Title: Impact of self-doubts on leaders at a point of transition in the workplace

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A thesis submitted for the degree of: Professional Doctorate

Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust and

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Date of submission for examination: June 2020

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Abstract

Inner self-critical voices are scrutinising, attacking, and discouraging. They are also a pervasive part of human nature, which seems to have become more dominant in current times.

This qualitative research study examines the effects of self-doubts and self-criticism on individuals holding a leadership role at a point of transition in the workplace. Taking a systems-psychodynamic perspective, this study aims to explore the origins and consequences of self-doubts, looking at both the individual (intra-psychic) perspective as well as the systemic (psycho-social) aspect of self-doubts.

Situated within the social-constructivist paradigm, case study was chosen as a research design strategy and Grounded Theory methodology was used for data analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of eight participants in leadership positions who had experienced a role transition while working in commercial organisations.

Key findings suggest that the impact of self-doubts might be linked to the individual's self-worth, sense of belonging, and need for external validation. An elite group identity, created as a social-defence mechanism, is collectively and unconsciously developed by members of an organisation to deal with self-doubts anxiety. Looking beyond the individual's intra-psychic experience, another significant finding in this study is linked to the specific characteristics of the wider organisational and societal contexts in which these leaders operate, and the impacts of these characteristics on these individuals. The overlap between the individual and the system seems to create a re-enforcing cycle of self-doubts anxiety, which might have detrimental consequences for individuals and organisations. On this basis, it is recommended to create space for self-reflection and interventions at individual, group, and organisational levels, using an integrative approach to deal with the impact of self-doubts.

SECTION I - SETTING THE SCENE

> *'Therapeutic work on the super-ego of the patient constitutes such a vital and significant portion of clinical work that most would agree that an intensive psychotherapy cannot be successful unless the super-ego of the patient undergoes a demonstrable change… it is perplexing that more is not written specifically on this topic.'*
>
> - ***William S. Meyer***

Section I starts with a short introduction, providing an overview of the research study (**Chapter 1**). **Chapter 2** explains the rationale of choosing this research area, including both what this specific study means to me personally as well as my professional practice. **Chapter 3** outlines the most pertinent literature review and its gaps. Following on from this, in **Chapter 4,** the reasoning of research design and methodology are discussed.

Chapter 1: Choice of research area and research questions

1.1 Background and rationale for the choice of research topic

A telescope pointed to the sky. Father and daughter looking at the stars dotted in an infinite dark sky during a humid summer night in South America. The overzealous father points up and explains to the six-year-old daughter about planets traveling in ellipses, light years and remote galaxies. Anxiously, he looks at his daughter and says, 'Mmh no, you didn't understand … or, have I not explained it properly?' The child remains in silence, perplexed by the complexity of what she was hearing and the felt intensity of her father's eagerness to explain those difficult astronomical concepts.

This was the first time, at least that I remember, when I felt, 'I am not enough, I am not intelligent enough to understand what my Dad is saying'. And this anxious feeling of self-doubts and shame as a disappointing daughter has stayed with me since then, re-emerging and intensifying ever so often. At the time, I did not understand what was going on, I just experienced the uncomfortable heaviness of not meeting expectations.

Not accidentally, later on in life, I ended up studying psychoanalysis. My early career background was in psychoanalytical psychotherapy. I grew up and studied my first degree in a part of the world dominated by psychoanalytical thinking. I am deeply grateful for this. When I moved to the UK, I continued studying psychoanalytical thinking applied to organisations.

For over a decade, I have been working in leadership development and coaching in different organisations, mainly for professional services firms and for a business school. As part of my day to day work in leadership development and coaching, I have noticed key themes amongst leaders: self-doubts, high self-demands, and a strong sense of self-criticism. This is expressed

through being unsure about the value of their contributions in meetings with clients, questioning their abilities as a leader, concerns about being judged for saying something out of place or missing potential errors, not meeting expectations, self-deprecating comments, and the list continues. Many discussions during workshops and coaching sessions revolve around the demands and high expectations coming from clients, colleagues, bosses, and the organisations. These high demands are both external real demands and the internal demands that these leaders put on themselves.

I have also noticed how, in some cases, self-criticism may hinder the leaders' ability to take up a role, perform well in that role, and progress in their careers. In some cases, the anxiety generated by the self-critical voices is debilitating rather than facilitating, impacting the leaders' well-being. Equally, these same self-doubts seem to push leaders to achieve more and to encourage them to take new challenges.

What has been key is the sharp contrast between how these leaders, are seen by others as capable and successful professionals, yet internally being filled with self-doubts by their own perception of themselves. Through a psychoanalytical lens, I interpret these themes as evidence of an active super-ego; a part of the organisational psychic which holds the internalisation of authority figures and acts as a punishing and critical voice (Freud, 1923), a critical inner voice that is carefully observing, judging, questioning every movement and demanding more.

One of the exercises I have carried out with leaders in workshops or coaching sessions has been to do a pictorial representation of a moment when they doubt themselves. One example is in Figure 1, below – a photograph of a drawing by one of the leaders to whom I have offered coaching. The drawing can be seen as a distressing and chaotic pictorial representation of self-doubts, which summarises what I was noticing as a pattern in other leaders.

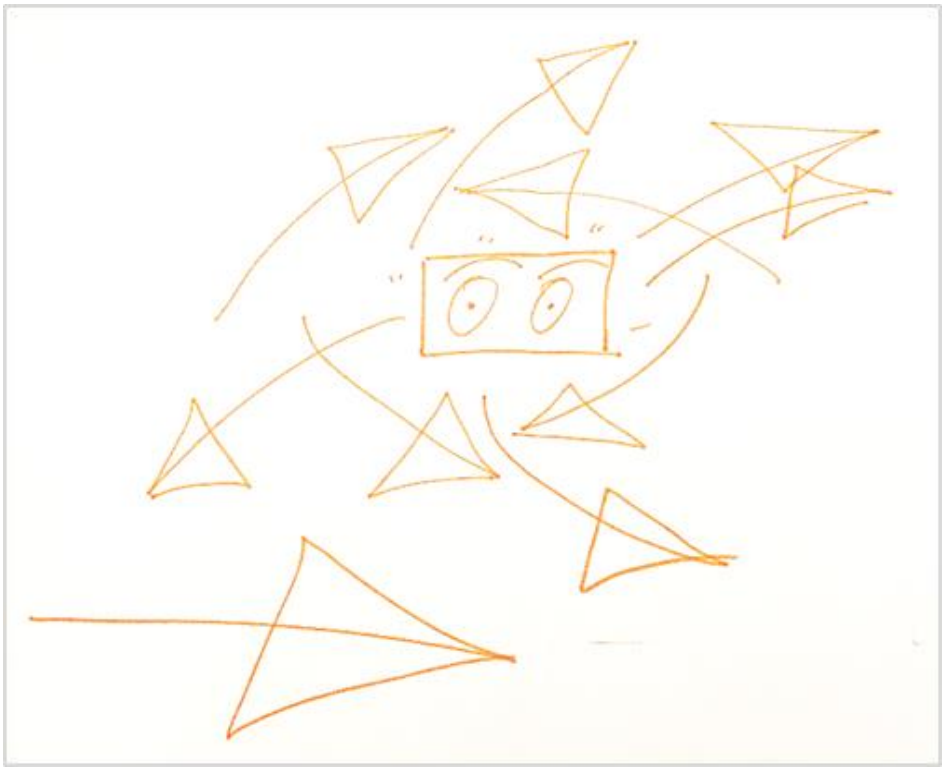

Figure 1 A drawing from a workshop participant.

In other drawings, workshop participants represented themselves as significantly smaller than others; in cages, boxes, or within constricting lines and frames with anxious looks; and generally emanating anxiety, intensity, heaviness, panic. The main themes emerging from drawings and discussions have been about how restricting and limiting the critical inner voices are, leaving leaders to experience self-doubts with little or no space for manoeuvre, for thinking or feeling. I interpreted the sometimes-overwhelming pain, stress, and pressure that emerged from the discussions and drawings as further signs of a critical super-ego that affects people's confidence and holds them back.

The relentless quality of the super-ego and the inner critic is the aspect that seems particularly intriguing to me. There seems to be something, perhaps unresolved, that drives leaders either back to their saboteur mind-set, or pushes them to achieve greater career challenges.

These themes are definitely not alien to me in my own personal history. Evidence of my own unchallenged self-doubts themes was when I recently, while writing this thesis, came across, amongst old papers on my bookshelf, an unopened postcard addressed to me. (See Figure 2 and Figure 3). Inside, a postcard reads 'Do not open for four weeks'. The postcard outlines two areas for development that, it was suggested, I should be working on. When I recently found the letter, I tried to make sense of it, realising later that it was part of a training course exercise I had attended many years ago. The note was from a colleague, who must have noticed my lack of confidence and self-doubts. I assumed I must have put aside the sealed letter and forgot to open it at the time. I had no recollection of this event, only to find it seven years later, while writing a thesis on self-doubts. This was a confirmation that my self-doubts had been there, latent, all the time, perhaps temporarily repressed to the unconscious but still manifesting themselves and being noticed by people around me.

I have been able to notice the self-doubts themes in leaders I have worked with because they closely resonated with my own experience. I have known far too well how it feels to be drawn by inner critical voices. Paradoxically, the self-critical themes have been so attuned to my own inner-world that for years I had ignored them. Harsh self-criticism has been habitual to me and has remained unchallenged for most of my life, until recently.

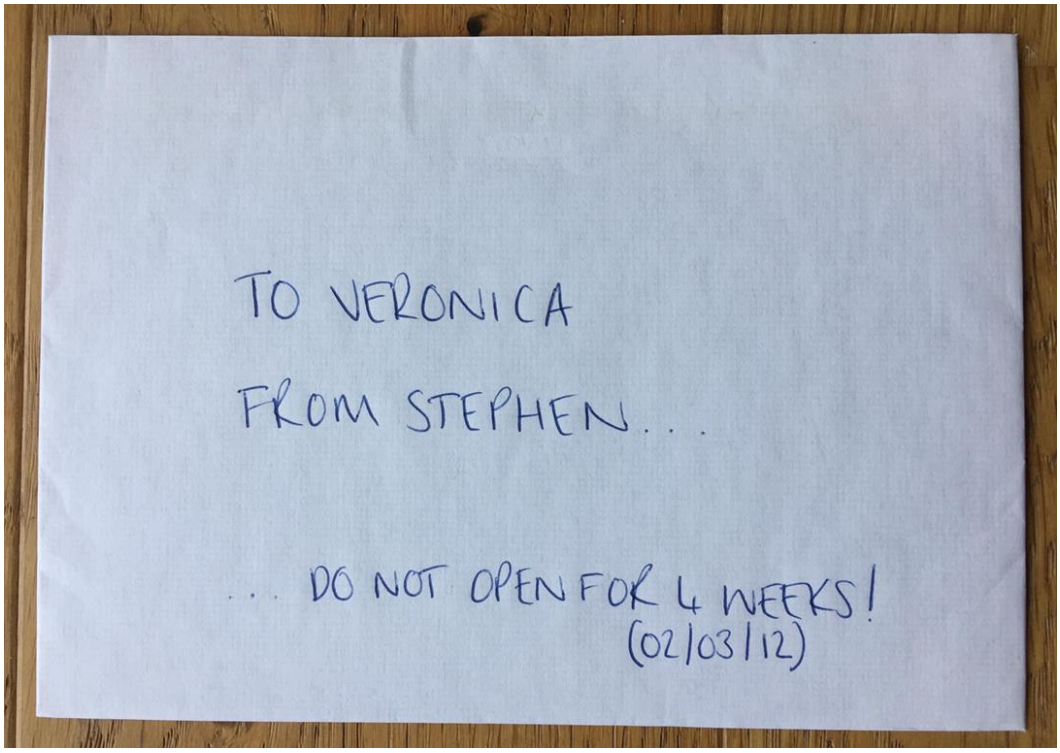

Figure 2 Unopened postcard envelope.

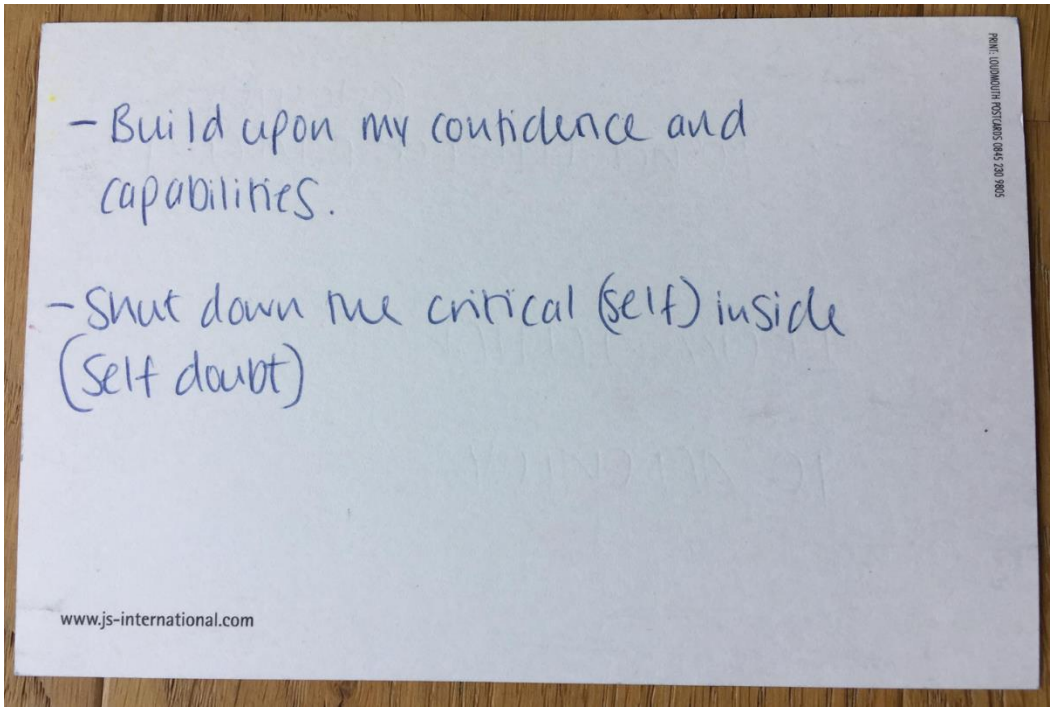

Figure 3 Text written on the postcard.

1.2 Research questions

Main question:

- How do self-doubts impact on leaders at a point of transition in the workplace?

Sub-questions:

Individual level

- How might self-doubts/self-criticism become a driver or an obstacle for leaders in the workplace at a point of transition (e.g., promotion, career progression, new job)? What would the cost be for the individual's well-being?
- How might the characteristics of the early years and family history influence the quality of a leader's inner critical voices, potentially impacting their performance in the workplace?

Organisational level

- How might psycho-social aspects contribute or interact with the leaders' self-doubts/self-criticism?
- Where might the overlap be between an individual's characteristics and the organisational culture?
- What defence mechanisms might be developed at individual and organisational levels in connection with self-doubts in a culture of performance, targets, and scrutiny?
- How might society as a system be fuelling self-doubts?

1.3 Research objectives

- To examine and draw insights on how self-doubts may impact leaders at a point of transition (e.g., shortly before promotion, right after promotion, or taking up a new role or a challenging new project).
- To recognise how self-doubts may function as an obstacle to or as a driving force for leaders' performance.
- To use a systems-psychodynamic approach to differentiate how much may belong to the individual's personal history and how much to the organisation's culture.
- To offer insights and recommendations from a systems-psychodynamic approach about potential interventions to support leaders and organisations in dealing with the consequences of a strong sense of self-doubts/self-criticism.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Defining terms and taking a position - Self-doubts, self-criticism, super-ego and inner critic

Some of the concepts discussed as key elements of my research are similar or overlapping in meaning. Consequently, it is important to define these terms in the context of and for the purpose of this thesis.

The Freudian term 'super-ego' has been discussed for decades; however, similar concepts such as 'inner critic' (Gendlin 1981, 1986) or 'impostor phenomenon' (Clance and Imes, 1978) are now proving to be much "trendier" and widely spoken about. Although the term inner critic has recently been popularised, particularly in the leadership and coaching fields, it arguably seems very similar to Freud's concept of the super-ego. A note must be made here about what constitutes the super-ego and how the inner critic may overlap with it. Meyer (1998), building on Kramer (1958), suggests that 'the super-ego can be divided into three component parts: the ego ideal, the benign or benevolent super-ego, and the prohibiting super-ego' (Kramer, 1958, cited in Meyer 1998, p 353-4); I will expand on this later. The inner critic concept seems to be very close to the prohibiting super-ego.

Another similar concept linked to super-ego is the internal saboteur. Although not widely known, the concept of internal saboteur, coined by Fairbairn (1951) and based on his model of intrapsychic dynamic ego-structure, appears comparable to the concept of the super-ego: 'It will be seen that the resulting differentiation of ego-structure corresponds roughly to Freud's account of the mental apparatus – the central ego corresponding to Freud's 'ego', the libidinal ego to Freud's 'id' and the internal saboteur to Freud's 'super-ego'' (Fairbairn, 1951, p 170).

Although debatable, for the purpose of this thesis and in the interest of simplicity I will use the terms inner critic and super-ego interchangeably. I see self-doubts and self-criticism as a result of an active super-ego or inner critic, I have decided to use the term *self-doubts* to describe the feeling of uncertainty about oneself (abilities, behaviours, feelings, thinking etc.), because it seems an overarching term that can include self-criticism. The term self-doubts seems specific enough to focus the study on, at the same time being generic enough to include similar or related concepts.

2.2 Key bibliography and its gaps

This section offers a summary of the literature review most pertinent to the research topic.

Due to the characteristics of my research question, to explore both the individuals' inner-world as well as their working environment, it seems an obvious choice to include both earlier psychodynamic developments on the super-ego and a more contemporary systems-psychodynamic perspective. The review also includes non-psychoanalytical literature which I have found enriching, seeing areas of overlap between the different paradigms.

I have broadly organised the literature review chronologically and loosely grouped around epistemological paradigms.

2.3 Early psychoanalytical thinking on super-ego

The relevant literature for this research starts with Freud's concept of super-ego, which generates self-doubts and self-criticism. Freud defines the super-ego in 'The Ego and the Id'

(1923) as a part of the organisational psychic that holds the internalisation of the authority figures and acts as a punishing and critical voice (Freud, 1923).

According to Frank's (1999) compelling historical analysis of the super-ego, Freud's notion of *Über-Ich* (translated as super-ego by Strachey) holds a prohibiting function and also a motivating function that encourages the individual to aspire towards a high ideal. Referring to Freud's conceptualisation of the super-ego, Frank suggests that some of these ideals are conscious and 'more or less realistic ideals', ego ideal and 'unconscious, more or less unrealistic ideals', ideal ego (p 448-9). While Freud's emphasis is on the phylogenetic factor and the father (rather than the mother) as a model for the super-ego, post-Freudian discussions focus on the effect of parent relationships and how the child processes those interactions (Frank, 1999).

Following from this line of thought and based on the conceptualisation of the super-ego emerging from the literature review, discussions on the super-ego seem to draw a comparison between Freudian and post-Freudian/contemporary psychoanalytical perspectives on the super-ego development. For example, post-Freudians such as the Kleinian school place more emphasis on the relational perspective.

Beyond the different and often conflicting views on what constitute the super-ego from the different schools of psychoanalysis, broadly the common denominator amongst those schools and the essence of the concept specifically relevant for this thesis, is that the super-ego represents severe and punishing voices as well as aspirational ideals. The quality and severity of these voices seems to depend partly on the parenting style and what the child made of the introjected authority figures.

Frank (1999) provides a thorough account of very lengthy debates amongst psychoanalysts on Freud's super-ego concept, these are certainly beyond the scope of this research. To remain in the periphery of these lengthy theoretical debates I have used Kramer's and Meyer's

conceptualisation of the super-ego, which suggests, as mentioned earlier, that 'the super-ego can be divided into three component parts: the ego ideal, the benign or benevolent super-ego, and the prohibiting super-ego' (Meyers, 1998, p 354). Building on Kramer (1958), Meyer indicates that 'the ego ideal represents what the person wants to be; the benign super-ego relates to the ego with love; and the prohibiting super-ego … is that function of the mind which is demanding, harsh, and often punitive' (Meyers, 1998, p 353). Meyers recognises that conflict is inevitable amongst the three components; however, he distinguishes between a healthy and a pathological state of the super-ego components. The healthy state seems to uphold a cooperative balance between the three components, allowing for a reality-based input. Conversely, the pathological state presents a 'disproportion and extreme discord among the three parts' (Meyers, 1998, p 354).

Kramer and Meyer's definitions of the super-ego provide clarity and sufficient depth about its characteristics and components for my study's aim, whilst at the same time staying away from debates that are not necessarily helpful to my research.

2.4 Contemporary psychoanalytical thinking on super-ego in the work context

For a more contemporary psychoanalytical outlook on the effects of self-doubts and self-criticism on leaders in the work context, I have followed the works by Kets de Vries, who has a psychodynamic approach to coaching and leadership development. Kets de Vries broadly analyses the leader's earlier background and family dynamics, and their impact on the leaders' role at work. A specific example discussed by Kets de Vries is the impostor phenomenon (Kets de Vries, 1990, 2005, 2006). Kets de Vries discusses the 'neurotic impostors', defined as individuals who feel fraudulent while actually having accomplished success in their lives, because they attribute their success to luck, physical attractiveness or likeability rather than

recognising their own personal abilities. Other characteristics of these individuals include: fear of not living up to others' expectations, hard work to compensate for shortcomings, sensitivity to experiences of rejection and social failure, anxiety and lack of confidence. Kets de Vries links this to the infant's development, which results in the lack of a cohesive sense of self. He also refers to family dynamics linked to impostor phenomenon, parents overinvested in their children's achievements or disadvantaged family backgrounds where there is not an expectation of success.

Whilst I find Kets de Vries' work compelling, there are times when the convinced tone of his discussions and his perhaps over-interpretative approach are questionable. When taking a psychodynamic perspective, we work with hypothesis and tentative assumptions, not certainty. More importantly, while Kets de Vries offers a psychodynamic analysis of the leaders' past history and superficially refers to some organisational dynamics created by leaders who feel like impostors, Kets de Vries' work stays at the individual level of analysis rather than looking at groups and organisational unconscious processes linked to self-doubts.

2.5 Self-doubts and self-criticism from a non-psychoanalytical perspective: counselling, psychotherapy and work context

As discussed previously, a contemporary term interchangeable with an aspect of the super-ego concept is the inner critic, defined by Stinckens *et al.* (2002, p 40) as the impersonal inner voice that 'nags and repeats himself relentlessly', a voice that attacks individuals and grinds them down. Stinckens *et al.* discuss the inner critic in the counselling and psychotherapy context and attribute the development of the concept to Gendlin (1981, 1986). Stinckens *et al.* introduce the phenomenon around five main process clusters: a past history of rejection,

restriction and neglect; negative self-schemes; information processing deficits; self-protective behaviours; and interpersonal problems.

While this paper belongs to the psychotherapy field and my research to the work context and organisational psychology, Stinckens *et al.* offer very valuable insights linked to work situations and job performance. Some examples are: interpersonal problems with other colleagues, exaggerating merits or minimising mistakes while carrying out a task, the incompetence self-scheme affecting employees when taking up a new role or striving towards extremely high standards at the expense of their well-being or their team's well-being. Although this study's approach is not psychoanalytical it arrives at very similar findings as, for example, the work done by Kets de Vries. These findings also corroborate my own research assumptions.

David *et al.* (2013) in the Harvard Business Review (HBR) discuss the inner critic in the work context through the concept of 'emotional agility', focusing on how effective leaders manage their negative thoughts and feelings. David *et al.* suggest useful practical strategies for overcoming the inner critic, as well as work-related examples. David *et al.*'s perspective on the topic seems at times to have a very specific audience (HBR readers) and an implicit commercial purpose (achieving publicity) in mind. Whilst there is nothing wrong with this, this approach feels at time prescriptive, simplistic, linear, or even evangelistic. Perhaps my views differ from David *et al.*'s due to being situated in different epistemological paradigms. We know from psychodynamic thinking that deep-rooted issues, such as this one connected to super-ego and early family history dynamics, cannot not simply be changed using a set of prescribed strategies. Additionally, David *et al.* emphasise only the individual dimension rather than exploring the process impacting the phenomenon at a system level.

It would be amiss to discuss the inner critic concept without mentioning Gallwey's 'inner game' (2000). Gallwey explored performance in the context of sport and became a best-selling author in the 1970s. Despite his academic background, it was while working as a sport coach when

he recognised that there was a dialogue occurring in the player's head – an internal conversation between two inner selves. Self one – the saboteur – judges and gives negative commands to self two, who holds the potential and capabilities that a person is born with. The dialogue between self one and self two creates an interference – a state of mind that proves to be very unhelpful for the player. Gallwey indicates that when athletes are at their best, their minds are quiet and focused. This thinking has been extrapolated to leadership coaching and the business world, and remains very popular in leadership development. Although Gallwey's discovery of the inner game has not been developed in the academic setting, it must be acknowledged that Gallwey's model is relatable and corresponds to aspects of conceptualisations of the super-ego.

Overall, this literature review is not psychoanalytical and is primarily concerned with the individual level of analysis. In other words, the literature reviewed so far places all the emphasis on the individual psychic and it does not seem to explore the unconscious or the organisational context from a systemic perspective.

2.6 The impostor phenomenon – non psychodynamic and work context

As mentioned earlier, a key concept intrinsically connected with the super-ego, self-doubts, and self-criticism is the impostor phenomenon (IP). Arguably IP is the consequence of a very active super-ego. The IP concept was initially coined by Clance and Imes (1978) and defined as an internal experience of intellectual phoniness which seems to be particularly predominant in high-achieving individuals (Clance and Imes, 1978).

Since its inception, the IP has been studied in connection to perfectionism, self-handicapping behaviour, fear of success and failure, personality traits, and inner barriers to career

development, to mention only a few (Fried-Buchalter 1997, Ferrari and Thompson, 2006, Vergauwe *et al*., 2015).

Vergauwe *et al.*'s (2015) study is particularly relevant as it specifically discusses the IP linked to trait-relatedness (e.g., neuroticism, conscientiousness); its relevance in the work context; and the workplace social support that could buffer its harmful effects, for example, coaching (Vergauwe *et al.*, 2015). The study claims the need for additional research in this area.

Vergauwe *et al.* (2015) indicate that impostor tendencies can have detrimental consequences on both people's well-being and individuals' career advancement to senior positions. Vergauwe *et al*.'s paper also highlights that individuals affected by the IP could benefit from coaching programmes that focus on the enhancement of self-efficacy and the alleviation of maladaptive, perfectionistic concerns. The study is relevant to my research because its participants were knowledge workers from commercial organisations, including an international accountancy firm and several HR-consultancy firms. It is also relevant because it refers to leadership development and coaching, all of which are aspects linked to my research study.

The sources on IP mentioned in this subsection (2.6) offer a thorough understanding of IP in the work context, but they are conducted from a different epistemological stance to my research. These studies seem to focus on objective facts, measurements, correlations, statistical analysis, and verification of hypotheses, making assumptions about the world and knowledge that are more aligned to a positivist or realist position rather than an interpretative one. While these studies are very helpful, their outcomes equally seem at times linear, descriptive, and in some cases, self-evident. The emphasis seems to be on explaining the phenomena of an assumed external objective reality. These studies seem to have left out the more subjective, non-conscious, and experiential aspects of the phenomenon, excluding what is beneath the surface. For example, they describe the links between IP and a maladaptive

personality style, but there is no exploration of where this comes from or how participants' earlier family dynamics may have had an influence. Furthermore, although the organisational dimension is mentioned, the studies omit how psycho-social systems and a specific moment in history may impact the phenomenon studied.

Concerning the impostor syndrome, Empson (2017) discusses insecure overachievers in professional services firms and the cult-culture of these firms. Insecure overachievers are defined as highly intelligent individuals 'driven by a profound sense of their own inadequacy', typically linked to childhood experiences (Empson, 2017, p 116). Empson argues that employees in these firms are socialised into a culture that exploits their insecurities; she suggests that being chosen and promoted within these firms provides immense reassurance to the insecure overachievers.

While Empson's research is robust and a key source in connection with leaders' insecurities in the work context, arguably, some of the arguments stays on the surface. For example, the origins of employees' insecurities is briefly discussed but not explored in depth, excluding the rich unconscious dimensions of parent and child interactions.

Empson's research appears to be qualitative – she describes using 'elite interviewing' (Empson, 2018). Her studies denote the use of sociological lenses rather than psychodynamic lenses. Epistemologically, Empson situates her research within the poststructuralist paradigm, giving significant attention to power relations and aiming to discern the hidden underlying rules, norms, or power structures (Given, 2008, p 152), as seen in her studies of professional services firms.

While Empson extensively analyses power, authority, and leadership, sometimes from a Foucauldian angle, she does not explicitly mention any psychodynamic concepts, such as unconscious or social defences. She does not seem to attribute any reasoning for what occurs

in organisations or individuals to the unconscious, which psychoanalysis understands to be a repressed and hidden part of each person's emotional life which remains inaccessible to the person's (researcher or interviewee) consciousness.

To a degree, this non-psychodynamic literature is helpful in insightfully exploring conscious, cognitive, and emotional aspects of the phenomenon. However, it does not fully address the complex and often conflicting unconscious psycho-social aspects of the inner critical voices that impact specifically on senior leaders and organisations.

2.7 Systems-psychodynamics

To bring the organisational system dimension into play and explore the boundary between the individual (intra-psychic) and the organisation, this review includes some of the fundamental concepts in the systems-psychodynamics literature. This helps in understanding the phenomenon I am studying, as well as enabling theories to be built.

What follows is a condensed version of some of the most relevant concepts to this study (not a conclusive list). These concepts reflect a triad of disciplines that have historically and theoretically influenced and formed a systems-psychodynamic approach to organisations, known as the Tavistock Tradition. This combines three main perspectives (Fraher, 2004): (1) the application of Klein's (1987) psychoanalytic concepts of intra-psychic processes (specifically object relations) to groups, concepts that have built and evolved from Freud's earlier thinking. Secondly, (2) Bion's (1961) insights and observations of group behaviour, seeing the group as a whole and seeing oneself as an instrument to understand the group dynamics in a more experimental and experiential way, which became later on the foundations for group relations as a methodology for studying groups and organisational unconscious dynamics. Finally, (3) Lewin's (1947) perspective on open systems applied to human systems, which provides a

model to look at the relations between the parts and the whole in organisations, and between the organisations and its wider environment (Roberts, 1994).

Klein's (1987) work with children led her to the conceptualisation of the paranoid – schizoid position and the depressive position, seen as part of the children's normal stages of development. The avoidance of difficult feelings and intense anxiety results in the child developing defence mechanisms to help the infant deal with the emotional pain. These primary defence mechanisms; splitting, projection and projective identification, which are seen in early childhood, may also be utilised later on in adulthood in response to anxiety that is experienced as unbearable.

Splitting refers to the process of separating feelings into differentiated and isolated elements. Splitting is often followed by projection, which involves unconsciously disowning and relocating uncomfortable feelings on to others in the external world (Halton, 1994). While projection is about distancing oneself from difficult feeling, projective identification involves a subtle unconscious interpersonal interaction in which one becomes the recipient and identified with others' projected difficult feelings (Segal, 1988, Czander, 1993, Halton 1994)

While these mechanisms form part of basic human responses to anxiety, they may also occur at a group and organisational levels. Bion's (1961) observations of unconscious group processes led him to conceptualise the work-group mentality and the basic assumption mentality. The group-work mentality is linked to working on the task assigned (sophisticated group). The basic assumption mode is linked to avoiding work and evading a conflicting or painful reality between group members (Bion, 1961, Stokes, 1994).

In connection with the basic assumption mentality, Bion (1961) used the concept of valency, borrowed from chemistry and physics. Bion defines valency as 'the individual's readiness' (p 116) to unconsciously act on the group's basic assumption. It is 'the capacity of the individual

for instantaneous combination with other individuals in an established pattern of behaviours – the basic assumption' (Bion, 1961, p 175).

Another key concept within the systems-psychodynamic perspective is Menzies-Lyth's (1960) social defence mechanism. Working with nurses in a training hospital, Menzies-Lyth observed how the painful and anxiety-provoking nature of the nurses' tasks resulted in them developing a set of unconscious defence mechanisms to avoid those difficult feelings, which were exhibited through day-to-day practices, processes, and procedures. In other words, social defence mechanisms refer to how members of an organisation or a group align their personal defences with each other, and with the structure and culture of the organisation. The aim of this unconscious alignment is the avoidance of painful feelings.

A more recent paper, which is particularly relevant to my study, links social defences and super-ego features (Halton, 2014). Halton revisits Menzies-Lyth's paper on social defence mechanisms by examining Freud's thinking on obsessional-punitive mechanisms. What I have found particularly valuable in Halton's thinking is how he links Freud's super-ego concept – specifically its punitive and surveillance function – with the characteristic of the processes and procedures established amongst nurses in Menzies-Lyth's case, seeing this as a cohesive unconscious force.

Finally, Obholzer's influential concept of authority (Obholzer, 1994, Huffington, 2004) – the right to make ultimate decisions which are binding to others, is also linked to individuals' inner authority figures – has proven to be pivotal for my research as it is closely linked to the super-ego and the individual inner ability to assume a professional role in the work context.

As mentioned earlier, the above is a summary of some of the key systems-psychodynamics concepts that support the understanding of the phenomenon studied.

2.8 Potential gaps in the above literature

In summary, the above literature review seems to indicate a niche gap in the literature exploring self-doubts or self-criticism within leadership in the work context, specifically using a psychodynamic perspective that goes beyond the individual dimension of analysis.

For example, Empson and David consider leaders' self-criticism in the work context but not from a psychoanalytical paradigm; Kets de Vries does so from a psychoanalytical perspective, but the psycho-social dimension seems to be missing or less explored.

My study aims to offer an angle on this field that appears less explored: it focuses on a systems-psychodynamic perspective of self-doubts and self-criticism in leaders in the work context. My study does not only explore the intra-psychic perspective, but also examines the group, organisational, social, and historical context where the phenomenon occurs.

2.9 Literature explored as a result of my research findings

The constant comparative nature of Grounded Theory (GT) as the chosen method for analysis in this study (Chapter 3 expands on this) led me to return to the literature during analysing the data. As suggested by GT (Charmaz and Henwood, 2013), while analysing the data and constructing tentative theoretical concepts from it, I went back to compare the emerging concepts with theories and studies in the relevant literature. This approach enabled me to develop my ideas first and then make a comparison with earlier theories, using the extant literature to help me interpret, integrate, and explicate meaning emerging from the data.

It seems naïve and unrealistic to assume that one can conduct research with no theoretical preconceptions; equally one must be constantly cautious of being unhelpfully influenced by existing theories and work in the field. Consequently, as suggested by Charmaz and Henwood

(2013) I have maintained a critical view of the literature and an open eye on the data. The following paragraphs outline some of the key concepts and literature explored during data analysis when significant findings started to emerge.

Gilbert and Iron's (2009) study on the relationship between shame, self-criticism, and social compassion in adolescents has been relevant to my research. The authors argue that the transition from childhood to adolescence is accompanied by an emphasis on peer-group relationships, a sense of belonging, and acceptance; the authors indicate that shame and self-criticism are associated with different psychological issues, including depression and anxiety. The common denominators of these psychological issues are shame, self-criticism, and a feeling of inferiority through social comparison. While their research is on adolescents, many of their findings on the impact of shame and self-criticism linked to; sense of belonging, need for social comparison and shame, have been helpful to understand the psychology behind leaders in my study.

Building on Klein and Bion's thinking, and to help me deepen the understanding of intra-psychic aspects of phenomenon I am studying I have looked at Waddell's (2002) specifically on paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, as well as, the complex early communications between the mother and the infant and its later impact on the person's sense of self and confidence.

The concepts of 'elite identity' and 'status anxiety' (Gill, 2015), studied within the professional services firms, have also become very relevant as these are also patterns I have noticed in the data. Elite identity refers to an identity construction relating to how some individuals see themselves amongst the best (Gill, 2015). Gill's paper draws on psychological and sociological theories connecting identity and anxiety, and suggests that the encouragement of an elite identity by some firms leaves employees feeling acutely anxious.

An essential and recent paper that addresses the psycho-social perspective, connected with today's world, is Hoggett's (2017) discussions on shame and performativity in the context of neoliberalism and its impact on the individual feeling inadequate and deficient. Hoggett's reflections are partly informed by his clinical cases observations and builds from other psychoanalytical thinkers and organisational theorists. Hoggett's discussions offers intellectual depth, clarity and eloquence on the topic, combining intra-psychic with psycho-social thinking in a compelling way. Some of these arguments, are closely aligned to aspects of my research findings. Building on from the psycho-social perspective, Armstrong's (2005) re-worked concept of organisation-in-the-mind, described as the individual's internal models seen perhaps as a secondary formation in response to a shared organisational dynamic, has also been helpful to my research.

A recent study (Cristea *et al.*, 2019) examines the prevalence of impostor feelings among senior leaders and the impact of these feelings on their well-being and performance in the workplace. This study has also been relevant for its similarities with my study and its approaches to managing self-criticism. Cristea *et al.* consider efficient coping strategies for dealing with impostor feelings. While this research uses both surveys and interviews, bringing useful insights to the field, it stands in a very different epistemological paradigm, focusing on facts and measurements, omitting unconscious and subjective aspects of research participants. Furthermore, the study remains in the individual level of analysis and does not question organisational or societal issues impacting the individual's impostor feeling.

In summary, from different perspectives and paradigms, the above literature has helped me to deepen the understanding of the data and build from it to create new, tentative theorisations about self-doubts in individuals and organisations.

Chapter 3: Research design and methodology

3.1 Research Design: Rationale for choosing case study as research strategy

I consider the research design to be the logical steps that guide the researcher to gather and analyse data to answer the research question – it is the overarching empirical strategy (Yin, 1994).

Considering the purpose and nature of my research question – how leaders are impacted by self-doubts – the strategy chosen for the research design is qualitative and case study based. Epistemologically, this study sits within the interpretative and social constructivist paradigm (Given, 2008), emphasising exploring human agency and meaning-making.

The focus here is on the in-depth analysis of one or a few instances or phenomena, aiming to understand a phenomenon from the perspective of those experiencing it and how the understanding of the phenomenon is co-constructed with research participants (Given, 2008). When choosing a case study as the research strategy, I consider three conditions (Yin, 1994): the type of research questions, the degree of control that as a researcher I aim to have over the phenomenon studied, and whether the focus is on contemporary or historical events.

My research seeks to understand the overlap between individual personal history, personality traits, and the organisational characteristics and context. Thus, the type of research questions posed in my study are how and why.

Exploring the impact of self-doubts on leaders focuses on examining the leaders' subjectivity in real-life contexts, at a particular moment and in a certain part of society (e.g. Western Europe, capitalism, neo-liberalism). In other words, understanding how these leaders see the

world and themselves and what meaning is *constructed* in their interactions with others, as they are part of a community in a specific historical moment.

The purpose of my research is not to control the phenomenon, but rather to carefully observe it in its most natural ways. The focus of my investigation is not to draw inferences concerning causal relations between variables, nor is it about achieving scientific generalisability. Using a quantitative research design and methods, such as questionnaires or surveys, may be limiting and leave out the actual essence and richness of the data I aim to collect. A quantitative approach here may remove the aspects of the data that are most helpful for answering my research question. A laboratory experiment aimed at divorcing the phenomenon from its context and controlling the environment would also not be helpful for my research study.

The research in my study is on the details of a phenomenon; the research efforts value depth over breadth, with emphasis on the specific over the general and on the interconnected relationships and processes rather than numerical results. Looking for leaders' real-life experiences in their actual environment, rather than reducing them to a numerical value or a mere frequency of incidences (Yin, 1994, p 6).

In summary, given the characteristics of my investigation and its epistemological position, the most suitable research strategy is case study.

3.2 Challenges posed to case study research design

While I am clear about my choice of research strategy and my research's epistemological position, I am also conscious that the choice may be challenged by other paradigms. Traditional prejudices against case study strategy view it as a less desirable form of enquiry than either

experiments or surveys. Usually, the concern is linked to a perceived lack of rigor associated with the investigator's bias influencing the research findings (Yin, 1994, p 9).

Another challenge with case studies is that they are seen as providing little basis for scientific generalisation. 'How come you generalised from a single case?' is usually the question (Yin, 1994). The case study research I am conducting is not about taking the results from a sample and applying it to a population, as statistical studies do. Instead, 'case studies are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations' … 'in case studies the investigator's goal is to expand and generalise theories (analytic generalisation) and not to enumerate frequencies' (statistical generalisation) (Yin, 1994, p 10)

3.3 Research methods: Method for data collection – semi-structured interview

I see the research methods as specific research techniques to be used for data collection and analysis. Given the nature of my research question, the method for data collection chosen is semi-structured interviews, and the method for data analysis is Grounded Theory (GT). The semi-structured interview is a method that incorporates elements of a fixed set of questions as well as allowing space for exploration and probing certain areas in more depth (Brewerton and Millward, 2001, p 70). My choice of semi-structured interviewing approach has been significantly influenced by other unstructured and in-depth interview methods such as Free Association Narrative Interview (FANI), Biographical Narrative Interview Method (BNIM) and intense interviewing in Grounded Theory (GT) studies.

A key aspect of this research study is to examine both the internal and external world of leaders; the participant's subjective experiences, memories and feelings in a historical, organisational and sociological context. Therefore, given the nature of my research at first, I

had considered BNIM (Wengraf, 2008) which allows an exploration of the lived experiences and whole lives of individuals and collectives.

However, realistically, some potential limitations made BNIM unsuitable and able to derail the data collection. These potential limitations were the research participants' time restrictions (senior leaders' busy calendars); the pressures of their work environment, which does not lend itself to participants opening up; and the sometimes guarded emotional characteristic or personality traits of the participants, who might not be prepared to open up in an unstructured way or to share their vulnerabilities. The particularly unstructured characteristic of BNIM, the type of setting required for it, and the time needed would have been too alien to the research participants. I saw the BNIM interview style as a potential barrier or obstacle between the interviewee and the researcher for this specific group.

With this in mind, semi-structured interviews provide a methodology for data collection that allows the participants' conscious and unconscious narratives to unfold while also providing a loose structure that would feel more familiar or acceptable for participants. However, as I was not prepared to miss the richness of the participants' lived experiences, the nature of the interview questions and my attitude as a researcher were influenced by FANI and GT intense interviewing. I thought this was a fair compromise between the goal of the research study and the characteristics of the research participants.

On one hand the key elements of GT intense interviewing are described as 'open ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent and paced yet unrestricted' (Charmaz, p 85, 2014). On the other hand, the essence of the FANI method assumes research participants are 'defended subjects'. FANI borrows from psychoanalysis the principle of free-association and assumes that a thread of unconscious thoughts or materials will freely emerge if and when individuals are allowed to structure their own narratives, revealing significant personal meanings of their biographical unique reality, which would not emerge otherwise (Hollway *et al,* 2008).

Therefore, considering the key principles of both GT intense interviewing and FANI, I developed and asked both predetermined questions and probing questions to prompt participants to expand on specific aspects of the narrative. Equally, where possible, most of the questions were open-ended to allow for unconscious thoughts to freely emerge, giving the participants the possibility to choose and talk about their own unique story and experiences of the phenomenon.

3.4 Interview questions

Below (Table 1) are the interview questions and an explanation of how they link to the different aspects of the main research question and sub-questions.

Table 1 Interview questions linked to research sub-questions.

Interview questions (including probing questions)	Links to the research study main question and sub questions
1. Tell me your story - How did you get to where you are now in your career?	Individual's background Career progression Transitions/taking up a new role
In the invitation to the interview, there was a statement referring to self-doubts as the main focus of the research. 2. How come you felt drawn to this topic of self-doubts? 3. Can you tell me about two situations, one when you were having self-doubts and another	Exploring the impact of self-doubts / consequences of self-doubts How self-doubts may function as an obstacle or as a driving force?

situation when self-doubts was not there?	
4. How would you describe the firm or company culture at those times when you had self-doubts? 5. Is the organisational culture influencing self-doubts? How come?	Exploring the overlap between individual dynamics (intra-psychic) versus system dynamics (wider group, organisation, industry)
6. Can you recall any experiences from your childhood that might have contributed or impacted on your career today?	Personal background Characteristics of the early family dynamics or upbringing potentially impacting on critical inner voices and leader's role
7. What tactics do you use to deal with self-doubts?	Tactics used to deal with self-doubts. Potential interventions/recommendations (One of the research objectives)
8. Is there anything else you want to add?	

3.5 Sampling participants: approach and rationale

Sourcing participants

There were three main sources for recruiting research participants: one source was newly promoted partners from a consulting firm where I am currently an employee, working in the people function, designing and delivering leadership programmes for firm's partners. The other sources were executive MBA students from a business school where I work as a coach, and my professional network.

I shared with potential participants a brief statement about my research, inviting participants to come forward if they felt the topic resonated with them. I emailed some of the newly promoted partners in the firm where I am an employee and I arranged with the business school to send a note with my research statement and request as part of their executive MBA newsletter. People within my professional network spontaneously showed interested in the research topic, and through them, I was put in contact with senior leaders from different organisations willing to contribute to the research.

I provided each research participant with the research participant pack (see Appendix A in Section IV), which contained an introductory letter, an overview of the research, and its aims. The pack also included a note on participants' expectations, confidentiality, potential risks and benefits of participating, their right to withdraw, what would happen to research findings, and a permission request from their organisations. All participants were asked to sign a research consent form (see Appendix A).

All participants were made aware that they had the right to withdraw at any point of the interview process and were offered, if needed, a follow-up session separate from the research to discuss any feelings that might have emerged.

The participants included individuals in senior leadership positions who had recently experienced a role transition (e.g., promotion, lateral move, taken on a new challenging project etc.) and were working in private sector organisations. The reasoning behind the emphasis on transition is linked to one of my research assumptions: self-doubts appear to worsen or become more dominant at a point of change. This has been a noticeable pattern throughout my work with leaders.

My approach to sourcing research participants, as a self-selection process, worked well – it allowed me to obtain data from individuals who were aware of experiencing self-doubts, which

is the phenomenon I sought to study. However, the potential limitations of the opt-in approach may have excluded individuals who cope well with self-doubts, who do not see it as a challenge, or who appear not to experience self-doubts. Exploring these aspects might have provided an enriching different angle to the study, particularly on the specific psychological characteristics of individuals who do not experience self-doubts or on coping strategies. Additionally, another potential limitation may be linked to sourcing participants relatively close to my professional position in the firm. All participants selected were sufficiently distanced from my immediate network. However, my role in the firm and the business school where I work might have inhibited participants from fully opening up. That said, I have not noticed any signs in the data concerning this.

3.6 Research participants sampling[1] (table summary)

Table 2 Summary of Research Participants.

	Participant's Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Role	Industry	Nationality
1	Slava	Female	40s	Partner	Professional services	Russian
2	Sabrina	Female	40s	Partner	Professional services	Scottish
3	Keira	Female	30s	Partner	Professional services	English
4	Paul	Male	30s	Partner	Professional services	English
5	Megan	Female	50s	Senior Partner	Professional services	English
6	Lennox	Male	30s	Principal consultant / EMBA Student	Cybersecurity consultancy	British/Danish
7	Emma	Female	30s	Director of global operations/ EMBA student	Auction house	USA
8	Frederik	Male	30s	Director for workspace - EMA	Media/technology	Dutch

3.7 Rationale behind sampling size

I knew from the outset that small-sized samples and small-scale studies are the prevalent approach in qualitative social research (Denscombe, 2003), valuing depth over breadth. I was

[1] All participants' names, some of the details and organisations' names have been anonymised and/or modified to protect them for confidentiality purposes.

also aware that GT uses purposive or subjective sampling methods to select participants, based on characteristics of a population and the objective of the study (Starks and Trinidad, 2007). This is what I have used, having predetermined criteria to select participants. Moreover, I took into account that 'the concept or the experience under study is the unit of analysis; given that an individual person can generate hundreds or thousands of concepts, large samples are not necessarily needed to generate rich data sets' (Starks and Trinidad, 2007).

While aware of all these factors, I had still not decided on the number of interviews. Originally, I had intended to conduct between eight and twelve interviews. This figure was led partly by initial discussions with my supervisors in connection with the purpose and nature of my research. After I had conducted and coded the seventh interview, I asked myself, 'How many interviews is really enough?' It was comforting to know that in qualitative research this is a frequently asked question, even for established academics. The actual answer to this question was not particularly comforting: 'it depends' (Baker and Edwards, 2012, p 3).

The points of view on sample size for qualitative interviews seem to vary significantly from a single case to hundreds, and any figures in between: 6, 12, 14, 20 and so on, , according to a paper by the National Centre for Research Methods (Baker and Edwards, 2012), who compiled the answers from expert voices to respond to the question 'How many qualitative interviews is enough?' There is unanimous consensus that sample size should be directly linked to the purpose and nature of the research, epistemological stance, and ultimately data saturation. It should also be linked to what data it is realistically possible to obtain given the type of research (Baker and Edwards, 2012).

The question about the size of the interview sample led me to re-visit the research purpose and the methodological and epistemological perspectives of my study. Considering 'whether a greater or fewer number of interviews would produce the desired outcome' (Baker and Edwards, 2012, p 5) was key to help me to consider what I would achieve from conducting

more interviews, and what I would aim to obtain from the data. The emerging and exploratory nature of qualitative research makes it difficult to arrive at an absolute, certain, or exact figure. After coding seven interviews and arriving at tentative initial categories, I started to notice that the emerging evidence and data had become at times repetitive and predictable. Many researchers and academics (Baker and Edwards, 2012, Charmaz, 2014) suggest that at this point there is no need to continue.

The criteria used to stop gathering data is dictated by the point at which properties of one's theoretical categories are saturated with data, namely, when gathering new data no longer reveals new properties or insights for core theoretical categories (Charmaz, 2014). In GT this is referred to as saturation of theoretical categories. At the seventh interview, I believe I achieved this state; however, when looking at the participants, I noticed that it was mostly female participants who volunteered to contribute to the research,[2] which left the research sample with only two male participants out of seven. Contrary to what has happened at a societal level, men seemed to be unrepresented in this sample. At this moment, I realised that the desired outcome of conducting further interviews was to seek specific data related to the range of variation in responses, specifically in terms of gender. This was not to achieve representative population distributions.

Referring to sample size in qualitative studies, Baker and Edwards (2012,) said, 'with our little samples we can't establish frequencies, but we should be able to find the RANGE of responses' (Baker and Edwards, 2012, p 4). Therefore, the main reasoning for conducting further interviews was specifically to collect the perspective of male senior leaders. Increasing the

[2] Links between self-doubts and gender are outside the scope of this study. However, having mostly female participants putting themselves forward to talk about self-doubts is meaningful, yet unsurprising, given that earlier research on impostor syndrome (Clance and Imes, 1978) was done specifically on females in academia, although later research suggests that the impostor feeling affects both men and women (Kets de Vries, 2005).

sample size was to achieve theoretical sampling to find diversity of responses regarding gender.

Additionally, without compromising the integrity and rigour of the study, other practical aspects were inevitably considered when deciding on sample size. Some of the practicalities were, for example, that this study is part of a doctoral programme to be completed within a set time frame, which I am undertaking alongside full-time employment. Furthermore, it was necessary to have realistic resources to conduct the research: this is not a funded research project with a team of researchers.

In summary, as the research purpose focuses on the leaders' subjectivity and considers the method for data collection, which prioritises the understanding of the person's history and context, it seems appropriate and realistic to have a small sample. The aim here is to obtain very detailed information, valuing depth over breadth, being guided mainly by the purpose and nature of the research, and aiming to achieve data saturation.

3.8 Choosing Grounded Theory as a method for data analysis

My research study aims to explore the participants' subjective experiences and perspectives in a historical and sociological context, while simultaneously developing possible explanations for the phenomenon studied. Given the nature of my research question, when selecting a methodology for data analysis, I was not seeking methods that focus on objectivity, generality, and verification of facts. On the contrary, I looked for a qualitative and exploratory method that emphasises the study of meaning created through social interactions, exploring participants' subjectivity in a specific context. I also aimed and valued the possibility of contributing to the development of new theories through the insights from my research – new theories intended to be practical for people's daily life. Therefore, GT's intellectual tradition seemed most suitable for my study. The following paragraphs elaborate on this.

Exploring people's experiences in real contexts – As a method for data analysis, GT offers a rigorous approach to undertaking 'exploratory research using qualitative, real-world data and with the goal of understanding and theorising about people's lives, experiences and meaningful worlds…' so that the outcomes of the research make contributions to the world (Charmaz. and Henwood, 2013, p 350).

Small-scale qualitative social studies – Given that GT intends to explore and generate explanations for particular events and requires rich and detailed data, GT is particularly suitable for small-scale qualitative social studies (Denscombe, 2003).

Knowledge is constructed and subjective – Selecting GT as a method for data analysis implies making certain assumptions about the world from an epistemological position. Since its inception (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), GT has evolved into alternative versions; I follow the constructionist version of GT (Charmaz, 2014, Willig, 2013), which approaches research as a construction while acknowledging that it occurs in specific conditions of which the researcher

may not be aware (Charmaz, 2014). Constructivist GT assumes that social realities are negotiated by human actors (Willig, 2013). Individuals (such as research participants) interpret and experience the world around them from their own subjectivity. In other words, when gathering and interpreting data, GT researchers assume that the world or realities studied are the result of the interactions between the individual, the individual's history, and the social events taking place. This is referred to as the symbolic interactionist perspective, to which GT subscribes. This particular aspect of GT was crucial in my selection of a data analysis method.

Generate theory based on data - Furthermore GT's aim is to move from data to theory (the end-product), so that new theories can develop (Willig and Stainton-Rogers, 2017, p 69). These theories should be specific to the context and grounded in the data rather than constructs or categories from pre-existing theories, thus leading to the development of new theories.

In summary, the nature and characteristics of GT as a methodology: qualitative, small scale, the aim to generate theories based on data and its particular emphasis on analysing participants' subjective experiences, lend itself to be the most appropriate method for data analysis.

3.9 My approach to data analysis using GT

In terms of the process of analysing data, GT is 'a systematic inductive, comparative, iterative, abductive and interactive approach to inquiry' (Charmaz, 2017, p 344), making logical inferences (abductive approach) from observations to the possible theoretical explanations of them. 'Grounded theory involves the progressive identification and integration of *categories of meaning* from data. It is both the process of category identification and integration (as *method*) and its product (as *theory*)' (Willig, 2013, p 70).

With these GT key principles in mind and strongly driven by my need for control and orderliness, I decided that to be rigorous with the iterative process that GT entails for data analysis, I would need a step-by-step table as guidance. To this end, I developed a one-page GT table by combining different sources (Willig and Stainton-Rogers, 2017, Charmaz. and Henwood, 2013), to which I have referred throughout the data analysis process.

'The qualitative codes in the excerpt label what I saw as happening in the data fragments' (Chamaz, 2014, p 111). This quote accurately captures the process I went through during the initial coding. In other words, initial coding involves naming fragments of data that categorise and synthesise the data, moving from simple statements to emerging meaning, appearing from stories and observations. I approached the interview transcripts with an open mind, while meticulously interrogating each bit of the data. Numerous times, when I was getting lost in the data, I found myself going back to Charmaz, Willig and my one-page table to bring me back and remind me: what am I doing here? What is the task and what is the question to which I am seeking answers? What is happening with the data?

As suggested by GT methodology, I added a column to the right-hand side of the transcripts, and I went through the transcripts line by line and sentence by sentence, identifying the key themes (low-level categories) emerging more frequently from the data. I attached largely descriptive labels to the different sections of the data.

As I was going through the transcripts and vividly re-living the interview meetings, I was paying attention to both what the participants were saying and what the data was evoking in me (reflexivity). At times, I lost myself in their fascinating life stories, as if I was getting inside their minds. As I moved back and forth between the data and the GT method literature to ensure rigour in my approach, I read the below paragraph and I knew I was on the GT right path. 'Ground theorists … try to learn what occurs in the research settings we join and what our

research participants' lives are like'. 'We study empirical events and experiences and peruse our hunches and potential analytic ideas about them' (Charmaz, 2014, p 3).

As the analysis continued evolving I followed the GT cyclical nature of collecting and analysing data: 'the researcher collects some data, explores that data through initial open coding, establish tentative linkages between categories and returns to the field to collect further data' (Willig and Stainton-Rogers, 2017). This approach allowed me to slowly and gradually digest the data by examining and comparing key themes that were emerging, while also starting to find relations and group some of the themes, noticing what were the most dominant, repetitive, and predictable events.

Table number 3, below, is an example from the data to illustrate coding using GT.

3.10 Example of data coding

Table 3 Example from the data to illustrate coding using Grounded Theory.

Transcript	Initial coding	Tentative categories	Memo-writing
Sure, I mean it happens all the time. So interestingly I can tell you, when it never happens, which is (Overlapping Conversation), and actually it doesn't often happen when I'm dealing with clients. So it's interesting to know that when – and this is just a personal thing – when I'm dealing with the clients, I know I'm good at what I do and I know that I can help clients and advise them and everything appropriately, the self-doubt always comes in terms of either in the context of feeling responsible for the team in terms of	Self-doubts happen all the time Absence of self-doubts when dealing with clients When with clients Being good at and Knowing what I do Appropriate advice 'Never' and 'always' used often Self-doubts in the context of feeling responsible for the team, bringing enough clients Ensuring the team is ok/healthy – caring for the team	**Absence of words/resistance to the topic** **Absence of self-doubts (confidence) when dealing with clients**	Although self-doubts happen all the time she starts with situations when it doesn't happen. Why? Is it too painful to think about it? Is it difficult to connect with the self-doubts? The absence of self-doubts when dealing with clients has come up before. Are self-doubts and anxiety projected onto the clients?

making sure that I am bringing in enough clients or doing enough in that respect, making sure that team's okay and the team's healthy and all of that sort of stuff. And then also, I guess in comparison to, if you start comparing yourself to sort of your peers sometimes I guess in terms of how they behave and stuff, because inside I still feel like I'm a 21-year-old girl who doesn't really know much, (laughs) apart from when they start questioning me about technical stuff then it's like, (laughs) you know.	Comparing with others/peers Feeling a girl inside – doesn't know much apart from technical stuff Maturity or immaturity	**Comparison and competition** **Maturity or immaturity/ regression**	Reference to maturity or immaturity may be linked to theory or research somewhere else Inner critic makes us regress, put us in a child-like position towards others Feeling less than others Seeking validation

3.11 Iterative nature of GT method of analysis and the relevance of memo-ing

The cyclical approach of GT also allowed me to adjust some aspects of the interview questions, probing specific areas of the study that seemed more relevant to answer the research question.

'We use interviewing not only to learn about the world but also to advance our progress in constructing theory. Telling statements – and silences – that we catch during an interview can give theoretical direction to our emerging ideas. As we arrive at tentative theoretical categories, our use of interviewing may diverge from that of our qualitative colleagues. Our stops to conduct interviews can occur in different places; our ideas may lead us to take another path…' (Charmaz, 2014 p 83).

Following Charmaz's suggestions, after I conducted the first few interviews and analysed them, I started to notice which questions worked well and which ones were not eliciting the information I was after. Furthermore, I noticed how much I was involuntarily contributing to the atmosphere of the interview set up. Pausing the data collection to conduct the initial coding for the first few interviews allowed me to start seeking linkages and to modify the interview questions accordingly. Then, I returned to the field to collect further data. The modified set of semi-structured interview questions were informed by what emerged in the initial coding.

Parallel to the different stages of coding, I discovered the power and usefulness of memo-ing. Inadvertently, perhaps due to my introverted inclinations, I somehow conducted memo-ing naturally. Charmaz (2013) suggests that memo-writing is a crucial aspect of the GT method and sees it as a process of taking written notes (or drawing diagrams) of theory developments, which occurs alongside data collection and analysis. The main purpose is twofold: to improve the analysis of categories and engage in reflexivity.

By progressively capturing my own thinking and reflections, as the analysis was progressing from initial coding to focused coding, I started to discover substantive findings emerging from the data. Many of the ideas discussed in the research implications (Section III of this thesis) originated from embryonic thoughts that emerged in the memo-ing notes and supervision discussions.

3.12 Reflexivity: self as a tool to understand the data

Memo-ing as a self-reflective activity in the GT method seems closely linked to reflexivity. Acknowledging how the researcher influences and shapes the research process is crucial in qualitative research. Reflexivity allows researchers to consider how they are implicated in the study and findings (Charmaz and Henwood, 2013).

While my study focuses on the leaders' subjectivity, researchers are equally subjects, with our own unconscious and inner-world conflictual forces, which cannot be denied or ignored. Researchers must examine it through self-reflexivity to help shape and interpret the data (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, 2008). In a social constructionist version of GT, researchers are aware, reflect on how their construct, and interpret the phenomenon studied from their own history and subjectivity.

I have undertaken the research process with this in mind, consciously and purposely pausing to reflect on what my state of mind was and what I was potentially perceiving from the interviewee or organisation. Furthermore, I used discussions with my supervisors as a forum to recognise how my own subjectivity might impact the data analysis. To this extent, in the following Sections (II and III), I have shared my felt experience during the research process.

SECTION II – PARTICIPANTS' NARRATIVES AND KEY CATEGORIES ANALYSIS

> *'One is usually so busy looking for something out of the ordinary, that one ignores the obvious as if it were of no importance'.*
>
> - ***Wilfred Bion***

This section focusses primarily on research participants' narratives and the key categories and themes that have emerged during the coding stage.

The section is divided into two main chapters. **Chapter 4**, starts with brief reflections on my approach to data collection, highlighting the overall context of interviewing participants and the impact on me as researcher on the interview process. Following on from this, the chapter provides a synopsis for each research participant, including; their career background, role transitions, early upbringing linked to self-doubts and my felt experience of each participant. Narratives summaries point out specifically data relevant to both categories' definition and later discussions.

Chapter 5 begins with a brief note on the process of identifying categories and how gradually they start to take shape. The rest of the chapter considers the interviews collectively, looking at the most significant categories that have emerged throughout the interviews, highlighting and analysing the key patterns and dynamics the participants are getting caught up in, in view of their dominant self-doubts. The chapter defines a category and then illustrates the category with pertinent quotes from the data.

Quotation marks in this section belong to participants' own narratives.

Chapter 4: Participants' narratives

4.1 Reflections on my approach to data collection and my subjectivity as researcher

Before introducing participants, it is important to briefly note both; general aspects of interviewing participants that contributes to building a picture of their work context and how my own experience and subjectivity might have had an impact during interviews.

Interviews took place either in very corporate-like office buildings at a heart of a business district or a business school. Most interviews took place during office working hours. All participants at the time of the interview held senior leadership positions and work in fast-pace and demanding organisational contexts.

I had not difficulties in sourcing research participants, leaders who had been contacted willingly accepted the offer to support my research and openly admitted having self-doubts. However, during two interviews participants struggle to provide examples and needed a bit of prompting from me. The first few interviews felt tense and sometimes rushed. Partly this may have occurred as a result of the pressures these individuals are under which does not allow for reflection and free association of thoughts, and as we will see later, this was also influenced by their own sense of self-criticism. Equally, I may have as well contributed to that tension as I have also been the receiver of the same or similar organisational pressures.

Through reflexivity and in discussions with my supervisors I have started to discern how much of my own subjectivity I was bringing into the room during interviews. As noted earlier, my need for control, orderliness and obsessional traits along with my own self-criticism, questioning my abilities as a researcher perhaps have influenced the climate of the first couple of interviews, to a degree, inhibiting participants to openly free-associate and share their experience. Similarly, as it will be discussed in Chapter 5, talking about personal experiences

of self-doubts, as participants were asked to, can steer difficult feelings, consequently these are repressed onto the unconscious, defended against and not talked about. Therefore, the tension felt during interviews belonged to both participants and researcher.

As social constructivism and GT suggest (Willig, 2013), as a qualitative researcher I was more than a mere witness of the phenomenon studied, I have brought my own anxiety, personal history and assumptions which have contributed in shaping the interview and the phenomenon studied.

4.2 Summary of each participant interview

Participant 1: Slava (female)	
Age: 40s	**Nationality:** Russian
Role/Position: Partner	**Industry:** Professional services

Career background

The reference to 'being a foreigner' in Slava's interview proved to be of crucial significance, charged with meaning to be unpacked.

Slava qualified as an accountant in Moscow and moved to the UK to work for a big consulting firm where she is currently a partner. Over the years she progressed to director level (a level below partner). While working towards becoming a partner in the UK, Slava moved back to the Russian office where she became well-known and was then made partner.

Following on from this, as a result of her husband's promotion, they moved back to the UK. Slava found it very difficult to come back to the UK office; she had to come back as a director (this type of demotion is not uncommon when changing countries). In the new environment, Slava felt she had to prove that she was able to operate at a partner level in order to be made partner. This had a big 'knock-on effect' in her confidence and made her feel, as she was told by the firm, 'not good enough' to be a partner.

The transition from Russia to the UK and the fact of being a 'foreigner' was particularly significant. Moving back to the UK for the second time had reignited her self-doubts, her experience of being different, culturally and technically, and having to prove herself.

Self-doubts were linked to 'not being accepted' as a partner by the firm and, as a result, questioning her own objectivity about her abilities, while seeing herself as someone constantly

pushing herself towards self-development and finding personal learning points. She acknowledges that this can take one into a cycle of self-doubts, asking, 'Am I lacking something in comparison with my colleagues?' The constant comparison with her colleagues led to resentment and disillusionment, which she openly talked about in the interview. She feels lucky and grateful to those who supported her in the process, particularly a female senior partner who sponsored her case for partnership.

Moving back to the UK office coincided with a big restructuring happening in the firm and the organisation not doing well financially. Consequently, Slava had to move to another part of the business, resulting in a deep sense of 'dislodgement' for Slava. Not belonging and trying to figure out how to bring value in this new business area, had significantly impacted her confidence.

From early in her career, Slava has been conscious of whether clients like her or not, whether she is saying the 'right things' etc., and has noticed how self-doubts creeps in.

After being made partner in her current firm, Slava feels (with hesitation) that her abilities have now been recognised. Self-doubts are still present, but they are of a different nature. Slava is clear that she is not affected by the 'new partner imposter syndrome'; she accepts and is comfortable about not knowing everything. However, self-doubts arise more about the future of the business, her ability to adapt the business to changing times.

Early years

'It is all very Freudian'. This was Slava's first line when asked about her personal background. She came from a family of a doctor and a space engineer, which at the time were low-paid professions in the Soviet Union. She describes her childhood as not very prosperous. Her parents had instilled in her the 'need for self-development' and she openly pointed out that

she 'always wanted to do them proud,' and their approval, being told 'you are a good girl' and 'mak[ing] my parents proud' have been always important.

She believes there must be 'some kind of complex' from childhood that results in her being her own strongest critic, replaying situations in her mind and finding something to criticise herself about.

Slava mentioned coming out of the partner interview panel thinking she could have done better or said something differently. Gradually, she noticed, she got into a more 'rational state'. In connection to this event she said: 'The strive for perfection comes from childhood'. Having been at the top of her class throughout education, Slava then realises how difficult facing the world is when there is no time to be perfect, and she acknowledges how so many things are outside her control.

Towards the end of the interview, Slava said that she will probably replay the interview in her mind and think of what she could have or should have said.

My felt experience

I have met Slava previously only briefly in a work context situation. At the time my impression of her was as a tough and cold woman, guarded and task-focused. Her presence made me a bit hesitant. Also, I remember she had appeared to be stressed and under a lot of pressure. In contrast, during the interview Slava seemed fairly relax, generous and willing to share her feelings and thoughts. I felt her warmth. I was impressed with her self-awareness and the links that she was making about different aspects of her life. Evidently self-doubts were something that Slava has been noticing and reflecting on for a while.

Participant 2: Sabrina (female)	
Age: Late 40s	**Nationality:** British
Role/Position: Partner	**Industry:** Professional services

Career background

Sabrina started her career at a big advisory firm where she progressed to director level. She describes the organisational culture of that firm as aggressive and challenging. Partly as a consequence of this, Sabrina decided to move to a competitor firm, where she is currently a partner.

While Sabrina thinks that self-doubting comes with the role and happens so many times, she struggled to find a specific situation where she doubted herself. Eventually, she linked self-doubts to the time running up to winning a big tender, having 'loads' of self-doubts when going to the pitch. There were high expectations and a lot of internal pressure to win the tender, as one of the biggest accounts for the firm. She questioned her own decision and judgement on picking the pitching team and feared criticism if things didn't turn up as well as they did.

During the time when the pitch took place, Sabrina's father was dying. She was tearful when narrating this and there was an overwhelming feeling of sadness.

Sabrina also links self-doubts to being misunderstood and delivering messages that could be wrong. She sees 'guys' (male colleagues) as full of confidence, believing in what they said rather than being 'picked apart'. Others have noticed her self-doubts, as she has received feedback about this.

Sabrina feels comfortable when talking about her technical area of expertise. She recognises that in meetings with other partners, while some colleagues 'say something for the sake of being heard,' she speaks only if she feels comfortable. Self-doubts have held her back from

asking good questions, which are then asked by somebody else. She links her self-doubts with her background and who she is.

Early years

One of six siblings and born from working parents, Sabrina points out that she didn't attend private school and described her childhood as 'very great': she was 'smart enough to pass exams' at school and had 'loads of great friends'. Sabrina didn't expand much about her childhood but fast-forwarded to the time when she had just started working at a big firm, much earlier on in her career. She was amazed at how the majority of the workforce was privately educated and how profoundly out of her depth she felt; embarrassed by her accent, she felt like an outsider. Passing accountancy exams and being liked and accepted by clients who noticed her regional accent helped her build her confidence.

My felt experience

Overall, Sabrina's narrative felt hesitant, with a doubtful tone throughout, starting sentences and not finishing them, were her inner critical voices getting in the way? At times it felt disjointed and slightly incoherent, sometimes it was difficult to follow her story. The interview meeting was significantly shorter. She was unnecessarily apologetic. At the end of the interview, Sabrina questioned her contributions to the interview and wondered whether other interviewees had spoken more than her. It felt as if Sabrina believed what she has shared wasn't enough or up to my expectations. I felt a sense of sadness and imaged she needed to be comforted.

Participant 3: Keira (female)	
Age: Early 40s	**Nationality:** British
Role/Position: Partner	**Industry:** Professional services

Career background

Keira joined her current firm as a graduate and has worked in this firm all her career, holding different roles in different locations. Originally, after finishing her master's, she had the altruistic aspiration to work for the World Bank and 'make a better world'. However, she was discouraged from this idea when told she had to have a PhD or be older to work for the World Bank.

Keira links self-doubts to the firm's culture and to the phrase 'nervous high-achievers,' a phrase she struggles to remember. She describes employees at the firm, including herself as 'always trying to achieve the best but [who don't] self-promote'.

Self-doubts are 'always' present for her, although she recognises that they 'never' happen when dealing with clients. She knows she can advise clients and she knows she is good at it, when it is about technical knowledge. In contrast, self-doubts rise in connection with being responsible for the team, bringing in enough clients and ensuring the team is OK and healthy. When it comes to the revenue stream and dealing with resources, Keira feels it is her responsibility and doesn't want to 'burden' other people by asking for help. These are the situations when self-doubts creep-in.

When comparing herself to her colleagues, Keira 'feels like a 21-year-old girl who doesn't know much'. In such times she feels the presence of self-doubts.

Self-doubts also emerged during her half-year performance review, looking at her/her team's financial results. She was feeling 'unworthy' as the results were not necessarily where she

wanted them to be. Despite those results and her internal high expectations, her performance partner (a senior partner similar to a line manager) said she was doing a good job and noticed that she dwells longer on negative events and moves too quickly onto the next things after doing a good job.

She questioned herself as a leader, wondering, 'Do I know what I am doing?'

Self-doubts for Keira also intensify when the wider context appears gloomy, such as during a down-turn, poor financial results or due to the general economy.

Keira describes that after coming out of the partner interview panel, she went to the toilet and cried for half an hour, thinking she did a 'crappy job'. On her way home, she received a call saying she got the job.

Keira openly said that she attempts to hide her self-doubts and disguise her self-doubts from others.

Early years

Due to her father's job, Keira and her family moved between different countries extensively.

At the age of 11, she was sent to boarding school while the rest of the family continued travelling for work. At the age of 18, her parents bought a flat for her younger sister (16) and her, and Keira 'was left looking after' her sister. Generally, Keira's parents appeared not to be very present, neither physically nor emotionally.

Keira married at a very young age. They are still together after 20 years. Her husband seems to represent the stability that she lacked earlier in her life.

My felt experience of Keira

Her tone was casual, humorous and at times self-deprecating, expressing an engaging narrative.

There was a lot of laughter during the interview, however I left the interview with a deep sense of sadness. Keira's insights about being self-reliant hit me; they felt too familiar to my own story. While the ability to be independent and self-sufficient is a powerful quality, it seems it was a result of a lack of parental warmth: being prematurely pushed to grow up, to 'toughen up'.

The interview was shorter than scheduled. At the end of the interview, Keira questioned her contribution to the interview and wondered about the length of other interviews.

Participant 4: Paul (male)	
Age: Early 40s	**Nationality:** British
Role/Position: Partner	**Industry:** Professional services/finance

Career background

Hesitant about from what point in his career or life to start sharing his background, Paul decided to begin from when he 'properly' or 'more professionally' started working, joining an investment bank as an experienced graduate. After growing a team and 'doing well,' the bank went through significant strategic changes that resulted in a decline in his business area. He was made redundant as a consequence. Following on from this, Paul joined his current firm as a director and was made partner recently before the interview.

During his last year at the bank, Paul was unhappy and frustrated as he felt he 'was not allowed to do things he thought were right'. He didn't feel supported, even deliberately held back, and realised that he should have moved on earlier. Afterwards, Paul noticed there were a lot of opportunities out there and that he had value to add.

Paul firmly steered the interview specifically towards 'how things have evolved' in the last six months since being a partner. The transition from director to partner wasn't very different. What changed was being an advocate of the firm: 'what you say has more bearing'; 'people listen to what you say'; 'you got to be careful, it is a powerful position'.

There is a piece of formality/legality in becoming a partner (putting-in capital, his equity in the firm) which to him becomes almost irrelevant. What seems significant to Paul is how connected he feels towards the firm and the expectations of people around him.

Paul links becoming a partner with submitting his first MBA assignment and questioning himself about whether he did a good job. 'You got no sort of a yardstick to measure'.

When asked about what drew him to contribute specifically to this research interview on self-doubts, he seemed to disown the idea of having self-doubts or being able to contribute to the specific topic, but rather he accepted the interview to help with the research, not necessarily the topic of self-doubts.

Later on, Paul admitted that we all have a level of self-doubts, although he is still reluctant to fully embrace the concept or seems not fully comfortable with the term, preferring to refer to it as 'low points'. Eventually, Paul links self-doubts with working with experts and linked to sales pitches.

Paul recognised that self-doubts/low points must be kept in check and he tried to be 'factual' with himself. For example, when reflecting on losing a tender, he recognises that that was a result of a combination of things.

Towards the end of the interview, Paul once more turned the tables and enquired very eagerly about how others deal with self-doubts. He wondered whether others also have struggled to come up with examples/situations during the interview; 'Is that a normal thing?' he asked.

Early years

Paul had vivid memories of his parents, particularly of his dad being very positive to the extent of 'becoming unrealistic'. His dad was very supportive and encouraging; 'You can do anything,' his dad said to Paul. He believes that his dad's optimism and encouragement has definitely been a positive reinforcement and a contributing factor to Paul's ability to succeed. A very significant memory illustrates this: his dad gave Paul Jack Welch's[3] autobiography as a present, saying to Paul, 'This could be you'.

[3] Jack Welch is an American business executive. He was the chairman and CEO of General Electric from 1981–2001.

Paul views this positive encouragement as a 'useful armoury … protection' against the 'knocks of confidence' or self-doubts that any senior leader may go through.

My felt experience of Paul

During this interview what was not said carried much more meaning than the actual verbal narrative.

From the very beginning, Paul took control of the interview by asking me questions about the research and my background, which left me feeling inexperienced and anxious; afterwards, I wondered to whom these uncomfortable feelings belonged.

He also seemed very cautious and guarded. This was shown by choosing to read the research paperwork by himself while in the meeting room with me, rather than me verbally taking him through it, as I offered. I felt not trusted. Cautiousness was also exhibited by his attention to detail, the need for accuracy and questioning about the paperwork and research, length of the interview, what I was going to do with the research and so on. I interpreted this as potentially underlying persecutory anxiety and experienced Paul as a defended individual.

While I was conscious that the interview technique is a semi-structured and open narrative style, however, I notice how Paul tried to take control of the direction of the meeting and the meaning behind it. It felt as if he wanted to squeeze value out of the interview; he didn't seem prepared to just give. Many times throughout the interview I felt confused as to who was interviewing whom.

Participant 5: Megan (female)	
Age: 54	**Nationality:** British
Role/Position: Senior partner	**Industry:** Professional services/finance

Career background

Megan has been working for 36 years. Deciding to not go to university, instead she went straight into the world of work, mainly working in investment banking and professional services, advising companies on raising capital and often working at the boardroom level.

Megan joined her current firm when she was approached by a partner, who then became the firm's chairman. At the time she was asked to set up a business within the firm.

In her view, self-doubts affect decision making for her personally. She made a clear distinction between self-doubts being present when it comes to personal decisions and less dominant when dealing with clients.

A pivotal moment in connection with self-doubts was when Megan was approached by a head-hunter carrying out a targeted search for a role. Megan was persistently sought after for this position, only recognising, in retrospect, she was very good at. One of the reasons for her hesitation about taking the job was self-doubts.

While at the time, she was conscious of her self-doubts or 'apparent lack of confidence,' equally she is able to recognise that she had a big market presence, winning work and being well-regarded by clients. Her prospective employers 'knew her value more than she did'.

Another key influencing factor was a friend of Megan, who strongly encouraged Megan to take the job. Eventually, Megan accepted the job offer, remuneration being a decisive factor. Megan mentioned money frequently, which is not uncommon in people working in finance or

professional services firms. While conscious of this fact, I was also wondering what financial reward may be representing.

Early years

Megan was born to a lawyer and a housewife.

As a result of Megan being a very quiet and introverted child, Megan's mother invested and supported Megan while growing up. In contrast, Megan described her father as a taskmaster, for whom nothing was ever good enough. Her father 'went mad' when she decided not to go to university, and it took him a long time 'to sort of admit that she had done all right'.

My felt experience of Megan

With an authoritative but gentle approach, Megan started the interview by pointing out an aspect of the research paperwork that to her point of view was no clear. Despite this, she said she trusted me and we proceeded with the interview. I felt anxious as a result of this and due to her senior position. However, her openness, informality and engaging style made me feel comfortable enough to enjoy the interview.

Megan came across as very confident and to-the-point, equally generous in sharing her experiences and willing to contribute.

Participant 6: Lennox (male)	
Age: Late 30s	**Nationality:** British/Danish
Role/Position: Principal consultant	**Industry:** Cyber security

Career background

Lennox's early career started in academia, completing a PhD in computer science and working as an adjunct professor, followed by holding different roles in cybersecurity consulting for big advisory firms. At the time of the interview, he had recently started an executive master's in business administration (EMBA) at a top business school.

Lennox entered the cybersecurity consulting world going straight in to managing projects and leading a team. Moving from academia to professional services consulting was a culture shock.

Every year he 'moves up the ranks,' and when this isn't possible, he moves to another equivalent firm that can offer the possibility of career progression.

Lennox altruistically aspires to develop new technology to influence and change the way we structure society, businesses and eventually capitalism.

Self-doubts are described by Lennox as 'always present,' particularly linked to public speaking and at times of transitions.

Early years

Lennox grew up in an unconventional setting, born out of an 'intellectual and dysfunctional family'. His parents were of the '60s hippie mind-set, and they lived in a commune where a group of academics aimed to build an independent society. At the age of three, the family moved to Denmark due to employment.

Describing his 'father a drug addict' and his mother an 'overworked' schoolteacher, his early years were labelled by him as 'unsupervised'.

While Lennox recognised, he was gifted academically, he was very often getting into trouble at school and was engaged in petty crimes and drugs.

As a result of his chaotic family lifestyle and his parents' divorce, Lennox was sent to boarding school followed by living on his own by the age of 15. He dropped out of high school, struggling with romantic relations, finances and life in general. He believes that self-doubts were instilled there, linked to feeling no 'worth of parental love'.

Overall, his narrative has been filled with ambivalence.

My felt experience of Lennox

There has been a sense of childishness, immaturity and rebelliousness about Lennox. His narrative felt like verbiage most of the time, which could be interpreted as a result of high anxiety.

Equally, the life stories he was sharing were very engaging and captivating. It felt at times he was seeking attention through a dramatic narrative and with the careful use of language to create an impact. It felt as if he decided to use a dramatic and intellectually cunning form of storytelling, and I felt almost manipulated.

Ironically, as this research is closely linked to the impostor phenomenon, I wondered, was this participant faking the interview?

Participant 7: Emma (female)	
Age: Early 30s	**Nationality:** North American
Role/Position: Regional director	**Industry:** Art auction

Career background

Emma is currently a project director with the global operations team at an international auction house. In the past she has worked in New York eventually becoming the head of the client service department.

A few years ago, Emma moved to London for personal reasons, starting a new role in the London office rolling out a global IT system. Following on from that, she was promoted to become the regional director of IT business solutions. It was at this point when Emma felt anxious and doubted herself.

Emma was completing an EMBA at a top business school at the time of the interview.

While she feels that she hasn't necessarily struggled with confidence, she realised that self-belief might be challenging at times, which manifests through questioning herself and 'agonising' over decisions or the way she has handled situations.

Emma felt comfortable, 'at one with the role,' when she was the head of client services. While this was a big promotion and she questioned herself at times, she was also able to learn from her mistakes and feel at ease. She was a subject-matter expert, managing a very ambitious and eager entry-level team, which wanted to grow in the organisation.

During the time when Emma doubted herself, she had taken the IT role, which was new to her, had changed offices and countries, and there was a noticeable culture change on different levels. It was at this time when self-doubts were at its worst.

What helps Emma to overcome self-doubts is talking to other people (colleagues or her husband), which helps her unpack and understand her self-doubts.

Overall, Emma comes across very gentle, emotionally mature and calm, although slightly guarded.

Early years

When growing up, Emma always felt well-supported by her parents. She linked this with being confident. Equally, Emma noticed that she puts a lot of pressure on herself and considers that most of her self-doubts come from that.

Emma did not expand much about her early childhood but shared memories from her time at school and university. Being competitive is a characteristic she recognised in herself, since she attended achievement-driven private schools and universities. She described herself as always being a strong student, conscious that she keeps 'pushing herself for the next thing,' measuring herself against others by grade or job title. Likewise, she acknowledged that the academic environment furthers that competition.

Similar to what happened with other participants, Emma apologised for the way she answered some of the questions, doubting her contributions to the interview.

My felt experience of Emma

The interview felt very composed, neutral, unruffled, and perhaps a bit transactional. I didn't sense the anxiety or intense feelings when she described her experiences of self-doubts and situations linked to it. There was a sense of detachment and it was unclear whether it was hers or mine.

It seems she has thought about self-doubts and strategies to manage it very carefully – this must have been affecting her a lot.

Participant 8: Frederik (male)	
Age: 30s	**Nationality:** Dutch
Role/Position: Workplace director for Europe	**Industry:** Technology and media

Career background

Frederik early career was as a pastry chef taking international internships in the hospitality industry. As he matured, he decided to go back to university and study a master's in workplace management and organisational psychology. Following on from that, he worked as a consultant for a real estate team. Frederik then joined a global technology company as a workplace manager, where his main role was ensuring employees had a good work environment; his job involved opening new offices, working with architects and managing the facilities team. At the time of the interview, he has joined another technology organisation, being in the 'middle of the craziness of getting to know the organisation,' trying to perform in a new job, travelling extensively as well as dealing with instability in his personal life.

In his own words, Frederik concluded that his self-doubts come from two factors: his own ambition and high-performance nature combined with a job that involves 'really stepping up' and the cultural characteristics of the organisation, which results in him feeling a bit insecure.

When it comes to tactics to overcome self-doubts, what helps Frederik is being open about it with the people around him, talking about it, both at home and at work, and asking for the right help. Looking at the situation from a higher level and bigger context also helps, asking himself 'is this really worth having sleepless nights?'

Early years

Frederik doesn't think there is a connection between his childhood experiences and self-criticism in adulthood.

The youngest of four kids, he was born and raised in a small town in Holland. All of his family still live there. Frederik was the only child who decided to 'spread the wings' and breakthrough a family ethos of staying put. His father was a director of a construction company and his mother a nurse.

Frederik tells me that he was spoiled and had an 'easy life' until the age of 17, when he started travelling for work. This is when he believed he grew up and became more of an adult. It was during that time that he became more ambitious, which seemed to also ignite while studying, as he became the top student and started to feel the pressure.

Frederik recalls a pivotal moment when people 'would put him on a pedestal,' which resulted in him feeling the pressure or the need to perform. This feeling has continued through his career.

My felt experience

Although Frederik comes across very open and willing to share his experience, the interactions with him felt hesitant, he seems to be frantic. There was a sense of urgency and rush. I felt unusually very calm. I wondered what Frederik was holding on behave of the organisation. And whether the dynamic that was taking place in the interview was reflecting the dynamics and nature of relations taking place in the wider organisational context.

I was so impressed by Frederik's career progression, his international experience and the calibre of organisations he has worked for.

Chapter 5: Analysis of key categories emerged from the data

This chapter starts with a short note on how categories begin to emerge in the data analysis process. Subsequently, it considers the most significant categories and sub-categories that have arisen, highlighting and analysing key patterns and dynamics from the participants' data.

Following Grounded Theory (Willig, 2013) suggestions on how to present the research results, this chapter is organised around key categories identified and discussed in sequence. Firstly, the category is defined, following on from this, vignettes are used to illustrate the category.

5.1 Reflections on my approach to analysing the data and subjectivity as researcher

At this point it is important to pause and reflect on the approach to coding data and how I went about using GT as a methodology. This pause and reflection point in the thesis mirrors the actual process I have gone through while collecting and analysing the data.

Although the summary of research participants' interviews and category definition are presented in is this thesis in an orderly manner the actual process, at the time, wasn't as neat.

Building on from Chapter 3 (3.9 'My approach to data analysis using GT' and 3.11 'Iterative nature of GT method of analyses') I follow the cyclical nature of collecting and coding data, moving back and forth between identifying similarities and differences between emerging categories. After coding some of the first few transcripts I outlined a long list of descriptive labels or low-level abstraction categories and I started to group together those that shared a central characteristic. For example, some of the initial low level categories I noticed; 'being a foreigner', 'feeling an outsider', 'not fitting in', 'seeking recognition' and 'seeking approval', which emerged in the context of self-doubts, led to one of the core category; 'sense of belonging'.

As I was re-visiting the long list of initial categories I started to recognise those that were surprising, such as 'sense of belonging' or 'in-and-out member group', and those themes that were predictable, for example; 'low self-worth', 'lack of confidence', 'doubts about own abilities'.

Many times, I found myself surrounded by post-it notes representing the different categories and arrows signalling the links between them. Gradually (and with some hesitation) I moved from descriptive labels to more abstract and interpretive thinking. Consequently, some of the core categories, tentative hypothesis and links between categories started to take shape.

This wouldn't have been possible without discussions with my supervisors, writing memos and re-visiting the data numerous times.

On reflection, the hesitation felt during coding was probably linked to my own self-doubts about my abilities, which I am very familiar with and partly led me to this research. As noted earlier, I continue making use of reflexivity (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000) as a tool to consider how, as researcher, I have contributed in shaping and interpreting the data. For example, it is not by chance that some categories resonated more with me than others. I was hearing participants' stories while situated within my own personal story, values and beliefs. Arguably, I have reached insights and have been able to evolve the category analysis partly as a result of my own subjectivity and personal insights.

As suggested by constructivist Grounded Theory, there has been a mutual construction of data and theorisation through interaction (Charmaz, 2014) between participants' realities and my own.

5.2 Analysis of key categories and sub-categories emerged from the data

Categories, as defined by GT, emerge from the data and designate the grouping together of instances, such as processes or occurrences, which share key characteristics (Willig, 2013). The categories outlined in the following pages are significantly evolved from an analytic point of view, they have a high level of abstraction. They are the result of early low-level categories clustered, where interpretive thinking has taken place, including links between categories and embryonic tentative hypothesis about the phenomenon studied.

Table 4 List of most significant categories.

Most significant categories emerged from the data	
Category 1	Ambivalence about self-worth – The oscillating nature of the phenomenon
Category 2	Presence or absence of belonging and support (individual and organisational levels)
Category 3	'I believe in you' (sub-category of support)
Category 4	'Elite group' membership (sub-category of belonging)
Category 5	Competition, results-orientation and high performance as characteristics of both organisational culture and individual narratives (absence of support)
Category 6	Transition and uncertainty in the wider context (organisation, industry, geo-political and economic landscape)
Category 7	The silence category: The meaning behind the absence of words

Category 1	Ambivalence about self-worth – The oscillating nature of the phenomenon

Category definition

Unsurprisingly, self-worth has come up as one of the strongest themes throughout all of the interviews. Generally, participants, in one way or another, to different degrees, questioned their own self-worth and the value they bring to the work context or something else, for example, the research interview. This was predictable, as the sense of self-worth linked to self-doubts and self-criticism has been studied elsewhere (as seen in the literature review, Section I).

After all, the research participants self-selected themselves to take part in this study, knowing the study was on self-doubts. The actual indecision about their self-worth has been constant, usually being expressed by the question, 'Am I good enough?' This includes wondering whether they meet or do not meet (assumed) high expectations, having a sense of lacking something in comparison with others. Questioning their decisions about different situations (e.g. career, sales pitches, recruitment etc.), wondering if they are good leaders or whether they are able to bring value to their clients, teams and organisations.

In other words, feelings of self-doubts and self-criticism affect the value they place on themselves in the work context. These themes are what I have noticed prior to this study (outlined in Section I) and are what led me to the research question.

I won't expand further on the sense of self-worth as it is an obvious category or has been already studied elsewhere. However, within the category of self-worth as a theme, what has been characteristic among the participants interviewed is specifically their *ambivalence* towards their own self-worth, the oscillating nature of the phenomenon, the pendulum quality of it. Self-doubts and a sense of self-worth don't seem to be permanent but fluctuate between

feeling good enough and not feeling good enough. This perhaps relates to the actual indecision and hesitation characteristics of doubts.

Furthermore, this oscillating characteristic has been present in other categories that will be discussed later.

The following vignettes are examples from the data that most clearly illustrate this category.

Examples from the data

Slava

'I think I was quite able, so it's feeling that your worth is not recognised but at the same time, it's then… well, it's self-doubts creeping in, so do these people generally not see the value in me that I see in myself, so does it mean maybe I'm not being objective to myself, and is it something that I need to seek feedback on?…'

As a result of moving back to the UK for the second time, Slava loses the partnership with the firm in Russia and is demoted to the director in the UK firm (which is very common in this firm). The demotion left her feeling not accepted and not recognised by the firm. It also led her to compare herself to her colleagues and to question her own abilities.

'You always wonder whether you are lacking something and whether there is something that you are missing…'

'I think now [after the promotion] I feel so my abilities have been recognised and my voice has been heard. So certainly they've nominated me for partnership and therefore, they must have… known that I'm bringing something in addition to what they have, otherwise they wouldn't have made me a partner'.

'I know I can be a partner, I've done that a few years, I know I can be very successful, but can I be more successful than the market…?'

'It also adds confidence to actually you've done it before, you can do it again so when I have self-doubts. I will remember the good times and remember that actually, in this situation, you have shown what you can do it so you can do it again'.

These quotes exhibit how Slava experienced the oscillating movement from feeling worth it, recognised and believing she has value to offer, to questioning her worth and whether she can continue being successful.

Sabrina

'Should I really be here? Because I am nowhere near, but we all bring something different, it's the diversity of the group of the partnership…'

'I feel more comfortable if I am doing my sort of technical part of tax'.

In addition to the above quote, Sabrina's ambivalence is shown when making a decision about gathering a team for a sales pitch. Sabrina hesitates between whether she is making the right decision or not, and then recovers her confidence by saying: 'Well look, I am running this, and this is why I think…'

These quotes express Sabrina's vacillation: first questioning her right and legitimacy of being a partner, while immediately afterwards, recognising the value of bringing something different. It is an internal oscillating battle, going from questioning her risky decisions to re-asserting herself and standing up for her choices.

Paul

'For me [it] is just feeling like there is a positive flow in things, things are moving forward, and something it can be a bit … I have to be careful that it's not- that I don't deceive myself about progress or about moving forward…'

Paul shared that he is at his best when he is busy, when he is able to balance competing pressures, when there is a 'positive spiral of positive things happening'; for example, coming out of a good meeting, landing a new piece of work and so on. However, immediately after sharing this, he very quickly questioned whether he is able to continue the positive flow without misleading himself. This seems to indicate the pendulum nature of the phenomenon.

Megan

'When I had been at [a bank] for 15 years, I got approached by a head-hunter. [Inaudible] wanted me to go and work for them to do a particular job that I was very, very good at doing. Now, I can say it like that now, but when they approached me, it took them about 12 calls to persuade me to even have a conversation…. Three reasons at the time… and the third reason was self-doubts. I didn't know whether I could go—I had this sense that the notion that I could only do what I was doing in the environment that I was in'.

'…So bear in mind, they [the head-hunters] weren't just being nice, I had a big market presence, people knew me, they knew I was winning work, and they knew clients like me … So they knew my value more than I did'.

In additional to the above illustration of ambivalence about self-worth, another example is very early on in Megan's career. She described this event as 'a demonstration of no self-doubts whatsoever'. In one of her first jobs in a very hierarchical bank, Megan decided, despite

shocking people around her, to talk to the most senior person in the organisation and openly expressed that she was bored and wasting her skills, asking for other more challenging tasks. At the same time, Megan questioned herself: 'Oh what have I done?' and saw herself as arrogant. After four weeks Megan had moved to a new role and location within the same organisation.

Megan's ambivalence about self-worth, as seen above, is clearly acknowledged by her, but equally, it seems or feels like events from the far past; not just chronologically, but moments that have already been digested and learned from. This is in contrast to other participants, whose examples of ambivalence about self-doubts still seem very present and live. Megan is able to recognise her self-doubts but also able to recognise her own value and own it.

Megan seems to manage self-doubts better in comparison with the rest of the participants. She is slightly older and significantly more senior than the other participants. Is there a link between self-doubts and emotional maturity? Was she able to achieve such a senior position due to her emotional maturity or her ability to 'manage' her self-doubts?

Lennox

While working for a big advisory firm, Lennox discovered that he has a 'sort of aptitude for' working in consulting, describing his successful career progression. Also, Lennox expresses his altruistic ambition to significantly transform the structure of society, modern business and capitalism. Arguably, both the description of his successful career and his grand aspirations may imply a strong degree of confidence in his own abilities (or perhaps a degree of grandiose defences).

However, not much later in his narrative, Lennox describes self-doubts as 'always present' and 'as a pervasive fear of being found out,' 'of not belonging here,' and of being 'racked by nerves'.

Furthermore, sharing that he believed he has succeeded in 'fooling,' 'deceiving' and 'tricking others into thinking he was clever and capable'.

Again, parallel to sharing his experience of being a fraud, Lennox also acknowledges his success in a TV debate he participated in, saying: 'to put it roughly, I think I won that debate quite clearly'.

Other quotes that reflect Lennox's ambivalence about his self-worth are as follows:

'This odd pattern, again, I do have some gifts in some ways of being very high-performing in the sciences'.

'And I very much had the feeling that I had succeeded in fooling them during the interview of them asking me various questions. And I certainly had exaggerated my previous experience and my abilities, but I was able to persuade them that, you know, I was good enough'.

Self-doubts have manifested in parallel with struggles to 'feel good inside' and his inability to take in and celebrate successes such as being awarded a PhD. He seems not to be able to nourish himself from those moments.

The data here exhibit the pendulum effect of owning and disowning self-belief.

Emma

It was at the time of taking a new role when the self-doubts were at their worst for Emma, dwelling on them several times a day and at night. This was exhausting and depressing to her.

Later on, Emma shared that she got more settled into the role and became more confident, sharing the following:

'I know that I am actually very good at my job. I consistently get really good feedback. I've been promoted, I got raises. All of these signals objectively are there to say I actually am very successful at my work and people really like working with me, and yet in those moments I don't see that and I don't feel any of that and that's like on a completely different planet, like in those moments of self-criticism or self-doubts, you can't remember that and that feels so far away…'

This quote illustrates how Emma seems to own and disown her accomplishments, finding and losing her sense of self-worth.

In addition to the above examples, an overall pattern emerging, linked to the oscillating nature of the phenomenon, was the fact that most participants questioned their own contributions to the research interview, predicting that after the interview they would probably reproach themselves for forgetting to mention certain aspects or they just simply asked me whether their contributions were enough. They also asked about the length of other participants' contributions.

Yet again, they accepted to participate in the research, which arguably leads to assuming they believed they had something valuable to offer, while still questioning their contributions.

Category 2	Presence or absence of belonging and support

Category definition

Parallel to ambivalence about self-worth, I began to notice that most participants have referred to the presence or absence of belonging, of being supported and accepted. This was a bit unexpected, not necessarily obvious.

Participants wonder and pay attention to whether they belong to a group or organisation, whether they are being supported or not, accepted or not, and recognised or not by an organisation or colleague/s. This seems to be very present in these leaders' minds.

Belonging, or the absence of it, as an emerging category in this study, refers to a sense of not fitting in, appraising themselves as different or less in comparison to a group, feeling like an insider versus feeling like an outsider. Ultimately, it refers to the absence or presence of a sense of connectedness to others, of being acknowledged by others, by a group of peers or an organisation. Am I in or out? Do I have what it takes to be in? What am I missing when I am not in? In other words, there seems to be a link between experiencing self-doubts and wondering about belonging and acceptance.

Belonging, feeling supported and accepted, while similar, yet, they don't necessarily hold the same meaning. Perhaps what they have in common is a sense of being held. When we feel part of a community or group, we feel supported, accepted, acknowledged by someone, held by others. I see 'belonging' as a cluster category, implying support, recognition and acceptance, which are linked themes in the data that have emerged.

In contrast, the absence of self-doubts in many cases has been linked to moments of being accepted and supported by people around them or by the organisation, also when somebody

has believed in them, implying support and encouragement. This can also be linked to the idea of being held, of connectedness, which the concept of belonging and support have in common.

The belonging category appears to have two dimensions: the individual intra-psychic perspective and the group-organisational perspective. The two dimensions are closely intertwined, and quotes from the data reflect this.

The following vignettes are examples from the data that most clearly illustrate this category.

Examples from the data

Slava

It is probably not by chance that the sense of not belonging was firstly brought up by a participant who happened to be a foreigner.

'The very first time I moved to the UK, I think the transition was also quite difficult, I was one of the two foreigners in a department of about 350 people, so I think the self-doubts, the second time took me back to all those years about how difficult it was for me to come back and then work my way up, and really prove myself because I had a very different background, very different outlook in life and culturally as well as technically'.

Slava referred to the sense of not belonging, or as she put it, 'dislodgment,' in multiple ways; her nationality, Russian style and name were 'sticking out'.

Beyond her nationality, Slava's sense of belonging or not was expressed in other ways too:

'…and I remember finding myself sitting around the table with people who culturally have worked in local markets across the UK and I had very little in common with them and I felt that… I found it difficult to find common ground and they didn't particularly show any interest in me … I don't think was as welcoming as they could have been. And obviously, I can't generalise

because, you know, Lydia was helping quite a lot'.... 'I felt lost ... I felt lost and I'm always very vocal about my opinions. I do have opinions and I just felt that I couldn't contribute because I just had very little in common with them...'

In this quote, we can see both; the absence and presence of belonging/support, a difficult sentiment of not fitting in and at the same time recognising the importance of having support (Lydia).

Slava highlights how the culture of the organisation plays a role in influencing employees' self-doubts. She shares that years back the firm had a more supportive culture that encouraged people's development and growth.

'I was really proud to be part of the firm. At the time we had this culture of working as one firm, really our HR policies where we were one kind of the best employer, we really looked after our people...'

Since then the organisational culture, in her view, has changed to be not as supportive, which impacts employees who wonder whether their efforts are recognised.

'If it is the wrong culture, it doesn't help people who have self-doubts'.

Slava's narrative points out the supportive and unsupportive working context, highlighting the contrast between the impact of working in a supportive culture that encourages personal growth versus an unsupportive culture that can create self-doubts.

The reference to the sense of belonging or not belonging has continued emerging in most of the participants who were not, in fact, foreign nationals.

Sabrina

Sabrina is the one who probably expresses the sense of not belonging in the most explicit way. She starts the interview by talking about being removed from the partner track for being pregnant in her previous organisation, which implies a culture that is not particularly supportive. Then she refers to male colleagues as 'full of confidence,' unlike herself, who doubts herself before speaking in meetings, which implies feeling different from her colleagues, both gender-wise and attitude-wise, believing she is lacking something that, she assumes others possess.

'You are a partner of [the firm], you're owner of the business … that frightens me to death … you're constantly surrounded by such amazing bright people … really academic or really technically … and I think gosh, I am nowhere near that! … should I really be here? Because I am nowhere near, but we all bring something different, it's the diversity of the group of the partnership…and you are in meeting with such bright smart people that you may have a good point to make, but I got a doubt in my head that is going to come across stupid … I don't know whether or not that's a confidence thing as an individual … I've only been a partner for a few months, and it will come with time…'

The quote captures fundamental aspects of this study all in one paragraph, from both individual and organisational levels. At an individual level, Sabrina's narrative implies the assumption of a group, the partnership, perceived as different from her, as *other*. Her question 'Should I really be here?' implies questioning her belonging to the group and her self-worth to be part of it, along with assuming/appraising her potential comments as 'stupid'.

Sabrina's perception of being 'in or out' of a group is also evident at the beginning of her career:

'…I remember … when I joined [a big consulting firm], I was almost amazed at that point like in the door if you like, because everyone else around you, I mean I'm seeing 95% of their work

force are privately- private school educated and I think the first few years there did knock my confidence a wee bit because I feel that I didn't speak as nice, I didn't- the depth of my knowledge…'

The idea of otherness, of being an outsider and feeling of not having what it takes to belong to a group continues here.

At the end of the interview, she shared situations when she felt accepted by clients, who made her feel less of an outsider, again expressing the dilemma of belonging or not belonging.

In summary, what we see here is a sense of not fitting in, not being part of a group of colleagues. Equally, it is an expression of ambivalence about self-worth in connection to belonging.

Keira

Keira's reference to support was more explicit in her personal life. With humour and an underlining sadness, she shared that as a child she moved countries and schools a lot due to her father's job transfers. As mentioned earlier, Keira was then sent to boarding school and was put in charge of looking after her younger sister while her parents lived abroad. Keira believes that consequently she became 'always very self-reliant' and avoiding asking for help at work, not wanting to 'burden other people'. Arguably, this refers to support, although it seems the absence of it, from her parents, and the refusal of it by herself.

The defensive humour in her narrative was perhaps covering up for a sense of resentment or abandonment as a result of the lack of parental emotional support and physical presence in the early years of her life.

Furthermore, Keira refers to support and her self-doubts in connection with her husband. She seems to find emotional refuge in her husband, describing him as the 'grounder' when she is having self-doubts. Once more, we see here the reference to support or the lack of it.

Paul

References to belonging and support appear numerous times in Paul's narrative. When working for an investment bank, he didn't feel supported, which seemed to trigger self-doubts or 'low points'. In contrast, after being made partner, he felt supported by his team and other partners.

Also, in the personal realm, Paul highlighted the important role of his dad's supportive and encouraging attitude has played in Paul's life.

The sense of belonging and support was evident when Paul connected self-doubts with becoming a partner:

'A little bit like you are entering a club event, so in a good way … you feel you have been let in to this club, and what is really nice is that I see the partners looking out of each other and trying to support each other … it is a bit like walking into this club when you are a new member and everyone else is sort of established … it does feel a little bit initially intimidating …it is actually hard to not to feel … do I deserve to be here? … am I going to be able to meet the expectations and the standards that are being asked? … there was nobody who was making me feel like I shouldn't be there, so it was much more about self-fuel, self-confidence than I think anybody else trying to belittle anyone'.

Similar to Sabrina's case, Paul is legally and officially a partner in the firm, yet he questioned whether he 'deserves to be there'. Again, we see how he questioned his self-worth linked to

the group members, the other partners in the firm. We can also see the oscillating nature of the phenomenon, experiencing ambivalence towards his worthiness of belonging, feeling supported at the same time as feeling intimidated.

Paul's quote clearly illustrates the dilemma about belonging through the in-and-out club membership. There is ambivalence about belonging and self-worth. While Paul is legally and officially a member of the 'partnership club', yet he questioned whether he deserves to be part of it. One could wonder, whose decision is it to be 'let in' to a group that you already belong to?

Similar to other participants, Paul intuitively wonders whether these dynamics are self-fuelled or come from others. The overlap between the intrapsychic and the group dynamic seems particularly evident.

Later in the interview, Paul makes the link between self-doubts and being surrounded by experts:

'So a moment of self-doubts, I think it's always hard to be surrounded by people who are hugely experts in their area… I think, trying to be confident in doing what I need to do and bringing all of those experts along is something which takes some practice…'

This quote expresses, again, the assumption of a 'hugely expert group' to which is perhaps attributed special qualities, and the question about self-worth: am able to bring value? Do I belong to this expert group or the partnership group? Do I fit in? Am I enough?

Lennox

Evidence of not belonging or not fitting in, in connection with self-doubts, is seen in Lennox's narrative too.

'But for me, yes, it's probably a more pervasive fear of being found out that I don't really sort of belong there'.

Lennox openly recognised some aspects of his early years as situations that were 'several standard deviations from the norm'.

In the personal realm, Lennox expresses the absence or presence of a sense of belonging and acceptance in connection with his parents and a group of friends. The absence of support in his upbringing has emerged a number of times in connection with his parents. 'Unsupervised' has been a keyword used by Lennox to describe his childhood. This was as a result of an 'overworked mother' and a 'mentally not present father'. This 'unsupervised' quality can be interpreted as the absence of parental support and the sense of not being cared for.

'But also, quite clearly, you are not sort of worthy of parental love. I mean, neither of your parents were willing… to sort of really put in that effort and try and support me in that way. And those I think are definitely the core of my own self-doubts'.

When asked to describe a moment when self-doubts were not present, he refers to being with a 'close-knit group of friends'. This is when he feels accepted, having a sense of belonging when status is not important.

The sense of belonging, acceptance and support in Lennox's interview can be seen also in the comparison he made contrasting the organisational culture in big consulting firms versus the culture in a small tech consulting firm, having worked in both.

It can be inferred from his description that the consulting firm's culture is characterised by; being formal, an 'organised machine with clear profit targets' and a high-performance culture. Career status, advancement and bonus are seen as important, as it is a focus on outperforming and competing. Asking for help is perceived as weakness and sometimes people suddenly disappear due to depression. These characteristics seem to indicate a less supportive culture.

In contrast, the characteristics of the small tech firm are described by Lennox as having space for intellectual play, having 'a start-up feel' and doing 'fun and interesting projects'. 'The currency of social interactions was what was cool,' being a manager in this start-up-like organisation 'was easy,' there was diversity in employees' social backgrounds and 'as a whole, [I] didn't have nearly as much self-doubts', Lennox added. Lennox argued that these characteristics put people at ease. This description seems to imply a more welcoming and approachable culture where it is easier to integrate, to belong.

Both descriptions can be interpreted as evidence of the absence or presence of support and belonging, addressing the system/organisation level of analysis. I will expand on this later on, in Category 5.

Emma

The absence and presence of belonging and support were also evidenced in research participant Emma, when referring to having or not having much in common with a group of colleagues. Emma described being 'at one with her role' when managing a team of 'eager and ambitious entry-level people,' with whom one can assume she felt she had qualities in common. This appears in contrast to experiencing self-doubts when managing a new team of 'mainly middle-aged men' who seemed resistant and didn't seem as ambitious and driven as herself or her previous team.

Putting aside Emma's own prejudices and assumptions about the different groups of colleagues she was working with, her sense of belonging or not and sharing commonalities or not with a group of colleagues are present here.

Also, a reference to being supportive was made by Emma to describe her upbringing, as she always felt supported by her parents who encouraged her to 'try whatever you want to try,' linking this with being confident later on in life.

Frederik

Evidence of the presence or absence of belonging in Frederik's case appears more clearly in reference to the organisational culture.

Frederik's interview took place in his organisation's office. Describing my felt experience of the organisation may help to portray some characteristics of the organisational culture relevant to the belonging and support category. On arrival to the interview, I was welcomed by the receptionist with a small bag containing a mug, chocolates and a hand-written, welcoming postcard. The toilette had a sign reading 'all gender,' and inside there were female towels, deodorants and other products. People were wearing casual clothes and I could hear different languages and accents. The organisation provides free breakfast, lunch and snacks in an area similar to a stylish warehouse building, filled with natural light and plants, where I was invited to have lunch. Generally, the atmosphere was informal and friendly.

At that point, I would have described the organisation as diverse, inclusive, welcoming and generous. At the time, I would have categorised my experience of the organisation as evidencing the presence of support and belonging.

In contrast, during the interview, Frederik described the organisational culture as overwhelming, 'direct' and ambiguous, as well as offering a lot of freedom and benefits.

He links self-doubts with his first mistake at the company, perhaps implying that the organisational culture would attribute negative connotations to making mistakes. He carries on saying the following:

'Because especially in [the organisation] as an organisation it tends to be pretty… not a hard culture, but like we… [are] very rational so we don't talk about emotions…'

'So that's this philosophy of the dream team which basically from [the organisation's] philosophy is getting the best people in the industry and putting them together in a team. And if somebody is not… doesn't fit in the dream team anymore, we let them go, right'.

'So it's… so it's… there's a big – we call it a keeper test. So every manager, every leader kind of needs to apply the keeper test to everyone in a team every now and then. Just to make sure okay, is [a person] still the right person for this job and is he worth a salary basically. And otherwise, let's find a new [person]. So there is this culture especially from the US that we let people go easily, then we give them a generous severance package so there's no hard feelings, but still that kind of creates a little bit of fear in the culture obviously…'

'Fear of retaliation, a fear of getting fired basically, you know. I'm not sure if it's that direct that people really feel fired but it's definitely underlying, okay shit, I really need to be on my best because otherwise they might let me go'.

The above quotes from Frederik evidence the absence of support and belonging category. An organisational culture that fuels fear, persecutory anxiety and feelings of insecurity, which can be interpreted as representing the absence of support. These characteristics seem to be in contrast to the friendly and generous welcome I experienced when entering the organisation.

On my way out of the building, when speaking informally with the person to grant me access to the organisation, she shared that it sometimes seems as if the human aspect of the organisational interactions has been removed.

Category 3	'I believe in you' (sub-category of support)

Category definition

Within the category of 'presence or absence of support,' I have begun to notice that most research participants made reference to somebody in their life, past or present, who has believed in them, who has encouraged and supported them.

In other words, participants have been able to recall situations, either from early years or adulthood, where somebody, usually significant to them, had expressed faith in them, confidence in their abilities, encouragement and willingness to invest in them. This can be significant as it appears in contrast to these leaders' lack of self-belief.

I am unsure whether this is a category on its own right or is a sub-category, an extension of the 'presence or absence of support/belonging'. Certainly, it is worth exploring as it may provide clues to understanding the psychology behind self-criticism.

Examples from the data

Slava

As seen earlier, Slava expresses gratitude to her senior partner (Lydia), who supported and sponsored her in the process of becoming a partner herself. Arguably, Slava felt that Lydia had believed in Slava's abilities to becoming a partner.

Keira

As seen earlier, Keira talks about her husband as someone in her life who represents stability when she has self-doubts:

'… it's weird to think he's the stable one, if that makes sense. And he's become my… not my conscience but the grounder I guess when I'm having self-doubts'.

Paul

Paul shares how his father supported and believed in him.

'… so I have very strong vivid memories of my parents being, my dad particularly as I was growing up, being a very positive … probably to the extent that it was unrealistic, that you know, I can do anything, that I'm you know, so very sort of yeah, very positive, very supportive in words right, so in terms of you know, you can be successful in this, of course you can do it and so on, and I think that has definitely been a factor in being more positive… '

'So I remember- so yeah, my dad gave me a- the Jack Welch's autobiography, and we're both in it, so you know, this- so you know, something that this could be you, you could do this or something like that, so you know, very nice…'

The quotes show the experience of someone important to one expressing faith and encouragement in one's abilities and potential.

Equally, in Paul's case, it seems evident that while his father had expressed faith in his son's abilities, he also set high standards and expectations for his son.

Megan

Megan's mother and, later on, a friend of Megan, seems to have also played a fundamental role in encouraging Megan at times of self-doubts.

'And then the third component which was very important for me at that particular time was, there was a woman who I'm still friendly with… we're similar, she was slightly more senior than me, similar age to me, much more self-confident than me… And so, I told her what was going

on [considering a job offer] and she was very, very, "You should go do this. You shouldn't be doubting what you're doing."'

Later on in the interview:

'So I have my mother to thank for a lot…. So I was a very introverted child, believe it or not, and I was very quiet… and so, my mother invested a huge amount of time in me, sending me to dance classes… and so, I was sort of forced, and so interestingly, even that didn't manifest itself as me being a greatly comfortable public speaker as soon as I hit the workplace, but it did create a high level of confidence I suspect'.

'And so, she [Megan's mother]… was the classic mother who told me I could do anything that I wanted to do'.

Megan's mother seemed to have played a key role in providing reassurance, support and encouragement, believing in Megan's abilities and potential. Her mother's words seems to have been deep-seated in Megan's life.

Lennox

The 'someone believes in you' category was particularly evident in Lennox's data, both from his professional and his personal life.

'… after about a week in [starting a new job in a big firm], I came in and confessed to the partner that I have no clue what I think what I'm doing. I don't know how to do it. I was very lucky that he's [a partner in the firm Lennox was working for] like, "Don't worry, Lennox. I have faith in you. Don't worry. Go home. And it's all going to run fine."'

Later on in the interview:

'I mean, just to illustrate, one of the big transitions was the woman who would eventually become my wife I met during my PhD. And indeed, I mean, the wedding ring that she had made for me is inscribed with the text, "I believe in you."'

There seems to be a number of people throughout Lennox's life who he had felt 'began to see him as worth investing in,' as he puts it, people who encouraged him and made him feel accepted. As shown above, his wife, his partner/boss in the consulting firm and also (not in the quote) his PhD supervisor expressed support and saw potential in Lennox.

Emma

Emma's narrative also shows evidence of people (her parents) believing in and encouraging Emma and seeing potential in her.

'I think when I was growing up, I always felt very supported by my parents. They were always encouraging and always try whatever I want[ed] to try, so I think that's where maybe the confidence part comes from that we spoke about at the beginning. So, it's certainly not anything from that. I think that I probably put a lot of pressure on myself as I suppose'.

Category 4	'Elite group' membership (sub-category of belonging)

Category definition

When participants refer to the presence or absence of belonging and support, the majority of the narratives imply the creation of an in-group or out-group dynamic, denoting otherness. Along with this, there is an assumption that this selective group holds certain qualities, perceived to be superior.

As seen in previous vignettes, there has been a reference to people/groups perceived to be 'special' that hold 'amazing' qualities. There has been reference to a 'members club' or a 'dream team' with the 'best people'. Implicitly, this perception seems to create a sense of distance from others, the non-members, who perhaps show weaknesses or vulnerabilities and who may not be performing up to the expected high standards of the 'in-group'. The in-group most of the time is seen or perceived as an 'elite group' or 'elite organisation'. This elite group category can be seen as a sub-category branching out of the sense of belonging or absence of it. What is specific about this category is the assumption of superiority in a group which creates a sense of elite.

In summary, the strong theme that has emerged from the data in connection with the absence or presence of belonging is the membership or not to an elite group/organisation which is perceived to have superior qualities. At times, research participants seem to perceive themselves as part of the elite group and at other times they doubt their belonging to it or their worthiness to belong to it.

The below are examples from the data that illustrate the category membership (belonging) to a group, specifically around the assumption of the elite quality of the group. Some of the below

quotes are similar from the examples outlined under Category 2 but highlight specifically the elite quality aspect.

Examples from the data

Sabrina

'… you're constantly surrounded by such amazing bright people [referring to the firm partnership]… really academic or really technically … and I think gosh, I am nowhere near that!… Should I really be here? Because I am nowhere near…'

As pointed out in this earlier quote, Sabrina's narrative refers to belonging or membership to a group, the partnership, perceived to be holding 'amazing' qualities. Sabrina seems to appraise herself (in comparison to the group) as not possessing the qualities or meeting the assumed high standards to belong to this group (of partners), although she is, in fact, a partner in that same firm/group/partnership.

As seen previously, Sabrina also compared herself to her peers very early in her career, pointing out not just that she felt like an outsider but also perceiving and assuming superior qualities in her 'privately educated' colleagues.

'… I feel that I didn't speak as nice, I didn't- the depth of my knowledge wasn't- and that's still you know, I think their education was so much stronger and that depth of knowledge that they had about everything almost, I didn't have…'

Paul

As seen in previous quotes, Paul referred to the sense of belonging to the firm's partnership as entering a member's club, 'being let into this club,' perhaps implying exclusivity, an in-and-out dynamic.

Paul also referred to the assumed high expectations and high standards of this club and wondered whether he would be able to meet them. Afterwards, Paul mentioned being 'surrounded by people who are hugely experts and how hard it is to demonstrate value amongst them'.

Once more, the quote reflects the in-out group dynamic and the assumption of certain superior qualities and high standards of the group.

Lennox

Evidence of the perception of an elite group is explicit in Lennox's narrative:

'… well, frankly, propaganda. You know, there's a lot of retelling that we are an elite [referring to the time working for a big consulting firm], so that we are these things and so on. And I think, actually, that creates more distance from the people and their own individual self-doubts. There's a story that we all go along with, that we all tell…'

'Those moments are odd [when asked to talk to graduates joining the firm] where you particularly find the distance from what you're telling them about this high-performing culture, how we're all sort of best friends and do amazing things …'

Lennox categorically points out how the organisation he worked for portrays and promotes a notion of an elite group, which employees seem to collude with, consciously or unconsciously.

Frederik

Data suggesting the notion of an elite group is also seen in Frederik's narrative, referring to the culture of the organisations he has worked for.

'I think … [the organisation] prides itself [in] just hiring the best and brightest and the smartest'.

'So that's this philosophy of the dream team which basically from [the organisation's] philosophy is getting the best people in the industry and putting them together in a team'.

'… we call it a keeper test. So every manager…needs to apply the keeper test to everyone in a team every now and then. Just to make sure okay, is [a person] still the right person for this job and is he worth a salary basically. And otherwise, let's find a new [person]'.

This quotes evidence the notion of the elite in-group as 'the best, brightest and smarter,' and the out-group as those not passing the 'keepers test' and not meeting the standards of the 'dream team'. The perception and belief of a superior and exclusive members group seem obvious here.

Category 5	Competition, results-orientation and high performance seen as characteristics of both organisational culture and individual narratives (absence of support)

Category definition

While noticing common themes at an individual level, I have also began to recognise certain characteristics in the organisational culture where these individuals operate.

Specifically, I have observed, in both individuals and the culture, the following patterns: competition and comparison to others, emphasis on outcomes and expectations of high performance.

Most participants reference competition; at an individual level, expressing the importance of advancing in their careers, or competition at organisational level, focusing on outperforming competitors in the market. Eagerness to do better than others seems to be important to this group.

Also, at an organisational level, there seems to be an expectation of achieving results. Financial and performance targets have been mentioned by most participants. These organisations are well-known for setting ambitious targets at organisational and individual levels.

In other words, the key characteristics of these organisations can be described as a high-performance culture, where efficiency, effectiveness and achieving superior results is particularly encouraged and expected of employees.

To add to the evidence of the sense of competition and result-orientation was my felt-experience during most of the interviews, a sense of urgency in participants to get things done quickly, perhaps reflecting the demands of a high-performing and high-expectation organisational culture.

While initially, these patterns emerging from the data referring to competition, comparison and results-orientation were emerging at an individual level. Overtime, it become apparent that the individual characteristics were also a reflection of the organisational culture. Perhaps it is not coincidental that individuals who are highly competitive have ended up working in organisations that value competition, results and high performance, collectively creating a culture of such characteristics.

In summary, a specific organisational culture has emerged as a category that includes the following features: competition at individual and organisational levels, comparison to others, emphasis placed on results, outperforming others and meeting high expectations. These characteristics can be described as demanding and pressuring, a harsh culture, the opposite of support and belonging, or rather the absence of them.

The following vignettes illustrate this category.

Examples from the data

Slava

A number of times, Slava compares herself to colleagues' progression and her husband's career progression. Additionally, she links self-doubts with winning work in a competitive market.

'… I think where I feel self-doubts and concerns is more about… whether I'll have the ability to adapt the business to the changing times…. Will I find work for my team, will I be strong enough to still be able to be busy for the next year or so? So, it's less about my abilities and being recognised and more about whether I will fulfil the role … I know I can be very successful, but can I be more successful than the markets…? … Will I be able to win as much business with high

profile clients or not, it's the question. … Well, I feel actually it's very, very difficult to compete in that situation…'

Sabrina

Sabrina describes the organisational culture of the different firms she has worked for as aggressive and challenging, where there were high expectations and a lot of internal pressure to win work and outperform competitors.

'Yeah. I mean maybe things like you know, we won [a tender for a bank] (mumbling) and I was up against you know, you're there and you know you're up against the two partners from [competitor firm] …'

'Yeah, no, no, no. There's a lot of pressure from you know, [a senior partner, head of the function] is running the account and there was – this was the first that… commits tender for six years, it was a lot of internal pressure…'

The language used here explicitly points out competition, comparison, high expectations and pressure.

Keira

Keira links self-doubts to her half-year performance review, looking at the financial result of herself/her team.

'… say for example Monday, I was going through the half-year results, and that's when I had a complete paddy, I looked to them, broke them down, analyse them why aren't they necessarily where I want them to be?, you know, and stuff like that, and probably began to feel, I guess, unworthy… '

While this quote reflects Keira's own expectations and internal self-demands, this is happening at a time in the organisation where evaluations of performance are taking place, where people are measured against targets. Also, this is happening in an organisation well-known for its competitive culture. Perhaps Keira is expressing, at an individual level, dynamics that also belong to the organisation as a system. Keira may be holding and experienced the organisation's pressure to perform and achieve targets.

Paul

'[Referring to the investment bank he worked for in the past] I think it was a lot more internally political, I think there was a lot more I would say – so what's the right word, maybe more aggressive culture, more Americanised culture, I think people weren't particularly nice to each other a lot of the time… '

'I suspect it's probably the way people are compensated and awarded, so I think that the people are very you know, every month and every week, we get communicated what our personal results are, and people get focussed on that, are far more focussed on – I suspect every partner in this building could tell you what their own personal results and sales look like… '

The quote explicitly points out the emphasis on personal results and how they are openly communicated by the firm. This seems to generate comparison and competition amongst partners, and potentially self-doubts too.

Additionally, earlier on Paul linked self-doubts or 'low points' to losing a pitch, which led him to question his own abilities, whether he was good enough or whether this may happen again in the future. Winning work and generating opportunities is key as a partner, added Paul.

Furthermore, Paul linked the experience of becoming a partner to submitting his first MBA assignment, implying competition, comparisons and feeling judged.

These examples from the data refer to somebody or something being evaluated and assessed against set objectives or other individuals, as well as to performance results, pitches/tenders or assignments.

Megan

Comparison and competition appear more clearly in Megan's personal realm.

'But I have a younger brother and he is the best educated person I know, he went to a good university, he then went on and did a master's in something, and then he did an MBA in Chicago. And he cannot get the sort of job that he thinks he deserves, right? He's done all of these things and I feel his pain in that he looks at me and thinks, what the hell? But the big difference between us is I don't think I'm entitled to anything. He thinks because he's done all of these things that somehow that qualifies him'.

Not going to university has come up a number of times in Megan's narrative, although she appears sure about her decision. She compared herself with her brother on their education and accomplishments. Megan felt she was not defined by her education, yet she mentioned it.

This quote evidences comparison and competition; equally, it implies self-authorising and self-worth. To an extent, Megan is wondering here, where is the sense of entitlement coming from? How is one's legitimacy determined? How does my worth compare to others? It is not necessarily by education. It may not be accidental that competition emerges in Megan's narratives when she is one of the top executives in an uppermost global firm.

Lennox

The below quotes expand on the earlier description of the organisational culture differences between bigger consulting firms versus a smaller tech firm and academia, mentioned when evidencing Category 2: Presence and absence of belonging and support.

'There's much more time for sort of intellectual play [in academia]. Whereas jumping straight into something like [a consulting firm], it's much more this organised machine. I mean, there is clear profit targets written on the wall, you know, weekly updates about who's performing how'.

When working in the small tech firm, the culture was more informal and playful, and the perception of failure was seen as part of an evolving process, as evidenced here:

'So, even there was much more a freedom to say 'I don't know' to explore ideas, to accept that projects would get derailed… [the small tech firm] … was much more characterised by this is fun, you know. And people would stay late at [the big consulting firm] and so on to achieve bonuses that outperform and compete with things'.

Lennox continues highlighting the cultural differences by saying that in big consulting firms the emphasis was more about 'posturing' and 'people moving forward in their careers'.

'You had to make money, not to make friends, whereas [the small tech firm] is much more an organisation focussed on that social bond together'.

'… Whereas most of the colleagues and so on I've had in the [big consulting firms], well, after two, three years in one position, if you're not moving forward, you're dead in the water. So, yeah'.

'… there was a need in the [big consulting firms] to be capable of any task you were handed. Asking for help is of course encouraged openly and you're meant to collaborate, but asking for

too much help is undoubtedly a sign of weakness, and will be used against you. I mean, this is simply the nature of the game. At [a small tech firm], there was never a feeling that that sort of account could ever be spent'.

Lennox's rich description of the cultural differences between the two kinds of organisations evidences the competitive, driven-by-results culture versus a more collaborative, playful and open-to-explore culture.

Emma

'So, I think my company [an auction house] is getting better but we are afraid of failure… it's hard to feel that you can experiment and try something new or that you feel like you can't make a mistake often'.

'… two or three years ago … people were hiding information or holding back on information and that it didn't feel collaborative and there was maybe a bit of finger-pointing and blaming of things – I guess that would be another sign of self-doubts or fear of failure'.

While these quotes seem impregnated with persecutory feelings, in contrast, Emma also described a very passionate and energising organisational culture, where people care a lot about art and what they do. Arts creates a sense of community and togetherness.

Frederik

As discussed earlier, Frederik describes the organisational culture as 'direct' and 'hard', 'letting people go' if they don't pass the 'keepers test' or don't meet the high standards of a 'dream team,' expecting employees to perform at one's best all the times. Unsurprisingly, this seems to create a climate of fear and persecutory anxiety that may lead employees to doubt their

abilities and to work harder. Frederik shared these characteristics of the organisational culture with a degree of normality, almost detachment. At this point in the interview I remembered feeling very anxious, I had the sense of being easily replaceable, disposable and worthless. I wonder whether Frederik and other employees in this organisation feel the same. Also, I couldn't help but notice the contrast between the warm and friendly welcome when I arrive to the office (e.g., a 'goodie' bag with chocolates and a hand-written postcard) and the ruthlessness and brutality of the 'dream team' and the 'keepers test'. Was that friendliness covering up for the aggressive nature of the organisational culture? Was the super-ego behind that aggressive sentiment?

In summary, the key themes emerging from the data denote persecutory anxiety and imply the following: there is an expectation to produce work outcomes at a fast pace where is no space for mistakes and to work at your best standard all times. When these standards are not met, employees are 'let go', removed or rejected from the elite group.

Category 6	Transition and uncertainty in the wider context (organisation, industry, geo-political and economic landscape)

Category definition

The sampling criterion for this study was individuals in leadership positions who have recently gone through a role transition (e.g., promotion, lateral move, taken on a new challenging project, etc.). The reasoning behind the emphasis on *transition* is linked to one of my research assumptions, which is that self-doubts appear to become more dominant at a point of change. This has been a noticeable pattern throughout my work with leaders over the years. In all interviews, participants were able to recall and share a moment of transition and reflect on whether self-doubts were present or not.

Parallel to the professional or role transition, I have also noticed that the workplace environments of these leaders have been very uncertain and shifting. Therefore, a category or sub-category emerging from the data has been a pattern of significant changes in the organisations, industries or wider systems where these leaders work. Examples include strategic or operational transformations, organisational restructures, a down-turn in business areas or a turbulent/uncertain time for the economy and politics.

Factoring in the impact of transitions becomes relevant because, as we know from psychoanalysis, uncertainty and change can trigger anxiety.

The following paragraphs briefly illustrate this category.

Examples from the data

Slava experienced a sense of 'dislodgment' when the firm was going through big restructuring changes, strategically and operationally. Additionally, she pointed out that the business wasn't doing that well financially and she described a slump in the market. Consequently, she doubted her ability to adapt the business to changing times.

Keira noticed that her self-doubts have emerged particularly at points when yearly performance evaluations. Equally, self-doubts for Keira seem to intensify when the wider context appears gloomy, such as during a down-turn, poor financial results or the general economy not doing well.

When Paul shared a 'low point' in his career working in investment banking, he described an organisational context that was changing operationally and strategically, resulting in a business decline. Also, while he didn't explicitly mention it, the business decline he referred to was possibly a consequence of the 2008 financial crisis.

Emma's self-doubts emerged at the points of significant changes taking place: Emma took a new role and moved to a new country/office. Also, she points out changes in the organisation's leadership team.

Ambiguity and fast pace are the ways Frederik described his organisation, and how quickly the company was expanding, opening new offices and growing. While Frederik hasn't explicitly mentioned his organisation's industry competitors, it is public knowledge that the technology/media sector has been going through a substantial transformation as a result of the whole industry being disrupted.

Furthermore, as many participants in this study are from the professional services industry, it is worth pointing out that this is also an industry that, while historically well-established in the market, has been disrupted and is going through colossal transformations in order to survive.

Category 7	The silence category: The meaning behind the absence of words

Category definition

With the concepts of reflexivity and countertransference in mind, I have started to notice patterns emerging throughout most of the interviews. These patterns have been occurring within the nonverbal sphere. For example, some interviews ended significantly earlier than the time agreed, and many participants struggled to find examples when self-doubts were particularly dominant. However, most of them admitted experiencing self-doubts very frequently.

Equally, I noticed my feelings of deep sadness during and after many of the interviews or while reading and analysing the transcripts. Sometimes, while analysing the data, the content of the transcripts brought me to tears, I felt a sense of sorrow, rejection and abandonment. I had free associations of providing warmth and comfort to the participants as if they were children in need of care. Were these feelings my own? Or was I picking up this sentiment from the participants?

The silence, the absence of words, expressed by the shorter interviews and lack of examples in participants' contributions, coupled with my feelings of sadness, led me to recognise how painful it can be to talk about self-doubts, to connect with difficult early experiences, and how the nature of this research question takes us back to poignant and primitive states of mind.

I am unsure whether this is a category in its own right; however, it is an insightful pattern worth mentioning, which provides an understanding not only into the psychology behind the participants but also into my own psychic.

SECTION III – DISCUSSIONS OF RESULTS, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

> 'The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any'.
>
> - *Alice Walker*

Having defined, analysed, and evidenced the most significant categories in Section II, Section III focuses on deepening the understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, proposing tentative hypotheses, and addressing theoretical and practical implications. This section is divided into two main chapters.

In Chapter 6, I discuss the research results in relation to existing research and literature, particularly within systems-psychodynamic concepts. The discussion formulates tentative hypotheses based on the previous category analysis, continues establishing relations amongst defined categories, and indicates emerging theoretical formulations. Following on from this, Chapter 7 outlines implications, recommendations, and conclusions.

This section has been rather difficult. I had many ideas and theoretical assumptions about the data; however, I have struggled to find and own my *intellectual voice*. I came to realise that while observing self-doubts and low self-worth through the participants' narratives, I found *myself* struggling to believe in my abilities and to see worth in *my own* ideas.

Chapter 6: Discussion of research results in relation to key systems-psychodynamic concepts and the emergence of theoretical formulations

To orientate the reader, discussions in points 6.1 and 6.2 provide insight into the following research sub-questions:

- How might the characteristics of the early years and family history influence the quality of a leader's inner critical voice, potentially impacting on their performance in the workplace?
- What defence mechanisms might be developed at an individual level in connection with self-doubts?

6.1 What may be behind the oscillating nature of self-worth? The importance of early year's experiences

As noted earlier, one of the strongest categories has been the oscillating nature of self-doubts and, consequently, the impact on self-worth. Participants fluctuated between doubting their sense of self-worth on one end and feeling confident and capable on the other. The link between self-criticism and self-worth is neither surprising nor novel, but its oscillating nature seems to be a new idea.

The oscillating nature of self-worth combined with the categories 'belonging' and 'I believe in you' seems to refer mainly to intra-psychic dynamics. More specifically, this feature relates mainly to how the participants' early experiences have impacted them in terms of their career choices, professional identities, and the way they negotiate those childhood experiences in their interactions with the world of work.

Psychoanalysis suggests that early childhood experiences, particularly those with the main caregivers (who are also authority figures), influence who we are in adulthood. With this in mind, a hypothesis could be that the oscillating nature of self-worth exhibited in these individuals may be linked to the nature of introjected early authority figures and to how these internalised objects create multiple inner voices that constantly oscillate between authorising and undermining these individuals in their day-to-day professional roles. This can be explained in different ways through a psychoanalytic lens.

Firstly, the oscillating nature of the phenomenon reflects how the super-ego is structured and the difficulty of balancing its three different components. Secondly, as the super-ego forms in the early years while the introjection of authority figures takes place, some of these become persecutory objects and some become more benevolent objects. The interaction and dynamics of these internal objects in the inner-world creates fluctuating states of mind, occurring not

only in childhood, but also in adulthood. The multiple inner voices, the inner-world phantasies, and states of mind influence and sometimes may distort the way these leaders appraise themselves and the world around them. This may create unconscious conflict, generating a battle between what is unconsciously desired versus what is acceptable for the conscious mind. The following paragraphs expand on the above argument.

The structure of the psychic, the quality of the unconscious phantasies, and ambivalent self-worth

The origins of self-doubts can be traced to the super-ego, which results from the introjection of primary authority figures in the early years. Conflict amongst the different super-ego components – the ego-ideal, the benign or benevolent super-ego, and the prohibiting super-ego – is inevitable. A healthy state seems to uphold a cooperative balance between the three components, allowing for a reality-based input. The pathological state presents an imbalance among the three components (Meyers, 1998, p 354). Unconscious phantasies are formed by introjected objects throughout the natural development of the early years and have the capacity to unconsciously shape an individual's thoughts, emotions, and defence mechanisms. In other words, unconscious phantasies taint the way we relate to reality. Freud refers to the super-ego as 'an introjection – in phantasy – of a parental figure, a parental phantasy figure distorted by the child's own projections' (Segal, 1988, p 11).

These psychoanalytic theorisations of the psychic and super-ego structure offer an understanding about the ambivalent nature of the phenomenon. Introjected objects – some of the authority figures that help build the super-ego – create internal voices which can be ideals to aspire to, encouraging, or prohibiting. The different introjected objects and super-ego components populate an inner-world filled with discordant motives, feelings, and intentions,

generating different states of mind. This may result in an individual's ambivalence about their self-worth. The multiple voices and unconscious phantasies seem to taint the individuals' perceptions of themselves and the world around them.

Participants' narratives and their inner parental voices

The vignettes in Section II evidence the oscillating nature of self-worth and show the multiple internal voices in participants' minds. Looking closely at the participants' narratives, specifically when describing their early years, some of the participants' parents were more present, and others were less so; some participants' parental voices were more dominant, and others were less so.

For example, **Slava**'s parents instilled in her the importance of self-development. Slava was an 'A' student and a 'good girl' who remembered how good it felt to make her parents proud. It could be assumed that internal parental voices told her, 'You must improve yourself' or 'It is important to achieve top places', which she has done in childhood and adulthood.

Paul's vivid memory of his father giving him an autobiography of a very successful businessman as a present and saying, 'This could be you' is a strong parental message saying, 'You must become very successful'.

In **Megan**'s case, her parents seem to represent different voices. As the daughter of a lawyer and a housewife, Megan describes her father 'going mad' when she decided not to go to university. Here, the father's voice seems to carry negative judgement and criticism. In contrast, Megan's mother invested much attention and care in Megan and encouraged her to 'come forward', which seems to represent a kinder and more supportive parental voice.

Similarly, when growing up, Emma always felt supported by her parents, who encouraged her and told her to 'try whatever you want to try'.

To a degree, these parental voices seem mostly encouraging, enabling, and authorising; they assume potential talents in their children and express perhaps the parents' own narcissism. Equally, they place high pressure and expectations on their children. The underlying intent of these voices when internalised may explain the high pressure these individuals put on themselves and the competition and strong drive for achievement seen in their narratives. It may also explain the fluctuation between feeling worthy when in touch with supportive voices and feeling unworthy when in touch with severe voices.

States of mind and the oscillating nature of self-worth

Building on Klein's thinking, Waddell (2002) refers to how the infant oscillates between experiences of deep gratification and extreme discomfort and persecutory feeling, between integration and disintegration. Klein describes the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions as states of mind: one dominated by persecutory anxiety and the other dominated by a more balanced and integrated relationship with the other separated from the self (Waddell, 2002). These states of mind or positions influence the way we view ourselves, our relationships, and the world around us; they can leave us unable to see someone else's point of view or leave us disconnected from external reality. These states of mind or positions are partly influenced by the quality and nature of introjected authority figures, by the quality of the super-ego, and by inner-world phantasies. This can also help to explain the oscillating nature of self-worth in this group of leaders.

Different states of mind can be seen in participants when they recall situations dominated by persecutory and punitive voices, leading them to experience states of mind filled with despair

and not-good-enough anxiety. Other situations in their narratives seem more balanced and show more integrated experiences of themselves and the world around them.

While Klein's positions or states of mind postulation describes the earliest stages of infant psychic developments as the child interacts with the main carer and environment, the fluctuation between these two states of mind continues in adulthood. Some of the principles of these postulations can be seen in research participants' interactions at work, as shown in the following excerpts:

Keira: *'So I did a partner panel … and I went into the toilet and cried for half an hour because I was quite a bit sad, and that's a crappy job, and you sort of get home and you got the call … saying you got it … [the partnership offer]'.*

Emma: *'I think where I struggle is, logically and rationally, I know that I am actually very good at my job. I consistently get really good feedback. I've been promoted, I got raises. All of these signals objectively are there to say I actually am very successful at my work and people really like working with me, and yet in those moments [of self-doubts] … I don't feel any of that and that's like on a completely different planet, like in those moments of self-criticism, you can't remember that'.*

As seen in the above examples, participants seem to have fallen into a state of mind that is distorted and unhelpful. The paranoid-schizoid state of mind seems to be dominated by black-and-white extreme ways of thinking and unreasonable ways of appraising themselves and others. Emma describes it as 'being in a completely different planet'; in other participants, this was exhibited in a wrong belief that they had performed badly in partner interview panels.

Paul: *'[referring to losing an important tender] … so you've got to keep that in check a little bit I think, and be clear like I try to tell myself, you know, I try and be quite factual with myself to*

say that this- I know this wasn't because I was bad, it was just a mixture of things, some of which we probably couldn't have done anything about'.

This excerpt could be interpreted as Paul defending himself from rejection; however, it could also be Paul's ability to bring a sense of perspective – a balanced view in response to a negative outcome. Using 'we' rather than 'I' seems to imply that he shares responsibility with others rather than simply blaming himself, as a severe inner critical voice would do. Moreover, seeing events as a combination of different factors may indicate some degree of integration – he is able to see both positive and negative aspects of an event.

The depressive state of mind seems to allow for a more integrated view of themselves and the world around them. In the relationship between the infant and carer, it is the stage when the child is able to recognise that the object (carer) is both good and bad, a stage of integration. In adulthood, the ability to have a more integrated view is shown in the recognition that oneself, others, or life situations hold both negative and positive qualities. This integrated view allows individuals to have a more balanced view of themselves and the world around. Here, individuals can connect with both supportive and encouraging voices, not just the persecutory ones.

Finding and losing personal authority

Building on the concept of super-ego, introjected objects, and inner-world phantasies, Obholzer's (1994) concept of *authority from within* can also be helpful. Authority from within essentially depends on the nature of early authority figures, which in turn impacts the way roles are taken up when entering an organisation. Being appointed to a position of authority 'sanctioned from below', yet not able to fully take the position due to an 'undermining of self-

in-role by inner-world figures' creates self-doubts and potentially prevents external authorisation (Obholzer, 1994, p 41).

Observing the oscillating nature of self-worth and linking it with the concept of authority from within (Obholzer, 1994), it can be assumed that the quality of these leaders' inner-world voices, introjected objects, and phantasies are creating ambivalence about their belief in their own capacity and entitlement to fully inhabit their role as leaders in the here-and-now workplace.

At times, these leaders seem to not feel sanctioned by their internal authority figures when taking a leadership role; at other times, the internal voices seem more benevolent, enabling, and authorising. In other words, there is an oscillation between the authorising and undermining voices.

Unconscious conflict: torn between not meeting parental expectations and guilt for outperforming them

The ambivalence about self-worth can be also seen as a sign of unconscious conflict. One of the basic principles of psychoanalytic thinking is the existence of the unconscious mind and how painful or conflicting materials that are unacceptable to consciousness are repressed to the unconscious. Often, what appears to be contradictory, such as the oscillating nature of self-worth, is a compromise between the individual's desires and what is acceptable for their conscious mind. If so, what is the unconscious conflict in these participants?

In the participant narratives, there seem to be two broad groups or types of unconscious conflict. One group appears to be about not living up to parental expectations and the feeling of shame attached to that experience; the other group seems linked to the feeling of guilt for outperforming parents or siblings.

In the first group, participants inner parental voices seem to be enabling and encouraging at the same time as implicitly or explicitly setting high expectations. Here, participants may want to meet their inner authority figures' mandates; however, they may equally doubt or question whether they can meet those mandates. Examples of this can be Paul and Emma, who express encouraging, supporting, and enabling parental voices. However, the voices also seem to carry the parents' overinvestment in achievements, high expectations of succeeding, and implied great talent of their children. Consequently, in adulthood, these individuals might be driven by their subjective experience of not being good enough to meet their parents' expectations, whether these are parents in real life or in their inner-world phantasies. Shame seems to be the underlying feeling that creates the unconscious conflict.

In the other group or type, parents in real life appear to be 'neutral', less present, or even neglectful. These parents seem not to have shown or set high expectations, for example, in the cases of Keira, Lennox, and Frederik. Here, although parental expectations may not be very present, these individuals still seem to strive to accomplish much in their lives and careers. Expectations seem self-imposed. In this group, perhaps there is no fear of failure or of not meeting parents' expectations, but there is the fear of success or outperforming parents or siblings. Kets de Vries (2006) refers to this idea, building from Freud's thinking, in an essay called 'Those being wrecked by success'. Doing well in life and being successful is both desired and dreaded, and this apparent contradiction may show the multiple underlying parental voices and unconscious conflict. This conflict may be shown in participants' ambivalent feelings towards their own accomplishments and their ambivalent sense of self-worth. Guilt seems to be the underlying feeling that partly creates the unconscious conflict. This may result from unresolved rivalrous feelings towards internal parental figures or siblings, according to Kets de Vries (2006).

These leaders (from both unconscious conflict types) have accomplished much in life and are seen by the outside observer as successful. However, it may be their own internal experience and unconscious conflict that is creating anxiety, ambivalence about themselves, and perhaps holding them back from fully internalising those accomplishments.

6.2 Why may research participants be seeking belonging?

As seen earlier, in parallel to the ambivalence about self-worth, I noticed that most participants were caught up in the presence or absence of belonging, of feeling supported and accepted (or not) by an individual, group, or organisation. I began to wonder whether these leaders' sense of self-worth is partly dependant on a sense of belonging, leading to the questions: Am I worth belonging to this group? Am I enough to be a member? Who do I have to be to be accepted? In other words, seeking belonging, possibly triggered by self-doubts, might be evoking in these leaders' questions about being or not worthy of belonging.

A hypothesis could be that these leaders may be preoccupied with seeking belonging, recognition, and social acceptance, ultimately to gain validation and to obtain a sense of self-worth. This might be driven by severe and persecutory inner-world phantasies that create an inner sense of abandonment, isolation, and rejection. As discussed previously, participants' early past experiences, such as parenting style and the nature of the introjected authority figures, can be often filled with persecutory and demanding feelings and have an impact on adulthood.

Having established these hypotheses, it must be noted that the need for belonging and relatedness to others appears to be an innate quality. Humans have an inborn need to connect with others, as is argued by evolutionary psychology and attachment theory. The following paragraphs expand on the above arguments.

Belonging and relatedness as an innate quality

Evolutionary psychology approaches argue that human beings are naturally driven towards establishing and sustaining belonging. The motivation for belonging has an innate quality, which presumably has an evolutionary basis, linking the desire to develop social bonds to

survival. For example, hunting and protecting each other from potential predators are best achieved as a group (Baumeister and Leary, 1995).

Attachment theory explains the vicissitudes of the parent-child relationship and how the quality of the attachment influences subsequent development in adulthood. Notably, the need for relatedness and connectedness initially felt towards the main caregiver continues throughout one's lifespan (Bowlby, 1988).

Research on shame and self-criticism linked to attachment theory (Gilbert and Iron, 2009) emphasises the 'co-construction of self, and the importance of the experience of self in the mind of "other"… [H]umans are innately motivated to seek social acceptance' (p 196). Humans are highly social beings whose survival depends on how we relate to others and how others relate to self. 'One of the important social needs that links to a felt sense of security in relationships is the need to create positive affects in the mind of others … is the knowledge that we are valued and seen as individuals of worth by others that creates a sense of security in the social domain' (Gilbert and Iron, 2009, p 196).

Based on the above paragraphs, from an evolutionary psychology and attachment theory perspective, we could conclude that it seems natural that research participants, along with the rest of humankind, gravitate toward seeking belonging and connectedness. Therefore, there is nothing novel in the link between self-criticism or self-worth and the need for belonging and acceptance by others. Belonging and social acceptance is an essential and primitive part of being human.

Nevertheless, I wondered why this particular group is particularly prone to having an ambivalent sense of self-worth. What are participants gaining by seeking a sense of belonging while experiencing self-doubts?

Seeking relatedness and validation to gain self-worth

As discussed earlier, self-doubts and self-criticism can originate from the super-ego. The scrutinising and punitive quality of the super-ego could generate a range of negative affective states, such as feeling disapproved, judged, and discouraged. These negative states evoke persecutory anxiety and shame. Consequently, many unconscious phantasies may be filled with these negative affective states, specifically about self-worth – not feeling good enough. This seems a very hostile inner-world, with inner voices that reject and undermine the self. With this in mind, research participants seem to seek belonging and validation in the outside world as they cannot find these in their inner-world.

While the need for belonging, recognition, and approval have emerged in all participants, **Slava** is the participant in whom the need for validation and belonging is most noticeable. As seen earlier, Slava's parents instilled in her the importance of self-development. Based on the interview data, it can be assumed that parental voices (whether these were real parents or what Slava made with the internalised version of them) neither seem particularly severe nor overly encouraging. However, as indicated previously, there seems to be an inner parental message that says, 'You must improve yourself' or 'It is important to achieve top places and make my parents proud'. Throughout school and university years, Slava accomplished her parents' mandate: she was an 'A' student and attended a top university. In her adult life, Slava's need for external validation and achieving top positions seems to have continued – she has worked hard to belong to a partnership of an organisation perceived as prestigious. Slava's need for external validation seems evident in the following quote:

Slava: *'…as I was going through the partner process, some of the papers require you to get feedback from clients … and I remember asking with trepidation, asking clients to give you some feedback and thinking, oh my god, I hope they give me a good feedback. And I remember reading what they've written and how grateful I actually felt at the time…'*

'… I think for me, this praise, it certainly comes from childhood. I've always wanted to be a good girl and I also wanted to do my parents proud, I still want to be a good girl (chuckles)'.

Consistently throughout her life, Slava seems to need to achieve and belong to places, positions, organisations, or groups that assist her in gaining a sense of self-worth and approval. It is perhaps the fear of failing to meet parental expectation – 'You must improve yourself' – that drives Slava's need for validation by belonging to places that provide self-worth. Perhaps the here-and-now feedback request, taking place in adulthood, is driven and reigniting the earlier need for parental approval.

Need for belonging driven by an internal sense of rejection, disapproval and shame

In connection with self-criticism, Hoggett (2017) discusses shame and says that 'shame is the emotion of failure … specifically feeling inadequate and deficient' (Hoggett, 2017, p 364). The primary anxiety evoked by shame is about 'loss of love, abandonment, rejection and exclusion' (p364). Building on other thinkers (e.g., Wurmser, 1981), Hoggett suggests that shame is aggression turned inward, creating rejection, abandonment, and isolation. The empirical findings emerging from my research seem to be very much in line with Hoggett's discussions on self-criticism, shame, and the sense of abandonment and isolation. The participants' need for belonging, support, and external validation is perhaps driven by an unconscious internal sense of abandonment and isolation created by internal critical voices that shame them and make them feel rejected, exposed, and unloved. It is their internal experience of abandonment and rejection that drives belonging. This seems to be particularly evident in **Lennox.** His parents appear absent and even neglectful, or as he describes his childhood, 'unsupervised':

Lennox: *'And those [referring to childhood] I think are definitely the core of my own self-doubts. It's fundamentally that question of if I really had value, my parents would have been more affectionate'.*

Lennox has openly expressed his drive for career progression. He has obtained a PhD, is finishing an executive MBA at a top business school, has held senior positions in organisations perceived as prestigious, and has participated in TV debates on his area of expertise. Lennox's strong drive – expressed by a frantic need to have what is perceived as a well-accomplished life – seems to be disproportionate and in clear contrast to the absence of parental encouragement earlier in his life. Arguably, his need to belong to accomplished places in adult life may be to compensate for a profound internal sense of abandonment, rejection, and feeling unloved. He is externally gaining the sense of self-worth that was not present earlier on.

Based on Lennox's example and the previous discussion, seeking belonging or being concerned about being accepted by a group of peers or by an organisation perhaps ignite the experiences of the early years. Potentially, the lack of parental warmth, empathy, and feeling unloved may arise from an early experience of rejection or being 'unsupervised'.

Perhaps participants introjected parental voices, which were either not enabling self-authorising or 'over-authorising' voices, set the bar far too high, setting unachievable or unrealistic ideals. Both alternatives seem to create depletion and unfulfillment.

In short, the intra-psychic reasons why these leaders may be drawn to the dynamic of belonging or not to a group may be to seek reassurance, validation, and acceptance, which they seem to lack in their inner-world, or to compensate for over-invested or absent parental voices. Ultimately, these leaders might be searching for worth and being authorised externally.

Belonging in this context seems to be both an evolutionary drive as well as a fulfilment of an unconscious phantasy of being accepted, approved, and loved.

For some of the participants, this is the way of negotiating with the here-and-now, adult-professional-life. What they did not experience in the past: being or feeling acknowledged and

authorised by significant others. Belonging is key here, whether it is the lack of it or the longing for it. It seems to go to the very essence of being human.

The soothing and strengthening effect of 'I believe in you'

Along with the 'presence or absence of belonging and support', most participants also made reference to somebody in their life, either from early years or adulthood, who believed in them and encouraged them – somebody who had expressed faith in them. This appears in contrast to the leaders' ambivalent self-belief.

These leaders' inner-world phantasies are – I believe – persecutory and charged with anxiety about being insufficient. Therefore, their references to being supported and someone believing in them is significant for two main reasons: it has a soothing and containing effect to compensate for internal persecutory anxiety, and it helps to strengthen a battled or beaten-up self. Unsurprisingly, these leaders seem to find emotional refuge in *someone believing in them.*

Gilbert *et al.* (2008) suggest that a safe/containment positive affect has the highest negative correlation with depression, anxiety and stress, self-criticism, and insecure attachment. Gilbert *et al.* continue by suggesting that only animals with an attachment system can be calmed and soothed in social contexts. One of the functions of mammalian caring is 'soothing the infant', which generates states of calmness and contentment (Gilbert, 2018, p 183). 'Signals and stimuli such as stroking, holding, voice tone, facial expressions, and social support evolved natural stimuli that activate this system, and have the effect of calming and soothing recipients' (Gilbert *et al.*, 2008, p 183, quoting Uvans-Morberg, 1998, Wang, 2005). Gilbert *et al.*'s studies are in the psychotherapeutic setting, involving adolescents and students rather than

professional working adults. However, some elements of his thinking can be used to understand the psychology behind these leaders in the work context.

Therefore, having somebody expressing encouragement and faith in these leaders may have a calming and containing effect to counter the anxiety and persecutory feelings created by self-criticism. This kinder and supportive voice can be recalled from the past, such as encouraging parents, as we can see in the case of Paul or Megan, or current colleagues, bosses, or spouses.

Equally, this encouraging and containing voice or person may also help to strengthen and nourish the self and to retract the abrasive impact of the super-ego.

Support and encouragement from others are fundamental to an individual's development and sense of self-worth and seem to have a soothing and containing effect, whether in childhood or adulthood. However, it is equally important for an individual to develop a belief in and sense of self-worth internally, to develop good-internal objects, rather than being persecuted by internal bad objects and looking for external soothing.

Having somebody expressing support and faith is positive; however, it also seems important for these leaders to develop that faith and belief within themselves, genuinely believing that they are worthy, not only because somebody believes in them or because they are accepted by a group. Rather, it is important they are able to recognise, value, and internalise their personal qualities on their own right.

Ultimately, as we have seen before, this is a matter of self-authorisation, of feeling entitled from within, accepting and having faith in oneself. In adulthood, having somebody believe in us will not necessarily guarantee self-authorisation or self-worth.

The experiences of being understood and held linked to self-worth

Waddell (2002) describes the subtle and complex early communications between the mother and the infant and its later impact on the person's sense of self and confidence. This led me to consider the psychology underpinning the research participants. This is also aligned to Gilbert's work on the infant's need for soothing.

To illustrate Bion's (1962) concept of *reverie* – the mother's ability to understand, be receptive, and contain the baby's needs – Waddell uses the analogy of a child trying to complete a jigsaw puzzle. In this situation, the child becomes increasingly anxious as a result of not being able to see where a jigsaw piece fits into the puzzle. Waddell suggests there may be three responses from three different mothers.

One response relates to the mother's own anxiety and irritability about the child's inability to fit the puzzle piece. Consequently, the child, sensing the mother's anxiety, feels overwhelmed and unable to manage the situation. No learning from experience occurs.

In the second response, the mother simply takes the jigsaw piece and places it in the puzzle. Here, the mother merely – and perhaps rationally – solves the problem and gets on with other chores. This action shuts down the possibility for the child to explore and figure out the puzzle.

In the third response, the mother observes attentively, taking time to sense the child's difficulty. The mother turns the piece around in such a way that it readily corresponds to the hole it is to fill. The child then places the piece and expresses enjoyment. The mother here is emotionally available and receptive to the child's distress, enabling the child to see what he or she could not before.

'Something happened between mother and child which enabled the child to feel understood. From the experience, the child was able to derive a sense of achievement and self-esteem.

Inseparable from this, no doubt, is an experience of being loved and of loving…' (Waddell, 2002, p 22).

In the third response, the mother is able to understand and contain the baby's distress; she is able to engage with it rather than imposing a solution or being overwhelmed by her anxiety. Waddell explains that a baby who has this experience of being understood enough often can absorb these mental functions psychically, and these become built into the child's personality structure. Having experienced containment, the baby will possess 'an inner strength of his own and is not wholly and anxiously dependent on external help to hold him together' (Waddell, 2002, p 34). The different mothers' responses described by Waddell may be helpful to understand the different parental voices seen in the participants' narratives.

It is not the core purpose of this research to make claims about how parenting style and parents' ability for containment impacted the research participants. However, a tentative hypothesis can be formulated. Psychoanalysis suggests that the early experience of a main caregiver in response to the infant may determine the individual's ability to have a healthy sense of self-worth later in life. Some of the leaders interviewed may have experienced a mother/main caregiver response that perhaps was not containing and receptive enough to provide a strong enough sense of self-worth, potentially resulting in an oscillating sense of self-worth. This, in turn, may leave them feeling overwhelmed by anxiety about feeling insufficient and unable to 'solve puzzles' that working life presents them in adulthood. Consequently, they may look to the external world for the reassurance and comfort that they did not seem to fully experience earlier on in life.

With this in mind, some assumptions can be made based on the participants' narratives. As seen earlier, Slava and Paul's parental voices have been encouraging but equally demanding. In Lennox's case, on the contrary, his mother is described as 'overworked' in the context of an 'unsupervised' childhood. These glimpses from the data into the participants' childhoods might

be interpreted as children that perhaps have absorbed their parents own anxiety rather than having the experience of being understood or their needs being met. Perhaps for Slava and Paul, as the parental voices appear encouraging as well as demanding, the experience of being held and understood took placed to a certain degree. In contrast, Lennox, who might be the most fragile in terms of self-strengths in comparison to the other participants, seems to have faced serious difficulties in experiencing containment and being understood seems to have happened with serious difficulties.

In summary, some of the research participants might not have fully experienced the containing feeling of being understood and accepted by their parents, but instead they were left to absorb their parents' own anxiety. As a result, these individuals in adulthood may have more difficulties in accepting and valuing themselves.

6.3 The creation of an 'elite group' identity as a defence mechanism

To orientate the reader, points 6.3 and 6.4 provide insight into the below research sub-questions:

- How might psycho-social aspects contribute to individuals' self-doubts?
- Where might the overlap be between the individual's characteristics and the organisational culture?
- What defence mechanisms might be developed at an organisational level in connection with self-doubts?

A significant theme that has emerged from the data is membership of an 'elite group' or an 'elite organisation' that is perceived to have superior qualities and to be exclusive. Being part or not of the elite group is closely linked to the presence or absence of belonging' category, as it refers to seeking to fit in.

So far, it has been noted that research participants experience a sense of ambivalence about their self-worth and turn to the external world for belonging and validation. Specifically, they seem to pay attention to being part or not part of a group perceived as exclusive: the elite group. At times, research participants sometimes see themselves as part of the elite group and other times doubt their worthiness to belong to it.

A hypothesis could be that the creation of an elite group identity is a defence mechanism to cope with self-doubts and feelings of inadequacy or insufficiency. The elite group notion may represent a 'collective ego-ideal' (Freud, 1921), the holding of idealised qualities. Individuals project these idealised qualities (originating from their ego-ideals) onto one and the same object, in this case the elite group or elite organisation. Consequently, they are unconsciously and collectively united by following this ideal and belonging to this elite group. Those outside

of the elite group are left holding the feelings of anxiety and inadequacy/insufficiency. These feelings are intolerable and therefore projected outside by in-group members.

To argue this hypothesis, I start by briefly looking at two key concepts: 'elite group identity' (Gill, 2015) and 'insecure overachievers' (Empson, 2017).

The elite group and insecure overachievers

The notion of a special or superior group that emerged as a theme in the data is similar to and supported by the concept of an 'elite group' or 'elite identity' that Gill (2015) studied within the professional services industry. The elite identity is partly generated by the organisational ethos (organisational culture) and partly generated by the employees' personalities (intra-psychic), creating a reinforcing cycle. Along with the elite identity comes status anxiety – apprehension or worry about obtaining or losing a position of value in a hierarchy (Gill, 2015, p 8). Being preoccupied by holding or losing a position of value in the organisation seems key for my study. The word *value* here appears in contrast to participants' ambivalence about their self-worth. Linked to earlier discussions, these leaders may be seeking a position of value in the structure of an elite organisation to gain a sense of self-worth, while they may lack or are ambivalent about their own *self-value*.

The term *insecure high achiever*, which is used to describe senior leaders in professional services firms well-known for their elite identity and high-performance culture (Empson, 2017), can also shed light into my research. Empson (2018) describes how the 'cult-culture' of these firms amplifies the insecurities of individuals working in these firms, activating their fear of being found out to be inferior to their peers. On one hand, insecure overachievers are driven by a profound sense of their own feeling of inadequacy. On the other hand, these firms attract

and recruit the 'brightest and best' from top universities, with perfectionistic and ambitious traits making the most of the individual's insecurity traits (Empson, 2017).

Whereas the work from Gill and Empson refers specifically to professional services firms, the elite group characteristics described apply to the key findings that have emerged from the research participants and organisations from a different industry (as seen in Frederik's case coming from technology). The following paragraphs explore the above concepts from a systems-psychodynamic perspective.

Elite group, ego-ideal, and defence against self-doubts

The creation of an exclusive or superior group notion can be understood using the psychoanalytic concepts of ego-ideal and collective ego-ideal. The ego-ideal[4] component of the super-ego represents a narcissistic model the individual aspires to be (Meyer, 1998). It is formed by introjected authority figures and collective ideals (Laplanche, 1973, p 144).

This ego-ideal component can also occur jointly amongst group members – according to Freud's collective ego-ideal concept – when members of a group have placed the same object as their ego-ideal. The phenomenon is described as 'a number of individuals who have put one and the same object in the place of their ego-ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego' (Freud, 1921). Members of a group, collectively, are potentially being subjected to whatever has been projected into the collective ego-ideal. In other words, members of an elite group or elite organisation may project their ego-ideal

[4] Within Freudian psychology, the Ego-ideal defined as 'a model to which the subject attempts to conform' (Laplanche, 1973, p 144), should be differentiated from the Ideal-ego – 'an ideal of narcissistic omnipotence constructed on the model of infantile narcissism' (Laplanche, 1973, p 201).

aspirations into the elite group and collectively and unconsciously identify with it. The members may align with each other to create this collective ego-ideal – an elite group.

In my research, the collective ego-ideal, represented by the elite group, appears to hold perfect idealised qualities, as described by the participants: recruiting the 'brightest and the best', being surrounded by 'amazing colleagues', being 'task masters', belonging to a 'dream team', working at their best or having the 'best people in the market'. These qualities seem to indicate idealised and omnipotent ways of thinking, where a more realistic idea of a fallible human seems removed, perhaps, as such they can be interpreted as defence mechanisms. We know that defence mechanisms are there to help individuals cope with anxiety. In the case of the research participants, their anxiety possibly originated from a sense of inadequacy or insufficiency. This dynamic can be seen particularly in Frederik's narrative on the 'dream team' and the 'keepers test':

Frederik: *'So that's this philosophy of the dream team which basically from [the organisation's] philosophy is getting the best people in the industry and putting them together in a team. And if somebody is not… doesn't fit in the dream team anymore, we let them go, right'.*

'[E]very leader kind of needs to apply the keeper test to everyone in a team… Just to make sure okay, is [a person] still the right person for this job and is he worth a salary basically. And otherwise, let's find a new [person]'.

The 'dream team' might represent the elite group and holds aspirational collective ego-ideals as well as omnipotent and idealised qualities, with no space for error or 'bad days'. The 'dream team', as a group defence mechanism, may be there to help in dealing with the not-feeling-good-enough anxiety characteristic of the group. Another set of defence mechanisms could be taking place: splitting, projection, and denial of bad qualities – the elimination of anything outside of the idealised qualities.

Rather than having an integrated view of positive and negative qualities about themselves or the group they belong to, what seems to occur here is the splitting of the positive and negative qualities of themselves and the group. An in-group member may project the positive qualities onto the elite group and identifying with them, while at the same time denying the negative qualities of themselves and the group by projecting them onto those who do not pass the 'keepers test.' These defences aim to preserve the idealised and omnipotent phantasies as well as lowering the anxiety of not-feeling-good-enough.

The need for belonging to and being validated by an elite group perhaps provides a temporary sense of fulfilment. Deceptively, belonging to this elite group may be comforting for a short while, but as evidenced in the participants' ambivalent self-worth, it does not seem fulfilling in the long term: the participants seem to be continually caught up in seeking validation.

6.4 Self-doubts and the interplay between the individual and the wider system

To orientate the reader, point 6.4 provide insight into the below research sub-questions:

- What defence mechanisms might be developed at an organisational level in connection with self-doubts in a culture of performance, targets, and scrutiny?
- How society as a system might be fuelling self-doubts?

The hypothesis that leaders who doubt themselves may turn to their work environment to gain a sense of self-worth led me to recognise the specific characteristics of the organisational context. The following characteristics have emerged in the data: competition at individual and organisational levels; comparison to others; and emphasis placed on getting results, outperforming others, and meeting high expectations (as outlined in Category 5). These characteristics create what can be described as a severe or harsh culture, the opposite of support and belonging, or at least the absence of support and belonging. Participants seem to turn to the external world (such as the workplace) for validation or belonging; however, these working environments are not particularly supportive.

Comparing the key qualities of the super-ego (scrutinising, monitoring self-performance, setting up high expectations, and demands) with the characteristics of the organisations studied, there is a clear overlap between both. Therefore, it seems that the characteristics of the super-ego functioning may be present not just in the individual (intra-psychic) but also in the organisation culture.

Several hypotheses can be formulated from this discussion. Firstly, the characteristics of the organisations' culture in this study seem to be an externalisation of super-ego features, whilst also exploiting the individuals' severe super-ego, their self-doubts, and natural willingness to work towards high expectations.

Secondly, the research participants, as members of these organisations, seem to collude with one another, creating social-defence mechanisms to cope with the anxiety and feelings of incompetency, insufficiency, and the fear of not meeting expectations.

Thirdly, the participants' tendency to experience self-doubts seems to put some of them in the position of being the recipients of anxiety or uncomfortable feelings (valency) linked to a sense of incompetence. The sense of incompetence and the anxiety attached to it appear to be part of the organisation's culture, not just the individual's intra-psychic.

Fourthly, and paradoxically, participants seem to unite themselves to create social defences to cope with the super-ego anxiety, while the social defences they create have a super-ego quality.

Finally, looking at the phenomenon at the macro-system level, the popularisation of concepts such us the inner critic or impostor syndrome and the significant media coverage of them may be a sign of current societal changes. The characteristics of current Western society (in terms of its socio-economic and political ideology) seem to fuel organisations' severe, demanding, and scrutinising culture as well as exploiting the individual's super-ego.

Key characteristics of the organisational environment

Considering that this part of the discussion focuses on organisational culture, and more than half of the research participants are working or have worked previously in professional services firms, it is pertinent to briefly mention the characteristics of these firms' environments and their employees as a data point to contribute to the argument.

Most professional services firms are partnership organisations which provide advisory services to multinational companies. Traditionally, these firms' culture is highly hierarchical. They set

expectations of working long hours to the highest standards and charging expensive consulting rates. Building from this, Empson's (2017) description of these firms' culture is in line with the organisational cultural patterns that emerged from my research findings. These firms attract and recruit the 'brightest and best' from top universities – individuals with perfectionistic and ambitious traits. These recruits are socialised into a culture that exploits their insecurities through high competition or an aggressive up-or-out policy. Employees' insecurities and fears of losing the identity that comes with working for such a prestigious organisation has become a powerful control mechanism (Empson, 2017). Referring to the Foucauldian conceptualisation of power, Empson (2017) discusses how unquestioned norms, beliefs, and behaviours become engrained within the culture, to the extent that individuals are unable to recognise the degree to which they submit themselves to doing extremely long hours and working under huge pressure. 'Social control comes from the knowledge that someone who matters to us is paying close attention to what we are doing and will tell us if our behaviour is appropriate or inappropriate' (Empson, 2017, p 119).

While the characteristics described above are typical of professional services firms, again, I noticed very similar qualities in the data that emerged from the organisations or leaders working in a completely different industry, such as technology or media, as seen in Frederick's case.

Super-ego features in a culture that exploits the individual's insecurities

The key characteristics of these organisations – described by Empson and emerging in my research – include being aggressive, demanding, and scrutinising; encouraging competition; being fast-paced; having high-standard expectations; and being results orientated. These characteristics are key features of the super-ego function. These characteristics are also

expressed through the culture in the organisation's processes and procedures, for example, as seen in participants' narratives – the evaluations carried during the performance appraisal process described by Keira, the ambitious business sales targets Paul indicates, and the emphasis on outperforming others and winning work shared by Sabrina and Slava.

Examples that illustrate the severity of organisational culture are evident in Lennox and Frederik's narratives too.

Lennox describes the culture of consulting firms as an 'organised machine', with 'clear profit targets written on the wall' and 'updates about who's performing'. Asking for help is encouraged but is seen 'undoubtedly as a sign of weakness'.

Frederik describes the organisational culture as 'direct and hard'. 'Letting people go' if they do not meet the high standards of an effective 'dream team' or if they do not pass the 'keepers test' are seen as usual procedures.

If we look closely at the core of super-ego functions, we find similar features: a demanding and scrutinising voice characterised by critical observation and examination, comparisons against high standards (ego-ideal), and shame when expectations are not met.

In addition to the examples from the participants' data, another example that illustrates the sense of the super-ego surveillance function of these organisations is my own experience, as I have been an employee in two of these professional services firms for over seven years. Clear instances of the scrutinising super-ego culture include timesheets and the firms' ambitious utilisation targets. All employees are requested to code their working hours in a software system to measure utilisation, defined as the percentage of time spent on chargeable projects (fee-earning client engagements). This system shows whether or not employees are meeting utilisation targets. Emails are circulated that highlight in red colleagues who have not met

utilisation targets. I connect this not only with the scrutinising quality of the processes in place, but also with the shaming quality of the super-ego.

With the above discussions in mind, the organisation's cultures in the research can be seen as the externalisation of the super-ego function. There seem to be super-ego qualities not only in the individual's intra-psychic, but also in the organisation.

Furthermore, these aspects of organisational culture exploit the individual's severe super-ego and their self-doubts. The company's ethos stimulates the very primal and latent question of self-worth: Am I good enough?

Empson's (2017) Foucauldian description of 'paying close attention to what someone is doing', social control, and individuals unconsciously submitting themselves to that harsh culture can also be seen from a psychoanalytic perspective as the externalisation and exploitation of individuals' super-ego qualities. Building on the Foucauldian understanding of power and control, the concept of panopticon (Foucault, 1991) is also helpful here. The panopticon is described as a mechanism designed to exercise discipline and power over those individuals labelled as *abnormal*. Foucault's notion of the panopticon was initially taken from an architectural structure arranged into spatial units in which individuals could be constantly observed. The purpose of this composition was to induce in the individual a state of conscious and permanent observation which would ensure the exercise of power and surveillance (Foucault, 1991).

Organisational culture mechanisms, such as digital timesheet inputting, measuring utilisation, and closely monitoring performance through 360-degree feedback, as seen in this research, are perhaps the contemporary version of a surveillance panopticon composition. This can also be extended to a societal level, linked to the digital surveillance and data capturing that are prevalent in society.

The constant judging gaze, which is characteristic of the panopticon as a way of exercising power and control at a social level, also takes place at an intra-psychic level through constant super-ego scrutiny. This relentless internal and external gaze might be what creates a degree of inescapable pressure on individuals in today's society. This is perhaps what makes the phenomenon at times unsustainable and distressing.

Super-ego expressed in social-defence mechanisms

A systems-psychodynamic perspective suggests that there is an overlap between what the individual brings from their internal world to the organisation and the social-defence mechanisms taking place at an organisational level. So, how much self-doubts or self-criticism belongs to the individual and how much has its place in the organisation?

Halton (2014) revisits Menzies-Lyth's (1960) paper on social-defence mechanisms through the lens of Freud's thinking on obsessional-punitive mechanisms. Halton (2014) linked the punitive and surveillance function of the super-ego with the characteristic of the processes and procedures established amongst nurses in Menzies-Lyth's case, seeing this as a cohesive unconscious force. This thinking has helped me to understand the dynamics of the organisations and participants in my research.

Social-defence mechanisms can be seen as some unconscious aspects of organisational culture, as they are group processes that help individuals contain or reduce anxiety, and can be manifested in the organisation's processes, relationships, and ways of doing things.

Research participants, as members of these organisations, seem to collude unconsciously with each other and develop social-defence mechanisms to defend themselves against super-ego anxiety, or more specifically, a sense of insufficiency, incompetence, and not meeting set targets, whether those are intra-psychic parental or organisational ones.

The type of social-defence mechanisms expressed in the culture visible in participants' narratives, as mentioned earlier, are idealisation and omnipotent mechanisms. There seems to be an unrealistic and unconscious assumption that everyone in the organisation should or can be working at their highest performance at all times, exhibited by the elite group, for example. Along with idealisation comes the denial of failure, as discussed previously. There is no space for errors in these organisations and people who do not meet expectations are 'let go': they are removed and replaced. Another social-defence is found in the ritualised tasks that focus on controlling and monitoring – timesheets, performance reviews, and emphasis on utilisation.

In organisations that pride themselves on hiring the 'best and brightest', one could wonder what happens when individuals face work challenges and the anxiety attached to some tasks, as any job could involve. What happens with feelings of incompetence or uncertainty about the task at hand in a culture where everyone has to be 'bright' and performing at their best? Perhaps, in this work environment, nobody wants to admit that the targets are unrealistic because that might make them appear weak and therefore excluded from the elite-group of 'bright and smart' task masters, letting down themselves, their colleagues, bosses, and their inner-world parental figures. Arguably, the whole set-up is collusive in order to defend against self-doubts anxiety.

Paradoxical dynamics in a socio-psychic field

Research participants are both contributors in creating the culture as well as submitting themselves to the culture, which creates a reinforcing cycle. As seen earlier, research participants seek belonging and validation in their work environment. Paradoxically, they end up working in organisational contexts that are demanding and scrutinising, often unsupportive,

and even aggressive. These individuals may feel drawn to this type of organisational culture because it reproduces their severe inner-world. There seems to be an alignment between inner and outer worlds, so the work environment replicates either the parents' lack of support or the parents' high expectations that some might have experienced in the early years. Seeking belonging, validation, and support in a severe environment seems to perpetuate two dynamics: the need for approval not being met and an aspirational ideal that also might never be met.

The super-ego-inner-world and the super-ego-organisational-culture seem to feed each other.

This undistinguishable dynamic area between the individual's inner-world and the organisation led me to associate it with Armstrong's (2005) re-worked concept of organisation-in-the-mind.

Armstrong suggests that the analytic object of organisational work is 'emotional experience', which corresponds not necessary to the individual's own psychic property but rather with a 'property of human context', a 'relational context which is both internal and external' (2005, p52). Within this backdrop, Armstrong refers to the organisation-in-the-mind as the following: 'Not the client's mental construct of the organisation but, rather, the emotional reality of the organisation that is registered in him or her, that is infecting him or her, that can be owned or disowned, displaced or projected, denied, scotomized—that can also be known but unthought' (p52).

It is perhaps in this interplay between the individual and organisation, in a playground of projections and projective identification, in the milieu between the individual's psychic and the organisation as a system, where the self-doubts seem to live. What is important and challenging is to examine this overlapping space or, as Armstrong puts it, the 'socio-psychic field' because it discloses meaning.

Participants' valency

The voluntary participation of the research participants in this research topic implies that they might be particularly sensitive about self-doubts. Their propensity to experience self-doubts seems to put some of these leaders in a vulnerable position as the recipients of uncomfortable feelings, anxiety, and self-doubts that are, perhaps, part of the system or organisational culture. This unconscious process is described by Bion's concept of valency (Bion, 1961), defined as 'the capacity of the individual for instantaneous combination with other individuals in an established pattern of behaviours – the basic assumption' (Bion, 1961 p 175). Valency is a form of projective identification where the recipient of a projection unconsciously owns and identifies with the projected feelings (Halton, 1994, p 16). Research participants seem to be (at times) recipients of self-doubts or a sense of incompetence projected from other individuals or the self-doubts 'floating' in the system as characteristics of the culture. The self-doubts in the system or those projected by others seem to awake the voices of the participants' super-egos.

These leaders' experiences of their earlier upbringing, marked by a particularly severe super-ego and their psychological composition, may explain why they voluntarily offered to support this research and their propensity to unconsciously put themselves in the projection-recipient position.

While not seen in the narratives, perhaps, at some point, these leaders may also become persecutory agents, not just of themselves but also of their teams and peers. Within this organisational landscape, there is the opportunity for some individuals to inhabit a super-ego role and become the tough, ruthless leader who sets unreasonable, unrealistic targets – targets that perhaps only the phantasies of elite, high-performing groups can meet.

The proliferation of self-doubts: what may be happening at the macro-system level?

The word *self-doubts* gathered more than 19,400,000 results in a Google search (February, 2018). Self-doubts, along with the closely related concepts of the inner critic and the impostor phenomenon, seem to be well-known by the public and discussed in the media, in non-fictional publications, and multiple sources (Harvard business review, blogs, BBC, websites, books, etc.). Actors, writers, senior executives, first ladies, vloggers, self-help books, spiritual gurus, yogis, and others are openly talking about their own self-doubts, others' self-doubts, and are giving advice on how to tame the inner critic.

The dissemination of the inner critic concept and other similar terms, as well as the academic body of knowledge on the topic may be indications that self-doubts is an issue that touches all of us. It seems we can all relate to the effect of self-doubts at some point in our lives and careers.

While writing this thesis, I have been invited to give non-academic talks on self-doubts and the impostor syndrome in the context of leadership development programmes, women in leadership, lawyers in transition, and more. This activity and attention left me with many questions: Why now? Why is this topic so prolific now? Was this issue not presented decades ago? Were the super-egos in previous decades less severe? Has something changed in us or our society? The intra-psychic level of analysis does not seem to explain the phenomenon fully.

It appears that organisational culture and society could fuel the individual's super-ego. The following paragraphs explore the phenomenon at the macro level, paying attention to what is happening at the societal level at this point in history.

Self-doubts in the context of performativity and uncertainty

Hoggett's (2017) discussions on performativity in the context of neoliberalism closely resemble the empirical findings in my research, particularly regarding how the dominant self-doubts, traditionally seen solely as part of the individual intra-psychic sphere, are fuelled by organisational and societal super-ego characteristics.

Performativity is linked to 'how management maximises the efficiency of educated labour under neoliberalism … performativity exploits the employee's desire to achieve the ideal, yoking this to target setting and performance monitoring. Everything becomes quantified, including the self' (Hoggett, 2017, p 364). Performativity also promises an unobtainable ideal which encourages continued self-improvement. It uses sophisticated performance management systems to exercise control. Consequently, '[w]e become ontologically insecure: unsure whether we are doing enough, doing the right thing, doing as much as others, or as well as others, constantly looking to improve' (Hoggett quoting Ball, 2003, p 220). There are 'outliers', 'underachievers', and 'under-performers' who become targets of disapproval and are seen as lacking the qualities required (Espeland and Stevens, 2008, p 416, quoted by Hoggett, 2017, p 368). 'Caught in the grip of performativity, the modern self hardly ever feels itself to be enough, it never measures up… Brief moments when the demand of the ideal is satisfied…' bring mostly relief 'until the persecutory feeling of not performing returns' (Hoggett, 2017, p 369).

My research findings are very much in line with Hoggett's thinking. Performativity promises an elusive ideal and exploits the employees' desire to achieve that ideal by encouraging pride and striving. The elusive ideal and its underlying intent seem very close to the elite group identity category discussed in my research. This unachievable ideal is unconsciously and collectively

created as a defence against insufficiency anxiety, which individually and collectively exploits ego-ideal aspirations. The outliers and under-performers described by Hoggett are those excluded from the elite group who are left holding the feelings of insufficiency. These individuals outside the elite group are the recipients of the unwanted feelings of incompetence, of low self-worth. They are the ones shamed in red, who have failed to add value, to meet utilisation targets, to pass the 'keeper's test' and have not met the 'dream team' ideal high standards. The outliers have failed to both their inner-world parental figures and the organisations they work in.

Target-setting, performance-monitoring, measurement, and quantification are the mechanisms to achieve excellent performance in a performative world, suggests Hoggett. This also seems in line with my research findings, which may be linked to the super-ego culture that characterises organisations in this study: a scrutinising culture that values competition, emphasises high expectations, assumes best performance, and creates pressure to produce results. The modern organisation described by Hoggett focuses on the links between performativity, continuous improvement, and the self, encouraging employees to outperform others, whether these others are peers or the market competition, through self-improvement, as we have seen in the key themes emerging from this study (Category 5).

My research findings empirically support the conceptualisation of performativity by indicating how current organisational and societal characteristics can be the ideal breeding environment for the exacerbation of the individual's intra-psychic feeling of inadequacy.

Building on discussions about how the wider context overlaps with individuals' characteristics, it is important to indicate that this phenomenon occurs in a very uncertain and shifting environment (as discussed in Category 6). Research participants experienced self-doubts at points of transition, such as changes in their roles, significant changes at operational or strategic levels in their organisation, or at points where the whole industry faced disruption.

From a systems-psychodynamic perspective, transitions and uncertainty can generate anxiety. Therefore, these leaders' role transitions are accompanied by the uncertain environment in which they are working, which probably adds more anxiety to the already pressured organisational cultures by continuing to fuel self-doubts and not-good-enough anxiety.

Creating value and feeling worthless

Adding value seems key to performativity. Similarly, adding value, financials, and remuneration were mentioned by research participants numerous times. To an extent, this could have been a secondary category. Most of this thesis's findings gravitate around self-worth. The words *worth* and *value* can be seen as synonyms. The participants' references to money may metaphorically represent something else here. Given that the research delves into personal value and self-worth, what is the role money is playing here? Usually referred to as 'compensation', is money a vehicle to compensate by bringing monetary value and financial worthiness in areas in their inner-world where they feel worthless?

Research participants exhibit a strong drive and ambition to hold *valued positions* in the hierarchy of powerful organisations and are very well-financially compensated. Equally, many of these individuals feel at times *worthless*. Is the monetary value of money charged with a different meaning? Is money used to compensate for feeling worthless?

Paradoxically, it seems that the more the system (organisational culture or socio-economic ideology) demands from knowledge workers to add value, the less these workers feel worthy. These individuals seem to struggle to find a sense of self-worth in a world that demands individuals to *add value*.

A culture that instils performativity and quantification seems to heighten the already self-scrutinising function of the super-ego, which may ultimately result in the abject self (Hoggett,

2017) being filled with insecurities, a sense of failure and shame, and a self that feels devalued and *unworthy*.

Performativity and the modern organisation seem to be a fertile ground for super-ego voices to grow stronger. This seems particularly perverse considering that individuals have an innate tendency to seek validation and approval from authority figures, whether these are external coming from the workplace or internal from their inner-world.

Chapter 7: Implications, recommendations and conclusions

This chapter summarises the main implications of the study, making inferences from the data and concepts that perhaps were not explicitly stated.

Following on from this, potential interventions are suggested as recommendations to work on the issue of self-doubts at an individual and organisational levels.

The thesis concluding thoughts are also outlined in this chapter, bringing this piece of work to an end, for now.

7.1 Summary of implications

Most of the implications that have emerged as a result of this research have directly or indirectly been argued throughout Section III. What follows are the concluding main points of the implications discussed.

Losing and finding a sense of perspective

- Inner critical voices appear to give authority to the individual and then take it away. In this oscillation individuals may lose touch with their internal personal worth, owning and disowning their self-belief, their sense of resourcefulness, and personal authority. The constant internal battle between authorising and undermining voices may lead to consuming ruminating thoughts that leave individuals feeling depleted and resourceless.
- The fluctuating nature of the phenomenon seems to remove individuals from external reality and draw them into the intensity of inner-world scrutinising dramas. As participants seem to temporarily lose sense of perspective and objectivity, they may also lose their sense of worth, authority, and capabilities.

Self-worth, place and belonging

- Belonging has been key in this research, as some of the participants expressed feeling dislodged in connection with self-doubts. The suffocating nature of the super-ego appears to leave the self with limited or no space at all, dispossessed.
- Recovering a sense of self-worth and belonging seems linked to the legitimacy of making more space for the self, for taking your *place in the world*. Often participants

seemed not being able to take their place in the world due to their own internal self-excluding voices.

- Participants may have introjected parental figures who generate anxiety and persecutory feelings. Perhaps, these internal objects have not been able to provide a 'holding' function. Consequently, good-internal objects with encouraging and supportive voices do not seem to be strong enough to contain anxiety.
- The 'someone believes in you' category becomes relevant here because it gives participants space, a home, a place in the world. What is equally important is to develop that belief and a sense of self-worth, internally, to develop good-internal objects that provide the internal experience of feeling accepted.

Healthy uncertainty versus silenced unfulfillment

- A small amount of self-doubts seems to be healthy; it seems linked to an awareness of one's own limits. It may imply that participants are able to check-in with themselves and reality rather than having absolute certainty. This is perhaps linked to a degree of emotional maturity.
- Perhaps a double-edged implication of self-doubts for this group is that their self-doubts have pushed them to accomplish much, which can be seen as positive and healthy. However, their professional accomplishments may have come at a high cost to them, a cost which sometimes appears silenced. The stress and pressure that participants are under, often is not explicitly verbalised or only admitted privately (in the intimacy of coaching conversations). What may be holding them back from expressing and admitting self-doubts publicly might be connected to the feeling of shame that makes us feel exposed under the gaze of the punitive super-ego (Hoggett,

2017). Also, this silenced distress is encouraged and suppressed by the organisational culture that seems to deny and punish weaknesses or mistakes.

Dilemma between aspirational and toxic

- The ego-ideal represents a narcissistic model to aspire to, individually or collectively. This can be seen as the drive for individuals and society to grow and develop; equally it can alienate the individual and push organisations into toxic cultures. At what point does the individual or the collective ego-ideal stop being an aspiration and become an excluding elite group or a toxic corporate culture that can be detrimental to the individual's and organisation's well-being?
- It seems that the overlap between the individual super-ego voices along with an organisational culture and a societal system that values performativity may erode the self and may leave individuals caught up in an anxious cycle. Perhaps, this seems to explain the proliferation of mindfulness and self-compassion research and practices, as they are much needed to calm down the primitive anxieties that we carry as individuals due to both our own family history as well as those triggered and exploited by a perverse system—organisationally and socially.

7.2 Recommendations

The recommendations suggested here are potential interventions for individuals, groups, and organisations affected by self-doubts. The interventions are mainly aimed at creating awareness and *space for the self,* which will hopefully lead to questioning and pushing back against the status quo. They are also aimed at generating a shift in our ways of working and, ultimately, society.

Enabling self-awareness, self-reflection and sharing experiences with others

From a systems-psychodynamic perspective, a fundamental recommendation is to work with organisations by offering leaders and employees the opportunity to reflect upon and share experiences about super-ego anxieties and their implications in day-to-day life in order to remove the silenced nature of the phenomenon. This removal can be done through one-to-one or group coaching and by highlighting the importance for individuals to develop self-awareness around the boundary between what belongs to them, their own personal history (their potential valency), and what belongs to the organisation's culture as a system. Furthermore, how individuals might be exploited by the system and/or be active contributors to the dynamic can also be examined.

Research (Vergauwe *et al.*, 2015) carried out on the impostor phenomenon suggests that workplace social support, such as coaching programmes, could be the key to working with self-criticism. Another research study (Cristea *et al.*, 2019) outlines positive coping strategies for overcoming the impostor feeling in senior leaders, which includes engaging in self-reflection and self-awareness, maintaining physical and mental fitness, and actively seeking emotional support (including talking to others, coaching, and therapy).

While situated within a different epistemological paradigm than the above studies, a systems-psychodynamic approach would agree with the above studies, as they emphasise the benefits of talking and of putting thoughts, emotions, and experiences into words.

For those cases where self-doubts are debilitating, much time and effort are needed to break the cycle and to recover self-strengths. A shift requires a careful look into unconscious motivations: parental desires versus one's own desires and aspirations. Being able to recognise the origin of a conflict enables individuals to stop repeating patterns and to rewrite the script inherited from parental voices. Developing a reflective capacity about our own ways of functioning is key.

When working at an individual level with leaders, it is important to help them to become aware that self-doubts and persecutory anxiety of not-being-good-enough are linked to not only those internal models and inner-world experiences from childhood, but also the emotional reality of the organisation that is influencing them as leaders, paraphrasing Armstrong (2005), when discussing the organisation-in-the-mind. What is important to pay attention to is; the interplay between what the individual brings from their internal world, the impact of the organisation as a system on the individual's inner-world, and the response of the individual to the system. In other words, what is crucial here is helping leaders to delineate what they are bringing from their own inner-world experiences and how they relate and respond to the system. Examining and working within that 'socio-psychic field' (Armstrong, 2005) can bring insight and meaning to leaders' emotional experiences.

The realisation that they, as leaders, may not only be carrying their own experience of insufficiency coming from their inner-world but also be recipients of what the system is doing to them can bring emotional relief. Consequently, this awareness may drive actions to contest the organisation's processes and procedures and/or the industry's cultural characteristics. Helping leaders become more aware should also address any potential impacts on their teams,

while keeping in mind that these leaders can potentially become demanding parental figures who overwhelm team members with unreasonable requests. In this way, leaders act out or externalise their internal severe super-ego voices. Helping leaders recognise this may allow them to own and understand the origins of their unreasonable demands on their teams, which can create space for support and empathy towards their teams.

Self-reflection and self-awareness, hopefully, can enable individuals to make conscious decisions about work, careers, leadership styles, the type of organisational culture they want to lead, where they wish to work, and, ultimately, decisions about life in general.

Creating space for the self

It has been a consistent pattern throughout this research that individuals affected by self-doubts place much pressure and many demands on themselves. Simultaneously, the organisational cultures where they work also place a great deal of pressure and demands on them. This combination of inner-world and outer-world pressures seems to restrict and suffocate the self. Therefore, interventions should be aimed at creating space for the self, expanding horizons, and enabling a degree of playfulness. By expanding that brief sense of relief that the modern *abject self* experiences, before the persecutory feelings return (as Hoggett,2017, describes) and transforming that brief relief into the ability to internalise and nourish the self with accomplishments. Invite the possibility of discovering their own career and aspirational ideals rather than only following parental ones, so they can come to terms with recognising their own limitations as well as their positive qualities while accepting that life is not perfect.

We have seen how participants may find and lose a sense of perspective by disconnecting themselves, at times, from their own personal authority and resources, which leads to distorted views of themselves and the world around them. Consequently, interventions should

be aimed at helping individuals become aware of this and at bringing a more balanced and integrated view, thereby recovering a sense of perspective.

Beyond the individual, leaders as change agents: dissolving the elite identity defence mechanism

As seen earlier, affiliation with an elite group can be a defence against self-doubts. It holds perfectionistic and idealised qualities that are part of a demanding organisational culture, creating a sense of exclusion as well as unrealistic standards. In this context, leaders' role can perhaps be recognising these unconscious dynamics in themselves, helping others recognise it too, and acting as the catalyst for change.

Arguably, each of us, regardless of the official hierarchy of our jobs, can become agents of change if we exercise our personal agency and authority. However, leaders of large corporations or professional service firms perhaps hold extra influence, a significant power that can function as a fundamental catalyst for change, within their teams and organisations, as well as within the industries they work in and society at large. With this in mind, a key recommendation is to work with leaders not only to help them become aware of their own individual self-critical voices but also to enable them to bring awareness and to generate change at the group, organisational, and wider system levels.

The notion of an elite group identity that emerged from this research can be used to support these leaders so that they can recognise how policies, procedures, and the organisational culture are impregnated with a divisive and toxic elite group dynamic. For example, they can call out the sense of exclusion, by acknowledging the in-group and out-group membership or the unrealistic organisational targets and expectations, and how these can contribute towards an organisational culture that demands much of the individual.

Through working with leaders in recognising these detrimental dynamics, we can, firstly, remove or minimise excessive emphasis on the individual level of self-criticism; thereby, gaining awareness about this should generate a sense of relief. Secondly, it may enable leaders to consciously and purposefully influence policies, procedures, and the organisational culture by questioning the subtle dogmas held by performativity and the expectations of 'being at our best' or 'being the brightest' at all times. As we know, these dynamics can be an omnipotent defence mechanism against self-doubts, and as such they are unrealistic and unsustainable.

In summary, by gaining awareness about how self-doubts not only are carried by the individual but also are within the system, we can, hopefully, support leaders in being the catalyst of change, helping them to dissolve the elite group defence mechanism and leading them to make different decisions and to model new roles. We need expectations for roles and organisations that are more realistic and that portray a more fallible image, recognising that we all may have bad days. From a position of power and influence, these leaders can help to spread awareness that an image of constantly performing at our best is perhaps to do with a neoliberal socio-economic system that puts pressure on performance and outputs at any cost, resulting in losing a sense of humanity.

Consultants' self-doubts

Consultants and coaches working in these settings or/and with leaders of these organisations may be able to recognise and relate to these research findings. Perhaps some of the implications and recommendations for consultants are linked to the risk of being unconsciously pulled into the self-doubts dynamics and defence mechanisms present in these organisational contexts. Consultants might need to pay careful attention to how their own self-doubts as professionals can be affected by the elite group notion and by an organisational culture that operates under the pervasive doctrine of performativity.

What may be projected onto consultants in these contexts? Potentially, consultants may start to experience doubts about their own abilities: not being good enough to help the client. In such cases, I would invite consultants to reflect on how much they are becoming the recipients of the self-doubts and the sense of insufficiency floating in the organisation or the individuals commissioning the consultancy work. Furthermore, I would invite consultants to reflect on how they may be affected by the sense of exclusion that emanates from the elite identity notion of 'you are not good enough to work for us' or the expectation to carry out a piece of consulting work that is probably unrealistic, which is likely linked to the results orientation and high performance culture typical of these organisations. Ultimately, we are, willingly or unwillingly, part of and work in systems and groups; therefore, we are not immune to being impacted by the unconscious dynamics taking place. As we know from psychoanalysis, consultants can use what countertransference can teach us about clients and about ourselves. Being receptive and aware of those self-doubts projections coming from the organisation can help consultants understand the state of mind of the organisation and the type of anxiety the employees are experiencing. Where appropriate, consultants can share this information with the client in a digested way so the client can become aware and make sense of it. This sharing ultimately may help the client find the language and name the intensity of their experiences.

A systemic issue

It is key and seems evident that the implications of leaders' self-doubts go beyond the individual. As a consequence, the recommendations and ways to address this issue must be understood not only from the individual's perspective but also from an organisational and social angle. Offering one-to-one coaching is a widely used, research-based practice for buffering impacts on self-criticism. However, as seen in this research, self-criticism is not only rooted in the individual psyche but also well entrenched in the system. Therefore, working with

the organisation as a whole is also recommended. Offering small reflective group workshops and working with leadership teams to enable their people to talk about when they feel stress or pressure, allowing them to voice when the workload or targets are unrealistic and to recognise failure as part of work and life.

From a practical perspective, designing nudge interventions can be an effective approach. One example is offering talks or sessions that raise awareness and encourage members of the organisation to speak about internal and external pressures. This can be done at different key points: when entering the organisation (on-boarding), with a promotion, or when returning after a long leave (maternity, paternity, career break).

Another practical intervention could be to rethink the way these organisations offer feedback. Using 360-degree feedback systems to drive employees' performance is a widely known practice, and one seen in most of the organisations in this study. However, neuroscience research (Buckingham and Goodall, 2019) suggests that feedback may be perceived as criticism and can trigger a fight-or-flight response. Feedback is experienced as a threat and, consequently, can inhibit growth and learning. When considering the valency or inclination of these individuals to experience self-criticism, a regular feedback mechanism that fuels more criticism may not be the most appropriate for their development and performance.

The key contribution from systems-psychodynamics is to bring the wider system perspective by looking at how the self-doubts culture, the uncertain context, and the performativity environment impact the individual.

As part of this research, a contrast between two organisational cultures has emerged: the severe organisational cultures in the world of performativity contrast with other organisational cultures that are more supportive, as there is tolerance of failure and more space for play and excitement about the tasks at hand. The comparison between these two organisational

cultures, the scrutinising versus the playful, led me to wonder about what these two distinct cultures can learn from each other. How can organisations allow space for being playful and curious? How can organisations become aware of the tipping point when aspirational ideals become toxic?

A call for an integrated approach to self-doubts?

Self-doubts are not simply going to disappear. Although they are deep-rooted in human nature, they can be managed. Coaching and a safe network of friends or colleagues can help the individual to 'catch' the inner critic. Equally, given this is a deep psychological issue, some of the suggested interventions may go beyond what coaching can offer. In some cases, a referral to psychotherapy will be needed, particularly for those who are in a more fragile state after being left holding their own anxiety as well as the system's anxiety.

The value of a psychodynamic approach is in helping with a deep understanding of the issues and enabling the individual to stay with the difficult feelings as opposed to disowning them. Consequently, the individual can consciously manage the difficult feelings better.

Perhaps when working with self-doubts, a psychodynamic approach may be lacking helpful practical strategies that follow from an understanding and self-awareness of the phenomenon. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), as well as research in self-compassion mindfulness practices, can help (Gilbert 2014; Neff, 2003). While not having the depth of psychodynamic understanding, these approaches should not be ignored as a way of offering practical strategies to support the individual's well-being. Perhaps there is a call for an integrative approach to this phenomenon, one that includes both space for deep self-understanding as well as practical ways to manage the unhelpful critical voices.

7.3 Conclusions

This research has examined the origins and consequences of self-doubts in individuals holding a leadership role at their workplace, and it has pointed out insights that, I hope, will be helpful to individuals, groups, and society.

Self-doubts and self-criticism are an inescapable part of human nature. As Meyer suggests (quote at the beginning of Section I), therapeutic work cannot be considered successful unless the individual's super-ego undergoes significant change. This highlights the importance of understanding and working with self-criticism, which my research has aimed to do.

Building from previous research and theorisations, my study has pointed out that the different components of the super-ego and the quality of the internal multiple voices may explain the oscillating nature of self-worth. This, in turn, results in a pendulum movement of owning and disowning personal authority and inner-resources.

Bion's quote at the beginning of Section II refers to looking for something out of the ordinary. Perhaps this was what I initially aimed for when starting this doctorate—something ground-breaking. A key realisation was to find out that most research findings go straight back to the core of human nature: seeking belonging, validation, and connectedness to others. Equally important, while belonging and relatedness are part of the innate essence of being human, it appears that the internal experience of abandonment and rejection (created by the super-ego) is what may be driving that need for belonging. Seeking belonging seems to be aimed at gaining a sense of self-worth that might not be fully experienced intra-psychically. In this psychological milieu, the experience of being emotionally understood, of *somebody believing in you*, seems crucial to holding a sense of self-worth.

Unexpected insights have emerged, not within the individual psychic, but at the group, organisational, and society levels. The creation of an *elite group identity*, potentially seen as a

collective ego-ideal that represents idealised qualities, has been key, as it has ironically developed as a defence against the painful feelings of self-doubts. The severe and scrutinising super-ego, while it is part to the individual psychic, can also be seen at organisational and society levels. In particular, super-ego qualities seem to strengthen in organisational cultures and societies that constantly monitor and measure performance of the self, resulting in a restricted and insecure self that hardly ever feels worthy. It is perhaps this psycho-social perspective of the phenomenon that makes a new and key contribution.

As pointed out in Alice Walker's quote (beginning of Section III) and this research findings, the most common way individuals (research participants, and many of us) doubt their self-worth is by losing touch with their own personal resources and/or projecting their resources onto individuals, groups, or organisations perceived to be superior or greater. In this unconscious dynamic, they lose their sense of self-worth by not allowing themselves to take a *place in the world*.

Inadvertently, we often listen to unkind super-ego voices that deplete our inner-personal wealth. Ironically, we often work in organisations and live in societies that exploit some of these core elements of human nature.

SECTION IV – REFERENCES AND APPENDICES

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Appendix A – Research Participant Pack

University of Essex

The Tavistock and Portman NHS
NHS Foundation Trust

Research Participants Pack

Research Project Tittle: Exploring the impact of self-doubts in senior leaders' abilities to take up a role at a point of transition

Dear Research Participant,

As informally discussed in previous communications I am carrying out a research as part of a doctoral programme exploring how self-doubts can have an effect on leaders' abilities to take up a role in the workplace at a time of transition. The professional doctoral programme I am undertaking is offered by the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust and is an accredited course validated by The University of Essex.

In order to conduct the research I am looking for participants to take part on a voluntary basis in an initial 90 minutes interview and potentially a 60 minutes follow up session.
Participants who may be willing to take part should fulfil the following criteria:

- To be working in a private sector organisations, ideally global organisations
- To hold a senior leadership role[5] in their organisations

[5] Senior leadership role in the context of this specific research study is defined as a leadership position within the top 3 layers of the organisation.

- To have been gone recently (last 3-12 months) through a role transition: for example have been promoted or have taken a new role and/or challenging project within their organisations

The interviews will be recorded and transcribed. All the data will be anonymised.

Materials emerged from the interviews will inform the doctoral thesis and anonymized aspects of the findings may be potentially presented in conferences, submitted to academic journals, be published in books, mass media and/or social media.

This research project has been approved by the Tavistock and Portman Trust Research Ethics Committee. If you have any queries regarding the conduct of the programme, please contact: Paru Jeram, Trust Quality Assurance Officer pjeram@tavi-port.nhs.uk

If you are interested in taking part or understanding more about the research/interviews please contact me.
Many thanks,

Veronica Azua
veronicaazua@yahoo.co.uk
mvazua@essex.ac.uk
07905532857

Research Participant Information Sheet

The purpose of this document is to provide you with the information that you need to consider in deciding whether to participate in this study.

This project has been approved by the Tavistock and Portman Research Ethics Committee (TREC) and the Doctoral Programme is accredited by The University of Essex.

Research Project Description and Aim

This study is set to examine the impact of leaders' self-doubts/self-criticism in their work context, at a point of role transition (e.g. after promotion or taking up a new role/new challenging project). It will explore when/how the self-doubts hinder or facilitate the taking up of their leadership role.

As a result of the findings the study's intentions are to offer insights and recommendations to support leaders and organisations.

What is Expected of Participants?

The model of research I will use is a semi-structure narrative interview process that partly explores peoples lived experiences and the impact on their career/role. This methodology uses a two stage approach to interviewing with initially open and then more targeted questions.

Taking part on this study is completely voluntary. There will be an initial 90 minutes interview and (potentially) an up to 60 minutes follow-up session for further clarification on any points raised. Interviews will be recorded and then transcribed with participant's identity anonymised (more details on this under confidentiality).

Confidentiality of the Data

Participants and the organisations that they belong to will be anonymised and remain confidential. All details which would allow identification, of the individual or the organisation, will be changed to protect confidentiality.

Considering specifically the small sample size for this research, every effort will be taken to preserve anonymity and confidentiality of participants. To achieve this, pseudonyms will be used and specific identifiable details of participants will be altered or removed.

The audio recording of the interviews will be encrypted files and stored in a secured location only accessible by the researcher. This is in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

Personal data shall not be kept for longer than necessary. The Research Councils UK (RCUK) guidance currently states that data should normally be preserved and accessible for 10 years.

I may be obliged to breach confidentiality if disclosure of imminent harm to self and/or others may occur.

Potential Risks and Benefits of Participating

Although unlikely, the partly open narrative style of the interview process may evoke uncomfortable or unexpected feelings and thoughts in the interviewee. Participants can withdraw at any time of the interview and/or the research process, if they wish. In these circumstances I would offer a follow up session which would be free of charge, would not form part of the research and, therefore, would remain separate from the overall program of research.

As a result of the research interview process participants may reach a deeper understanding of the impact of their self-doubts in their roles as senior leaders and consequently strengthen their self-awareness.

The findings that will emerge collectively from the research will contribute to a better understanding of the topic, including leaders' subjectivity and its organisations.

Right to Withdraw

Participants are not obliged to take part in this study, and are free to withdraw at any time during the first four weeks after the research interview process. Should participants choose to withdraw from the programme they may do so without any disadvantage to themselves and without any obligation to give a reason.

Research findings

Materials emerged from the interviews will inform my doctoral thesis and anonymised aspects of the findings may potentially be presented in conferences, submitted to academic journals, be published in books, mass media and/or social media.

Permission

If participants, as senior leaders of an organisation, consider that is **necessary to require permission from their organisation,** participants would need to have this in place prior to interview.

Research Participants Consent Form

Research Project: Exploring the impact of self-doubts in leaders' abilities to take up a role at a point of transition

I have read and understood the information in the 'Research Participant Information Sheet' relating to the above programme of research in which I have been asked to participate and have been given a copy to keep. The nature and purposes of the research have been explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information. I understand what is being proposed and the procedures in which I will be involved have been explained to me.

I understand that my involvement in this study, and particular data from this research, will remain strictly confidential. Only the researchers involved in the study will have access to the data. It has been explained to me what will happen once the experimental programme has been completed.
I understand that the researcher may be obliged to breach confidentiality where disclosure of imminent harm to self and/or others may occur.

I am aware that materials emerged from the interviews will inform the researcher's doctoral thesis and anonymised aspects of the findings may potentially be presented in conferences, submitted to academic journals, be published in books, mass media and/or social media.

I am also aware that as a research participants I will seek permission from the organisation I am working for, prior to the interview where necessary.

I hereby freely and fully consent to participate in the study which has been fully explained to me. Having given this consent I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the programme at any time without disadvantage to myself and without being obliged to give any reason.

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS) ……

Participant's Signature ……

Investigator's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS) ……

Investigator's Signature ……

Date: ……

Appendix B - List of figures and Tables

Figure 1 A drawing from a workshop participant.

Figure 2 Unopened postcard envelope.

Figure 3 Text written on the postcard.

Table 1 Interview questions linked to research sub-questions.

Table 2 Summary of research Participants.

Table 3 Example from the data to illustrate coding using Grounded Theory.

Table 4 List of most significant categories.