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BUSINESS LEADERS’ NARRATIVES ABOUT RESPONSIBILITY IN LEADERSHIP WORK

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Academic dissertation to be presented with the assent of The Doctoral Training Committee of Human Sciences, University of Oulu for public defence in the Arina auditorium (TA105), Linnanmaa, on 4 December 2015, at 12 noon

UNIVERSITY OF OULU, OULU 2015
Keränen, Anne, Business leaders’ narratives about responsibility in leadership work.
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Abstract
This research aims to provide additional knowledge and understanding to augment existing ideas and theories of responsible leadership, and to bring forward the voices and practical experiences of business leaders. It approaches responsible leadership from a constructionist perspective and highlights the importance of leadership processes. This approach considers responsible leadership in today’s fragmented business environment as increasingly formed through interaction between people. Thus, the practice of good responsible leadership is conceptualized foremost as the ability to work within and through relationships in which language plays a central role.

This research is based on ten narrative interviews with senior leaders of different business backgrounds. The narrative approach is used because individuals interpret and make sense of their experiences using narratives, and narratives structure our ethical positions in the world. The focus is partly on the content of individual accounts but more on how the stories reflect the social world from which the stories arise. This information, in turn, allows us to interpret interaction in certain social leadership contexts based on leaders’ individual accounts.

The results of this research suggest a fluid definition of responsibility. It is a continuously changing construction in which many participants in addition to the leaders themselves are involved. Therefore, the discussion on responsibility is polyphonic. Every leader negotiates the meaning of responsibility within the limits and possibilities of local settings. The results of this research highlight the importance of relationships among participants in responsible leadership instead of seeing responsibility as part of an individual leader’s personality or character.

Keywords: leadership, narrative, relationality, responsibility
Keränen, Anne, Yritysjohtajien kertomuksia vastuullisuudesta johtamistyössä.
Oulun yliopiston tutkijakoulu; Oulun yliopisto, Oulun yliopiston kauppakorkeakoulu,
Johtamisen ja kansainvälisten liiketoiminnan yksikkö; Martti Ahtisaari Instituutti
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**Tiivistelmä**

Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena on tuoda lisää tietoa ja ymmärrystä vastuullisen johtamisen käsi-
tykksiin ja teorioihin yritysjohtajien kertomuksien ja kokemuksen kautta. Tämä tutkimus lähes-
tyy vastuullista johtamista konstruktionistisella otteella korostaen vuorovaikutussuhteiden mer-
kystä. Vastuullinen johtaminen nähään muodostuvan päivän pirstaleisessa liiketoimintaympä-
tsyttöössä enenevässä määrin ihmisten välisissä suhteissa ja vuorovaikutuksessa. Siten hyvä
vastuullinen johtaminen tarkoittaa käytännössä johtajan kykyä työskennellä ihmissuhteissa ja
niiden kautta. Tässä työssä kielellä on keskeinen merkitys.

Tämä tutkimus perustuu kymmenen yritysjohtajan kertomuksiin. Kertojat ovat senioritason
johtajia ja heillä kaikilla on erilainen liiketoimintatausta. Kerronnallista lähestymistapaa käyte-
tään, koska yksilöt tulkitsevat ja luovat ymmärrystä kertomusten kautta. Kertomukset jäsentävät
myös meidän eettistä asemaamme maailmassa. Tässä tutkimuksessa analysoitaan osittain kerto-
musten sisältöä, mutta enemmän sitä, mitä kertomukset kuvastavat, ja tämä näkee erilaisessa kontekstissa
yksittäisten johtajien kertomuksista.

Tämän tutkimuksen tulokset viittaavat siihen, että vastuullinen johtaminen voidaan määritel-
ää vaihtelevasti. Se on jatkuvasti muuttuva määritelmä, jossa johtajien lisäksi moni muu osapuo-
li osallistuu vastuullisuudesta. Nämä ovat keskustelu vastuullisuudesta on moniääräinen. Jokainen
johtaja neuvottelee vastuullisuuden merkityksen paikallisten olosuhteiden antamien mahdollis-
uuksien ja rajoitteiden sisällä. Vastuulliseen johtamistyöhön osallistuvien jäsenten välillä vuoro-
vaikutus korostuu vastakohtana sellaiselle vastuullisuuksettomukselle, jossa vastuullisuus näh-
dään yksittäisen johtajan ominaisuutena tai luonteenpiiritteenä.

**Asiasanat:** johtajuus, kerronta, relationaalinen, vastuullisuus
Acknowledgements

The process of writing this dissertation has been shaped by many people in various ways. My academic career has been fairly short, and for that reason their help and support has been invaluable. I want to start by thanking Professor Vesa Puhakka for his patience and encouragement while supervising this dissertation from the beginning to the present stage. I am especially grateful for his open-minded attitude in discussing the different choices a researcher can make and eventually giving me the final responsibility to decide which one to follow. Professor Emerita Leena Syrjälä, together with our narrative research group, helped me significantly with the narrative research approach. Professor Veikko Seppänen was always ready to assist with any practical concerns in doing research, and he provided me with valuable feedback.

I am grateful for the support of Professor Anna-Maija Lämsä, especially for her expertise in leadership research and for her guidance in writing research articles. Professors Thomas Maak and Hanna Lehtimäki made an important contribution in the form of the pre-review. Thanks to Hanna Siurua for her careful work in editing the dissertation. I also want to thank warmly the ten business leaders who devoted their time to telling me their stories of responsibility and in that way provided the core of this research.

For financial support for this research I want to thank the Marcus Wallenberg Research Foundation of Business Economics, the Tauno Tönning Foundation, the Foundation for Economic Education (Liikesivistysrahasto), the University of Oulu, and the Martti Ahtisaari Institute.

I am grateful to the Martti Ahtisaari Institute and our team there for the opportunity to put into practice what I have learned during the process. In particular, I want to thank Sauli for introducing me to the international network of GRLI (Globally Responsible Leadership Initiative), and Antti and Pirjo for sharing with me their knowledge of teaching practices in EMBA studies. I would not have been able to tackle all the practical challenges without effective help, and I am thankful for the support of Marketta and Liisa, with whose collaboration many problems were solved.

My closest “colleagues” in my research were my fellow PhD researchers in the same field. Of the many people who could merit mention, I especially want to thank Anniina for philosophical discussions on what research is all about, Noora for always showing me the way a little bit ahead, and Leena for rich
conversations at every stage. Sharing the pains and the joys of the journey as academic researchers has been enjoyable and memorable.

The seeds of this dissertation and my ideas regarding responsible business were planted in my early professional career at Polar Electro; I learned a lot there about ethics and business. I have had the opportunity to reflect on my experiences and share thoughts in several discussions with the former CEO of Polar Electro, Tapio Tammi, who has subsequently been a trusty mentor to me throughout my entire career. In addition, I had the chance to see how good values in business can be put into practice through leadership when I worked at Elektrobit. As a researcher, I am aware that both of these professional experiences have affected this research.

I am also grateful to my “personal coaches,” Johanna and Sirpa, who, through hobbies, have helped to balance my days and have kept me in shape and on the move. These little moments and breaks in otherwise hectic days were necessary to clear up my thinking and to recharge my batteries. I would also like to thank my children’s school and its great personnel—the teachers and school assistants who through their great work allowed me to concentrate fully on my work during the day.

My path from the small village of Salla Aholanvaara on the Arctic Circle (located, as its slogan says, in the middle of nowhere) to academic research was by no means self-evident. If the seeds of this dissertation lie in my professional career, then its roots are in my childhood and my family. My parents, Maija and Onni Hänninen, fostered a family spirit in which everything is possible in their work and especially in their attitude. Many political, environmental, and societal concerns were discussed around our kitchen table, not to mention my fathers’ rich and informative stories about the history and development of the area and its people.

Every researcher knows that dissertating is done not only during the day at work, and the hours put in at home certainly affect the family. My special thanks, therefore, go to my husband Timo and our children Toni, Jani, and Kimi. It is wonderful to have your support and to celebrate each of our small and big successes together.

Tupos, Liminka, Finland, October 2015

Anne Keränen
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1 Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

Business leaders are recognized to play a key role in directing the activities of companies in order to respond to higher ethical, accountable, and sustainable standards in business (Hind et al. 2009, Maak & Pless 2006, 2009, Pless & Maak 2008, Waldman & Siegel 2008, Waldman & Galvin 2008). As a consequence, both the theory and the practice of leadership are seeking to reconceptualize leadership in a way that enhances companies’ ability to respond to new standards and new societal concerns (Maak & Pless 2006, Mirvis et al. 2014, Pearce & Manz 2011, Voegtlin et al. 2012). Companies’ strategic activities that make a positive contribution to society are referred to in the literature as corporate citizenship, social responsibility, sustainability, and shared value creation (Crane & Matten 2010, Porter & Kramer 2011, Prahalad 2009, Siegel 2014). In pursuit of these goals, companies have, for example, made innovations in their products, services, and operational processes as well as in their entire business models and their partnerships (Gitsham 2012, Halm & Laurila 2009). As companies have started to respond to the change in their role in the direction of being more proactive in solving societal concerns (Scherer & Palazzo 2011), there has been growing interest in business leadership as a way to reach this goal (Maak & Pless 2006, Pearce et al. 2013, Waldman & Galvin 2008). The present study focuses on what responsibility in leadership can mean for insiders—that is, leaders in the course of their work—and on the various possible ways in which leadership can enhance the integration of responsibility in organizations.

During the last decade, as the role of business has changed, the meaning of leadership has also deepened and expanded among researchers beyond the traditional understanding of leadership as only a property of formal leaders (Fletcher 2012, Hosking 2007, Uhl-Bien 2006). One significant change with definite implications for the meaning of leadership is the increased fragmentation of work and the consequent pluralism in people’s values, norms, and lifestyles (Scherer & Palazzo 2011). This means that organizations’ understandings of their own roles are changing, and the importance of networks, shared value creation, and thus relationships with many stakeholders both within and outside of organizational boundaries is growing (Maak & Pless 2006, Pless & Maak 2011).
To account for these new realities, Nohria and Ghoshal (1997), for example, introduced the concept of boundaryless organizations already nearly twenty years ago. This concept views organizations through horizontal relationships, focused more narrowly on core competences and the knowledge of people. What is not part of this core can be outsourced to some other organization that can do it cheaper, faster, and more innovatively. Business is then based on alliances and relationships (Czarniawska 2004). The development of technology and especially communicational technologies is facilitating the change and people’s interaction, movement, and communication across different spaces (Gergen 2002). The traditional assumption has been that the meaning of a work setting is singularly rooted in one organization and place, and much research has been based on this idea. However, more emphasis should be placed on how understandings are formed in networks of people rather than in one specific organization, and such studies should use methods that facilitate the study of people who move around a great deal and form their understandings of certain phenomena using a range of different sources within society (Crevani et al. 2010, Czarniawska 2004, Gergen 2002, Williams & McIntyre 2000).

In addition, recent studies argue that traditional leadership theories that emphasize leadership as a function of the abilities and qualities of individual leaders do not support responsibility in leadership in view of the circumstances in which leadership work happens today (Maak & Pless 2006, Pearce & Manz 2011). The writings on responsible leadership point out that the weakness of many leadership theories is that they emphasize leadership as a phenomenon that occurs between leaders and subordinates as followers, even though a broader view is needed today (Ciulla 2013, Maak & Pless 2006, Pless & Maak 2011, Waldman 2011). In the same vein, Kurucz et al. (2008) suggest that the central focus of research should not be the company itself but rather how the company can be part of society and how business can function as a means for serving society. This perspective, in turn, would mean a shift in focus away from the creation of organizational wealth to the organization as an instrument for creating wider societal value (Gioia 2003).

A well-established and growing literature on responsible leadership as a special theory within leadership studies is seeking to broaden understandings of leadership (Doh & Stumpf 2005, Maak & Pless 2006, Voegtlin et al. 2012, Waldman & Galvin 2008, Wilson et al. 2006). Studies on the concept of responsible leadership emphasize it as a relational, values-centered phenomenon whose target is to generate positive outcomes for followers as stakeholders (Maak
This turns attention from leaders to leadership relationships and places leaders’ relationships with different stakeholders at the center of responsibility construction (Maak & Pless 2006). According to the stakeholder perspective, leaders have responsibilities to a broad set of stakeholders, including, for example, employees, customers or consumers, the environment, and the broader community (Waldman & Galvin 2008). Responsible leadership should thus balance the needs and interests of all these different stakeholders.

Recent writings on responsible leadership are moving from a focus on conceptual discussion to more descriptive research on how responsibility is interpreted in business companies (Pearce et al. 2014, Pless & Maak 2011, Pless et al. 2012), because the challenge—as well as the opportunity—in companies’ pursuit of greater responsibility lies in translating the principles of social responsibility into practice (Hind et al. 2009, Mirvis & Manga 2010). Even though research has concluded that leadership plays a crucial role in the effective advancement of responsibility in companies (Pearce et al. 2014, Pless et al. 2012) there has nonetheless been little research or attention on how responsibility becomes an integral part of a business through leadership (Mirvis & Manga 2010, Pearce et al. 2014), and especially little from a perspective that sees business organizations as part of society (Gioia 2003, Kurucz et al. 2008).

Of the limited research that exists in this area, one strand examines leadership competences and leaders’ experiences (Gitsham 2009, Hind et al. 2009, Mirvis et al. 2014, Wilson et al. 2006) and another evaluates the ways in which companies could integrate responsibility into their leadership and practices (Mirvis & Manga 2010, Pearce et al. 2014). The theoretical foundation for responsibility in leadership is still developing (Johnson 2012), and additional research is needed to determine which approaches might be beneficial for advancing leadership and enhancing organizational outcomes (Siegel 2014).

This research takes on the challenge outlined in the existing literature on leadership as an important medium to enhance responsibility integration in companies. Thus, this study focuses on responsibility in leadership and approaches leadership as socially constructed among people, an approach that grants language a central role in the construction process (Crevani et al. 2010, Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Fairhurst 2008, Hosking 2007, Vine et al. 2008). This approach suggests that communication among people relates to or coordinates constructed realities (Barge 2012, Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien 2012, Hosking 2007, Vine et al. 2008). In addition, this study explores leadership as embedded in and
part of the dominant discourses in a particular sociocultural context (Crevani et al. 2010) and thus understands business as part of society.

In viewing leadership as a process of social construction through relationships (Hosking 2011), this study grants particular importance to the dynamics and ethical nature of relationships (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011) and to the ways in which leadership is co-produced through talk and conversation (Vine et al. 2008). Thus, it conceptualizes responsibility in leadership as socially constructed in and through relationships as manifested in daily interactions through language.

Understanding how responsibility is constructed through daily leadership interactions may, then, offer an insight into how responsibility is integrated within companies. The challenge that remains today in responsible leadership is how to enhance practical outcomes everywhere in organizations (Mirvis & Manga 2010). Earlier research on responsibility in business has largely ignored the role of business leaders in integrating responsibility within organizations, even though the success of integration efforts is likely to depend on how leaders and leadership support adaptation at all levels of an organization (Siegel 2014). Weaver, Treviño, and Cochran (1999) found that top management’s personal commitment to ethics plays a key role in determining the scope of ethics initiatives in business organizations.

Until recently, many theoretical and empirical studies as well as other national projects (for example, those conducted by the Ministry of Employment and the Economy in Finland) have focused on issues at the level of the whole business and on the impact of responsibility practices on financial performance (Margolis & Walsh 2001). By contrast, the present research concentrates on a more nuanced approach to the connections between responsibility and leadership. This study argues that the relational attributes (processes) of leadership could show the way toward a more inclusive understanding of responsibility and of ways to integrate responsibility within organizations.

1.2 Aim and research questions

The aim of this dissertation is to expand our knowledge of more inclusive ways to integrate responsibility within companies through leadership. There is a clear need for change toward more responsible business practices because of recent scandals in business (Maak & Pless 2009, Pearce & Manz 2011), and globally steps have been taken to encourage this kind of change through, for example, the
Principles for Responsible Management Education and the Globally Responsible Leadership Initiative. There are also many models for companies that advocate a comprehensive, strategic, and long-term plan for business responsibility (Gitsham 2012, Mirvis & Manga 2010, Pless et al. 2011). Typically, the idea behind this kind of thinking is that programs of change toward responsible business practices are executed from the top down in a formal manner (Mirvis & Manga 2010). But in the current, fragmented business environment there are problems with executing a formal change program because responsibility issues can be connected to meta-level problems in which risks, causes, effects, and benefits are multidimensional (Kurucz et al. 2008, Mirvis & Manga 2010, Mirvis et al. 2014).

Recent research focusing on how responsibility is integrated through leadership indicates that more shared forms of leadership support responsibility integration (Johnson 2012, Mirvis & Manga 2010, Mirvis et al. 2014, Pearce et al. 2014, Waldman 2011), as does top management’s personal commitment to responsibility initiatives (Waldman & Galvin 2008, Weaver et al. 1999). Shared forms of leadership enable more adaptive, fluid, and flexible ways of responding to situations in leadership (Mirvis & Manga 2010). In addition, when more people are included in leadership there is more potential for considering and taking into account the variety of needs in the surrounding society (Pearce et al. 2014).

This research addresses the discussion outlined above and emphasizes that responsibility in daily leadership work is not determined in a formal, programmatic way or by leadership competence alone, but that it also emerges in relation to social interaction and conversations within organizational networks of people, in which language plays a central role (Crevani et al. 2010, Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Raelin 2011). A narrative approach accommodates examination of such factors, and it is therefore adopted in this study (Ospina & Foldy 2010, Riessman 2008, Uhl-Bien & Ospina 2012). Narrative study is an effective approach to the subject because narratives have moral force and provoke ethical reflection (Frank 2004, Uhl-Bien & Ospina 2012), and they include relational aspects that take into consideration interaction among people (Bamberg 2006, Ospina & Foldy 2010).

Through the narratives told by leaders themselves as experts in leadership work we can gain a view into the dynamics of daily interactions and into the ways in which responsibility is constructed in these interactions (Hosking 2011, Sparkes & Smith 2008). Narrative inquiry is one form of case-centered research (Riessman 2008), and leaders’ stories are the “cases” that can form the basis of
analysis. The first guiding research question through which this study approaches responsibility integration through leadership is the following:

*How do leaders narrate responsibility in their leadership work?*

Through this question, we can investigate understandings of responsibility and locally sensible accounts of responsible leadership. The term “work” refers here to the everyday work of giving meaning to specific phenomena (Ospina & Foldy 2010, Raelin 2011, Sparkes & Smith 2008), in this case to responsible leadership, in particular social settings. Raelin (2011) explains that leadership work is about where, how, and why leadership is organized and accomplished. It focuses on work in practice, not on who tells others how to do the work. In this study, the term “work” emphasizes that the focus is on leadership construction, not on the leaders themselves.

It is important to examine how responsibility in leadership is conceptualized, because this conceptualization affects what actually becomes apparent in narrative interviews (Sparkes & Smith 2008). Narratives are here viewed as a form of social action and as a way to understand how leaders interpret leadership and the social life of their organizations and how they position themselves and other people in relationships in a certain organizational environment (Bamberg 2006). Narratives allow us to examine how leaders determine the responsible action in a certain situation. A particularly interesting question is how leaders interpret their agency and options for responsible action, because in narratives we tend to position ourselves and others in certain ways within the limits of local social settings (Bamberg 2003). Fletcher’s (2004: 650) synthesis of what he terms “postheroic leadership” also encapsulates well the understanding of leadership that underpins the present research:

“Postheroic leadership reenvision the “who” and “where” of leadership by focusing on the need to distribute the tasks and responsibilities of leadership up, down, and across the hierarchy. It reenvision the “what” of leadership by articulating leadership as a social process that occurs in and through human interactions, and it articulates the “how” of leadership by focusing on more mutual, less hierarchical leadership practices and skills needed to engage collaborative, collective learning.”

This kind of understanding of leadership will, in turn, affect what it means to be a leader and what kind of leadership is valid in a certain social context. Thus, in this research leadership is closely connected to the social context and to its narrative
environment. The narrative, then, represents the perspective of the leader, but the full meaning of stories emerges when we consider also the circumstances of their production and reception (Sparkes & Smith 2008). The specific approach of this study is narrative ethnography, which, according to Gubrium and Holstein (2008), provides analytical access to the multilayered nature of personal stories and reveals how these stories relate to other stories in society, which this research refers to as the “narrative environment.”

An analysis of individual stories leads us to the complex social context in which the stories are constituted and shows how these contexts reflexively relate to stories and storytelling (Gubrium & Holstein 2008). Narratives are a powerful means for expressing opinions, and by listening to narratives we can gain an understanding of why people engage in certain activities (Frank 2000, Riessman 2001). Thus, from narratives we can obtain important insights into how leaders engage in responsibility and what constitutes responsibility.

The second research question supplements the first question and focuses on understanding the dynamic relationship between the stories of responsibility in leadership and the narrative environments that shape these stories (Gubrium & Holstein 2009, Riessman 2003, Sparkes & Smith 2008). The second research question is the following:

What narrative resources are used, and how, in these stories?

This question guides us to investigate storytelling as a process in which certain sociocultural resources can serve to affirm or restrict responsibility (Sparkes & Smith 2008). Here the focus is especially on the dynamic relationship between experiential accounts and their narrative environment (Gubrium & Holstein 2009). The stories can reveal the surrounding social life, and thus the culture “speaks” through individual stories (Riessman 1993). Through leaders’ stories we can hear not only their voices but also other people’s voices as well as the wide range of different narrative resources that institutions such as organizations, families, and the economy produce (Gubrium & Holstein 2009, Somers 1994). This gives us the possibility of following how responsibility in leadership is produced, performed, and developed over time.

Leaders have a full repertoire of resources to draw on in talking about responsibility. They have many life experiences that they may use in constructing their narratives. The narrative resources that their stories employ are significant, because the choices a leader makes about how to narrate a story and who to include in the story-building process suggest a certain set of plots and stories of
responsibility (Somers 1994). Following these cues can point to the conditions that support or hinder responsible leadership. The aim of this study, then, is to describe how leaders narrate responsibility in their work and how different kinds of narrative resources shape the social construction of responsibility. This may in turn indicate aspects that could be beneficial for integrating responsibility more deeply in business practices.

1.3 Scope and significance of the study

This research contributes primarily to the literature on responsibility in leadership (Maak & Pless 2006, Pearce & Manz 2011, Voegtlin et al. 2012, Waldman & Galvin 2008, Wilson et al. 2006). It analyzes how business leaders narrate responsibility in their work and what kind of narrative resources they rely on when talking about responsibility. Previous research on responsible leadership has discussed the relational aspects of leadership and the importance of leaders’ taking into account the many stakeholders of business (Maak & Pless 2006, Pless & Maak 2011). The main focus of previous writings has been on opening up the myriad relationships in which leaders are involved and accordingly the responsibilities that leaders have toward different stakeholders under their influence (Maak & Pless 2006). Thus, previous studies have investigated the web of stakeholder relationships and how leaders should balance the divergent needs of various stakeholders, avoiding an exclusive focus on shareholder needs only.

The present research follows existing studies in agreeing that the leadership environment today is filled with many expectations held by different stakeholders. But the principal focus in this research is on relationships themselves and especially on the dynamics of those relationships. To understand responsibility in leadership better, it is appropriate to study responsibility as process that is shared or distributed among people (Pearce et al. 2014, Pless et al. 2012, Waldman 2011) which highlights the crucial role of the relational stance (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011) and the social processes of interaction in leadership (Hosking 2007, Uhl-Bien 2006). Responsible leadership theory, thus, attempts to pay attention to all of the different stakeholders and to see leaders as mobilizers in business networks. In today’s business, the status of stakeholders is similar to that of leaders; there is no formal authority between them, and leadership is thus based on cooperation. To build responsible business is demanding work, and consequently the concern with responsibility should be shared by people beyond formal leaders (Mirvis & Manga 2010, Pearce & Manz 2011). Therefore, this
research seeks to enhance our understanding of responsibility constructed in and through leadership relationships and of the dynamics of those relationships. This viewpoint adds to previous responsible leadership research a focus on the socially constructed nature of responsibility and shows how that special focus could enhance responsibility integration in companies.

In addition, this research sees responsibility construction in leadership as embedded in a sociocultural context in which language has a central role (Crevani et al. 2010, Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Raelin 2011). Even though many authors have questioned the viability of centralized, hierarchical, and individualistic conceptions of leadership (Conger & Kanungo 1988, Pearce & Manz 2005, Pfeffer 1977), it still is persistent in the rhetoric of business leadership, raising the question how that kind of a grand narrative of leadership may be affecting the construction of responsibility. This research follows a narrative approach, because language has a central role in social interaction (Fairhurst 2008, Hosking 2011) and because narratives are used, in particular, to argue for and justify the standpoint of the storyteller (Frank 2000, Riessman 2008).

The emphasis here is on narratives as a way to articulate understandings of the world, one’s life, and one’s self, and on the function of such narratives within social relationships and context (McNamee & Gergen 1999, Riessman 1993). The narrative environment and narrative practices have significance for how leaders construct their understandings of responsibility in their work. Storytelling engages the experiences of a narrator (Riessman 2008), which in this study means the experiences of leaders as experts in leadership. The narratives of leaders are understood as arising from the relation of the personal self, past experiences, and particular social contexts. This research, then, also helps to demonstrate how more descriptive methods can enrich our understanding of responsibility construction in daily leadership work and how certain sociocultural understandings may affect that work.

1.4 Key concepts of the study

The key concepts as used and understood in this study are summarized in this section and discussed in more detail in Chapters 2 and 3.
Leadership

This study follows the stream of research that examines leadership not in terms of individual qualities, competences, or behaviors but as a collective phenomenon that is distributed or shared among different people and socially constructed (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Hosking 2007, Uhl-Bien 2006). Since leadership is collective, “followers” include all the people who engage in leadership, not just the immediate subordinates of the individual leader (Maak & Pless 2006). This approach to leadership emphasizes the relational nature of leadership and thus leadership processes and interaction (Hosking 2007). In addition, language plays a central role in constructing leadership (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Fairhurst 2008, Raelin 2011, Vine et al. 2008).

Relationality

Uhl-Bien and Ospina (2012) describe relationality as being characterized or constituted by relations. In leadership research relational refers to the understanding that both leaders and followers are “relational beings” (Gergen 2009), which means that they are constituted to be leaders and/or followers within the dynamic relationships among them (Crevani et al. 2007, Dachler & Hosking 1995, Uhl-Bien 2006). Leadership research is interested in the invisible threads that connect people who are engaged in leadership practices, processes, and interaction (Crevani et al. 2010).

Responsibility

Responsible leadership is about responsibility in the context of leadership. According to the existing literature, the emphasis in responsible leadership is on accountability, moral decision making, and trust (Pless & Maak 2011). Responsible leadership in this study is a relational concept. The study emphasizes the relational nature of leadership and thus defines responsible leadership in particular as a values-driven and principles-driven relationship between leaders and stakeholders (Maak & Pless 2009). Responsibility means being responsive and responsible toward others in our everyday interactions with them (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011). In leadership, responsibility has a great deal to do with how leaders and followers encounter and treat each other within their mutual
relationships. Thus, responsibility is not something leaders have; rather, it is constructed between leaders and followers through their relationships.

**Narrative**

In this research narratives are considered context-oriented, which opens up the possibility of different narratives in different contexts for different purposes (Gubrium & Holstein 2008, Hyvärinen 2010, Riessman 2008). Narratives are social constructions in specific situations, not—as traditionally understood—textual artifacts that are relatively permanent and independent of context (Hyvärinen 2010, Sparkes & Smith 2008). A particular social context represents a certain kind of narrative environment and practices that narrators rely on when telling their stories (Gubrium & Holstein 2009), and such practices accordingly have significance for how narrators construct their understandings of responsibility in leadership (Crevani et al. 2010). In this research the focus is more on how people produce their stories than on the narratives themselves.

1.5 **Structure of the dissertation**

This dissertation consists of seven chapters. The first chapter introduces the research topic and the aim. In addition, it situates the present research in relation to previous literature, outlines the scope of this study, and summarizes the study’s key concepts. The introduction is followed by a more detailed description of the theoretical foundations of this study.

Chapter 2 concentrates on previous writings on responsibility in leadership, and it makes the following observations. First, previous writings have established the groundwork for the concept of responsible leadership (Maak & Pless 2006, Waldman & Siegel 2008) and opened up the need to examine leadership within the web of relationships in which leaders are involved and accordingly to pay attention to the responsibilities that leaders have toward different stakeholders (Maak & Pless 2006, Pless & Maak 2011). Second, achieving responsibility in organizations is too challenging a task for individual leaders and centralized leadership, and a more descriptive and shared view of leadership is consequently needed to understand responsibility integration in companies (Johnson 2012, Mirvis et al. 2014, Mirvis & Manga 2010, Pearce et al. 2014, Waldman 2011). Shared forms of leadership support more adaptive, fluid, and flexible ways of responding to situations in leadership (Mirvis & Manga 2010). To date, this
advantage has been noted in responsible leadership research mainly from the perspective of irresponsible leadership (Pearce & Manz 2011), but it has not itself yet been a major focus of research.

Chapter 3 introduces recent leadership studies that examine issues around sharing leadership more widely in organizations (Denis et al. 2012). It focuses on studies that give more attention to the ethical dimensions of sharing leadership and especially to the relational nature of leadership (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011). The theory of responsible leadership emphasizes these same issues, and studies that examine more distributed or shared forms of leadership and the ways in which these could enhance responsibility potentially have much to contribute (Waldman 2011). These studies view leadership relations as socially constructed in leadership processes (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Hosking 2011, Uhl-Bien & Ospina 2012) and have a special interest in language (Crevani et al. 2010). The theoretical part of the dissertation concludes by proposing an approach to responsibility in leadership as relationally constructed through leadership processes involving people beyond formal leaders.

Chapter 4 introduces the philosophical and methodological principles of this research, describes the narrative context, positions the researcher in the research process, and outlines the various phases of data analysis. The empirical work is based on the narrative research approach (Gubrium & Holstein 2008, Riessman 2008). In this research, responsibility is approached not as an individual ability but rather as something that leaders perform and do in relation to others (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, McNamee 2009). In addition, social action and relationships are studied as a sociocultural phenomenon (Sparkes & Smith 2008). The method that best serves this approach to responsibility is narrative ethnography, because it allows the researcher to study narrative production in a way that takes the socially shared and contextual features of the narratives into account (Schall et al. 2004). This method also accommodates the fact that in this study the individual accounts are not as important as what they tell us about the social worlds their producers inhabit (Gubrium & Holstein 2009). The stories that form the basis for this research come from business leaders in senior executive positions with heterogeneous business backgrounds.

Chapter 5 offers a diverse range of stories of responsibility in leadership with the aim of contributing to a better understanding of responsible business leadership. The chapter reproduces direct quotations from leaders’ stories to enable readers to access the original narratives and subsequently to follow the analysis, discussion, and interpretation of the stories. This chapter concentrates on
the leaders’ stories and consequently does not include theoretical references. The empirical results are discussed in the light of previous research in the following chapter.

Chapter 6 discusses the findings of the study and summarizes the analysis of the narratives. The discussion connects this research to previous writings on responsibility in leadership and considers the extent to which this study’s narrative contribution could enhance responsibility integration through leadership in business companies.

Finally, in Chapter 7 the empirical findings are connected to earlier theories. This chapter evaluates the research in this dissertation and discusses its theoretical, managerial, and methodological contributions. The limitations of the study and suggestions for further research are also presented in this chapter. The dissertation ends with conclusions.
2 Responsibility in leadership

No organisation can be sustainable in an unsustainable society.

(Shani & Mohrman 2011)

The discussion on responsibility in leadership is part of a broader discussion about the role of business in our societies (Crane & Matten 2010, Maak 2009, Scherer & Palazzo 2011). The relationship between business and society is changing, and many business organizations are taking a proactive role in solving wider societal issues (Maak 2009, Scherer & Palazzo 2011). The focus on business responsibilities is important, because the power and influence of business in society is greater than ever before (Maak 2009, Maak & Pless 2006) and there are claims that the ability of nation-states to regulate business activities through global rules and standards is in decline (Maak 2009, Scherer & Palazzo 2011). Business also has the potential to make major contributions to society, with the growing numbers of social entrepreneurs as a good contemporary example. On the other hand, the malpractices of business can potentially cause significant harm to individuals, communities, or the environment.

Numerous stakeholders have expectations about responsibility in business organizations (Maak & Pless 2006). Businesses need to consider these expectations seriously: a mistake or malpractice can cause enormous problems because everything can become public instantly via the media. Companies need to be careful in their operations in order to safeguard a good company image and brand (Hind et al. 2009). Customers are interested in the origin and ethics of the businesses and products they use, and investors are increasingly aware of responsibility issues. Responsibility in business is both critically important and replete with possibility because it concerns the most important issues in society as a whole, such as climate change, biodiversity, the sufficiency of natural resources, and the quality of human life, and business has the potential to make a positive contribution on these issues (Crane & Matten 2010).

There is a growing number of business companies putting strategic emphasis on activities that provide added value to society. Such companies are discussed in the literature under rubrics such as corporate citizenship, social responsibility, sustainability, and shared value creation (Crane & Matten 2010, Porter & Kramer 2011, Prahalad 2009, Siegel 2014). This orientation has given rise to innovations in products, services, and operational processes as well as overall business models and partnerships (Gitsham 2012, Halme & Laurila 2009). The changing and
increasingly proactive role of business with regard to societal concerns has prompted greater interest in the role of business leaders in this process. Business leaders are driving activities aimed at responding to higher standards of ethics, accountability, and sustainability in business (Hind et al. 2009, Waldman & Galvin 2008), and they thus play a central role in advancing business responsibility (Maak & Pless 2006, 2009, Pless & Maak 2008, Waldman & Siegel 2008). As a consequence, leadership is being reconceptualized in both theory and practice to enhance companies’ ability to respond to societal concerns (Voegtlin et al. 2012).

The central theme in leadership research and literature has been the quest to define efficient leadership, mainly in the form of individual capabilities (Yukl 2010). A counterargument suggests that this is the wrong starting point and that instead of efficiency we should seek to establish what is good leadership (Ciulla 1998). In the search for good leadership, the emphasis is on considering leadership as a specific kind of human relationship in which ethics guides how we treat each other (Ciulla 2006). Shani and Mohrman (2011) have argued that it is difficult for an organization to be sustainable if the society in which it is embedded is not sustainable; similarly, we could argue that leadership responsibility needs the support of the broader society to succeed. Therefore, responsibility in leadership is not only a matter for individual leaders but rather should be considered more broadly from different stakeholder perspectives (Maak & Pless 2006). In the current literature on responsibility in leadership the bases for this viewpoint are well established (Maak & Pless 2006, Pless & Maak 2011). The central theme in this literature is the importance of taking into account the various different stakeholders who are part of the business. Siegel (2014:1) encapsulates the need for a wider perspective well:

“Social responsibility is usually defined as corporate actions that signal a firm’s desire to advance the goals of identifiable stakeholder groups, such as customers, suppliers, employees, the local community, nongovernmental organizations, and some shareholders (e.g., SR investors), or to advance broader societal objectives, such as enhancing different aspects of social and environmental performance (e.g., diversity, the adaptation of progressive work practices, and sustainability).”

Research on responsibility in business and leadership is an emerging area in leadership studies (Maak & Pless 2006, Waldman & Siegel 2008). Although some well-established leadership theories already share common ground with
responsible leadership, there are also good reasons for a special research area that focuses on responsibility issues in leadership (Pless & Maak 2011). The main argument for such a research area is that existing leadership theories do not emphasize the need for a wider perspective encompassing different stakeholders in the pursuit of broader social objectives in business (Maak & Pless 2006, Pless & Maak 2011).

In what follows the focus is first on those more traditional leadership theories that bear on the discussion of responsibility in order to clarify the bases for this study and establish why more research on responsibility is needed. This chapter starts with an overview of leadership theories that either share a concern with ethical considerations or are considered to fall within the responsible leadership stream. This means that the literature on leadership and responsibility that is reviewed here has been chosen for its relevance to the purposes of this study and is not representative of the entirety of leadership research. This preview is followed by an introduction to responsible leadership theory and its conceptual foundations, after which the discussion moves to more recent descriptive writings about different approaches toward responsibility. Finally, the third section considers other emerging studies that have potential to contribute to our understanding of how leaders integrate responsibility in leadership and in their work practices. The purpose of the third section is to clarify what we know based on the current literature about the connection between social responsibility and leadership, with a particular focus on the ways in which leadership can enhance inclusive responsibility integration in business. The third section also makes the case for the next chapter, which focuses on the relational lens on leadership and responsibility adopted in this research. This lens prompts us to turn our attention from individual leaders’ capabilities to leadership as distributed or shared among people (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Pearce et al. 2014) and to the ways in which it can potentially foster responsible leadership and its more inclusive integration throughout an organization.

### 2.1 Responsibility in leadership theories

This section starts with an overview of leadership theories that include elements of responsibility and thus have linkages with the concept of responsible leadership. In the broader domain of leadership theories and concepts, servant leadership (Greenleaf 1977), transformational leadership (Bass 1985, Bass & Avolio 1994, Burns 1978), authentic leadership (Avolio et al. 2004, Avolio &
Gardner 2005, Luthans & Avolio 2003), and ethical leadership (Treviño & Brown 2004) incorporate an interest in the moral dimension of leadership and are therefore reasonably taken into account when investigating responsibility in leadership (Pless & Maak 2011).

The basic idea of servant leadership is that the leader’s task is to serve the needs of others and to act in the interests of others (Greenleaf 1997, 2002). Servant leadership shares with responsible leadership the idea of serving beyond one’s own self-interest and mobilizing followers to serve the purpose of the organization in a way that contributes more broadly to the needs of all stakeholders in society (Pless & Maak 2011).

In transformational leadership it is important for the leader to ensure that the followers are committed to achieving the objectives of the organization. Responsible leadership shares the idea that vision and inspiration are important in leadership. But responsible leadership is less concerned with defining the abilities of transformative leaders, and “it is geared toward a relational leadership approach” (Pless & Maak 2011: 8). The relational leadership approach (Uhl-Bien 2006) highlights the need for collaboration and communication with many stakeholders. Central to both relational leadership and responsible leadership is the leader’s ability to coordinate interaction within the stakeholder network (Maak 2007).

Authentic leadership deals with such concepts as leader self-awareness and truthfulness. For transformational leaders, authenticity is the key to moral decisions and serves as a moral guide through which the intentions of transformational leaders can be evaluated (Bass & Steidlmeier 1999). Crucial for authentic leadership is that the leader possess integrity and that leadership appear as transparent as possible to others (Avolio et al. 2004). The coherence of words and actions is essential, and authentic leaders have “high moral character” (Avolio et al. 2004). Authentic leaders base their actions on their personal values and convictions, and it is important that those values be original, not copied (Shamir & Eilam 2005). Responsible leadership theory shares this stress on the importance of self-awareness, but instead of concentrating only on leaders’ individual values it calls on leaders to develop a sense of others’ emotions and values in the context of the general norms and values of the local society (Pless & Maak 2011).

Waldman (2011) suggests that conceptually ethical leadership could be most closely connected to responsible leadership. Both of these theories are based on values and principles. In the literature, one perspective on ethical leadership is philosophical or normative, suggesting how ethical leaders ought to behave
The study of ethics usually consists of the examination of right, wrong, good, evil, virtue, duty, obligation, rights, justice, fairness, and so on in people’s relations with each other and with other living things (Ciulla 2006).

Another approach to ethical leadership has been that of the social sciences, whose focus is on describing ethical leadership and identifying its preconditions and consequences. This literature has mainly followed the work of Bandura (1977, 1986). He uses social learning theory to explain why some individual characteristics and situational influences are related to followers’ perceptions of their leader as ethical. For leaders to be perceived as ethical by their followers, they must be attractive and credible role models for the followers. Leadership is understood as

“the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision making.” (Brown et al. 2005: 120)

To be perceived as an ethical leader it is not enough to be an ethical person. An ethical executive leader must find ways to focus the organization’s attention on ethics and values and to create principles that lead to desired actions by employees (Treviño et al. 2000). Treviño et al. (2000) have explored what the term “ethical leadership” means to those who observe executives at work. They argue that a reputation for ethical executive leadership resides in two critical areas: the leader’s visibility as a moral person and his or her visibility as a moral leader.

The research of Treviño et al. (2000) highlights a number of personal ethical characteristics. To be viewed as an ethical person one should exhibit traits such as integrity, honesty, and trustworthiness, engage in certain kinds of behaviors, and make decisions based on ethical principles. The principal thrust of their study was, however, to point out the importance of proactive effort on the part of managers to make their ethical leadership explicit and salient to their employees. Possessing a strong ethical reputation reduces the number of legal problems, increases employees’ work satisfaction, and promotes an ethical climate in an organization (Treviño et al. 2000). The research in this area has found that the success of role modeling is related to the ability of a person to work closely with the model. In particular, people follow how models behave and treat other people in daily interactions (Weaver et al. 2005).
Responsible leadership theory shares this emphasis on the need for a leader to be a positive role model. Ethical leadership theory is more focused on leader-subordinate relationships, while responsible leadership addresses a wider range of stakeholders and focuses specifically on the relational approach (Pless & Maak 2011). The outcomes of responsible leadership are considered to reflect multiple levels, including contributions to society and to the sustainability of business, whereas in ethical leadership outcomes are mainly sought at the leader-subordinate level, such as in how ethical leadership could address employee job satisfaction.

In sum, writers on responsible leadership suggest that the element of responsibility is missing from these various leadership theories and descriptors, even though responsibility is what effective leadership is all about (Waldman & Galvin 2008). In these other theories, responsibility is understood mainly as an individual-level phenomenon, and such research thus contributes to an understanding of individual characteristics, styles, and processes. By contrast, the concerns of responsible leadership are broader, and this perspective understands followers as encompassing the whole network of stakeholders both inside and outside the organization (Pless & Maak 2011, Waldman & Galvin 2008). The other main difference is that the aim of responsible leadership is a positive contribution to society as a whole, but this aim is not explicit in the other leadership theories.

Waldman and Galvin (2008:328) summarize the distinctiveness of responsible leadership theory thus: “We contend that responsible leadership is broader, more strategically oriented, and potentially less controversial than similar concepts, such as ethical leadership.” Earlier writings on responsible leadership have emphasized the need for a distinct theory of responsible leadership, which could provide conceptual clarification as well as enhance general leadership research (Maak & Pless 2006, Pless & Maak 2011, Waldman 2011). More recent writings explore responsibility in leadership from different perspectives and offer descriptive and empirical contributions on the topic (Pearce et al. 2014, Pless et al. 2012). The next section delves deeper into the emerging discussion on responsible leadership theory and its conceptual foundation. The following sections then broaden the perspective to consider more recent and descriptive research on the topic.
2.2 Responsible leadership theory

Within the field of theory, responsible leadership is an emerging concept at the intersection of different types of studies. In previous literature, responsible leadership has been connected mainly to corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability (D’Amato et al. 2009) as well as ethics (Ciulla 2005), in addition to leadership itself. Interest in leadership as a significant factor contributing to organizational responsibility has grown in recent years, and there is an expanding literature on responsible leadership as a special theory within leadership studies (Doh & Stumpf 2005, Maak & Pless 2006, Voegtlin et al. 2012, Waldman & Galvin 2008, Wilson et al. 2006).

Researchers in the area of responsible leadership emphasize it as a relational, values-centered concept whose goal is to generate positive outcomes for followers as stakeholders. Maak and Pless (2009: 539) define responsible leadership as “a values-driven and principles-driven relationship between leaders and stakeholders who are connected through a shared sense of meaning and purpose, through which they rise to higher levels of motivation and commitment to achieving sustainable and responsible change.”

They believe that leaders have co-responsibility because they have the power, potential, and abilities to act as agents of global benefit or as agents of social change (Maak & Pless 2009, Pless & Maak 2008). They widen the perspective from traditional leader-follower relationships to considering all stakeholder groups as followers. This research approaches the discussion of responsibility from the encouraging, positive viewpoint of research on responsible leadership (Pless 2007). There is a research stream that focuses on the factors that cause irresponsible leadership (see Pearce & Manz 2011 for a review), but those studies do not fall within the principal scope of this research because the focus here is on the construction of responsibility. Thus, the purpose of this research is to apply an approach that helps us to understand the positive construction on responsibility in leadership.

The aim of responsible leadership is to balance the diverse needs of different stakeholders. This duty can be fulfilled by building good relationships that are not based on authority but rather on collaboration. Responsible leadership is a relational and ethical phenomenon, based on the social processes of interaction (Maak & Pless 2006). The context of leadership has changed, and the challenge of many leadership theories is that they see leadership as a phenomenon that
happens between leaders and subordinates. Responsible leadership theory rejects this view, seeks to realize the needs of all different stakeholders, and casts leaders as mobilizers within vertical business networks. Given that many stakeholders are similar in status to the leaders, the latter may not hold formal authority over them; consequently, leadership is formed in cooperation.

The success of responsible leadership is based on the coordinated actions of all individuals who have interests in the leadership, not merely the leaders themselves. Individual leaders are no longer the sole important actors in directing responsible leadership actions. This, in turn, emphasizes that leaders should prioritize relationships because they are important for the leadership project. The focus in leadership is on relational processes of leadership. This means that leadership is shared through interactive and communicative processes in which each participant has a voice and the message is respected (Maak & Pless 2006, Pless & Maak 2011). The purpose of cooperation is to achieve a commonly shared and meaningful vision.

The nature of relationships among diverse stakeholders who have differences in values, worldviews, cultural backgrounds, and moral and ethical perceptions creates specific challenges for integrating responsibility. The more divergent the expectations of leadership are, the more demanding it is to find a sustainable and legitimate alignment to address them. In order to be successful in this kind of leadership process, a leader needs to be a facilitator. Leaders need abilities that are both relational and moral. Relational intelligence (Maak & Pless 2006) is based on a leader’s ability to understand ethical and emotional challenges in interaction with others. A responsible leader can take different roles depending on the stakeholder group with whom he or she is interacting. Maak and Pless (2006) have created a model of these different roles that a responsible leader can take in stakeholder relations. The model emphasizes relational processes toward different stakeholders and contains four main roles: steward, citizen, visionary, and servant.

A leader who acts as a steward is concerned about values and steers business responsibly through business challenges. Stewardship means choosing service instead of pursuing self-interest (Block 1993). The main message of this viewpoint is that leaders are trusted to take care of business in a sustainable way, and they should act accordingly even toward stakeholders who are not yet visible, such as future generations. The leader operates within a network of relationships and acts as a cultivator and a coordinator (Maak 2007).
The leader as a citizen recognizes responsibilities toward society. Companies are not isolated from society, and leaders are thus in a position to take care of the surrounding society as members of it. In the long term, the well-being of the communities in which companies are located supports the well-being of the companies themselves. Good relationships with actors in society at large can be seen as mutually beneficial and necessary to solving complex societal problems (Crane & Matten 2010, Maak & Pless 2009). This in turn also benefits businesses.

Casting the leader as a visionary puts emphasis on envisioning the future of the business. A shared vision of the business is important for a responsible leader to act as an enabler in directing the desired actions of different stakeholders. Leadership research frequently describes the role of the leader as a visionary as charismatic or ideological (Strange & Mumford 2002), which, in contrast to responsible leadership, gives prominence to the agency of the individual leader. In responsible leadership, on the other hand, it is important that the vision is co-created and serves as an inspiration to action for everyone involved (Maak & Pless 2006). The aim of responsible leadership is to achieve higher social goals (Maak & Pless 2009). To enhance responsible business, the vision of the company should promote its members’ ability to view themselves as a part of something that serves a larger purpose for the surrounding society (Kurucz et al. 2008). The meaning of the vision should be understood and shared by all members.

The conceptualization of the leader as a servant concerns the other-oriented nature of leadership. Servant leadership is a concept that was first introduced by Robert Greenleaf (1977), and it is an understanding and a practice of leadership that places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader. Serving others means that a leader is able to be sensitive to and care for the interests and needs of others (Maak & Pless 2006). Caring for others is not limited to the members of the leader’s organization but also encompasses the needs of others beyond organizational limits.

In addition to these four main roles, the leader can take on supporting roles, which are those of coach, architect, storyteller/meaning maker, and change agent. These roles can be described as more operational and closer to the real actions of leaders. Coaching is a key role in relation to immediate followers (Maak & Pless 2006). Coaching is about facilitating the learning and enabling the growth of individual and teams.

In the architect’s role, the leader’s task is to ensure that the company’s management principles, processes, and practices support the achievement of a shared vision of the common good. The architect’s role showcases the importance
of infrastructure and its alignment with the goal of the common good. For example, human resources systems for rewarding people ought to measure and reward performance that facilitates cooperation instead of competition among individuals.

Casting the leader as a storyteller emphasizes that leaders tell stories and in doing so create meaning. The stories they tell show some things as valued in the organization and considered to be important—and others as not valued and not considered important. Leaders create shared meaning through sensemaking and dialogue (Smircich & Morgan 1982). Stories are tools of searching for meaning, and they help sensemaking (Weick 1995), especially in the case of responsibility. It is often difficult to express morality through language and to ensure a common understanding of what is said.

Leaders also play a key part in achieving change, and in the discussion on transformational leadership leaders have the role of change agents. The change they seek is toward more sustainable business; their goal is thus responsible change (Maak & Pless 2006). The model of responsible leadership roles gives the discussion of responsibility a more concrete shape by describing the differing roles a leader can take while leading different stakeholders and businesses in society. This model clearly shows how multifaceted and challenging the work of individual leaders is. The model has been used as a theoretical framework for analyzing the biography of Anita Roddick, the founder of The Body Shop, applying a narrative approach (Pless 2007). That research examines responsible leadership behavior in connection with underlying motivational drivers. The model emphasizes the sensitivity of the leader to these different roles and his or her ability to develop good social relationships with different stakeholders. It focuses on the interplay of the leader with the surrounding social settings and on the dynamics of relationships. Hence, researches in the area of responsible leadership emphasize the ability to develop good social relationships, but they have also made other important observations that should be considered when studying responsible leadership (Waldman 2011).

Attention should be paid to these arguments in order to forestall criticism of responsible leadership as unfocused, ideologically driven, or ephemeral. The first caveat proposes that responsible leadership be conceptualized and examined using multiple definitions and moral bases. The dominant definition of responsible leadership that is gaining currency follows integrative and ethical theories of CSR and especially normative stakeholder theory. According to that view, a leader should balance the needs and concerns of a variety of stakeholders.
This view is challenged by a strain of argumentation originally started by Milton Friedman (1970) and his famous statement that the only responsibility of a firm is to make profits for its shareholders; there is no other responsibility. This argument casts doubt on the benefits of the input of responsibility for business.

The second caveat is about ideological views on responsible leadership. Researchers should be aware of their own ideological values and how those values could affect their research and normative guidance, and they should acknowledge that no one ideology or political leaning represents an indispensable basis for responsible leadership (Waldman 2011). Thus, how business leaders approach responsibility may vary and lead to differing orientations toward responsibility.

The third caveat highlights the uniqueness of the concept of responsible leadership in the broader domain of leadership theories. Responsible leadership is distinguished mainly by its concentration on a broader set of stakeholder concerns and its aim of contributing to society in the long term (Maak & Pless 2006). Some research addresses the important role of executive-level leadership in shaping an organization’s approach to responsibility (Waldman et al. 2006, Weaver et al. 2005, 1999). These studies approach responsible leadership as strategically oriented, meaning that its importance is greater at higher organizational levels, especially at the level of executive leaders who set the strategic targets of responsibility (Waldman & Galvin 2008). By contrast, recent writings on responsible leadership stress that the integration of responsibility depends on leadership at all levels of the organization (Pearce et al. 2014, Siegel 2014). These studies indicate that research in which executive-level leaders are part of the research focus but not the center of it could improve our knowledge of responsible leadership in business companies.

The idea of strong, heroic, and centralized leadership has long prevailed (Ciulla 2001, Pearce & Manz 2005), although for the most part heroic, charismatic leaders are more mythology than reality and the leaders of organizations are ordinary human beings (Conger & Kanungo 1998) who prefer to have the people around them share the responsibility. One long-term notion in organization theory is also that the environment sets constraints on individuals’ ability to control any aspect of organizational life (Lawrence & Lorsch 1967). Many writings on responsible leadership emphasize that ongoing changes in the business environment challenge traditional understandings of leadership and make leadership more complicated (Pless & Maak 2011, Voegtlin et al. 2012, Waldman 2011). Thus, leaders need to cooperate with many stakeholders in order
to achieve the goal of responsibility (Maak & Pless 2006). Some researchers argue that centralized leadership may also be a key factor for understanding the potential for irresponsibility in organizations (Pearce & Manz 2011).

In sum, responsible leadership research approaches responsibility as a complicated phenomenon that transcends individual leaders and manager-subordinate relationships. It emphasizes that leaders should balance consideration of the needs of all stakeholders to reach sustainable business goals. Recently responsible leadership researchers have also stressed the importance of research that is not ideologically driven or biased in a particular direction (Waldman 2011). Accordingly, research should not seek to establish a normative definition of appropriate responsible leadership but rather create space for alternative constructs of such leadership. Recent research thus brings to the discussion a versatility in understanding responsibility by offering a different orientation toward responsibility in leadership (Pless et al. 2012, Waldman & Galvin 2008) and by suggesting more shared and broader perspectives on responsibility (Pearce & Manz 2011, Waldman 2011).

The focus on responsibility in leadership directs attention to the various others to whom a leader may be responsible (Waldman & Galvin 2008). According to this view, responsibility is based on both moral and legal concerns and the ability to act accordingly toward others as well as to be accountable for the consequences of those actions. Waldman and Galvin (2008) further ask who are these others and how, precisely, a leader should show responsibility toward them. Researchers have noted that leaders’ attention to others may vary according to the breadth of the considered constituent groups and the degree of accountability toward others (Pless et al. 2012). In the next section these differing orientations of responsible leadership are presented in more detail. Researchers also posit that the variation in orientation is closely connected to the different actions of leaders (Pless et al. 2012). This is an interesting point, because the dynamics behind the various responsible leadership orientations and actions are under observation in the present study.

2.3 Different orientations to responsible leadership

Recent studies have suggested that there is a spectrum of orientations or perspectives on responsible leadership (Pless et al. 2012, Waldman & Galvin 2008). Thus, there is no single way of being responsible leader. Leaders’ approaches to responsibility and the actions that are taken in organizations may
vary accordingly (Pless et al. 2012). Waldman and Galvin (2008) posit two basic perspectives on responsibility, which they label the economic and stakeholder perspectives. The economic perspective emphasizes that the shareholders are the only stakeholders to whom leaders are responsible. Leaders should think strategically and be able to show that they provide a positive return for shareholders and owners. Leaders should also be monitored to ensure that they act in a strategic and calculable manner. The economic perspective is a constant topic of debate in business (Waldman & Galvin 2008). According to that perspective, leaders should engage in responsible activities only if they yield better results for the company.

There is a distinct line of research that investigates the connection between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and the financial performance of the company concerned (Siegel 2014). Even though this line of research has been prominent, the results of that research area are still mixed, and more attention is now focused on the question of how responsibility is implemented in companies (Halme & Laurila 2009). That, in turn, will have an impact on outcomes in these companies, including financial ones. Leaders who adopt the stakeholder perspective are likely to have a strong sense of values concerning the importance of the needs and interests of multiple stakeholders under their influence (Waldman & Galvin 2008). According to the stakeholder perspective, leaders have responsibilities to a broader set of stakeholders, including, for example, employees, customers or consumers, the environment, and the broader community. Leaders should thus balance the needs of these different stakeholders. Following this perspective, a responsible leader would take into account, for example, the needs of employees and environmental aspects such as pollution in addition to the return for shareholders. Thus an appropriate leader response to any situation should consider economic benefit balanced with a range of other stakeholder concerns (Waldman & Galvin 2008).

This is not an easy task, because expectations on leaders are often high (Ciulla 2001). For example, in a situation in which a company is in a downturn and laying off workers, the leader faces the challenge of justifying the decisions. Especially in the short term, the company’s profitability and shareholder interests appear to drive decisions in such situations. In addition, the stakeholder perspective suggests that the benefits of responsible leadership are not always calculable, at least not in the short term. The time frame in which the results are reviewed affects outcomes, and in the longer term leadership can emphasize different aspects of responsibility. For example, investments in new technologies
with societal or environmental benefits may not yield positive financial results in the short term, and the long-term payoff of such investments is not clear. The question then arises whether companies should make investments if the return on those inputs cannot be guaranteed.

In addition to the differing orientations of the economic and stakeholder mindsets in responsible leadership, discussed above, recent research has identified more diverse and multifaceted approaches to responsibility. Pless et al. (2012) created a framework of responsible leadership orientations based on the core narratives they found in their data. They recognized four distinct responsibility orientations among leaders: traditional economist, opportunity seeker, integrator, and idealist. Their research was based on qualitative data collected from 25 business leaders or entrepreneurs.

The first two orientations are described as narrow and the latter two as wide perspectives on responsibility. The traditional economist orientation stresses the interests of the owners, trying to maximize the economic benefit of the shareholders in the short term. The opportunity seeker is also oriented toward economic benefit but operates on the idea that investments in responsibility will provide economic benefits in the long run. The integrator, in turn, understands responsibility as an integral part of the entire business. The role of the business, from this perspective, is to serve the wider society. The idealist orientation is best exemplified by social entrepreneurs. They are guided by a deep moral will to direct the business to solve social problems or to serve particular stakeholders’ needs. The latter two approaches are based on traditional moral thinking and are connected to business leaders’ doubts in the ability of governments and markets to address social concerns adequately.

In sum, responsibility orientation varies according to the breadth of the constituent groups considered by the leader and the degree of accountability toward others. Particular decisions and actions are associated with different orientations (Pless et al. 2012). Leaders can make divergent decisions and implement differing configurations of responsibility policies and practices in their organizations because of differences in orientation. Leaders’ orientations also influence how they engage with society and with their social responsibilities, and they are manifested in a variety of responsibility-promoting activities in companies. Pless et al. (2012) introduced the research focus on the dynamics of leadership and differing orientations, but there is still a lack of research to explain why differences in orientation exist and how companies could achieve a more inclusive orientation.
Some organizational scholars emphasize that companies can be at different levels or stages in their responsibility activities or awareness (Kurucz et al. 2008, Mirvis & Googins 2006). These theories describe the development of responsibility as a holarchic progression, in which each stage is inclusive of the last. According to this line of study, in order to advance responsibility, organizations should view themselves as part of an integral complex network of shared value creation. In addition, the vision of the company should serve the ability of its members to view themselves as a part of something with a larger purpose in society. The focus should not be on the company itself but rather on how the company can contribute to society and how business can be a means for serving society (Kurucz et al. 2008). This would mean a shift in emphasis away from creating organizational wealth to the organization as an instrument for creating wider societal value (Gioia 2003). The authors of studies in this stream of research suggest that instead of adhering to the stakeholder model of the firm, research should emphasize the inter-systems model of business (Stormer 2003). Overall, they also challenge the view of companies as individual entities, which considers their obligations to the community only secondarily. Instead, they assume that companies are an integral part of society and in close relation to the communities around them. Finally, Kurucz et al. (2008) recommend that organizations take a more pragmatic approach and encourage managerial experimentation with new business models for value creation that would take into account a wider range of possibilities and include interactions with many members of the organization.

Overall, research on responsible leadership is moving from a focus on conceptual discussion to more descriptive studies on how responsibility is interpreted in business companies (Pearce et al. 2014, Pless & Maak 2011, Pless et al. 2012). By now it is clear that leadership plays a crucial role in advancing an inclusive responsibility orientation in companies (Pearce et al. 2014, Pless et al. 2012). Researchers have concluded that a company’s responsibility orientation is affected by the depth and breadth of its integration of people and business considerations (Pless et al. 2012). Still, there has been little research or attention on how responsibility becomes an integral part of a business through leadership (Mirvis & Manga 2010, Pearce et al. 2014), especially from a perspective that sees business organizations as part of society (Kurucz et al. 2008).

The next section discusses research that could enhance our understanding of the integration of responsibility in business organizations, particularly through leadership. It previews research on integration and touches on other areas of
leadership research that could be beneficial for such understanding. As noted earlier, there is still a shortage of research in this area and thus a need to improve our knowledge of ways to promote leadership that would enable a more inclusive responsibility orientation in companies.

2.4 Integrating responsibility through leadership

The challenge as well as the opportunity for organizations seeking to enhance responsibility lies in translating the principles of social responsibility into practice (Hind et al. 2009, Mirvis & Manga 2010). There is only limited research that approaches the issue of responsibility integration through leadership in companies. One discussion examines leadership competences and leaders’ experiences (Gitsham 2009, Hind et al. 2009, Mirvis et al. 2014, Wilson et al. 2006) as a basis for enhancing responsibility in practice; another evaluates ways of integrating responsibility as part of leadership and practices (Mirvis & Manga 2010, Pearce et al. 2014). The former approach, focused on competences and experience, investigates how organizations can foster leaders who possess the competences to integrate social and environmental considerations into business decisions. The latter type of research, focused on the formal methods of integration, concentrates mainly on the degree of centralization or distribution of leadership responsibility in companies and the effect of this on responsibility outcomes in these companies.

This section reviews the literature on, first, competence- and experience-based studies and, second, research concerning the form of responsibility integration. The section concludes with discussion of a complementary research direction that could further improve our knowledge of responsibility integration by building on the earlier research on this subject. This discussion identifies the gap in the existing research that this study seeks to address. The following chapter introduces recent leadership theories and outlines their potential contribution to understanding responsible leadership.

The purpose of the research carried out by Wilson et al. (2006) at European multinational companies was to explore how organizations can foster leaders who have competences for integrating social and environmental considerations into business decisions. Their conclusion was that the qualities and skills of responsible leadership can be identified, but they posited that “reflexive abilities” are needed in order to translate these qualities and skills into individual managerial behavior. An analysis of the data generated five reflexive abilities:
systemic thinking, embracing diversity and managing risk, balancing global and local perspectives, meaningful dialogue, and developing a new language and emotional awareness. They found that these abilities are central to integrating social and environmental considerations into core decision-making processes.

The research of Wilson et al. further examines the challenges of focusing on developing competences and reflexive abilities. The reflexive abilities are very generic, and not all of them are necessarily needed in the case of every company. Also, the development of these abilities could take a long time (Wilson et al. 2006). In practice, this means that when companies choose to engage in responsible leadership but do not already possess these kinds of abilities it might take the companies several years to adopt more inclusive responsibility activities. In addition, this research also suggests that there is a “generational gap,” which means that younger people are better than their older colleagues or managers at adopting and presenting the abilities needed for integrating responsibility (Wilson 2006). This suggests that we may need to wait until a new generation of leaders takes over in business, which may take many years.

Building on this research, Hind et al. (2009) and Gitsham (2009) in their studies highlight the importance of examining leaders’ personal experiences and learning to find new and innovative solutions to improve responsibility quickly. According to these scholars, there is a need for greater use of leaders’ experiences and their learning from these experiences. Until now, research has focused especially on cases in which corporations have used experiential learning programs to involve their workers in contributing their time and skills for the benefit of third parties, such as nonprofit organizations (Gitsham 2012, Pless & Maak 2008). The corporations have implemented these kinds of programs to provide possibilities for learning in practice in order to encourage their workers to respond in responsible ways in business settings also. Learning from one’s own experiences is central to integrating abstract company responsibility goals in practice. Personal experience and emotional tension are essential in turning from abstract awareness to actual commitment to action and change. Leaders who have had a chance to take part in experiential learning have gained experience in the possibilities of how business can be part of solving social and environmental problems. The learning is supported by giving leaders the opportunity to reflect on their experiences. Reflection is necessary for the individual process of making sense of one’s direct experiences (Gitsham 2012).

In addition, the turbulence of the business environment highlights the need for the continuous ability of leaders to adapt and respond (Mirvis & Manga 2010).
Experiential learning can provide better understanding of other people and of how to connect with them (Mirvis et al. 2014). Real-world situations usually involve many people with different backgrounds, and the experiential baggage of individuals beyond the leaders thus represents many other possible sources of action. There are, then, multiple sources of action to choose from when people together evaluate possible responses and actions in a particular business situation. Leaders need to be able to leave space for open discussion and for everyone’s opinions (Gitsham 2012, Mirvis et al. 2014).

The other approach to studying responsibility integration has focused on the form of integration. In the past decade there has been great interest in developing formal long-term plans for integrating social, ethical, and environmental concerns in organizations and in executing them from the top down through a formal change program (Dunphy et al. 2007). This method of responsibility integration has recently been challenged (Mirvis & Manga 2010) because of the resistance that can occur at all levels of the organization. Instead, a less programmatic approach has been proposed, in which the leaders of the integration drive can be from any organizational level as long as they are adaptive and responsive to the situation at hand and thus to the emergence of responsibility. In this approach, the capacity to adapt flexibly and respond creatively to changes in the environment is particularly important. Mirvis and Googins (2006) found in their research that companies that have advanced and inclusive responsibility practices have aligned their responsibility efforts with their business strategies, integrated responsibility into their structure and processes, and finally institutionalized it within their company culture and values. Mirvis and Googins further found that people who were driving integration in companies engaged in three kinds of activities: generating knowledge of responsibility across the company, building relationships with managers at all levels and functions for collaboration on matters of responsibility, and taking actions toward the strategic integration of responsibility.

Research focused on shared leadership (Pearce & Manz 2011) also supports these principles and proposes a more shared form of leadership as a basis of responsibility in companies. Pearce et al. (2014) argue in their recent article that shared leadership outcomes can support responsible leadership practices. In shared leadership, various organization members exercise leadership when their skills and knowledge are needed in work processes. Interaction and mutual responsibility among organization members are important. Sharing leadership
more broadly can promote healthy organizational practices and therefore responsible leadership (Pearce et al. 2014).

In sum, competence- and experience-based research suggests that studying leaders’ experiences can enhance our knowledge of responsibility integration. The present study follows the same approach but from a different perspective by concentrating on real business leadership experiences. Even though research conducted in experiential learning programs is valuable, there may be aspects of responsibility integration that arise only in actual business life.

As discussed above, research that focuses on how responsibility is integrated through leadership indicates that more shared forms of leadership support responsibility integration (Johnson 2012, Mirvis & Manga 2010, Mirvis et al. 2014, Pearce et al. 2014, Waldman 2011), even though the personal commitment of top management to this kind of initiative is also important and needed as a support in business organizations (Waldman & Galvin 2008, Weaver et al. 1999). Shared forms of leadership accommodate more adaptive, fluid, and flexible ways of responding to situations in leadership (Mirvis & Manga 2010). In addition, including more people in leadership increases the potential for considering and taking into account a variety of needs in the surrounding society (Pearce et al. 2014). However, this angle has to date been explored in responsible leadership research mainly from the perspective of irresponsible leadership (Pearce & Manz 2011); it has not yet been the direct focus of research.

Currently, there is growing interest within other areas of leadership literature in issues around sharing leadership more widely in organizations (Denis et al. 2012), and some of these studies give more attention to the ethical nature of shared leadership and especially to leadership relationships (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011). The theory of responsible leadership directs attention to the same issues. Therefore, studies that examine more distributed or shared forms of leadership offer potential benefits to the study of ways to enhance responsibility (Waldman 2011). The following chapter discusses studies that understand leadership as a shared or distributed process involving people beyond formal leaders, highlighting the relational nature of leadership. This is the perspective that the present research takes as its lens on responsible leadership and on the ways in which such leadership can enhance companies’ ability to translate the principles of social responsibility into practice. The relational lens on leadership concentrates on leadership processes, not on individual traits, behaviors, or competences. The following review, which concludes the theoretical discussion,
demonstrates that the focus on leadership processes offers useful perspectives for the study of responsibility integration.
3 Relational perspective to responsibility in leadership

The aim of this chapter is to review new approaches in leadership research that are especially interesting and relevant given the focus of the present research on responsibility and leadership from a relational perspective (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Hosking 2007, Uhl-Bien 2006). These new approaches turn our attention from individual leaders and their behavior to leadership as distributed or shared among people and based on social processes that happen between people (Denis et al. 2012). Thus, this research draws on an increasing number of leadership researchers who understand leadership as socially constructed and relational (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Fairhurst & Grant 2010, Grint 2005, Hosking 2007, Uhl-Bien 2006). More precisely, this stream of research sees leadership as continually negotiated and created in relational leadership processes, and it emphasizes the discursive dimension of leadership (Crevani et al. 2010, Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Fairhurst 2008, Vine et al. 2008). This means that the rhetoric of leadership is a strong tool for directing interpretations of leadership (Crevani et al. 2010).

The chapter begins with a short introduction to the history of leadership research, especially senior-level leadership research. The empirical data of the present study are gathered from senior-level leaders, and thus a brief survey of previous writings is appropriate even though the main emphasis is on recent studies that see leadership as more distributed in nature. This introduction is followed by a review of leadership theories based on a social constructionist approach and a closer look at the development of leadership theories based on relations. This more detailed review focuses on the development of a relational view of leadership and responsibility, because some of these studies incorporate ethical and moral concerns as central concepts in leadership (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011). It examines how local understandings of responsibility are constructed in leadership through the use of language, especially in narratives. The chapter concludes by bringing together the theories of responsibility in leadership and of the relational approach to leadership, respectively, to consider how leadership processes can affect responsibility integration in companies. This forms the basis for the empirical research setting, which follows the theoretical summary.
3.1 From individual to more shared forms of leadership

Senior-level leadership is especially interesting because leaders at that level are in a position to influence and direct the responsibility orientation and actions of the business (Waldman 2011, Weaver et al. 2005), and there is still little empirical research focusing on responsibility at the senior leadership level (Waldman 2011). The changes in business from hierarchical to network structures, from local to global operations, from an exclusive shareholder focus to a broader stakeholder orientation, and from companies as independent players in society to corporate citizens affect the demands placed on leadership (Maak & Pless 2006). These transitions and changes in business provide a basis for more socially shared forms of leadership (Uhl-Bien 2006). Leaders can have a central role in enabling their organizations to be more responsible, but this is a very challenging task for an individual leader because of the complexity of today’s work environment.

The research interest in senior leaders can be traced back to the mid-twentieth century (Barnard 1938, Selznick 1957). The early studies emphasized the personal role of senior executives in shaping their organizations. Subsequently the role of senior leaders was forgotten for a few decades; conventional wisdom in this period held that contextual factors largely determined an organization’s trajectory and there were few choices to be made. Renewed interest in senior executives started to emerge in the 1980s.

The new wave of research directed attention to how differences in managers’ behavior might be explained by differences in their personal characteristics (Kotter 1982). Others proposed that senior executives make strategic choices based on their cognition and values, and that organizations are reflections of their top managers (Hambrick & Mason 1984). The main focus of these studies was still on the thoughts, traits, actions, and personas of leaders over those of followers (Wood 2005). The principal challenge addressed by most of these studies was defining what constitutes an effective leader. Several theories within this stream also contribute to understanding responsibility in leadership. These theories are described earlier in Section 2.1.

Around the 1980s researchers formulated a different kind of definition of leadership that saw it as a union of leaders, followers, and situations (Hollander 1978). This definition had an impact on subsequent studies on leadership: instead of focusing on the personal qualities of leaders, researchers turned their attention to more collective forms of leadership. Recent reviews on leadership have noted that there is an emerging research area that attempts to see leadership as more
distributed (Avolio et al. 2009) and that a growing amount of organizational research and theorizing supports a view of leadership as a collective phenomenon and distributed or shared among people (Denis et al. 2012). Some of the reviews are specific to certain kinds of organizations, examining, for example, distributed leadership in education (Bolden 2011) or in health and social care (Currie & Lockett 2011); others focus on the conceptualization of shared and distributed leadership (Fitzsimons et al. 2011).

Denis et al. (2012) use the term “plural leadership” as an umbrella term for all plural notions of leadership in the literature, including “shared,” “distributed,” “collective,” “integrative,” “relational,” and “postheroic” leadership. Plurality means that multiple leaders have combined influence in a certain situation. Although these theories share some common tendencies, there is also notable inconsistency among them and thus a variety of streams in plural leadership research. Denis et al. (2012) further identify four major streams of research, which emphasize different types of situations and are based on distinct epistemological, theoretical, and methodological orientations.

The first stream of research focuses on sharing leadership in order to maximize team effectiveness in reaching team or organizational goals (Pearce & Conger 2003). This stream of research is interested in leadership that is shared among groups of people at any organizational level. A central idea in this stream is that shared leadership has potential to contribute to higher team and firm performance (Day et al. 2004). In particular, recent research within this stream focuses on the effect of leadership on corporate irresponsibility (Pearce & Manz 2011). The results of this research indicate that shared forms of leadership together with self-leadership lessen the potential for malpractice and thus for irresponsible behavior. The concept of self-leadership posits that all organization members are able to lead themselves to some degree (Pearce & Manz 2011). When self-leadership and shared leadership are well developed in an organization, the potential for irresponsibility is lowest. The second stream of research focuses on pooling leadership at the top of the organization; for example, some companies have two people sharing the position of CEO. A collective form of leadership is at the center of this research, and the empirical focus is on situations in which two or more leaders together act as co-leaders vis-à-vis others outside the group (Alvarez & Svejenova 2005). The third stream is interested in spreading leadership across levels over time, that is, the dispersion of leadership roles across organizational levels and even beyond organizational boundaries, for example, in the form of interorganizational collaboration. This stream is home to
most discussions of the concept of distributed leadership, particularly current in the area of education (Spillane 2006) and between organizations (Huxham & Vangen 2000).

As noted earlier, many leadership studies still focus on leaders as individuals and are interested in their qualities and skills. The fourth stream of research discussed here decentralizes this focus on individuals and concentrates on the production of leadership between people (Hosking 2007, Uhl-Bien 2006). These studies consider leadership a relational phenomenon, and many of them are grounded in a constructionist perspective. This view of leadership, according to some writers, calls into question the very nature of leadership and puts emphasis on its moral grounds (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011). Most of the contributions within this stream are recent and were authored in the past decade or two.

The present study mainly follows the fourth stream and emphasizes relationality and a social constructionist idea of leadership (Hosking 2007, McNamee & Hosking 2012). Overall, there is still a dearth of constructionist research in management, organization, and leadership studies (Hosking 2007), but research that has been done in other fields, such as psychology and sociology, can support the study of the socially constructed nature of leadership (Fairhurst 2008, McNamee 2009), especially when focusing on responsibility in leadership.

The next section examines in more detail the idea of leadership as created through relational processes through language (Crevani et al. 2010, Fairhurst 2008, Vine et al. 2008). It focuses on research that has something to contribute to our understanding of responsibility and its relational nature and especially to our knowledge of how to integrate responsibility through leadership (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011).

### 3.2 Leadership constructed in processes

Several contributions that focus on leadership as constructed in processes aim to develop a new conceptualization of leadership as a collective phenomenon in which formally designated leaders are central actors but other actors, too, have equal importance (Drath et al. 2008, Hosking 2007, Uhl-Bien 2006). The authors use the term “relational leadership” to describe this kind of leadership. Uhl-Bien (2006: 668), for example, defines relational leadership as “a social influence process through which emergent coordination (i.e., evolving social order) and change (i.e., new values, attitudes, approaches, behaviors, ideologies, etc.) are constructed and produced.”
The interest in leadership processes rather than leaders is a key characteristic of this research approach (Hosking 2007). Thus, hierarchical positions are not the only signs of leadership; leadership can occur everywhere in the organization, and interactions between people are important in constructing leadership. This kind of orientation to leadership is fairly new (Uhl-Bien 2006) even though the concept of relationship-oriented behavior has been noted since the earliest formal studies of leadership in organizations (Stogdill & Coons 1957). Traditionally, leadership research has paid attention to leadership behaviors that are relationship-oriented (Likert 1961) under the rubric of developing good work relationships based on high quality and trust (Graen & Uhl-Bien 1995).

The more recent approach sees leadership quite differently compared to the traditional understanding, which considers relationships from the standpoint of individuals as independent and discrete entities (Hosking et al. 1995). In contrast, in the new approach relationality is based on processes and not persons (leaders), which means that persons, leadership, and other relational realities are constructed through processes (Hosking 2007). The more traditional orientation toward relational leadership is called the entity perspective (Uhl-Bien 2006). Entity perspectives can be divided into several distinct research streams (Uhl-Bien 2006, Uhl-Bien & Ospina 2012).

What entity perspectives have in common is that they focus on individual entities and assume that individuals have personal qualities such as needs, minds, and personalities (Hosking 2007, Uhl-Bien 2006). Further, they assume that individuals have access to the contents of their personal qualities and that these entities can be distinguished from other entities (i.e., people) and the environment (Dachler & Hosking 1995, Uhl-Bien 2006). According to Dachler and Hosking (1995: 3), this approach is called a “subject-object” understanding of leadership, by which they mean that “social relations are enacted by subjects to achieve knowledge about, and influence over, other people and groups.” Noting the distinction between entity and process perspectives is important (Crevani et al. 2010, Uhl-Bien & Ospina 2012), because each emphasis directs attention to different aspects in research (Uhl-Bien 2006). The emphasis in the present research is on the process perspective, and at the end of this section the effects of that perspective on empirical research are discussed in more detail. The next section introduces the key aspects of leadership as a process.
3.3 Key aspects of leadership as a social process

In the relational approach to leadership knowledge is socially constructed and socially distributed rather than constructed, accumulated, and stored in individual minds (Hosking 2007, Uhl-Bien 2006). The relational orientation means that an organizational phenomenon such as leadership exists in interdependent relationships and as intersubjective meaning (Uhl-Bien 2006). Knowing is a process of relating in which the relating is a constructive and ongoing process of meaning making through language, limited by the sociocultural context (Dachler & Hosking 1995, Hosking 2007). Relational dynamics are central to exploring leadership, and context has a critical effect on these dynamics (Uhl-Bien 2006). Relationality refers here to the social processes, practices, and interactions that construct leadership (Hosking 2007, Uhl-Bien & Ospina 2010). In addition, leadership is seen as constructed and part of powerful societal discourses that in turn have effects on those processes, practices, and interactions (Crevani et al. 2010). Leadership as such is a well-known and institutionalized concept in society. When leadership is performed in companies, people tend to draw on such institutionalized notions of leadership, which should be kept in mind when studying leadership (Alvesson & Sveningsson 2003, Crevani et al. 2010). Thus, leadership is not only produced in interaction but also forms part of an institutionalized discourse that influences leaders’ conceptions and actions (Crevani et al. 2010, Denis et al. 2012).

Table 1 provides a summary of the key aspects on leadership as produced in social processes (Denis et al. 2012, Hosking 2007, Uhl-Bien 2006). The table does not aim at comprehensive coverage of the field of relational leadership research; rather, it includes those viewpoints that are meaningful from the perspective of this study and the lens that this study takes on responsibility in leadership. These viewpoints are recognized as key contributors to leadership as constructed in social processes (Hosking 2007, Uhl-Bien 2006).

Table 1. Key aspects of leadership as a social process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key aspects</th>
<th>Leadership as a social process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The central role of language</td>
<td>Leadership is constructed in interaction through language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational stance toward others</td>
<td>Leadership is a process that affirms collaboration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socially shared leadership</td>
<td>Leadership construction involves all participants, not just formal leaders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership embedded in local social settings</td>
<td>Local leadership constructions and particular processes apply.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leadership generates and supports multiple local constructions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The four aspects presented in the table are discussed in more detail below as they apply to research on leadership orientation. The key insight of each aspect is summarized in the table and then elaborated in the text. The discussion is based on leadership literature and but supplemented by writings from other fields that share the same assumptions of social construction and shed additional light on responsibility and leadership as relational phenomena (Gergen 1994, McNamee 2009). Since leadership construction processes have not yet received much attention in the literatures of management, organization, and leadership (Chia 1995, Gergen & Thatchenkery 1996, Hosking et al. 1995, Ospina & Foldy 2010), leadership researchers have drawn on other fields of literature that have a wealth of writings about relational construction processes (Hosking 2007). In addition, the aspects in the table are connected to responsibility in leadership. This discussion forms the special theoretical lens on responsibility in leadership that has been adopted in this research.

3.3.1 The central role of language

At the center of the relational view on leadership is the assumption that leadership is co-constructed in social interaction processes among people (Fairhurst & Grant 2010, Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien 2012). The approach to leadership as socially constructed among people gives a central role to language (Crevani et al. 2010, Fairhurst 2008, Hosking 2007, Vine et al. 2008). Language is emphasized as a means of communication (Barge 2012, Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien 2012, Hosking 2007, Vine et al. 2008) and of reflection (Crevani et al. 2010). The adjective “relational” indicates that communication relates or coordinates constructed realities among people (Vine et al. 2008). This leads us to investigate how leaders and followers construct relationships through communication and why some constructions are more valid than others (Hosking 2007).

Research has shown that other people and the context influence how we construct realities (Barge 2012, Sparkes & Smith 2008). People learn and talk about social phenomena in interaction with each other (Barge 2012). But not just anything goes: people speak about phenomena in ways that are recognizable and meaningful in their social contexts, because communication should resonate with a community’s general understandings (Sparkes & Smith 2008). Accordingly, responsible leadership is not a property inherent in individual leaders; rather, its meaning is generated within the realm of human interaction with other people. Responsibility, then, is not something that can simply be transmitted from leaders.
to others. The meaning of responsibility is co-created through interaction. It is not constructed in isolation of the conditions of its production, and thus the settings and matters related to responsibility shape it as well as the ways in which responsibility is interpreted among the people involved in the leadership process (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Barge 2012). In this way, leadership is a relational phenomenon co-created by leaders and followers in context (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien 2012). Barge (2012: 118) uses the concept of coauthorship to describe the co-creation of leadership through language:

“What is important to remember, however, is that conversations are always co-authored: the other participants are also practical authors who may offer similar or different formulations of the linguistic landscape as well as sometimes contest the formulations offered by others. The intersection of multiple practical authors, entering and leaving the conversation at different times, and making different bids for creating the landscape in particular ways, creates an emerging changing linguistic landscape that individuals must manage as it is being constructed. The notion of situations as being dynamic and co-authored by multiple practical authors has significant implications for leadership and leaders.”

In addition, the traditional theory of leadership treats leaders as individual subjects who are seen as the architects of organizational design, strategy, and vision and who carry the responsibility for success or failure (Dachler & Hosking 1995). By contrast, the relational construction of leadership relies on the proposition that processes make people and worlds (Hosking 2007). For example, in the context of interactions, shared expectations are recognized as playing an important role (Crevani et al. 2010, Sparkes & Smith 2008). Interactions are based on the idea that others will respond to our actions in ways consistent with shared expectations. However, expectations are not stable and thus what is expected is constantly evolving in the context of unfolding social situations (Crevani et al. 2010). Accordingly, expectations are not a set of fixed norms but rather are formed through everyday interpretative social actions (Sparkes & Smith 2008).

This, in turn, suggests a fluid definition of responsible leadership that is also shaped by social situations and context. Responsible leadership, then, is a task that requires an individual’s active role but also reflects the contributions of other people and the social context. Consequently, responsible leadership needs to be continuously reconstructed, and communication plays a significant role in this
ongoing process (Vine et al. 2008). This is an important point in studying responsible leadership, because it highlights the fact that everything might not be in the hands of a single leader. In addition, Grint (2005) suggests that what distinguishes successful leaders from unsuccessful ones is that, while leaders do not need to be perfect, successful leaders recognize their limits and rely on others to compensate for these limits. This leads to the next aspect, which emphasizes the relational stance toward others in leadership.

3.3.2 Relational stance toward others

The emphasis on leadership processes leads to a need to pay attention to how relational leadership can be created in practice (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Raelin 2011). Researchers use the term “work” to indicate the focus on leadership processes in practice (Ospina & Foldy 2010, Raelin 2011, Sparkes & Smith 2008). Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) argue that relational leadership is about how leaders situate themselves in the world how leaders relate with others. Research has found that in everyday leadership work it is vital to pay attention to how people relate with each other (Barge 2012, Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011). In the same vein, McNamee (2009) concludes that studying a social phenomenon such as leadership as something that is socially constructed and always in the making leads to investigating what people can create together in organizations, which is also an ethical question. If leadership is seen as a social construction, the focus should not be on pre-determining what kinds of interactions will produce transformation and lead to responsibility. To the contrary, the emphasis should be on applying what McNamee (2009: 60) calls “a relationally engaged stance” toward others. She further argues that within such a stance, the ethics of relationships dictates being relationally sensitive and relationally responsible toward others (McNamee & Gergen 1999). In leadership this would mean leaders knowing how to be sensitive and create openings for viable possibilities for those with whom they work (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, McNamee 2009).

Although McNamee (2009) writes about research in psychotherapy, her point about relational responsibility is valid in any social science field, and for that reason studies about relational responsibility influence the basis of the arguments in this study. The focus in relational responsibility is on what leaders and followers do together in a relational stance. It is important to investigate the ways in which leaders and followers construct their relations and how a particular
construction is established while other possibilities remain unrealized (Hosking 2007).

In practice, relational processes may include written or spoken language but also nonverbal actions, things, and events (Hosking 2007). Such relational processes give rise to an understanding of responsibility construction. The process of relating does not mean simply, for example, a leader communicating face to face with employees; rather, a sense of what constitutes responsibility is co-constructed together using various possible means. Therefore, we cannot determine outside a given context or, more specifically, a particular interactive moment what is a responsible response in that situation. The range of resources for action expands when the interactive moment is socially constructed and the focus is on creating together. Thus, in the research the focus has been on those leadership processes and on studying them in practice (Crevani et al. 2010, Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Raelin 2011). The next aspect focuses on sharing leadership and creating together.

### 3.3.3 Socially shared leadership

A crucial perspective in relational leadership is the idea that it builds on participation and collaboration (Hosking 2007, Pearce & Manz 2011, Raelin 2011). Raelin (2011) argues that the need to share leadership in organizations arises because the traditional models of leadership no longer meet the demands of today’s organizations in which work is based on knowledge, structures are increasingly horizontal, and organizational boundaries are diminishing. An interesting aspect of responsibility construction is the question of who is then the responsible actor in the construction process. Some argue that we are so familiar with the Western understanding of the individualized self as an agent who is held practically and morally responsible for his or her words and actions that we find it difficult to accommodate alternative subjectivities (Holstein & Gubrium 2003) or alternative ways to focus on constructing agency (Raelin 2011). In other societies and times, agency and responsibility have been incorporated in relation to many other social structures, such as the tribe, the clan, the lineage, the family, the community, and the monarch (Geertz 1984). The notion of the bounded, unique self, only partly integrated with others as the center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action, is a fairly new version of the subject (Gergen 2009, Holstein & Gubrium 2003).
If we see leadership as shared within the organization, the responsibility of leadership becomes not a property of the individual formal leader but rather emergent in the leadership process and a property of the group, network, or community (Grint 2005, Raelin 2011). The source of the irresponsibility or responsibility of leadership, then, lies not in leadership itself but in the type and process of leadership that is being considered (Pearce & Manz 2011). Defining leadership as socially shared and constructed in social relationships shifts the emphasis of responsibility in leadership to being likewise socially shared and formed through relationships. It encourages many to take responsibility and can lead to growth of leadership capacity and an increased ability to respond to ethical challenges (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011). Sharing leadership loosens boundaries and enables the emergence of new forms of organizing that happen not only inside one organization but within networks and thus also beyond organizational borders (Raelin 2011).

This view highlights the importance of interactions with multiple stakeholders in leadership work (Raelin 2011). A sense of togetherness is created through interactions, and this forms the basis for the emergence of responsibility on a scale broader than the acts of an individual leader (Pearce & Manz 2011). Gergen (2009: 333) effectively highlights the significance of relational leadership: “relational leading refers to the ability of persons in relationships to move with engagement and efficacy into the future.” Organizations need collaboration among participants to make responsibility emerge. In addition, leadership extends beyond organizational boundaries and reflects the surrounding social world (Gergen 2009, Raelin 2011) as well as the institutions in which it is embedded (Crevani et al. 2010). This brings us to the next aspect.

3.3.4 Leadership embedded in social settings

In studying leadership in terms of processes and as a socially constructed emergent phenomenon embedded in its sociocultural setting, attention must be given also to dominant discourses in society (Barge 2012, Crevani et al. 2010). The context of everyday leadership work is not determined by broad, universal categories such as culture but by locally interpreted and enacted social settings (Hosking 2007). Gubrium and Holstein (2009) use the term “environment” to describe the settings and factors that shape the interpretation of social circumstances. In other words, environmental factors such as local culture, status, job, and organization can mediate what is included in the understanding of
responsible leadership. In a similar vein, Sjöstrand et al. (2001) analyze institutions that (re)produce constructions of leadership, such as business schools, management education institutions, and business journals. These environments (Gubrium & Holstein 2009) and institutions (Sjöstrand et al. 2001) shape the leadership discourse in society, and that discourse contains expectations concerning how professional leaders should appear, behave, relate, and react. In this research, the term “narrative environment” will be used to describe the settings and factors that affect interpretations of leadership and consequently stories of responsibility.

A prevailing understanding about leadership is that it is expected to occur in formal or informal events within a company, although interactions extending beyond typical work situations can contribute important perspectives for the construction of leadership (Sjöstrand et al. 2001). There are no solid boundaries that prevent the inclusion of particular points of view, information, or attitudes in the construction of leadership (Gubrium & Holstein 2009). This means that experiences gained in non-work-related contexts such as hobbies can alter the normative expectations guiding leaders in the process of enacting leadership in their organizations. Leadership may thus be constructed, produced, and exercised in many unrecognized arenas in addition to those that are formal, usually acknowledged, or visible. Generally accepted norms or points of view represented in research literature, mass media, or leadership development programs, for example, may strengthen or erode a particular local understanding of what constitutes legitimate and effective responsible leadership (Sjöstrand et al. 2001).

Social settings can also be discursive and thus invisible, and we create certain possibilities for action through language in the course of conversations (Marvasti 2008a). Constraints on and opportunities for action are created, for example, within locally unfolding stories (Gubrium & Holstein 2009). Access to and the availability of certain language-based resources affect the formulation of certain understandings of leadership (Barge 2012). Consequently, studying leadership competences is not sufficient for understanding how responsible leadership could be integrated more comprehensively in companies. We will also need to understand the language-based resources that shape what kind of leadership is locally assigned and made possible within stories (Barge 2012, Gubrium & Holstein 2009). The construction of responsible leadership can be accomplished in many ways, and leaders today confront multiple and conflicting moral realities (Crevani et al. 2010). Sometimes we form understandings in conversation with people, but other people and institutions can influence our thinking even without
explicit conversation. The moral orders within which we live are produced in our daily visible or invisible interactions, which reflect historically and culturally situated dominant discourses (McNamee 2009).

These dominant discourses, or dominant stories, as Brown (2006) calls them, may establish guidelines and norms for interpretation. Established dominant stories also provide a point of comparison for other stories told, and there is thus a risk that deviant stories become marginalized (Murgia & Poggio 2009) and are cast aside in favor of the dominant stories. Contradictory stories may lack the verisimilitude that is necessary to make them seem plausible and convincing (Näslund & Pemer 2012). A dominant story may achieve so powerful a position that deviant stories no longer make sense or even become unthinkable because they challenge the implicit, taken-for-granted assumptions of the dominant story (Geiger & Antonacopoulou 2009). This, in turn, underscores the important point that responsibility and its viability in organizations reflect at least partly the extent to which responsibility has been incorporated in dominant stories of leadership overall. In sum, whether the story of responsibility receives legitimization and respect is sensitive to the ability of leaders and other participants in leadership work to craft a shared understanding about responsibility. Therefore, it is also important to study how leaders negotiate the story of responsibility against the dominant story of leadership and its assumptions regarding what is possible (Crevani et al. 2010).

The central point here is that responsibility emerges from leadership processes; it is not the responsibility of leadership defined according to hierarchical positions or roles. Responsibility can occur in leadership processes among people throughout the organization and even outside the boundaries of the organization. The emphasis in this field of research is on leadership processes among people and their context over time, which highlights the fact that leadership is contextually situated and emergent as multiple local leadership constructions. In this research, these four aspects are seen as key contributors to leadership as constructed through social processes. The focus of the next section is on the options for empirical research with a focus on leadership processes.

3.4 Exploring leadership processes

Recent studies sharing the understanding that leadership emerges in processes focus especially on empirical work using the practice perspective (Crevani et al. 2007, 2010, Lindgren & Packendorf 2011). The emphasis in these studies is on
leadership as processes and practices organized by people in interaction, not on what formal leaders do and think (Crevani et al. 2010, Hosking 2007, Uhl-Bien 2006, Wood 2005). In particular, they are interested in leadership in action, which means that leadership is continually negotiated and created in the web of interactions. They thus pay special attention to the discursive dimension of leadership (Crevani et al. 2010).

In addition, these studies stress that the rhetoric of leadership is a strong tool for directing interpretations of leadership processes, practices, and interactions. The principal message of these studies is that leadership is in part a social, cultural, and institutionalized discourse that also influences how leadership is perceived by people (Denis et al. 2012). Thus, listening to the stories that leaders tell might improve our understanding of the often invisible socially constructed nature of leadership and its role in opening up or closing down possibilities for responsibility in leadership (Uhl-Bien & Ospina 2012). However, the question of what could be empirically studied as leadership processes, practices, or interactions remains.

Leadership processes can be studied in many different ways. A major distinction from the point of view of the present research is that between the entity and relational perspectives of leadership (Uhl-Bien 2006). The entity perspective focuses on identifying the attributes of individuals participating in an interpersonal relationship. By contrast, the relational perspective concentrates on leadership as a process of social construction through which certain understandings of leadership—in this research, of responsibility in leadership—are formed. These two approaches can complement each other, but their implications and analyses differ in practice (Uhl-Bien 2006, Uhl-Bien & Ospina 2012). The specific relational perspective adopted in this research is described later in the discussion of methodology because it affects how the research was actually conducted.

The focus of the relational perspective can be on processes of interaction, conversation, narrating, dialoguing, and multiloguing (Dachler & Hosking 1995). Abell and Simons (2000: 161) describe the relational perspective through a narrative metaphor, which creates

“a shift in our understanding of organizations as “things” towards experiencing them more as an array of stories, always in the act of construction whose meaning and relevance is context-dependent. Meaning is constantly negotiated and renegotiated in the relational act of conversation,
deriving its meaning within the context of its particular sociocultural location. The world is seen as being brought into being via our collaborative “storying” of our experience, implying that as humans, we can actively intervene in constructing the societies and organizations we’d like to see emerge.”

Gronn (2002) highlights arrangements such as spontaneous collaborative patterns, intuitive understandings that emerge between people, and institutional arrangements that support self-managed teams and other formal structures. Drath et al. (2008) point out the increasing importance of shared and distributed leadership, and they present a framework that is based on the production of direction, alignment, and commitment (the DAC framework). Leadership is then a collective production in which members of the organization are willing to put mutually agreed long-term goals ahead of individual ones. Dialogue and sensemaking are important activities in leadership (Drath et al. 2008). Building on this earlier work and putting additional emphasis on the relational nature of leadership, Crevani et al. (2010: 81) further develop the basis for empirical research and propose that researchers should study

“co-orientation (enhanced understandings of possibly diverging arguments, interpretations and decisions of all involved parties) and action-spacing (construction of possibilities, potentials, opportunities and limitations for individual and collective action within the local-cultural organization context).”

This suggestion moves the focus of attention from the perspectives of individuals, in this case leaders, to investigating how understandings of certain phenomena (such as responsibility) are collectively formed by all involved participants and how these then create a space for action. Crevani et al. (2010) further suggest that studying leadership this way requires methodologies that allow an in-depth, processual understanding of the phenomenon.

In sum, there is some empirical research that offers direction for studying responsibility in leadership through a leadership process lens. In terms of methodology, this research also takes advantage of other fields of social science literature to complement the methodological options for investigating leadership as socially constructed through leadership processes; in this way, it also enriches the methodological repertoire of leadership studies. The next section summarizes
the theoretical discussion and outlines the basis for the empirical research setting and the actual empirical research.

3.5 Responsibility construction in leadership processes

Writers on responsible leadership argue that the element of responsibility is missing from most leadership theories that emphasize the moral or ethical dimensions of leadership (Waldman & Galvin 2008). Such theories, summarized in the beginning of the theoretical part of this dissertation, include those of servant leadership (Greenleaf 1977), transformational leadership (Bass 1985, Bass & Avolio 1994, Burns 1978), authentic leadership (Avolio et al. 2004, Avolio & Gardner 2005, Luthans & Avolio 2003), and ethical leadership (Treviño & Brown 2004). The need for more research on responsibility and leadership stems from the need to understand the concern with responsibility as a broader phenomenon in organizations and to see followers as a whole network of stakeholders both inside and outside the organization (Pless & Maak 2011, Waldman & Galvin 2008). In the other leadership theories that address ethical or responsible dimensions of leadership, responsibility is understood mainly at the individual level and research focuses on individual characteristics, styles, and processes. Businesses and business leadership have the potential to make a positive contribution to society. The drive to make responsibility concerns more inclusive and widely applied in organizations through leadership strengthens the need for more research on responsibility, because this aim is not explicit in the other leadership theories.

In addition, much research still follows a normative approach to responsibilities in leadership, which represents a challenge because such research may be ideologically driven or even biased in a particular direction (Waldman 2011). Thus, what studies declare to constitute appropriate responsible leadership may simply reflect the personal ideological values of the researchers, for example. Taking into account concerns over earlier normative research, Pless et al. (2012) created descriptive constructs for alternative approaches to responsible leadership in organizations. This research likewise pursues a less common, more descriptive approach to the study of responsibility with the aim of illustrating a potentially fruitful new approach to the study of responsibility and demonstrating how research could better inform managers and practitioners (Siegel 2014).

The literature on responsible leadership has identified a need to widen the perspective in order to see the followers involved in leadership not only as direct
subordinates but also as other stakeholders who ought to be incorporated into leadership considerations. Previous research on responsible leadership has shown that there can be variation in responsible leadership orientations (Pless et al. 2012), mainly because responsibility orientation is affected by the depth and breadth of the integration of people and business considerations. Some responsibility studies focus on how responsibility concerns are integrated and what is important in that process. Their emphasis is on leaders’ qualities and competences (Wilson et al. 2006) and on how some multinational companies are integrating responsibility in practice (Mirvis & Manga 2010, Pless & Maak 2008). Previous research on responsibility considers relationships an important element of leadership (Maak & Pless 2006, 2009), and it seems plausible that by studying the dynamics of social interactions we could formulate additional explanations of the variation in orientation and thus promote understanding of how best to support responsibility integration in companies.

Although a major focus of research in responsible leadership theory has until recently been the importance of taking a broader view of legitimate stakeholder expectations, research has still mainly taken the leaders’ perspective and sought to analyze how individual leaders can balance the diverse needs of different stakeholders. This view emphasizes individual aspects, such as the different roles that leaders need to take in balancing stakeholder needs (Maak & Pless 2006). However, even though the perspective of individual leaders is central, the present research argues that responsibility integration in businesses would be better served by an approach that incorporates co-creation and engagement via relational processes of leadership (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Hosking 2007, Mirvis & Manga 2010).

This research investigates how responsibility is interpreted and created in the everyday work of leadership. Relational theory, which applies to leadership processes, combined with theories of responsibility in leadership brings a nearly unexplored angle to the study of responsibility in leadership. There are some studies that are concerned with ethical and moral issues in leadership in addition to the relational view (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Raelin 2011), but beyond these there is little of this kind of research. According to Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011), relational leadership is a “way of being-in-the-world” in which interactions and dialogue are important. The strong emphasis on interactions highlights the ethical questions of leadership, and reflection on these questions is made possible by concentrating on relationships. Dialogue is understood as listening to and understanding differing views and values as well as establishing relationships.
What is important is that leadership is based on the responsibility to act and relate in ethical ways. Responsibility is not formalized in job descriptions, policy documents, or guidelines, but rather is deeply rooted in everyday relationships (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011).

This study contributes to the emerging discussion on responsible leadership and proposes a focus on the work of leadership as relationally constructed through leadership processes involving people beyond formal leaders. This approach highlights collaboration among groups of people within a specific context, not only phenomena at the individual level. Earlier writings on responsible leadership theory refer to the relational aspects of leadership as social processes of interaction (Maak & Pless 2006, Pless & Maak 2011). Responsible leadership theory is less interested in individual leaders’ characteristics (the “great man” approach), but it has close parallels with the relational leadership approach (Pless & Maak 2011). Previous writings have mainly focused on investigating the myriad relationships in which leaders are involved and accordingly the responsibilities that leaders have to different stakeholders (Maak & Pless 2006, Pless & Maak 2011). Here the focus is more on the relational nature of leadership and on how leadership is produced through relationships. This emphasis could enhance our understanding of responsibility in leadership because it has not yet been the focus of research and thus offers a novel opportunity for studying responsibility as a shared or distributed process. This approach has also been recognized by responsible leadership researchers as a potentially fruitful one for further research (Pless et al. 2012).

Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical framing of this study. The approach taken here suggests that an important avenue toward understanding responsibility in leadership is to study its socially constructed nature in ongoing daily interactions of leadership and thus in leadership processes. Accordingly, there are certain specific perspectives on the construction of responsibility in leadership to which this research is committed and which it explores. First, language plays a central role in constructing leadership; second, leadership is based on a relational stance toward others; third, leadership is socially shared among people; and finally, leadership is embedded in local social settings, and thus multiple local leadership constructions may emerge.
Fig. 1. Theoretical approach to constructing responsibility in leadership.

Responsibility in this study is understood as something leaders perform and do in relation to others rather than as something they possess within themselves. This definition shifts the emphasis from individual leaders to a vision of responsible leadership as a form of social action and a relational, sociocultural phenomenon in which language has central role (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Raelin 2011). This research also acknowledges that when leadership is approached in this way, dominant discourses about leadership in society are an inevitable and integral part of what is studied as leadership (Crevani et al. 2010), and therefore individual leadership stories are embedded in an overall narrative environment of leadership (Gubrium & Holstein 2009). It is particularly interesting to investigate how responsible leadership is interpreted and understood and to grasp the dynamics or creation and (re)production of such frames of understanding and their evolution over time. One way to explore these local interpretations is by listening to the stories that central actors in responsible leadership construct about responsibility (Sparkes & Smith 2008). When leaders recount episodes or stories to others, they also simultaneously reveal their thoughts, emotions, feelings, and morals in
relation to the context of their production (Sparkes & Smith 2008). Through studying leaders’ stories we can discern the multifarious relations (Gergen 2009) in which they are enmeshed and explore how different leadership positions on responsibility are constructed in the midst of these relations (Bamberg 2003). Listening to the stories told by leaders may offer a means for “seeing” the invisible threads that connect actors engaged in the leadership process as well as a way to understand how these actors together form understandings of phenomena such as responsibility and how they direct their actions accordingly (Uhl-Bien & Ospina 2012). The construction of responsibility can take local forms and be affected by local settings such as the surrounding society through processes of interaction and communication in leadership (Crevani et al. 2010). In this research, the stories of leadership are thus understood to be embedded in the leadership discourse in society.

This study would have been difficult to conduct solely through, for example, observing leaders in their work, because in such an approach the reasons for particular events and actions would not be apparent and thus the linkages between social interaction and common understandings in society would remain obscure. Consequently, if the aim is to study responsibility from a relational perspective as a social phenomenon, it is necessary to clarify the socially embedded nature of responsibility constructions. This research explores responsibility in leadership using a narrative approach. Narrative study is an effective approach to the subject because narratives have moral force and provoke ethical reflection (Frank 2004, Uhl-Bien & Ospina 2012), and they include relational aspects (Bamberg 2006). The next chapter describes the methodology and the actual fieldwork in more detail.
4 Research design and method

This chapter begins by discussing the research design and the philosophical approach of this study. The philosophical foundation forms the basis of methodological choices. This research uses a narrative approach to study responsibility construction, and the chapter thus provides an introduction to the specific narrative approach of this study. This is followed by a description of the data collection process. Data were collected through narrative interviews carried out over a period of four years. The interviewees are senior-level leaders, and they are described in summary form in order to maintain anonymity and sensitivity. The chapter continues with a detailed description of data analysis and the methods used for that purpose. In narrative research the researcher is very much involved in interpreting the research outcomes. For that reason the researcher should present his or her specific point of view to the reader. Accordingly, the description of the data analysis and the methods is followed by reflection on my personal perspective on the research process.

The storied world of leadership is the context from which the specific stories for this research have been collected. The context of the leadership stories is the narrative environment in which the work of leadership takes place. The description of the personal research process is followed by discussion of the narrative environment, its special characteristics in terms of responsibility, and aspects that we should be aware of when listening to leadership stories. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the possibilities for evaluating the research. There are many such possibilities, and the choices that have shaped this study are presented in more detail. The following chapter, then, enters into the leadership stories and presents the story lines of responsibility.

4.1 Research design

In this section, the present research is positioned in relation to various scientific approaches. When doing research it is important to clarify the underlying orientation to the philosophy of science that directs decisions concerning research design. The aim of this section is, therefore, to discuss philosophy of science in general and the special philosophical factors that affect the design of this study in particular. The philosophical foundation helps to determine the way in which data are gathered and interpreted to respond to the research questions that animate this research (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008). Research procedures and tools are
applications of our ontological and epistemological presuppositions (Hatch & Yanow 2008). Certain approaches support better than others the chosen research design. The philosophical considerations have various effects and can help to clarify the research design.

This research is qualitative and empirical by nature. Social scientists use a range of terms for central philosophical concepts when describing different methods in qualitative research, including philosophical positions, paradigms, epistemologies, research philosophies, and research traditions. Many qualitative approaches are interested in understanding reality as socially constructed, that is, produced and interpreted through cultural meanings (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). Therefore, qualitative approaches are concerned with interpretation and understanding. The collection and analysis of data require a holistic understanding of the context of the issues studied. In the literature all qualitative research can be placed under the title “descriptive,” but it can also be divided into several distinct positions such as postpositivism, critical realism, constructionism, and postmodernism (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). Each of these positions holds certain beliefs about ontology, answering two questions: what kind of being is the human being and what is the nature of reality. The positions differ also in their views on epistemology, which offers answers to the question of what the relationship between the inquirer and the known is. Finally, certain methodological choices are more suited to specific positions, and the methodological question is thus how we know the world and gain knowledge of it.

Management research is said to be dominated by positivism, whose basic claim is that research produces facts and accounts that are derived from an independent reality and value-free. Positivist research is based on empiricism, which means that observation and measurement form the basis of science. This means that research can discover what truly happens in organizations and leadership through categorization and scientific measurement of the behavior of people and systems (Hatch 2012). Critical realism shares with positivism the idea that there is an observable world that is independent of human consciousness. However, knowledge in critical realism is socially constructed. Research based on critical realism has well-established roots in organization and management studies (Alvesson & Willmott 2012).

In recent years the focus of qualitative inquiry has been increasingly on the socially constructed character of lived realities (Gubrium & Holstein 2008). In social constructionism reality is determined by people rather than by objective
and external factors. Hence, the task of the researcher should not be to gather facts and to measure how often certain patterns occur, but to appreciate the different constructions and meanings that people place upon their experience. The focus should be on what people, individually and collectively, are thinking and feeling, and thus attention should be given to the ways in which they communicate with each other, whether verbally or nonverbally. We should, then, try to understand and explain why people have different experiences rather than search for external causes and fundamental laws to explain behavior. Human action arises from the sense that people make of different situations, rather than as a direct response to external stimuli (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008).

Postmodernism is opposed to the positivist idea that there is a world that can be rationally and objectively discovered. In studying individuals and their life experiences, postmodernism has contributed to our understanding the insight that there is no access method or window into the inner life of an individual (Denzin & Lincoln 2011). How individuals account for their experiences is filtered through the lenses of, for example, language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity. Therefore, there are no objective accounts but rather socially situated accounts or stories of individuals’ actions or intentions.

This research mainly follows the philosophy of social constructionism. The seminal work on social constructionism is that of Berger and Luckmann (1966). The more recent works of Burr (2003) and Gergen (1999) in the area of social construction have contributed to the perception of leadership as socially constructed (Fairhurst & Grant 2010, Grint 2000, Sjöstrand et al. 2001, Uhl-Bien 2006). The field of social constructionist research has many divergent understandings (Fairhurst & Grant 2010, McNamee 2012), and research in this area varies considerably. Constructionist researchers start out with the assumption that access to shared, dynamic, and individually constructed reality is always mediated by social constructions such as language and shared meanings (Gubrium & Holstein 2008). This is why interpretative and constructionist research focuses not only on the content of empirical data but also on how this content is produced through language practices (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, Fairhurst & Grant 2010, Gubrium & Holstein 2008).

Constructionist research is a diverse field, and various frameworks and dimensions are attached to it. One of these is narrative (Sparkes & Smith 2008). We can easily understand narrative only as a research method and narratives as research data (Hyvärinen 2008). But social constructionists hold a more comprehensive notion of narrative as part of the constitution of the social,
cultural, and political world (Bruner 1991). According to some researchers, narrative is even an ontological condition of social life (Somers 1994).

The approach used in this study is related to the ontology of social constructionism and thus assumes that we exist in mutual relationships with others and our surroundings and that we both shape and are shaped by the social experiences of ongoing interactions (Berger & Luckmann 1966, Gergen 1999). This study has been influenced particularly by relational (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Hosking 2011, McNamee 2012) and narrative constructionist (Gubrium & Holstein 2008, Sparkes & Smith 2008) thinking. The emphasis is on narrative as a form of social action and as a relational, sociocultural phenomenon, and thus narratives form the epistemological basis for this research. Instead of concentrating on the individual and his or her personal experiences, this study considers narratives as forms of social action through which human life and our sense of self are constructed, performed, and enacted (Sparkes & Smith 2008).

In the context of this research that means that our understandings of leadership are made, not found, and therefore how people use language and construct narratives gives rise to our understanding of responsibility in leadership (Barge 2012). Therefore, it is important to explore how particular understandings are linguistically and narratively constructed. Such understandings are local, valid in particular contexts, formed in particular ways, and also fluid and dynamic as shifts in language create new understandings both of leadership and of social arrangements (Barge 2012).

There are several different approaches within social constructionism (Fairhurst & Grant 2010), but most of the approaches share three key assumptions (Barge 2012), which also form the foundation of the present research. The first assumption is that our use of language shapes our sense of self as well as our social arrangements such as relationships, organizations, and understandings about leadership. The second assumption is that our explanations of social phenomena are grounded in patterns of interaction and social practices. The third assumption is that history and culture affect our knowledge and understanding of social phenomena. In sum, social constructionism directs researchers to explore how leaders draw on historical and cultural knowledge to construct leadership together with other people by using linguistic materials, such as narratives.

In qualitative research analysis is based on a relatively small amount of empirical data or cases. The important aspect is the details of the data. The details are found in particularities and in people’s understandings or interactions (Silverman 2005). The study of narratives as a form of social interaction is well
suited to finding details. The narrative approach in this research follows
constructionism, as described in the next section, and supplements the research
setting in this study.

4.2 Constructing narratives

Within the field of research studying the internal organization of narratives, there
are several distinct orientations. Some deal with the personal self and its stories
(Gergen 1991, Polkinghorne 1988), while others are interested in more relational
selves (Holstein & Gubrium 2000, Riessman 1993). The latter approaches focus
on the self in relation to everyday life and, more specifically, on social interaction
and situations. The self is formed in communicative relation with others. The
following passage by Bamberg (2003) describes the narrative approach of this
research:

“When we speak, we usually speak to others and we speak about something
(or about others)—and we do both at the same time and by use of discursive
means (such as lexical devices, syntax, suprasegmentational devices, and
gestures). When we tell stories, we do a little more; we signal to others that
we are entering, maintaining or handing over the floor to “do” a story, and
we order aspects of what the story is about (particularly the characters in the
story) in space (there) and time (then) into a plot; again, by use of the same
discursive devices. In other words, time, space, and characters inside the
story world gain their existence in story performance; they are creations or
constructions, and so is the self (in its role as storyteller) as well as the
audience (in their role as participants and listeners).”

Narrative research has well-established roots in the social sciences, and in the past
decades its influence in management and organizational research has grown
considerably (Czarniawska 1997, Gabriel 2000). Brown et al. (2009) have
outlined the wide-ranging ways in which narratives are currently used in
management research. Narratives and storytelling are also gaining more interest
in leadership studies (Fairhurst & Cooren 2009, Shamir & Eilam 2005, Sparrowe
2005), and they have also reached the study of responsible leadership (Pless 2007,
Pless et al. 2011). The narrative approach of Sparrowe (2005) and Shamir and
Eilam (2005) describes what constitutes authentic leadership and thereby provides
a more insightful understanding of what motivates leadership development.
Empirical studies using the narrative approach are also found in the study of
leadership processes (Crevani et al. 2007). There are some articles about responsible leadership that use a narrative approach to the subject (Pless 2007, Pless & Maak 2008). Pless (2007) uses narrative analysis to understand the role identity and motivational drivers of responsible leadership. She examines the life story of Anita Roddick as an example of responsibility. Pless and Maak (2008) use the narrative approach in their study of experiential learning in a case organization in a developing country. They present the narratives of participants about their learning experiences. In general, research on responsible leadership is turning to more descriptive studies of leadership in order to understand how responsibility is interpreted in business companies (Pless et al. 2012).

Social scientists such as Riessman (2008) suggest that an important reason for doing narrative research lies in the belief that people are storytellers because telling and sharing stories help us to understand ourselves and to connect to each other. “Narrative” does not have a single, simple meaning among researchers, and it is sometimes used interchangeably with the term “story.” According to Hyvärinen (2009), narratives tell us about events and about how humans experience them. He uses Phelan’s (2005: 18) definition of narrative as “somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened.” In this definition, narrative is organized temporally. In this study, the stories that leaders tell are seen as reflecting a relationship among the personal self, past experiences, and the particular social contexts from which these stories arise; this relationship is illustrated in Figure 2.
In recent discussions about the direction of narrative research, there has been growing interest in using narrative ethnography as a complementary approach in practicing narrative research (Gubrium & Holstein 2008). Narrative ethnography allows us to study story production in a way that takes the socially shared and contextual features of narratives into account and thus accords with the constructionist basis of this research (Schall et al. 2004). In a narrative ethnographic approach the main consideration is the relationship between “own stories” and social worlds. For this approach, the individual accounts are not as important as what they tell us about the social worlds their tellers inhabit (Gubrium & Holstein 2009). This information, in turn, allows us to interpret social interaction in certain social contexts based on individual accounts. Therefore, we can interpret the accounts of leaders in order to analyze the social reality of leadership work as it unfolds among people. Accordingly, in this study the stories of individual leaders also represent the larger social narrative context of leadership. For example, we can investigate a leader’s stories to see which environments have affirmed or challenged the story of responsible leadership. We
can also obtain important insights into the meaning of the stories if we listen to what is usually said about responsibility in the leadership context and what leaders remain silent on. The stories of leaders are not only told in the interview session but also extend into the lives of these leaders and their past experiences on various occasions.

In sum, in this research both leadership and narratives are viewed as socially constructed. Therefore, narratives do not “objectively” mirror reality; rather, as Riessman (1993: 5) proposes, “they are constructed, creatively authored, rhetorical, replete with assumptions, and interpretative.” This research, then, focuses on how leaders as research participants interpret the work they do and what those interpretations reveal about responsibility in leadership (Schall et al. 2004).

4.3 Narrative interviews

According to Gubrium and Holstein (2008), narrative ethnography provides analytical access to the multilayered embeddedness of stories in relation to other stories. Analyzing individual stories leads us to the complex social context in which the story is embedded and shows how these contexts reflexively relate to stories and storytelling. In this research, responsibility is studied by taking into account different backgrounds of experience. The entry point is provided by the experiences of particular leaders, whose leadership is shaped by and a constituent of relations in a narrative leadership environment.

Mishler (1999) points out that studying personal narratives is a form of case-centered research. The leaders in this study were chosen because they have diverse backgrounds and experiences in terms of business type, leadership position, gender, and age. As Gubrium and Holstein (2009) put it, we tend to consider a good storyteller someone who has direct access to the experience being narrated, but in addition we should consider how good storytellers are identified in everyday life. My main criteria in selecting interviewees were the following: potential interviewees needed to hold leadership positions, show an interest in advancing responsibility in business, and have varied leadership experiences. The organizations represented by the interviewed leaders range from international companies listed on the stock market to small and medium-sized family-owned companies. The leaders hold various positions, including managing director, owner acting as managing director, and director of sustainability and corporate social responsibility. Many of them have changed positions during their careers.
Their ages vary from 35 to 65, and both genders are equally represented. Altogether ten leaders’ stories are included in this research.

In a narrative interview, the researcher invites stories, provides space for storytelling, and asks questions that encourage stories (Hyvärinen & Löyttyniemi 2005). It is recommended that the researcher first offers the interviewee the possibility to tell a larger story in order to create good settings for more specific narratives. The researcher uses preplanned questions only as conversation initiators. There are some guiding questions, but the conversation is free to move in any direction of interest that may come up. The guiding questionnaire that was used as a supporting tool for the interviews for this study is provided in Appendix 1. It is important to note that leaders may have questions and concerns of their own to discuss. The advantage of a narrative interview is that it is highly individualized, contextualized, and relevant to the interviewee. Because each interview is unique, time-consuming analysis is necessary to draw out the detailed aspects of each interview. In order to get as close as possible to the varied environments in which the work of leadership actually happens, most of the interviews were recorded at the companies where the leaders work. The purpose of this was to minimize the distance between the researcher and the leaders being studied.

Narrative research material can be collected in various forms, and not all of the material is originally in narrative form. The empirical material consists of ten leaders’ interviews, some magazine articles, and presentations given by leaders on different occasions. The research generally involved two interview sessions with each person. The first interview lasted approximately one to one and a half hours; it was recorded and subsequently transcribed. These interviews yielded about two hundred pages of transcript in Finnish.

Table 2 summarizes the interview sessions with each leader and the timetable of each interview. I followed a snowballing approach when conducting the interviews. Each interview cluster brought new insights and nourished my thinking further. The first two interviews gave me experience in conducting a narrative interview and the ability to test the method to see whether this kind of approach to data worked. The second round yielded my main results. The final round strengthened the understanding I had gained from preliminary analysis of previous narrative interviews.
Table 2. Interview sprints.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Round number</th>
<th>Time frame of interviews</th>
<th>Number of interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>8/2011–2/2012</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4/2013–5/2013</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first interview session with each leader focused on gaining an overall picture of the leader’s leadership career and on creating a good relationship between us. The main discussion themes were the leader’s career, his or her leadership, responsibility, and development. The recorded interview was transcribed in full detail, including all words, pauses, and other personal expressions such as laughter. The transcription provided a very good way of becoming familiar with the content of the interviews and of acquiring a preliminary understanding of the data.

The first interview was followed by a second, review discussion, which was shorter in duration; four of these follow-up discussions were conducted by phone. This discussion was based on a thematic analysis of the transcript of the first interview. The leaders received a copy of their own thematic analyses before the review discussion. Usually the summary was around two pages long. The purpose of the review discussion was to offer leaders an opportunity to add comments on the identified themes and also to add new stories and questions that had emerged after the first interview. In the analysis phase, the second discussion was recalled based on notes taken during the discussion. The next section describes the process of analyzing the ten interviews.

4.4 Analyzing the narratives

There are plenty of books about narrative analysis that are useful when analyzing organizational life and leadership. They range from early versions of analysis (Labov & Waletzky 1967, Propp 1968) to newer ones (e.g., Czarniawska 2004, Riessman 1993, 2001). The seminal work of Ochs and Capps (2001) turns the focus from analyzing full narratives to analyzing narrative as a form of conversation full of discursive processes that does not necessarily constitute a full story as previously understood in narrative studies. Similarly, Gubrium and Holstein (2008) argue that investigating the storytelling process widens the perspective from individual storytellers to the many voices that stories can reveal about the culture and the context.
The researcher’s purpose in narrative ethnographic research is not to generalize about the group of people interviewed but to describe social processes that have general effects. In other words, the idea is not to investigate the leaders themselves but to focus on the social relations that affect the work of responsible leadership and on how leaders talk about social life in general. In this research, the analysis of the narrative data took place in two main phases and featured different methodological choices in each phase. A description of the phases and the analysis follows. At the end of the description the methods of analysis are summarized in a table.

4.4.1 Creating an overall picture with first-cycle analysis

Instead of one overall method of analysis a narrative researcher might use a collection of methods in analyzing material. The qualitative analytic process is cyclical rather than linear (Saldaña 2009). First-cycle methods are those that are used during the initial coding of data, and they are fairly simple and direct. In fact, a preliminary understanding of the data begins to form already in the interview situation and continues during the data transcription. According to Saldaña (2009), first-cycle methods can be divided into such subcategories as grammatical, elemental, affective, literary and language-related, exploratory, procedural, and data-theming methods.

The first cycle may take considerable time, spent on reading transcripts and gaining an understanding of what the interviewees are talking about. In this phase I read the interviews as a whole many times. I identified initial themes according to colored markings, underlinings, and marginal annotations. At this stage I also used mind mapping as a tool to gain an overall picture of the data; Appendix 2 provides an example of a mind map of the themes that arose from the stories. Subsequently I categorized the contents of the interview transcripts into themes. A two-page personalized thematic summary was sent to each interviewed leader for the review discussion. The first cycle of analysis is partly a joint production with the interviewees themselves, because during the second interview round they had the option of reviewing whether the thematic analyses and interpretation accurately represented their opinions and thoughts. In addition, they had the possibility to add comments or more stories if something was on their mind. This was also a chance for more detailed discussion of topics that needed further clarification. In this way the leaders themselves were involved in producing the
research data as experts in leadership work. The first cycle had an important role in directing the focus of the analysis during the second cycle.

It is not possible to analyze all stories using every single method, but it is necessary to evaluate which of the methods are most useful for specific stories. Not everything in a story is equally interesting. Second-cycle methods are used to identify those parts of stories that should be analyzed more closely for the purposes of the research topic.

4.4.2 Deepening the picture with second-cycle analysis

Second-cycle methods are very challenging, because they require analytical skills such as classifying, prioritizing, integrating, synthesizing, abstracting, conceptualizing, and theory building. The aim of the second cycle in this research was to investigate certain parts of the interviews in more detail. The process of using the first-phase methods and taking note of what emerged in the interviews led to the adoption of a particular approach to the analysis. Throughout the stories, there was lots of talk about the social process of positioning, which caused certain patterns of responsibility to materialize. This observation led me to examine the use of positioning as a central analytical lens on the narratives.

Davies and Harré (1990) were the first to introduce the concept of positioning in the context of interactive exchanges between people; they related the concept to narratology. Harré and van Langenhove (1999: 16) summarize positioning as “the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person’s actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts and within which the members of the conversation have specific locations.” Harré divides positioning into three elements, represented by the “positioning triangle”: story lines, social acts, and positions (Davies & Harré 1990, Harré et al. 2009). Positioning theory has been chiefly interested in selfhood, and the primary source for studying selfhood has been autobiographical narratives. In the analysis of narratives, the positions that are assigned to particular persons are informative for detecting the dominant story lines and the rights and duties that belong to certain story lines (Harré 2010). Harré’s seminal work has provided the basis for further development of the use of positioning in narrative research, but many narrative researchers approach positioning differently than Harré (Bamberg 1997, Day & Kjaerbeck 2013, Deppermann 2013).

Bamberg (1997) divides positioning into three levels: first, positioning at the level of the story; second, positioning at the level of interaction; and third,
positioning with respect to the “Who am I?” question. Bamberg (2003) criticizes Harré’s approach to positioning, which assumes that discourses in society provide the semiotic and moral frameworks within which subjects are positioned, and thus subjects pick positions from among those that are available in discourses. In Bamberg’s view, by contrast, people can construct discursive positions themselves and therefore have a more agentive orientation toward positioning than Harré suggests. Bamberg introduces a more constructionist approach to positioning, according to which narratives should be analyzed as interactively accomplished situated actions (Day & Kjaerbeck 2013, Bamberg 2006). Positioning can be examined through the following questions (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008):

1. How are characters positioned in relation to one another in the story?
2. How does the speaker position him- or herself in interaction and how is (s)he positioned?
3. How does the speaker position him- or herself with regard to dominant discourses or master narratives?

More recently, in line with his growing interest in small stories (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008), Bamberg has put more emphasis on interactive, second-level positioning. Since small stories are embedded in conversational interaction and shaped by situated discursive concerns such as justifying actions, blaming, advice seeking, and advice giving, interactional positioning becomes an important motivation for storytelling and for self- and other-positioning through the story (Deppermann 2013). Interactional positioning, then, turns attention away from biographical approaches and emphasizes situated interactive positioning and smaller stories in the flow of conversation.

The present research adopts the interactional approach to positioning because of the underlying assumption of constructionism as well as the nature of the data, which are based on the situated storytelling of leadership (Deppermann 2013). In addition to the interest in interactional positioning in storytelling, this study also takes into account positioning at Bamberg’s third level and analyses how interactional local “micro” acts of positioning in storytelling relate to larger “macro” discourses of leadership (Crevani et al. 2010, De Fina 2008). An ethnographic orientation to the analysis of storytelling is one way of approaching the interplay between interactional occasions of storytelling and the “macro” discourses of leadership, which in this study is termed the narrative environment of leadership (De Fina 2013, Gubrium & Holstein 2008). This research also takes advantage of narrative ethnography (Gubrium & Holstein 2008) to access deeply
embedded social understandings of leadership in discourses and to discern how these understandings frame local understandings of leadership.

Positioning has also been used by constructionist leadership researchers (Barge 2012, Barge & Fairhurst 2008, Crevani et al. 2010). For the purposes of this research, special attention should be paid to how the analysis of positioning is conducted, because some of the positioning literature relies on the entity perspective of relationships between people. Relating should not be understood only in terms of one person talking face to face with another; it should not be limited to interpersonal or intrapersonal communication processes between already known people. Positioning in this study goes beyond what happens in interpersonal or intrapersonal processes between leaders and followers. Rather, in this study’s view, processes of relating (words, stories, things, events, etc.) construct positions in reality and endow these positions with meaning as heroes and villains, good and bad, right and wrong (Hosking 2007).

Narrative researchers also use other concepts related to the concepts of position and positioning, including footing, standpoint, voice, stance, and social location, and some of these concepts are also used throughout this study (Deppermann 2013, Schuman 2012). For example, Frank (2012) uses the concept of standpoint, which reflects a person’s own, unique experience and asserts membership in a community of those who understand shared experiences in mutually supportive ways; similarly, McNamee (2009) uses the concept of stance to refer to how people orient themselves toward others in interaction through narratives. Gubrium and Holstein (2005) use the concept of social location to describe position. Diverse social locations provide alternative understandings, possibilities, and challenges to those within the locations. For example, siblings may understand the life of their family differently depending on their gender or their birth order in the family (Gubrium & Holstein 2005). Likewise, the leaders of organizations may understand leadership differently depending on their particular social locations and on the ways in which understandings are formed in their circumstances, reflecting, for example, who is involved in the discussions. This stream of analysis concentrates on how leaders discuss leadership dynamics and interpret the work of leadership from their distinctive positions. Different social locations may carry different perspectives on leadership and relationships, and thus positioning happens in interaction (Schuman 2012).

Positioning is a good point of entry into analysis, because people use fluid positioning, not fixed roles, in describing different work situations (Barge & Fairhurst 2008). Formal leaders are appointed to leadership positions, and thus
positions are similar to leadership roles. Positions, like roles, are associated with permissions, obligations, and prohibitions regarding how leaders make sense of situations. But in contrast to roles, positions are more fluid (Raggatt 2007). Positions are not physical or visible; they are negotiated in discursive fluxes of various sorts, and they can be expressed in many different ways, such as in words, signs, and gestures (Marvasti 2008a). Participants in social interaction are not static or fixed in time and place, and thus analysis cannot be solely based on documents or predetermined frameworks of social action (Marvasti 2008a). Positions, then, are constructions that appear when people tell others about some issue, and these positions are mediated by concrete conditions and interpretative actions. For example, Crevani et al. (2010) show how different positions and relations between people are constructed in discussions at the workplace and also what tasks and responsibilities these positions include (i.e., who should do what).

The narrator can shift between different positions, functioning in an agentive role in some circumstances and in a passive role in others. Narrators use the positioning of certain characters as well as of the self in addition to grammatical resources to make their moral messages clear to their audiences (Raggatt 2007). Positioning in stories features the local moral landscape, and people can express their moral stands in practice by, for example, taking notice of people or ignoring them, giving them tasks, praising them, and so on (Harré et al. 2009). Thus, positioning is a good analytic lens because it enables us to capture the dynamics of responsibility creation, for example, by identifying who is included in the construction of responsibility. A leader can include people both nearby and further away in the story of responsibility.

Below is an excerpt from one of the narratives in this study that illustrates how positioning takes place in the stories:

“But the world has become much more complicated and I'm not a technologically gifted person; I have noticed that I have to take a completely different approach to leading, an intuitively different approach [than that of my predecessor], in the sense that of course [he/she] didn't mean it badly and it is by no means a bad way of doing things, but it's a different way. The way I see it myself is that I rather want to give responsibility and power to those who know what they're doing. . . . Business has become so difficult that you just have to have trust, and it's wonderful that you can trust other people—so I don't know what kind of a model mine is but it's in any case different in that it's not so me-focused. I've noticed that I naturally . . . I have tried to unlearn
this: I used to take on everything that my predecessor delegated to me and I initially took really strong control over everything, but then I realized that, hey, I’m making the same mistake that I’ve been criticizing [him/her] for. So now I am consciously trying to make sure that that model isn’t perpetuated; you have to give people freedoms and such, you have to try to do things differently, so it’s not just that you let the employees make decisions but that you actually give them real responsibility.” (S10)

Here the leader positions himself in opposition to the former leader and also refers to the context of leadership in the process of positioning in his story. In addition, he includes other people in the company in his story of responsibility. The aim of the analysis is to understand how responsibility is constructed socially in leaders’ stories: first, how positioning emerges at the level of interaction (Bamberg 2003, Deppermann 2013), and second, how positioning arises from macro-level social generalizations of certain institutions in the narrative environment of leadership, which means that the phenomenon under study is our common cultural understanding of responsibility in leadership (De Fina 2013, Gubrium & Holstein 2009). Research in the social sciences has established that certain institutions in the narrative environment shape the stories that people tell (Gubrium & Holstein 2001, 2009). Accordingly, institutions within the narrative environment of leadership, such as families, organizations, business schools, and the media, influence how leaders construct their stories of leadership (Gubrium & Holstein 2009). Therefore, this research draws on the idea that there is a close interplay between the narrative environment of leadership and positioning in leaders’ narratives.

Table 3 summarizes the forms of positioning according to which the data are analyzed in this research. The approach to positioning should be decided in light of the data at hand (Raggatt 2007). Thus, those forms of positioning that leaders themselves identified in their stories were emphasized when conducting the data analysis. This kind of approach to identifying relevant positions constructed in storytelling can yield more interesting insights into the data than would using only positions that somebody else has thought to be relevant in analyzing leadership work (Raggatt 2007).
Table 3. Forms of positioning in leadership narratives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form of positioning</th>
<th>Locus of positioning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactional</td>
<td>Positioning self and others within interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative environment (institutions)</td>
<td>Microsocial environments (profession, close relationships, jobs, family)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Macrosocial environments (organizations, culture)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Table 3 the first form of positioning is interactional, that is, positioning used in the everyday micronarratives of leadership work (Deppermann 2013). Leaders use interactional positioning to describe the settings and circumstances of their interpretations of leadership work. Positions in interactions are dynamic and changing, and people use the cultural, symbolic, and narrative resources that are available for positioning (Raggatt 2007). The present research is particularly interested in the interplay between positioning and the narrative resources provided by certain institutions and in how these institutions shape the leaders’ stories of responsibility (Gubrium & Holstein 2001, 2009). Analysis of interactional positioning includes such considerations as who understands the message of the story and who perhaps does not, are there any limitations regarding to whom the story can be told, and who is included in the “we” in the story and who is excluded (Frank 2012).

Positioning might also be affected by the basic values being pursued at a given time. For example, in leadership transactions with people leaders can either pursue power positions or relate to others in a more caring manner. Positioning is thus also affected by the nature of transactions (Apter 2003). If the leader pursues power, he or she likely feels that a leader should be tough and in control, be looked up to by others, and demonstrate superior skills. By contrast, approaching transactions in a more caring way emphasizes leadership that is more sensitive to people and context, with the leader positioning him- or herself within a kind of friendship and close to others. Leaders often use positioning implicitly to describe social hierarchies, power relations, and differences, for example, in terms of male vs. female, manager vs. subordinate, and expert vs. novice (Raggatt 2007).

The second form of positioning happens in the narrative environment of leadership work and is institutional (Gubrium & Holstein 2009). Institutions shape the narrative resources on which leaders rely when they speak about leadership work. In the case of leaders, relevant institutions include the profession of the leader and the dominant story concerning how people should behave in leadership positions. A highly influential institution today is the media, which
shape the image of and opinions about how leaders should be and behave. The profession of leadership is framed by expectations regarding what leadership is about. The question, then, is to what extent a leader needs to adapt and fit into the expected rights and duties. Leadership is shaped by what is expected and supposed to be done because of history and tradition, for example. Breaking the rules, being unconventional, and doing something that is unexpected require courage. In the present study, analysis revealed the ways in which the leaders framed their messages within the storied world of leadership against the dominant story of leadership and the narrative resources to which they referred while creating their stories (Gubrium & Holstein 2009). The dominant story became apparent when leaders evaluated the stories they constructed during the interviews. The dynamics of stories were analyzed based on how the leaders framed the specific stories in the narrative environment of leadership work. The framing happened in two principal ways: in relation to the grand narrative of leadership and in relation to narrative resources.

In positioning we can discern framing taking place against a dominant narrative or against shared cultural knowledge about leadership work. Dominant narratives represent normatively favored accounts (Hyvärinen 2008). Dominant narratives are seldom told by anyone, but we can hear parts of them by listening to, for example, small narratives that restrict or take distance from such culturally privileged ways of talking about leadership. As an example of how powerful institutions as narrative environments can be in shaping narratives, Gubrium and Holstein (2008) examine the narratives created in two different institutions for recovering alcoholics. They compare the respective narratives of Alcoholics Anonymous groups and Secular Sobriety Groups (SGS). They note that while the SGS genre privileges the roles of the agent and the experiencer, the narratives of AA groups, by contrast, favor a role that is the opposite of the experiencer, that is, that of the patient. In this case narrative positioning affects the shape of the narrative position adopted by individuals in accordance with the grand story of the institution. In addition to the grand narrative, framing is influenced by the use of narrative resources. Certain narrative environments support specific narrative resources, which individuals rely on when telling stories (Gubrium & Holstein 2008).

The leaders interviewed in this study already possessed ample life experience and thus diverse narrative resources. The question, then, is which narrative resources they relied on when talking about responsibility. The answers to this question could provide guidance regarding how responsibility can be integrated in
leadership. Narrative resources are used to talk about something, and they consequently guide the way in which we speak about that something (Frank 2012). Table 4 summarizes the process of analyzing the research data.

Table 4. Summary of the analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase of analysis</th>
<th>Means of analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First phase</td>
<td>Preliminary understanding formed in interviews and transcription</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Holistic reading of the stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thematic analysis, joint production with the interviewees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second phase</td>
<td>Positioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Analyzing details, framing, and narrative resources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data analysis yielded four stories of responsibility, which are described in the next chapter. Presentation of the stories is followed by a summary of the main dimensions of each story for the purpose of studying the dynamics between the stories. Narrative researchers have found this to be a good way of obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the stories, and this research has applied the same approach to capture the specific dimensions of responsibility stories (Beech 2000). Despite the attempt to impose order on the data analysis and to create a process for progress, this kind of qualitative research always embodies a leap of faith. It requires decisions regarding how to work with the large amount of transcripts, thinking about potential arguments, and drawing on existing literature about the phenomenon under study. In practice, this involves trying out different interpretations and organizing categories to identify the most descriptive ones, and this process cannot follow a strict procedure. The following section offers my personal reflections on the research process. In narrative research, transparency is important. The researcher has an influence on how the story data are created and interpreted, and thus the reader should have an opportunity to understand the viewpoint of the researcher.

4.5 Personal reflections on the research

I chose to place my personal reflections in a separate section because I aim to follow constructionist research reporting practices throughout my work, which makes it difficult to separate theory, my reflections, and my interviewees’ thinking. According to the philosophy of constructionist research there are no
clear boundaries between the producers of knowledge, so the reader can hear many intertwined voices in the reporting (McNamee & Hosking 2012). This remains the case even though I have sought to help the reader by means of a clear reporting strategy and separate theory, methodology, empirical, and discussion sections. Writing reflexively is quite difficult. The potential pitfall in writing about oneself as a researcher is that reflexivity can turn into narcissism and description that unduly highlights the role of the researcher (Denzin 1997). I can easily understand that danger: the researcher needs to be committed to and enthusiastic for the topic under study in order to persevere and complete the research successfully, but on the other hand the researcher must retain the ability to maintain some distance to the work and to be open to sharing ideas and integrating input from others as an important part of the work. I did not keep a research diary; instead, I found that drawing mind maps was more appropriate for my purposes. I accumulated a considerable collection of such mind maps from various phases of the research. From these maps I can see how my own understanding changed during the process.

In narrative research the researcher is an integral part of the research. At the beginning of the project I thought that I could remain objective and write without putting myself in the research. The reflections of other researchers indicate that this is a common belief among beginners in constructionism and narrative research. Learning took place during the research process, as I realized that I could not avoid participating in the construction of the knowledge I studied, even though especially in narrative descriptions the temptation to leave oneself out of the inquiry is strong. Many novice researchers have reflected on the uneasiness they felt when listening to their own voices in interview situations and finding their interjected comments to sound unprofessional. I had very much the same experience and was tempted to omit my comments from the transcripts. It would be interesting to study how stories are co-constructed in the research process, and there are already good examples of such research (Holstein & Gubrium 2003, McNamee & Hosking 2012), but that would have given rise to another story and perspective, and the emphasis in my study is on the leaders’ story construction process.

I studied for my master’s degree in economics and business administration at the University of Oulu in the early 1990s. At the time, Finland was in a deep economic crisis, but this had little effect on us students because a new industry was growing rapidly in our area: high technology companies. Many of my fellow students began to work for these technology companies already during their
studies. I started at one of these firms in the human resources department and after six years changed to another high technology company, still in human resources. Altogether I amassed nearly 15 years of work experience. The ethos in high technology was to change the world, and companies were aiming for worldwide business. A major element in their strategy was innovation, such as new mobile communication products. The goal of human resources was to use various means to enable growth. There I was, a young professional responsible for finding such means in an organization that had very little history and few established structures. I was not alone: my colleagues in other areas faced the same challenge. How we managed to meet it was by cooperating, by creating a network outside the company to support our knowledge, and by inventing new ways of working.

I began by addressing structures for producing knowledge, and for that work we established practices such as management meetings and an advisory team of external experts from the fields of unions, health care, social security, and law. We also used consultants in management development and recruiting. Soon, as the company continued to grow, I noticed that there was a need for common leadership processes, such as performance management. The most important learning took place after some years of process development and unifying the international human resources of the company. I gradually became aware that there was something important that affected the organizational atmosphere, the work ethic of the employees, and our dedication to our work. That was the culture and spirit of leadership at our workplace. That realization sowed the seed of a research idea, and several years later I entered a PhD program with an interest in studying leadership and the invisible influence of ethics in business. I like to think that my preliminary understanding of the subject was already taking shape when I was working and that I was in a way doing ethnographic and narrative research even though I was not yet able to name it as such. My personal experience of business during my career influences my research, and one avenue through which it does so could be the narrative interviews and the ways in which the interviewees position their stories when they share them with me. I also interpret these stories in the context of my own experiences.

There have been plenty of awakenings and much learning during the process. I might describe the process as a learning journey among many people. Maturing as a researcher has also given me the opportunity to reflect on what I learned during the earlier years at work. Already when formulating my preliminary understanding of earlier theories, I contrasted the theories with my own
experiences. While I was conducting the narrative interviews and frequently meeting the leaders, much thinking was going on. Trying to stay alert to everything that was happening was sometimes difficult. Working with empirical data, previously published studies, and new concepts in the research community, such as GRLI (Globally Responsible Leadership Initiative), was confusing and needed time to incorporate into my research. An important lesson I learned in this confusion was that planned work was not yet half done, because the thinking process and the maturing of ideas also take their time that does not fit into a linearly planned timetable.

In the early phase of the dissertation I struggled with the question of ethics and leadership. How could I position myself in a situation in which I would need to say whether somebody was a responsible leader or not? I found the solution to this problem in the narrative approach that I follow in my research. I do not aim for a conceptualization of responsible leadership but rather to report how leaders themselves construct their understanding of responsibility in leadership.

Possibly the most educational phase was when I was conducting interviews. I noticed tensions between myself and the leaders I interviewed, stemming from their perceptions of me as a co-researcher, their perceptions of themselves as co-researchers, and my own perception of myself in researching the topic. These tensions prompted me to think about the moral and ethical responsibilities of a narrative inquirer with leaders. What constituted a sensible topic was negotiated case by case. Several times my interviewees explicitly told me not to include something they had said in my report. At other times I myself had to adjust the message so as to ensure that it was sensitive to the people invited into the stories. In addition, some leaders were worried about whether they had expressed their point of view sufficiently reasonably and whether their language of expression followed the common understanding regarding how leaders should speak. This observation led me to consider vulnerability issues in leadership.

There were no easy answers to how to cope with these tensions, but in the course of my attempts I started to realize that I needed to understand more than just the stories the leaders were telling about their lives: I also had to appreciate the ways in which their stories could be understood through and shaped by culture and contextual settings (institutions). Once I engaged more closely with the stories and reread them repeatedly after the first five interviews, I realized that my preliminary understanding, gleaned from responsible leadership theory, was inadequate. I began to notice that the leaders were mostly talking about people and their relationships in equally based settings. This led me to widen the scope
of relevant literature and to search for guidance in relational and interactional approaches to leadership. The stories were about responsibility construction while living in the midst of relationships with people at home, within organizations, and in communities. Staying alert and trying to understand these relationships and tensions was not an easy task.

Finally, reporting research is tricky work; it is challenging to find an effective way to carry the reader from the introduction to the conclusions. Another source of challenge lies in the researcher’s philosophical commitments and the fact that the entire report is based on these commitments. Every research report is also personal in terms of, for example, its written style, especially in narrative research. The leaders used a variety of different metaphors as well as drawings in articulating their stories of responsibility. This may reflect the difficulty of expressing how they actually interpret the meaning of responsibility in leadership. That, in turn, makes it challenging to express the message in the form of academic writing. I have consequently often used pictures when presenting my research. Such use of pictures and other new modes of expression as possible vehicles of reporting empirical research has been discussed in the literature (Marvasti 2008b, McNamee & Hosking 2012).

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that working in high tech and doing research bear some close similarities. Both involve inventing something new that could benefit others (society) and always aiming for the best possible result, otherwise your research (or product/service) is not relevant. For such work you have to be open to working with other people or experts and to creating an atmosphere of mutual responsibility. You have to trust your own ideas, because qualitative research is a form of entrepreneurship.

4.6 The social environment of leaders’ stories

The stories studied here were collected in and arise from the social environment of executive-level leadership positions in Finland-based business organizations. The organizations in which the leaders worked at the time of the interviews range from international companies listed on the stock market to small and medium-sized family-owned companies. The business sectors represented vary, as shown in Table 5:
Table 5. Business sectors of companies in the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business sector</th>
<th>Number of companies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Telecommunications</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health services</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial services</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textile industry</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some of the leaders had changed companies several times during their careers, and their stories of responsibility related to different companies during their careers. The stories arose from a range of experiences, not all of which were connected to a work organization or to only one work organization. How the companies approached responsibility issues varied. In some companies the approach to responsibility was rooted in overall company leadership principles, and in those companies responsibility issues were integral to business decision making. Other companies were actively seeking to move toward more responsible mainstream business activity. Finally, in one company a significant driver of responsibility had been a crisis situation in which the company had faced negative feedback because of the materials used for its products.

An important factor that influences the narrative of responsibility in addition to personal narratives and leaders’ histories in their organizations is the current metanarrative of leadership, which means the narrative of a certain profession, the organizational narrative, or the narrative in society in general about leadership. The borders between these different narratives are increasingly blurry. The metanarrative formed the context for the stories told by the leaders. Therefore, the accounts did not arise only from a specific company but were also related to the leadership metanarrative. This research thus explores leadership in a linguistic landscape (Barge 2012) or narrative environment (Gubrium & Holstein 2009) of leadership that does not represent any physical setting for research.

In their stories, the leaders were enmeshed in a variety of relationships and the significance of concrete physical settings was not remarkable. Leaders today include in organizational settings not only physical settings but also the relationships they have with people. This is why the relational perspective on leadership constitutes a meaningful lens for studying responsibility.

The traditional assumption has been that the meaning of a work setting is singularly rooted in one organization and place, and much research has followed this idea. But in today’s society people do not interact only within a single local
organization. They might work in many separate locations, including at home, and this is made possible by, for example, the use of the internet. Technology and mobility have facilitated interaction, movement, and communication across space. This affects everyone, and the sense of belonging is no longer rooted in a local space (Gergen 1991). In view of such working conditions, the objects of our study should, according to Czarniawska (2004), be networks of people rather than specific organizations, and we should use methods that facilitate the study of people who move around a great deal.

These new kinds of relational being and communal life are made possible by new technologies such as mobile phones, internet, and other mobile devices (Gergen 2002, Williams & McIntyre 2000). There are numerous narratives globally in which the story of responsibility is based on different ideals, ways of life, or religions. Different generations generate different understandings, and today the range of understandings may vary more than ever before because local micronarratives can easily mix with global ones facilitated, for example, by technological possibilities such as the internet (Williams & McIntyre 2000).

All of the organizations represented by the interviewed leaders are currently undergoing many kinds of changes. During change, leadership is emphasized, and the role of leaders is especially crucial. Although change is in some form always present, the intensity of change can vary over time. Change can occur quickly, but the process of effective change is slow (Fullan 2001, 2008). Therefore, Weick and Quinn (1999) propose that change is a normal state in organizations and should be approached by means of dynamic leadership. The pressure for change may be external, coming, for example, from investors or customers, or internal, from owners or employees. According to Fullan (2001), in situations of change effective leadership means a focus on making a difference, encouraging people to solve problems and to be accountable for solutions and leading others in developing a moral purpose within the organization. Developing relationships among the people in an organization helps to establish the foundation for communication and for the achievement of effective leadership goals.

In today’s business environment it is fairly obvious that initiating and handling change is an important and integral part of a leader’s work. What is not so obvious is how leaders deal with pressures for change to meet ethical challenges. People tell stories to make sense of change (Brown et al. 2009). In situations of change, meanings are fragile and the mind is confronted with many different possibilities. Treviño and Brown (2004) argue that pressures from the work environment can have the effect that even if people initially make the right
decision, they may later find it difficult to follow through with it and to do what is right. In sum, chance is in many ways at the core of studying stories, because it can either affirm or challenge responsible leadership. The way we frame the world in discourse influences how we act vis-à-vis the world. For example, do leaders make constant reference to the irresistible pressures of the market, or do they see themselves as having a choice in how to act?

The transition of corporations from hierarchical to network structures, from national to transnational operations, from a shareholder focus to a stakeholder orientation, and from a self-understanding as independent players in society to becoming corporate citizens affects the demands on leadership (Maak & Pless 2006). In the social environment of leadership stories, the rise of so-called knowledge-based companies has also influenced leadership work and narratives. Knowledge-based companies are more common in Western countries, and all of the companies in which the interviewed leaders worked could be described as such. These companies are characterized by task complexity and professional employees with deep competence, and shared forms of leadership are common in them (Pearce 2004, Pearce & Manz 2005). These kinds of professionals have the ability to take charge of leadership roles and responsibilities. Shared forms of leadership are thus the result both of the complexity that leaders face in the landscape of modern leadership work and of the ability and willingness of other organization members to share leadership.

The role of interactions and language in constructing more distributed and shared forms of leadership are crucial. We can gain a window into the construction process through listening to the stories people tell about their daily work. Stories thus provide a way of discerning what is considered to be valid in responsible leadership when leaders reflect on responsibility, because stories are not bound to any particular organization or person. In stories, people are able to move between places and to include different actors in constructing their accounts. Therefore, narratives of leadership or the narrative environment (Gubrium & Holstein 2009) form the context for the stories of leadership responsibility in this research, because in practice the leaders’ storytelling did not reflect only the organization in which they were currently employed.

The following section evaluates the adequacy of this research. The question of validity is an overarching and central issue when studying stories (Polkinghorne 2007). The purpose of the next section is to discuss the stories and the idea of validity in research. Narrative researchers argue that traditional ways
of evaluating the validity of research are not applicable when investigating narrative research (Riessman 1993).

4.7 Evaluation of this study

There are many alternative perspectives from which to assess what constitutes good narrative constructionist research. Judgments about scientific research are based on the weight of the evidence and the arguments offered in support of research statements and knowledge claims. Narrative research issues claims about what life events mean for people and how people understand different situations and the people involved in them. Narrative researchers should provide sufficient justification for their readers about the claims their research makes, and the readers should thus be able to follow the claims throughout the research process in order to make their own judgments about the relative validity of the claims (Polkinghorne 2007).

Riessman (2001: 696) takes a clear stance against the expectation of objectivity “My approach to narrative analysis does not assume objectivity but, instead, positionality and subjectivity.” The social constructionist perspective is not based on verification of life facts but rather on understanding the variation in individuals’ interpretations and meanings and how these represent local history and culture. In the investigation of narrative accounts, it is irrelevant whether events really happened as people report them. People tend to present past events from the vantage point of present realities and values (Riessman 2001). The plots of story lines might shift as people accumulate more experiences. Mishler (1999: 5) notes how the shift in story lines can be heard in personal narratives:

“We continually restory our pasts, shifting the relative significance of different events for whom we have become, discovering connections we have previously been unaware of, repositioning ourselves and others in our networks of relationships.”

The validation of interpretative work needs criteria other than the traditional one of correspondence (Riessman 2001), since narrative research aims to present not a structure set in advance but instead different viewpoints that should be considered while conducting and reporting narrative research (Heikkinen et al. 2007, 2012). I will next discuss this research in relation to validity questions from three different viewpoints: the situational nature of stories (Heikkinen et al. 2007), the
transparency of interpretation (Polkinghorne 2007), and possibilities for a variety of actions (McNamee & Hosking 2012, Riessman 2001).

Stories are never told in a vacuum, and they thus represent a particular situation in the continuum of history (Heikkinen et al. 2007). The macro-level history of leadership stories was considered earlier in the theoretical discussion of the current understanding of responsibility in leadership. A more nuanced and micro-level approach to stories was described in the previous section, which presented the narrative landscape of the leaders’ stories. Later in the discussion the empirical leadership stories are positioned in the light of the historical continuum in order to provide a view into the context in which the stories are created.

The transparency of the claims made in narrative research offers readers the possibility of evaluating the research. In this research the viewpoint of the researcher was discussed in more detail earlier in Section 4.5. It is important to present the researcher’s standpoint explicitly, because it has a central role in narrative constructionist research. The actual stories are co-creations of the interviewer, the participants, and their interaction, in which interviewers can affect participants’ responses (Mishler 1986). Therefore, examining how we as researchers enter the process of inquiry is important. In addition, reproducing excerpts of the original stories gives readers access to the authentic voice of the participants. The validity of the generated interpretation can also be improved by going back to the participants to gain clarification or further stories (Polkinghorne 2007); this was the purpose of the second round of interview sessions during my research process. Transparency also means open descriptions of the analytic process and thus of the production of the empirical stories presented.

The approach of this research to the subject of responsibility in leadership is to examine it as narrative interactional practice. There is, then, no sense in asking which narrative of leadership is correct or in saying that some approaches do not add to existing knowledge. Rather, the interest of researcher lies in how relational processes open up or close down possibilities for responsibility to occur and how they create space for responsibility to become a more inclusive phenomenon (McNamee & Hosking 2012). It is also an ethical imperative for research to take notice of the multiple voices in the stories and to represent these voices carefully so that nothing essential is silenced. The multiplicity of stories can open up possibilities for a variety of actions, not just for a single way of understanding responsibility.
An important question in evaluating the stories is what the people involved in the inquiry consider to be a good story. Some of the leaders struggled with the question of what is a good story and what falls within the frame of inquiry. The nature of the stories varies from thin, small stories to rich descriptions with a beginning, a middle, and an end that have a specific point to make. But regardless of their nature, the stories are formed with an eye to respect and sociability (Gubrium & Holstein 2009). In this case the leaders sometimes noted things that in their opinion fell outside the inquiry’s scope, ought not to be publicized, or did not accord with mainstream leadership discourse.

The next chapter presents the leaders’ stories of responsibility, with a particular focus on how leaders narrate responsibility and on the narrative resources they rely on in telling their stories. To ensure that readers have the opportunity to hear directly what leaders actually narrated in inquiry situations, the discussion includes plenty of direct quotations from the original material. Nonetheless, crafting stories to represent the original stories was a difficult and demanding task. This challenge is well described in the words of Van Maanen (1988: 35): “There is no way of seeing, hearing, or representing the world of others that is absolute, universally valid and correct.” Writing the researcher into the research when reporting research findings is a necessary but sensitive task (Marvasti 2008b).
5 Leaders’ narratives of responsibility in their work

This chapter of the dissertation focuses on the stories that the interviewed leaders told on the theme of responsibility in leadership. This was, without doubt, the most demanding part of this study because of the rich and manifold data that enable different directions for interpretation. It is difficult for a researcher to capture the most interesting and relevant aspects of the data into a report. In general, each of the interviewees was keen to share his or her stories, and little was needed to activate the conversation. The interviewed leaders used a wide range of narrative resources and expressions to articulate their insights about responsibility in leadership. I will now describe how these leaders used work-related resources and orientations to shape their stories of responsibility. These resources and orientations help us to understand the work of leadership.

The chapter begins by providing an overall view of the leaders’ stories. This overall view serves as an entry point to the following discussion of the four distinct main stories, or “metastories,” that emerged from the leaders’ narratives. These four main stories illustrate the richness and variation with which the leaders narrated responsibility in their work. The formulation of the stories was based on positioning analysis of the data. Finally, some of the most interesting details and ideas to emerge from the interviews are discussed in greater detail in order to deepen the analysis and the presented four stories. This provides the reader with more insightful vignettes of the stories. Throughout, I reproduce numerous direct quotations from the leaders to give readers a sense of the original stories. Each excerpt is marked according to the interviewee whose account the excerpt represents. The label “S” stands for “story,” and the following number (1–10) identifies the interviewed leader.

5.1 The big picture of the stories

The big picture of the stories relates to how the leaders interpreted their organizations and where they positioned themselves in their stories; it is thus based on analysis of interactional positioning. These two notions are important because they affect the way in which the leaders later talked about responsibility in leadership work. Description of the big picture helps readers approach the four main stories presented later, which are used to glean further insights from the data.
5.1.1 Understanding the organization through people

Every interview began easily, and the atmosphere was informal. I met the interviewees at their workplaces in meeting rooms, offices, or nearby cafeterias. Workplaces varied widely, ranging from the very clean and plain headquarters of an international company with strict security formalities to colorful and elegant offices in old buildings. My sense of the ambience in the physical workspace gave me tools to understand better the stories and the leaders’ framing of them. This deepened my understanding of what it was like to work in that organization. For example, an abundance of formalities when a visitor arrives in the office can indicate how that organization functions, and the tone of the place can likewise shed light on its character. Some places were more formal with hushed tones while in others there was lively and loud discussion.

After I had concluded half of the interviews I made the interesting observation that the leaders, while telling me about their work, talked mostly about people and about their relationships with these people rather than about themselves. The interviewed leaders seemed to interpret their organizations through people and to connect the meaning of responsibility to these relationships. When talking about responsibility, they did not talk about organizational charts or reporting lines but rather about people, relationships, and social interaction. For them, responsibility in leadership meant primarily working with people in relationships. Thus, when leaders talk about responsibility they talk about people, and the organization is then understood as an invisible network of people and their relationships. This kind of knowledge of the organization is tacit, and formal organizational descriptions do not usually reflect such informal networks, which are based on knowing as well as experiencing.

Periods of transition, in particular, highlighted this interpretation of interpersonal networks. One example is the story of a leader in a multinational technology company. He told me about ongoing organizational rearrangements in the company and about how he acted after them:

“Every time the cards are dealt anew, you have to look up your network right away.” (S5)

Networks and getting to know people were important for the leaders. This priority emphasizes the significance of knowing people who have importance for one’s work. After an organizational change, the first thing to do is to look up one’s new network and get to know people. Knowing people means also knowing them
personally. It is not enough to know what people do at work; one must also show
interest in knowing them more broadly, for example, knowing about their
families, hobbies, and interests.

Another leader, the managing director of a service organization, gave a
similar description of her situation when she entered her current position:

“You have to know the people. I deliberately focused on this in the beginning.
I started an online discussion and got something from that, and then I did the
rounds of our stations and talked with people there, and this is actually what
I’m doing now, too, all the time.” (S6)

The limited availability of time for making decisions was also described as a
reason for being near people. The question of how to act in a given situation
needs be answered straight away, and the leaders also referred to discussions
whose goal was to circulate different opinions about the correct answer. In
addition, several leaders noted that to solve problems in practice one needs to
have previous experience in order to identify ethical dilemmas and then find
solutions to the dilemmas.

“These ethical questions are something that comes up all the time, already
just recognizing them and then being able to solve them even though, being
the boss, you can’t withdraw for days to think about them, for example about
how to respond to some customer feedback. . . . Practice makes perfect,
maybe this is the theme here.” (S6)

In addition to dealing with time limitations, close interaction with people is
important to make change happen. Especially when people from different cultures
are involved in the discussion, there seems to be a special need to adapt to cultural
differences. Thus, the solution in one place might not be appropriate for another
place.

“If you think about leading your company’s offices in various countries
through Excel, if you just focus on the numbers, it looks easy; but when you
actually go out there in the midst of the troops, your leadership style is
completely different in different countries. That’s really hard to adapt to.”

“Korea and Taiwan are completely different, and the Americans have a
different culture of leadership. The difficulties arise precisely from the
challenge of leading globally.” (S3)
“You set off young and eager, and then at some point you realize that you just can’t push things through, and so you loosen up somewhere and allow some local style. It’s really hard to adapt to different styles”. (S6)

This short excerpt describes well the juxtaposition of a leader who isolates him- or herself from others and leads using managerial tools with a leader who is responsible. Close interaction with people is highlighted in these stories. In listening to the stories about leadership my first observation was that leaders talked about people, and this lead to other interesting observations regarding how they positioned themselves in these stories. The hierarchical power relations existing between people can be interpreted from these stories.

5.1.2 Reflections on positioning as a leader in social relationships: the metaphor of a wheel

The second interesting observation was that when telling stories about their leadership, leaders positioned themselves in the middle of people. This is well described in the metaphor used by one leader:

“As a young girl I built racing bicycles with my father. And we also tailored the wheels ourselves. I have used the wheel to describe my way of thinking about the leader and the organization. I draw myself in the middle and the people are around me like the spokes of a wheel. The wheel needs all its parts to turn and function well.” (S7)

Positioning the leader in the middle of other people highlights the need for close interaction with people. Change also happens through people. Leadership occurs in relationships and is socially shared among people, thus contributing to more shared responsibility; the challenge is that change takes place very slowly.

“Promoting responsibility is in large measure hard work, you do it and then at some point people’s eyes open, maybe through catastrophes: “Wow, that was close, we were nearly in the media, didn’t the responsibility manager talk about this very thing”—that kind of situations wake people up every now and then. When sustainability policies are crafted together, people realize that yeah, that’s right, that’s exactly how it is. You have to gain your own experience of it; it’s been a long road.” (S9)
Leaders found that they are one of many important participants in the construction of organizational leadership and responsibility. The commitment of other people to responsibility is needed because of the complexity of business.

“The way I see it myself is that I rather want to give responsibility and power to those who know what they’re doing; business has become so difficult... and you need so many different kinds of expertise... that you have to have trust, and it’s wonderful that you can trust other people.” (S10)

Communication between people was considered crucial. Communication was both formal and informal in nature. All kinds of social conversations were reported to be very important. The stories presented in the empirical interviews give good reason to believe that informal chats with people are of great importance to the construction of responsibility and its execution in practice. Although informal chatting was described as central, not all chatting was useful. Organizational politics was mentioned as a very powerful type of informal conversation that has a negative connotation for building responsibility.

“I guess I work for too large an organization, because I don’t particularly like politicking, this kind of organizational politicking, and in a company of this size you inevitably have quite a lot of it. But I try to stay well out of it, in so far as I can; it’s pretty difficult”. (S9)

The leaders told stories from a range of different settings, and leadership was built on invisible relations both within and outside the work context. The leaders included in their stories a variety of relationships nearby and further away, including those related to associations, hobbies, and family. All these relationships in various ways appeared to affect and shape the social construction of leadership. Thus, leaders constructed their understanding of responsibility in leadership among people in ways that varied depending on the person and his or her relationships with other people at any given point in time. Leadership comprised a number of variously organized relationships with different people, and these were not confined to organizational limits. The target of the leader’s concern varied from close relationships to the wider community. The stories of responsibility included others ranging from leaders’ families to the larger community, as well as a perception of leadership as serving the overall cause of the community. The next section describes the different stories that leaders constructed in their narratives about responsibility.
5.2 The four stories of responsibility

Four main stories concerning how leaders constructed responsibility emerged from the data. Some of the individual stories told by the interviewed leaders were dominated by one particular main story, whereas other leaders’ stories called on different main stories at different points in the narrative. The four stories were characterized, respectively, by personal leadership, which emphasizes deep personal engagement to responsibility; family leadership, which emphasizes continuity in responsibility; community leadership, which emphasizes sharing leadership responsibility; and holistic leadership, which emphasizes the purpose of responsibility in leadership. These stories can also represent different approaches to trying to increase responsibility in business.

These four stories are described below. This description is followed by deeper analysis of the dynamics among the stories and comparisons among story lines.

5.2.1 A story of constructing personal responsibility

The first story presents responsibility as something that a leader needs to be involved with as a person. The story highlights the agent role of the leader. The leader is positioned as an identity maker for the organization. The whole identity of the company depends on the leader. Companies that lack such strong leadership are seen as nameless, without an identity of responsibility. The power of a leader is the passion and commitment that he or she shows in practice. The leader is a kind of energizer of the people. The following narrative excerpt reflects this kind of thinking:

“I managed to keep going in the company as long as I felt that the director cared about it. Everything was identified with the managing director. There’s the question of whether the director should be someone who the company is identified with; I think yes, if we’re talking about this kind of technology company that’s trying to brand itself. There are lots of those nameless, bland companies.” (S3)

The central theme here is that the leader cares, shows involvement, and carries final responsibility for decisions. He or she is expected to invest much personal dedication to leadership. The people who are involved are those close to the leader, and thus the interactions described involve people close to the work of
leadership. For these leaders, the passion for responsibility is also personal, not derived solely from their profession.

The leader carries a lot of responsibility and faces the challenge of coping with that. In the stories there were also accounts of leaders dissociating themselves from signs of weakness or vulnerability, positioning themselves in opposition to weakness. The leader is viewed as a person who cannot show too much weakness in front of others. The leader stands for the company until the end, and the presence of the leader matters a great deal in this story, with absence being equated with lack of responsibility. There were many accounts of active engagement with the issues at stake at any given moment and in any problematic situation. The following excerpt gives an example of the demand for presence:

“In my opinion a good leader can’t be a wimp; you have to have the courage to step in and take responsibility and of course also grant responsibility. If someone thinks that by being all quiet and not getting involved they will be a more polite and nice and likeable supervisor, I don’t believe that. You have to grapple with things, and if there is something that’s bothering me I don’t want to waste time and energy thinking about it; I would rather talk it through with someone so we can move forward from the situation. I am pretty direct and someone who says what they think, but I believe that many of my employees appreciate the fact that they don’t need to try to guess what I think about things.” (S9)

Many of the leaders talked about the importance of having good role models during their careers. They believe in social learning and thus try to be role models for others while themselves observing other leaders as examples. They reflected on and talked about their former supervisors when evaluating their own leadership approaches. It is significant how they related to the others whom they observed. Even though they talked about other leaders as examples, what was most important for them was to find their own ways of leadership. In the following excerpt one leader reflects on her career and her growth and maturation as a leader. A central message here is awakening to taking other people into account.

“I think that a certain growth and maturation as a person has definitely helped me grow significantly as a leader and as a boss. If I think, for example, about what an overeager performer I was back when I was young versus now, I have to say that age and experience really do bring some
wisdom into what one does, and these experiences aren’t just something superficial.” (S6)

What is problematic about this story is that highlighting personal commitment risks placing too much responsibility on one person. The potential weakness in the concentration of responsibility in the hands of one leader lies in the fact that there are limits on what one person is able to carry. The “overeager performer” of the above excerpt is committed to leadership, but if responsibility is not shared, commitment can turn into weakness. The story of commitment highlights the need for personal dedication, but the trigger for more inclusive responsibility lies in an awakening to include other people and to share responsibility. The next story uses the family as a metaphor for responsibility. Central to this story is the theme of constructing continuity.

5.2.2 A story of constructing family responsibility

The second story is about family-like leadership. The story is typically told using the first-person plural, which means that the responsible actor is no longer seen as an individual but rather as a group of people. Responsibility is shared among family members and built through family identity, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

“We’re a family company that reflects the family; we have our opinions and we express them. For us, that means that we believe in continuity and we believe that we’re going to pass this from one generation to the next, and we value that private ownership. We’re very committed to the company, to its welfare, its personnel, its customers, everything.” (S4)

A family identity does not necessarily mean a family company. A leader can perceive a division within a company as her or his family. In the following excerpt the leader describes a situation in which she felt that leading was like taking care of her family and outlines how she protected the business unit in which she worked using family as a metaphor for protection from the effects of turmoil around that business unit.

“I was kind of like the breadwinner of the family, that’s how I’ve been thinking about my role there; I was doing business very successfully and there was massive turmoil all around, so as a leader I decided to follow the
strategy of protecting my unit so it wouldn’t be affected by that turmoil. I had a big responsibility to support the whole company.” (S6)

The story of familial responsibility incorporates a long-term perspective on responsibility, with business ownership passing from one generation to the next. The central focus is on continuity in business and long-term horizons. This perspective emphasizes that when thinking about responsibility in business, the short-term reporting of companies is problematic, as shown by one leader’s reflections on the situation in a public company:

“What’s difficult is, of course, this quarterly financial reporting system. I wish I could do what Unilever did, a listed company that decided that regardless of the circumstances we’re not going to issue quarterly reports anymore, because they don’t tell the story that we want to tell, they’re too shortsighted, and we just don’t work with such a short-term perspective. If we could do that, make that kind of a decision, it would be great. Life would be a lot easier. Because the fact is that in the short term the most responsible decision often isn’t the most appetizing financially.” (S9)

In privately owned family companies there is less pressure to make a profit, and in the long run such companies may, for example, feel less need to lay off people when there is a downturn in business. In the following excerpt a leader in a family company talks about a downturn and about responsibility during the downturn:

“In a family company, where you don’t have other owners, you have completely free hand to do things. And when there is no external pressure, no external target, you can set the target yourself, which allows you to act irrationally, so to speak.” (S10)

“Acting irrationally” refers here to not laying off people in a downturn but keeping them in order to develop the future competences of the company and to secure long-term success. Central to continuity building are values, which are learned implicitly. Values are learned by working together with elders, and there is great loyalty among family members. The challenge inherent in such a scenario is that it is difficult to be different; also, an outsider may find it hard to join in. The boundaries that family forms are strong, and it may be difficult to give voice to divergent opinions. The family focus may also cause a kind of blindness to chances outside the family boundaries. Opening up and operating in other networks forms the basis for a broader view of responsibility. For example,
several leaders mentioned the benefits of serving on another company’s board or in an association that provides an opportunity to exchange opinions with other leaders.

“For an entrepreneur it’s incredibly important to be active outside your own company, whether in a voluntary role or on the board of another company, or in any context that also broadens your own perspectives and your way of looking at things and interpreting them. I think that I have developed as a person, a supervisor, and a colleague much more in this way than in any other for many years. And when you do these other tasks, it opens up your horizons in a completely different way. It would be good for every entrepreneur to be involved in some way, even if it’s just some position or charitable activity in the immediate community that broadens his or her view.” (S4)

The family-like story line highlights continuity in responsibility and seeing business effects in the long run. The family creates a coherent unit of responsibility, but this can turn into a weakness if the boundaries are too tight. In that situation responsibility can be interpreted too narrowly and become a kind of idealism that is not tolerant of other opinions. Thus, responsibility is nurtured by keeping boundaries open to ventilation and fresh stories from outside the world of the family. Another story of responsibility, discussed next, also casts responsibility as shared among people, but this story is formed in communities that people join because they share a particular interest together.

5.2.3 A story of constructing community responsibility

In this story, people sharing a common interest (for example, open source developers) form a community. People join the community because of their shared interests and their willingness to share their knowledge and thoughts with each other. Communities are often informal and support the pleasure of sharing ideas with like-minded people, such as colleagues. Thus, the community may be demarcated by visible boundaries like those that define formal companies.

The community story line is supported by the development of technology that promotes dialogue (mobile phones and internet). Major new technologies have changed our understanding of the traditional community, which was based on seeing others face to face. Traditionally, communities were geographically defined. The community as understood here is not an organization that has formal
boundaries or business objectives in the conventional sense. The community’s business benefits are formed in the network, and rules are based on jointly agreed commitments. The traditional control exerted by a central authority is diminished. There may not even be any stable center of the community, such as a particular geographical location.

Today technology plays a central role in facilitating the formation of communities and communication with others regardless of where on the globe they actually live. Mobile communication makes possible new forms of communal life and relationships. Responsibility emerges among people within the community, as described in the following comment:

“The advantage of all this globalization and internet, though of course there are many disadvantages connected with them too, is that they make possible a new kind of discovery, because everything you do is in the end based in some way on relationships and on contacts in general, and on doing things with people whom you can trust and with whom you enjoy working. That’s the hope, though global companies can’t always change the rules; but you have to start at the level of the individual and precisely through a better understanding at the individual level.” (S2)

This excerpt is part of a story that also included the idea that young people who are used to global communication represent the hope for change by caring at the individual level about their “net friends” around the world. Community members care about each other regardless of personal origin. The spirit of the community ties people together. Communication among members of the community also forms a basis for learning. Through dialogue, the community creates opinions and values for acting together. Leadership provides a sense of direction and invites participation through communication. Responsibility in the community is shared, and it is in the hands of many people.

“If you go overboard on anything it can turn into a weakness; that’s what I’ve been thinking about recently. These ruminations probably got started at my last job, about the need to have mercy on yourself, that it’s also not responsible to carry all the responsibility yourself and do everything yourself. What’s responsible is carrying what you can at any given moment—and that varies too, by the way—and making sure that there are other strong pillars at the company. I’ve done a lot of this kind of successor planning and tried to pay attention to it. Responsibility has a company context, but you also have to
be responsible for yourself, take it easy, and have other things in your life too.” (S6)

Leadership happens in many arenas, and leaders can hold memberships in many communities. Leaders can move physically between organizations and communities, but they can also communicate simultaneously with different people in different groups using technology, even while working in one place. The challenge here is that the communal spirit may make the members of the community blind to changes outside as well as inside the community. The spirit may form a kind of hegemony that strongly binds the members together while narrowing their view of the outside world too heavily. Misunderstandings are also possible because people may not meet face to face, and this hampers the accurate interpretation of communication through, for example, nuanced discussions and expressions as well as body language. The next story follows the same idea of sharing responsibility but widens it to encompass broader societal issues.

5.2.4 A story of constructing holistic responsibility

In this story, leadership means serving others, and there is a vision of a larger good for society as a whole. The larger good means that companies’ overall business purpose is to deliver on some societal need and that all operations of the business are sustainable. The following excerpt describes this holistic story line of responsibility and the idea of business as serving others:

“[You should] constantly think not about yourself but about looking at things from the other side as a basic orientation, and when you accomplish this then you also accomplish your job almost as a side effect. In this sense most companies are completely messed up. They think only of me, me, me, “I’m coming to sell you my products”; not “I’m coming to make your life easier by providing you with a good product that is so reliable and has such a good turnover,” and then you have happy people and a committed customer base that keeps coming back.” (S7)

The same leader continues her story by describing economic profit as the result of operating responsibly in serving others, with the profit shared among the business network members or chain of partners:

“What was so wonderful about this process was being able to build a system in which the families of raw material producers in developing countries
supported themselves and their kids went to school, and in addition our employees supported themselves, I supported myself, and so did our whole crew of agents, that is, all parties concerned, and we got good, lasting products that people could use as long as they wanted and even sell on afterward.” (S7)

The leaders frequently connected their stories of responsibility to reflections on values. Many of the leaders emphasized that company values should not remain a document or a policy with no practical meaning. Some of them even argued that there are no written values for people to see, because values should be something that emerges through everyday practices. Ethics is a way of living. The challenge is to bring values from policy documents into everyday practices. The following two excerpts showcase stories of values.

“At this point I think about the things that I wanted to work for in my life. What I want to do for myself can’t be anything other than what I am deep down. Values can’t be something you just glue on top.” (S7)

“You have to come up with the rules of the game for the company right from the beginning. Ethics is a strategic question: do you take it into account in all decision making right from the start or don’t you? It’s not something you keep in the desk drawer, something you use when it gives you an advantage and hide when it doesn’t seem to be of use. It’s not a tool but a way to act and live.” (S1)

There were references to not hanging the company values on the wall because they should be lived in everyday practice:

“Many people, especially our new employees, would like the company’s values to be visible, like displayed on the wall somewhere, at the office for example. I have always said no, I don’t want to have to show off our values in every phone call and every e-mail message; they have to be inherent, not something in pretty golden frames on the wall.” (S8)

The leaders point out that the purpose of the company should enable the members of the company to view themselves as part of something larger, namely, the way in which the company promotes sustainable development in society. The role of the leader is to ensure a smooth working culture and a level of commitment where everyone takes responsibility for his or her part in reaching the overall target. The challenge is that this responsibility may become so abstract and extensive that it
loses touch with everyday work in companies. An example is the use of responsibility for marketing purposes and as window dressing without any actual basis in the practices of the business.

The four stories represent the overall picture of responsible leadership drawn by business leaders. The stories reflect the variation in the narratives. The next section enters into the details of the four stories and highlights the insights of the narrative reflections.

5.3 Details and insights of the four stories

This section examines the dynamics of the four stories more closely. Each of these stories emphasizes different aspects of responsibility. One leader might employ just one of them as the overall theme of his or her story, while another might draw on different types of stories at different periods in a career, for example. The data show that individual leaders changed and developed their stories over time while recollecting different phases of their careers. A story might be more akin to a draft when the leader is in his or her first executive-level position. The description becomes more nuanced and richer as the leader gains more experience. Changes in circumstances were reported to be a trigger for a new understanding and a new story. Changes in social circumstances were evident in many instances, but a particularly significant change involved crossing boundaries by, for example, starting work in a new culture. The following excerpt illustrates this well. The quoted leader is reflecting on the beginning of her career:

“Being in Turkey working on that project was in many ways a real growing experience for me. But as a leader probably the most important aspect was that I really had to get the people there to want to work with me. The very straightforward manner that I had at the time just didn’t work; I had things happen such as holding a project meeting and people getting fed up with it and just leaving the room, and there I am wondering what on earth just happened. So I learned to pay attention to people and include them in the discussion, to ask for and listen to their opinions, and at the same time get them to commit using the means and tools of coaching leadership; I had to do it, otherwise the whole thing would have been doomed.” (S6)

Overall, in their stories the leaders emphasized that leading should take place in the midst of people. There were similarities in how they approached leadership and how they related themselves in interaction with other people around them. An
interesting aspect of the stories is what influences the shift from one story line to another. A major element in the leaders’ stories was changes in viewpoint leading to broader understandings of leadership work. Responsible leadership appears in interaction with people and is not tied to formal places or confined within organizational boundaries. Stretching these boundaries was, in fact, one way of learning more about responsibility. Table 6 summarizes the story lines and their principal messages.

Table 6. Summary of the four responsibility stories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Story of personal responsibility</th>
<th>Story of family responsibility</th>
<th>Story of community responsibility</th>
<th>Story of holistic responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unit of responsibility creation</td>
<td>Individuals</td>
<td>Small group</td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Business and society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interational positioning</td>
<td>Responsibility embedded in close relationships</td>
<td>Responsibility shared among family members</td>
<td>Responsibility formed collectively</td>
<td>Shared, all-inclusive responsibility creation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional positioning</td>
<td>Microsocial environments</td>
<td>Leadership as individual, deep commitment</td>
<td>Leadership as an island of local culture</td>
<td>Global business and global rules</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Central message</td>
<td>Framing the story</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>The limits of the individual</td>
<td>Tight boundaries around family</td>
<td>Abstract vision: difficult to understand in practice</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Continuity</td>
<td>Tight boundaries</td>
<td>Collective hegemony</td>
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Interactional positioning in the story lines discloses who is involved in the story of leadership responsibility. In the story of personal responsibility, responsibility is constructed in close relationships, and the people involved in the story are those who are close to the leader. This story highlights the leader’s commitment to responsibility construction in leadership. A responsible leader cares about the viewpoints of others and accommodates the potential influence of others by carefully gaining a feel for situations and granting space to a variety of viewpoints. The story of family responsibility highlights shared responsibility
within a group of people. Leaders referred to this conception of responsibility using the metaphor of a family. This story reflects a local cultural understanding of responsibility. Its key feature is a long-term view of business responsibility and thus continuity from one generation to the next. The story of community responsibility emphasizes collective responsibility beyond formal structures such as organizations. Consequently, there are no limits on who can form or participate in the collective, and it typically relies on the use of technology. Each member of the collective carries responsibility based on rules that the members create together to guide collective responsibility. The central idea is the coming together of people who share an interest in creating something purposeful. The fourth story is all-inclusive and holistic; in it, responsibility lies in the hands of members of the broader society. Business concerns are global and based on solving societal problems. In this view, the purpose of business is to serve society.

5.3.1 Relating the key to responsibility integration

Integrating responsibility in practice was the central theme of the stories. An important aspect of integrating responsibility in the stories was how leaders were relating to people. The leaders talked about how to enable the participation of many people in responsibility construction. One leader gave the following example of relating to people and how he had adopted it from his father in the family company:

“That is, of course, where it comes from, how to relate to people; frankly, it comes from how my father relates to people, and he does it really well. That’s where my model of thinking comes from, that even though business can be tough, you have to be fair to your employees and fair to your customers, and then there’s the network in general and you also have to have good relations with the city.” (S10)

According to this leader, relating well to all participants in the business leads to positive long-term effects for the company. He continues his story:

“It’s not even about doing it deliberately; it’s just that gradually, when you have good relations with those around you, doors start to open. Sometimes you have to be open with people and participate, and not think too mathematically about whether something is going to make money for you, because if you always think that way you will never succeed. And on the other
hand, when you practice your appearance and behavior and how you organize things with these kinds of stakeholders, you’re simultaneously rehearsing for that big deal. It’s the same with getting accustomed to engaging with people.” (S10)

In talking about leadership an important ability was the capacity to sense correctly the feelings of other people. The leaders talked about the importance of having good social skills to be able to “read” people accurately and then to adapt to the situation appropriately. They stressed the importance of giving recognition and significance to everyone’s potential contributions through the small details of interaction: the asking of questions, one’s tone of voice, the selection of words, and posture. This, the leaders said, is something that can be learned in every life situation in the course of life. The above-quoted leader, for example, mentioned that he had learned such skills by observing his father. Knowing the people with whom you work enables you to react correctly, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

“Previously, leadership meant that I was close to people and I knew everyone well; I knew their personal lives and their children and everything. Now it’s good if I know the names of a few people. So leadership has changed a lot. At first it was like a big family, but now I am more removed, maybe also deliberately a bit more removed from our rank and file coaches, so the immediate supervisors can be more present.” (S8)

This excerpt also points to the dynamics of responsibility and to changes in ways of relating to people. The leader in this excerpt moves away from a family-like approach in order to give space to new supervisors. The leaders also emphasized that maintaining a positive mood in leadership work is necessary to increase responsibility; as one leader put it, “By increasing the good, the bad is diminished.” A positive spirit is needed to uphold a mood to carry on the work through difficulties.

5.3.2 The spectrum of narrative resources for responsibility

This section focuses on the kinds of narrative resources that leaders used to talk about responsibility; in other words, the ways in which society, culture, and institutions shaped the stories told by the leaders. The stories indicate that broadening the scope of participation in interaction beyond one’s immediate
social surroundings opens up possibilities for a new understanding of responsibility.

The leaders used the whole spectrum of their life experiences as resources for making sense of leadership. Their stories did not always happen in the course of credentialed activity; often they described ordinary, everyday situations. Experiences in professional settings and in everyday life may overlap considerably with each other. We often tend to think that professionals possess more credibility, but these stories support the idea that other relationships can be equally worthwhile. The leaders talked, for example, about experiences connected to hobbies, family life, and military service.

The leaders found it important to have opportunities to explore and make sense of their values and lived experiences with the significant people in their lives, such as parents, friends, and colleagues. But they also benefited from taking part in courses and reading books in which others tell their life stories and share their understandings of responsibility.

The leaders said that knowing one’s true self is more important than being a perfect leader. But it seems that the true self is not discovered in the absence of others but rather needs relationships with others. These others could also be fictive. Leaders referred to reading fiction as a way of widening their understanding of possible ways to act in relationships. This means that experiences do not need to be authentic to be useful. A story is not always authentic in the sense that every experience is owned by the teller. In crafting a story of self, the leaders referred to other people who may be either real or imaginary. This broadens the repertoire of how other people can be treated and what might be the consequences.

“As a human being, I feel that my way of learning, of growing, of finding my own inner strength is through literature. I read a lot and across the board, and a certain kind of literature can completely absorb me; I become fully immersed in it, and I think about and live through the things in it. This has been a really central path for me.” (S4)

Building one’s way of leading is like piecing together a puzzle: taking pieces from the example of other leaders, from experiences with other people, from books, and from hobbies and finally constructing a very individual leadership story. Interestingly, the voice of experts on responsible leadership, such as trainers or consultants, was missing from these leadership stories. None of the leaders
talked about leadership models and techniques, and few mentioned formal training.

The framing of responsibility was constructed in many different ways in the stories. First, the leaders talked about the current situation of coping with regulations and reporting and different institutions that demanded such work:

“Even those who have behaved moderately have become victims of regulation. Regulation is based on those who behave badly. It’s crazy. The amount of regulations that we have to impose is all at the expense of improving customer service. Nobody understands how many resources go into something that is not at all visible to the customers. We just change systems to report, to do this, that, the other, and everything possible.

What really bothers me is that this is endless business for a lot of actors, and they’re making reporting and its checking (assurances) so difficult; who does it serve, who reads the sustainability report and all the information that gets put into it?” (S5)

Second, there were stories about the grand narrative of leadership and how we culturally have certain expectations of leadership. The challenge here concerns the credibility of leadership: how far you can stretch the story and still remain credible in the present situation and business culture. Some leaders argued that a leader has to first earn credibility as a business leader, and after that responsibility can be added in a comprehensive way to the work of leadership. One leader reflected on a time when he was considering leaving a company to do something else; the reason why he decided to stay was to make the current business an example to show that you could run a responsible business and be credible.

“[I saw] business as a tool, an example of being credible in the things that I deep down want to promote. Success in business leads to these things getting more attention. This was my motivation for staying in the company. It was a chance to do something to prove things that are significant.” (S1)

The most sensitive aspects of this story line may include spiritual elements. These relate to a view of life as having a purpose that goes beyond traditional business goals and that should be incorporated into business activities. This does not necessarily mean adopting the viewpoint of any specific religion. A spiritual element is included, for example, in such notions as the Golden Rule, which all
major religions share in some form: that you should “do to others what you would want them to do to you.”

Faced with the challenge of rapid changes in business, many leaders’ response is to have a dynamic relationship with people. In their stories, leaders talked about the importance of having their own physical sense of what was going in the organization:

“I feel that even though I’m away a lot, and even though when I walk around here people think that I never have time to see anything, I’m never here, I can’t know a thing about anything, I still can surprise them with how I somehow quickly sense it if something is amiss somewhere.” (S4)

The leaders use written principles drawn from their understanding of responsibility, and they use narrative skills to share these principles with others. They say that sharing in dialogue with others gives them an opportunity to build real understanding. They also use written stories to direct their companies toward the desired vision of the future. Narrative can open up the purpose and values of the leader and invite the listener to share his or her understanding of the opportunities. In a good dialectical process this will lead to learning together, which is, as one leader said, even more important than having the right answer in the beginning.

Although leaders told stories of building commitment and interaction with their subordinates, they seem to lean mostly on their colleagues in difficult situations. One leader told the story of a huge media scandal that the company had faced and how they handled the situation:

“To me, it felt like a real model case of collegiality. In effect we formed a crisis group that in the beginning got together every afternoon.” (S6)

One leader talked about a situation in which she had had to lay off several employees. She reported that at some point she started to think that this was something that she actually wanted to do to herself, and she realized that she needed to be responsible for herself and her family. After this realization she left the company.

5.4 Socially constructed responsibility in leadership narratives

The leaders’ stories of responsibility are embedded in societies, cultures, and institutions. When leaders talk about responsibility, their stories are not only
stories of individual leaders: other voices, representing the narrative environment of leadership, can also be heard in the stories. Leaders derive narrative resources from the grand narratives prevailing in the surrounding society. The grand narratives tend to define what is knowledge in leadership and how that knowledge is generated, as well as what forms of argument, evidence, and forms of reasoning are viewed as appropriate and legitimate by participants in social interaction. These grand narratives thus shape how leaders talk about responsibility. They form the narrative context for responsibility in leadership and seem to affect the way in which responsibility is interpreted in different organizations.

These resources enter the creation of responsibility by the participants in leadership work through interaction. The grand narrative provides frames and context for the local construction of responsibility in the form of narrative resources. The grand narrative guides storytelling about responsibility and determines what is accepted in that story. In addition, responsibility in leadership is a locally interpreted construction that builds on the historical roots of every business. Thus, for example, some business sectors are regulated by certain global rules of doing business. Crises and malpractice in one area of business tend to increase regulation across the board. So, for example, the financial sector crisis in the 2000s led to more regulation of the sector globally. To follow global regulations takes lots of work and time. The aim is to prevent possible malpractices by companies, but the effect is to require every company to dedicate efforts to meeting globally set norms and rules. The leaders felt that this might not be the best way to build locally sensitive responsibility.

The analysis of positioning in the leaders’ stories uncovered various responsibility orientations adopted by the leaders. In the stories, formal leaders positioned themselves in the midst of a network of people. This positioning demonstrated that responsibility is built and negotiated on an equal basis among leadership participants. The leaders thus saw responsibility construction in leadership as equal and socially shared work. Although all of the leaders positioned themselves in the midst of people, the construction of responsibility took varied and differing forms. This research highlighted four distinct stories about responsibility construction in the narratives. The variation among stories reflected who was included in each story of responsibility. Each of the stories had a different central message.

The first story represents an interpretation of responsibility that emphasizes close relationships among leadership participants. This story highlights commitment to leadership work. The second story contains a multiplicity of
responsible actors and family-like sharing of responsibility. This story highlights continuity in responsibility. The third story centers on community-based responsibility, made possible by technological development and the consequent ability of people to form communities regardless of their physical location. This story is about sharing responsibility among members of a community. The fourth story represents a holistic understanding of responsibility. This story focuses on the purpose of business as contributing to society overall and the holistic responsibility of many actors in society together with business actors.

The variation in responsibility stories was dynamic: individual leaders did not necessarily limit their narratives to a single story even though one story could rise above the others; the stories of responsibility evolved in the course of the narrative, and some leaders recounted all four stories. Through the variety of stories we can gain an insight into the dynamics of responsibility construction in leadership work. The argument here is not that these stories constitute definitive and fixed ways of representing reality; rather, they capture some of the shifting ways in which responsibility can be constructed in leadership.

The interpretation of responsibility among leadership participants was formed in a narrative environment shaped and framed by both grand narratives and local understandings. The key challenge lies in integrating responsibility into the practices of a business. Leaders stressed that in the work of integrating responsibility, relating to people is crucial. Stretching the boundaries of leadership in the formal or informal settings of leadership work opens up possibilities for a more inclusive understanding of responsibility. Therefore, opening organizational boundaries to admit fresh and alternative ways of understanding plays a central role in the social construction of responsibility. This stretching of boundaries can take many forms; it is not confined to formal business settings, and resources for this work can be derived from books of fiction or hobbies, among other sources. Figure 3 summarizes the main empirical findings of this study.
The next chapter discusses the findings in the light of previous research and outlines the contribution made by this research. The discussion also includes an evaluation of this study and possible future directions of research in this area. The main findings are summarized in a concluding section.
6 Discussion

This chapter discusses the empirical research of this study, connects it to previous writings on responsibility in leadership, and evaluates how the contribution made by this study could enhance responsibility integration through leadership in business companies.

6.1 Responsible leadership occurs in the midst of people

Traditionally, leadership theories that share common ground with responsible leadership theory and incorporate an interest in the moral dimension of leadership focus their attention on individual leaders as persons in top hierarchical positions and see leadership as a phenomenon that happens between leaders and subordinates (Maak & Pless 2006, Pless & Maak 2011, Waldman 2011). However, this focus does not take into account changes in the environment of leadership. Therefore, there is growing interest in research that is aimed at enhancing responsibility in leadership (Pless & Maak 2011). The argument animating this tendency is that there is a need for a wider perspective that encompasses a greater range of stakeholders when pursuing broad social objectives in business (Maak & Pless 2006, Pless & Maak 2011). Researchers emphasize that responsible leadership is a relational and ethical phenomenon, based on social processes of interaction among all relevant stakeholders of the business (Maak & Pless 2006).

Until now research on responsible leadership has focused mainly on the leaders’ perspective and on how individual leaders can balance the diverse needs of different stakeholders. The present study argues that even though the perspective of individual leaders remains central, interesting insights can be gained by concentrating on responsibility integration as the everyday work of leadership and as the product of co-creation and engagement by many members of an organization (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Hosking 2007, Mirvis & Manga 2010, Mirvis et al. 2014). The result is a focus on leadership that happens in interactions between people. This research suggests that we can improve our understanding of responsibility integration in companies by combining theories of responsible leadership with those that emphasize leadership as a relational process between people.

The stories of the leaders interviewed in this study support this idea, because when the leaders talked about their everyday work and leadership, they positioned
themselves at the same level as everyone else. Accordingly, for them responsibility in leadership occurred in the midst of people, in close interaction. When talking about responsibility in leadership, formal leaders felt it important to view leadership through social relationships and to focus on people working together to create leadership. This observation gives rise to a more shared understanding of leadership, in which interaction in everyday work situations is crucial. It also directs research in the area of responsible leadership to focus more on the everyday interactional practices of leadership and how through those practices responsibility could be integrated in companies (Crevani et al. 2010, Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011). If companies are still struggling with such integration, the results of this research suggest that leaders should understand responsibility as something that happens among people, not only as, for example, a formal strategic issue that can be implemented through formal tools.

The positioning in the middle of the people was encapsulated in the metaphor of a wheel in one leader’s story. The same metaphor is also used by Grint (2005) to describe the balanced responsibility of leaders and followers. The central idea is that it is important for leaders to recognize their limits and thus to share responsibility. Recognition of the limits of an individual leader generates a need for responsibility in followers to compensate for these limits. Understanding one’s own limits was connected to responsibility in leadership. Grint (2005) borrows an ancient Chinese story retold by Phil Jackson (1995: 149), coach of the Chicago Bulls basketball team, containing the same metaphor of a wheel.

“In the third century BC the Chinese Emperor Liu Bang celebrated his consolidation of China with a banquet, where he sat surrounded by his nobles and military and political experts. Since Liu Bang was neither noble by birth nor an expert in military or political affairs, some of the guests asked one of the military experts, Chen Cen, why Liu Bang was the Emperor. In a contemporary setting the question would probably have been: “What added value does Liu Bang bring to the party?” Chen Cen’s response was to ask the questioner a question in return: “What determines the strength of a wheel?” One guest suggested the strength of the wheel was in its spokes, but Chen Cen countered that two sets of spokes of identical strength did not necessarily make wheels of identical strength. On the contrary, the strength was also affected by the spaces between the spokes, and determining the spaces was the true art of the wheelwright. Thus, while the spokes represent the collective resources necessary to an organization’s success—and the resources that the
leader lacks—the spaces represent the autonomy for followers to grow into leaders themselves.”

Research on shared leadership and responsibility (Pearce & Manz 2011, Pearce et al. 2013, 2014) highlights similar findings, suggesting that sharing leadership opens the doors to more responsible leadership in practice through broader and more balanced attention to various stakeholder needs in decision making as well as effective performance through teamwork. Many of the stories in the data corroborated this idea. These stories indicate that leadership is often a more equal, socially shared function than is understood in traditional leadership literature, where the followers’ job is to do what the leader wishes (Rost 1991). Thus, leadership means working with possibilities rather than with externally given, closed recipes, and working in a way that appreciates the variety of viewpoints. The shift to possibilities can invite ways of working that help participants learn how to improvise better and how to imagine new ways of progressing together (Hosking 2004) when solving practical issues at work. Such a reorientation is necessary because of the manifold demands of business and because the solutions to daily problems are frequently unique, as the leaders suggested in their stories.

The shift to appreciating multivocality in leadership work recognizes the multiple understandings of the participants and their differing constructions of knowledge. When leaders position themselves in the midst of relational realities and therefore without secure grounds either for claiming superiority or for critique, space is opened up for the shared construction of responsible actions. On the other hand, the stories in this research show that difficulties arise when the leader is not able to act equitably toward all stakeholders and the basis for interaction is lacking. This may lead to the leader’s decision to leave the company. Alternatively, if the leader understands his or her position in the middle as that of the nucleus of the atom, as mentioned by one of the leaders, then leadership comes to be about controlling everything that happens, and it fails to deliver responsibility. It may also lead to an excessive workload and burnout.

The analysis of these narratives shows that leaders devote personal resources to leadership in the form of having close social relationships with all participants in the work of leadership. The stories indicate that the need for such relationships may be rooted in the rapid changes in the business environment and the consequent need for direct and quick feedback. The leaders reported that they needed to create an interactive organizational environment that enabled direct and regular discussion and to learn to solve ethical questions as they arose. A balance
must be found between formal processes, direct personal commitment, and more sophisticated interaction. Thus, leaders told stories about realizing that relating to others is a key process in responsibility construction. Relating or the responsible relational stance (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, McNamee 2009) highlights the need for leaders to think carefully about their relationships and about how good relationships are constructed to form the basis for the emergence of responsibility. In sum, to enhance responsibility integration it is crucial to recognize that, according to these stories, responsibility in leadership is constructed and activated in close interaction with other members of an organization, among other people, and not only through top-down formal change programs.

6.2 Variety in leadership stories of responsibility

The leaders’ stories indicate that responsible leadership is fluid and its meanings are not fixed, but rather shared and negotiated in social circumstances and the settings of everyday leadership work. This was reflected in the stories in the form of four distinct understandings of responsibility. In these stories, responsibility is not only a property of the individual formal leader but rather emergent in leadership processes and also a property of the family (or family-like group), the community, and society at large. This finding is supported by leadership studies that emphasize leadership as a process (Grint 2005, Hosking 2007, Raelin 2011) and as emergent in daily leadership work (Crevani et al. 2010). Thus, the turn to more descriptive research in the area of responsible leadership is well justified and necessary to support understanding of how to integrate responsibility in business practices (Pless et al. 2012).

Any set of social interactions can be interpreted variously in different settings. What a group of people think about leadership and responsibility is built over time through common sense-making processes by the members of that group (Näslund & Pemer 2012). The leaders’ stories indicate that it takes a long time to adopt a new understanding and new behavior even if those new ways would lead to more responsible practices. This was especially noticeable in leaders’ stories about starting in a new position and attempting to change the way of leading to share responsibility more widely among people.

What is also clear is the situated nature of the stories that the leaders told. They narratively oriented the stories in relation to other members of the organization and also in relation to their social status in the organization. They actively shaped what they said about leadership according to how they positioned
themselves and different people in their stories. A story is thus sensitive to its environment and, in this case, to special social settings and to the people taking part in everyday leadership work.

The variation in how responsibility is constructed in these stories can also reflect varying situations in the leaders’ lives. McAdams (1993) points out that people work on different aspects of their stories depending on where they are in their lives. He suggests that life stories change over time, with the “draft” story characteristic of an early career stage evolving as an individual accumulates more experiences, challenges, and opportunities. With such a store of accumulated experiences, leadership turns into enabling more shared ownership of responsibility, though it still focuses on individual capacity. Accumulated experiences can thus affect how responsible leadership is understood in companies. Previous research on special corporate learning programs has shown that there is a need for greater use of leaders’ experiences and their learning from these experiences (Gitsham 2012, Pless & Maak 2008). Through these programs, corporations provide possibilities for learning in practice in order to encourage responsible responses in real business settings. The formal learning enabled by experience programs can support a more inclusive understanding of responsible leadership, but the present research indicates that the experiences do not need to be authentic to be effective and that they are not confined to organizational boundaries.

This argument is supported by other leadership researchers (Grint 2005, Sparrowe 2005). The situations in which leadership is learned need not be authentic (Sparrowe 2005), that is, they need not reflect actual, authentic experiences. The sources of learning could also be imaginative, such as taking ideas from fiction. The sources might, then, be real experiences as well as the experiences of imaginary persons. The greater the diversity of alternative ways of acting that are considered, the greater the capacity to respond to challenges in responsibility. For example, Grint (2005) compares how adults learn to be good parents to how leaders learn to lead. He proposes that as children teach adults to be parents, followers teach leaders to lead. Thus, interaction and making meaning together offer ways to discover possibilities for integrating responsibility.

Leaders have a central role in creating shared meaning through sensemaking and dialogue (Smircich & Morgan 1982). This is also a very sensitive task. How individuals interpret events and experiences depends on their readiness to be open to and extract something new for the purpose of growth (Avolio & Hannah 2008). Thus, creating a belief among other people that one can be successful in
responding to responsibility challenges is key to the acceleration of positive development in responsibility (Avolio 2010). The problems that need to be solved are often novel, and leaders and other participants may not have previous relevant experience that could guide them on how to proceed. Entertaining a variety of possible solutions in complex decision making might yield better and more responsible solutions (Avolio & Hannah 2008). Instead of trying to avoid meeting difficult challenges, the participants in the situation can use the full range of their imaginative repertoires and hence see various potential successful outcomes, which in turn will also contribute to a more inclusive responsibility orientation.

We still know little about what kinds of resources for action are used in different situations (Avolio 2010), especially when integrating responsibility in organizations. According to these stories, responsibility is better enabled and enhanced through participation in multiple social networks, even informal ones; this also helps companies to avoid overly narrow understandings of responsibility. Therefore, when we study leadership our focus should not be limited by formally designed organizational boundaries, and we should consider people working outside organization and who take part in leadership work not just stakeholders but central actors in constructing responsible leadership.

These stories support the conclusions of earlier studies claiming that responsibility construction in leadership should also be studied in terms of processes and interaction, not only in terms of individual capacities or formal managerial tools (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Raelin 2011). In addition, the stories encourage opening up the field to study leadership as a phenomenon that is not confined to organizational boundaries. The present study’s lens on responsibility is thus in line with other emerging studies that understand leadership as socially constructed and relational (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Fairhurst & Grant 2010, Grint 2005, Hosking 2007, Uhl-Bien 2006) and likewise do not see it as circumscribed by organizational boundaries but rather formed in close interaction with external actors.

The four stories presented in the previous chapter also bring out the interplay between responsibility construction and the circumstances in which responsibility stories are produced. The story of community responsibility, in particular, casts the relational view in light of developments in technology, such as mobile communications, and the new generations that have grown up using the technology. Opinions about what is right and wrong are formed via chatting online with others. Mobile communication facilitates the formation of common opinions and shared values and the expression of mutual support in relationships.
with little time delay. Earlier leadership studies have highlighted the perspective of leaders and their authenticity in terms of their own personal values and convictions as the basis of their actions (Shamir & Eilam 2005). But the interviews in this study offer an alternative perspective by highlighting collaboratively formed and shared meanings rather than the individual values or opinions of a leader. In these stories values are formed together by collaborating members, and shared understandings are crucial.

Community responsibility suggests a new understanding of interactional positioning in relationships, but it also contains the risk of conflict. Through communication, the members of a community develop both ontologies and ethics (Gergen 2002). There is the possibility that a community positions itself in opposition to “them,” as somehow better than “them.” People create common understandings on the basis of shared language and meanings, but these may exclude other interpretations and contrasting voices. Issues that are not in the interests of the community are ignored. There is thus the danger that the boundaries are too tight and only one way of understanding is accepted. Both the promise and the danger are especially evident among members of the young generation, who are born to use mobile communications: the importance of traditional positions on politics, religion, profession, and gender tends to diminish, and there is a shift to more flexible leadership arrangements that are crafted together and in numerous relationships. The development of communities can lead to a more unified and holistic understanding of responsibility in societies, but it can also cause micro-level fragmentation in society. Even though these changes are evident, the grand story of leadership still seems to adhere to the model of heroic, hierarchical, and tough leadership. The interviewed leaders framed their stories against this understanding (Pearce & Manz 2011).

In sum, leaders form their understanding of responsibility in fluid ways and include others in defining the meaning of responsibility. Thus, they craft locally sensible responsible leadership accounts that reflect locally meaningful issues. In their stories, they position themselves and depict leadership as emerging in the midst of people, and from that position they tell diverse stories of responsibility construction. In addition, the narrative of responsibility is also sensitive to the leadership environment. We can hear in the narratives how leaders use the narrative resources available in the leadership environment to tell and frame their stories. There are resources that restrict the story of responsibility and others that affirm it. The following section discusses narrative resources and the ways in which these resources are used in the leadership stories.
6.3 The insights and dynamics of stories in the form of narrative resources

This study approaches leadership as continually negotiated and created through relational leadership processes, and it especially emphasizes the discursive dimension of leadership (Crevani et al. 2010, Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Fairhurst 2008, Vine et al. 2008). It concurs with researchers who argue that the rhetoric of leadership strongly shapes our interpretations of leadership (Crevani et al. 2010) because leadership is a well-known and institutionalized concept in society. Therefore, when leadership is constructed and performed in companies, people draw on these institutionalized discourses of leadership (Alvesson & Sveningsson 2003, Crevani et al. 2010). In this research the framing of the stories shows that leadership is not only produced in interaction but also forms part of an institutionalized discourse, which the grand narrative of leadership represents. The grand story influences leaders’ conceptions and thus also how responsibility is constructed in practice. In telling their stories, the leaders used specific narrative resources, and studying their stories yields clues about the grand story of leadership and about the particular institutions that leaders drew on when telling their stories of responsibility.

When we consider the narrative resources used in these stories, we must also ask what other, unused narrative resources might have led to different stories and altered the possibilities for responsibility perceived by these leaders (Holstein & Gubrium 2012). The following discussion examines which narrative resources were used or not used and also how the resources were used in the stories. After considering such alternative resources it is important to think about what might have prevented the use of those resources in the stories. For example, are there certain people to whom a leader would not tell a particular story, and if so, why? As mentioned in the introduction, many of the leaders had a rich collection of experiences to mobilize for the stories they told about responsibility.

We tend to have high ethical standards for leaders and to expect leaders to fail less often than most people (Ciulla 2001). Every once in a while such great leaders do appear, but mostly leaders are normal human beings with limited abilities, and according to Ciulla (2001) the ethical standards for leaders should not be different from those for anyone else. Leadership research and training assign leaders the roles of acting, planning, and designing, but the element of change makes the job of leadership unpredictable and hard to be prepared for. One can never know everything there is to know, and incompleteness is therefore
a fundamental part of leadership. Nonetheless, as soon as a leader makes a mistake, people judge him or her for being irresponsible.

What, then, is at stake when leaders tell stories about responsibility? Thinking about the issue of responsibility in leadership work reveals the vulnerability of leaders. Holding one’s own is important in responding to this vulnerability (Holstein & Gubrium 2012). In their stories, the leaders were negotiating the limits of responsibility against the theme of credibility. They talked about the imperative not to show too much weakness in front of others and the need to first establish oneself as a credible leader before expanding to areas that are not part of the conventional leadership discourse. Some positions may be difficult to express in leadership if they are not appreciated. They remain inaudible in discourses, and the official discourse would rather do away with them altogether. When talking about responsibility, for example, the leaders were sensitive to being seen as “freaks” or “weird,” and there was consequently a tendency to limit the story of responsibility to a level that was accepted by the business environment and the grand narrative of leadership. But once an individual had earned appreciation as a business leader he or she had enough credibility to speak about a comprehensive conception of responsibility in business. Thus, responsibility construction may vary because of the tension between what is accepted in the grand narrative of leadership and how that is understood and coped with in business companies.

The concept of credibility is taken for granted and embedded in the structure of the leadership profession. Thus, the leaders’ accounts included stories about responsibility as a problematic and complex issue. There are hardly any studies in the business leadership literature that connect leadership and vulnerability, though contributions similar to the present study can be found in the broader domain of professionalism studies. One example is provided by studies of teachers’ work (Kelchtermans 2009). The particular professionalism of teachers is characterized by personal commitment and vulnerability. In the present study, vulnerability is not understood primarily as an emotional state or experience, but rather as a structural characteristic of the profession. Structural vulnerability relates to three elements, also characteristic of the case of teachers.

The first element is particularities of the working conditions, such as regulations, quality control systems, and policies. The leadership stories indicated that regulation of companies’ responsibilities, for example, has changed the work of leaders. Second, teachers can prove only to a limited degree that pupils’ results directly follow from teachers’ actions. Similarly, in the work of leaders cultural
differences, for example, affect how leaders interpret their responsibilities, and
there is a need for adaptation. Third, teachers make lots of decisions, but they lack
a firm ground on which to base their decisions. Consequently, their decisions can
always be challenged and questioned. In this sense, leaders’ work is in many ways
similar to that of teachers. We can agree with Kelchtermans (2009) that
vulnerability is condition that teachers, like leaders, “find themselves in.” It is not
something that they choose or actively plan for. The changing conditions that
cause vulnerability also support the idea of more shared responsibility.

Earlier leadership theories consider it an important task for a leader to be a
role model for followers who seek guidance in ethical behavior (Treviño et al.
2000). They suggest that power and status enhance the attractiveness of leaders as
role models (Bandura 1986). The stories in the present study support the idea of
the leader as a role model, but they also show that leadership can be learned in
many circumstances and from many kinds of people. The leaders reported that it
was important to be open-minded and to have a readiness to learn. Even more
important was having variation in social circumstances and engaging in other
activities outside the company. Such variety provided opportunities for exploring
one’s own potential. According to the narratives, the role modeling of previous
leaders was not particularly important to the leaders in their exploration of new
ways of acting as leaders; instead, the stories gave greater emphasis to interactive
responsibility construction.

In the stories, being open-minded and creating opportunities for widening
perspectives and meeting a diversity of people prepared the ground for the
emergence of a broader understanding of responsibility. For example, there were
stories about the importance of opening up organizational boundaries in family
businesses and connecting with other social communities. In addition, some
narratives indicated that an effective way of gaining a new perspective was
working abroad in another culture and practicing leadership in a different
leadership environment. Creating space for new interactions and people adds new
perspectives and interpretations to the discussion and thus new possibilities for
action. If the boundaries of the organization are tight, the possibilities for action
are confined to the resources within the organization. The leaders argued that
openness and diverse interactions are crucial to expanding personal as well as
organizational perspectives for responsibility.

The risk is that leaders promote a responsibility orientation that challenges
the dominant story too strongly, and consequently the integration of responsibility
is not supported or is even marginalized by other members of the organization or
the business environment at large. Internal pressures in organizations, such as the organizational politics mentioned by one leader as quoted earlier, may pose a challenge for responsibility in leadership, particularly during times of business stress and struggle. The commitment to responsibility is tested when business is in a downturn. Socially constructed responsibility forms a sound basis for the progress of responsibility because people start at a similar level of understanding and advance together to a more inclusive understanding of responsibility once its foundation has been laid.

All in all, different kinds of environments and organizations tend to provide contexts that emphasize different aspects of responsibility. The challenge lies in integrating responsibility in business practices in a way that is accepted in each specific environment. The accounts of leaders highlight the sensitivity of responsibility integration to the narrative resources that are acceptable in a given environment. Thus, the integration of responsibility is not only about skills and competences but also about the narrative resources that are available at a certain time and place. This is evident also, for example, in the fact that the leaders’ stories did not make much use of formal training as a resource for talking about responsibility.
7 Conclusions

This chapter presents the contribution made by this study. The contribution is assessed in three ways: on the levels of theory, method, and practice. Discussion of the study’s contribution is followed by suggestions regarding issues that further research could fruitfully explore. The chapter ends with a short summary of the study’s conclusions.

7.1 Theoretical implications

The theoretical contribution of the relational leadership perspective on responsible leadership adopted in this study is that it enables the study of leadership regardless of where and by whom it is constructed, as well as the analysis of leadership as embedded in local social settings. Previous research has mainly approached the subject from the leaders’ perspective, investigating how individual leaders can balance diverse stakeholder needs. This view has examined, for example, the various roles that leaders are expected to fulfill in the balancing process (Maak & Pless 2006). While recognizing the importance of individual leaders, this study proposes that giving greater attention to the relational processes of co-creation and engagement in leadership would lead to a better understanding of responsibility integration in businesses (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Hosking 2007, Mirvis & Manga 2010). Theories of responsible leadership are still very new, and many of them focus on theoretical conceptualization of the phenomenon (Maak & Pless 2006, Pless & Maak 2011, Waldman 2011).

Previous research has found that responsibility orientations in leadership differ (Pless et al. 2012, Waldman & Galvin 2008). The present research suggests that the reason why they differ may lie partly in the fact that leadership participants form their interpretation of responsibility through interaction and the fact that they use locally valid narrative resources in this process. The meaning of responsibility is understood in particular local terms, and what is accepted as valid is constructed in shared interactional processes (Hosking 2011, Holstein & Gubrium 2011). Efforts at more inclusive integration of responsibility in organizations need to consider the process of integration through locally accepted ways and be ready to adapt accordingly. In addition, when the focus is changed from individual leaders to leadership processes, the possibility arises to
investigate far wider societal interactions that affect responsibility construction in leadership.

The grand story of leadership supports the centrality of the individual leader, but the stories in this study emphasized that responsibility is co-constructed among various participants in leadership. Theories of leadership responsibility thus stand to benefit from a view of leadership as more collective and not always confined to organizational boundaries. Leadership can be found and learned in everyday life circumstances and in all daily interactions. A path to more inclusive responsibility integration lies in the use of the resources that leadership participants bring to the table where everyday responsibility questions are addressed.

The stories of responsibility in this research demonstrate that the emphasis in research should not be only on the qualities or competences of individual leaders but also on a wider perspective of what is possible if we think about the narrative environment of leadership. The stories of responsibility are constructed within the possibilities and limits defined by local conventions of speech and action. Thus, these conventions have the power to influence what is possible in integrating responsibility in organizations. The relational lens on responsible leadership theories opens up the interactional and communicative nature of responsibility and in particular furthers our understanding of how responsibility is constructed in practice in everyday leadership work. Today, leadership is formed through communicative narrative practices without clear organizational boundaries, and the available narrative resources affirm or restrict the construction of responsibility.

7.2 Practical implications

I have presented the empirical findings of this research to managers and leaders on various occasions, as my understanding of the subject has grown. For example, I discussed this research at two management meetings in April 2013, one for the ten-person management team of a company that operates in the high technology industry and the other for eighteen communications professionals as a part of an advanced training program.

These situations provided an opportunity to disseminate my results and to discuss their implications, and they evoked rich discussion about responsibility in leadership. One important topic that arose in the discussion was the following question: if leaders interpret responsibility as tied to interaction and being formed
in relations, how can we then further responsibility in organizations? In their stories, the interviewed leaders did not use formal leadership training as a narrative resource for talking about responsibility. Why not? One answer could be that formal leadership training does not respond to the practical needs of responsibility integration. Instead, the leaders gave accounts of many informal ways of learning how to relate to people in a way that advances the collective discussion of responsibility issues. A good way to gain a broader understanding of responsibility, according to the leaders, was the opening of organizational boundaries and participation in other social settings to hear different interpretations and discussion about responsibility issues. The practical implication of this finding is that both informal and formal ways of broadening the scope and variety of social interactions should be encouraged in order to promote responsibility in companies. For example, communities of practice (Wenger 1998, 2000) should be formed around responsibility issues to complement formal training programs. Such communities of practice could include people representing different perspectives on responsibility from more than one organization. In addition, formal leaders should understand their position in the middle of the people in terms of the very sensitive task of enhancing cooperation and the collective construction of responsibility.

The present research has also had practical significance as the basis for teaching future and current leaders about responsibility issues in training programs such as the international MBA program and masters education at Oulu Business School. The subjects of my primary research are from Finland, but in the MBA program, for example, the students represent many cultures from the East to the West, and many of them are experienced business professionals. This broadens the range of discussion and viewpoints even further. In practice, I have used pictures as metaphors for the original stories, and so far my experience has been that pictures offer an easy way for people from different cultures to join the discussion. The dynamic understanding of responsibility as co-constructed is supported by the use of such alternative ways of interpreting the research (Marvasti 2008b).

In addition, this research has already reached audience in Finland in various business sectors through articles in outlets such as Locus, a magazine for professionals in real estate and construction. All of these discussions offer a chance for more comprehensive discussion about responsibility issues and for the inclusion of many voices in establishing the basis for a more inclusive understanding of responsibility and maybe changes in the grand narrative of
leadership. The perspective proposed in this study has potential to contribute in new ways to the grand narrative and to provide a source for seeing leadership as a more shared phenomenon (Crevani et al. 2010, Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011). Such a shift can, for example, help move the focus of attention from the dominant heroic conceptions of leadership to the central role of well-functioning interactions in leadership (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Raelin 2011).

7.3 Contribution to methodology

Narrative ethnography provides an opportunity to study the experience and changing meanings of the conditions that shape responsible leadership. It is crucial for our future—especially at this time of urgent environmental, social, and ecological challenges—that we develop skill and discernment in telling and listening to leadership narratives. The narrative method is not appropriate for large-scale studies. The approach is slow and requires effort to identify nuances of speech and organization of stories. This study supports and contributes to the trend in responsible leadership studies to analyze responsibility in leadership in more descriptive ways (Pless et al. 2012, Waldman 2014).

Interviews are often analyzed concentrating on the viewpoint of an individual and his or her experiences and thoughts about the world. The subject who experiences is an individual. But when we consider the teller of a story as part of society and as an expert on a specific cultural phenomenon (in this case the leader as an expert on responsible leadership), then the story offers a means to understand the phenomenon at large. Leaders, then, are not isolated islands but rather stand in relation to others and construct their leadership together with others (Crevani et al. 2010) Leadership is negotiated within the limits and possibilities of the narrative environment of leadership where certain institutions shape the stories of responsibility (Gubrium & Holstein 2001, Gubrium & Holstein 2009). Leaders use interactional positioning to describe the settings and circumstances of their interpretations of leadership work (Bamberg 1997, Deppermann 2013). In interactions, positions are dynamic and changing and people use the cultural, symbolic, and narrative resources that are available for positioning (Raggatt 2007). In this research the analysis led to four different stories of responsibility, which expose the dynamic nature of responsibility construction and demonstrate that it is always in the process of taking place.

The narrative and rhetorical conventions assumed by a profession also shape the reactions of the interviewees. Ways of personal expression, choice of
metaphors, figurative allusions, semantics, ornate phrasing versus plain speech, the organization of speech, and so on all work to structure a cultural portrait in particular ways. These are the features that most powerfully influence our understanding of what leadership is and what it is not. Analyzing narratives necessitates interpretation, and there are no straightforward recipes or formulas that can be applied to this work. My approach in this study is to include detailed transcripts of leaders’ speech so that readers can also access the stories independently of my analysis of them. The leaders also used a variety of different metaphors in talking of responsibility. This indicates the difficulty of articulating how they actually interpret what responsibility means in leadership. The mental processes of interpreting abstract and new phenomena are often expressed using natural metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson 2003). This both complicates the interpretation of stories and illustrates the necessity of using methods that can delve into the meanings of leadership more deeply.

The narrative interview is by its nature an educative dialogue between researcher and interviewee. The leaders said that they do not usually have much time to pause and reflect on their experiences. By engaging others in narrative inquiry, we can perhaps slow down our lives in order to stop and perceive the narrative structures that characterize our and others’ lives (Clandinin 2006). The narrative interview is well suited to studying people’s experiences. In this case, it enabled the creation of conditions that allowed me to give leaders back their stories and perhaps help them to see the social, cultural, and institutional stories within which they work and which shape them. Maybe they will even retell their stories and learn from each other’s stories. This is also an ethical issue in doing narrative interviews, because the process can alter the experience of those with whom the researcher engages.

When analyzing the material an important thing to keep in mind is the question of how the interviewed leaders positioned me as an interviewer. They could choose to explain something in more detail or expect me to understand it and let the story continue without details. This also affects my ability to interpret the stories, and it is likewise an ethical question. The researcher’s work is not simply to collect data; the researcher enters into a relationship with the interviewees and becomes part of the story-making process (Chase 2005).
7.4 Limitations and suggestions for further research

This section discusses the limitations of the research. The narrative data of this research consist of conversations with leaders. This represents a potential inconsistency in and limitation of this research, because the data cover only the viewpoints of the leaders. How can we then trust that they really do what they say in their narratives? On the other hand, most of the leaders made their ideas explicit also in many other ways, including in public through magazine interviews and other presentations.

Emphasizing leadership as a relational phenomenon based on interaction carries the risk of diluting the meaning of leadership (Crevani et al. 2010, Denis et al. 2012). If the argument is that everybody in an organization is in an equal position to contribute to leadership, what is the difference between leadership and other collective organizing processes, such as teamwork? Similarly, if leadership is not what formal leaders do, how can we distinguish between leadership activities and non-leadership activities? Such questions should be seriously considered when doing research. In this case, the leaders themselves emphasized in their stories that responsibility in leadership is about building collective commitment in order to reach a more inclusive form of responsibility. How such collective commitment comes about needs to be studied in addition to the qualities and competences of formal leaders.

The second limitation of this research is the relatively small number of interviews conducted. This number of interviews cannot form the basis of more general assumptions about the phenomenon. However, the purpose of narrative research is to provide insights that could be otherwise missed; it is not to achieve generalizability. The dissertation incorporates direct quotations from the leaders’ narratives. When I have presented my analysis of the narratives to other leaders, business professionals, and business students, the interpretations and quotations have often evoked similar sentiments in the listeners. Thus, the leaders’ narratives may provide a lens through which other professionals can reflect on their own experiences. This also provides an opportunity for a new understanding to emerge (Heikkinen et al. 2007).

Further research could fruitfully investigate leaders’ personal commitment to building social relations. Positioning oneself in situations may depend not only on language but also on what has been called “body language.” There is, for example, a growing literature on aesthetic leading (Hansen et al. 2007, Ropo et al. 2002). According to Hansen et al. (2007: 545) aesthetics refers to “sensory
knowledge and felt meaning of objects and experiences.” The research on aesthetic leadership argues that reason and logic have often been contrasted with emotion and feeling, but what all have in common is that they are sources of knowledge and generate meanings that we rely and act on (Hansen et al. 2007). Aesthetics involves meanings that we construct based on feelings about what we experience via our senses, as opposed to meanings that we can deduce in the absence of experience, such as through mathematics or other realist ways of knowing. The leaders in the present research reflected on the need to have personal experience of and to sense what was going on around the organization. They talked about trusting their own sensory knowledge. Sensory knowledge here referred to physical senses and not only to language. Thus, relating to others happens through the senses as well as through language. Further research on social relations and relating in the context of aesthetics could uncover important aspects of relating to others responsibly. The leaders’ stories were full of references to the embodied nature of leadership work and responsibility. Another direction for further research could be to deepen the study of the relational nature of responsibility in leadership. Relational leadership research has until now followed two ways of thinking. The entity and constructionist perspectives on leadership differ in their respective philosophical stances regarding the nature of leadership (Gergen 2009, Hosking 2011, Uhl-Bien & Ospina 2012). Therefore, the two perspectives also have different research agendas. Entity studies draw on postpositivist understandings and treat the objects of study as independent of one another. This leads to the separate theorization of leaders and followers, for example (Gergen 2009).

Constructionist researchers have a longer history in studying relational leadership because it is part of the ontological and epistemological perspective of constructionism (Uhl-Bien & Ospina 2012). Relationality is part of the constructionist view of leadership because it follows from the understanding that leadership is constructed in and through interaction (Hosking 2011). There has been a recent attempt to bring the two perspectives together in order to bridge the gap (Uhl-Bien & Ospina 2012). The present research does not concentrate on the special views of these two perspectives. Further research could investigate these perspectives and the interplay between them in the specific area of responsibility in leadership.

From a constructionist point of view responsible leadership would best be developed by engaging leaders and others in decision making on issues important to them and by supporting the kinds of activities that would enable such
engagement. Within organizations leaders should emphasize practices that engage people and share responsibility. The leaders talked about various means, including books and hobbies, which they used as developmental resources for interaction and responsible practices. The educational dialogue should be as close as possible to the circumstances of application, which means that training should occur at workplaces.

The leaders in this research indicated a need to cross organizational boundaries for fresh and inclusive perspectives on responsibility. This could be another interesting area for further study. The community story line, for example, was based on the idea of leadership being shared among people who have a particular interest in common, regardless of the organizations or places where the participants are actually located. This kind of sharing is made possible by technology. There is a body of research on what Denis et al. (2012), in their review on plural leadership, described as “spreading leadership across levels over time.” Future research could investigate further how responsibility can be advanced via interaction across organizational boundaries.

7.5 Conclusions of the study

This research examines responsibility in leadership through an approach that sees leadership as socially constructed among people, with language playing a central role in the process (Crevani et al. 2010, Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Fairhurst 2008, Hosking 2007, Vine et al. 2008). This approach indicates that communication relates or coordinates constructed realities between people (Barge 2012, Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien 2012, Hosking 2007, Vine et al. 2008). In addition, it views leadership as embedded in and part of dominant discourses of leadership in the sociocultural context (Crevani et al. 2010). This perspective prompts investigation of how responsibility is constructed among people through leadership and why some constructions are more valid than others (Hosking 2007). This particular lens may provide guidance for the promotion of more inclusive responsibility integration in business companies. The empirical research in this study focuses on ten leaders’ narratives of responsibility in leadership work.

The first conclusion of this research is that responsibility construction in leadership should be studied in terms of processes and interaction and as an shared phenomenon involving a variety of leadership participants equally (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Raelin 2011). In addition, this study opens up the field
for studying responsibility as a phenomenon that is not confined to organizational boundaries. This research lens on responsibility is in line with other emerging studies on leadership as socially constructed and relational (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Fairhurst & Grant 2010, Grint 2005, Hosking 2007, Uhl-Bien 2006), not only within a particular organization but in close interaction with other, so-called external actors in leadership (Crevani et al. 2010).

This approach highlights responsibility integration as the everyday work of leadership and as the product of co-creation and engagement by many participants both inside and outside the organization (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Hosking 2007, Mirvis & Manga 2010). A relational stance toward others is crucial in leadership work (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, McNamee 2009). Leaders draw on all kinds of formal and informal everyday social situations to develop their understanding of responsibility and their ability to interact with others in a responsible way. The skill of relating responsibly is fostered both inside and outside organizational boundaries in all types of social situations. This point underscores the importance of a varied field of visible and invisible relationships in which responsibility is constructed. In particular, more attention should be paid to informal interaction, because it can also be a significant factor in responsibility construction in an organizational context.

Second, this research emphasizes that there is no single right way of constructing responsibility through leadership. In this study, four different stories represent the variation in responsibility construction. Previous research on responsibility in leadership also indicates that there is variation in the responsibility orientations of companies (Pless et al. 2012). This study suggests that variation occurs because the construction of responsibility takes local forms and is affected by local settings such as the surrounding society through processes of interaction and communication. In addition, the interpretation of responsibility is influenced and challenged by the grand story of leadership. The formulation of responsibility is sensitive to the limits of what is potentially accepted as a valid interpretation. An overly challenging interpretation may be ignored and marginalized.

The currently dominant leadership discourse is dominated by the concepts of productivity, efficiency, and short-term results. In talking about responsibility, the leaders reflected on what constitutes an overall credible discourse in business leadership. Showing weakness or making mistakes may not be part of that discourse, and thus the pressure to be perfect hinders the quest to achieve the higher aims of responsibility. The more different kinds of ongoing discourses and
narratives about responsibility in business we have, the more interpretative frameworks and new ways of acting are created for organizations and leadership participants (Bisel & Barge 2011). Stories can function as a starting point and encourage and inspire others to take action toward the common purpose of more inclusive responsibility integration and thus more responsible business. Openness to new ideas creates space for new and more inclusive understandings to arise. Thus, opening organizational boundaries to participation in social interaction with other members of society makes it possible for the interpretation of responsibility to be challenged and renewed. In addition, local constructions of responsibility should be appreciated because they have coherence and rationality for those involved. Such understandings are based on what participants have found valuable and what works for them in their particular circumstances.
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Appendix 1 The framework for narrative interviews

The following questions represent and illustrate the guiding themes of the narrative interviews, but the discussed themes were also tailored to each interview. The themes served as a background tool that could be used if there was a need to stimulate stories in the course of the interview.

YOUR INFORMATION
Name:
Age:
Current Position:
Years in Current Position:
Current Company:
Current Industry:

YOUR CAREER
Tell me about your career—an overview of how you’ve grown from your first job to the present one.

YOUR WAY OF LEADERSHIP
How would you define your way of leadership?
How would you describe your ethical point of view? What have been your guiding values?
How do you “grow” in terms of responsibility issues?
When and why did you realize that responsibility issues are important to you?
How have you evolved in responsibility to where you are today?
How do you exercise responsible leadership in practice in your day-to-day activities of leadership?
How would you define the purpose of business?
What type of an organizational culture do you strive to create?
What do you see as important issues for the future?
Appendix 2 Example mindmap of thematic analysis
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