like Ben, participated in development
projects to broaden his responsibilities and gain respect. Henry gets constructed as someone who has been in perpetual liminality for quite some time. However, although he is not pleased, his narrative is understood as progressive. He seems to be the “man of the house” and makes the final call, which pleases him a great deal.

4.5 Poker faces

These stories are categorised as conversion stories, which lack “the hype”. There is no passion towards the organisational changes in them, but neither is there negativity. The poker faces purely describe the state of affairs as something ordinary without excitement and as business as usual. Whether this is something purely constructed with me or the description of the actual situations is irrelevant because the focus is on language use through discursive practices. They see nothing major as having happened, and hence, there are no signs of liminality present in their storytelling. The major changes had been their own career transitions regardless of the organisational phase. The name “poker faces” suits these branch managers because although they express emotions, they don’t consider the latest changes as having a large impact on them. Especially Leo does not want to reveal much about him and keeps his guard up.

4.5.1 “Changes are business as usual” (Fiona)

Fiona has been working in the branch network her entire career, and she was near her sixties at the time of the interview. Fiona is responsible of a medium-sized branch in large multi-branch area. For the most part, Fiona told about her career in the Bank and how in general she saw changes coming and going as part of the business. In this narrative, there are no indicators of liminality; on the contrary, Fiona seemed serene and calm and did not worry about the future too much. Her narrative could be characterised as the most balanced of them all, maybe even overly balanced, so it makes me wonder whether this could have been a masquerade instead of genuine comments. She changed branches frequently throughout her history but has gradually slowed down the pace. As a young woman, she would not have even imagined that she would someday be a branch manager. Fiona’s approach is humble, and she does not make a big deal about herself.

“I am extremely grateful to the Bank that I was able to start out as a summer intern and advance from there.”

She characterises herself as someone who has been needed to fix things in branches, and, just as things start to run smoothly, she is called to pick up new challenges. Leaving has always been an emotional situation for her because she has developed close ties with her employees. These transfers have also made her look at herself from a different perspective each time she started work with new people and with new tasks. She has been fascinated by the possibility of showing new sides of herself. She constructs herself as someone who has been able to come out as a winner against all odds as she tells how nobody supported her in the beginning. She even states that she was fortunate to have males as her supervisors and colleagues because it enabled her to understand the practical issues. Although she does
not say it out loud, she implies that these males were concentrating more on being managers and the status that came along with it.

“I couldn’t even imagine being a branch manager someday. My main motive was to learn everything possible, and I was really interested in everything going on in the branches. I was not afraid to take things up. Luckily, I had these guys as my supervisors and colleagues, which enabled me to concentrate on the daily operative activities in the branches.”

She mentions that she was forced to apply for her own position three times due to various strategic phases, but overall, it appears that the changes in her personal career have had a more radical impact on her than the larger changes in the Bank. She has a positive attitude towards the future as the secret behind her success.

“... the basic business has remained the same ... somehow we have to be able to keep things simple and not make banking something it's not. We have taken big steps, but the actual outcomes regarding, for example, management have been rather minor.”

Fiona talks about the turn-around process, which normally entails 5 steps forward and then 10 steps back. The most important thing is not to lose faith in reaching the set targets eventually. She feels it important to remember to take into account the human aspects as well as one pushes through radical changes. She speaks in detail about how she together with her staff was able to transform her current branch to perform well.

“When the last one was on board, we celebrated together and also acknowledged publicly our huge effort. I must admit that it's not always an easy and simple task to make things happen.”

She gets constructed as determined a woman who has the needed patience to make things happen. I am using the term “woman” here intentionally, because she identifies herself strongly as a woman. In the beginning of her managerial career, she was told she would be under extra surveillance together with other female colleagues. Her instant reply to this was: “Fine, but keep an eye on the actions of men also!” Fiona identifies herself strongly as a woman, which originates from the early stages of her career. This cast identity of being first and foremost a woman has stayed with her ever because.

At times Fiona has also wondered whether she would survive in another kind of environment than branch because she likes people and the fast pace. The “cherry on the sundae” has been the customers and being able to make their dreams come true. However, she has reflected on other career possibilities as well when the going got really tough and there were massive lay-offs. She has also tried to maintain her competence by reading professional magazines and management books and participating in seminars. The reading hobby is for her also a way to confirm that she is on the right track with her branch and the way she manages.

“I like to spend time reading everything possible concerning leadership and management and take seminars. My goal is to get fresh ideas or ideas which can confirm my belief that I am doing the right things.”
Fiona positions herself clearly in the middle, being responsible for implementing the strategies. She says that there is no point in fighting against the chosen direction; instead, the energy should be used on making it happen in her branch. She has noticed that it has been accepted that branches move in the right direction at different paces, depending their surroundings. She sees this acknowledgement as a positive change because she describes how at times branches have been expected to reach targets within the same time limits. Branch managers have to get their personnel on board to make things work in practice. She does not consider the centralised concepts which are to be implemented as limiting because there is still room for her to figure out how she is actually going to carry out the implementation process in practice. However, sometimes she wishes there were a few more practical considerations before dropping new models onto the branches.

“At times I have really wondered how to actually implement certain concepts within my branch because local adjustments have to be made. We have to consider how to fit new elements with already existing ones. These concepts have not always been thought through properly. I am not certain that people with practical knowledge have taken part in the planning process or if the concepts have been tested in any way. I know that most likely everything new encounters resistance, but this might decrease if the concepts were explained better before launching.”

When we enter into a discussion about her sense of freedom, she constructs herself as an independent actor. She is not certain whether she has been given the mandate or has at times just taken it. She is certain that the ability to take liberties also comes with age. For her, an integral part of being a branch manager comes from the courage to step up and take responsibility. She characterises herself as independent right from her childhood.

For Fiona, certain colleagues have proved valuable. She does not hesitate to call them and ask for consultation. They can talk about whatever comes up and support each other in difficulties. However, lately there has been less time to benchmark with colleagues because of the fast pace. She is certain that there is so much more that they could accomplish together. She blames the profit centre model for this because it forces managers to put all their energy into making sure that everything is running smoothly in their branches. She says that stress destroys creativity. Regardless of the support from colleagues, Fiona sees her job as a lonely one because, at the end of the day, she is the one whose neck is on the line. Fiona has also been active in the local social circles because they have given her perspective in addition to important connections. However, the challenge has been not to have too many commitments.

From the start, Fiona has been able to analyse all the possible numbers and statements available and is thus glad that they have been developing into more objective and reliable ones over the years. She sees that it is her duty to look at them in detail and then serve suitable “mouthfuls” to her staff. At times, she stays in her branch rather late in the evenings as she goes through the figures in private.

“I don’t want to exhaust my personnel with numbers, but they have to have updated knowledge of where the branch is headed compared to our neighbours as well as
nationally. My job is to serve these numbers and make suggestions on how to proceed and talk about possible scenarios and their impact on the numbers . . . at times; I look at the costs and comment that someone has been buying a lot of pencils (laughing).”

For her, it is important that she is the only “administrator” in the branch and that her group managers keep close touch with the customer front-line. She explains how she is coaching her young group manager to pick up managerial duties gradually because she does not want him to get burned out right from the start. She describes her role as the coach of the future branch manager. However, currently, he has few managerial duties because almost all of his time goes into customer meetings. Fiona mentions how this group manager has noticed the demanding nature of the branch management duties and is not ready to jump into her shoes yet.

Fiona also points out how important it is to be able to grow as duties change. She sees it being a typical habit for women to pick up new tasks but not drop old ones. She talks of how she has preceded along a classic career path for women, which implies a different kind of path for men other than starting from the operational level and moving gradually into managerial duties through to the junior management level. This practical background also has disadvantages because at times it has been hard to leave old duties behind as she has progressed in her career.

“There should be the ability to let go and understand that now these things are not part of my duties anymore. I am responsible for other kinds of tasks now.”

However, she has tried to make herself unnecessary because the branch has to function whether she is present or not. Fiona recalls how she was expected earlier on to be the number-one salesperson in her branch and then entered into the coach’s role. Today she is sometimes the best “knower” in branch meetings, and at other times she is being trained by the best knower. She likes to think herself as one of the staff. She is certain that the younger workers accept this, but it is harder for the older ones. For her, the world has changed, and branch manager status does not mean having a higher status than others. Fiona also points out how she tries to take everyone into account equally and make sure that no one is left out from social circles or gets exhausted under too heavy of a workload. She describes this as demanding because the employees’ job descriptions vary a great deal.

“My job is to bring my branch forward as a unified group . . . because otherwise people get exhausted if only certain people are at the centre of attention. I have heard that in some branches some advisors have gotten tired of feeling left out due to being the minority group (due to their job description). That shouldn’t happen even though people have different responsibilities. Making equality work in practice is a challenge.”

She is rather close to her retirement, which may be re-enforcing her reflections on her personal history in the Bank. Being a branch manager is more than she even dreamed of as a young girl, and the role of local implementer is fine by her. However, she takes a lot of liberties according to her statements and does not seem to worry about the consequences. On the other hand, she says she has an open relationship with her supervisor, and on many occasions she has consulted him before making the final call.
To summarise, Fiona’s narrative identity, she is satisfied with her current position in the middle and sees nothing extraordinary about the latest changes. Hence, this narrative entails no signs of liminality. This narrative is positive, but no emotional outbursts are present. This narrative can be labelled as converted or neutral. The largest changes from her perspective have been the ones in which she has progressed in her career and transferred branches. Yvonne is constructed as someone with a positive attitude and thus, the narrative is also taken to be progressive.

4.5.2 “Nothing special” (Leo)

Leo, in his fifties, has been a branch manager for years and appears rather calm. He is managing a large branch in urban multi-branch area. Leo’s narrative was the shortest, and it was told by far in the most straightforward manner of all the narratives. For Leo, keeping an image of a coherent identity and being on top of things is obviously important. It seems that he is careful with every word he says. Judging from his language use, he does not seem to let anyone close and likes to keep a distance. Although I asked clarifying questions, they did not lead me anywhere with him. Was his interview in vain, and is this narrative useful in anyway? I’m sure Leo had reasons why he talked the way he talked, although they remain a mystery to me. He kept his guard up and showed no emotions except when he was joking.

“A manager’s main duty is to become unnecessary and then move forward to new duties. For example if there is a huge operational transformation taking place and the manager handles it well, he is no longer needed there and he can take on new duties to handle . . . of course, he can leave as well . . . (laughter).”

Leo constructed the changes as a normal part of the business. For him, the possibility to work in an atmosphere surrounded by people and training them has been enjoyable. Although this narrative is categorised here as a neutral or slightly converted one, being in the middle is not a walk in the park. He states that he has taken some liberties along the way and has not always behaved by the book. For him, this is only natural due to his long experience. As an expert, he got joy from personal success, whereas today the greatest victories come from being able to achieve something together as a team. Here, he constructs himself as having transformed to fit his role as a branch manager.

The largest change for Leo has been the transformation from taking orders from customers to being part of a more proactive sales force. He also sees that his relationships with his employees are much closer today than in the “old days”. From his point of view, the profit centre model has not altered anything at all. He sees that the only thing that has changed is more reports to retrospectively look into. He characterises rather laconically his position in the middle. For him, it is the way it is, and there is nothing he can do about it.

“You put your mouth where the money is.”

He says harshly that there is no point in staying if he cannot accept the strategy. Next, he comments that many times there have been strategies that he has not quite fancied and thus has not pushed into practice with much force. Thus, his bold language use is contradictory, because he is still here and has not left, although he has considered some of the implemented strategies over the years as not making sense to him. He talks of how he
has not been restrained in any way and has proceeded as he wanted but was also careful to explain his reasoning to his supervisor.

“I don’t know whether I have had liberties, but I have done as I have wanted and haven’t felt restrained in any way. Of course, no one should cross the given mandate, but if I have done so, I have explained the reasons behind my actions.”

He likes to talk about how he spends his days in close interaction with his employees as he coaches them on improving customer meetings. He says that his main objective is to make himself unneeded. By this, he means that he can use his time for something else after the needed change in some procedure has been implemented successfully in his branch. He jokes around saying that of course he could also leave then. He has also been in an expert position, where success came through his own efforts, whereas now it is his whole branch that is needed to get things rolling into the right direction. He speaks of how he gets great pleasure when they accomplish something together as a branch.

I appreciate the achievements differently because we have accomplished them as a branch and not as individuals.

He reflects on how other people have viewed him. He is certain that even his close friends are not aware of all his duties over the years. He recalls how low the respect for branch managers was in the 90s when the banking crisis was happening. However, he talks of how he was able to keep up the spirit even as things were tough. Hence, he constructs himself as superficially easy-going, not caring about other people’s opinions, but actually seems to care quite a lot as he wonders how others have viewed him and if the images matched. In the next quotation, Leo reveals a softer side of himself as someone who cares about people. In this case, he refers to customers.

“How the outsiders appreciate . . . I am certain that many outsiders don’t even know about the duties in the Bank . . . they have just known that I work in the Bank. If I consider appreciation of branch managers in general . . . it was not high after the recession. I valued myself even during those times, although I was afraid to answer the telephone because I knew that customers had only sad news to tell.”

Leo sees his main duty as making the needed changes in his branch so that the new procedures run smoothly. In order or this to become a reality, he sees that creating a warm atmosphere so that people enjoy coming to work in the morning is also crucial. However, he sees this as a never-ending project because new procedures, models and products keep on coming all the time. His job means the world to him; he wants to point about that he has never been unemployed and has always transferred into a more challenging position. He talks in a swaggering manner of how he has never needed assistance in anything. He characterises himself as a “man who walks his own path” and who has not felt any restrictions. He wants to emphasise that he has followed all the rules and regulations, but he has coached his staff in his own way and not according to a certain concept. Overall, he constructs himself as an independent actor who has been able to manage well.

When we enter into a discussion of the groups in his branch, he says that he has not felt much change, whereas it has had a huge impact on his employees.
“It has been purely internal reorganising.”

I am persistent and keep on asking if there has been some incident that has been integral or meaningful for him, but he repeats:

“Nothing radical has happened. These job descriptions have changed, but no . . . personally I have not felt anything significant taken place.”

To summarise, Leo’s narrative identity was the most peculiar one because nothing major is said and everything emotional stays under the radar. Leo has no issues being in the middle and there are no signs of liminality either in his narrative. He explains his behaviour by the fact that he has been involved in so many situations in the Bank. He hardly commented on anything in particular. Therefore, this narrative has the same elements as the previous one (Fiona). The narrative structure can be evaluated as progressive due to its positivity and humour. Career-wise, Leo is also near retirement, which most likely has affected the way he sees the world.

4.5.3 “Experience teaches” (Yvonne)

Yvonne started her banking career right after graduating. Hence, now in her fifties, she has had a long experience in banking in various positions and is now managing a medium size branch in large urban multi-branch area. This narrative could be characterised as down to earth and with no emotional displays. Yvonne is not against the new direction, but is not one of the greatest believers either. I wondered about categorising this as one of the conversion stories because, compared to Simon and Ray, Yvonne lacks anticipation and the overly positive language use of those two gentlemen.

As becomes apparent, Yvonne makes multiple comparisons between herself and young people, not always to her younger colleagues, but in general. She also makes many comparisons between manager and expert duties by which she seems to construct her competence as a manager. These comparisons are not in any way signifying liminality because they come out mainly as vehicles to highlight Yvonne’s own seniority and superiority. However, her way of talking is not conceited; instead, her words are more humble in nature. She starts her story by explaining in detail the beginning of her career and how she finally ended up as branch manager. For her, it was an expected move in her career and she does not talk about in a dramatic manner. In addition, other changes have been a normal part of the business.

“I have not counted the number of CEOs during my career, not that many, but there have been some changes. The Bank has changed its name a few times and the management style has developed along the years . . . and the supervisory tasks have also been altered along the way – that’s obvious.”

For her, working together towards a common goal and feeling proud of one’s workplace are important. She seems to be puzzled over the differences between the generations. I am not familiar with the average age of her employees, but I guess there are some rather young ones because she mentions this as a challenge. I wonder if this is directed towards me as a much younger manager.
She makes many comparisons between today and the former Postipankki-times from a “big picture” perspective. She tells how the whole banking sector was lightly regulated. She wonders how much the changes in branch management have actually been affected by the market changes and how much is due to purely internal changes in the Bank. She states how there used to be employees in the branches with manager status without supervisory responsibility because they actually were experts such as lawyers. She speculates how many of them are left today, when different kinds of skills are needed than their expertise allowed. Here, she portrays herself as someone who has had the needed skills to become a branch manager, whereas those who are orientated more towards expert positions are short of a similar competence level.

“If you are still in business and started up in the 80s, the markets were totally different back in those days. Maybe some of those managers had competence and own interests directed to other tasks than leading people.”

She is certain that she could have the possibility to influence: just a word to the regional manager and she would be involved in all sorts of projects. However, she decided to leave the stage to the younger and eager ones because they might have fresher ideas.

She was appointed a new supervisor some time ago. Their relationship is rather distant because she does not feel the need for support. Being a branch manager means for her having the ability to confront up-coming issues alone. She also points out how the regional managers have been coming and going in recent years. She is quite sure that her supervisor would talk with her more frequently if she wanted, but she comments that he is a newcomer in his role and needs time to learn how things are done in the Bank. She feels that she and her colleagues were forced to manage on their own at first, and now it is the natural way to work. It is interesting how she describes her relationship with her new supervisor. From her perspective, it is her decision to stay back and “let the supervisor take the needed time to learn how things are done in the Bank”. Her perception of their difference in knowing the business procedures seems to give her leverage.

“We have been forced to function like this. We have also had some learning to do.”

“Somehow thinking about the role of the regional manager . . . I have been the manager in this branch for several years now, and I am not in need of any kind of help in operational management.”

She sees that it is the senior management’s duty to come up with the strategic direction and her duty to see that they match with her values. If there were to be a contradiction, she would not be able to carry on. She is also quite certain that if there was a mismatch, the Bank would not let her be responsible for the implementation. She characterises herself as a flexible person. Years back, she witnessed certain business models she did not feel comfortable with, but is glad that those were temporary solutions and were replaced fast. She has not been comfortable with all the conceptualisations because they have appeared a bit hasty to her, but overall she sees that all the small steps that are taken in the Bank lead towards the same strategic target.

“I am a part of the middle management in this organisation, and especially if we are talking about the stock-market listed companies, they have the top management to decide on the strategies. I have to see that these strategic directions are not against
my values because then I would not be able to carry on. I suppose the organisation would not let me work here anymore either. I am a realist. I have not confronted this kind of dilemma yet.”

She mentions briefly how she occasionally looks at the balance sheets and profit and loss statements but admits being aware that some of her colleagues are more active in that. She talks more about the daily operational tasks and events in her branch. She would be more eager if the figures could be trusted. It becomes evident that she is not against the new profit centre model but was not one of the first absorbers either. Then later she returns to this subject and explains how she usually goes through the main points from the reports in their branch meeting every month. She also proudly speaks of the actions they have taken in order to improve the results.

She has just delegated part of the sales management to her group manager. It seemed a natural step to take because her experienced group manager was ready to take more responsibility, and on the other hand, she also states that she is finally ready to take a step back and does not need to be aware of every single tiny detail in her branch. She explains how her “double sword management style” works in practice: she influences her employees directly and then she influences her group manager. The following quotation is one example of how Yvonne sees a difference between herself and her younger colleagues. She describes herself as someone who has passed through the phase of being a sales manager into more senior level duties.

“Maybe this has to do with experience. When you have been a manager long enough, there comes a time when you want to distance yourself a bit and give some trust. When I am having a discussion with my younger colleagues, I get the feeling that there is a need to be closer to the customer interface and know all the cases. I felt that X (the group manager) is highly experienced, and it would be a shame not to let her develop into sales manager.”

Yvonne tells how the years in managerial duties have changed her. She describes how a manager at first figures out her own approach and later on as a more experienced manager looks back and reflects on her own accomplishments. She confirms that she will not lose her nerve if they do not always reach their targets. She sees that the largest challenge is to be able to grow along with time and leave some duties behind as new ones come along. In addition, she talks on a general level about the important choice to be made of whether to become a manager or an expert. According to her, people should not be after fancy titles and status. She also explains that certain managerial duties demand accuracy, and it would be a shame if someone made the wrong choice. This talk emphasises how she sees the nature of branch management to be demanding. Here she constructs herself as someone who does not care about status or titles and is a thorough and careful manager as opposed to some others, who are not named in particular.

She states that it is ridiculous if a branch manager attempts to be the salesperson in her branch. She wonders why the manager is unable to coach others to do the same. Here she constructs clearly the main dilemma, which has been apparent in almost all narratives: the struggle of being in between the positions of expert and manager. Yvonne sees herself clearly as a manager who does not take part in the sales activities or sales management on daily basis. However, as a counter comment, she is also a bit afraid that she will lose touch with daily operational business and small details. She tries to balance between having some
kind of touch with the daily business and keeping sight of the bigger picture. She reveals the results from their job satisfaction survey in which the employees rated her as being on top of practical things. Hence, the cast identity differs from Yvonne's perception of herself, which is slightly modest concerning practical issues.

“The results were interesting... of course it was the impression they had at that particular moment. It made us laugh (her and the group manager)... I cannot recall how the actual statement went, but I feel personally that my practical expertise is getting rustier all the time.”

To summarise, Yvonne's narrative identity, she is the third one of the poker faces, and hence follows the same characteristics as the previous two. From her perspective, there is nothing wrong being in the middle. She does not make many critical remarks, and the narrative is constructed calm but positive. Hence, this narrative is neutral and indicates conversion with no significant signs of liminality.

4.6 Summarising the branch managers' narrative identities

The branches led by the interviewed branch managers had succeeded well, although the managers were all constructed themselves differently as managers and in general. The narratives entailed many reflections as the branch managers were brave enough to reveal their greatest challenges and worries. They were far from perfect managers who have it all figured out; instead, they co-constructed themselves rather incomplete. It is also fair to state that since identity construction is an on-going process, it is never finished, which also makes the narratives incomplete and being “in progress”. This kind of insecurity can also manifest itself in positive terms. None of them were totally comfortable with all the changes that came along. Some of the branch managers were more open and had the courage to talk about their negative experiences as well as the positive ones. I took these as signs of courage and saw them as more open and reflective than the others (e.g., Salin, 2010).

For the most part these narratives were categorised as progressive, which implied that these branch managers had at least constructed with me an idea about their possible futures. This progressive narrative structure is one of the key dimensions since it is connected to the deepness of their narrated liminality: If the future is seen as desirable or there is a possible way to go, liminality is constructed as something that can be handled regardless of its nature as perpetual or transitional.

As stated, all the branch managers in these 12 narratives have been successful in their careers despite the differences in how they constructed the situation at the time of the interviews and their own roles in the new set-up. It seems rather human to describe oneself as a hero and someone else as the villain. The villain was, in most cases, the immediate supervisor — the regional manager who constrained manoeuvring and independence — or top management demanding profit-making. For almost everybody, the relationship with their boss was a bit awkward, including Ray, who was co-constructed as the most easy-going fellow.

It seemed that the branch managers were used to drawing a suitable discourse from “the storage” (Hänninen, 2000), depending on the counterpart, which intensifies the
understanding of acknowledging the perpetual nature of liminality. However, I as a counterpart probably appeared as a mystery and caused some uncertainty, which affected the choice of the appropriate discourse. For that reason, perhaps some narratives (Iris and Tina) broke down, and others also circulated around the most fitting one as they positioned themselves also in addition to casting an identity on me. It was obvious how they oscillated between the desired senior management identity and the operative manager identity (e.g., Down & Reveley, 2009). Whether to be a sales manager or take a “helicopter perspective” and begin to manage the branch as a business unit. Of course local circumstances make limitations and situation is different in large urban branch than in small rural branch in many ways; customer flows (amount of customers) and requirements to be present locally just to mention a few.

The narratives were divided into five categories: 1) busy businessmen, 2) camel boots managers, 3) cliff-hangers, 4) senior survivors and 5) poker faces. These labels were invented to characterise their identity construction. The busy businessmen especially used bold language and viewed themselves, for the most part, as superior to others. They were the “true believers” of the new direction of the Bank, and there was genuine excitement in the air. Simon and Ben were the most obvious ones to be categorised together. Ian shared their business mind-set but struggled with leading people. He was used to working with numbers due to his background from business banking.

The camel boots managers shared the boldness of the busy businessmen but were more critical. They saw the big picture as positive, but disliked the top-down procedures that had to be implemented locally. Ben saw himself as a local strategist and spent long evenings making calculations and devising possible scenarios. Amanda, on the other hand, commented harshly on the profit centre structure. Both of them had just been appointed to manage the corporate banking as well and enjoyed respect in the Bank. Whether these two are categorised as believers or disbelievers depends how the criticism is constructed by meaning making. I took it as a sign of commitment.

The cliff-hangers were the saddest ones because both of the branch managers in this category were constructed as disappointed. Tina had hoped for more possibilities to have a say in decision making and Iris for more appreciation from and interaction with her supervisor. These two also both lacked the needed skills in their new positions. Both stated being people persons who do not need to check and analyse the numbers; instead, they gain all the needed knowledge on their units’ performance level through discussions with their personnel.

The senior survivors shared many similarities. Both Charles and Henry were outspoken and did not spare their words in describing what irritated them. However, it appeared that they were able to rise above the challenges and had figured out ways to cope. Charles emphasised care for the people and could not accept the new market-driven values of the Bank. He had made up his mind to leave if the going got too tough and lay-offs began. Henry stated that, due to his long experience, he was able to decide what to implement locally from among the changes sent down from top management.

The three poker faces saw nothing new in the changes. For them, this was just another organisational phase. The biggest turning points for Yvonne had been the changes in her personal career. For her, leaving a branch has always been an emotional moment. Fiona did not feel that anything major had changed in, for example, leading people, although the market and the Bank had altered. She presented herself as being down to earth. The most
mysterious case was Leo, who did not speak much. He did not want to break the facade
and did not go to such personal levels as the other branch managers. Hence, these three
can be categorised as modestly converted or neutral.

What they all had in common was a demanding relationship with their supervisor and
trust issues with their group managers. The dilemma was that at the same time that the
Bank had mandated a new strategic focus and demanding targets to be reached, the branch
managers were also given more independence – or at least they were led to believe so – as
they stated in their narratives. They were also told to delegate sales management to be
handled by group managers.

In Table 6, the narratives and their approaches to a) the strategic direction taken as
conversion or de-conversion, b) the nature of liminality as transitional or perpetual, c)
language use in the narrative and d) narrative structure are presented. Aside from liminality
and conversion, these dimensions differentiate the narratives. For example, the cliff-
hangers and senior survivors would otherwise fall into the same category as the de-
conversion stories with perpetual liminality, but the progressive storyline of the senior
survivors separates them. The cliff-hangers were pessimistic about the future, whereas the
senior survivors had figured out their own solutions and ways to cope with unpleasant
changes – for example Charles, by possibly leaving the Bank. The camel boots managers
and the cliff-hangers also had much in common, but the criticality is constructed in a
different manner in them. The former seemed at times indulgent and disobedient, but they
had the organisation’s best interest at heart. They also took liberties and did not spend too
much time wondering about their strict mandate. The latter were more disappointed and
the future was perceived in their narratives as gloomy.

The emotional aspects were not analysed separately from identity construction because
as stated in the theoretical chapter, identity construction and liminality as narratively
constructed are taken to be embedded with emotions. This was the case in the original
narratives also for the poker faces who decided to stay on the safe side and not show
excitement or disappointment to me with regard to the changes. However, for example
Fiona’s narrative turned emotional when she talked about her devotion to her branch and
employees and the mixed emotions when she was forced to transfer to a new branch.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative identity</th>
<th>Conversion</th>
<th>Liminality</th>
<th>Language use</th>
<th>Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Busy businessmen</td>
<td>conversion</td>
<td>transitional</td>
<td>bold, positive</td>
<td>progressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camel boots managers</td>
<td>conversion</td>
<td>perpetual</td>
<td>critical, positive</td>
<td>progressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cliff-hangers</td>
<td>de-conversion</td>
<td>perpetual</td>
<td>disappointed, negative</td>
<td>regressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior survivors</td>
<td>de-conversion</td>
<td>perpetual</td>
<td>disappointed, negative</td>
<td>progressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poker faces</td>
<td>conversion</td>
<td>no signs</td>
<td>positive (or neutral)</td>
<td>progressive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6 Summary of the branch managers’ narrative identities

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An interesting nuance is the length of the narratives. The rewritten converted branch managers’ narratives were the longer compared to the de-converted ones. This follows the logic of the original narratives as well. The “believers” had more to say than the others. All the narratives used similar “business” discourse regardless of whether it was considered positive, negative, functioning or superficial. It was approached in all narratives from some perspective. Some branch managers used this “business” discourse to legitimise actions, whereas others saw it as having been given too much foothold in the Bank. It was loved and aspired, disliked or seen even as immoral. Hence, this banking business manager talk can be understood as a reference point (Watson, 1995; Wolfram Cox, 2007) from which they construct their identities as care-takers, real businesspersons, wannabe-businesspeople or individuals with higher morals than the senior management.

The conversion story was initially used as a method to analyse the narrative data, but eventually in this study the method and theory became so closely intervened that they almost got mixed together. The combined usage of the conversion story and liminality shed light on the complex nature of the large-scale strategic changes from the point of the middle management. No combination of de-conversion story and transitional liminality was found in the branch managers’ narratives. The reason for this might be the emotionally negative and pessimistic nature of the de-conversion stated in the narratives. In other words, if a manager has lost his faith in the Bank and the strategic direction, the struggle has to do with more profound issues than transferring from old identity into a new one.

In Figure 6 I am presenting the narratives by applying a model developed by Fairhurst and Grant (2010:177) in their article on “sailing guide” for social construction of leadership with different dimensions which were related to leadership theories. They stated that there could have also other dimensions and that their relation is more complex than the simplified figure implicates. The objective here is to illustrate the multifaceted nature of the identity construction.

In the next chapter the focus is set on the findings in more detail.
5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I discuss in more detail the five narrative categories and analysing their liminality and conversion. There is also a discussion on the ideal branch manager identity in different organisational phases, which creates a clear understanding of the changes that have taken place and the new demands. In addition, the circulation of multiple selves in liminality and the sources of liminality and stability presented in the narratives are discussed here.

5.1 Narratives constructing liminality

In this chapter, I analyse in more detail the five narrative categories. Both the narrated liminality and the conversion are covered. In addition, other methods such as the narrative structures are taken into account. Also the expectations and the narrated state of affairs are discussed based on whether the expectations were met or not in the narratives. Again I am utilising the present tense in presenting the categories in order to make them more “alive and present”. There will be a table (Tables 7-11) in the end each chapter to highlight the main elements in each category: construction of liminality as transitional or perpetual, liminal practices and conversion/de-conversion.

5.1.1 Conversion stories with transitional liminality

The busy businessmen share a similar kind of sense of liminality as the branch managers describe their process of attempting to solve the challenge of reconstructing their identities to fit into their current role as bank managers. Their narratives are conversion stories with transitional liminality. The positive hype towards the changes is expressed clearly as they made comparisons between the old and new. These three managers are like-minded, although the issues causing liminality for them are different: there are struggles in concentrating on the profit centre management rather than pure sales management and in learning to manage subordinates in supervisory position.

A common feature in these three narratives is a gap between the old and new expertise of the branch managers. Hence, Simon and Ray can be described as true believers of the new strategy but who are still reflecting on their new duties and the expectations coming from top management. Ray is especially puzzled over the new organisational structure with group managers. Ian finds himself at times in awkward situations because people require higher maintenance than he has expected. I am calling them “businessmen” because they share an interest in the banking business and the profit centre set-up. They all portray as their main duty to make their units function as profitably and efficiently as possible. The on-going changes have exceeded their expectations, which is a sign of conversion. Simon
and Ray seem to be on the career fast-track, whereas Ian is used to being a free agent and dislikes the tight control.

These three narratives point out the possibility of being a believer but not being quite sure about one’s own identity in the new organisation. Using religious terms, their belief is being tested by transitional liminality in their conversion process (Akselin, 2013). These narratives were logical and proceeded well, which emphasised the reflective nature of the branch managers’ thinking as they were facing the need to alter. The narratives describe the changes as something they had wished for and as something they see themselves being able to fit into practice, although it may take some time. Hence, in the discursive practices of these branch managers, it becomes obvious that there was a strong will to act as expected and no resistance, although Simon, Ray and Ian were not exactly sure how to proceed. Liminal practices are presented in these stories through self-reflection and recognition as being “promoted” to bank managers from branch managers.

Simon and Ray were portrayed as energetic and positive managers who were looking forward to the future with a “postalgic” attitude. These are probably the kinds of narratives the top management would wish for. Ian is more stable and reflective, but the underpinning of his language use is the same. Simon and Ray do not talk much about their relationship with their supervisor, the regional manager. For Ian, who was used to working independently in his former expert status, the tight control feels uncomfortable. Transforming into a manager from the expert role is not an easy task for Ian. He has the needed business logic skills, but due to his experience, that is only one dimension. The other comes from leading people which is not as effortless as he had anticipated. In addition, the constant surveillance has started to get to him. However, the behaviour of his supervisor has opened up Ian’s eyes, and he is genuinely reflecting on his own behaviour as well and whether he has been able to remain polite and respectful.

All these narratives have in common a strong belief that the Bank is going in the right direction strategically. Ray and Simon particularly are on the career fast-track, whereas Ian still struggles with his new supervisory position. All these narratives have a positive tone and are structurally progressive.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construction of transitional liminality</th>
<th>Practices of liminality</th>
<th>Conversion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Old/new separations:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Self-reflections:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Positioning:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From sales manager to banking business manager (S,R)</td>
<td>Strong awareness of the need to transform oneself (S, R)</td>
<td>Strong believers who wish to follow the official guidelines (S,R,I)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From corporate banking to managerial duties (I)</td>
<td>Need to balance sales orientation and banking business management (S)</td>
<td><strong>Expectations:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self–other constructions:</strong> Emphasise own competence/ business understanding compared to others (S,R, I)</td>
<td>Need to conceptualise the management of group managers (R)</td>
<td>Met for most part (S, R, I)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to be different than one’s supervisor (I)</td>
<td>Need to learn “people” skills (I)</td>
<td><strong>Emotions expressed:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Enthusiasm and excitement (S,R)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 7 Characteristics of the “busy businessmen” managers’ narratives**
5.1.2 Conversion stories with perpetual liminality

**Camel boots managers** Amanda and Ben are bold managers who seem to dare to speak up. Their narratives are *conversion stories with perpetual liminality*. These two narratives, especially Amanda’s, are also critical of the Bank’s strategic direction and the concepts. It appears that their expectations are met because Amanda is satisfied with her new corporate banking management responsibilities and Ben states that he has waited for these changes to happen for years.

Although these two narratives are critical, they have a positive echo. Both Ben and Amanda construct themselves as ambitious people who hate authority and being given orders. Thus, they have both been figuring out how to get more room to act independently: Ben through local strategising and additional tasks in for example development projects and Amanda through taking on new responsibilities and jumping into the unknown. They are both disappointed with the current situation, but their strategies for handling the situation differ. In their language use, Amanda points out directly her irritation that things have not turned out as promised, whereas Ben expresses himself more implicitly. On the surface, Ben seems content, but after taking a closer look, the dissatisfaction starts to unfold.

Ben’s narrative is an intriguing one because he has solved his predicament of not wanting to be bossed around by constructing this imaginative more senior status for himself through experimentation and identity play. Amanda has constructed her credibility through expertise and hence, she faces a new situation as she enters into managing the corporate banking, which is a new and unknown area for her. Both of them construct themselves as strong individuals, who are willing to cooperate with others, but on their own terms. For Amanda, the concepts and procedures that are supposed to be followed seem childish, and therefore the possibility of independently constructing a model for corporate banking is something she feels positive about. Ben wants to portray himself as someone who does not care what other people think about him.

These two narratives were the most demanding ones to label. Both Ben and Amanda want to give the impression that they are “running the show” and that others, such as the regional manager or the experts from the headquarters, have made no contributions. They are unwilling to follow the set guidelines set to full-extent but are committed to do whatever it takes to make their branches succeed. It is hard to differentiate the fine line between total disobedience and strong commitment. On one hand, they both are quite reluctant to follow the top-down concepts and procedures which they are supposed to implement. On the other hand, they have the desire to develop these to be even more usable locally. I chose to see these two controversial narratives in a positive light in that they signal even higher commitment and conversion than expected from them in their current organisational status. As Laine and Vaara (2007) stated, criticism can signal resistance to the dominating discourse in an organisation or articulation of an alternative discourse, for example, showing more initiative than is normally expected in someone’s position.

Amanda seems to do as she pleases, disregard instructions and still progress in her career. Ben is going to retire soon as he does not seem to have further career aspirations. He is able to fulfil his extra needs career-wise with additional tasks and through the identity-play of convincing others that he has a larger mandate. These two exceptional
narratives are both progressive. Their criticism has been taken as a sign of commitment because they both have been able to survive the large-scale changes – especially Ben – so many times. In addition, more than once Amanda has been able to convince her supervisor to give her more responsibility.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construction of perpetual liminality</th>
<th>Practices of liminality</th>
<th>Conversion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Old/new separation:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Self-reflections:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Positioning:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From sales manager to banking business manager (B)</td>
<td>Possibility to broaden one’s own expertise (A)</td>
<td>Desire for a larger mandate (B, A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From personal banking to corporate banking (B,A)</td>
<td><strong>Experimentation:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Expectations</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-other constructions:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Recognition:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Expectations disappointed earlier on, now high expectations (A)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing oneself as superior to others (B,A)</td>
<td>Getting more responsibility (B, A)</td>
<td><strong>Emotions expressed:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being decisive regarding with whom to interact (B,A)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Relief due to new responsibilities (A)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8 Characteristics of the “camel boots” managers' narratives

5.1.3 De-conversion stories with perpetual liminality

This chapter deals with two narrative categories — **cliff-hangers and senior survivors**. In these narratives, the branch managers signal high de-conversion and perpetual liminality. However, the difference comes from the structure of the narratives: whereas the cliff-hangers do not see a way out of this difficult situation, the senior survivors take things more calmly: Charles has decided to resign if things get too tough, and Henry reflects analytically on the current state of affairs. He enjoys his seniority, does not get irritated too easily and does not always “jump” when his supervisor tells him to do so.

**Cliff-hangers** Iris and Tina seem at first committed to the strategy, but as their narratives develop, it becomes apparent that their narratives are **de-conversion stories with perpetual liminality**. At the beginning of the interviews, they both wanted to make absolutely clear the difference between the old and new, which is a sign of transitional liminality. However, as their narratives proceeded, the perpetual liminality became apparent by their language use. Neither of them gets along well with their supervisors, and neither of them respected them either. Iris even questions the whole status and duties of the regional managers. Tina and Iris both feel uncomfortable in the middle in many ways, and they both also struggle with the profit centre model and focus on the balance sheet and profits.
Although the cliff-hangers’ language use was bold, I was able to sense uncertainty behind their words. They wanted to give the impression of bohemian managers who are working with people and making conclusions based on discussion instead of analysing numbers. However, the lack of the needed expertise has cornered them, and they have not yet found their way out. Tina and Iris are both aware of the expectations and the direction they should be moving in to please the management, but they find it hard. Tina considers the pace too slow, and Iris struggles with balancing work and family.

When liminality gets constructed as perpetual, the whole position of being in the middle is questioned and found challenging. Iris and Tina reflect on their current duties and the requirements expected of the branch manager. The challenge seemed to be the ability to circulate among multiple organisational actors with various demands and expectations such as personnel, supervisors and group managers. It becomes apparent how demanding it is to be in the middle and at the same time to try to come to terms with everybody and make the business run well. The rope was held too tight for them, and there was not enough room to act independently and creatively. In addition, they both suffered from a lack of an easy-going relationship with their supervisors: Iris wanted more feedback and discussion and Tina a more positive approach. Both of them had started their careers in another company, which they mentioned immediately. They also pointed out right from the start the pros of their former employer and the cons of their current one.

Iris and Tina are situated deep in liminality, which comes through in their language use. The narrative of Iris implicates deeper perpetual liminality from which there does not seem to be way out yet because, for example, she finds the possibility of balancing career and family to be unattainable. Iris is paying the price of wanting independence and, as a consequence, has felt lonely and having no appreciation. Being recognised as self-determining has given her room to manoeuvre, but now she misses the feedback. These two narratives were the saddest ones because although there was a lot of willpower and energy in their storytelling, there seemed to be no way out of their desperate situation. Iris and Tina were in the middle of liminality and, at that time, the structure of their narratives was regressive.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construction of perpetual liminality</th>
<th>Practices of liminality</th>
<th>De-conversion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Old/new separation:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Self-reflections:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Positioning:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From sales manager to banking</td>
<td>Need to find balance</td>
<td>Not following the set guidelines,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>business manager (I,T)</td>
<td>between family and career (I)</td>
<td>seem stupid at times (I,T)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self–other constructions:</strong></td>
<td>Need to learn the</td>
<td><strong>Expectations:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awkward relations with supervisor</td>
<td>expected skills</td>
<td>Disappointed in many ways (I,T)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(I,T)</td>
<td>(I,T)</td>
<td><strong>Emotions expressed:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of trust with group managers</td>
<td><strong>Recognition:</strong></td>
<td>Criticality and disbelief (I,T)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(I,T)</td>
<td>Being independent (I)</td>
<td>Iris (I), Tina (T)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not having the expected banking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>business skills as others (I,T)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“More of a people person” compared to</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>others (I,T)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9 Characteristics of the “cliff-hanger” managers’ narratives
Perpetual liminality and de-conversion are also strongly present in the senior survivors’ narratives. Charles and Henry had backgrounds from another banking group, which kept reminding them how things used to be better. Charles and Henry were steeped in nostalgia, which acts as the origin of liminality and de-conversion; the past is constructed as more glorious than the possible future. These narratives clearly state the challenges of being positioned in the middle of the organisational structure with no say before new issues are dropped down from top management. Besides the comparisons between past and present, the branch managers refer to other actors such as younger colleagues as novices being bossed around, dummies at the headquarters and demanding supervisors who are ignorant of the real business side of things. The main features of the perpetual liminality in these stories were the lack of commitment to 1) the direction taken and the set-up implemented in Sampo Bank overall and 2) their own role in the new situation.

Senior survivors Charles and Henry longed for the past for different reasons. According to Charles, people mattered more previously, and the emphasis on profit-making is against his values. For Henry, having responsibility for smaller tasks instead of larger entities is frustrating. In these narratives, the relationships with their supervisors and group managers are difficult. Charles wants to treat people with respect and feels too much pressure from his supervisor, who wants to prove himself capable as a newcomer. This nostalgia acts for them as an emotional support and defence against anxiety (Brown & Humphreys, 2002). The past in another banking group was something they both cherished a great deal.

Henry has taken liberties, but has not been able to convince his supervisor that there are too many tasks to handle for a single manager, which annoys him, although his supervisor has tried to frame the situation as if he was giving credit. In other words, this possible signal of recognition was not constructed as a positive one. Nevertheless, the language in these narratives was not depressed; on the contrary, the branch managers appeared rather bold regardless of their uncomfortable situation in the middle. Hence, perpetual liminality can also be viewed as business as usual if it has lasted for a long time. They both had made peace with themselves; Charles was going to follow his morals and Henry planned to hang on as long as he feels like it. Henry gets strength from knowing that he has greater expertise and deeper knowledge business-wise than many others.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construction of perpetual liminality</th>
<th>Practices of liminality</th>
<th>De-conversion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Old/new separation:</strong> Overall, things used to better (C,H)</td>
<td><strong>Self-reflections:</strong> No other choice than resign if going gets too tough and forced to act against morals (C)</td>
<td><strong>Positioning:</strong> Strong disbelievers in the new direction (C,H)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-other constructions:</strong> More people-orientated than others, paternalistic. Supervisor too profit-making-orientated (C)</td>
<td><strong>Need to watch over tasks not getting overly fragmented (H)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Expectations:</strong> Disappointed (C,H) No desire to act against his morals (C) Not enough room to manoeuvre (H)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different backgrounds complicate interactions with supervisor and experts from the headquarters (H)</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Emotions expressed:</strong> Critically and disappointment (C,H)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Charles (C), Henry (H)

Table 10 Characteristics of the “senior survivor” managers’ narratives
5.1.4 Conversion stories with no signs of liminality

The poker faces represented another kind of perspective than the categories already covered. They were somewhat positive and in that sense can be categorised as conversion stories. However, the changes have not had much of a strong impact identity-wise on these three actors; the changes are seen as a usual part of business and nothing special. The critical incidents in their careers as branch managers had not been the latest changes as I assumed because that had been the case with the other narratives. Therefore, these narratives are described as conversion stories with no signs of liminality. That does not mean that these managers have not entered liminality; rather, it is simply missing from their language use.

The steps in one’s own career, regardless of the organisational changes, are described as being more important (Fiona), nothing seems to have an impact (Leo) or the accumulated experience enables one to take a broader perspective and decrease the uneasiness of the changes (Yvonne). Whether this image of the situation constructed by their language use is true or not is out of the scope of this study. The role of these narratives is to point out how differently the changes are constructed by language use for actors having similar levels of organisational status. The structure of these narratives is progressive or neutral.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No construction of liminality</th>
<th>No practices of liminality</th>
<th>Conversion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Old/new separation:</td>
<td></td>
<td>Positioning:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change is a normal part of life (F,L,Y)</td>
<td>Multiple reflections, but not from liminal perspective (F,L,Y)</td>
<td>Neutral approach (F,L,Y)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in own career path more meaningful than changes in Sampo Bank (F,Y)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Expectations:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self–other constructions:</td>
<td></td>
<td>Met, “business as usual” (F, L, Y)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longer career gives the needed perspective (F,L,Y)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Emotions expressed:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mature language use (F,Y)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Unclear, jokes around (L)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fiona (F), Leo (L), Yvonne (Y)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11 Characteristics of the “poker face” managers’ narratives

In the next chapter, these narratives will be discussed though multiple selves, especially focusing on the ideal, expected branch manager profile.

5.2 Multiple selves in branch managers’ narratives

In this chapter, the focus is first on the ideal branch manager identity constructed in the narratives as well on the other selves: authentic, cast and desired. The purpose of this additional analysis is to highlight the multi-faceted nature of identity construction especially in context of change.
5.2.1 Development of the ideal branch manager identity

In the branch managers’ narratives, there was a strong presence of the ideal branch manager — that is, what is expected of them. They all seemed to be fully aware of the expectations set on them at the time of the interviews. Despite the differences in their storytelling and identity construction, the expectations they were facing were similar. The difference was mainly whether the changes and their impact on the particular branch manager were experienced as welcome or unpleasant. A completely different issue is whether this ideal identity was regarded as desirable or something everyone had the capacity for. It seems that this ideal identity was the major driver behind the turmoil and confusion which led to liminality in their narratives. The branch managers had to face many changes at the same time, digest them fast and also get their personnel on board as soon as possible. This led the branch managers to reflect on their own identities from multiple perspectives. For example many of them pondered about the capabilities they felt lacking.

Although the focus of my study is on how the branch managers narrate their identity as part of Sampo Bank in strategic change, it is crucial to take into account past events as well. As the old saying goes, “One cannot understand the present without understanding the past”. As it became apparent in the narratives, the past evoked many emotions, and the present was explained mainly by making comparisons with the past. Next, I will briefly cover each organisational phase of the Bank and how it was constructed identity-wise in the branch managers’ narratives.

Postipankki was described as a public institution and therefore the branch managers were also portrayed as the public servants of bureaucrats with no business orientation (Henry). Some branch managers followed the financial performance of their unit even in those days to the extent it was possible without official reporting systems (Ben and Fiona). However, compared to the current fast-pace, the old days also appeared to be less demanding and more relaxed, with the exception of the aftermath of the Finnish banking crisis, which took the glamour away from the branch manager status (Simon and Leo).

Leonia Bank was portrayed as an organisational transition phase into Sampo Bank. On the one hand, some branch managers used this phase to its full advantage (Simon) and learned a new profession as a sales coach who was able to lead by his own example. On the other hand, this sales-orientated phase was also seen to downgrade the branch manager position into one of “shop manager” or even into one salesperson among others in the branch.

The focus of this study, Sampo Bank as part of Sampo PLC, was, without major exception, on a totally new approach to banking. The counter voices questioned whether the branches were actually treated as genuine profit centres as declared (Amanda). The profit-making and profit centre logic was experienced as welcomed (Simon, Ray, Ian and Ben), morally unacceptable (Charles), superficial (Amanda), nothing special (Henry, Leo and Fiona) or too demanding to handle with former skills (Iris, Tina, Yvonne). The narrated view towards the change was dependent on each branch manager’s background, including their seniority as a branch manager and possible experience from other Finnish banking groups. Hence, comparisons were made between the current and the old bank or the current bank and other banks.
According to Kumpula (2011), new demands and expectations challenge the employees’ understanding of “a good employee”. This influences the employees’ perceptions of the desired identity and also makes them reflect on their own capacity to reach those new expectations. In addition, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) pointed out that contemporary manager’s managerial discourse contains on the one hand, elements from the dominant grandiose discourse of “manager as an administrator” and on the other hand, elements of manager’s own identity as they are narrated. The former is the expected one, whereas the latter may have, for example, softer and more creative elements such as the “leader”, “strategist” or “entrepreneur”. However, these antagonistic forces (Clarke et al., 2009) also enable managers to adjust their identity depending on the audience and circumstance, if necessary, and to maintain a relatively continuous self as opposed to represented discontinuity and a break-down of identity in liminality. This was constructed in the senior branch managers’ narratives as boldness to make independent decisions and at times take liberties. In Table 12 are presented the ideal branch manager profiles and the profile of the Bank in each phase constructed in the original narratives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisational phase/Profile</th>
<th>Postipankki</th>
<th>Leonia Bank</th>
<th>Sampo Bank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Bank</td>
<td>Public institution</td>
<td>Sales organisation</td>
<td>Real business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal branch manager</td>
<td>Bureaucrat</td>
<td>Best salesperson</td>
<td>Profit center manager</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12 Profiles of the Bank and the ideal branch manager

These profiles are so straightforward that they seem almost like caricatures. However, I consider that the constructions between old and new have turned out strict due to large changes the branch managers have faced.

5.2.2 Circulation of multiple selves in identity construction

In this chapter, I cover in more detail the three other multiple selves (besides the expected, ideal self already covered) in the branch managers’ language use. A large part of liminality originates from assessing oneself and making comparisons between oneself and others — especially if the liminality is perpetual. However, in this study, the branch managers constructed themselves in comparison with others: others inside and outside the Bank, regardless of the nature of their liminality. Hence, the main characteristics of liminality constructed by language use as not as straightforward as stated by Ybema et al. (2011): old/new comparisons in transitional liminality and self/other comparisons in perpetual liminality.

The authentic self was constructed on many occasions. For example, Yvonne claimed that she had been like that all her life. This comment implies that she felt comfortable and was able to be herself in social interaction. Watson (2009) discovered in a study that a person can draw meaningful events even from childhood as he explains “the way he is”. Watson (1994) also stated in his study that managers presented a moral dimension in their narratives by implying: “this is the kind of person I am”. Ashforth and Tomiuk (2000) stated that authenticity is highly contextual identity-wise: What we consider as authentic
may differ between, for example, home and work place, and thus they separate the private and public spheres of life. However, in my study one female branch manager made a comparison to her marriage and relations with her employees as she commented on the importance of speaking one’s mind in straightforward manner also at work. Amanda denigrated her female colleagues who imitated the clothing style of a member from senior management. For her, the authenticity was everything.

Beech (2008) found in his study on dialogic identity work how cast identities, the identities constructed by someone else for a particular actor, differed a great deal from the actor’s own view. The dialogic identity work is emotional because there is the possibility of hurting others’ feelings if they are offended by the identity others cast on them. For example, Simon had suffered in his younger years from being stigmatised as a novice among his senior colleagues. However, later on his cast identity altered due to his sales management skills and ability to lead by his own example. It is also possible that the cast identity is not constructed in social interaction; instead it can emerge as imaginary one. In my study Tina called herself a “weirdo” because she was not so keen on working with reports and statistics. She claimed that she was aware of what her colleagues thought about her.

They all had in their minds a certain kind of aspirational self — something they longed for. For Ben, being credible in the eyes of his employees was the bottom line. Also, Sims (2003) discovered in his study on middle managers that narrative identity consists for the most part of being credible in the eyes of others, mainly subordinates and supervisors. If one loses credibility, it is hard to regain, especially if it happens, for example, due to lying when narrating about oneself. However, some branch managers had a desire to have larger mandate and acted out having more decision-making power in front of their employees.

In the study of Beech and Johnson (2005), a new, tough CEO changed his behaviour into one he felt more comfortable with. However, such a radical change in behaviour, which is against the cast identity and against the desired one (the reasons why he was hired) caused problems. In my study, for example, Tina explained how she had been tougher than normal but was not actually sure whether her toughness had paid off. Otherwise, she constructed herself as a people person. Hence, the branch managers seemed to seek the suitable combination between toughness and softness in their language use.

These multiple selves are essential in constructing narrative identity and especially liminality as part of it because in constructions of perpetual liminality, the focus is on making self–other comparisons. Besides including other people, these comparisons include multiple versions of the self, such as how other people may see them (cast identity) or want them to be like (expected identity). The longest comparison was present in Simon’s narrative when he explained how he is superior in banking compared to his colleagues as well to professionals from other fields.

In the next chapter focus is in the antagonist themes co-constructed in the original narratives as sources liminality and stability.

5.3 Sources of liminality and stability in the narratives

In this chapter, I draw together firstly the main sources causing liminality and secondly the main elements that calm and give a sense of stability. The triggering event (Beech, 2011) in
this study is the strategic reorientation, which included: turning the branches into profit centres and implementing the new organisational structure in the branches. However, keeping the focus purely on the large-scale change is not enough to comprehend the discoursed liminality expressed in the narratives. In addition, it is worth a closer look into the calming factors that give a sense of stability in times of dramatic changes. Some of the themes are slightly overlapping such as “too much control/room to manoeuvre” and “compliance/rebelliousness”, but I have decided to present them separately in order to describe the sources of liminality and stability from all possible angles.

The starting point for this analysis was the division between business-orientation versus people-orientation. There seemed to be a clear division between whether the branch managers talked about “making banking business” or “doing things together”. For example, for Simon, his employees were presented in an instrumentalist manner, as tools that needed to perform, whereas Fiona felt closely connected with her employees, although at the same time she was business-focused. Iris seemed to be in total contrast to Simon as she was dwelling upon the troubles of her employees.

The care factor was especially apparent in the female branch managers’ narratives because some of them spoke of how they carried the personal troubles of their employees on their shoulders and had no shoulder themselves to turn to in need. They felt a need to become superwomen. In addition, regarding the males, especially Charles felt he had strong emotional ties with his employees. In the way he described their interaction in the branch and during free-time social events, he constructed himself as a paternalistic manager.

The antagonist theme “new expertise/old expertise” belongs in the discussion on transitional liminality, whereas the others have more to do with perpetual liminality since they deal with more profound struggles to be dealt with in order to be able to “hang on” in the middle. Some of the antagonist themes were constructed in the same narratives, such as “loneliness/sense of belonging”. For example, Fiona explained on the one hand being solely accountable for the results and making the final decisions while, on the other hand, feeling togetherness with the employees in her branch.

5.3.1 Too much control versus room to manoeuvre

In the narratives, the most common theme was the extent of independence and control without enough room to manoeuvre. There seems to be a variation in the identity construction of the branch managers: some of them see themselves as strategists and independent, whereas at the other end of the continuum identity is constructed as restricted and under constant surveillance. On the one hand, the organisational position of the branch managers was constructed as demanding due to strict accountability to their supervisors. It was also felt that creativity was not considered to be a virtue (Tina). On the other hand, some of the managers narrated that they had room to manoeuvre and a genuine possibility to have an impact on the bottom line through the activities of the branch (Simon and Ray). They all shared the exactly same organisational position but talked of different kinds of versions of their roles. The difference came from an acceptance of being in the middle as a local adjuster instead of desiring a more senior-level position.

I was almost fooled by the charade of having enough room to manoeuvre which Ben presented. However, on the one hand that he based his credibility in the eyes of his
employees on a false image of his mandate as a manager. On the other hand, he had also started to strategise himself because he saw the official top-down approach to be insufficient. He described himself as an entrepreneur who was completely accountable for the performance of his unit. Hence, another approach is to label taking the initiative as a pioneering act (Laine & Vaara, 2007), which can lead to business transformation with the support of top management (Virkki, 2012). This is closely related to the next theme: compliance versus rebelliousness.

My findings are aligned with the study made by Tienari and Tainio (1999) in which they stated that the reforms initiated by top management may have another intended target than that which is actually realised. In their study on the Finnish Kansallis Bank (today part of Nordea Bank) this was seen by the branch management as a movement towards more rigid organisation, although the intention had been just the opposite. Decisions aiming to increase local flexibility can be regarded as restrictive or the other way around. The branch managers may get behind in the organisational reform processes and stick with their old habits. In Sampo Bank the profit centre was not taken as genuine in all branch managers’ narratives For example Henri saw it more as a vehicle to increase branch managers’ commitment than anything else.

There was also discussion of the performance indicators and other forms of evaluating the success of the branches. The branch managers were fully aware of what kind of behaviour was expected from them as profit centre managers, regardless of the resistance some felt. Hence, this is in line with the note made by Kärreman and Alvesson (2004) of the “cages of tandem” in their article on identity control, referring to the loosened-up nature of the structural iron cage which is accompanied by a stricter mental cage. Hence, the looser behavioural control through a decentralised organisational structure is supplemented with paying more attention to the actors’ subjectivity and encouraging certain kinds of behaviour in that particular organisation, such as down-playing creativity and individuality. This does not in any way mean the disappearance of the structural iron cage because, the impact of these two cages combined covers a larger area of the employees’ activities and self-identification. This has close connection with the performance indicators talked in branch managers’ narratives. Although they were given more room to manoeuvre, they were under constant monitoring by their supervisors.

Eriksson (2006) wrote about management by fear, which has become a common phenomenon and at times seems to take place unintentionally. This was described also in the branch managers’ narratives as they told about the tight control they were under and how they wondered about their own ability to remain true to themselves and not also burn out as Ian put it. According to Parviainen (2008) management by fear is alive in current organisations, although the form has transformed and moved away from explicit manifestations (Parviainen, 2008). This discussion is related to compliance issues, which refers to “doing as being told” or there will be consequences.

Whether the feelings of disappointment coming from the gap between the expected and realised profit centre or from the more restricted and monitored organisation was intended, it was constructed as such in some of the narratives. The branch management was also understood as a way of life instead of simply a normal job.
5.3.2 Compliance versus rebelliousness

There were also narratives projecting an opposing image and bringing the broad possibilities of making local adjustments to light. Some of the branch managers had even taken some liberties and designed new procedures themselves and hence did not act by the book. Thus, this particular theme is not in line logic-wise with the others because both sides can be categorised to signal stability or liminality. This theme is closely related to the previous one on “too much control/room to manoeuvre”.

In a situation where middle managers do not have sufficient room to strategise, they can invent themselves roles as “local strategists” without addressing senior management first (Laine & Vaara, 2007). Vickers (2008) found out in his study that the inner organisational struggle was not about emancipating middle management; rather, it was more about the power struggle over who has the final say in strategising. In my study branch manager Henry pointed out on several occasions in his narrative the lack of expertise in the headquarters compared to that of himself and his colleagues. He also mentioned how he has learned to “pick up” the suitable procedures to be implemented in his branch and abandon the unsuitable ones.

Bold language use and descriptions of not acting by the book were clearly stated in the narratives of Ben and Amanda. However, both of them have been very successful in their careers and had been recently appointed to more demanding positions: They were both responsible for the corporate banking business in their respective branches. Particularly Amanda clearly stated her dislike of rules and how she ignored the pre-set procedures and regarded them as childish. She accepted the big picture but not the practicalities that came with it, which emphasised the complex nature of identity construction.

Ben, on the other hand, has had a long and prestigious career in the Bank, and he seemed to enjoy the respect he receives from others. For Ben, the profit centre structure was a turn in the right direction, but he would have liked even more decision-making power. The effect was that he and some of his close colleagues planned and implemented local business procedures which have not been discussed with his supervisor. Ben stated that “his ass is on the line” and that he is the “local strategist” who has to have the ability to find the ways to reach the set targets. Iris also belongs to these rebellious managers because she had not and was not going to implement the set organisational strategy. Iris and Henry stated that the clear guidelines are excellent for younger managers but were too restraining for themselves. Tina, on the other hand, felt herself being in a trap due to too-tight control. It appeared that she had suffocated her rebellious side due to prior bad experiences and tried to do as she is told, which at the end of the day made her feel uncomfortable.

However, the majority of these branch managers were comfortable in the middle. For example, Fiona saw it as a natural part of their duties to follow the pre-set guidelines. For Fiona, the value-base of the Bank was a crucial driver for motivation. She saw her role being to put the strategies to practise locally. Simon made a funny comparison when he mentioned his disability as a branch manager to suddenly decide to transfer into the “lollipop business”. These branch managers described in multiple ways how the “camel boots” managers (Ian’s words) do not belong in this retail chain ideology by which he refers to the basic logic of retail business best exemplified by grocery stores. Ian saw the
aligned behaviour as an integral starting point for success. So, the perception of the conceptualised processes was taken differently depending on the branch manager.

In this theme, the branch managers described as the stabilising factor, on the one hand, compliance, and on the other hand, rebelliousness — depending on the situation at hand (e.g., Clarke et al., 2009). It becomes evident that it is hard to state what kind of behaviour is disobedience or rebelliousness and what is simply a sign of commitment and taking initiative because they sense being left outside the official decision-making forums (Laine & Vaara, 2007). It is also acknowledged that many times the resistance towards strategy is not direct; instead, most likely it is implicit or even disguised in joking and ridiculing (e.g., Suominen & Mantere, 2010). Fineman (2003) noticed that in especially hierarchical organisations, there is more willingness to comply than not in order to avoid getting a negative reputation in the eyes of senior management. In change situations, there might be pressure coming from top management to implement the needed activities as soon as possible. This kind of demand can also lead to “participation by command” (Eriksson & Lehtimäki, 2001) through compliance instead of accepting the changes.

5.3.3 Loneliness versus belonging

The sense of belonging can be constructed in many ways: a strong desire to belong to the branch managers’ elite, use the common language (e.g., Carroll, 1995) or support from close colleagues. While the position of middle management was portrayed as a lonely place the closeness with at least certain trusted colleagues was seen as crucial in order to benchmark one’s ideas and have confidential discussions. Also sense of belonging to a certain place was constructed as something that made the branch manager’s duties desirable. This meant belonging to a particular branch, but also belonging to the larger community as an important local figurehead among other decision makers such as entrepreneurs and politicians. This came through especially in the narratives of Ben and Henri, who were appointed to run branches in smaller, rural towns. Being a branch manager also seemed to enter life’s private sphere. In bigger multi-branch cities, the branch manager did not enjoy as much attention and prestige because for one reason there were more of them.

Regardless of having colleagues and good relations with the regional manager, the organisational position of a branch manager was presented as a lonely one since at the end of the day he has to make the final call and bear the consequences. There was a need to feel independent but also to hear feedback and especially praise for excellent performance from time to time. Sims (2003) noted that senior management does not necessarily ignore the achievements of middle management; instead, it can simply happen by accident. Particularly Iris felt insulted because her supervisor had not contacted her after achieving excellent results in a nation-wide comparison between branches.

The sense of belonging was spoken of as a calming element in the narratives. Strong emotional ties to the employees of the branches were expressed due to getting through hard times and being able to reach milestones together. In addition, the local community, in which the branch operated, was constructed as meaningful and creating a sense of belonging. In addition, in the conversion stories, the intense identification with the Bank seemed to create a sense of togetherness and being part of a success story. For some
branch managers their position represented the elite in the Bank as well (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006). For example, with a few exceptions, the group managers were described as being less skilled and not having enough business intelligence. In addition, close ties with certain colleagues were described as something they valued. However, the branch managers chose carefully the ones they opened up to and had confidential relationships with.

Balogun and Johnson (2004) figured that lateral peer support replaces a lack of close connections with the supervisor. The lateral relationships become more important due to the organisational hierarchy. However, Sims (2003) discovered that, although the middle managers may appear to be friends, in reality, they are still battling for the same promotion opportunities and resources. The friendship is rather superficial since as soon as the opportunity presents itself, even the closest colleagues are ready to drag a colleague’s name through the mire if it benefits them somehow. Therefore, any chance of genuine support from them is not expected to happen. However, this kind of competitive relation with colleagues was not constructed in the branch managers’ narratives.

The unclear organisational position of being “in the middle” causes middle management at times to seek to position themselves as “the other” between first-line supervisors and senior management to justify their legitimacy and existence (Thomas and Linstead, 2002). Sims (2003) saw that problems arise if middle managers have not found a fit with their storytelling and mix storytelling “from the floor” about operational practices with the more senior-management-style storytelling. This kind of struggle emerged especially in Ben’s narrative as he tried his best to remain credible in the eyes of his employees and display himself as the final decision maker. This process of circulating smoothly between conversations both on a strategic and operational level and with various actors is what Ellis and Ybema (2010) called oscillating between discourses. Being on the on the one hand on of the best salesmen in the branch had an impact identity-wise and made it demanding to transforms to business unit manager. On the other hand the new role with possible broader responsibilities was narrated as welcomed.

Hence, the sense of belonging emerges from various elements which do not necessary have anything to do with the physical place, although it is described as connected to a certain place. Instead, the source seems to be the people and strong emotional attachment. Even in the neutral narratives, the “people factor” was expressed as meaningful, bringing purpose to work and life in general. These specific branch managers presented themselves as truly committed and not as “quick-fixing” managers who moved towards another project as soon as the current branch was performing well enough. In other words, although some of them had transferred branches rather often, they had been committed to each of those branches and especially to the people. Not being given praise or not being appreciated is closely related to this theme as well. Branch manager position was also described as a possible vehicle to self-realisation (Adamson, 1997) in many ways. For example Ben worked long days, but considered these after opening hour planning activities as a hobby. Hence, there was also a sense of belonging to the Bank as well.

5.3.4 Lack of trust versus trust

A lack of trust versus trust seems to have a clear link to identity construction and the way the branch managers constructed the world. This became through in their language use on
many occasions. The feeling of insecurity and being under constant monitoring was constructed as a source of anxiety. Hence, this particular theme has a close connection to the too-tight control versus room to manoeuvre. Lack of trust/trust theme rose to the surface in the majority of the narratives concerning the relationships between branch managers and other actors: mainly supervisors, group managers and colleagues. On the one hand, the branch managers felt a lack of trust from their supervisors, and on the other hand, they themselves felt a lack of trust in their group managers being able to deliver what was expected from them.

A lot was narrated based on gut feelings and emotions, and identities were cast on others. The situation was painted as a demanding one since branch managers were nominated to be accountable for their own branches as profit centres but the sales management was to be delegated to group managers. Hence, branch managers received more responsibility but felt they did not have full control of the activities in their branches. As Kramer (1996) stated, trust is central in hierarchical relationships, although distrust and suspicion are normal parts of those relationships. There are so many uncertainties due to differences in power: regional manager has the authority to exercise power over the branch managers. Trust became apparent mostly when it was missing, which certifies its “silence presence” (Misztal, 1999) as was illustrated in the narrative of Amanda as she described her relationship with her group manager. It was hence implicitly present as an integral part in the majority of narratives. Simon and Ben pointed out that the implementation of the profit centre structure would have taken place earlier if top management had trusted the branch managers to have the needed skills. On the other hand, Ray still doubted whether the competence level of his colleagues was actually sufficient. Yvonne made mature remarks as she stated that, through experience, she has been able to stay in the shadows and trust that business will function even though she is not constantly keeping an eye on it.

Most of the branch managers had close ties with their colleagues, but some preferred to be left alone or fret about the busyness, which hindered more frequent contact with colleagues. Trusting relationships with colleagues who shared a social connection such as a similar kind of background (Tyler, 2003) were constructed as a positive force in many ways. Close relations with colleagues had an impact on creativity, although at times this led to “overly creative solutions”, which, for example, Ben told about. The colleague relationships that were constructed in the narratives gave the impression that they were based on almost friendship-like relationships, which is not in line with the findings of Lewicki and Bunker (1996), who claimed that the trust in professional relationships is based on evaluation and information. However, the branch managers do not seem eager to make new friends; instead, they seem more satisfied to stick with the old ones who have proven to be trustworthy.

Atkinson and Butcher (2003) pointed out that even tough organisational structures have flattened the hierarchical mind-set lives strong in managerial relationships. This was described vividly in this study when the branch managers explained their relationships with other organisational actors. Whether there was trust or not seemed to strongly define the identities of the branch managers. For example, constant signals of a lack of trust deteriorated branch manager–regional manager relations. There is always present the power asymmetry in supervisor-subordinate relationships. The branch managers pointed out how from their perspective their supervisors, the regional managers, emphasised this power
asymmetry on regular basis. For example Tina described the lists covering the undone tasks that she receives from her supervisor.

Laine (2008) pondered in a study on trust in superior–subordinate relationships whether trust is based on emotions or knowledge. This kind of division is irrelevant from a social constructionist perspective, which focuses on how trust is constructed in language use. Especially in my study, emotions are integral part of identity construction and in specific liminality. Tyler and Kramer (1996) claimed that despite the dominating view of rational choice, trust seems to be based on something beyond calculations. Morally appropriate action seems to trump pure self-interest on many occasions. It appears natural to cooperate, and hence an instrumental approach is most likely inadequate to explain trust between people.

There is a wide range of theories and research on trust (e.g., Kramer & Tyler, 1996). However, the goal of this study is not to delve into those discussions. The idea is simply to point out how trust has an impact on identity construction and how a lack of it in social relationships, especially in a change context, can lead to feelings of uncertainty and liminality if an individual does not know where he stands. Many branch managers had had their bad experiences, which had been essential to make them the kind of managers they are today (e.g., Laine, 2008). For example, Ben spoke in detail about an incident that had happened many years back. He tried to keep that in mind whenever he was about step on his group manager’s toes.

5.3.5 New expertise versus old expertise

This controversial struggle became apparent in almost all of the narratives. In them, the branch managers used a lot of banking business “jargon” in order to be able to appear more professional and competent. One’s own superiority compared to others was also constructed through multiple self–other constructions, emphasising one’s own expertise and diminishing others with rather harsh language use. However, at times the narratives broke down as the branch managers at first camouflaged their lack of business logic understanding under the guise of being “people persons” who do not need to browse reports in order to know the performance level. Particularly Tina and Iris had a hard time due to their lack of the needed expertise.

For many branch managers, it was hard to balance the new responsibilities with the old ones, and on many occasions, it demanded at least partly leaving the old behind (e.g., Mankkinen, 2011), such as customer meetings. Many of the branch managers were accustomed to meeting with customers on a regular basis, which seemed impossible time-wise in the new set-up. For some, expertise with the customer front-line had been their source of credibility, and there were doubts in the air as to whether they would be viewed with the same credibility in the eyes of their employees. Iris even posed the question: “What would I be doing if all the sales management were delegated to my group manager?” This pondering highlights the mixed emotional status some of them were experiencing.

Branch manager Simon also clearly pointed out his superiority compared to managers with background in insurance whom he considered to lack the needed banking business skills. He took a lot of time trying to convince me of his expertise (e.g. Peltonen & Lehto, 1999). There was variance as to whether the group managers were regarded almost as
colleagues, who were respected, or merely as subordinates, who needed clear instructions and did not possess a strategic mind-set and expertise. Similar features were also found in the study of Dyer and Keller-Cohen (2000) on university professors, who distanced themselves from others, the non-professionals, through their language use. Using the rhetoric of one’s own profession is a way to show expertise and also to set boundaries and to establish hierarchies in organisations (Eriksson, 2002).

The changes were still in progress, and some were more adjusted to them than others, judging by their language use. Moving into the new role and balancing the new and the old identity was described as a major challenge. Transformation was described as demanding in many ways: from sales manager into banking business manager; from expert to manager or broadening one’s area of expertise as a manager in personal banking to corporate banking as well.

5.3.6 Gender ignorance versus gender sensitivity

I cover the gender issue in this chapter from two perspectives: firstly, how identity construction differs between male and female branch managers and secondly, how the femininity and masculinity are constructed in their language use regardless their gender. The gender got constructed in a rather traditional and stereotypical manner in the narratives as women talked about balancing their work and career without asking, while men talked purely about work. For me, this was intriguing since many of the female branch managers were also known to be professional and successful, in other words considered “tough ones”. Hence, their showing the softer side of themselves was pleasantly welcome. Tina stated how important it was for her to take care of urgent family issues first to be able to fully concentrate on work. Female managers also answered their phones as their children called them after school, and this made a natural transition to discussions about family.

Private life and work life were for the most part kept separately in most of the narratives (e.g., Salin, 2010). The gender issue from a family and parenthood perspective was discussed only in the female branch managers’ narratives. According to Thomas and Dunkerley (1999), the expanded duties of middle managers have pushed them to work longer hours, causing problems in the balance of home life and work. Besides demanding duties, there may also be a demand for “presenteeism” after official working hours, which refers to staying late just to be present and show commitment by putting in long hours. In a managerial position, this has become more or less a virtue. Iris seriously wonders if she has paid too high a price and has sacrificed her family life in order to keep up the pace at work. I sensed that it was important for many branch managers to point out working long days either as a sign of commitment or sacrifice.

Their awareness of being a woman (Iris and Fiona) became apparent in the language use of the female branch managers. Especially for Fiona, equality was an important guideline in her management, and she also mentioned that there has to be both male and female employees in a branch in order for it to function properly. She stated that men bring something extra to the organisational dynamics. Male branch managers never crossed the line and stayed strictly with the topic of business. They spoke of their late evenings at the branch but never implied someone waiting at home such as wife and children. Iris expressed the implicit rule of hiding the fact that she has a family and children. Extra
tension seemed to come from the pressure of reaching the targets or being sacked. Family issues were a taboo, which was not convenient to mention in any way. Hence family was sacrificed in the expense of career.

Fineman (2000) talked about referring to professional and organisational norms, which legitimise certain kinds of talk, displays of feelings and behaviour as acceptable and others as unacceptable. These so-called emotional conventions are part of the conventional etiquette in organisations and are presented through “correct” behaviour (Fineman, 2003). Some of the female branch managers felt that they had to hide their feelings and “suck it up” in order not to appear too weak. Iris stated that branch managers are expected to be “super humans”. Eriksson-Zetterquist (2002) found out in her study on organisational newcomers’ socialisation process in a trainee programme that although male and female participants stated opposite views on their desire to have a family, along the way their statements became more similar because the male newcomers transformed more family-orientated.

Linstead and Thomas (2002) described identity construction as an “on-going masquerade”, in which middle managers try to make sense simultaneously of what the organisation wants from them and what they themselves want for the future. Discourses used as masks enable managers to talk about issues otherwise left unspoken and therefore reveal the tension between home, work and self. There is a struggle to balance work, home and a sense of belonging. Hence, middle managers must keep up a false identity at work in order to survive. This may require that certain issues are not commented out in the open or language use is aligned with the dominating masculine culture. In my study the male branch managers narratives can be regarded for the large part as gender ignorant or as masculine besides the paternalistic approach used by Charles as an old-school manager. For example, in Ben’s narrative there was an apparent strong desire to make him look like more powerful.

The tension between the competing “professional” and “female” discourses is not unusual for women working in the banking business (e.g., Meriläinen, 2000). At times, the only solution available is to sacrifice private family life, in other words to “put it on hold”, until a better solution comes along (Thomas & Linstead, 2002). Tienari, Quack and Theobald (2002) pointed out that women tended to enter the middle management of the Finnish banking sector after organisational restructurings as men have entered into “more challenging” duties. In my study, this was not expressed in the narratives since the responsibilities of the local branch manager were altered to be more demanding in the Bank right at the time of the interviews.

In the female branch managers’ narratives, there was a lot more discussion about the “softer” issues. Amanda mentioned how she tries her best to “speak the language of angels” as she approached her personnel. Iris portrayed herself really close to her employees, which started to transform into a mental burden because she began to feel that there is no one she could talk to when, for example, she feels exhausted. Being worn out is not acceptable for a branch manager in a masculine culture. However, the female branch managers’ narratives also have tougher and more masculine language use. For example, on the one hand, Tina pointed out how she enjoys the close relationships and open discussions with her staff, and on the other hand, she spoke of how she is responsible for the business and how there is no room for being too sentimental. The business-orientation is instantly accompanied by dominant masculine language. Thomas and Linstead (2002)
and Clarke et al. (2009) stated that at the same time, with this image of a rational economic manager as the ‘saviour’, there also emerges an image of the caring manager. Individuals have a tendency to move rather smoothly between even contradictory discourses in order to compromise and please the needs of various parties.

Meriläinen (2000) saw the masculine language use of female managers as part of counter-identity construction. The ambiguities in their language use can be a way to handle the tension between the feminine care-taker and the masculine businessman. Through a different version of self, it is possible to integrate identities which appear to be mutually exclusive. However, Meriläinen, Tienari, Thomas and Davies (2004) pointed out in their cross-cultural study that in Finland, work is understood as simply one aspect of life, and the discourse of the balanced individual is accepted in many organisations. This refers to the possibility to pursue professional goals and be a parent at the same time. Obviously, the discourse of the balanced individual can be used as a normalising discourse as well as a form of resistance depending on the organisation. In Iris’s case, the narrative was constructed as resistance towards the masculinity of the organisation’s values that she felt was too strong.

5.3.7 Value mismatch versus value match

Possible value mismatch represents a deep source of liminality. This theme is closely related to gender ignorance/gender sensitivy just discussed since femininity and masculinity in language use refer to certain kind of value-base as well. Luomanen (2009) found in his study that individuals have a strong desire to stand for what they feel is right, and they have a clear view on how people should be treated. Contradictory values such as care and money (e.g., Kirpal, 2004b; Iedema et al., 2003) can also cause extra anxiety due to value mismatch. Whereas some branch managers could not hold back their excitement at the new direction with the business focus, others felt it to be unacceptable. Making profit and caring for people were not understood as a match made in heaven. Also, the ones who cared deeply for their employees had been forced to make tough calls.

In my study, Charles, especially, wanted to make evident the values and ethics he based his work on. The ultimate solution for Charles without losing one’s integrity was resignation. Charles loved making sales, but for him, the business-orientation had moved beyond pure sales to shareholder value maximisation. Congruence of values was understood as integral, and there were reflections on not being able to continue if there was to be found a mismatch (Yvonne). These value aspects, and being able to follow ones morals, are closely connected to the authentic self as well to the desired self.

According to the study by Clarke et al. (2009), managers use mutually exclusive antagonist discourses in organisational settings as they construct their work identity, such as un-emotion/emotion, professionalism/un-professionalism and business/people. The former components of the discourses follow the guidelines set by the company for the ideal manager, whereas the latter represent “a good person” with high morals. Drawing from these opposite discourses enables managers to survive in stressful circumstances and represent themselves most of the time as morally virtuous. This is also close to the concepts of emotional labour and search for authenticity as actors try to find a balance between their true selves and “fake” selves. The dichotomy comes from the pressure of
acting in a particular manner at work, for example being happy all the time (Horchschild, 2003 [1983]). In narrative identity construction, it is common to construct the storyline through battle against the “baddies” — being on the right side (e.g., Whittle & Mueller, 2009). Identity can then also be understood by otherness through what one is not and does not want to be (Watson, 2009).

The contradictory demand of multiple selves seems to be causing a struggle for branch managers; on one hand, the Bank expects something, and on the other hand, the branch managers themselves have aspirations, which might not match with the expected ones. In addition, Clarke et al. (2009) found in their study that organisational actors can have two controversial ideals of “a good manager” because the managers’ own ideal was a softer and more caring manager who shows the emotional side of himself, whereas the organisation’s ideal was more goal-orientated and straightforward. This more business-orientated behaviour was also encouraged by the management and peers. However, these antagonist discourses made it possible for them to represent themselves as morally virtuous. For me the same phenomenon became apparent as I wondered whether a certain branch manager was more of a “people person” or more “business-driven” because I was able to perceive implications from both sides. For example, on the one hand, Ian saw himself as a softener between his employees and regional management and on the other hand he was fond of the number-side as well.

On the other hand, if someone feels, for example, mistreated, a possible discourse to adopt is demonising the other and explaining to oneself that everything possible has been done to comprehend the other without success. The indignation is thus justified by reasoning to oneself and to others. However, most people are not comfortable with the feelings that rise to surface through indignation, but demonising the other will most likely remain a common phenomenon in organisational settings (Sims, 2005). For example, for Charles, top management represented everything bad that had come along, such as not appreciating people.

5.3.8 Summarising dimensions in antagonist themes

In this chapter, I am summarising the recently presented antagonist themes. Here, they are mapped against the three dimensions that were strongly constructed in the original narratives and also reconstructed in the rewritten ones, including career phase (senior/junior), gender and location. In order to point out their relevance, I have categorised them in Table 13. Seniority in particular emerged as a key element which was present in six themes.
It became evident in the narratives of the older and more experienced branch managers that they were not so concerned by whether they had exceeded their mandates. As Leo stated, they took the space they needed. This goes hand in hand with rebelliousness because the senior branch managers such as Henri and Ben followed the rules, but also decided rather independently which new procedures to implement and which to ignore. The seniors also had a large number of close colleagues with whom they kept in touch on a regular basis, including planning and implementing new developments in their branches. Trust appeared to be present in senior branch managers’ narratives, especially between colleagues, but was not seen as necessary in the relations with their supervisor.

Overall, the experienced managers did not worry so much how they got along with their supervisors, the regional managers, whereas the younger ones reflected on this relationship more. For juniors, it was important to give a good impression to their supervisor and to be seen as competent managers in every aspect, which also caused them extra pressure. Also, the possible value mismatch was constructed differently in the narratives of junior and senior managers because due to their impending retirements, seniors were not forced to take negative issues so seriously. In junior branch managers’ narratives, they often made strong statements about the new profit centre structure. Also, some senior managers saw the change as crucial. However, from a competence development perspective, the younger ones struggled more over whether they had the needed capabilities.

Gender was constructed in a traditional manner because it mainly presented itself in females’ narratives, whereas male managers focused purely on banking. Firstly, gender was constructed in women’s narratives though their concern about not being there for their children. This also has a close connection to value mismatch because family was crafted as a taboo subject which was not to be discussed openly. Secondly, gender was present in the way female managers talked about their close relations with their employees. Also, one male manager, Charles, narrated about his genuine care for his employees, which in his opinion, was in deep contradiction with the focus on profit making. Gender emerged from the preliminary discourse analysis as a people versus business orientation in which the people orientation belongs to feminine discourse and business to a more traditional masculine one.

Branch location seemed to be a rather huge factor in the narratives regarding identity construction, particularly whether a branch was in a large, multi-branch area in a big city or in a small, rural area with a single branch. On the one hand, in the multi-branch areas, the
branch managers had colleagues physically nearby, but on the other hand, they did not present themselves as being the cream of the area’s social circles. Hence, the prestigious position of branch management was stronger for the branch managers who were the sole managers in their areas. Especially in the rural areas in which Henri and Ben were located, the branch managers enjoyed high status in the local community. It was also many times the case that these senior managers had managed the same branch for years, during which they had developed strong relations with the local people. Ben told of how important it has been for him to be appointed as the sole branch manager responsible for personal and corporate banking in this hometown.

In the next chapter, I will summarise this thesis and make final remarks and conclusions.
6. CONCLUSIONS

In this final chapter, I discuss the theoretical contribution and the practical managerial implications of my study. I also evaluate the study and put forth some possible future research directions. Did these particular branch managers as part of middle management co-construct themselves “being caught in the middle”, as stated in the title of my thesis?

6.1 Theoretical contributions of the study

In this study, I have integrated the middle management and liminality discussions through the narrative identity construction process. The concept of liminality was used as “a lens” to approach the identity of middle management in strategic change. In the introductory chapter of my thesis, the research question was posed as follows:

How is middle managers’ narrative identity constructed in the course of strategic change?

In my study the middle manager position was not described as a temporary position to boost one’s career upwards as Thomas & Linstead (2002) stated; instead, the position was regarded as a “keeper” and something to which they had aspired. One branch stated that she would not have even believed to become a branch manager someday. Whether the branch manager’s position lived up to their expectations at the time of interviews was another issue. The organisational position in the middle and the strategic changes put a lot of pressure on the middle managers, which was narrated though liminality (Beech, 2011; Ybema et al., 2011).

Next I will discuss the main findings and how they fit into prior studies and theories. In this chapter, the contributions are divided into two sub-chapters: firstly, in order to point out the findings, which provide new knowledge especially in terms of the discussion on identity construction and liminality and secondly, to discuss in more detail the findings that relate more directly to the middle management discussion.

6.1.1 Middle management facing liminality

Utilising the concept of liminality enables capturing the narrated identity of the middle managers in a systematic manner. Liminality has so far been defined mainly with negative underpinnings, stating the identity disruption in times of change (Beech, 2011; Noble & Walker, 1997). In my study, it became apparent that liminality can happen even if the changes are expected and pleasurable ones, and thus liminality can be manifested by positive anticipation and excitement as well. Being uncertain of the future does not necessarily come out as negative or critical in language use. Even those who are the most deeply converted reflect doubts regarding carrying out what is expected of them. Only in
one category did the narratives show no signs of liminality; otherwise, the in-between-ness was expressed through self-reflection. Hence, the narrative identity may be anticipated as positive, implying a progressive narrative regardless of the confusion going on.

Although middle managers are situated in the same organisational position, they co-construct their narrative identities differently in strategic change. Therefore, the findings of my study are contextualised to the Bank and the local branch managers. The branch managers’ narratives in the strategic change of middle managers in this study compound from two dimensions: 1) the overall strategic change — the “big picture” and 2) one’s own identity in this change through narrative identity construction. These two elements, strategic change and identity, are connected in the branch managers’ language use in which they are constructed as ambiguous combinations, possibly signalling liminality. Hence, my study conceptualises the fuzziness of middle management through liminality. The controversial language use possibly signals liminality and demonstrates attempts to cope through meaning-making in demanding situations. I claim as the first theoretical contribution of my study:

The nature of the narrated liminality can be transitional, perpetual or a mixture of both. It is also possible that there are no signs of liminality, and the narrative gets constructed as neutral in strategic change. The liminality does not necessarily depend on whether the strategic change is constructed as a de-conversion or a conversion story.

It is thus possible to be constructed “a true believer” of the strategy and yet struggle to find one’s own place. This multidimensional language use could optionally also be understood as multiple and polyphonic discourses, which are just stated as a part of organisational life. However, an alternative approach can be adopted and seen the multiple discourses being possibly constructions of liminality as the branch managers struggle to craft their identities in the spin of change.

The antagonist elements constructed in the branch managers’ narratives were presented as thematically in my study: 1) too much control/room to manoeuvre, 2) compliance/rebelliousness, 3) loneliness/belonging, 4) lack of trust/trust, 5) new expertise/current expertise, 6) gender ignorance/gender sensitivity and 7) value mismatch/value match. These antagonist themes provide new knowledge on the narrative understanding of liminality and how it is constructed in the middle. On the one hand, some of the elements were more strongly present in the women’s stories, such as gender issues. On the other hand, these were also softer elements present in the male branch managers’ narratives, such as care-taking in a paternalistic manner. The biggest disappointments expressed dealt with the lack of having room to manoeuvre. Although these themes can be portrayed as sources of extra turmoil, they can also be understood as discursive resources, which the branch managers used to cope language-wise in the changing environment when relating with multiple actors. On the one hand, they were able to present themselves as tough managers to their supervisors, and on the other hand, they were able to express a more human and softer side to their employees.

Another contribution of my study comes from being able to construct through theme analysis clear implications for how career stage (senior/junior), gender and location impact the constructed liminality of being in the middle. Gender dimension was under discussion as such explicitly in the antagonist themes (gender ignorance/gender sensitivity), whereas
seniority and location came through more implicitly in other themes. The former was present in themes that included room to manoeuvre and compliance. The latter was discussed in the theme of a sense of belonging. Therefore, I state as the second theoretical contribution of my study:

The way narrative identity of middle management is constructed is influenced three elements: 1) seniority, 2) gender and 3) age. These all seem to increase or decrease the narrated liminality.

The senior branch managers did not make a fuss every time something new came along to be implemented. The senior survivors in particular were constructed as having a high perception of themselves and about their status as competent seniors, regardless of whether their competences actually matched those demanded by top management. They had all already considered their lives and careers, and I got the feeling that none of the most senior managers had any further career aspirations. Some of them, such as Ben and Henri, were at times critical, whereas Fiona was more diplomatic in her choice of words. This can be interpreted as a natural shift towards the next phase of life. For the younger junior branch managers, the mismatch constructed between the chosen strategic direction and their own views was a source of tension. There was also more pondering of how to move ahead if they did not buy into the new direction. They had so many career years in front of them and huge drive, which occasionally took a hit. For example, Tina described her attempts to get the message through to senior management as playing ping-pong because her ideas were instantly bounced back as irrelevant and not worth trying. Junior branch managers also saw their relationship with their supervisors more officially and were more concerned about “losing face”, whereas the senior ones did not care so much about how their actions would look like in the eyes of the regional manager. Hence, they language use differed as they described their relations with the upper management.

Gender was stereotypically constructed in the narratives, which was a surprise for me. However, gender seemed to foster a rather enormous source of liminality in many ways, including: balancing family and children as well as adjusting the softer feminine values to match business demands and targets. Male managers clearly wanted to stick with the public work circles. For me, excluding private life so strongly signalled that it was the standard masculine way of constructing oneself at work, which females struggled to fulfil. Gender was also constructed from value-based perspective in which feminine and softer values were mapped against more masculine, business-orientated ones.

Location also played a role in the way identities were crafted. There was a difference depending on whether the branch manager was located in a smaller rural town or in larger city with multiple branches. Ian, Ben, Tina, Henry and Amanda were the ones managing the sole Sampo Bank branch in the area. Especially in the narratives of Ben and Henry, the sense of belonging to that particular town and community was expressed strongly. Although they did not have colleagues physically near to do benchmarking and to discuss, they enjoyed their status in local circles. For Henry, it had been tough in the Postipankki days because he was not invited to mingle in monthly meetings with competitors’ branch managers. Ben spoke openly about the decision made between himself and the former corporate banking manager that he be nominated to branch manager. Ben was nominated and the other manager left the Bank. For Ben, the opportunity to be the sole Sampo Bank branch manager was constructed as a huge victory and appeared to be fulfilling. In the

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larger multi-branch cities such as the ones in the Capital city area, the branch managers were operating in a totally different context. Since they were not the sole branch managers, there were decisions to be made in collaboration with others. Also, the position was not constructed to be as prestigious in larger cities since the branch might have been located, for example, in a shopping centre instead of in a cornerstone office in the centre as in rural areas.

These three presented elements (career phase, gender and location) were also constructed as elements which besides causing stability or liminality, they also seemed connected to the structure of the narratives as progressive or regressive. Seniority appeared to bring with it a good deal of certainty. At times, they even crafted the idea that their supervisors were less competent than themselves. Being a female manager was constructed as an advantage or a disadvantage depending on the exact topic under discussion. Location and sense of belonging to a certain branch was a valued source of stability.

The “soul searching” might also be constructed due to lack of rites. The relationship between the expected branch manager and the current self was explicitly stated on many occasions. Identity-wise, this was presented as more demanding for some than others. The branch managers utilised multiple discursive identities (selves): the authentic identity, expected branch manager's identity, the identity cast on them and their aspirational identity in their language-use cleverly as they described themselves and the situation they were in. This process can derive from the lack of clear rites of passage in organisational settings (Trice & Beyer, 1999). The large-scale strategic change of the Bank was constructed as being similarly understood regardless of whether it was seen as something positive for the narrator. In an intra-role change which takes place with no change in organisational position, it is harder to draw the line between past and present (Louis, 1980), especially if there has not been any rites of passage to signify the changes. Some of the branch managers changed branches or got a new supervisor, but for the majority, the change was expected to place without clear rites of passage (Hallier & James, 1999). Some of the managers mentioned the trainings they had participated in. Others commented being called “bank managers”, which exemplified the changed status for some of them, but not for everybody. This leads to the third theoretical contribution of my study:

Lack of clear rites of passage signalling the impact of strategic change for middle management’s understanding of their new role can lead to constructions of uneasiness and anxiety, and cause unnecessary turmoil, which can be constructed as liminality in meaning-making.

Liminality was constructed by the inability to let go of the old identity and inhabit the new one. Hence, both the liminal stage and the incorporation are present at the same time (Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2002). Many of the branch managers were used to leading by their own example and being the best salesperson. Not being able to do that any longer seemed to bother them as did the need to delegate sales managerial responsibilities. The branch managers related themselves to sales managers or business unit managers depending on the exact topic under discussion (Thomas & Linstead, 2002). However, there were no clear and strict job descriptions available and hence, it was their own task to decide how to proceed.

Taking a closer look into the practices of liminality presented by Beech (2011), it seems that reflection was the most common one in the branch managers’ narratives. In some narratives, the recognition came from being appointed to manage new responsibilities and
receiving a new title as a bank manager. However, the experimentation with more senior-level duties was a rare phenomenon as it was only practiced by one branch manager. In perpetual liminality, there does not seem to be many places in which one is able to rehearse “back-stage” (Beech & Johnson, 2005) in a safe environment. This is also a possible source of additional tension. Some of them did not like to share ideas with their colleagues because it seemed as if they were also tying hands.

There had been sleep-over trainings organised to the business-orientation as rites of passage, but these were mainly targeted to tackle the possible lack of the needed new competencies. Rouleau and Balogun (2011) stated that internal trainings may concentrate too much on analytical skills instead of the ability to relate and engage in a meaningful way. In the branch managers’ narratives, there was a strong focus on the numbers-side and less on how to get the employees on board as well. It makes wonder whether the number side turned out to be over-emphasised in the Bank at the expense of focusing on the employees to make sure that they also received the needed rites of passage to follow the new strategy.

Beech (2011) presented five characteristics of liminality. I will next briefly go through each of them regarding my study: 1) in my study, the recognisable triggering event was the strategic re-focusing after the merger, which also brought along massive organisational re-structuring (group managers) and re-orientation (new strategy and branches transformed into profit centres). 2) The branch managers moved into a space “in between”, in which most of them were at the time of the interviews; they had lost their old identities but were not quite comfortable with the new ones. 3) The social separation was not apparent in all the narratives, but some of the branch managers expressed their worries of not yet having the needed skills in order to be considered to be a genuine profit centre manager. 4) The largest source of liminality was the dysfunctional relationships with the supervisors, which caused them ambiguity. The trouble arose from the mismatch between the expected independence in a new role and the actual tight control. 5) For some, this was narrated by not having full control of themselves and their branches. In addition, the performance indicators, which were regarded as unjust, highlighted this lack of control as well as being judged unfairly. Hence, it appears the characters of liminality were, at least for most part, present in the narratives.

Although I assume that Beech (2011) mainly had transitional liminality in mind when describing these characters just covered, they seem to go well with perpetual liminality as well. Perpetual liminality can be defined as not being completely comfortable in the middle for various reasons. Transitional liminality is more clearly related to a specific job role transformation, which starts the identity reconstruction. There were signs of self–other constructions in the narratives entailing transitional liminality as well, but the nature of these were different than in perpetual ones. In the transitional ones, the self–other was constructed mainly through comparisons claiming superiority of the self in some respect compared to others. In the perpetual ones, liminality mainly concerned relationships with others, and the discourses changed depending on the others under discussion. The perception of others, referring to the cast and expected identity, was in the focus. This is in line with the findings of Ybema et al. (2011), who stated that perpetual liminality deals with identity constructions related to the question “who am I to others?”

My study confirms the findings of Beech (2011), pointing out the necessity of peer support in liminality. Most of the branch managers stated having strong ties with their closest colleagues. The branch managers described their relationships as being close to
friendship with certain specific colleagues. Only a few colleagues belonged in the circle of trust. This is in line with the strong sense of comradeship in “the spirit of communitas” stated by Turner (1977 [1969]) and also supported by Eriksson-Zetterquist (2002). For the majority, close colleagues represented the possibility of trying out one’s ideas and maybe even implementing some new ideas in simultaneous collaboration across branches. Hence, *the fourth theoretical contribution of my study* is presented as follows:

Even though liminality may be constructed as deep, positive anticipation of the future and easy going relationships with one’s supervisor and peers can diminish the expressed anxiety emerging from liminality.

There was present in the branch managers’ narratives the identity mismatch between the branch managers’ own understanding of themselves and the ideal branch manager. The former refers to their own self-perception co-constructed with other people, and the latter to the ideal image of a branch manager. The gap between these two seemed to cause a moral struggle and/or defensive language use. Particularly the emphasis on shareholder value was regarded as immoral in some narratives. Changes in one’s own identity and the demands from top management put pressure on the branch managers to transform themselves into the ideal, expected manager. This target becomes even more challenging if the cast identity is against the expected one, as was the case in one narrative in which the branch manager characterised herself as a “weirdo” for not concentrating on analysing the reports. However, some may even find it exciting to oscillate between various groups and people outside and inside the Bank and “play” with multiple identities as they try to construct the best “fit” in each situation (Ellis & Ybema, 2010). As Beech (2011) stated, it can be difficult to change the perception of top management if they have categorised someone, for example, as “blue collar”, regardless of education level and expertise.

Perpetual liminality was for the most part constructed according to self–other constructions, whereas transitional liminality came forward mainly through comparisons between old and new (Ybema et al., 2011). In both cases, the relationship between the narrated expectations and the narrated experiences after the changes (Reissner, 2010) affected the nature and deepness of the liminality. Although the liminality was at times created by meaning making through separation of the old and new, the liminality was actually perpetual and vice versa. This puts emphasis on being able to look more closely and analyse the meanings made. At times, there were signs of both versions of liminality in the narratives, implying perhaps that it had started out as transitional but translated into perpetual due to a long duration of being in-between. This might have been the case in the narratives of the two senior branch managers who had backgrounds from another banking group.

Hence, the sources of liminality and stability played an important role in portraying the liminal space constructed by language use. I do not consider them in a positivist sense as cause–effect; rather, they were used in the branch managers’ narratives to paint a picture through meaning-making of their past, present and future to a certain kind in co-construction with me.

The next chapter deals with the the middle management position in between strategic and operational levels organisationally.
6.1.2 Middle managers in between strategic and operational

Here, the focus is on the implications of liminality more directly connected to the middle management discussion. My original assumption was that the strategic changes have been the most challenging changes for the branch managers. However, it became evident that despite the scale of the changes, they did not affect all the branch managers similarly. Some of the branch managers described their own career transformations as more significant than the strategic and organisational changes. The focus in this chapter is on three issues: 1) the strategic responsibilities of the middle managers, 2) the relation between middle managers and their immediate supervisors and 3) the organisational position of the middle managers in between the senior management and front-line management. In this chapter the noun middle management is replaced systematically with branch management/branch managers due to the context-driven nature of my study.

Firstly, the strategic dimension of the branch management responsibilities was not clearly stated for them which was constructed as confusing. The branch managers’ narrative identities of the state of affairs differed from considering oneself as a strategist to being an implementer. In addition, whether the implementation duties were constructed as valuable and important varied from one branch manager’s narrative to another. According to Mantere and Vaara (2008), discourses in organisations seem to legitimise and delegitimise certain ways of participation in strategy process. Some of the branch managers took as a given their exclusion from the actual strategy process, whereas others saw themselves as genuine strategists. Mantere and Vaara (2008) stated that this possible exclusion may not cause any problems because middle managers may be used to being responsible for implementing the top-down processes and the “water fall” models. Although their organisational position was the same, they described their room to manoeuvre as either wide or restrained. This seemed to be dependent on their background and the way they constructed their past. Some stated that now they have less independence, whereas others felt like they had the freedom to act as they wanted and needed. The branch managers used various tactics to tackle discursively their uncomfortable position of being in the middle.

Most branch managers did everything in their mandate to reach the set goals, which can be constructed as a sign of strong commitment, but some of them even crossed the line and exceeded their mandate, which can be taken as a sign of disobedience or of taking liberties. Hence, there seems to be a fine line between engaging in championing activities, which means taking strategic initiatives when it is not even required in that specific organisational position (Mantere, 2005) or crossing the boundary and coming up with one’s own procedures and processes (Vickers, 2008) and not acting in line with the official strategy and concepts. Mantere and Vaara (2008) have also identified in their study positive resistance, which is closely linked to championing activities as a way to take initiative and seek alternative ways to participate in the strategy. Some branch managers were taken up initiatives themselves and not asked permission to plan and implement something new in their branches. Also talk and action of their immediate supervisor and top management was not aligned, and some of the branch managers had expected a larger mandate for themselves.

Some of the branch managers claimed to be satisfied being in the middle, whereas for others the position was demanding to handle. They were considered as accountable, but
they were not given a full mandate. The most obvious source of mixed emotions was the role of the profit centre manager and the possible independence it brought. Because the narratives ranged from conversion stories to de-conversion ones, the emotional spectrum articulated in them was broad, from thrilling excitement to deep disappointment and anxiety. The older, more senior branch managers seemed to take even their disappointments in a more mature and reflective manner.

Secondly, many controversial elements in the branch managers’ narratives related with their relationship with their immediate supervisor, the regional manager. In many cases, the regional managers’ managing style was described more as commanding than managing. There was no room to manoeuvre or to act as an independent business unit manager. The problem emerged from the chain of command and accountability; if “the rope is tight” for the branch managers, it most likely signalled that the rope was even tighter for their supervisors. In other words, if the regional managers felt as if they were under tight control, they passed the control downwards. The mismatch between the communicated “big picture” and the middle managers’ interaction with their regional managers were constructed as irritating.

On many occasions, the regional manager was described causing extra anxiety due to strict control, which made it even harder to let go of the operational duties and trust the group managers. Some branch managers described how they had been given more liberties due to good performance, whereas others seemed to suffer from too much control over them. A couple of the branch managers even wondered about their own behaviour and whether they had started to imitate their supervisor’s “bad behaviour” too much. The controversy over what was expected from them as managers and leaders was constructed as opposite their supervisors’ behaviour. Branch managers hardly made any positive comments on their supervisors; on the contrary the regional managers were portrayed as ignorant and lacking leadership skills.

The possibility to discuss with close colleagues, gather into self-organised “semi-official meetings” and invent new procedures independently was communicated on the one hand as liberating. However, on the other hand, it was narrated to be a bit dangerous at times since it was unclear whether this kind of local strategising belonged to the responsibilities of the middle managers in this particular organisation. The unofficial branch managers’ meetings can also act out as a forum to deepen one’s own understanding and evaluate one’s own role in the organisation in a trusted atmosphere. Depending on how trusting the relationships are, these meetings can also be seen as forums in which one can test one’s ideas and “rehearse back-stage” (Beech & Johnson, 2005). These meetings were also needed due to awkward and formal relations with the regional manager.

Although the study was not about comparing the statements of top management versus the ones constructed by the branch managers, I cannot forget the quotation I used in the Prologue. The CEO of the Bank called the branch managers “the local kings”. One has to keep in mind that this message was directed to the larger public, but it also has to be in line with internally made statements in the Bank. Otherwise, it will only cause extra and unnecessary problems. Mantere and Vaara (2008) stated in their study that senior management may intentionally promote top-down models in strategising because they want to hold all the strings and control the overall strategy. This finding is aligned with mine because on the one hand, branch managers felt being officially given the mandate to act independently and, on the other hand, they felt controlled by their immediate supervisor.
Thirdly, the organisational position between senior management and operational front-line management was constructed as controversial, especially in the context of change. On the one hand, some of the branch managers reflected on their role in the customer front-line, in sales management and in the ability to rise up to the strategic level. On the other hand, some of them saw themselves purely as strategic managers and even wondered whether they had lost their operational-level competence somewhere along the way.

According to Huy (2002) middle management is the needed “buffer” for the operational staff in emotionally draining situations. The branch managers pointed out on multiple occasions how it is their responsibility to formulate messages coming from top management so that they are suitable for their own organisational settings. According to Sims (2003) middle managers may find themselves in awkward situations pleasing multiple “audiences” inside the organisation. In my study the branch managers had an additional audience after the changes: the group managers. Branch managers searched for some signs of stability as they faced massive changes and tried to justify their existence through multiple discourses. It appeared that at times the middle managers may have been forced to present the pre-decided issues as their own to preserve their credibility. The relations with their group managers were described as fellow managers or supervisor–employee relations, depending for example on the seniority of the branch manager.

Thomas and Linstead (2002) claimed that because of the demanding organisational position of the middle managers, it is natural to make self–other comparisons, especially with first-line managers and senior managers. Some of the branch managers questioned the status of the regional management and complained that the group managers did not possess enough knowledge to become serious discussion partners business-wise. Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) portrayed perpetual liminality as a normal state for multiple organisational individuals. The branch managers in perpetual liminality constructed themselves in relation to others in controversial ways, for example stating, “I am like everyone else” and “I am calling the shots here”. These statements highlight the dilemma of being in the middle in between the front-line and senior management.

Looking into the narratives in more detail revealed the mixed emotions generated by the new organisational structure in which the branch manager was a supervisor for group managers. The dilemma arose from the demanding situation of becoming accountable for the performance of one’s own branch as a profit centre and being forced to hand over sales management to group managers. In addition, the relationship with the regional manager was described as a challenging one because in most of the narratives the interaction was mainly characterised as awkward and totally lacking trust. This made the branch managers doubt their actual existence as genuine profit centre managers. It was hoped that the regional manager would not intervene but would show interest and give praise. Finding the balance which suits both parties can be difficult, especially if the expectations are not made explicit. A big issue in identity construction is that the middle managers do not feel that their input and the received rewards match, which causes bitterness and cynicism which can ultimately lead to withdrawal. Uncertainty and bitterness are present in the branch managers’ narratives. However, at the time of interviews there were no signs of downshifting (Thomas&Dunkerley, 1999) as such, since the branch managers wanted to be on top of things and have all the possible knowledge and skills needed to be successful.
In the next chapter, the discussion will be on the more practical managerial implications of my study.

### 6.2 Practical managerial implications of the study

In this particular chapter, I approach the findings of my study from a practical perspective and reflect on practical managerial implications that can be concluded from the contributions just presented. The issues addressed in this chapter are: 1) drive and potential of the middle managers to be used in strategy process, 2) training and discussion forums to clarify the mandate of middle management and 3) mentoring as a tool to increase possibilities to have open discussions and share insight in safe environment.

Firstly, according to my study, it seems that middle managers are willing to put more effort into strategy work and overall to act more independently if they are given the opportunity. This supports the findings of Kallio (2014) in which it became evident that at the same time as the middle managers took part in the strategy process; they also took part in their own ideal identity formulation. Being part of the process enables the identification of — in the early stages — the organisation’s strategic direction and expected behaviour. This makes it easier to assess one’s own willingness and capacity to act upon the formulations and, for example, to reflect on the possible match between one’s own and the organisation’s values. In my study many of the branch managers had taken part in development projects but somehow did not see them as strategic-level ones. Hence, it appears that there should be room for open discussions on what strategy and strategic level issues mean: Are strategy and strategic issues something that belong purely to top management or are they something that could be taken into account in branches as well as part of daily operations?

Many comments the branch managers made were critical in nature. However the criticality should not be taken necessarily as a sign of disobedience and disloyalty; the nature of it appears to vary. Criticality can be turned upside down and seen positively — for example, as a message of strong commitment. It can also be used as a driving force if it is harnessed in the right manner. The organisation can lose its ability to be innovative and make fast moves if there is a culture of “yes men and women” and homogeneity is overvalued. What kind of possibilities does the organisational strategy have to survive and to be a guide in the daily activities of the employees if it loses its credibility at the middle management level?

Secondly, it became evident how important it is to organise proper trainings and discussion forums in large-scale organisational changes. The big picture and the broader storyline were made explicit, but the branch managers lacked the more detailed description. The branch managers faced a new situation with the group managers, and some of them even explicitly expressed their need for a clear concept to be followed. In other words, they hoped for guidance in managing their group managers. I know that strategy workshops were eventually organised, but they would have beneficial for the branch managers right from the start for them to be able to reflect with colleagues and have an opportunity to discuss with top management, “What does the new strategic direction mean for me?” or “What are my responsibilities?” Reading and re-reading these narratives made me notice that for the large part they were left to manage on their own.
Kuusipalo (2008) also stated that in times of large-scale changes, support from management is needed more than ever. If the management is not present, the employees tend to distance themselves from the organisation and not use it as their point of reference. However, the obvious dilemma is what is the optimal presence of the senior management and the amount of support? In some regions, the branch managers had self-organised local get-togethers in which they had discussed business and other relevant on-going issues. This has also given them confidence in the way they are managing their branches. Maybe this could be something which is organised centrally. The challenge is how to actually organise these kinds of events if some branch managers see them as needed and others see them as setting even more strict and irritating guidelines on their management.

It appears that middle managers, at least the local branch managers, would benefit from more clearly defined mandate and expectations set for them. In large-scale organisational changes, their transformation into new duties might be smoothed by giving them support and training on the interactional skills needed in the new situation. However, normally the focus is on teaching hard-core business skills. “Structure did not follow strategy” (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985; Mintzberg, 1994) and the branch managers had to get along with loose guidelines. By “structure” I refer for example to trainings on profit centre management from other than purely financial perspective including communicative and leadership skills. In addition clear written job profiles, which describe the expected tasks and responsibilities would most likely diminish the uneasiness.

Thirdly, there appeared to be quite a lot of mutual distrust and even imagined cast identities projected on others. As discussed in the main findings, the manager–subordinate relationship is never easy, but it gets even tougher if both of them are in supervisory positions. It made me wonder whether sufficient room to manoeuvre is more like a mindset or something that can actually be given. All the branch managers share the same status and title but describe the situation differently. Thus, could a possible solution be mentoring and supporting as rites of passage into the new world? The mentor should be someone who knows the business but is not considered as a possible rival or current supervisor. Creating a functional mentoring system for middle managers will not be a simple task because most likely suspicion will arise regarding whether it is a new kind of surveillance method or a way to limit their actions.

Finally, I pose a question: who will succeed in the middle? What is needed in order to reach the targets? It appears according to my study that a middle manager, at least in the case organisation in this study, can be successful regardless of one’s own identity construction status. These 12 managers exemplified how it is possible to be constructed deep in liminality but still manage one’s branch successfully. Rouleau and Balogun (2011) stated that an effective middle manager has strong discursive competence. This ability goes beyond selling issues to top management (Dutton et al., 1997) because it also refers to the ability to provide the needed setting for discussion and surround oneself with relevant people when needed. This is needed from middle management due to the lack of self-evident formal power that senior management holds in their hands.
6.3 Assessing the study

In this chapter, assess this study, not from the traditionalist perspective of validity; instead I use the guidelines set by Kohler-Riessman (2008) for the validity of a narrative study, although she admits that there are no general rules to be applied that would fit all research projects. She divided the validity into, on the one hand, the validity of the story told by the narrator and, on the other hand, the validity of the story told by the researcher. A narrative told in a specific situation for a certain purpose is never able to reach the “true” experience and is not even intended to do so. Hence, the correspondence of a personal narrative with actual events is not relevant in studies which apply social constructionist orientation. Kohler-Riessman (2008) also stated as one sign of validity the pragmatic use of the research, which demands making explicit the choices made along the way and describing thoroughly the whole research process. She also stated as one option is to make the primary data available to everybody, which is not always possible. Wolfram Cox (2007) saw the richness of quotation as one solution for the readers to evaluate the validity. Gergen and Gergen (2003) listed ways to prove to readers the validity of qualitative research: reflexivity, multiple voicing, literary styling and performance.

According to Kohler-Riessman (1993:65) the focus is not in truthfulness; it is on the trustworthiness of the research. The value of this study will be evaluated by the readers: Have the narratives been enjoyable to read? Have they been plausible? I have done my best to be as transparent as possible in explaining my chain of choices and made a solid argumentation. My objective was to describe and analyse the narrative identity construction of middle management in the course of strategic change. I approached this topic taking narrative identity, liminality and middle management discussions as my starting points. For an insider of the case organisation, such as myself, it has from time to time been demanding to explain things that appear obvious but are in need of clarification for outsiders. I have tackled this challenge by making arguments to back-up my reasoning. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) trustworthiness emphasises the human, not straightforward process of construction of new vistas. For me this has meant openness in descriptions of my research process and data analysis. Juhila (1999) stated that one way to understand the interactional nature of empirical data and the researcher is to start by reflecting on one’s own presumptions and background, which directs the researcher to perceive certain issues from the data. For me the data analysis started from identifying elements related to change right from the start from multiple perspectives: organisational level, ideal branch manager level and individual branch manager level co-constructed in the interviews.

Hosking and Fineman (1990) emphasised the tacit-knowledge of “the native” researchers, which can be used to fill gaps in the data otherwise left unexplained in the research report. The biggest challenge doing research “at close range” is the blindness because the insider is so accustomed to that particular organisation (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Mäntylä, 2007). Over the years, my understanding has developed due to my own life experiences and changes. Hence, my understanding of the data is something rather different than in 2005 when the data were gathered. Some of my colleagues in the Bank have wondered whether I can remember everything that has happened correctly after such a long time. However, that is no issue in social constructionist orientation. On the one hand, the passage of time has given me perspective and the ability to distance myself from
the studied context (strategic changes). On the other hand, it has also brought some nostalgic feelings and has made me reflect on my time as a branch manager, although it took place in a different organisational phase with a different strategic focus. Putting aside one’s own background and being neutral has not been a goal for me (cf. Laine, 2008); instead, I have done my best to make visible my assumptions (Turnbull, 2002).

Why did I choose to concentrate on the branch managers’ stories instead of writing my own story? I decided to use my own experience as a valuable source of insider knowledge and to concentrate on the branch managers. This is due to not wanting to reveal my personal past in the Bank. I have had “my moments”, and then at times things have not gone so smoothly, and I, too, entered into liminality. At least I construct this particular phase as such today. I have had the privilege to work with amazing and competent managers and unfortunately quite the opposite for a while. A particular incident would have been too dominating in my own narrative. In addition, my own experiences pushed me to search for a profound understanding of the in-between-ness. McCormack (2004) pointed out the need to let the narrators read and comment on the rewritten narratives. However, I did not engage in that process for at least two reasons: It took me such a long time to get them finished and secondly, it is relevant from a social constructionist point of view. It would have been courtesy to them but not a vehicle to validate the data because I have built the rewritten narratives and antagonist themes in the spirit of social constructionism relating to my cultural and social background. Social constructionism has been accused of relativism, but I see the guidelines it sets as research orientation at times hard to be followed. “Not anything goes” and choices made require through explaining. However, I consider that I have been able to stay committed to my assumptions.

Would the data have been different had I had identity construction and, in particularly, liminality as a pre-decided focus before entering into interviewing? I see that letting the branch managers speak freely on the issues that mattered to them was the right kind of approach. By that loose interviewing method, I was able to co-construct vivid narratives filled with reflections with the branch managers. I could have left out the narratives that included no signs or only small portions of liminality. However, I wished to point out that in strategic change, actors in the same organisational position can experience and thus by their language use express changes in multiple ways, from “business as usual” to large-scale liminality, “shuffling the pack” entirely. Deciding solely to analyse the narratives, which fell nicely into neat categories, would have constructed the data falsely, although it might appear to be a tempting option (Hänninen & Koski-Jännes, 2010).

6.4 Future research directions

The world has changed, and we are living in a challenging economic climate. The year 2005 represented a time of growth, whereas today in 2014 banks are in an even more challenging situation. The Finnish banking sector is yet again in a severe transformation phase because there is a growing need to find supplementary income as the interest rates are staying at exceptionally low level. It appears that the banks in Finland will be led by different kinds of strategies based on their understanding of customer channel usage changes in the forthcoming years: Some invest heavily on digital services, whereas others believe strongly
in physical presence with cornerstone branches. There also seems to be a third alternative, which is a combination of these two choices. For these reasons, the Finnish banking sector will remain one of the most exciting research topics in the forthcoming years.

The most obvious future research direction from my perspective would be to study the sources of liminality in more detail. A deeper analysis of the sources of liminality in language use would provide more knowledge for the middle management discussion. Each of the antagonist themes in my study describing sources of liminality and stability entered into a broad theoretical discussion, which was possible to refer to only briefly in this study. For example, gender issues have been under study in the Finnish banking sector (e.g., Tienari, 1999) in the organisational restructuring context, and deepening the gender perspective would possibly provide new insights into this discussion.

Repeating the study in the future might add to the knowledge on strategic change in different kinds of economic situations. Many of the branch managers had for years been in that particular position when I met them. One possibility would be to interview branch managers again in order to see how they describe their identities today in a different situation. However, the Bank has once again entered into a new organisation, through the Danske acquisition; many of the branch managers have changed their duties within the Bank or decided to pursue a career elsewhere. Hence, this kind of follow-up study would most likely take part more clearly in the realm of career studies and might bring interesting insights into the middle management career discussion.

In addition, the complicated relationship of branch managers and their group managers seems worth digging deeper into. There seem to be many communication problems and a lack of trust. Including views from both sides — branch managers and group managers — would be enlightening. This could also be done in other organisational settings besides banking.

It would also be fascinating to study the leadership processes in local branches. This would mean moving away from the focus on individual managers and their narratives to a broader perspective — putting the leadership process in the spotlight (Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Hosking, 2011; Salovaara, 2011). This kind of approach would call for a methodological approach other than interviews in order to get inside the processes.

There are studies that focus on actors in multiple organisational layers in organisational change (Søderberg, 2003), but a new perspective would also approach the identity construction of the middle management in a dialogic perspective (Beech, 2008) and analyse the discursive practices of middle managers from themselves as well from their supervisors, subordinates and colleagues. This kind of approach would deepen the understanding of middle managers again from fresh perspective.

Sampo Bank as a part of Sampo PLC presented an intriguing organisational phase. Facing something new was exciting and challenging for the branch managers. Yet the challenges never seem to end . . . and something new seems to be behind every corner. Luckily, I might add.
7. REFERENCES


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