# THE RE-APPEARING ACT OF LEADERSHIP:

# AN EXPLORATION OF LEADERSHIP PRACTICE THROUGH THE LENS

# OF CULTURAL-HISTORICAL ACTIVITY THEORY

by

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# *ABSTRACT*

The notion of *reappearing* responds to a prominent article by Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a) who argued for the *disappearance* of leadership, predominantly due to their failure to look for the practices. This research focuses on this ontological orientation and undertakes a theoretical and empirical exploration of leadership practice in a Russian organisation, and provides three main contributions for the emerging field of leadership-as-practice. Firstly, I develop a framework primarily based on cultural-historical activity theory and critical realism that conceptualises leadership practice by placing agents' actions and interactions within the context of their relationships, objectives, experiences, material and non-material artefacts and wider organisational processes and structures; work that has not yet been undertaken in the field. Secondly, I provide a methodological guidance for future qualitative research design that connects ethnographically informed approaches to fieldwork with critical realist Grounded Theory techniques for data analysis process. Thirdly, drawing on the findings from my empirical research, I suggest how leadership practice is enacted within the day-to-day interactions and activities and how it affects the very context of its appearance. I conclude with suggestions for future research that draws on these contributions, as well as making recommendations for leadership development practice.

**Keywords**: leadership, leadership-as-practice, cultural-historical activity theory, critical realism, ethnography, Grounded Theory

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| | |
|---|---|
| **CHAT** | CULTURAL-HISTORICAL ACTIVITY THEORY |
| **CoP** | COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE |
| **CR** | CRITICAL REALISM |
| **GT** | GROUNDED THEORY |
| **ILT** | IMPLICIT LEADERSHIP THEORY |
| **L-A-P** | LEADERSHIP-AS-PRACTICE |
| **LMX** | LEADER-MEMBER EXCHANGE |
| **S-A-P** | STRATEGY-AS-PRACTICE |
| **SL** | SITUATED LEARNING |

# *CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION*

## *1.1     Setting the scene*

This thesis sets out an attempt to explore the practical implications of the emerging perspective of leadership-as-practice through the lens of cultural-historical activity theory and critical realism.

The name of the thesis echoes a prominent article by Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a) "The great disappearing act: difficulties in "doing" leadership" and directly responds to the arguments raised in the paper. Drawing on the lack of consistent leadership discourse in managers' narratives when asked to define the term, describe how it translates into practice and give examples of its application in their work, Alvesson and Sveningsson propose that leadership is a theoretical construct that may or may not relate to a 'real' phenomenon:

> A closer look sensitive to incoherencies and deviations from the claimed characteristics of leadership means that it dissolves; even as a discourse it is not carried through. Not even the massive presence of scripts for leadership articulation in contemporary organizations, provided by popular press and management educators, seems to be sufficient to produce coherent treatment of the subject matter. (p. 379)

On the contrary, the stance taken in this thesis is comfortable with discrepancies in individuals' accounts of leadership and the applied practice of leadership, as these two belong to essentially different social domains. Whilst conceptual constructs of leadership may and will inform individuals 'thinking' and 'doing' leadership, their

engagement in leadership practice does not necessarily translate into an ability to recall or describe his/her leadership actions or produce an accurate account of their impact and outcomes. These individuals become involved in leadership process as part of their coping with everyday activities and they are not necessarily aware of them. This assumption draws on the leadership-as-practice perspective and regards leadership as a social and relational process that unfolds within day-to-day routines resulting in increased direction, alignment, and commitment (Drath et al., 2008). I will revisit the argument and the findings offered by Alvesson and Sveningsson's research in the Chapter 6 and propose their re-interpretation in light of the theory discussed below.

The field of leadership-as-practice is relatively recent and has followed a "practice turn" in the broader landscape of organisational studies (Carroll et al., 2008). Rejecting the entitative, or individual-based, ontology that has been traditionally adopted by leadership researchers and steered the focus towards individuals, their traits, styles, skills and behaviours, the leadership-as-practice approach emphasises the importance of human and non-human interactions as the "unit analysis" and call for their exploration within organisational context (Crevani and Endrissat, 2016). The context of leadership relationships is diverse and includes, but is not limited to, the individuals' intentions, their on-going actions, past experiences and future aspirations, as well as material and non-material artefacts, assumed norms of communication and behaviour, and wider organisational structures and processes. The variety of the potential foci of attention has led to a wide range of leadership interpretations within the growing body of research.

My thesis proposes three main contributions to leadership studies, and in particular, to the field of leadership-as-practice. Firstly, the approach taken in the thesis provides an explanation of leadership emergence as part of routine organisational activities and elucidates the process of co-construction of leadership practice through unfolding interactions between individuals situated within pre-existing structures. The leadership practices and the relational and dynamic process of their emergence are illustrated empirically using examples from a particular context of a Russian organisation. It is shown how the 'small acts' of leadership emerge where agents address the appearing and re-appearing tensions and challenges of their day-to-day activities, even though they may not be able to articulate the meaning of their words and actions, and therefore it directly responds to the challenges raised by Alvesson and Sveningsson.

Secondly, this thesis offers a way of theorising leadership-as-practice using a conceptual framework developed out from cultural-historical activity theory. The framework scopes the elements of the leadership activity system, positions them against the other organising activities and explains their interconnectivity, as well as the potential causal powers and processes that affect the systems. By offering leadership-as-practice a language and a theoretical framework, I provide potential direction for future examination of organisational and leadership activities that would expand our understanding of the situated manifestations and contextual construction of leadership. Furthermore, the developed theory calls for re-assessment of the accepted leadership development practices and invites to extend our attention beyond traditional focus on leadership activity itself and to consider contextual factors

that would improve the collective capacity of agents to influence the pre-existing systems and structures.

Thirdly, drawing on theoretical and empirical research, I provide methodological guidance on the procedure of leadership-as-practice research. Despite the promise of the new perspective to bridge the gap and explain how leadership process is done on a day-to-day basis, so far the empirical investigations have been limited due to the challenges of identifying, capturing and analysing the subtle acts of leadership presented. This thesis offers an example of such empirical examination, and in Chapter 6 I reflect on the experience and propose ideas for further research. The two latter contributions emerged as part of the process of addressing the research questions within the current challenges of leadership-as-practice field, and are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6.

This chapter sets the scene for the rest of the thesis. I explain the reasons behind my interest in leadership studies and provide a summary of my dissatisfaction with the present theories of leadership. Next, I outline the promise and the current challenges within leadership-as-practice perspective and briefly describe how they are addressed. Then I provide an overview of research on Russian leadership and elucidate my fascination with studying leadership practice within this context. I conclude with an outline of the structure and summary of the chapters of this thesis.

## *1.2 Why research leadership*

I was first formally introduced to the field leadership studies during a Masters programme in Lancaster University Management School (2008/2009), and whilst working on my dissertation on experiential leadership development, I felt a growing

dissatisfaction with the mainstream leadership literature. The majority of 'traditional' leadership research focuses on the leader as the owner of the process and the source of influence, and therefore leadership development is primarily concerned with improvement of leadership skills and behaviours, and provides little account for the social nature of the process (Day, 2000). A few notable examples of 'alternative' leadership theories – such as distributed (e.g. Gronn, 2002), shared (e.g. Pearce and Conger, 2003b) and relational (e.g. Uhl-Bien, 2006) – consider some aspects of situational emergence of leadership but came short of offering a more systemic and contextually aware view of leadership process. This sparked my interest in a leadership theory that would explain the flow of dynamics of human relations enabling achievement of shared goals and creating a greater sense of purpose within a particular context of its occurrence.

Another aspect of my research interest in capturing on-going enactment of leadership process appeared as a result of the research that I had carried out in 2009-2010 during my internship at the Centre for Applied Leadership Research at The Leadership Trust Foundation. Part of the Worldly Leadership Initiative (Turnbull, 2012), we undertook a study designed to 'scratch the surface' of Russian leaders and investigate the underlying processes that drove their leadership understanding and behaviours (Takoeva and Turnbull, 2012). The empirical data included 26 interviews with business, political and social leaders. The findings resulted in identifying six leadership identities that Russian leaders appeared to swap like chameleons in their narratives, and I was left wondering how these 'snapshot' images of their psyche would emerge in daily behaviours in the office. Furthermore, drawing on the criticism that interviews as a method produce little value for understanding of the actual *doing*

of leadership (Alvesson, 2003; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a), I was interested in observing how these identities would portray themselves in leadership practice. Consequently, I embarked on a PhD programme aspiring to contribute to the extant research on Russian leadership and to investigate the interplay between the dynamics of leadership behaviours within their context. Presented with epistemological and methodological challenges of the original research questions, my focus was further shaped by the leadership-as-practice perspective (e.g. Carroll et al., 2008) and redirected to another puzzle – that of the day-to-day practice of leadership.

## 1.3     Why research leadership practice

My attention was drawn to the theory of leadership-as-practice due to its regard for leadership as a relational and collective phenomenon where leadership and followership identities are mutually constructed through on-going interaction between agents and events, and shared activities are continuously re-negotiated and re-shaped through the process of co-influence and co-construction of meaning (Carroll et al., 2008; Kempster and Parry, 2011a). However, despite the promise of allowing an insight into the re-appearing acts of leaderships, the theoretical and empirical exploration of the day-to-day practice has been so far limited due to a number of challenges that are related to the complexity of the concepts and relative novelty of the approach. Chapter 2 provides a detailed overview of the current state of leadership-as-practice field; I offer my interpretation of these challenges below.

*Challenge #1* is best illustrated by the following questions: If we assume that organisations are constituted of myriads of organising practices, how do we separate those that relate to leadership? If change is happening potentially everywhere and at

any moment, what is the leadership role in this process? Crevani and Endrissat (2016) even propose that practice-based interpretations of such organisational phenomena as leadership, strategy and coordination are similar to an extent that the same definitions can describe the phenomena if the terms are replaced in the sentences and over time they may collapse into the building blocks of a single *organising* process.

This highlights another theoretical confusion within the leadership-as-practice perspective *(Challenge #2)*: Is leadership an outcome of the collective action, its component or the catalyst? Crevani and Endrissat (2016) define the social *accomplishments* of leadership practice to be production of direction, or "collective agency in changing and setting courses of actions" (p. 42). On the other hand, Sergi (2016) regards leadership practice to be an outcome of the collective action. Although an answer to this chicken-and-egg question may be straightforward and explained by simultaneous changes at several levels of reality, a conceptual elaboration would clarify the issue.

*Challenge #3* lies within application of the theoretical definition of leadership-as-practice to the empirical research: When observing the on-going actions and unfolding routines in organisation, what should researchers look for in order to capture the leadership practice? We need to identify and single out the *units of analysis* within *relational* ontology and *dwelling* epistemology that represent the patterns that change – or the patterns of change – within them.

Finally, existent research has stressed the importance of a number of elements to the enactment of leadership practices, such as situational context, the actors, the materiality, and the impact of the past and the prospects of the future there, and

invited for further exploration of these aspects (Woods, 2016). Furthermore, there is a requirement for a new language for describing organising activities that is based on verbs and gerunds rather than nouns (Weick, 1979) and analysing the leadership-as-practice processes (Ramsey, 2016). Altogether, these issues exist due to the fact that at the moment there is no single framework that would link these factors – and this constitutes *Challenge #4*.

In order to tackle these challenges, I adapt the conceptual framework of cultural-historical activity theory (Engeström, 1987; Blackler, 1993) for organisational and leadership studies discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3. According to this framework, every action of an individual belongs to at least one activity system, characterised by a subject of activity (agent) working to achieve an objective with the use of artefacts (tools and concepts); situated within the context of underlying assumptions, community and roles and responsibilities that invisibly governs the system. These activities are layered within organisational structures, intertwined with each other and are continuously undergoing conflicts both within and between the systems. The activity of leadership emerges when individuals engage with leadership practices in order to address these conflicts, and create, modify and align the systems for a better future-oriented collaborative action. Therefore, this allows to distinguish *the social* accomplishment of leadership activity (Nicolini, 2009) by its objective, which is very similar to the direction, alignment and commitment leadership outcomes, as proposed by Drath et al. (2008).

Although the attempt to initiate a change may come from one agent, leadership practices cannot be enacted in isolation and require interaction and a collaborative effort. The agents may 'choose' from a variety of leadership practices depending on

the underlying systems that they need to address, and draw on the powers grounded in 'knowing' the activity systems in order to create joint momentum for change. The outcomes of these attempts depend on the dynamics of these structures and the history of relationships as they display themselves in organisational discourses. Therefore, in order to identify and analyse leadership practices, I propose a methodological framework where a leadership-as-practice researcher starts from within the context that initially appears as chaos of actions and interactions and navigates his/her way through the patterns. This approach is based on the philosophy of critical realism, and Chapter 3 offers an account of main arguments that I draw on. Firstly, a differentiation between the *socially real* social practices of leadership and *ideally real* theories of leadership points researchers to exploration of the manifestations of the empirical practice rather than sole analysis of people's narratives of their actions. Secondly, the assumption of stratified reality offers a conceptual way of analysing these empirical manifestations of leadership with a view to uncover the underlying causal powers that guide day-to-day activities and interactions of corporate agents and may result in changes to the existing social structures. In this regard, social practices, including those of leadership, act as a 'point of contact' and mediate between the pre-defined structures and the agency (Bhaskar, 1989) and those morphostatic and morphogenetic forces (Rees and Gatenby, 2014) that result in emergence of leadership practices. Therefore, exploration of leadership practice would involve collection of extensive data of the routine interactions and explanation of meaning and driving forces behind these interactions through analysis, interpretation and validation with the participants.

Chapter 4 provides a detailed account of my considerations for research design, fieldwork and data analysis.

## *1.4      Why research leadership practice in Russia*

The choice to base the research in Russia was driven by several factors. As mentioned above, my previous research project on Russian leaders' identities sparked further interest. In addition, I intended to capitalise on my personal connections in Moscow to source organisations that would participate in the research and grant me access to observe their day-to-day operations. My attention was drawn by the country's recent history and the political and economic changes that created a remarkable context for its leaders and the unfolding social practices within business organisations. Evidently, leadership activity has always existed in Soviet and later Russian organisations, and local leadership practices were enacted in some form, similar to any other organising context. However, introduction of the Western leadership concepts, the consequent growing awareness of the phenomenon and attention to leadership development are relatively recent events. Coupled with the drastic political and economic changes that have taken place since the 1990s, its social practices in business spheres have been subject to significant changes, thus creating an intriguing environment for answering my research questions.

Over the last 25 years, leadership practices in Russia have been exposed to a significant shift caused by transition from planned economy to an open market. In order to adjust to the new environment, directors of Soviet organisations had to embrace a range of new roles and skills overnight – "efficient managers, entrepreneurs, accurate forecasters, legal system monitors, astute negotiators, careful evaluators, accountable leaders, and self-motivators" (Ivancevich et al., 1992,

p. 43). Research has repeatedly shown that values and behaviours of Russian leaders differ from this in Western culture (Bollinger, 1994; Fey and Nordahl, 1999; Grachev, 2009) and are in the process of on-going transition (Ardichvili and Gasparishvili, 2003). The combination of 'old habits' and newly acquired learning, and the associated behavioural inconsistencies make "any attempt to decipher Russian business leadership styles an unnerving task" (Kets de Vries et al., 2004, p. xiii). This is further evidenced by the competing Soviet and Western discourses behind the Russian word *лидер* (a direct translation and transliteration of the term *leader*) as they denote both a political or a military figure with associated powers and image, and a business leader whose authority is emergent rather than position based (Takoeva and Schedlitzki, 2011).

Even two decades later, Russian leaders were still found to navigate between the challenges of 'old' and 'new' leadership discourses, to experience a different process of leadership learning from their Western counterparts and to have to accelerate development of their leader identities – learning new skills, developing networks and re-inventing stories about themselves (Korotov, 2008). The research project that I undertook at the Leadership Trust Foundation sought to contribute to the qualitative research on Russian leadership, enhanced by exploration of 'insider' and 'outsider' opinions, and to uncover types of leaders' identities (Takoeva and Turnbull, 2012). These include: (1) leader as *thinker* with an emphasis on intellectual and problem-solving abilities, as well as a strong respect for education; (2) *feeling* leader who shows strong empathy for others and appreciation of own emotions and harmony; (3) leader as *builder* who aims to create and leave legacy; (4) leader as *survivor* who is inventive and resilient but focussed on short-term goals; (5) *collective* leader who

shows strong appreciation for justice, equality and being on the same level with his time; and finally, (6) *paternalistic* leader that looks down at his followers but accepts full responsibility for their wellbeing. Each pair of these identities represent opposite ends of axes, i.e. thinker vs. feeling leader, builder vs. survivor, and collective vs. paternalistic leader, but unlike the results of a similar study investigating identities of Indian leaders, which were found to gravitate towards one of the four leadership identities (Turnbull et al., 2012), Russian respondents exhibited signs of most of the six identities in their narratives, if not all of them, which caused sudden changes in perspectives of their stories.

To summarise, Russian context may be regarded as an extreme case for learning about leadership practices; however, given it is my native language, I believe to have sufficient insight into the culture and social assumptions for a thorough analysis and for uncovering deeper meaning of individual actions.

## *1.5    Structure of the thesis*

The thesis is structured around seven main chapters that address the theoretical and empirical aspects of this research.

Chapter 1 has provided an overview of the key challenges within leadership-as-practice perspective, the background to the study and its main contributions, as well as an explanation of interest in studying leadership practices and my fascination with their exploration in Russian context.

The following three chapters address areas that correspond to the three modes of engaging with practice theory outlined by Orlikowski (2010) within the neighbouring field of strategy-as-practice – *perspective*, *philosophy* and *phenomenology*,

respectively. These aspects are not mutually exclusive and provide an insight into different areas of the practice-based view, and exploration of these areas offers a comprehensible picture of the proposed approach.

Chapter 2 addresses the *perspective* dimension of research and positions leadership-as-practice as a way of theorising and studying leadership, and sets the scene for the sensitising questions addressed in this thesis. It starts with a brief literature overview of the existing leadership theories offered through the lens of the main theoretical focus and implications for leadership practitioners and identifies the shortcomings of the traditional representations of leadership. Next, it introduces the emerging perspective of leadership-as-practice, its contribution to the leadership community and link to the extant leadership research, in particular, to those theories that regard leadership as a shared, socially constructed and relational process, and the challenges that it has faced so far. Finally, I introduce the research questions and their meaning against the current challenges of the field of leadership-as-practice.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to the *philosophical* foundations of this thesis and discusses the ontological and epistemological assumptions informed by critical realism and cultural-historical activity theory. First, I introduce critical realism as a philosophy of science that allows an explanation the causal powers and the process of leadership practice emerging as a result of continuous interplay between the agency and the structure; describe its ontological and epistemological assumptions and their implications for leadership studies in general, and its application for this research. Next, I present cultural-historical activity theory, the context of its development, main elements and research application to date; and offer a critical realist adaptation of the activity theory framework as a lens for exploration of leadership practice as it appears

within the context of day-to-day activities in organisations, Finally, I illustrate application of the proposed model through a hypothetical example of a research activity in organisation and discuss how they influence the methodological approach of studying practice.

Chapter 4 outlines the *methodological* approach to studying the phenomenon and describes the rationale behind the research design, the experience of fieldwork and analysis techniques employed in my research. I start by illustrating how the proposed means of data collection are related to the research questions within leadership-as-practice perspective and informed by critical realist philosophy of science and cultural-historical activity theory. Furthermore, I describe the activity of my fieldwork, its main elements and challenges. I conclude with an explanation of the process of Critical Realist Grounded Theory analysis and demonstrate its application on a data sample.

Chapter 5 presents the findings of my research in three sections against the backdrop of a selection of stories from my fieldwork. Firstly, I introduce the three levels of analysis through the lens of cultural-historical activity theory, which are required for making sense of the on-going organisational interactions and locating leadership practices within their context. Next, I introduce the leadership practices that emerged as a result of the Grounded Theory data analysis and describe how agents engage in collaborative leadership activity in order to change the contextual structural and interactional systems around them. Finally, I draw on three more examples of interaction in order to illustrate the enactment of these practices and the interplay between levels of activity systems and their various elements. Since the

latter stories are examples of re-occurring patterns in this team, I offer more data samples that relate to their occurrence in Appendix B.

Chapter 6 offers a discussion of the findings and the main contributions of my research and places them back within leadership-as-practice and the broader context of leadership research and development. Firstly, I re-examine the findings presented by Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a) in light of leadership activity theory and illustrate how the approach developed in this thesis can uncover previously unseen dynamics and characterisations of leadership. Next, I revisit the extant theories of leadership and reinterpret them through the culture-historical activity theory lens and interpret them as concepts that inform the activity of leadership researchers and practitioners. Then I evaluate the contribution of this research to the study of leadership practice and discuss its implications for leadership development.

Chapter 7 is the last chapter of this thesis and provides a brief account of the findings and their implications for the research questions, identifies limitations and suggests directions for the future research agenda. I conclude by summarising the meaning of the findings for leadership studies, organisational leadership practice, and my own development.

## *1.6 Chapter summary*

In this chapter I set the scene of my exploration of leadership theory and practice that will be presented in this thesis. I briefly introduced the leadership-as-practice perspective, its potential for informing leadership research and development and the current challenges it faces, and presented the overall structure of the thesis and the approach adopted in the next chapters.

# *CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW*

## *2.1    Chapter overview*

Over forty years ago, Stodgill (1974) coined the famous statement (later repeated by Bass and other notable scholars) that "there are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept" (p. 7). Academics continue to argue over the nature of leadership and the importance of its various elements even within the domineering paradigm of "tripod" ontology (Bennis, 2007) that regards leaders, followers and a shared goal as prerequisites of the phenomenon. This research draws on an alternative stance focusing on the practice ontology of leadership presented below, and develops an argument that explains why it is highly unlikely to ever negotiate a single definition of leadership due to the complexity of the process, the diverse range of leadership manifestations (Day and Harrison, 2007) and the researchers' background (discussed in Chapter 6).

Leadership cannot be seen yet one can feel its effects and consequences (Kempster and Parry, 2011b), and this illusive and 'disappearing' nature of leadership creates challenges for capturing and analysing it and produces various foci of researchers' attention. Grint (2005) describes leadership as an essentially contested concept and identifies four common interpretations of the phenomenon within the tripod paradigm. Firstly, some consider leadership to be the property of an individual and therefore search for the personal attributes and qualities of 'the leader' – traits, behaviours, and styles. Others regard leadership as a result of activity and focus on leaders' achievements and those critical actions that lead to the success. Thirdly, similar to management, leadership can be considered as a position, thus drawing researchers'

attention to the situations where leaders operate and to the formal and informal responsibilities they hold. Finally, leadership can be considered as a process, and this angle brings into scope the wider context of leadership, functions performed within this role and the relationships that emerge between the agents. From a rather contrasting perspective of the critical leadership field, it is argued that 'leadership' is a theoretical construct in people's heads rather than a real phenomenon; and since this concept may affect individuals and have causal powers, it should be studied accordingly (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a).

This thesis follows a relatively recent alternative approach to leadership that emerged following the "practice turn" (Carroll et al., 2008) within organisational studies. In accordance with the existing leadership-as-practice (L-A-P) literature (e.g. Carroll et al., 2008; Crevani et al., 2010; Denis et al., 2010; Raelin, 2011; Endrissat and von Arx, 2013; Raelin, 2016b), leadership is regarded as an immanent relational and dynamic phenomenon situated within social interactions. Building on the extant L-A-P research and the challenges identified in the field, I address the following questions on the re-appearing practice of leadership:

- How does leadership practice relate to the organisational context within which it emerges?

- How are the practices of leadership constituted within day-to-day interactions?

- How are the dynamics of leadership interactions co-constructed?

- How can the practice of leadership be theorised and researched within a single framework?

This chapter sets the scene for the rest of the thesis and lays out the terrain of leadership theories that addressed individual aspects of leadership phenomenon but have failed to address them in a consistent and contextually aware manner. Firstly, it offers a concise evaluation of the history of academic thought and its evolution from a leader-centric view to the point where leadership is understood as a socially constructed, co-created and relational process. Next, I provide my interpretation of the recent practice turn in leadership studies and present L-A-P as a categorically new leadership perspective. L-A-P attempts to complete the move from entitative to relational ontology, the beginnings of which have already been observed within the relational leadership perspective (Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012a), and to uncover how leadership is done and experienced in everyday life (Denis et al., 2010) and, thus, bridge the gaps in the existing research. The chapter concludes with my interpretation of the debates and challenges that the ontology of L-A-P presents for research epistemology and methodology, and the rationale behind the research questions address in this thesis.

## 2.2 Leadership not management

Leadership as a science is relatively young and is only approaching its centennial birthday. Although texts describing leaders and leadership can be found in 4th Century BC in China in the writings of Sun Tzu and in Machiavelli's "The Prince" in 16th Century Italy (discussed by Grint, 2010), the terms 'leader' and 'leadership' appeared in the dictionaries of English language only in the early 20th century (Rost, 1991). Furthermore, it was only in 1970s when academics introduced a distinction between the terms 'leadership' and 'management'; until then leadership was seen as

something managers *do* and the terms were used almost interchangeably (Rost, 1991).

As later explained by the theories of the Romance of Leadership (Meindl, 1995) and Implicit Leadership Theories (Lord and Brown, 2001), human beings tend to look up to individuals in power and accept them as the source of leadership. However, the origin of the open assumption that leadership is something that managers do as well as of the debate about the differences between the two phenomena is attributed to the article "Managers and leaders: are they different" published in 1977 by Abrajam Zaleznik. In this article Zaleznik (1977) presents managers as cold-hearted problem-solvers whose work is based on the assumptions of control and logical reasoning, whilst the term 'leader' denotes someone who uses their creativity and intuition to navigate through the chaos of organisational life. Several notable leadership writers have supported and popularised this approach. A frequently quoted example comes from the leadership 'gurus' Bennis and Nanus (1986, p. 21) who state that "managers are people who do things right, and leaders are people who do the right thing".

Despite the theoretical contraposition of leadership and management, it has been accepted that these are complementary processes that need to co-exist in high performing organisations. Building primarily on the work of Kotter, Daft and Lane (2008, p. 15) compare management and leadership across five areas of organisational activities: providing direction, aligning followers, building relationships, and developing personal qualities (Table 2.1) Overall, the main distinction between leadership and management processes is their relationship with change – a necessary amount of organisation, stability and consistency requires effective management, whilst leadership is essential for the dynamic change and development

for the future (Kotter, 1990). Kotter (1996, p. 21) develops this idea further in a model that portrays a leader as a key agent for organisational transformation who, thus, must engage in eight processes for effective change implementation: (1) establish a sense of urgency; (2) create the guiding coalition; (3) develop a clear vision and strategy; (4) communicate the new vision; (5) empower employees for the action; (6) form short-term wins; (7) produce continuous change; and (8) anchor new approaches in culture and practice.

| | Management | Leadership |
|---|---|---|
| **Direction** | • Planning and budgeting<br>• Keeping eye on bottom line | • Creating vision and strategy<br>• Keeping eye on horizon |
| **Alignment** | • Organising and staffing<br>• Directing and controlling<br>• Creating boundaries | • Creating shared culture and values<br>• Helping others grow<br>• Reducing boundaries |
| **Relationships** | • Focusing on object – producing / selling goods and services<br>• Based on position power<br>• Acting as boss | • Focusing on people – inspiring and motivating followers<br>• Based on personal power<br>• Acting as coach, facilitator, servant |
| **Personal Qualities** | • Emotional distance<br>• Expert mind<br>• Talking<br>• Conformity<br>• Insight into organisation | • Emotional connections (Heart)<br>• Open mind (Mindfulness)<br>• Listening (Communication)<br>• Nonconformity (Courage)<br>• Insight into self (Character) |

**Table 2.1 Comparison of management and leadership**
(Source: Daft and Lane, 2007, p. 15)

Defining leadership through juxtaposition against management has been a valuable instrument for understanding what leadership is. However, along with other writers Yukl (2013) regards leadership and management as essentially two sides of one job and provides critique of a juxtaposition approach. Firstly, empirical evidence has not supported mutual exclusivity of leadership and management. Secondly, it is difficult to imagine high performance in situations where one of them is absent: leadership is a necessary quality of an effective manager, and any leader is expected to perform

managerial tasks. This stance has long contributed to the emphasis of the 'leaders' as source of leadership and the focus on managers as likely owners of these properties.

The use of terms 'leader' and 'manager' in this thesis is based on the adopted definition of leadership. 'Manager' is a term denoting a position in the organisational hierarchy with a range of responsibilities similar to those described in Table 2.1 and the associated power to make and implement decisions. Therefore, when it seldom appears in this text, the word 'management' stands for the institute of hierarchical positions that governs the organisation. On the contrary, the term 'leader' refers to the assumed identify of those individuals who attempt (successfully or not) to engage in leadership process and initiate changes to the activities around them. Overall, this term is rarely used and normally denotes an actor in leadership process who is regarded as a 'leader' by others.

## 2.3    A history of leadership theory

The researchers have spent decades exploring leadership from a various angles and identified an array of elements that define, shape and contribute to the phenomenon, and each resulting theory appeared as an attempt to respond to the questions faced at the time within academic, social and economic contexts. While these representations have contributed to general understanding of leadership, overall we still know very little about how leadership is enacted and experienced by individuals within day-to-day activities (Denis et al., 2010), a gap that is addressed by the emerging L-A-P perspective.

Although this section follows the 'ritual' (Rost, 1991) of outlining the traditional leadership theories starting with the early 'Great Man' theories to recent discussions in the field that regard leadership as a social and situated process, my goal is not to provide a comprehensive list of all existing concepts or introduce them in strict chronological order. Rather I set the scene of leadership research landscape and present the theories through the lens of their main focus, their assumptions about leadership process and their implications for advancement of research agenda and leadership development. In other words, I analyse the theories according to their *units of analysis,* or "what is studied and focused on to produce knowledge about leadership" (Crevani and Endrissat, 2016, p. 21), and group them according to the central point of representations of leadership – leaders, followers, the relationship between the two, and collective action with the context. Although some theories can be attributed to several sections due to their diverse interpretations for research and development (for example, transformational leadership theory), they will be discussed within the context of their most common variation. Finally, rather than an in-depth review of these theories, I offer an overview that would provide enough detail to revisit them in Chapter 6 and re-interpret within the context of this thesis.

### 2.3.1   *Leadership as an activity of an individual*

The vast majority of existing leadership research, particularly produced before 1970s, views leadership phenomenon as property of an individual and regards the 'leader' to be the source activity of leadership. Research agenda has expanded over the decades to include leadership traits, skills and behaviours, but it is predominantly focussed on managers (as they hold the formal power in organisations), tends to emphasise leaders' actions and to dismiss followers' input, and is dominated by a

focus on goal achievement (Rost, 1991). Despite variations in the concepts, these theories share similar limitations in terms of their application for leadership development and research, which will be covered at the end of this section.

### 2.3.1.1 Leadership traits

The origins of the trait approach belong to the later decades of the 19th century and the theories of the 'Great man', when the attention was drawn to the 'great' men (and in some rare occasions, women) – the notable people in the military, political and social fields. At the time leadership capability was regarded as an innate quality of the individuals, and therefore researchers explored leaders' biographies, their actions and consequent outcomes seeking to identify leadership traits that guaranteed success. Although now it is accepted that leaders are both "born" and "made" (Burgoyne, 2006), the research still focuses on a variety of positive traits, such as intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity and sociability (Northouse, 2013, p. 23), and loosely splits them into two groups – those that allow individuals to attain leadership positions (*leader emergence*) and to effectively influence followers towards achievement of the goal (*leader effectiveness*) (Stodgill, 1974; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

### 2.3.1.2 Leadership behaviours and styles

By 1930s leadership researchers acknowledged the limitations of trait theories for explanation of leadership outcomes, and after World War II the attention of leadership studies moved to the link between leaders' behaviours and goal achievement (Rost, 1991; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Consecutively, the emerging theories adopted a *unit of analysis* that focussed on what leaders do and how they act in various settings, from small groups to large organisations (Rost, 1991;

Northouse, 2013). Through analysis of these situations, researchers from Ohio studies and Michigan University established two types of leadership behaviours: *initiation* or *production of structure* focussed on task achievement and *employee orientation* or *consideration* centred on fostering human relationships (Stodgill, 1974; Northouse, 2013; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). The task-focussed leadership behaviours included organising activities, such as assigning responsibilities and scheduling work; whilst people-motivated approach emphasised building trust and respect, thus improving leader-follower relationships. The central outcome of these studies was a recommendation to show care and concern for the followers as it would increase their motivation and commitment, and in turn improve work results.

### 2.3.1.3  Situational and contingency approaches

Both trait and style approaches to leadership have experienced limited empirical support (Northouse, 2013), which drove the research agenda further and led to the emergence of situational and contingency theories, mostly associated with the models developed by Fiedler (1967) and Hersey and Blanchard (1977). These two perspectives were the first mainstream leadership representations to include followers in the scope of analysis and provide guidance for managers on the leadership styles that they should adopt based followers' needs, complexity of the task and organisational structure.

According to Fiedler's *contingency* theory model, a leader should choose between a focus on task or people depending on the job, relationships with his/her followers and group power structures (Fiedler, 1967). For example, in case of a clear task and a strong leader-follower relationship characterised by symmetric power distribution, a relationship-motivated style is advised. Equally, *situational* leadership theory

distinguishes between directive (task-oriented) and supportive (people-oriented) styles and provides recommendation depending on followers' of skills and commitment (Hersey and Blanchard, 1977), guiding managers through the maturity cycle of directing, coaching, supporting, and finally, delegating

### 2.3.1.4 Charismatic and transformational leadership

The 1980 decade was marked by the end of the industrial era (Rost, 1991; Conger, 1999), separation of management and leadership functions and roles (as described in section 2.2 above) and emergence of two theories that emphasise the importance of leader-follower relationships – charismatic and transformational leadership. These events occurred as a result of a macro-economic shift that exposed American companies to competition from Asia and Europe (Conger, 1999). Managers found themselves having to deal with continuous business change and reorganisation whilst maintaining employee commitment and performance levels, which uncovered a shortage in leadership skills and presented business schools with a quest for alternative instruments of leadership. Essentially, transformational and charismatic leadership theories share a number of *units of analysis* – setting the vision and inspiration for the followers, acting as a role model and addressing followers' higher-order needs, empowerment and delegation, intellectual stimulation and meaning-making, expectations management and nurturing team's collective identity (Conger, 1999, p. 156) – and these components are perceived as central leadership activities today.

Transformational leadership approach distinguishes between three leadership styles – laissez-fair, transactional and transformational – and predicts their effectiveness in terms of impact on the followers' motivation and associated activity results. The

famous '4Is' of a transformational leader (idealised influence, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation and individualised consideration) are offered as instruments for addressing followers' needs, enabling their growth and building their commitment for goal achievement (Bass and Riggio, 2006, pp. 6-7). Charismatic leadership theory is based on the assumption that "leadership role behaviours displayed by an individual make them (in the eyes of followers) not only a task leader or a social leader but also a charismatic or non-charismatic leader" (Conger, 1999, p. 153). Two groups of factors influence whether an individual is accepted as a charismatic leader: his/her leadership qualities (e.g. ability to motivate followers with an attractive vision) and behaviours (e.g. showing sensitivity). If deemed charismatic, a leader is able to transform the nature of the followers' work by portraying it as heroic, moral and meaningful, thus creating higher commitment level and improved results of work.

### 2.3.1.5  Limitations of the leader-centred approach

The representations of leadership outlined above share common features: they are leader-centred and adopt as units of analysis those leaders' (or managers') qualities, behaviours and actions that are required to get the best out of followers; and have little regard for the contextual factors of this process. Despite the fact that these theories begin to provide an insight into why some individuals may be seen as 'leaders' or be more efficient in a leadership role, they share common limitations in application for research as well as for leadership development (drawing on summaries provided by Northouse, 2013). By focussing mostly on leaders, these representations fail to explain the link between relational and contextual elements and their mediating role in successfulness of leadership outcomes. Although some of these theories include followers in their scope of analysis, they are heavily

asymmetric and regard them merely as a factor in leaders' decision and actions and recipients of their influence. Neither do these models consider the demographic factors that are likely to influence the dynamics and quality of leader-follower relationships, such as life stage, gender, acquired education, and other past experiences. In addition, these limitations make the application of these theories to leadership development challenging. For instance, trait and transformational leadership theories focus on leadership qualities, and it is highly problematic to teach and learn particular traits.

Altogether, it is not surprisingly that leader-centric theories have found limited supporting evidence in empirical research. For example, researchers have not been able to agree on a universal list of traits that would guarantee successful outcomes in all contexts, and neither have they been able to conclusively support positive correlation between leaders' behaviours and styles and such leadership outcomes as job satisfaction, morale and productivity, nor to confirm that adopting a style that is high in both task and people orientation is most effective, as the theory implies.

This poses a strong argument for expanding leadership research agenda beyond this perspective, and the next sections provide examples of theories that have a stronger emphasis on followers and the contextual nature of leadership process.

### 2.3.2 Leadership as a relationship

Although the first proposition of the alternative approach to leadership can be found as early as 1940s in the writings of Mary Parker Follett on management and education (Follett and Metcalf, 1941; Follett, 1970), the body of research focussing on followers and the leader-follower relationship has appeared mainly since the 1970s. This section provides examples of the theories that focus on the individuals –

followers and leaders – and the relationship between them. I start by covering

follower-centric approach that emerged in response to asymmetric attention on

leaders, present leader-member exchange (LMX) theory as a relatively balanced

alternative to leadership research, and discuss the limitations of both perspectives.

### 2.3.2.1  Follower-centric approach

The follower-centric approach reverses the lens adopted by traditional leadership

research and regards followers as the source of leadership process who grant power

to the 'leader'. Therefore *units of analysis* are those attributes, cognitive and

emotional mechanisms that enable this phenomenon.

Meindl and colleagues proposed a theory named "romance of leadership", which is

based on the assumption that in the Western culture in particular, followers' attention

is drawn to the leader and his/her actions during organisational activities (e.g. Meindl

et al., 1985; Meindl, 1995; Meindl and Shamir, 2007). This creates a bias in followers'

judgement, and they tend to overestimate the causal link between leader's actions

and group outcomes. Another approach within follower-centric theories is implicit

leadership theory (ILT) (e.g. Lord and Brown, 2001; Lord et al., 2001), which is also

based on followers' individual perceptions of the image of a leader. Past experiences

form followers' beliefs about good and bad leadership, and a specific manager is or is

not recognised as leader based on a match between these normative evaluations

and his behaviour in the present.

### 2.3.2.2  Leader–member exchange

LMX is a process-based theory of leadership that is centred on the dyadic

interactions between leaders and followers, which preceded a wider perspective of

relational leadership presented below (e.g. Uhl-Bien, 2006; Uhl-Bien and Ospina,

2012). Unlike follower-centric theories presented above, LMX regards leadership as a two-way transaction, which is dependent on a particular leader and a particular follower (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Northouse, 2013). Within LMX, these dyadic relationships become *units of analysis* and are examined with the aim of uncovering factors that generate high quality relationships and should result in greater performance (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995).

LMX began with exploration of the 'vertical linkages' between a leader and each of his/her followers and patterns of role allocation within the group (Northouse, 2013). The original theory identifies two types of relationships: (1) in-group, based on individually negotiated roles and responsibilities, and (2) out-group, based on formally agreed employment contracts (ibid., 163). The prediction is that followers who belong to the in-group will normally be more compatible with the leader and show a higher mutual level of respect, trust and liking between them. The "out-group [members] just come to work, do their job, and go home" (Northouse, 2013, p. 164). Later research on LMX focussed on the link between leader-follower exchange and organisational outcomes. In particular, Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) identify that high-quality relationships have a positive impact on employee turnover, engagement and commitment, performance evaluations, and a faster career progress for the followers.

### 2.3.2.3 *Limitations of the leadership as relationship perspectives*

Although both follower-centric theory and LMX have contributed to understanding of leadership process by exploring previously unchartered territories, they also suffer from several limitations. For example, follower-centric perspectives offer a powerful explanation of the emotional and cognitive processes triggered when a leader-follower relationship occurs; however, they provide little account for the driving forces

behind the leadership outcomes. In a similar way, by focusing exclusively on dyadic relationship, LMX neglects other team members and organisational factors within the context of interactions. Equally, these leadership representations have the potential for informing leadership practice through building awareness about the factors that impact leader-follower relationships, such as previous experiences and asymmetry of relationships within the team, but they do not provide a clear guidance for improvement of these relationships.

### 2.3.3   Leadership as a social process

Growing complexity and pace of work, increasing frequency of collaborative activities within cross-functional teams, and deepening specialisation of expert knowledge have shown inefficiency of top-down and direction-setting representations of leadership. Similar to the economic shift in 1980s that led to development of transformational and charismatic leadership theories, the emerging trends of the 21st century created a need for alternative leadership theories. The rest of this chapter introduces 'post-heroic' leadership representations (Bolden, 2011) that reject a focus on the individuals and assume as a *unit of analysis* the process of shared creation of leadership and followership within the context of social interactions of multiple agents (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Bolden, 2011).

This section provides description of four eminent theories: *shared* (e.g. Pearce and Conger, 2003b), *distributed* (e.g. Gronn, 2002; Bolden, 2011), *discursive* (e.g. Fairhurst, 2008) and *relational* leadership (e.g. Uhl-Bien, 2006; Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012a). The research in this area is relatively young, the emerging theories are closely related and authors often draw on the neighbouring approaches, such as *emergent* leadership (Beck, 1981), *co-leadership* (Heenan and Bennis, 1999) and

*collaborative* leadership (Rosenthal, 1998). These theories start building the bridge from a focus on the individuals and their actions (Crevani and Endrissat, 2016) and giving "priority to the entities or social states that pre-exist relations and processes" (p. 23) to analysing the unfolding relations as they are enacted by agents in situ. Although these theories regard leadership as a process, the individual still tends to be the starting point of the research, which differs them from the relational ontology of the L-A-P perspective that will be covered subsequent sections.

### 2.3.3.1 Shared leadership

The first example of a social and contextual leadership perspective is shared leadership, a theory particularly associated with the work of Pearce and Conger (2003b). They drew their inspiration on LMX and other theories that provide evidence of successful leadership exercised by actors sharing responsibility in complex situations (Pearce and Conger, 2003a), and define leadership as "… a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organisational goals or both. This influence process often involves peer, or lateral, influence and at other times involves upward or downward hierarchical influence" (Pearce and Conger, 2003b, p. 1). Therefore, the leadership process is viewed as context-driven and portrayed through the collective activities of individuals. For instance, Heenan and Bennis (1999) describe 'co-leadership' work settings where two people perform a task that would be otherwise unattainable for one person. Likewise, in healthcare sector emergency care teams were observed enabling flexible engagement of their staff depending on the situation, which Klein et al. (2006) called 'dynamic delegation'.

### 2.3.3.2 Distributed leadership

Similar to shared leadership, distributed leadership theory calls for a more systemic approach to the phenomenon. However, whereas shared leadership is portrayed as a process of collective action emerging due to complexity of attaining the goal individually, distributed leadership assumes that agents are able to influence the direction and operations of an organisation irrespective of their level, and explores these processes. Bennett et al. (2003) elaborate on the concept of the collective action:

> Distributed leadership is not something 'done' by an individual 'to' others, or a set of individual actions through which people contribute to a group or organisation… Distributed leadership is a group activity that works through and within relationships, rather than individual action. (p. 3)

Distributed leadership researchers emphasise that "leadership is probably best conceived as a group quality, as a set of functions which must be carried out by the group" (Gibb, 1954, cited in Gronn, 2002, p. 424). Similar to shared leadership, distributed leadership approach extends the research focus from formal leadership positions to the factors of social and situational contexts, including material and cultural artefacts (Spillane et al., 2004), hence, emphasising that leadership is situated (Bolden, 2011). In addition, the importance of artefacts for enactment of distributed leadership provides a strong link with the cultural-historical activity theory (Engeström, 1987). Both Gronn (2002) and Spillane et al. (2004) refer to activity theory as a conceptual bridge between agency and structure, and this argument will be extensively discussed in Chapter 3.

### 2.3.3.3  *Discursive leadership*

Discursive leadership regards involved individuals as "agents of change" who possess "the ability to co-create the contexts to which they and others must respond – just as they might shape any other 'social reality' such as identity or legitimacy that, in turn, often vary based on how the context is being constructed in and through discourse" (Fairhurst, 2009, p. 1608). Leadership is viewed as an organising process (Hosking, 1988) set within the notion of *organisations becoming* (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002, discussed below), and thus the focus of discursive leadership shifts to exploring the processes where leadership occurs, or is perceived to have occurred, through discourse.

Fairhurst (2008) regards leadership as an attribution, and unlike psychological leadership perspectives that look for essentialising theories, discursive leadership rejects the search for essences and cause-and-effect connections and does not seek to answer the *why* questions:

> Unconcerned with the search for essences or causal connections among variables, discourse analysts instead want to know *how* a text functions pragmatically, *how* leadership is brought off in some here-and-now moment of localized interaction… What cultural forces at play define what leadership is and how it is to be performed in a particular social setting at a given historical moment…? (p. 517)

It follows that the role of language, discourse and context in shaping, framing and transforming social realities is central to this approach (Fairhurst, 2008; 2009). "Communicative practices – talk, discourse, and other symbolic media – occasioned by the context are integral to the processes by which the social construction of

leadership is brought about" (Fairhurst and Grant, 2010, p.176). In a similar vein, Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien (2012) propose a relational discursive approach to leadership that views followers as agents who interact with leaders in order to negotiate and influence organisational understandings and outcomes. Leadership is a "relational process co-created by leaders and followers in context" (p. 1024) and leaders and followers engage in the process of co-constructing through language games, or sequential patterns of control and influential acts of organising.

### 2.3.3.4 Relational leadership

Relational leadership is a relatively large area of research on leadership that broadly focuses on leaders, followers and their relationship. It originated from the early LMX research and has developed into two perspectives that differ in their starting point of analysing the leader-following relationships. The first starts with the individual leaders and followers and therefore follows the entitative ontology; whereas the second approach attempts to explore the group dynamics of relational leadership, thus assuming the constructionist perspective on leadership (Seers and Chopin, 2012). The on-going debate between the dominant entitative and relational approaches has produced a number of conflicting ideas on research, theory and development (Ospina and Uhl-Bien, 2012) and has become an important step towards an open shift towards the relational ontology of leadership.

Whilst the entitative relational approach to leadership is a continuation of the individual-based theories and focuses on leaders' and followers' qualities, skills, behaviours, and their impact on creation and quality of leadership relationships and associated leadership outcomes; the constructionist approach attempts to take into account the social context and the interplay between individuals that is embedded in

this context. In an open invitation for dialogue between perspectives (Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012a), researchers have explored "living in the moment" (Barge, 2012), group psychodynamic (Fitzsimons, 2012), critical construction of leadership (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012), and possible input from shared leadership perspective (Wassenaar and Pearce, 2012). These representations of relational leadership offer ideas on alternative interpretation of leadership from processual view; however, they tend to ground the research within the social dynamics, the discursive construction of meaning and relations and tend to neglect the broader situated context of the leadership activity.

### 2.3.3.5 *Limitations of leadership as social process approach*

This section provided an overview of a relatively recent shift in leadership thinking from individualistic to process-based approach based on the assumption that the phenomenon of leadership emerges within co-constructing of shared meanings and co-organising of joint actions. These theories offer a new leadership perspective by focussing on mutual influence and collaborative production of leadership and followership through interaction situated within the context of agents' activity rather than on the qualities and acts of isolated 'leaders' and 'followers'.

These representations of leadership are grounded in empirical research; however, shared and distributed leadership theories are constrained by their assumptions on the nature of leadership. Whilst shared leadership is expected to emerge predominantly in situations where complex objectives require collaboration between experts; the research focus and application of distributed leadership theory requires a relatively flat organisational structure and therefore is mostly restricted to school and education institutions in the UK (Bolden, 2011). On the other hand, although

discursive and relational leadership challenge the dominant research by assuming a strong constructionist view on leadership as the process of social relating and constriction of meaning, their focus is constrained by over-emphasis on interactions and talk-in-interactions. Within these perspectives, there is limited consideration for materiality and temporality of leadership, as well as for broader context and leadership outcomes. Furthermore, Ospina et al. (2012) introduce practice as an important aspect of studying relational leadership in social change context (p. 280), which I will explore in the following sections.

Additionally, due to the illusive nature of leadership interactions, these theories have struggled to offer definitive advice on leadership development. The general consensus is to focus on building the social capital of leadership (Day, 2000), or on the multiple dimensions of development of leader and follower identities (Day and Harrison, 2007), yet these recommendations rarely translate into effective organisational practices as leadership development implies stimulation of awareness of leadership processes and discourses (Kennedy et al., 2012).

## *2.4    Leadership-as-practice: tapping into the unknown*

The literature review so far illustrated leadership theory evolution from individual-based approach towards studying leadership from the contextual, social and relational representations of leadership. However, despite numerous examples of studies that seek to include more factors into analysis – actions of followers, leader-follower relationship and the impact of context on the process, the existing research has provided limited insight the real-life leadership experience (Denis et al., 2010).

Carroll et al. (2008) recently called for a "practice turn" in leadership research. This 'turn' marks the creation of a new leadership ontology, a shift from essentialist orientation on organisational entities, individuals, competencies and traits to studying the routines and practices occurring in organisations (see Raelin, 2016b, for a comprehensive review). The practice turn is also observed in other areas of organisational enquiry, such as strategy-as-practice (S-A-P) (e.g. Chia, 2004; Whittington, 2006), learning-as-practice (Raelin, 1997; Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002), coordination-as-practice (Jarzabkowski et al., 2012), and technology-as-practice (Orlikowski, 2000). In essence, L-A-P approach regards leadership as inherently relational and collective, situated and socially defined process (Carroll et al., 2008). It and invites researchers to look at leadership through the lens of lived experiences and focus on what managers and others around them really do on the day-to-day basis: "[l]eadership-as-practice is concerned far more about *where, how*, and *why* leadership work is being organized and accomplished than about *who* is offering visions for others to do the work" (Raelin, 2011, p.196).

The approach draws on a *relational* ontology where practices and processes prevail over individuals and their actions and therefore requires new modes of research. The growing body of L-A-P focuses on examining micro-level activities mainly through observations and narrative interviews in order to collect "real-time" data (Crevani and Endrissat, 2016) and exploring the causal links and resulting leadership effects with a fine-tooth comb (Kempster et al., 2016). So far, the perspective on leadership has been employed in a relatively small number of empirical cases, which tend to contribute through examining somewhat narrowly defined situations and understandings, e.g. the interplay between leaders' micro-actions and the context

(Endrissat and von Arx, 2013), the effects of those actions (Denis et al., 2010), and the importance of momentary interpretations and decisions *in situ* (Holmberg and Tyrstrup, 2010).

The field of L-A-P is relatively young, and emerging research and theories tend to vary in their exact definitions and interpretations of terms (Raelin, 2016a), and so closely resemble other theories within the processual approach to leadership that experts in both fields struggle to distinguish them (Crevani and Endrissat, 2016). In order to provide theoretical advancement, L-A-P research has drawn on the theories of communities-of-practice (CoP), situated learning (SL), actor-network-theory, phenomenology, ethnomethodology and cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), as well as other practice-based perspectives. In this section I offer my interpretation of the extant literature on L-A-P, its major contributions, potential benefits and encountered challenges that shaped the research questions that I address in this thesis. Altogether, this will lay the ground for Chapter 3 where I offer the framework informed by critical realism and CHAT that was developed in this research as a lens for uncovering leadership practices.

### 2.4.1   *The foundations of L-A-P*

L-A-P approach to leadership has emerged over the last decade following a "practice turn" that encouraged researchers to focus on process of social interactions and praxis – the everyday actions and routines in organisations – as both the context for and the source of the explanation of unfolding events (Schatzki, 2006; Carroll et al., 2008). L-A-P theory builds on several foundation blocks that include, but are not limited to, the notions of *social construction of organising*, organisational *praxis*, and *dwelling* epistemology These ideas were first applied to strategy research, where

strategising appeared as an alternative to macro-theories of strategy (for a comprehensive review see Johnson et al., 2007; and Golsorkhi et al., 2010). S-A-P assumes that organisational strategy is not 'done' merely at the top of the hierarchy through important documents written by managers and key stakeholders' decisions. These may constitute part of S-A-P routines and discourses, but organising is mainly formed by and played through the small acts of everyday coping (Chia and Holt, 2006) – the day-to-day interactions where agents co-define and co-direct their work, like the corridor chats where they make sense of the unfolding events (e.g. Jarzabkowski, 2003; Whittington, 2003; 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; 2011). In effect, S-A-P is a representation of situated construction of organisational strategy, and played a major role in development of L-A-P discussions alongside relational and distributed theories of leadership. In the following sections I will cover the main arguments that contribute to both theories and that are central to my research questions.

### 2.4.1.1 Social construction of organising

Within management literature, organisations are traditionally viewed as entities that provide stability, routine, control and order. From this point of view, an organisation is defined as "a noun, as a state, entity or condition" (Hosking, 1988, p. 148), where organisational change is an abnormal and distinct event that creates disturbance of normal operations (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). An alternative proposition is to regard organisation as a verb, a continuous activity, a social, cognitive, and political process whereby agents constantly (re-)organise themselves and others; where organisational change is an on-going and natural phenomenon and actors reweave their "webs of beliefs and habits of action as a result of new experiences obtained

through interactions" (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002, p. 570). This organising proposition is not entirely new, and over the last 25 years there have been several calls to reconsider approach to leadership and management research and embrace change as an essential condition and context of organisational life (Hosking, 1988; Hosking and Fineman, 1990; Pettigrew, 1992).

Although the two approaches refer to different ontologies of organisations, they are not entirely mutually exclusive and guide the starting positions in leadership research. Tsoukas and Chia (2002) describe the dual meaning of the notion of 'organisation':

> Organizations are sites of continuously changing human action, and organization is the making of form, the patterned unfolding of human action. Organization in the form of institutionalized categories is an input into human action, while in the form of emerging pattern it is an outcome of it; organization aims at stemming change but in the process of doing so it is generated by it. (p. 577)

Hosking (1988) identifies four main distinctions between the 'noun' and the 'verb' approaches to organisation, summarised in Table 2.2. From the traditional "organised condition" point of view, organisational structures pre-exists individuals and constrain their actions that are isolated from their context; which breaks the link between organisations and leadership outcomes (Hosking, 1988). Change is regarded as an unnatural condition with a beginning and an end, and discrepancies between individuals' values and believes are also regarded as deviations and rationalised as failures of the system.

**Table 2.2 Organisation vs. organising perspectives**

(Source: based on Hosking, 1988, pp. 149-151)

|  | Organisation | Organising |
|---|---|---|
| **Perception of influence source** | **Top-down**<br>• Organisations are structures that exist independently of activities and sentiments | **Bottom-up**<br>• Organising is inherently dynamic process where individuals continuously shape the context |
| **Perception of reality** | **Physical**<br>• Organisational structures are physical objects experienced and described by managers in the same way | **Social**<br>• The perceptions of organisational structures are socially constructed and negotiated |
| **Perception of values an interests** | **Unitary**<br>• Individuals share values and believes and are expected to act accordingly; discrepancies are explores as deviations | **Pluralist**<br>• Individuals hold different values and beliefs and make sense of them through action, negotiation and relationships |
| **Perception of individual action** | **Constraints**<br>• Individuals are constrained by organisational structures | **Choices**<br>• Individuals choose between available options based on the social order |

On the other hand, the 'verb' perspective assumes that organising is an inherently dynamic process, where individuals constantly shape their own context trough actions, relationships and negotiations, and make choices based a variety of underlying assumptions:

> Organizational phenomena are not treated as entities, as accomplished events, but as enactments – unfolding processes involving actors making choices interactively, in inescapably local conditions, by drawing on broader rules and resources (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002, p. 577).

In order to understand organisational *processes*, leadership being one of them, researchers need to adopt 'organising' as unit of analysis. Tsoukas and Chia (2002)

identify several advantages to adopting such approach. Firstly, it enables a deeper understanding of micro-processes of change in organisations by answering the questions: What are organisational changes when enacted in practice? How are the new modes of operation created, negotiated and engrained? Who is engaged in the process? Secondly, it allows researchers to uncover the dynamics of organising itself. If the organisations are a conflux of constant co-construction of social reality, does it mean that all the actions of agents are change-related, and are there established 'change routines'? They note that

> Insofar as routines are performed by human agents, they contain the seeds of change. In other words, even the most allegedly stable parts of organizations, such as routines, are potentially unstable – Change is always potentially there if we only care to look for it. (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002, p. 568)

In the process of this change, actors interact with others and with themselves, constantly reweaving their web of beliefs and habits, accommodating for the new experiences and reflecting on their status and meaning against the previously accumulated experiences.

### 2.4.1.2 The ontology of practice

The previous section introduced a new ontology of organisations that is based on the process of actors relating as the core of continuous organising rather than on the individuals' actions altering pre-existing structures. The organising approach echoes the 'practice turn' and thus contributes to bridging the gap between individualism and societism (Schatzki, 2005). A way to provide a link between the micro and the macro, to relate the individual human activity and the broader socio-cultural context where it

happens is to consider them through the lens of *site* (Schatzki, 2005), or *practice* (Whittington, 2006) ontologies.

Given relatively recent history of practice perspectives, it is not surprising that there are a few variations in the meaning attributed to the term 'practice' in the emerging literature (Raelin, 2016a). Practice may represent the explicit activities and routines and the assumptions that guide actors in situ (Kempster and Stewart, 2010), as well as the discourses that are enacted during the action (Fairhurst, 2009). I introduce terminology that first emerged in the S-A-P field, where Whittington (2006) introduced vocabulary based on three core concepts – praxis, practice and practitioners.

The meaning of *praxis* follows the Greek definition and refers to the actual activity, "what people do in practice" (Whittington, 2006, p. 619); this covers all types of interaction, talk, conversations, meetings, presentations etc. The *practitioners* are the agents (managers and others) who engage in the strategy or leadership praxis by drawing on the strategic practices. Practices are defined as "shared routines of behaviour, including traditions, norms and procedures for thinking, acting and using "things"" (ibid, p. 619). These are more or less stable institutionalised forms of behaviours and include organisation-specific routines, techniques and types of discourse, operating procedures and cultures; extra-organisational practices that come from larger social fields that the organisation is embedded in; or the societal practices. Praxis is therefore a context-specific occurrence of practices, and its enactment will vary when performed by different practitioners in different situations.

In the field of L-A-P, *praxis* is frequently replaced with a generic term *practice, which* is unquantifiable and emphasises the processual ontology of leadership. Practices are the "building blocks of organising" that are mobilised by actors and therefore

relate to the *entitative-soft* ontology (Crevani and Endrissat, 2016, p. 23); whereas practice is the "unfolding emergent dynamic" and is thus understood through the *relational* ontology. L-A-P reverses the causal links and challenges scholars' deeply rooted assumptions that leadership is something that individual managers *do* in order to direct the followers towards achievement of a shared goal (Crevani et al., 2010). The appearance of leadership is a result "of collective action and not one of its causes" (Sergi, 2016, p. 113).

Furthermore, this argument challenges the institutionalised understanding of leadership theory and separates the impressions and ideas about leadership that actors ('leaders') have and the enactment of leadership process in practice. The leadership notions pre-exist the enactment of leadership practices; and are re-constructed through individual interaction and internalisation of the new experiences. Crevani et al. (2010) suggest:

> …the empirical study of leadership should be based in a process ontology, focused on leadership practices as constructed in interactions – embedded in a cultural context where societal notions of 'leadership' are both taken for granted and under re-construction. (p. 77)

In simple words, thinking about leadership and 'doing leadership' does not equate each other (Carroll, 2016), which explains why managers may struggle to describe their leadership activities (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a) or why their behaviour will not match the interview narratives (Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006). The quotation marks act as a warning against slipping into the habit of entitative ontology that assumes continuous intentional and conscious acts of 'doing' and remind that

leadership is the process that *emerges between* the actors, structures and agency. The next section provides an account of type of interactions in L-A-P.

### 2.4.1.3 Relations within organising process

Within the organising paradigm, the relationships are not regarded as stable entities. Rather, they unfold in the present moment within the context of past experiences and transmit into the process of relating, the dialogue, and the re-negotiation of social order, meanings, roles and identities. The processes of leadership and construction of organisational social realities and identities occur in relation to other people, which echoes the constructionist approach to relational leadership (Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012a). Extending the argument between the entitative and relational perspectives, Simpson (2016) identifies three types of agency within leadership literature – self-action, inter-action and trans-action and loosely relates them to Whittington's practitioners, practices and praxis (or practice), respectively.

The leader-centric literature presented in section 2.3.1 is characterised by the "self-action" assumption and regards individuals' freedom to act in accordance with their will and does not take into account the context, relationship structures and the flow of time (Simpson, 2016). The "self-action" notion belongs to the perspective of organisation and entitative ontology where a leadership practitioner acts as an agent of change. Leadership "as a set of practices" regards agency as "inter-action" which is "re-defined in dyadic terms as "power over", or between (inter-) entities", taking on a soft-entitative and is still focussed on the entities that pre-exist process. Simpson (2016) argues that in order to adopt a relational ontology to studying leadership and to put process first, we should focus on the trans-actions:

Whereas inter-action starts with independently defined inter-actors and then investigates what happens between them, trans-actors are implicated as the ongoing, relationally relevant meanings that emerge from trans-actions. Trans-actors, whereas they are human or non-human, micro or macro, are defined within, rather than prior to, the dynamic unfoldings of trans-actional "becoming". (p. 167)

Although the trans-actional approach presents an attractive proposition for deep exploration of leadership practice, so far researchers have struggled to develop a methodology that would provide a toolkit for uncovering these. L-A-P and relational leadership theories face the challenge of clarifying the emphasis and interpretation of the social processes (Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012, Crevani and Endrissat, 2016).

### 2.4.1.4 The epistemology of dwelling

The assumptions underlying trans-actional view of organising strongly resonates with the *dwelling* approach to epistemology. Chia and Rasche (2010) describe the traditional *building* approach to research based on the *entitative* ontology, where individuals are regarded as "discrete bounded entity relating externally to its social environment and to other individuals in such a way as to leave its basic internally specific identity and agentic qualities relatively unchanged" (p. 34) and act in a purposeful, deliberate and intentional manner. In the *dwelling* mode, the world is regarded as *relational* where every actor emerges as a "locus of development" within his field of social relations (Ingold, 2000, cited in Chia and Rasche, 2010, p. 35). The majority of strategic and leadership research is constructed from the building perspective and views individual actions as based on the pre-conceptual mental representations that the researchers are to uncover through analysis of purposeful

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and planned interventions. This starting research position leads to heroic and leader-centric research outcomes.

In contrast, L-A-P takes on the dwelling mode of theorising, where "people are assumed to be intimately immersed and inextricably intertwined with their surroundings in all its complex interrelatedness. They have no privilege 'bird-eye' view of their situation and hence must act from wherever they find themselves to achieve a satisfactory resolution of their immediate predicament" (ibid, p. 38). This approach requires attention to the day-to-day activities and inter- (or trans-) actions as they unfold within organising processes. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a, 2003b) call for the 'extraordinarisation' of the mundane, inviting researchers to focus, for example, on the importance of casual conversations within the office that constitute routines of managers. In a similar fashion, Sjostrand et al. (2001) emphasise the importance of 'small talk' in organisations. The dwelling mode also has implications for studying development of leadership and followership identities through participative research engagement in leadership practice, that will be discussed in Chapter 6 in light of the findings of this research .

### 2.4.2   The developing field of L-A-P

The sections above have presented the conceptual building blocks of the theoretical foundations of L-A-P perspective. Although interest in alternative views on organisational phenomena has appeared since the 1980s, research into the qualitative and rich descriptions of subtle, mundane and casual acts of leadership is relatively recent. This change is linked to many interrelated factors, such as the changing nature of the macro- and micro- economic and business environments, dissatisfaction with the traditional representations of leadership and other areas of

organisational research, and a turn to practice studies in order to uncover the hidden "dark matter" beyond the surface of the empirical (Kempster and Parry, 2011a). Similar to the challenges faced by the constructionist relational leadership approach (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012b), such as lack of methodological clarity on how to research processes without focussing on individuals within the field already dominated by individual-based perspective, the current landscape of practice-based research is relatively narrow. As academics attempt to dive deeper into the yet unknown terrain, there are a few examples of the theoretical and empirical contributions to the field presented below.

Summarising the types of practices that embody leadership activities unrelated to individual agency, Raelin (2014, pp. 11-12) lists the activities expected to be found in L-A-P: (1) scanning for resources; (2) signalling for attention of others; (3) weaving the web of relationships; (4) stabilising the changing activities; (5) inviting others to act; (6) unleashing others' initiative; and (7) reflecting on the meaning of the past, present and future actions. Although this is an example of theoretical abstraction rather than outcomes derived from an empirical investigation, they present a good starting point for identifying potential acts of leadership within organisations.

Through analysis of historic cases, Denis et al. (2010, p. 74) propose four interrelated features of leadership practices, which are *dynamic* (implications of leadership acts in the past for the future), *collective* (complementary of leadership roles played by a constellation of actors), *dialectic* (leadership practices can cause both positive and negative outcomes in different contexts), and *situated*. These four qualities are illustrated further by Endrissat and von Arx (2013) who illustrate how leadership practices both influence and are influenced by the context of their occurrence.

Drawing on the narrative from one meeting in a software development firm, Sergi (2016) illustrates the importance of non-human interaction within organisations by combining L-A-P perspective with communicative constitution of organisations theory. He analyses the roles that one particular document plays during a meeting as a focus of discussions and its impact on the constitution of the project, agreeing specific actions, timelines, ways of achieving the targets, and making sense of various components of the project. Sergi summarises effects produced by the document by the categories of *directing, shaping* and *ordering* of the individuals' activities, and calls for a stronger focus on the materiality of leadership practices *in situ.* In a similar fashion, Carroll (2016) describes how a "koosch ball" is used as a powerful signal that informs and orders particular chain of events in interactions of a team of software developers. Through analysis of one incident in the office, she emphasises the importance of physical space (e.g. table layouts and positioning of various team members), habitual routines and artifacts for identity work.

The main methodological difficulty of conducting research from relational ontology standpoint is that of focus (Crevani and Endrissat, 2016): if it were no longer possible to focus on individuals and explore their actions, where would we focus, and how to explore the space between them? Even though relational leadership has a longer history of attempts to develop this approach, most notable examples still focus on stories of individuals' accounts about the importance of relationships, such as Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011), Offermann (2012) or other empirical examples collected by Uhl-Bien and Ospina (2012) and presented in a book on Relational Leadership (as discussed by Fairhurst and Antonakis, 2012).

### 2.4.3 Research questions: extending the field of L-A-P

The main promise of the L-A-P perspective is bridging the *how* gap in existing research through thick descriptions of organisational leadership practices that would elucidate and make re-appear the acts of leadership. In this research I aim to expand the field of L-A-P study: to address the puzzle of everyday practices of leadership within the ordinary operations, to make sense of the dynamic leadership relationships unfolding in the 'present time', thus, tackling some of the challenges that the field currently faces. The theories outlined above each present a valuable contribution to the L-A-P perspective, and there is a general consensus that L-A-P research should focus on the "subtle", "mundane", and "messy" acts of leadership. However, so far the conceptualisations of the field remain dispersed and do not align into a coherent story (Raelin, 2016a) and although researchers have frequently named the challenges outlined in Chapter 1, these have not been addressed in a consistent way. The research questions below echo the invitation from Carroll et al., 2008 (adapted from Whittington, 2003) and focus on "where and how is the work of leadership actually done; who does this leadership work; what are the common tools and techniques of leadership; how is the work of leadership organized, communicated and consumed" (p. 373). Specifically, research aims to address this gap and explore the following research questions:

- *How are the practices of leadership constituted within day-to-day interactions?* An exploration of the emergence of the leadership practice and its contextual factors and elements would directly address Challenge #1.

- *How does leadership practice relate to the organisational context within which it emerges?* Focussing on the place and role of leadership within the

organising practice would potentially address Challenge #2, and explain the relationship between the pre-existing context and the unfolding leadership interactions.

- *How are the dynamics of leadership interactions co-constructed?* Challenge #3 speaks to the issues of identifying and analysing leadership-as-practice interactions, and therefore addressing this question would enable to understand how leadership practices enacted and interplayed through individuals' actions and interactions.

- *How can the practice of leadership be theorised and researched within a single framework?* This research offers an adaptation of cultural-historical activity theory informed by CR, and illustrates how we can enquire about L-A-P without asking individuals directly about their leadership experiences, and explore a multitude of contextual, dynamic and relational elements using a single language

Answering these questions empirically requires three foci (Kempster et al, 2016, p. 242): being clear about the ontology of the research object, or the *unit of analysis;* developing a holistic methodological toolkit that would enable illumination and triangulation of the findings; and adopting a focus on generating theory. I address the first of these issues in the next chapter where I introduce and adopt a critical realist philosophy stance and interpret the role of leadership practice as transforming social structures; and comment on the modes of its exploration. Next, I propose an adaptation of cultural-historical activity theory as a method for theorising about the social practices, which are translated into empirical research in Chapter 4, and present a generated leadership theory in Chapter 5.

## 2.5    Chapter summary

This chapter covered three main topics: the landscape of leadership theory; a recent turn to alternative theories and emergence of L-A-P perspective, its promise and the questions that my research addresses. The main challenge of the L-A-P research is the methodological one: leadership practices are invisible, they are part of the organising processes, and are both a result and a catalyst of those processes. This suggests that we must explore the context of leadership occurrence in order to catch its emergence and enactment as part of dealing with everyday experiences.

This chapter addressed the first of three modes of engaging with the notion of practice (Orlikowski, 2010) and presented practice as *perspective* of viewing organisations. The next two chapters will provide an insight of my interpretation of the other two modes – *philosophical* (Chapter 3) and *methodological/phenomenological* (Chapter 4). Together, they will contribute to the interpretation of the findings presented in Chapter 5. In the next chapter I introduce critical realism as social philosophy of science and use it to adapt cultural-historical activity theory framework as a lens of looking at the leadership activity and its context. Leadership is defined as a *socially real* phenomenon that surfaces within the context of everyday practices of organisation, comprised of evolving and expanding activity systems. Consecutively, in Chapter 4 I outline research methods designed to examine the activity of leadership within the context of interactional and structural activity systems. These notions will be further explored in Chapter 5 (Findings), where I explain the emergence process, the role and the influence of practices of the activity of leadership on the on-going actions and interactions of agents in organisation.

# CHAPTER 3. CULTURAL-HISTORICAL ACTIVITY THEORY AND CRITICAL REALISM

## 3.1 Chapter overview

The previous chapter presented my research questions against the backdrop of the recent practice turn in leadership studies, and their potential contribution to the emerging field of L-A-P. It provided an account of L-A-P as a new theoretical *perspective* that regards the phenomenon of leadership to be constituted of unfolding social interactions within the organising processes, and the methodological and epistemological challenges associated with this representation of leadership. I argue that the framework developed in this thesis can respond to these challenges; and that an open discussion of the ontological assumptions and their implications for leadership-as-practice research facilitates addressing them. Therefore, the text below offers a *philosophical* account of L-A-P (Orlikowski, 2010). It introduces the critical realist philosophy of science and cultural-historical activity theory as a foundations of the framework that was used for uncovering leadership practices in my analysis.

Applying the CHAT lens to organisational research, I view organisations as comprised of multiple activity systems, folded into one another and connected into a network that may span outside organisational boundaries (Blackler, 1993; 2009). A key assumption of CHAT is the natural state of contradictions and tensions in the systems that lead to the development expansion cycles (Engeström, 1987). Building on these arguments, I will show how the activity of leadership (as agency) emerges as a result of and in response to conflicts within and between the elements of organisational activity systems.

A key challenge of leadership-as-practice perspective is the lack of clear instruments for identifying and analysing leadership practices (Kempster et al., 2016), and below I offer an adaptation of the CHAT model for analysis of the events and actions that leadership researchers may observe. I find this quote from Engeström (2004), a key figure in advancement of CHAT, to be an accurate representation of the issues that scholars face when studying organisations from practice perspectives:

> History is made of future-oriented situated actions. The challenge is to make the situated history-making visible and analysable. For studies of managerial discourse, this implies that we should look for ways of capturing how managers discursively create new forms of activity and organization. (p. 96)

In order to tackle this challenge, both theoretically and empirically, I introduce CR as a philosophy of science that provides a ontological, epistemological and methodological foundations for capturing the emergence of leadership and the process of real-time production of new forms of organisational activities within the context of pre-existing structures, agency and social practices. Essentially, it allows us to focus on causal powers that guide such emergence through situated, discursive, relational, and socially constructed practices of leadership. A framework developed from cultural-historical activity theory is a lens that enables exploration of the actions and interactions that constitute this emergence.

This chapter will be organised as follows. I start with ontological and epistemological argument of CR and present its potential value for exploring the emergence of social, co-constructed, relational and dynamic practice of leadership. Then, I offer a brief introduction of cultural-historical activity theory, its development and main principles, and review CHAT applications to organisational research and studying practice in

other areas of scientific enquiry to date. Finally, I introduce an adaptation of the framework informed by critical realism and illustrate its application as a lens for studying L-A-P in a hypothetical research situation, thus laying ground for Chapter 4.

## *3.1 Critical Realism*

The history of CR as philosophy of social science is relatively recent and its emergence is mainly associated with the names of Roy Bhaskar, Margaret Archer and Andrew Sayer. There is a strong argument for leadership research from CR perspective both in terms of a general enquiry into its intangible qualities and associated organisational understanding and emergence (Kempster and Parry, 2011b) and its potential contribution for the exploration of leadership practice (Kempster et al., 2016). In this section I will outline the main features that make it attractive for leadership research and L-A-P in particular – the interplay of morphogenetic and morphostatic forces within the duality of structure and agency, the emergent property and the mediation role of social practices, and the distinction between modes of reality – and their implications for my study.

### *3.1.1 The leadership phenomenon: socially real*

From the CR perspective, world is an open-ended system of *real* or *deep* (Fleetwood, 2005) mechanisms that constantly interact with each other. These mechanisms become *active* when they are triggered by agents' actions or other mechanisms and result in *empirical* manifestations of those structures (Sayer, 2000)*.* In learning about the world, an individual may only experience *empirical* representations of *actual* triggered mechanisms. In addition, the array of pre-existing theories and concepts, such as personal beliefs and opinions or socially accepted theories and norms, will mediate agents' sense-making of the world and consequent reflections (Fleetwood,

2005). Therefore, as researchers develop theories based on the *empirical*, they can hardly be sure that these are true representation of the *real* or even the *actual.*

In addition, there are several types of reality in CR (Fleetwood, 2005, p. 199). On one end of the spectrum are *materially* real objects that "exist independently of what individuals or communities do, say or think" (ibid.). On the other end are *ideally* real entities, a term that refers to *discursive* entities that include items like "discourse, language, genres, tropes, styles, signs, symbols… ideas, beliefs, meanings, understandings, explanations, opinions, concepts, representations, models, theories" (p. 200). Somewhere in-between are *socially real* phenomena, which are dependent on human activity, and may exist outside human identification since they are intangible. Finally, *artefactually* real phenomena, such as computers or makeup, may be a synthesis of materially, ideally, and socially real.

Kempster and Parry (2011b) state that most existing leadership research has probed effectively into the first two levels of reality – *empirical* and *actual* – however, due to the difficulty in accessing and measuring the *deep* level of leadership, the latter has not been explored yet. The first obstacle is that according to the classification above, the activity of leadership is a *socially* real phenomenon – it exists whether individuals are aware of it or not, it cannot be touched, yet it impacts the life of individuals and in turn is shaped by their actions. Leadership scholars get to observe the *empirical* manifestations of leadership practices when organisational activity systems come into a tension that triggers agents' response. Interpreting the empirical data, scholars construct *ideally real* theories of leadership, which belong to the activity of discourse (Wells, 2007), however do not necessarily have a referent amongst *deep* mechanisms. This explain why in the first part of twentieth century of industrial

business organisations and most leadership cases emerged either in politics or war-situations, and therefore leadership researchers had no choice but to focus on leaders as the 'source' of the change and hence the 'great man' theories were born. Over time and in parallel to transformation of business practices, researchers were able to identify other leadership processes, such as followership, shared leadership, the impact of context etc.

Therefore, assuming the meta-theory standpoint of CR allows us to make sense of the development of leadership thought through interpretation of the link between empirical manifestations of leadership occurrences and elements that researchers may have been able to draw on, which I will return to in Chapter 6. In the next section I present my argument for adoption of critical realist social theory for understanding of the role of social practices (of leadership) within the organising process.

### 3.1.2   Structure and agency, and what emerges between them

A central assumption of CR is the the notion of the duality of agency and structure: the existing social-cultural structures act as background for the actions of the agents, shape and define their perception, reaction and interpretation of reality; and in turn, under certain conditions it is possible that agency may mould and change the structures (Bhaskar, 1989; Archer, 1995, 1998; Fleetwood, 2005) Bhaskar (1989) states:

> [P]eople do not create society. For it always pre-exists them and is a necessary condition for their activity. Rather society must be regarded as an ensemble of structures, practices and conventions which individuals reproduce and transform, but which would not exist unless they did so. Society does not exist independently of human activity […] [b]ut it is not the product of it (p. 36).

Drawing on this interplay between agency and structure, Archer (1995, further developed in 1998) proposes a social theory that is based on the processes of morphogenesis / morphostasis. "...Use of term 'morphogenesis' to describe the process of social structuring; 'morpho' indicating shape, and 'genesis' signalling that the shaping is the product of social relations.... Conversely, 'morphostasis' refers to those processes in complex system-environmental exchanges which tend to preserve or maintain a system's given form, organisation or state" (Archer, 1995, p. 166). This warns researchers against both reducing people to society and reducing society to people. Therefore, when studying a particular phenomenon, we need to take into account human agents, as well as social structures and cultural systems; one cannot be reduced to the other:

> Since the existence of effects cannot serve to explain origins then the task of social theory cannot be restricted to the mere identification of social structures as emergent properties, it must also supply an analytical history of their emergence which accounts for why matter are so and not otherwise. Equally, once they are so, they constitute part of the social environment, and, as with any other environmental influence, we can neither assume that agents are determined by them nor are immune from them, but can only examine the interplay between the powers of the two. (Archer, 1998, p. 167)

Social reality is an open system of mechanisms, where the continuous elaboration between the agency and the structures lead to the process of its emergence and transformation. Within these structures, agents act from the assumed positions within social structures, and enact social practices that may be pre-defined by existing

contextual factors, or transformed through and as part of their interactions. In order to examine the interplay between the 'power of the two', there needs to be a

> …'point of contact' between human agency and social structures. Such a point, linking action to structure, must both endure and be immediately occupied by individuals. It is clear that the mediating system we need is that of the *positions* (places, functions, rules, tasks, duties, rights, etc.) occupied (filled, assumed, enacted, etc.) by individuals, and of the *practices* (activities, etc.) in which, by virtue of their occupancy of these positions (and visa versa), they engage … positions and practices, if they are to be individuated at all, can only be done so *relationally* (Bhaskar, 1979, p. 40-41, cited in Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2000).

This point is crucial to our study of social reality of organising. It implies that we should look for the empirical manifestations of pre-constructed social structures and real-time agency, mediated through the social practices of organising. As discussed above, these practices may include strategy (e.g. Chia, 2004; Whittington, 2006), leadership, coordination (Jarzabkowski et al., 2012), technology (Orlikowski, 2000), learning (Raelin, 1997; Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002), which are differentiated by the associated positions, relations and discourses that individuals may engage with. If we differentiate leadership practices by their social accomplishment of direction, alignment and commitment (Drath et al., 2008) this means that we would expect them to manifest in transformation of the ways other activities are accomplished. An important distinction between 'primary' and 'corporate' agents is that that former are unconsciously influenced by the structures and therefore enable sustaining them

through their actions; in contrast, 'corporate' agents have the influence to mould them independently of their awareness of the structures (Kempster and Parry, 2011b).

To sum up, approaching L-A-P from a CR standpoint implies a view of leadership practices as a mediating and relational 'points of contact' between the existing social structures and agency and exploring those occurrences where corporate agents engage in these practices and whose actions may affect the underlying structural systems.

### 3.1.3 *The processual ontology of Critical Realism*

The previous sections have positioned leadership as an *ideally real* phenomenon that *emerges* when agents engage with the social practices of leadership interacting with and moulding the (pre-)existing social structures. The concept of emergence within CR is understood both as "the process by which something comes into being" (Vincent and Wapshott, 2014, p. 150) and "the synchronic relation amongst the parts of an entity that gives the entity as whole the ability to have a particular… causal impact" (Elder-Vass, 2010, p.23). Here, "synchronic" points to the momentary relationship between the whole and its parts rather than their first appearance (ibid, p.16); "entity" is a *"persistent whole formed of a set of parts that is structured by the relations between these parts"* (ibid, p. 17, original emphasis), and "property" or "power" is an aspect of this entity "that can have a causal impact on the world" (ibid.) The emergent property occurs when a *whole* entity possesses powers that would not be exhibited by a combination of its *parts* without a "structuring set of relations between them" (ibid, p. 17).

This invites us to focus on the emergent properties of organisations ("wholes") that consist of individuals ("parts"), and the ways their positions and relations result in

impact on the emergent organising structures. As the emergent properties of social groups are defined by the momentary constellation of agents, their positions and relations, the causal powers of such groups and the transformative powers they possess are in the process of continuous negotiation, which makes CR an appropriate lens for exploration of the organising processes. Although leadership emergence appears in those moments when agents, engaging with particular social practices, have the power to influence the context, or in other words, to enable the morphogenesis, the causal powers that shape the emergence of leadership and the effects that leadership phenomenon may have on the structures, are in the interrelated on-going process.

Focussing on the empirical manifestations of such emergence of leadership practices and exploring the potential causal links that trigger these events, "surrounding" social reality and particular individual actions may allow us to uncover the deep structures and mechanisms of leadership. Thus, L-A-P studies should seek understanding of causal powers that shape leadership emergence and its effects on the process of organising within pre-existing social structures in the domains of the real, the actual, and the empirical (following the argument from Kempster and Parry, 2014, p. 86-87).

### 3.1.4 *The disappearing act and reappearing activity of leadership*

The argument presented above may be rephrased to say that the practice turn invites us to seek *real deep* mechanisms of social practices of leadership, and this thesis aims to develop instruments that can explain these. As I illustrate in the sections below, CHAT offers a potential theoretical solution through distinction between the action triangle of the activity system, the observable "tip of the iceberg" (Engeström, 2001, p. 134) that represents the action, and the invisible context it is embedded in –

the basis of the system – and other activity systems. As researchers, we *empirically* observe the *action* and through exploration of the basis may identify potential *deep* mechanisms that would otherwise stay outside of the analysis. To a certain extent, the use of this type of combination of CR and CHAT has already been presented in research in the fields of pedagogy (Wheelahan, 2007) and changes to practice of South African farmers (Mukute and Lotz-Sisitka, 2012).

This links to a potential obstacle in the exploration of leadership: due to the long history of leadership research, its popularity in business circles and general discussion in the media, not only leadership researchers are subject to mediation from the existent leadership discourses, but so are the participants. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a) talk about the 'great disappearing act' of leadership, where managers were not able to identify their own leadership work and repeated familiar leadership discourses. However, as I argued above, it is possible that agents may be engaged in leadership practices independent of their awareness of the process. I explain this contradiction by the fact that current image of leadership (*leadership theory* as an *ideally real* entity) has an impact on agents' ability to acknowledge their participation in this process. If a theory is helpful for agents' operations, they may adopt the discourse and identify with the real-world practices; however, it may also become a hindrance if a theory does not make sense within the context of their work (see CHAT discussion below for an example).

This has direct implications for the leadership research methodology. Interviewing leadership practitioners will not suffice – at its best the data will represent conceptually mediated answers to conceptually mediated questions, if not recital of the popular theories of leadership and crafting the narratives of their work through

their lens (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a; b). Rather researchers need to develop data collection methods that are transparent in their use of assumptions about the subject of research and involve direct observation of the empirical events that will remove additional barriers between the researchers and the *deep* mechanisms. Furthermore, in order to construct leadership theories that have internal validity, they need to engage agents at the stage of making sense and verification of the findings instead of treating them as a source of primary data.

### 3.1.5   Leadership theories: ideally real

The last point I make in the section is about the relationship between ontology and epistemology in CR. On the basis that any piece of knowledge is socially constructed and is subject to epistemological relativism, any theory can be more a less correct than another in its attempt to explain the causal powers of reality. For critical realists, the answer in part lies in pragmatism that states that a theory has the right for existence as long as it bears practical use for people using it (Johnson and Duberley, 2000): "we can develop and indeed identify, in a fallible manner, more adequate social constructions of reality by demonstrating their variable ability to realize our goals, ends or expectations since our practical activities allow transactions between subject and object" (p. 163).

Kempster and Parry (2011b) develop this argument through re-interpreting the terms of validity, plausibility and generalizability for CR. They use an example of transformational leadership theory (p.112) and discuss that although it provides a plausible explanation of reality in the contexts that it was derived from, it has been found to fit less well with other cultural-historical contexts. Therefore, although it meets the criteria of pragmatic adequacy and internal validity for the situations based

on which it was developed, it is not generalizable for all the settings, and their parameters and structures are less conducive to practice informed by transformational leadership theory. My research is a continuation of this tradition and aims to broaden further the scope of leadership research. I attempt to be clear about the assumptions made during the research and to provide a plausible explanation of the data, and verify its validity and pragmatic adequacy through conversations with the participants. However, testing for the criterion of generalizability of the explanation of deep processes of L-A-P remains outside the scope of this study.

### 3.1.6 Conclusion: the promise of Critical Realism for leadership-as-practice

In this section I presented an argument for exploration of leadership practice through the lens of critical realist philosophy of science. Firstly, CR offers a view where the differentiation between the *socially real* social practices of leadership and *ideally real* theories of leadership invites researchers to explore the meanings and mechanisms behind the manifestations of the empirical practice rather than sole analysis of individuals' narratives of their actions. Secondly, the assumption of stratified reality offers a conceptual way of analysing these empirical manifestations in order to uncover the underlying causal powers that guide day-to-day activities and interactions of corporate agents that may result in changes to the existing social structures. Thirdly, the emergent property of leadership invites us to investigate both the process of leadership appearance caused by particular actions and events in its content and the effects it may have on the structures. In this regard, the social practices, including those of leadership, act as a 'point of contact' and mediate between the pre-defined structures and the agency (Bhaskar, 1989) and those morphostatic and morphogenetic forces (Rees and Gatenby, 2014) that may enable

or disable a transformation. Therefore, the methodology for exploration of leadership practice would involve collection of extensive data of the routine interactions and explanation of meaning and driving forces behind these interactions through analysis, interpretation and validation with the participants.

As discussed in Chapter 1, one of the key challenges within L-A-P is a methodological one, and although CR offers philosophical foundations that allow for distinction of leadership practices from the other social practices, and their role within the process of social change, it does not provide a direct framework for exploration of social activities. In order to tackle this challenge, I introduce a method based on cultural-historical activity theory introduced in the next section. Although CHAT is traditionally associated with social constructionist tradition, the benefits of its combination with CR have been considered on several occasions (Wheelahan, 2007; Mukute and Lotz-Sisitka, 2012; Nunez, 2013); and I will point below to the adaptations of CHAT features that make the framework particularly compatible with and useful for studying L-A-P from CR perspective.

Before I move forward, it is important to note that by introducing CHAT to studying L-A-P, I do not aim to develop another leadership theory. Neither do I seek to prioritise one view of leadership over the other. Rather, I develop a framework for analysis of leadership practices that would allow investigation of the process through which agents constantly co-negotiate, co-influence and co-direct their day-to-day activities within situated cultural-historical context. In other words, I offer a view on L-A-P where the activity of leadership is embedded in the broader organising processes, structures and interactions.

## *3.2 Cultural-Historical Activity Theory*

The term 'Cultural-Historical Activity Theory' overarches a wide range of theories concerned with the developmental processes of practical social activities (Sannino et al., 2009). Originating in the Soviet Union, it became known in the in the West after the 1970s and has since received growing attention, primarily in the fields of education and information systems. The use of CHAT in management research is mostly associated with the works of Yrjö Engeström and Frank Blackler (e.g. Engeström, 1987; Blackler, 1993; Engeström et al., 1999; Blackler, 2009). Although it has been shown that CHAT is a suitable instrument for uncovering organisational studies (e.g. Blackler, 1993; 2009), strategic practices (e.g. Jarzabkowski, 2003), HRM / HRD practices (e.g. Ardichvili, 2003; Fenwick, 2006; Gvaramadze, 2008), and organisational and individual learning (e.g. Engeström et al., 2007; Schulz and Geithner, 2010), it has not been applied to the leadership studies of practice.

### *3.2.1 The origins of CHAT*

There are three notions that remain central in the array of interpretations and adaptations of CHAT and that are principal to my argument:

- Every activity has an object and a purpose, by which it can be identified and distinguished (Leontiev, cited in Foot, 2001, p. 60);

- The relationship between the subject and object of activity is mediated through various material and non-material artefacts and are situated in a cultural-historical context (Engeström, 1987, pp. 6-7); and

- The activity systems go through developmental expansion cycles driven by tensions and contradictions within and between themselves (ibid.).

These assumptions were first developed in the USSR in the 1930s, when Lev

Vygotsky took on the task of developing a sociological and psychological theory

independent from the Western school of thought. Drawing inspiration from Marxist

ideas, he based his theory on the thesis that human nature is determined and

continuously changed through productive activity. Engeström (1987) describes the

combination of object, subject and mediating artefacts of activity as the 'first

generation' model of activity theory, represented in Figure 3.1 below: the response

(R) is not a simple reaction to the stimulus (S), but is mediated through a cultural

component (X).
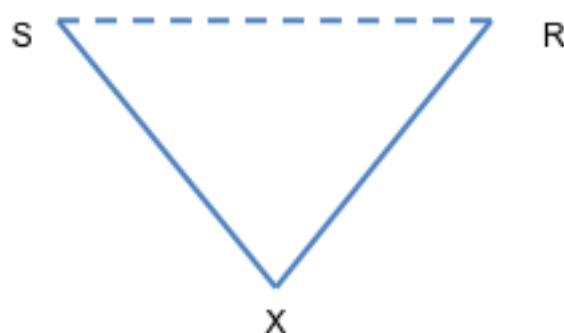


**Figure 3.1 The mediated act – first generation of CHAT**
(Source: adapted from Vygotsky, 1986, p. 62)

Engeström's (1987) interpretation of this argument talks directly to the duality of

agency and structure within Critical Realism, their co-dependence and co-influence:

> …the insertion of cultural artifacts into human actions was revolutionary in that
>
> the basic unit of analysis now overcame the split between the Cartesian
>
> individual and the untouchable societal structure. The individual could no longer
>
> be understood without his/her cultural means; and the society could no longer

be understood without the agency of individuals who use and produce artifacts. (p. 5).

Current representations of CHAT are particularly associated with the work of Yrjo Engeström, a key figure in the field since 1980s. After Vygotsky's death in 1934, his writing and ideas were developed by the Soviet thinkers for decades, but they only became known in the West after exchange programmes in the 1960s, and the translations of the texts in English in the late 1970s. For example, 'second generation' activity theory (Figure 3.2 below) that appeared in Engeström's publications in 1985 is frequently attributed to Leontiev's development of the Vygotsky's action triangle (Figure 3.1), where the focus shifts from a single action to an activity system with a hidden motive situated within the context. However, Sannino (2011) states that the model cannot by reduced to Engeström's extension of Vygotsky's representation through readings of Leontiev and is a result of additional extensive theoretical research. In my analysis I draw mostly on Engeström's theory, as well as its later developments by other scholars as I found them more applicable for studying L-A-P.

### 3.2.2   Second and third generation activity systems

Figure 3.2 depicts the 'second generation' activity system (as interpreted by Kain and Wardle, 2012) and shows the upper triangle of action (object, subject, and tool / artefacts) situated within the basis of rules, community and division of labour (Engeström, 1999, pp. 30-31). The immediate object of the activity is subordinate to a more general long-term objective and provides motivation for the actions of the subjects. The basis of the activity (three bottom elements) forms its context, as it is a result of past actions and at any given moment pre-exists the current actions: it is not

necessarily directly visible during the action and it bears an impact on the upper triangle of the system.

The arrows represent the mediating relationship between the elements: the activity of the subject is mediated by the artefacts (echoing Vygotsky's original thesis); the impact of community on the subject is mediated through the rules that they have to adhere to, and on the object through the agreed division of labour, and so on.
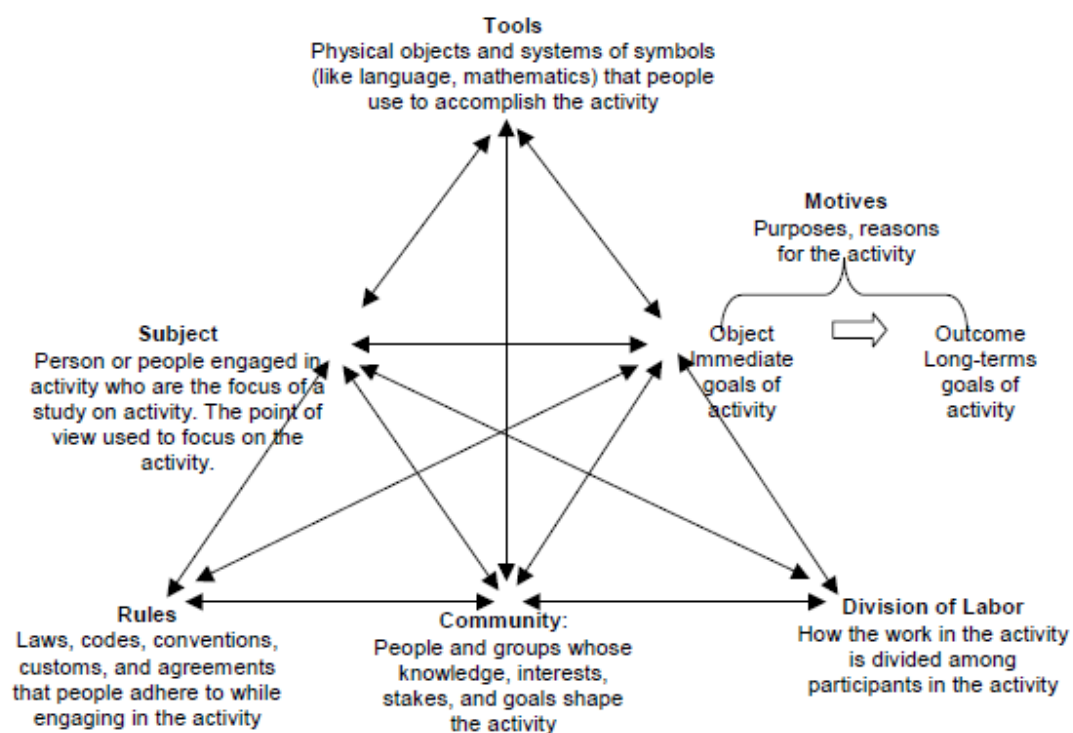


**Figure 3.2 Second generation activity system**
(Source: Kain and Wardle, 2012)

The 'third generation' of CHAT includes several systems with similar objects of activity (Engeström et al., 1999). In an organisational context these may be two adjacent teams that have similar targets, working together on the same piece of software; or finance departments in two organisations that are engaged in the same cost-cutting exercise. This highlights CHAT's perspective on organisations as

consisting of several interrelated activity systems and networks (Blackler et al., 2000), each with associated subjects and objects of activity, specific tools and mediating concepts, set within a broader community.

It is possible to isolate an activity system by its object and motivation behind it and thus is "a unit of analysis for understanding a larger flow of human life" (Foot, 2001, p. 60). Engeström et al. (2007) note that in the modern context objects become increasingly fragmented, short-term, and difficult to identify; and at the global scale the may turn into 'runaway objects' that are rarely under someone's control and have far-reaching and unexpected effects (Engeström, 2009, p. 204). Engeström (2009) develops the argument:

> Objects are concerns; they are generators and foci of attention, motivation, effort, and meaning. Through their activities, people constantly change and create new objects. The new objects are often not intentional products of a single activity but unintended consequences of multiple activities. (ibid.)

All day-to-day practices and actions represent processes that are subordinate to a particular object and activity system. Therefore, in order to make full sense of the agents' activities, we need to dig deeper into the meaning of their work, attempt to investigate the elements of these systems and in particular the contextual elements that may be invisible to the observers or the subjects of the system, and build understanding of the complex interrelated networks.

### 3.2.3   *Expansion of activity systems*

Activity systems are not static structures, rather they are dynamic entities that go through expansion development cycles and are constantly re-constructed through

interactions. Engeström (1987, pp. 102-103) identifies four kinds of contradictions and explains them as historically accumulated tensions within and between activity systems, which brings in the notion of time and context:

- The first level of contradiction occurs within any element of a given activity system and follows from the (Marxist) assumptions of discrepancy between the exchange value and the use value in capitalist socioeconomic formations. For example, if a particular tool, say, a piece of software was designed in the past, its value to the author will be different from the value other members of the system attribute to it.

- The second contradiction emerges directly between the elements of an activity system. For example, when an old piece of software is replaced by a new system, it may contradict the current division of labour structure and will hence require a change in the business process.

- The third type of contradiction arises between the new and the old elements of the activity. Continuing with the example above, if a new (more advanced) business process is introduced, it may happen that there will be two activity systems operating at the same time, and the new and the old ways of working will collide.

- Finally, the forth type of contradictions happens between the systems. The next step in the above scenario involves a third party that uses the same (old and new) software, and their ideas on how the business process differs from the one under consideration.

According to CHAT, these tensions are the primary cause for expansive learning, whereby the systems develop, evolve and grow; and these principles have been used extensively for studies of organisational learning (Blackler et al., 1999; Engeström, 2001; Greig et al., 2012). Engeström (1987) states that "the expansive begins with individuals subjects questioning the accepted practice, and it gradually expands into a collective movement or institution" (p. 12). It is also possible that the changes will not take place if the agents are not ready to act on the tensions Engeström (2001). This speaks to the process of emergence of leadership that depends on the individuals, their relations and positions within current structures, and the potential impact that leadership may have defined by the appearing morphostatic and the morphogenetic forces.

I argue that the activity of leadership appears when an individual or a group of individuals attempt to influence the existing organisational activity systems set within the cultural-historical context (structures); and leadership practices are enacted within this leadership activity (agency). Therefore, L-A-P research requires understanding of the present and past structures, their contradictions, and consequently, the activity of leadership that emerges within this context. Despite direct correlation between the principles of CHAT and research interest in practice, so far its application has been limited. The sections below present the current use of CHAT in organisational studies, and its potential benefits to the study of practice, offer my adaptation of the model and illustrate its application through a hypothetical example of L-A-P research.

### 3.2.4 CHAT in organisational research

Currently, CHAT is used in a variety of fields, mainly in education and informational technologies, and there are multiple adaptations of the model to research contexts. My method is based on five principles that Engeström (2001) presents as the 'current shape' of CHAT (most of them were discussed before but are worth repeating):

- The prime unit of analysis is a "collective, artifact-mediated and object-oriented activity system, seen in its network relations to other activity systems" (p. 136).

- Multi-voiced nature of an activity system: "the division of labor… creates different positions for the individuals, [who bring] their own histories" (ibid.), traditions, interests and points of view. The structure of the activity system in its own right "carries multiple layers and strands of history engraved in its artifacts, rules and conventions" (ibid.).

- The activity systems are developed and transformed over long periods of time and therefore "their problems and potentials can only be understood only against their own history" (ibid.). Thus, the principle of historicity requires local investigation of activity and its elements and "how theoretical ideas and tools have shaped" these (p.137).

- The contradictions within and between activity systems are primary forces for change and growth; since they are open systems, every time a new element is adopted it will collide with the old elements. For example, implementation of a new technology is likely to change the process and division of labour (ibid.).

- As activity systems accumulate contradictions, individuals start to "question and deviate from established norms, [which]… in some cases…turns into a collaborative envisioning and deliberate collective change effort" (ibid.), transforming into a relatively long expansion cycle. "An expansive transformation is accomplished when the object and motive of the activity are reconceptualised to embrace a radically wider horizon of possibilities than in the previous mode of the activity" (ibid.).

Generally, the application of CHAT for organisational research can be identified within two (non-exclusive) major routes. The first one employs CHAT as a framework for straightforward analysis of dynamics of on-going practices or historic events. The second approach, primarily within the field of learning and development, focuses on various features of activity theory (such as expansion cycles, situated nature, collective intentionality) and adapts the model to fit the context and object of inquiry.

### 3.2.4.1 Using CHAT as a lens for analysis

In the field of information technology studies, Anthony (2012) and Bonneau (2013) use CHAT as a framework for analysing the success of a technology implementation programme within school and university contexts. Drawing on several examples from healthcare, Engeström presents a case for CHAT-based analysis of systematic contradictions for redesigning work (2000) and interpreting expansive learning and strategic development (2001) within hospital settings. In a similar vein, Greig et al. (2012) suggest that CHAT should be used for understanding of implementation of best practices and practice improvement within UK hospital settings instead of knowledge transfer theories.

Several scholars employed CHAT for practices-focused research. Foot (2001) illustrates its value for drawing on the data from a research on conflict-monitoring network. Blackler and Regan (2009) apply CHAT for investigation of the practices with the context of reorganisation of social services for vulnerable children and families. Daniels and Warmington (2007) develop an interpretation of CHAT, which they employ to investigate the transformation processes in a multiagency service supporting young people. Gluch and Räisänen (2012) use it to uncover tensions between project practices and environmental management through study of two plants. Mukute and Lotz-Sisitka (2012) examine the factors driving implementation and development of sustainable agricultural practices of southern Africa.

In more business-oriented research, Blackler et al. (1999) apply CHAT for analysis of various stages of manufacturing production development and provide insight on managing the experts in innovation-intensive industries. Through analysis of a 'historic ethnography', Engeström et al. (2007) investigate and compare the expansive learning effects of two different intervention programmes that took place 15 years prior to the analysis. Schulz and Geithner (2010) employ CHAT to look into dynamics of the interplay between individual and organisational learning, and their potential success or failure. Macpherson et al. (2010) analyse the impact of symbolic and material artefacts on organisational learning in SMEs, such as identity, discourse, IT, space and time artefacts and political and friction artefacts.

### 3.2.4.2 Adaptations of CHAT for organisational studies

Ardichvili (2003) notes on the similarities between CHAT and situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and adapts the model (and the interpretation of the elements) to explores adult learning as a socially and distributed situated process.

Although CHAT and SL originated from different strands of theory and make dissimilar assumptions about the cognitive processes, both CHAT and SL emphasise the importance of learning and doing and their occurrence in workplace interactions. Using an example from an MBA programme, Ardichvili (2003) describes a process where learners (1) learn about the object of activity; (2) interpret the object through modelling and abstraction; and (3) apply and develop the knowledge in related organisational practices (p. 12). Although they do not develop a separate model, Fenwick (2006) makes a similar argument for the value of combination of CHAT, SL and actor-network theory for HRD research, in particular workplace learning; and Gvaramadze (2008) applies CHAT analysis to HRD practices in an organisation.



*Perspective Shaping*
How the community of activity understands
current priorities and imagines the future
Contextual innovations

*Emerging*
**collective** ⟶ *Outcomes*
**object of**
**activity**

**Community of**
**activity**

*Perspective Taking*
Relations with other
communities of activity
Boundary innovations

**Related**
**Communities**
**of Activity**

*Perspective Making*
The contribution of each
community of activity
Domain innovations

drawing on the contrast between individual and collective learning.

**Figure 3.3 Organising process in Activity Networks**

(Source: Blackler et al., 2000, p. 283)

Blackler et al. (2000) adapt the framework to suit their exploration of high tech company that they regard as an activity network created by a nexus of interrelated activity systems. They introduce a concept of 'communities of activity', that "…can be

loosely defined in terms of the extent to which members recognise shared work priorities, work with a common cognitive and technological infrastructure, and support each other's activity" (p. 282) and use the term very similarly to CoP (Lave and Wenger, 1991). They change the names of the activity system elements to fit with the discourse of CoP, and illustrate how the co-operative relationships between the 'communities of activity' are related to 'perspective taking', 'perspective shaping' and 'perspective making (see Figure 3.3 above).

There are several examples of CHAT application for micro-focussed analyses of situations and processes. Jarzabkowski (2003) adapts the model to studying S-A-P within university settings, and compares the dynamic practices in three universities through exploration their role as a mediation instrument between management actors, collective structures and strategic activity. Engeström and Sannino (2011) develop and empirically test a framework of discursive manifestations of systemic contradictions in several cases of organisational change interventions.

Whilst the examples above illustrate the range of potential adaptations and applications of CHAT to different contexts, they also demonstrate its limited use for the studies of organisational practice *per se* and, in particular, absence of leadership studies. In the next section I draw on a version of CHAT developed by Frank Blackler (1993) and propose a further adaptation of the framework for studying L-A-P.

## 3.3    *Activity systems in organisations*

Pioneer in application of CHAT to organisational research, Blackler (1993) introduced certain alterations to the original triangle of activity system. Firstly, he placed the model within the discourse of organisational studies by re-naming elements of the

activity system: he replaced 'subject' with 'agent(s)', 'community' with 'colleagues and co-workers', and 'division of labour' with 'organization and role structures'. By adding 'concepts' to the *artefact* element he emphasised the importance of cognitive constructs for meditation of organisational activities.

Furthermore, Blackler (1993) rejected the Marxist assumptions underpinning the original variations of CHAT that explained internal incoherencies of the systems through relations between ownership of production tools and labour outcomes. Instead, he grounded proposed assumptions that situate the activity system within its specific historical and cultural circumstances (p. 875):

- *The* concept *of activity* emphasises the overall coherency of numerous organisational processes by focussing on collective action of individuals and the social formation of incentives.

- *The nature of activity systems* portrays how various mediating elements are "interwoven in a "complex web of mutual relations". (ibid.)

- *Active participation* in activity systems is a way of situated learning, both for novices who join the activities and the whole communities as they develop new knowledge about their own actions and create new systems.

- The significance of the *social and historical location* of the activity systems.

- *The prevalence of incoherence and dilemma* as an integral feature of the activity systems and the source for personal and collective learning.

Figure 3.4 displays Blackler's representation of organisation as an activity system. The first visual novelty is the wedge-shaped 'trajectory of development' that denotes continuous expansion and emergence of the activity systems. Furthermore, he

suggested that rather than achieving concrete objects, the agents negotiate and

maintain routines; and although not stated explicitly, the shift of focus on agreeing

*what* should be done as opposed to *why* it should be done resonates with the

concept of organising and coping with day-to-day influx of actions (Chia and Holt,

2006).
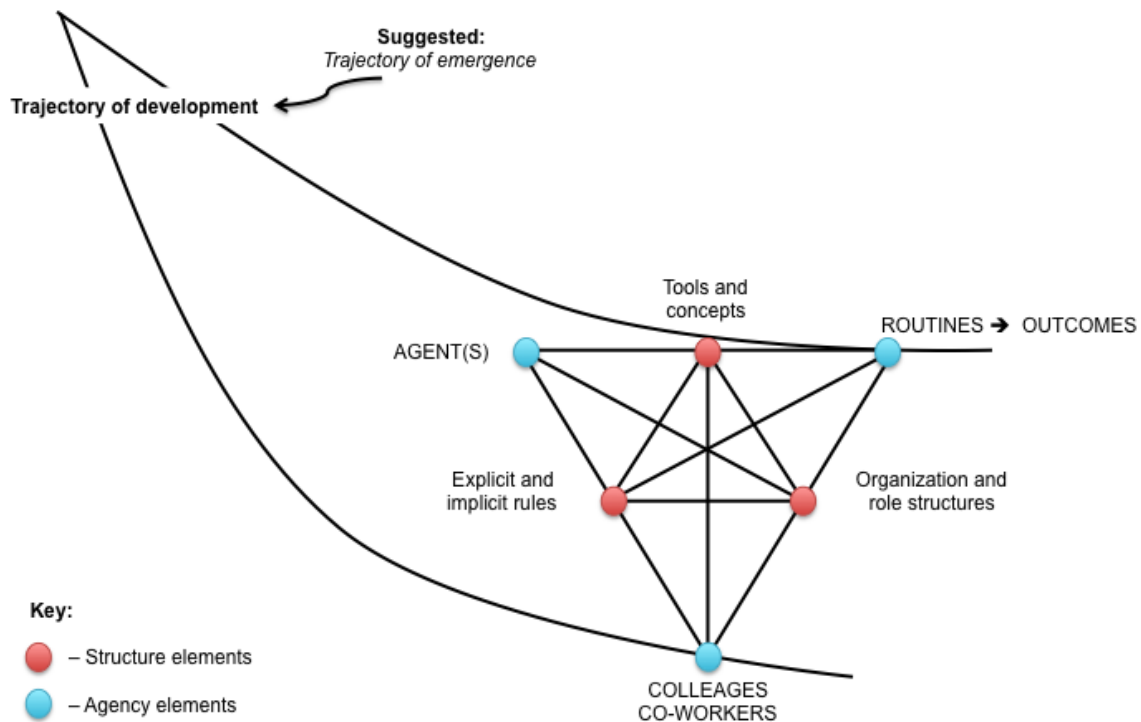


**Figure 3.4 Organisation as an activity system**
(Source: Blackler, 1993, p. 876, with my comments)

Next, Blackler differentiated between the structural elements of the system (rules,

tools and concepts and organisation and role structures) and the agency elements

(agents, the routines their actions maintain and colleagues / co-workers), and

swapped the triangles around emphasising strong connections between the former.

Bearing in mind that tensions in the system may influence the structures, altogether

this echoes the CR assumption of the pre-existing social structures that influence the

agency, and in turn, the possibility that individuals' actions may mould this structures

for future action. In this light, I would suggest replacing "trajectory of development" with "trajectory of emergence". Despite traditional association with social constructionism (Blackler, 1993), CHAT does not contradict the philosophy of CR, and on contrary, allows for exploration of stratified reality.

Furthermore, we empirically observe the 'action' triangle of the agents, their tools, and the apparent outcome/ routine of their activity system when agents act and engage in social practices (activities). However, it is the exploration of the culture-historical context and their relationships with other activity systems that may lead us to uncover the underlying deep mechanisms of social reality. According to Bhaskar, both CHAT and CR have strong links with Marxist theory and therefore their combination does not create theoretical conflicts that may pose problems for research (Bhaskar, 2012, lecture at University of Birmingham).

Although I do not adopt all Blackler's innovations, his adaptation of the model was a crucial element in the development of my L-A-P framework. For example, whilst the reverse triangle model provided an insight into the relationship between the elements of structure and agency, over time I rejected the idea of keeping both versions for the sake of simplicity and focussed on the traditional representation. Here I introduce the language of activity system that is used in the rest of the thesis:

- Outcome(s) ➔ *Long-Term Goal / Purpose*. Depending on the nature of an activity, these two terms stand close to the organisational discourse, and both terms are associated with creating motivation for the individuals.

- Objectives ➔ *Routines / Short-Term Goals*. Depending on the activity under consideration, I believe that some organisational activities are aimed at

concrete short-term goals, whilst others are aimed at maintaining routines, and both can be created and enacted with a view to achieve the Long-Term Goal/Purpose.

- *Tools & Concepts* include all the artefacts that may be used in the activity: material such as furniture, computers, pens, and non-material such as frameworks, concepts, IT-systems.

- *Agents* element includes everyone directly involved in the process, engaged with Tools & Concepts and in moving towards the shared long-term goal. Within leadership activity system, the agents include both 'leaders' and 'followers'.

- Explicit and implicit rules ➔ *Underlying Assumptions* describe the 'informative' part of the organisational and team culture, those learnt occupational practices that individuals absorb at work; they also include individual values and beliefs that may influence agents' work, as well as the rest of explicit and implicit rules that may govern a group in action.

- Organisational and role structures ➔*Roles & Responsibilities* include organisational functions and structures that define agents' expectations about their own work and role in the process and about that of others.

- Colleagues and co-workers ➔*Situated Community* is the 'community' in the original sense and consists of those people and groups, who are not directly visible in the action, but whose interests, knowledge, stakes, values, assumptions and goals are reflected in the ways agents act.

**Tools and concepts**
IT system, technologies, models and frameworks

**Agent(s)**
Leaders, followers

**Routines**
or objectives

**Outcome(s)**
Long-term goal
**Purpose**

**Underlying assumptions**
Organisational and team culture
Individual values and beliefs
Explicit and implicit rules

**Situated community**
Agents from adjacent or related
activity systems

**Roles and responsibilities**
Organisational functions and
structures

**Figure 3.5 Activity system of organising**

These changes are reflected in Figure 3.5, and this version is used for analysing the existing structures in the organisation and (with minor alterations) interaction incidents. A more detailed account of the version for leadership as activity will be presented in Chapter 5.

Since any activity exists within the network of other activity systems, I wish to emphasise that the systems may be linked by the elements 'shared' by the systems. The possibility of a common objective has already been discussed before as the 'third generation' of CHAT (Engeström, 1987). Expanding this argument further, the agents of one system may have activities going on elsewhere; same tools and concepts can be used in separate businesses; different teams in an organisation may adhere to the same set of underlying assumptions or have a similar set of stakeholders whose interests shape the activity and so on.

The 'Situated Community' element deserves special attention. The value of combining the theories of CHAT and SL within the context of organisational learning has been noted before due to the shared focus on the inseparable nature of 'learning' and 'doing' processes (Ardichvili, 2003; Fenwick, 2006). Lave and Wenger (1991) define learning as a socially constructed process situated within a CoP, or "a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4). Individual learning occurs when a new member of CoP joins this activity (with its purpose and practical challenges) and through using their tools (objects, technology and language) becomes part of the community. Similarly, from CHAT perspective, individual learning occurs through inter-personal interaction and its subsequent internalisation for deeper understanding of the processes (Ardichvili, 2003). Therefore, for both CHAT and SL the individual and the social context coexist and are inseparable; they are mediated through action and interaction, and draw on importance of shared activity and use of tools. This theoretical resemblance is not surprising since both theories were influenced by the Soviet school of thought (Ardichvili, 2003; Jarzabkowski, 2003).

Although it is possible to construct an activity triangle of CoP, CoP is not equivalent to activity system as a unit of analysis; rather it reinforces the shared situated nature of learning, activity and interactions. Most importantly, it expands the interpretation of the 'community' element from colleagues and co-workers, managers and clients, whose interests may shape the system to wider CoPs that may have a bearing on the system. For example, if we observe the activity of a cross functional project team that includes agents from finance, law, IT and HR, the 'situated community' will

include not only the official stakeholders of the project, but also channel the influence of associated communities, directly or through mediation of other elements.

To sum up, organisations are comprised of the networks of activity systems. Some may be folded into others (i.e. a smaller parts of a larger project), whilst others may have adjacent objectives or other elements of the system. The leadership activity co-exists alongside other activity systems, however, given its social outcome is "direction, alignment and commitment" (Drath et al., 2008), and surfaces in the situations where an emerging conflict requires leadership action. In the following section I propose that that the practice of leadership appears when there is a need to influence, develop or change the underlying activity systems for the future action.

## 3.4    *The role of leadership activity*

In Chapter 2 I argued that leadership is a socially constructed process occurring within organisational context. Therefore, the activity system of leadership should be considered within the context where day-to-day actions in an organisation can be attributed to a myriad of interrelated activity systems that involve agents who may be perceived as 'leaders' and 'followers' (as one cannot exist without the other) aiming to achieve goals, objectives (Adair, 1973) or higher purpose (Kempster et al., 2011) by means of tools and concepts. According to L-A-P perspective, some of those actions and interactions relate to the practice of leadership, or the broad group of activities of leadership.

I suggest that leadership is a process that enables coping with conflicts and tensions of the activity systems and aims to co-align and co-direct them. The notion of conflicts and tensions is central in CHAT and is an inevitable and necessary source

of development and expansion of the activity systems. The extant literature in CHAT brands the process as "organisational learning" at a high level of conceptualisation; however, little attention has been drawn to how this learning happens in practice and to the factors that determine readiness of the individuals for change and the process of system development as it occurs. This process implicitly assumes appearance of agency where individuals exhibit joint influence on the system and gain a collective momentum for change. The emergence of such collective momentum signifies that individuals engage in the activity of leadership that in turn enables changes to the underlying organisational activity systems. If there is not enough collective intention of addressing these tensions and changes are not implemented, it becomes a 'failed' attempt of engaging in leadership practice. I propose that a close analysis of such events has the potential of informing L-A-P perspective.

The idea is not new and several research examples have explored the situations where the organisational dynamics and the processes of leadership and management are shaped by the tensions within the systems. Watson (1994) in his ethnographic study of British management noted that managers were frequently caught between two different organisational discourses and had to work their way through and establish their identity and attitude towards the subject. Sjostrand et al. (2001) argue that frequently managerial leadership occurs where the organisation fails and that the *raison d'être* of management is rather the social construction within uncertainty than the ideas of efficiency, power and ownership. Chia and Holt (2006) propose that day-to-day strategic activities of managers are linked to coping with organisations processes rather than intentional change.

These tensions may appear within every element of a single activity system. If we look at the upper 'action' triangle of the model, the tensions may include stories when agents do not have a unified view of their group identity, or have different ideas about the tools and concepts that should be used, or their interpretation of the 'shared' goal may differ from their colleagues. In addition to the differences in the observable part of the triangle, each leadership interaction is laid in an organisational context that reflects the outcomes of previous historic activities, or its basis. Every individual is influenced by his/her set of underlying assumptions – frames of references of nation or region, organisational field, functional or divisional, and organisational (Johnson et al., 2006). While the rest is understood intuitively, the notion of organisational field is similar to the concept of inter-organisational networks / CoP developed by Brown and Duguid (2002) and Wenger (1998). In addition, every individual is part of several CoPs (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) that may collide in the 'situated community' element. Finally, although every employee signs a contact with job description, it is rarely the case that individuals perform the exact range of their formal responsibilities; which leaves a lot of grey areas in the organisational 'roles and responsibilities'.

Therefore, application of CHAT suggests that leadership work includes shaping various systems and their elements. Within the activity this could mean altering the object, expanding constitution of the team (agents) or the situated community, as well as moulding the structure elements – tools and concepts (e.g. models used), or leading others to deviate from currently accepted explicit and implicit rules or roles and responsibilities. There are a few examples that support this view on leadership. Hawkins (2005) describes leaders as 'facilitators of learning' in organisation, and I

believe that it is their actions that alter the practice in parallel to their and followers' identities related to this practice. In a similar vein, Yukl (1989) provides a broad leadership description "to include influencing task objectives and strategies, influencing commitment and compliance in task behaviour to achieve these objectives, influencing group maintenance and identification, and influencing the culture of an organization" (p. 253).

This creates a focus of attention on both formal and informal occasions of emerging leadership 'incidents'. Formal events include meetings, presentations, mentoring sessions – these occur with intent to produce *change* in practice; for example, developing a new vision for the organisation or talking to a subordinate about goals in their work and thus motivating them. It has been shown that informal manifestations, such as small talk in corridors also constitute leadership acts (Sjostrand et al., 2001; Larsson and Lundholm, 2010). This also opens doors to the distributed qualities of leadership, as the concepts of upwards and sideways leadership suggest that capability of influence is not necessarily attached to the formal position. In any case, researchers of L-A-P would be able to observe how these are manifested in discourses and situated within the context of activity.

Do agents need to be aware that they are engaging in the activity of leadership? My answer is both 'yes' and 'no'. On the one hand, according to CHAT they need to have a conscious objective in order to be engaged in the activity; on the other hand, CR as a philosophy of science suggests they do not require being aware that this objective may alter the existing structures, and therefore that they are engaged in leadership activity. This explains the situations where managers struggle to identify what

constitute their leadership act (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a). It is also possible that the objective they think they are working towards differs from the *real* one.

## *3.5    A not-so-real example of leadership activity research*

To illustrate the arguments above and the ways in which a methodology based on the CR-informed CHAT framework has the potential to uncover leadership practices, I offer an example that will be mostly told through visual representations of the activity system triangles. In order to reduce the amount lines on the diagrams, I drop arrows in the pictures, but they are still assumed to be there.

Imagine that a researcher V interested in L-A-P gets to observe a board meeting in Company X, a car manufacturer. This meeting takes place during their internal company-wide performance improvement project that should improve the market value of the company in long-term. Although there may be several long- and short-term goals in the organisation, I suggest a version of the activity system associated with this objective in Figure 3.6, where all the agents are involved in this project.
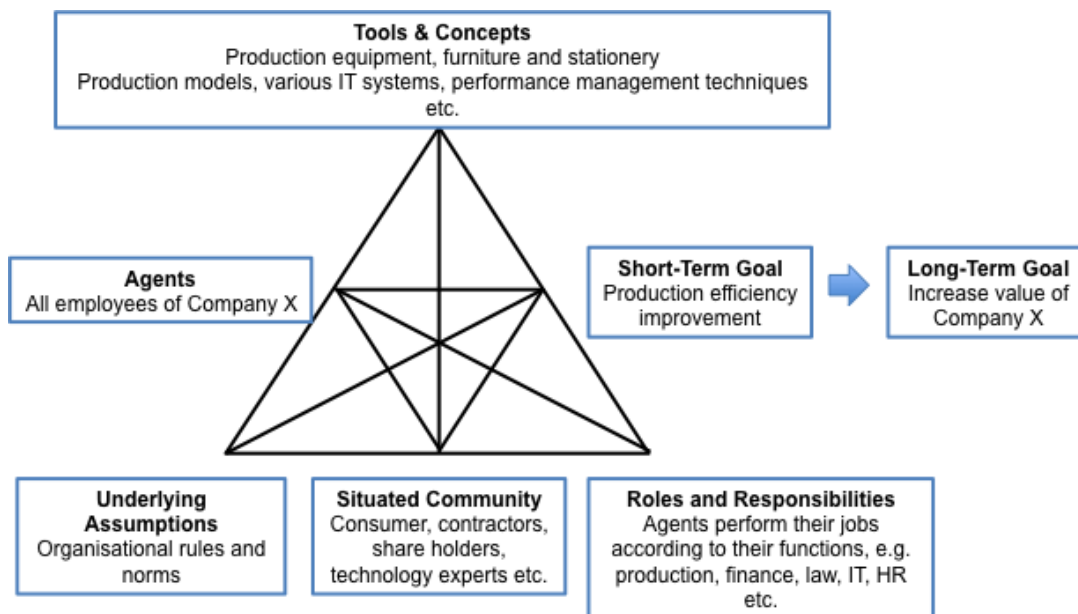


**Figure 3.6 Example: Activity system of efficiency improvement project**

The CEO of the company has initiated this project as a response to the shareholders' concerns, and the initiative was cascaded down through his board of directors and distributed further through several workshops for the employees from all departments. Figure 3.7 represents the 'typical' activity of a board of directors that is responsible for smooth operations of Company X. However, within the project their need to engage their employees in the change process, and a related system is presented in Figure 3.8. As can be seen, although some elements remain the same, others differ to fit the context; in Figure 3.7 the routine of carrying out regular board meetings is an instrument of their activity; and in Figure 3.8 the workshops are instrumental to engaging the employees. Finally, Figure 3.9 offers a CHAT representation of a typical workshop that the board of directors organise for their employees.
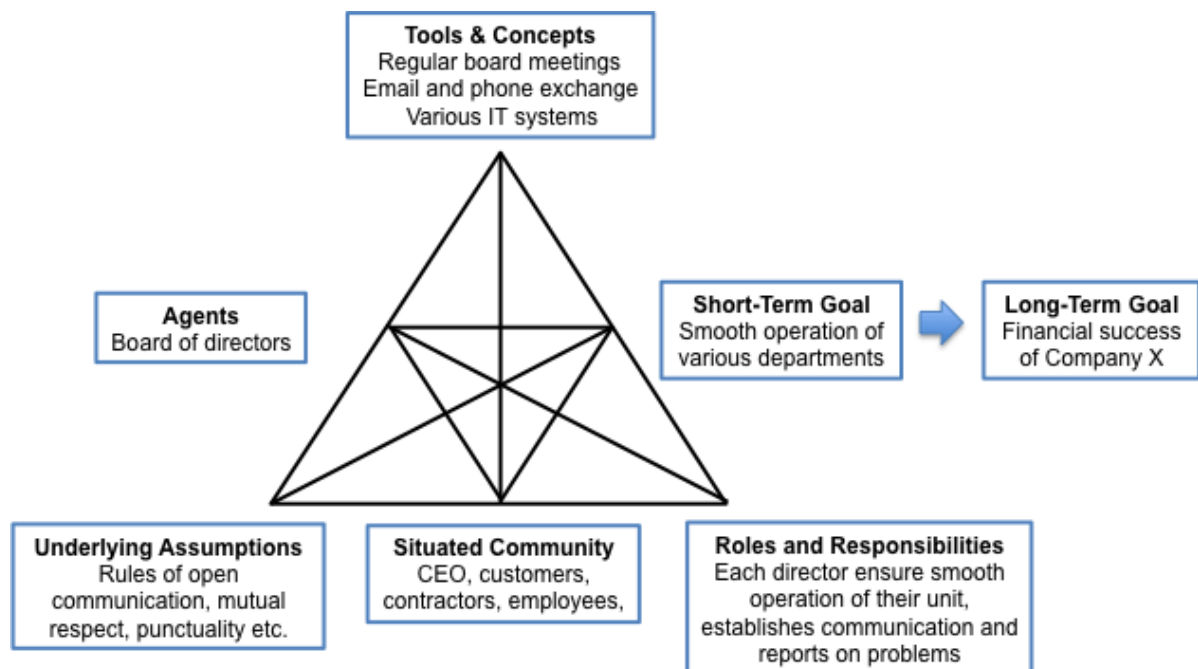


**Figure 3.7 Example: Activity system of the Board of Directors**
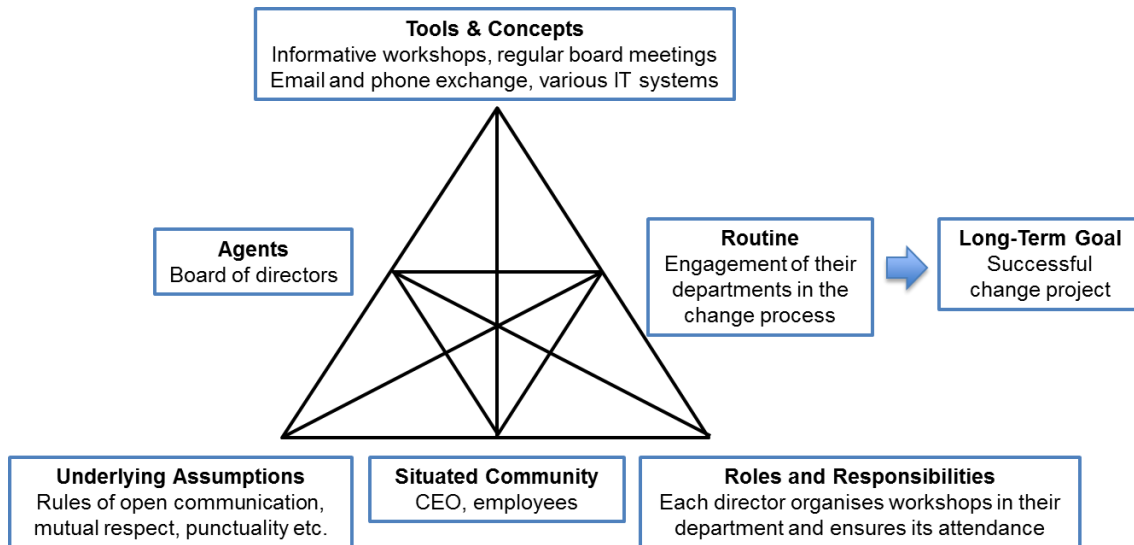
**Figure 3.8 Example: Activity system of employee engagement by the Board**
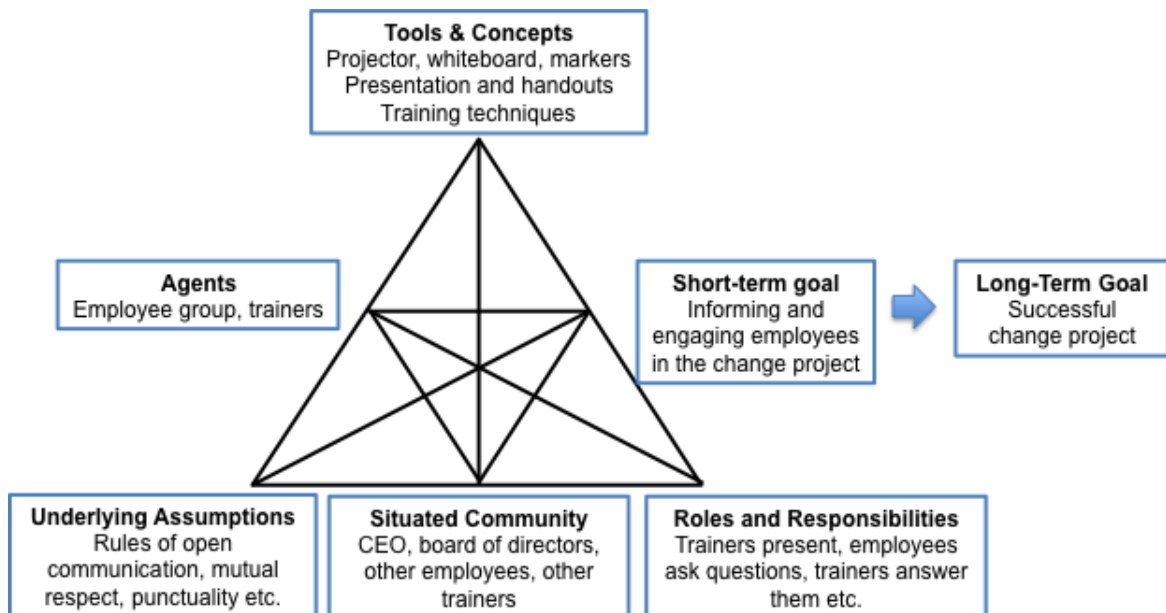


**Figure 3.9 Example: Activity system of an engagement workshop**

Before the meeting, researcher V talks to the CEO and asks about the agenda of the meeting, which will evolve around the performance improvement project and the results of the workshops which had already happened in all the departments. In passing, the CEO proudly mentions that he had read a book written by Bass and Avolio about 'transformational leadership' and is very keen to put it to practice in this meeting, and Figure 3.10 illustrates this.

Figure 3.11 shows the bearing of this interest, as through the influence of the CEO

'transformational leadership' becomes a part of the 'tools & concepts' element.
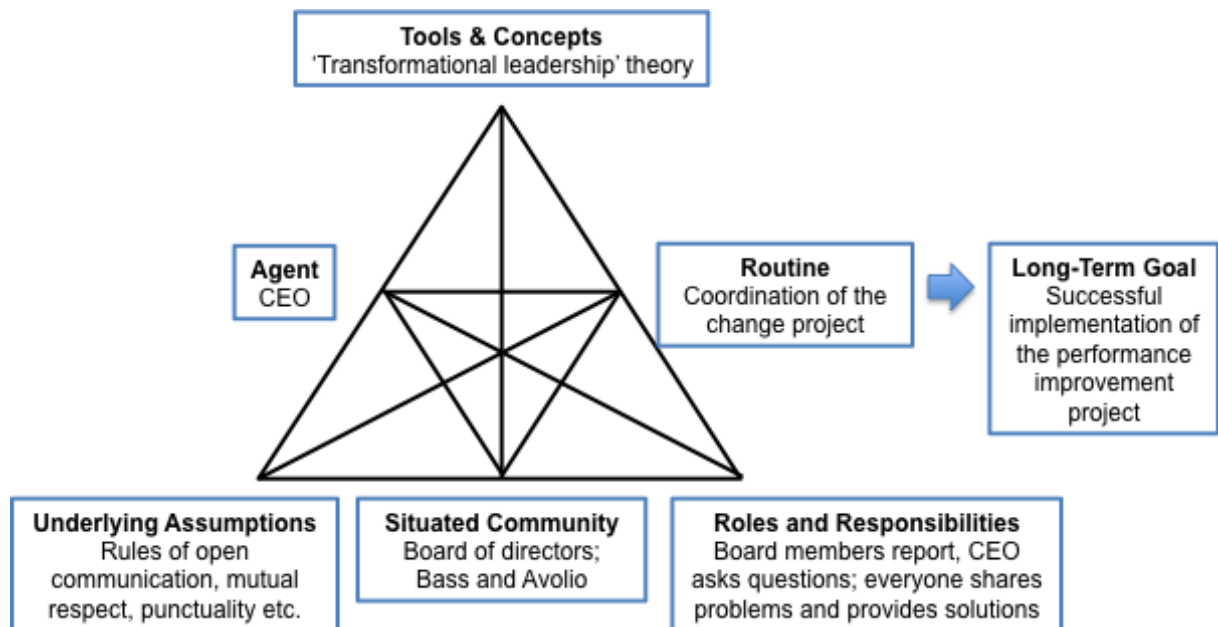
**Figure 3.10 Example: Activity system of the CEO's in the meeting**
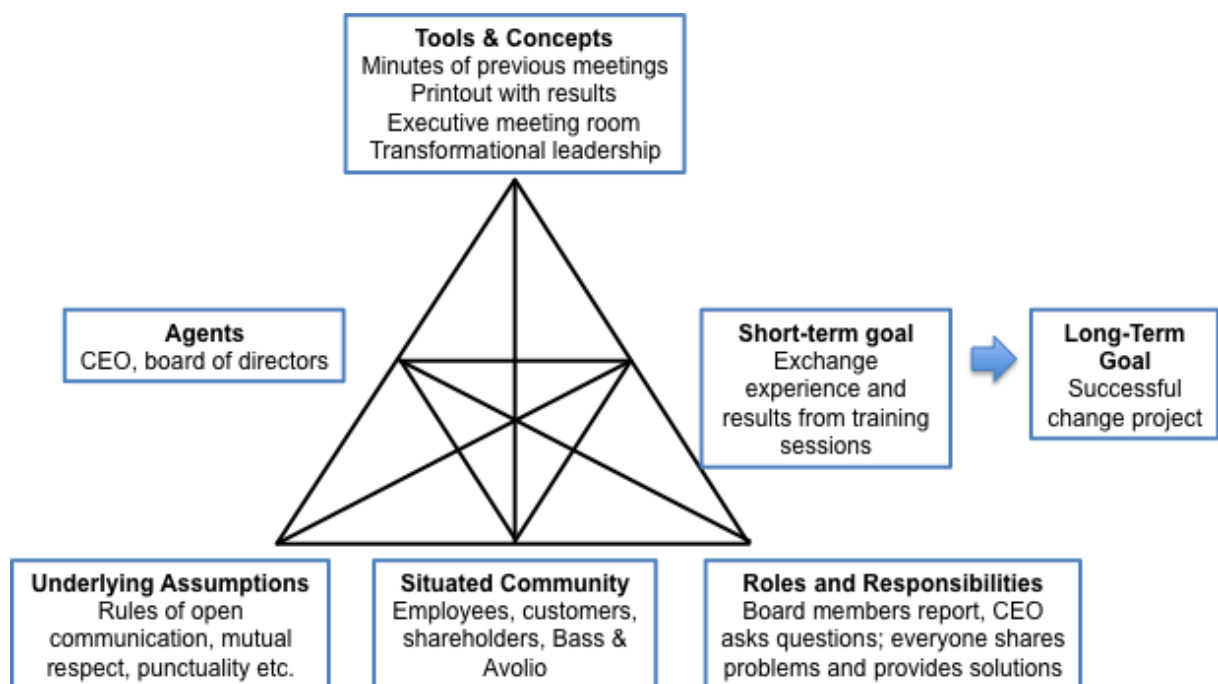
**Figure 3.11 Example: Activity system of the meeting**

All of these systems constitute the background to the board meeting that the

researcher V gets to observe. These are not the only activities that influence the

meeting: for example, we know nothing about the system of the shareholders' activity

and, hence, the exact reasons behind them prompting the CEO to launch this project; nor do we have a detailed account of the situation in the department of every board member; nor do we know the history of the previous potential change projects.

Now, researcher V needs to decide what to focus on during the meeting, e.g. what *empirical* data should she be recording that could later help her uncover the underlying causal powers. Could it be the use of material artefacts? The board meeting takes place in the executive meeting room, with large table of dark wood and leather chairs. The CEO takes a chair at the top of the table, and the other board members take their seats at both long sides. Do we know the significance of the CEO's position, and who sat there in the past? Do other board members take the same chairs every week, and what happens if they don't? Or should she focus on the language used in the meeting, jokes told and laughed at, slang used and metaphors created? Or maybe she should be paying attention to all the names of other key agents from other related systems? Or the 'success' and 'failure' stories of the workshops and their interpretations by the C-suit? Or the ways of how the CEO attempts to put in practice 'transformational' leadership theory?

The CHAT framework developed for L-A-P research above gives a 'yes' answer to all those questions as they relate to activity system elements that may be undergoing changes. If they are, it is possible that within the interactions of these meetings researcher V will observe empirical manifestations of the activity of leadership, but it does not mean that the whole duration of the meeting will consist of leadership practices. Rather, leadership activity may show in CEO's attempts to introduce 'transformational leadership' discourse for the rest others (and their response); shared sense-making of the progress of the project and decision-making about the

next steps; or shaping their activity with the view of shareholders' interests. These practices emerge within the organisational activities outlined above, and in response to them; they are shaped and conditioned by the context; however, they have the power to influence the structures. Thus, researcher V has an opportunity to make sense of the *socially real* mechanisms of L-A-P. Most likely, had she asked the CEO about his views on leadership instead of observing the meeting, his answers would be mediated by the leadership book he had just read; and she would come to different conclusions.

After the meeting, researcher V is left with empirical data from the meeting, her notes and recordings, and through her use of data analysis techniques (Chapter 4), she comes to conclusions very similar to the findings presented Chapter 5. Observing the meeting allowed her to collect the data, interpret it within the context and develop a theory that provides a *plausible* explanation of the observed events. The theory also meets the criterion of *practical adequacy* if it makes sense for the agents involved. However, the *generalizability* of the theory will depend on whether it is robust enough to offer an explanation of generative mechanisms that exist in other contexts and have effect. Even if similar mechanisms exist in other contexts (be it Company X at a later stage or another organisation), the generalizability is contingent on the influence of other mechanisms in this context.

## *3.6      Chapter summary*

In this chapter I provided the philosophical foundations in my research and the beginnings of the methodological approach to data collection and analysis. I argue that an interpretation of CHAT informed by CR has the potential to solve theoretical and methodological challenges of L-A-P perspective as it offers a way of exploring

the emergence of leadership phenomenon within its particular contextual cultural-historical setting. Critical realism provides an explanation of the relationship between pre-existing social structures and the agency shaping each other; the mediating role of social practices of leadership within the process the interaction between agency and structure; and the distinction between *doing* and *talking about* leadership. Based on these assumptions, the proposed adaptation of the CHAT framework can be used as a method for understanding the process of leadership emergence and co-construction within the context of interrelated organisational activity systems and for identification of the leadership practices that appear within the context.

More specifically, L-A-P marked a turn in ontology of leadership studies – from individual-based interactions to a focus on the actual practice that occurs in the space between individuals; and immediately posed epistemological challenge of studying something that cannot be observed or even identified. The framework outlined in this chapter offers a unit of analysis – an activity system – that allows distinguishing between practices within the chaos of all the events that unfold in organisations. It does not single out managers as the source of leadership; rather it creates space for the appearance of leadership-followership process, where agents engage in leadership activity through interaction and thus create impetus for expansion of the organisational activity systems.

Over time, leadership theory has evolved from leader-centric lens that focused on the individual traits, qualities and behaviours to multi-layered, shared and relational theories (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Day and Harrison, 2007; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). L-A-P invites us to take a step further and focus on the social practices that emerge between the individuals and within their relationships; however, it has not yet

provided a consistent methodology for uncovering these. The method of looking at

leadership activity through a CHAT lens has the potential to explain the emergence

of various leadership theories: leader-centric (if the impetus for change starts from a

single manager), follower-centric (if we focus on the other agents to support the

change), or relational / distributed perspectives – if the agents element of the

leadership activity system includes all the individuals involved. I will expand this

argument further in Chapter 6.

Although CHAT has a history of application in organisational research, it has seldom

been used for studying practice as defined within strategy-as-practice and L-A-P

fields. I propose that adopting CHAT framework for analysis of organisational activity

systems as a potential solution to this challenge. In the next chapter, I will build on

these foundations to explain the approach to methodology employed in my research,

as well as the fieldwork and analysis procedures.

# CHAPTER 4. METHODOLOGY, FIELDWORK AND ANALYSIS

## 4.1.    Chapter overview

This chapter outlines the approach to methodology, fieldwork and data analysis employed in this research. It builds on the two previous chapters and presents the design of the study within the context of the L-A-P research questions and chosen theoretical foundations of the research – philosophy of critical realism and CHAT. I adopted an ethnographic approach to data collection (Watson, 1994; Van Maanen, 2011; Watson, 2011) and combined observations, shadowing techniques, and interviews in order to collect the maximum amount of evidence of the unfolding practices. The data was captured through audio recording and continuous note taking. A critical realist adaptation of the Grounded Theory technique (Strauss and Corbin, 1997; Charmaz, 2006) is employed to analyse the scripts of the observed meetings and other interactions, whilst the data collected through interviews and shadowing enabled a more detailed and context-driven interpretation of these events.

The chapter is structured as follows. Firstly, I outline considerations behind my decisions regarding methodology and describe learning derived from the pilot studies and the final design of the data collection. Then, I provide a practical account of the experiences on site, a high overview of data collected, and a reflexive account of my research activity through CHAT lens. Finally, I present a version of the Grounded Theory analysis informed by critical realism (Kempster and Parry, 2014) and adapted further to my research.

## 4.2.  *Choosing the lens for leadership-as-practice*

The methods employed in this research were chosen to satisfy the demands of the research questions within the L-A-P perspective and the implications of CR as philosophy of science. These ontological assumptions urge us to consider implications for studying the process and emergence of leadership practice:

> The ideal of the processual ontology points to a general need to create a detailed understanding of situated micro-processes in organizations, but also to relate what happens in these micro-processes to societal discourses on leadership on macro- and meso-levels. Such understandings should also be based on in-depth empirical fieldwork where practices and interactions as such are observed, without pre-defined operationalizations… [A]ny empirical fieldwork intended to understand leadership processes would be enriched by incorporating how leadership norms are constructed in interaction and what such construction 'does' to us. (Crevani et al., 2010, p.80)

Therefore, drawing on the conceptual foundations of a CHAT framework informed by critical realism, the main criterion for the design was that of allowing construction of knowledge about unfolding activity systems that occur in organisations, particularly those of the elusive practices of leadership. Firstly, I had to acquire a general understanding of the existing processes and structures, the culturally and historically constructed context of the real-time actions that I observed. Secondly, the research implied gaining access to the on-going interactions between the employees of the groups in focus. Additionally, there was a requirement for the space and time where I could question individuals about their thoughts, actions, jobs, interactions and general opinions about the occurring events.

The first requirement – that of understanding the context much wider than the usual term 'leadership' would include – is the crucial step in deconstructing the complex nature of the emerging leadership practice. As discussed in the previous chapters, I regard leadership as the process of creation of direction, alignment and commitment (Drath et al., 2008) with the view of changing underlying activity systems. It does not mean that everything that changes in organisations involves leadership practice – it is only those actions that address tensions in underlying systems posing a threat to the current negotiated order or perceived future goals. Therefore, without an insight into the existing objectives, routines, connections, goals and motivations of agents, it is impossible to draw conclusions on the dynamics of the interaction. After (or in parallel to) the existing activity systems were constructed, I would be able to start looking for those signs of tensions within the system and associated occurring changes.

The next challenge of L-A-P is the combination of the visible and the invisible. Building on the CR assumption, the 'real-time' empirical data, what a researcher observes in the room through watching and listening, is likely to help them learn about only the upper triangle of an activity (*agents of activity – object / purpose – tools and artifacts*). In order to scratch the surface and learn about the invisible, the context of activity (*roles and responsibilities – situated community – underlying assumptions*), I would need to look out for stories of the past and present actions, references to the other activity systems and comments about significant people that influence the process and to ask questions about the nature and meaning of the recorded events.

Equally, the research had to involve recording events as they happened in real time. Whilst people's recollections and interpretations of past events and forecasts for the future are a valuable source of information, they do not necessarily represent the reality objectively and come as a result of sense-making through the lens of personal reflection, emotional responses and expectations.

Hence, my research aimed to tease out the practice of leadership, and drawing on a CR-informed interpretation of CHAT, combined several methods of data collection seeking to uncover both on-going processes and underlying causal influences. I adopted qualitative ethnographic approach that involved observations, shadowing and semi-structured interviews. I had to be flexible in my behaviour in the offices, and whilst my intention was to stay as uninvolved in the activities as possible in order to reduce my impact, on some occasions I found myself drawn in discussions, or acting as part of the team on a routine basis, such as making teas and coffees. The aim was to observe formal meetings and, where possible, small talk in the corridors; follow them up with semi-structured interviews and possibly engage in insignificant activities of the group.

### 4.2.1 Looking at the practice of leadership through ethnography

It has been argued that survey methods or interviews on their own have little potential for understanding of what goes on in organisations (Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2011). On the other hand, the benefits of ethnography for studying practices of management and leadership have been acknowledged and result in a long list of research publications; most notably, Tony Watson's manuscript "In search of management'" (1994) and a collection of chapters edited by Sjostrand et al. (2001) in '"Invisible management: The social construction of leadership". Ethnography is more

than a research method that enquires into social life; rather it is a way of analysis and writing about it (Watson, 2011).

The purpose of ethnography is to describe and explain social occurrence in the same way as it is perceived by the participants, which leads to a very strong inductive perspective of the approach (Saunders et al., 2009). Organisational ethnography has gone a long way from the origins in anthropological studies and developed its own distinctive features (Yanow, 2012): "ethnography, whatever stripe is concerned with sense-making, that of situated actors – in our case, "living" in organisation of various sorts – along with that of the researcher her- or himself'" (p. 33). One needs to 'immerse' themselves in a setting and social group to the extent that they would "understand the meanings and significances that people give to their behaviour and that of others" (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008, p. 94).

The general agreement is that in order to understand L-A-P, we "need to understand a task as it unfolds from the perspective and through the "theories of use" of the practitioner… and the knowledge, expertise, and skills that the leaders bring to the execution of the task" (Spillane et al., 2001, p. 25). Although several researchers have attempted to explore L-A-P through in-depth and retrospective interviews (e.g. Denis et al, 2010; Caroll et al, 2008), the mainstream direction of practice-based research is leaning towards capturing *talk-in interaction* in real time (e.g. Samra-Fredericks, 2000; 2003; 2010; Whittington, 2011). Ethnography as a research instrument allows capturing how the 'real world' of leadership is created on day-to-day basis (Kelly et al., 2006; Larsson and Lundholm, 2010) and to capture influence of subtle things such as manager's humour and even its interconnection with gender (Holmes, 2000; Schnurr, 2008). Recently, several qualitative studies have attempted

to look at the practice of leadership using ethnographic approaches (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a; Kan and Parry, 2004; Larsson and Lundholm, 2010) and argued for its success.

A notable example of ethnographic approach to studying practice-based process of S-A-P can be found in the works of Samra-Fredericks (2003). Through a combination of observing and recording the routines and interactions of six actors, she employed conversation analysis in order to identify six practices of strategising: the ability to speak forms of knowledge; mitigate and observe the protocols of human interaction (the moral order); question and query; display appropriate emotion; deploy metaphors and finally; put history 'to work' (Samra-Fredericks, 2003, p.144).

Another interesting exemplar is offered by Crevani et al. (2010), who warn L-A-P researchers that "in order to be open to the idea that all interactions are potential instances of leadership,… still maintain[ing] a pragmatism that enables us to discern and identify leadership activities in the making" (p. 81). In attempt to limit the focus of enquiry, they conceptualised two types of leadership practices within organisational context: co-orientation (improving of understanding, negotiation of interpretations and decision-making) and action-spacing (creation of momentum for individual and collection actions). The data collected through participant observations of the meetings (with voice recording) and in-depth interviews with both formal managers and employees presented evidence of both accounts.

Finally, although not admitting to an ethnographic approach openly, Karp (2013) used a variety of data sources in order to accumulate a rich set of evidence of the

'subtle acts of leadership', and combined interviews with observations of formal meetings and leadership development training events over a two-year period.

### 4.2.2 Critical realist ethnography

The ethnography approach has been adapted to CR-informed studies and has served as an instrument to uncover the interplay between the *deep* mechanisms and social actions (Porter, 1993; Banfield, 2004; Roberts and Sanders, 2005; Porter and O'Halloran, 2012; Barron, 2013). As Rees and Gatenby (2014) note, a "critical realist ethnography would aim not only to describe the events but also to *explain* them, by identifying the influence of structural factors on human agency", especially "a certain mix of causal powers [that] has been formed and activated" (p. 138). Furthermore, Porter (1993) has argued that CR as a meta-theory is a particularly powerful starting point to address the challenges of practice-based research in response to the critique of ethnographic studies provided by Hammersley (1992) (as summarised up by Porter, 1993, p. 592):

- There is a need to explicate the representational claims of a study and to make apparent the assumptions and values that underlie it.

- There is a need to focus empirical research on the theoretical issues that it is designed to illuminate.

- There is a need to examine the explanatory status of a methodology that rejects determinism.

The previous chapter on CR has addressed these issues, implicitly or explicitly, and therefore they do not require a long elaboration. All three problems are covered by the distinction between the reality comprised of existing deep structural mechanisms

and their empirical manifestations that contribute to the body of knowledge. The latter is always contextual to the research inquiry, and therefore demands openness about the assumptions and interests that drive it. In turn, research outcomes and the resulting theories are not expected to be universally applicable, and their validation requires further testing against alternative contexts.

At the same time, analysis of the empirical observation would allow a journey 'from actions through reasons to rules and thence to structures" (Sayer, 1992, p. 98) and would us allow to "reveal the links between the subjective understandings and their structural social origins" (Rees and Gatenby, 2014, p 132). Rees and Gatenby (2008) offer an example where an examination of various categories of data have allowed to distinguish between the morphogenetic and morphostatic forces in their analysis of (un)changing organisational behaviours. Furthermore, using categories of data that refer to terms from 'laminated systems' (Bhaskar, 1993) ontologically relevant to the focus of study, would inform the analysis and enable data collection of entities, parts and relations in question. In my research, using activity systems as a way of segmenting the data into meaningful categories allowed a more systematic approach to examination of other elements and the dynamic of interaction.

### 4.2.3 Refining the ethnographic toolkit

The ethnographic studies are typically long-term participant or non-participant observations of organisational life (Watson, 1994; Van Maanen, 2011) and tend to focus on the formal meetings rather than informal interactions in the office, on the C-suite rather than middle management, and sometimes involve shadowing and accompanying interviews (Yanow, 2012; Noordegraaf, 2014). Often, the initial design is tested by reality during the fieldwork, where the researcher is required to negotiate

access and constantly manage their insider/outsider identity in order to gain the levels of trust and openness required for meaningful interaction (Bell, 1999; Ram, 1999), a personal account of which I cover in section 4.3.2.

In order to satisfy the aforementioned methodology requirements, my approach involved observations of the day-to-day interactions in the office, formal and informal meetings, and semi-structured interviews with the key players. Meetings are the focal point of interaction and are therefore key events in operation of organisation of any size (Angouri, 2012). This is the 'playground' for decision-making, raising issues, re-negotiation of organisational norms and practices, and co-construction of organisational context (Samra-Fredericks, 2003). Thus, a large part of the data originated in recording long hours of meetings of varying importance. However, the informal meetings and chats in the corridor are as important to weaving the organisational activities as formal meetings (Sjostrand et al., 2001), and in order to capture these interactions I found myself shadowing the managers around the office (Gill et al., 2014; McDonald and Simpson, 2014; Noordegraaf, 2014).

The use of interviews in the research served two purposes. Firstly, introductory semi-structured interviews in the beginning of observation of a particular manager and his/her team allowed gaining insight into the history of the team and building a general understanding of the activities and processes, and developing a rapport with the participants. Despite the fact that retrospective interviews provide a highly subjective personal account of a situation, they were required to lay historical ground for making sense of the observations; similar to discourse historical approach outlined by Clarke et al. (2012) for analysis of talk in strategy meetings. Secondly, on-going questioning about the observed meetings provided deeper insight into the

unfolding events, as well as actors' understanding and interpretation of their meaning. Although both applications of the interviews were important, they were additional sources of the information, which I used to interpret the unfolding interactions observed in the office, rather than a data point of their own. This follows the critique Alvesson (2003) provides on the 'naïve' and 'romantic' tradition of regarding interviews as a direct source of insight into the 'real' events and argues for alternative consideration of their political, situational and cultural contexts, including that of the social setting of the event of the interview.

Furthermore, the addition of shadowing had a number of advantages over the observation of meetings on its own (Noordegraaf, 2014), as it "enables researchers to see with their own eyes and to make sense of what they see" (p. 43). Therefore, similar to the use of the interview, it enabled two objectives to be achieved: firstly, it allowed capturing the 'random' and chaotic actions and interactions of the managers and those around them, and collecting the evidence of their actions and interactions in passing. Secondly, a closer look at the actors permitted observing and recording a richer contextual evidence and questioning the leadership actions and their meaning from the ethnomethodological stance (Iszatt-White, 2011).

The final point that requires an explanation is timing of my data collection. Ethnography is generally associated with long-term involvement with the participant organisations, and Van Maanen (2011) discourages from undertaking the approach unless the researcher is prepared to become a part of the community and be fully immersed into their life. Furthermore, Westney and Van Maanen (2011) critique 'casual ethnography' as an approach where a researcher spends little time with the organisation and focuses on the executives as opposed to the overall culture. The

design of my research, albeit based on a relatively short time of one week spent with every team under consideration, allowed to move around the departments and collect evidence of leadership practices across various groups of people. I spent just over six weeks with five different teams in Moscow. In addition, with each group I made an effort to observe the daily routines of the teams when their line managers were absent from the room.

### 4.2.4 Piloting the design

I tested the research design outlined above in two pilot studies. Since the initial intention was to carry out a full comparative analysis of the organisations in Russia and the UK, it was decided to test data collection in both settings. It was particularly important, as I anticipated a challenge in gaining access to the organisations that would be willing to participate in the proposed research.

In the first pilot, for four days I observed the activities of the MBA department that at the time was managed by Professor Kempster. I was relatively relaxed in following the procedure and stayed mostly in his office, observed several meetings, carried out individual interviews with participants, and tried to record their interactions as much as possible. The experience was valuable, and I made several conclusions. Firstly, I realised that I had to think through in advance how and when I could physically position myself in the rooms during and between the meetings. Secondly, I realised that if the layout of the office was secluded and did not have open spaces, I would have to adapt a strategy and be selective on the participants I follow around. Whilst I had previous experience of carrying out multiple interviews, it was also my first attempt of systematic observations and on-the-go interviewing, which required further

practice and reflection on my positioning of a researcher (see section 4.3.2.1 below). Finally, I was able to adjust my on-the-go interview questions.

For the second pilot I spent a week in my mother's organisation in Moscow where she works as the deputy CEO/General manager. Since most of her employees were already acquainted with me, I could easily talk to them and observe the meetings; but it was still emotionally challenging as I had to fit in with the image of a "big boss's daughter". Drawing on the learning from the previous pilot, I was very conscious of shadowing my mother and tried to follow her around in the office in order to have the chance of catching small talk in the corridors, and talked to her in advance on where I could position myself during the meetings. Both strategies turned out to be effective. I also found that when I explain to people the subject of my research – leadership – they tended to engage with heroic discourses of leadership and changed my materials and questions to avoid this bias.

Overall, both pilot experiences were valuable in preparing for the data collection process in a number of ways, and I reflect on their value for my approach to data collection process in section 4.3.2 below. Firstly, based on my pilot experiences, where the MBA team was dispersed across rooms and even floors of the business school, I considered open plan seating to be ideal in terms of ease of daily communication amongst team members and the 'kitchen small talk'. Later experience in my mother's office led me to conclusion that the best way to catch them would be to shadow the formal manager, although there was also value in staying behind and listening to their team alone. Both techniques were used later in the actual fieldwork, where I even followed a manager and his closest co-workers to they cigarette breaks. In addition, it was important to test observation and note-taking techniques. For

example, as I was able to voice-record the conversations both in and out of formal meetings, my notes were predominantly focussed on the physical actions of individuals, their body language and gestures that accompanied the dialogues, physical layouts of the rooms and other aspects that would later be useful for interpretation of the interaction incidents. Next, it highlighted the choices I would have to make on a daily basis on the amount of engagement with the people I observed, which would manifest themselves in how I would introduce myself to new people and explain my own actions, where I position myself during observations and when I may intervene with questions, and the degree of formality and friendliness that I would seek to balance when talking to the participants. Finally, it guided the combination of data collection methods, as I was able to experience the limitations of observing meetings on their own, and the challenge of posing questions about on-going activities, and the importance of following people around outside of their formal interactions.

### *4.2.5  Final version of the fieldwork approach*

Although I did not analyse the data of the pilots in great detail, the overall conclusion was that the design was fit to the purpose of the research. Building on these experiences, I finalised the research design and used it as a guideline during both periods of actual data collection. In the invitation letter to participating organisation, the ideal procedure of the research was presented in the following way:

- Thursday or Friday (before Day 1) – introductory interview with the manager about his/her department, his/her understanding of their procedures and operations; team members; his/her views on leadership and management (approx. 60 minutes)

- Friday or Monday – introductory interviews with the team members about their department (20-30 minutes)

- Monday to Friday – observations of formal meetings, pre-interview with the manager; post-interview with the manager and other participants

- Monday to Friday – where possible, shadowing and observation of informal contacts (corridor, kitchen etc.)

Whilst it was my best intention to follow the plan, I often had to adjust my activity for various reasons, some of each I outlined below. Despite the fact that this thesis draws on the Russian side of my data, I regard the experience of UK fieldwork valuable with regards to improving the fieldwork techniques. Therefore, although the next section focuses in the Russian data as it provides an account of the process of sampling, gaining and negotiating access, and the reflections on fieldwork experiences presented through the lens of CHAT draw on examples from both sites.

## 4.3.    The activity system of my fieldwork

This section outlines the mechanisms that affected my research *before*, *during*, and *after* the fieldwork (Roberts and Sanders, 2005), explains the process of preparation for the actual data collection and describes the fieldwork experiences. It also highlights the instruments I employed to capture the process and the challenges I faced through a reflexive construction of the activity system of my own research.

### 4.3.1   Before: Sampling and gaining access

The two factors that I had to consider before the start of data collection were finding an appropriate organisation that would allow my data collection process to take place, and explaining my research in a way that would interest their stakeholder(s)

enough to grant my access to their day-to-day operations. It was decided that I would use my personal connections in Moscow in order to source a suitable organisation, and therefore I contacted a friend who delivers consulting and facilitation services to a number of clients in Russia. After we discussed several options, I prepared a document that outlined the purpose of my research, sample procedure of data collection, and potential benefits that my research would deliver through validation and sharing my observations. My contact sent this document to one of his clients, and we agreed to meet and discuss opportunities in February 2013.

### 4.3.1.1  Trading access and places

The main decision in gaining access was on the strategy of "trading places" in order to gain access to the organisations. As I aimed to minimise my effect on the existing activity systems, the three frequent options of exchange – trading my professional skills and knowledge, providing open support to the participants in their daily activities, or 'selling' the potential benefits of experiencing the fieldwork (Ram, 1999, p. 96) – were not available to me. Therefore, I offered to give feedback on their leadership activities *after* the data collection and analysis, and this led to positioning myself as a *student* who was not ready to provide on-the-spot advice, but was willing to share the research outcomes at the validation stage of my research. This further contributed to the development of the fieldwork activity system and, in particular, the becoming of my identity as a researcher within these companies began *before* the fieldwork.

### 4.3.1.2  Context: The participating organisations

The organisation in Moscow – "Media Inc." – where I collected the data is a large company that places advertisements in the media market. The organisation was

founded in 1987 and was privately owned at the time of fieldwork. Although the group employed about 2000 people, I carried out my research in one of its departments – 'Development Division' that employed circa 200 people and was central to the firm's innovation and operations. I was introduced through my connection to the head of the department ("Adrian", his and others' real names have been changed to protect participants' anonymity) in February 2013, and he expressed interested in my research in exchange for learning about the findings.

The Development Division as a separate 'first level' part of Media Inc. had been formed just about a year prior to data collection under Adrian and was previously part of the Sales Division. It consisted of four departments managed by the following agents: Jane (department of development of business instruments and marketing – Department K), Manager-V (system support and development), Manager-B (innovation department – DIT), and Andrew (IT department). Whereas the first two teams were under Adrian's responsibility before the restructuring, the latter two were brought into the scope of his control in order to create the momentum for change. Inclusion of IT department in this group as opposed to keeping it a separate department is explained by the context of business activity: the company was heavily driven by its IT technologies, it was the source of their market expertise and reputation, and their clients as well as competitors used their IT products and solutions for advertisement placement and document circulation.

**Table 4.1 Site of data collection**

| Company name | Media Inc. |
|---|---|
| **Location** | Moscow, Russia |
| **Business nature** | Advertisement placement in the media (Internet, Cinema, Plasma screens etc.) |

| Size of organisation | Circa 1000 |
|---|---|
| Group of people in focus | 200 ('Development Division') |
| Structure | Head of Division and four departments at the next level |
| Period of data collection | April-June 2013 |
| Total length of recordings | 76 hours |

Data collection was structured accordingly, and it was agreed that I would spend a week with each manager. The intention was to start by shadowing Adrian for one week; however, he was away on the work trip, and therefore after an introductory interview with him, I was thrown in the deep end at the IT department shadowing Andrew. After that, I observed Adrian, and then spent a week with Jane and Manager-V, respectively, and finally, two weeks with DIT as it was going through management change.

### 4.3.2   *During: A reflexive account of my fieldwork*

In this section I aim to provide a reflexive account of my research (Bell, 1999; Giampapa, 2011; Gill, 2011; O'Connor, 2011) through an open discussion of the activity system of my fieldwork using CHAT framework. The stories below represent the tensions and external and internal conflicts that I had to address, therefore altering my actions to suit the context. I have to admit that, although I was aware of most considerations below at the time of data collection, others emerged from my consciousness after the fieldwork, and some only appeared during the writing period of this thesis.

**Tools & Concepts - negotiated:**
Interview guidance, CHAT framework, note book for note-taking, voice recorder
Consent form, mobile phone etc.

**Agent – negotiated:**

"the researcher"
"the partner in crime"
"the observer"
"the student"
"the shadow"

**Collecting data for my research**

**Findings**
For my PhD
As feedback for the participants

**Rules and norms - negotiated:**
Patterns of my and participants'
behaviours during data collection

**Participants**

**Patterns of engagement - negotiated:**
Patterns of observations, shadowing, interviews

**Figure 4.1 Activity system of my fieldwork**

### *4.3.2.1 The Agent: myself as a researcher*

One of the central requirements of a reflexive practice in ethnographical research is awareness and open discussion of my identity becoming during the data collection. In order to capture this process, I took notes on my reactions, emotions and adjusting patterns of behaviour for consequent reflection (Watson, 1995; 2011; Gilmore and Kenny, 2015), which occurred on weekly, if not daily, basis. Throughout the experience, I alternated between being a "researcher", a "student", an "observer", a "shadow", and "a partner in crime". In a similar vein, Harding (2007) describes her experience during a one-to-one interview there are at least seven parties in the room:

> …the academic self I myself generate, the academic 'me' generated by the interviewee, the managerial self generated by the interviewee, the interviewee generated by the academic, the interviewee self generated by the interviewee, and the two organizations, university and NHS Trust, invoked as we offer questions and answers. Each brings with them discourses of their 'professional selves' generated or spoken through numerous others all of whom will be

invoking 'their' organization as they interact. The interview situation is thus a very crowded room (p. 1766).

This dynamic was further influenced by the gender dynamics between participants and myself (Bell, 1999; Gill, 2011). In both organisations I shadowed one female manager and four male managers, and unsurprisingly, my bond with the female counterparts was stronger and quicker (Gill, 2011), and the developed identities were those of comrades. At the same time, my relationships with male managers were more varied and unpredictable as I was very aware of the gender dynamics, which upon reflection, I managed in different ways. In Russia, where has the Soviet resulted in a high percentage of females in senior management and where gender games are played relatively equally, I took on the identity of a "partner in crime" – cheerful, attentive and positive, engaging in banter and intellectual debates in the free time. At the same time in the UK, the managers tended to assume a more fatherly or a more boyish attitude towards me, which I reciprocated with "looking up" or "looking down".

It was during the first pilot at Professor Kempster's office when I experienced a need to present myself in a way that would foster creation of rapport and a level shared understanding in order to negotiate access to the activities. There, the image of an inquisitive PhD student seemed most appropriate and was mainly an extension of the supervisor-student relationship that had already been established. However, even though this was a familiar role, and a frequent one within the university walls, it mediated my interactions with the team. For example, it made my relationship with female careers and admission advisors very easy, as they were used to dealing with the MBA students in a positive, light-hearted and inclusive way. At the same time, I

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felt a sense of reticence from a young female programme administrator – as I realised later, most likely due to the fact that she was often the first point of problem resolution, and therefore did not associate my presence with positive consequences. Finally, the most emotional and conflicting experience occurred during building rapport with Professor Kempster's deputy: on the one hand, she was a fellow PhD student and therefore we had a common ground we could relate to; however, an equal relationship contradicted her senior position at the university, and although she appeared helpful and open, at some point I realised that she was carefully crafting her description of the MBA department during the interviews and choosing what to say and what not to say. Although this was a moment of great internal frustration for me, it was also a learning point that created greater awareness of power distribution within the data collection process (Giampapa, 2011). During the second pilot in my mother's office, I had to act within pre-arranged settings, where most of the company knew me as 'daughter of the boss who is doing her research', and therefore my main task was to maintain their level of trust by insisting that my observations would remain confidential.

I found that the *consent form* was an important Tool as the first step of building the rapport with participants, since this artefact presented an opportunity for me to introduce myself and my research, and the future rules and norms, and patterns of engagement. This was the time when the participants would ask questions about my background, PhD project, interests, and build their understanding about my work. In effect, with every person this was the initial negotiation of his/her involvement in my research activity system – or equally, my involvement in the activity systems of their jobs. Things did not always go to plan; for example, one of the participants read the

consent form and crossed out her agreement to be voice recorded without much

explanation of her choice. I respected this decision and started taking notes by hand

during the introductory interview, but once she realised the level of detail that was

required for my records by the research aim, she kindly reversed her decision.

During the first day of each week, I went through emotions of isolation, frustration

and doubts (Shaffir and Stebbins, 1991) whilst negotiating access to a new team and

establishing my research activity within the new context. Every day I would come

home intellectually and emotionally exhausted from trying to learn about the activities

and being painfully self-aware of continuous negotiation of my role in context. During

the first week of data collection in Moscow, this feeling was further reinforced by the

fact that the manager who I intended to shadow was away and therefore it was

difficult to have a high-level understanding of what was happening around me.

### 4.3.2.2  The Objective: What am I looking for?

Although the objective of my fieldwork was to collect the data that would enable me

to address the research questions, I was careful in my explanation of the research

topic, particularly in the organisation in Russia. As discussed in section 1.4, the

discourses attached to the terms 'leader' and 'leadership' have a great range of

meanings within Russian language, and therefore when asked about my research

topic and focus, my usual response would be that I was studying team dynamics and

related processes, such as communication, leadership etc. This leadership-neutral

explanation seemed to put people at ease, as they did not feel pressured to match

the discourse of heroic leadership in their jobs, which I observed earlier in the second

pilot.

### 4.3.2.3 Tools and Concepts: Voice-recording, note-taking and beyond

In addition to the *consent form*, over time I developed a number of instruments that mediated my activity of fieldwork – including questioning, voice-recording, note-taking, CHAT-informed checklists for capturing situations, and ways of managing the intensity of contact with the participants.

CR-informed research focuses on discourse and its orders as well as on the texts and the processes and explores how these are interrelated (Fairclough, 2005), and thus requires a great attention to every detail of activity in the office: what is being said and how it is said, when and where conversations take place, and even what people wear on the day. Therefore, I used a variety of methods to record the rich data of the events unfolding around me, and in addition to voice recording of most interactions, I continuously took notes of the actions, seating plans, particular remarks, gestures and any further information that I could capture, marked against the time point of recording.

For every action and interaction observed, my goal was to gain knowledge about the activity systems elements. During the meetings, my attention was drawn to different elements of activities, as well as reference to themes outside the workplace and the emotional and intellectual turns of the conversations. Later, these observations were explored in follow-up 'chats' with the meeting participants in order to clarify their meanings. This was especially important for shadowing managers, as it is through active elaboration and auto-ethnographic conversations with the individual that I was able to explore deep processes into the leader-follower relationship (Kempster and Stewart, 2010). On-the-go interviews with both the manager and team members

were centred around their perceptions about objective of the meeting, its outcomes, their further actions on the matter etc.

Finally – and this may appear almost counter-productive – I had to devise the space where the managers would not feel observed and could focus on the 'boring' desk activities. Therefore, in these quiet moments I would write my notes and reflections, or even 'play with my phone' to give them a break from continuous and active "spect-acting" (Gill, 2011).

### 4.3.2.4 Rules of engagement – Underlying Assumptions and Roles & Responsibilities

Gaining access remains a continuous challenge in the field of ethnographic studies (Van Maanen, 1988; Shaffir and Stebbins, 1991; Ram, 1999), and I found that it was very greatly dependent on the basis of the activity system – rules and patterns of engagement. First and foremost, since the primary source of data resulted from shadowing the managers, I had to make sure that they were fully on board and content with my presence in their office for a week. The expectation was that they would feel more relaxed if I were to observe their meetings with their *internal* team as opposed to *external* stakeholders. Therefore, additional caution was taken when I presented myself on the first day in the office and during each of these meetings and obliged immediately on few occasions when I was asked to leave the room due to a sensitive subject of discussion, e.g. resignation and other personal issues.

As the time went, I found myself focusing more on shadowing the managers rather than observing the whole team. Firstly, this way it was easier to explain to other participants what I was doing, and they were more relaxed around me. Secondly, despite the assumption that leadership is a collective and distributed process, the

hierarchical power to change the systems belongs to the formal manager, and is either carried out or 'authorised' by them, and therefore was the most common source of insight for my research.

Furthermore, most Mondays I "followed the rules" (Gill et al., 2014), did not 'push' or 'stalk' the managers and did not pose too many questions. Unlike the pilots, during the main study I had to split the 'introductory interview' in two parts: on the first day, I questioned the manager about their team and structures, whereas their past experiences were narrated throughout the week, and I had a more detailed co-autoethnographic session with them at the end. Also, despite my best efforts it was not always possible to interview all team members on the first day, and I had to be relaxed enough to do so throughout the week, as this was a chance to learn more about their reactions to the meetings that I had already observed.

Another choice that had to be made every week is whether the observation of team's life should also involve participation in their activities. The general recommendation in ethnographic literature is to approach the researched community as close as possible to the extent of working alongside them (Watson, 1994; Van Maanen, 2011; Watson, 2011). The lens of activity theory suggests that instead of looking from the outside of the *activity system,* entering the system would allow deeper experience of the underlying processes and closer relationships with team members, but if I were to become one of its fully participating agents, the activity system itself is likely to change. Therefore, I required a role that would be close to everyday life of the team; but would not involve my direct participation in activity of the team. For example, on some occasions I would make drinks for the team members, help organise conference rooms, or support personal assistants with their tasks. This allowed to

acquire the 'what' and the 'how' information of the CoPs (Brown and Duguid, 2002). At the same time, I quickly learnt that I had to keep a relative distance, as sometimes people would start chatting to me during the meetings, or try and ask about my knowledge of unfolding events or office conflicts, which I always rejected due to ethical commitments. The only exception when I broke the rule and participated in the activity was during my UK part of fieldwork, when the senior management were staying late into the night drafting slides for a crucial presentation on the next day about upcoming structural changes, struggling for energy and time, and insisted on my help even though they knew it was *against the rules.* Torn by the need to keep distance as a researcher and empathetic desire to help them, I agreed to take over the laptop and 'type down' what they said, but tried my best not to suggest ideas or direct their flow of discussions.

Furthermore, I asked most managers and their team members if they thought the dynamics of their interaction were different due to my presence, and interestingly the answers varied: whilst managers tended to express the opinion that they were more aware of their actions and tried to 'look good', their team members did not notice any changes. One manager in the UK said: "Of course your presence changes my behaviour. It does so in a similar way to when I imagine my role model watching me during important meetings". This creates an interesting argument that although my presence increased managers' awareness of the leadership practice, it did not alter the activity system itself.

### 4.3.3 After: A return to the desk

It is argued that the end of ethnographic data collection it is important for the researcher to negotiate their exit from the fieldwork, and switch to transcription and

consequent data analysis (Gill, 2011). In my case, I departed both sites with a promise of a comeback to discuss and validate the findings. However, this was realised only for the Russian organisation (discussed below in Section 4.4.7), as I did not have the opportunity to analyse the second part of the data.

Furthermore, although the question of validity was relevant throughout preparation for fieldwork and data collection stages, it came to the forefront of considerations after I returned to the desk for data analysis and interpretation. Whittemore et al. (2001, p.534) identify several validity criteria for qualitative enquiry, and whilst I believe that Chapters 3 and 5 address the secondary criteria (explicitness, vividness, creativity, thoroughness, congruence, and sensitivity), it is worth highlighting the primary criteria now. In the narratives of this and the following chapters the participants' experiences and multitude of their voices are situated and presented within their context, thus addressing the criteria of *credibility* and *authenticity*. In turn, the criteria of *criticality* and *integrity*, requiring critical appraisal and repetitive testing of findings, are rooted within CR Grounded Theory techniques presented in the next section.

## *4.4.    Data analysis: Grounded Theory*

As discussed in Chapter 3, this exploration of L-A-P is underpinned by the philosophy of critical realism, and therefore both data collection (framed by CHAT) and the data analysis are informed by CR assumptions. As a consequence, the Grounded Theory approach (GT) (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1997; Charmaz, 2006) adopted for making sense of the data is not a classic version of GT, but a critical realist variation that draws on analysis of the empirical to uncover the *real* (Kempster and Parry, 2011, 2014). 'Classic' GT is an inductive approach to analysis

that assumes no a priori structure, where definitions and models emerge from a particular set of data about human phenomenon under study (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). During the research process, data is continuously analysed and used to focus further data collection, which in turn shapes the developing theory (Charmaz, 2000); from that perspective, it can be called an inductive/ deductive approach (Collis and Hussey, 2003). It is for reasons of flexibility, possibility of emersion in the context and attention to both the fine details and high-level tendencies that GT became the last piece in the L-A-P puzzle.

### 4.4.1 Critical realist Grounded Theory

Even though GT has been widely used in social sciences, its potential contribution the leadership research agenda and L-A-P in particular has been undervalued (Parry, 1998; Kempster and Parry, 2011b). In conjunction with CR, Kempster and Parry (2011b) suggest that GT offers a toolkit that may serve as an instrument for uncovering the deep real mechanisms beyond their empirical manifestations. For example, Charmaz (2000) argues that any method of data gathering is appropriate for GT, as long as the researcher does not fall into the trap of forcing the data into preconceived categories through imposition of artificial questions. However, CR-informed research benefits both from particular attention to the contextual factors as well as drawing on extant knowledge at the stage of data analysis (Kempster and Parry, 2011b). For example, due to the large amount of data and the ambiguity of the definitions of the situations where leadership practices may emerge (Crevani et al., 2010), I sought a careful balance in my research. Initially, although my data collection methods were constructed based on a version of CHAT framework adapted for organisational research, during the fieldwork itself I made a conscious decision not to

think specifically about the framework to avoid disregarding the evidence that would not fit with it. However, once the data was collected and transcribed, I struggled to make sense of the whole data set, which included recordings of conversations, interviews and my notes about people's actions, body language etc. To tackle to issue, at first, I split the data by interaction event (such as meetings, discussions, chats) and identified themes under broad headings, such as 'goal-setting', 'references to stakeholders', 'stories of past actions', 'humour', 'emotional labour'. Next, these themes were placed back into their situated context and assessed against the on-going events, which lead to the appearance of the three levels of the activity systems – structural, interaction and leadership, where the emerging leadership themes related to the elements within these activity systems. Therefore, the three levels of analysis and the leadership practices, both of which relate to CHAT framework, appeared from the data, and allowed subsequent analysis of their interplay and dynamic. I follow this sequence of analysis in my presentation of the findings in Chapter 5.

This examples is an illustration for the fit of GT approach for 'local contextualised understanding and explanation' of leadership (Kempster and Parry, 2011b, p. 107) and is therefore an appropriate complement to the practice-based methodology. Drawing on the combination of the contextual evidence, on the empirical observations and interpretations of the actors involved are key to building a 'thick' description of the emerging processes of leadership (Geertz, 1973). The consequent input from the research participants for the interpretation and making sense of the research outcomes tests and feeds back to the theory against their experience and

thus provide internal validity. Finally, testing the theories against other contexts would expand the boundaries of practical applications and generalizability.

This process is similar to the one described by Decoteau (2016), who developed a model of building a valid theory of ethnographic. The "AART" model is a four stage approach to CR-informed ethnography: abduction, abstraction, retroduction and testing, which resembles the CR-informed GT. Building on the work of Danermark et al. (1997), Decoteau defines 'abduction' as recontextualisation, where "surprising empirical findings lead to hypothesis-generation" (p. 15); in other words, giving the freedom to follow the data and emerging findings. The next step is abstraction, a development of theoretical conclusions based on the concrete empirical evidence. At the retroduction stage the researchers theorise on the structures and causal links that explain the phenomenon in question, and its place in the context of other theories. Finally, similarly to the approach outlined by Kempster and Parry (2011b), testing phase is an essential stage of theory validation and refinement in future use.

Below I outline my adaption of Kempster and Parry's Critical Realist retroductive GT approach (Table 4.2). Following this approach, I analysed each transcript looking for different meanings and phenomena, units of interaction and exchange of information and utterances, references to past actions, key stakeholders and other activity systems. I also looked for reactions to and remarks of these themes in the interviews with the agents and their interpretations of the meanings.

**Table 4.2 Grounded Theory analysis procedure**

| Step | Adaptation of Kempster and Parry's CR Grounded Theory approach | Number of readings | Focus |
|------|----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|-------|
|      |                                                                |                    |       |

| Step | Adaptation of Kempster and Parry's CR Grounded Theory approach | Number of readings | Focus |
|------|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|-------|
| 1 | Transcription—transcribe interview recordings (interviews and meetings) | | All data |
| 2 | Bracketing and the phenomenological reduction – understand the meaning of what a person is saying from their word-view; listening to the meeting recording and the interviews for a sense of the whole – often a number of times to get a feel of the gestalt | 1/ 2 for interviews; 2/3 for meetings | All data |
| 3 | Delineating units of meaning – a word, sentence, paragraph or significant non-verbal communication; where available – use field notes for body language and other remarks | 1/2 | Meetings |
| 4 | Delineating units of meaning relevant to the research questions – use extant leadership literature | 1/ 2 | Meetings |
| 5 | Eliminating redundancies – identifying the number of times a unit of meaning is mentioned as well as differentiating between meaning in context of the same unit and meaning mentioned more than once | | Whole week with a team – same actors |
| 6 | Clustering units of relevant meaning— seeking natural groupings of units that have similar meaning; overlapping is seen to be inevitable as the clusters are part of the whole phenomenon | | Whole week with a team – same actors |
| 7 | Determining themes from the clusters of meaning – central themes which express the essence of clusters and the gestalt of the interview / meeting | | Whole week with a team – same actors |
| 8 | Writing a summary for each team – reflecting on the whole of the week in light of the clusters of meaning and themes | | Whole week with a team – same actors |
| 9 | Return to the participant with the summary and themes—validity check to see if the interview agrees with the clusters and themes and whether additional information is required | | Offer to managers and let them invite their teams if they are interested |
| 10 | Modifying themes and summary—in light of additional information from (9) and repeat stages 1-8 | | |

| Step | Adaptation of Kempster and Parry's CR Grounded Theory approach | Number of readings | Focus |
|---|---|---|---|
| 11 | Identifying general and unique themes for all the data – looking across data for common themes and unique themes | | All data |
| 12 | Contextualisation of themes—placing the common themes back into context to enrich and validate meaning | | |
| 13 | Composite summary—the phenomenon in general as experienced by the participants | | |

Whilst Chapter 5 – Findings provides a detailed account of the levels of activity systems and the leadership practices that emerged through analysis, below I present a short episode and illustrate how the detailed analysis of the situation has been carried out. Although this episode involves the actors described in Chapter 5, and supersedes the events described from that week, it provides a rich example of leadership interaction within the organisational context.

### 4.4.2 Data transcription and preparation (Step 1)

I transcribed most of the recordings manually, using my notes as the guideline for events taking place. Since I was overwhelmed with the amount of information whilst I was collecting the data and some days all of my efforts resulted merely in keeping up with the activity, transcription of the audio-recordings was essential for listening, understanding and making sense of the data. Having tried several formats of transcription, I chose to use tables for noting what was said, who said it, and numbering the lines. Additionally, each file had a heading for the week and recording number, page number in my notes, date, time and length, and location. These were kept additionally in an Excel spread sheet, where I could write additional comments in order to keep track of the information.

### 4.4.3 An example of analysis

The conversation below was a standalone example of interaction between the head of department Adrian and one of his senior managers, Jane (here and below the names have been changed). The whole conversation lasted less than three minutes and occurred when Jane entered the room with a quick request for Adrian to show support and make an introductory speech at a marketing event she had been organising. This represents an attempt at leadership, where an agent attempts to influence the surrounding structures of activity systems and uses the existing resources in his/her networks of activity systems – members situated community, the power they have from understanding and shaping the norms and value and organisational roles – in order to achieve an organising outcome. On the other hand, the interaction itself is an enactment of the common routines as small chats like that happen within the organisation all the time. Finally, the unfolding dynamics of the interaction refers to various components of the leadership practice. As the purpose of this abstract is to illustrate the interplay between the themes that emerge through speech and their contextual meaning, the codes and their wider meanings presented below are not exhaustive in terms of leadership practice.

There was no formal start to the interaction, as Jane followed Adrian from a large status update meeting into his office and therefore there was no requirement for small talk (which is way less popular in Russian than in the UK). However, dropping into the manager's office without prior arrangement was relatively unusual in this team, and therefore Jane hesitated in the doorway until Adrian looked at her, and an inquisitive expression on his face invited her to speak…

**Table 4.3 A sample of coded script**

| N | Ini. | Line | Code | Impact level | Meaning/ context |
|---|------|------|------|--------------|------------------|
| 1 | Jane | I wanted to ask you to **support with authority**… | Using influence of a key stakeholder | Current interaction – setting the objective; Future interaction – setting a role; Structural – inviting to influence an activity system | Illustrates the culture of respect of hierarchy |
| 2 | Adrian | Marketing? | | | |
| 3 | Jane | Yes. I wanted to ask you to make an introduction and **talk about the strategic role of marketing** in our company…. | Conveying a message to another team | Structural – shaping the image of the team; Interaction – setting the goal for Adrian's future actions | Request to articulate/ pass on a story within the organisation |
| 4 | Adrian | Ah… Who will be there? | Shaping community | Learning about the future interaction activity through learning who are the stakeholders | Evaluation of impact |
| 5 | Jane | ..and… there will be plenty of people, I will send you the list later. Or rather I hope that there will be plenty of people (laughs). That is, we wanted to invite everyone who has some relation to the marketing function…. [...lists teams and names of people…] | Naming the stakeholders in order to convince Adrian to attend | Current interaction – dropping names to create credibility for request; Future interaction – creating a reason for Adrian to attend the session | Reference to the impact and value of the proposed action as a criterion for agreement |
| 6 | Adrian | Great. | | | |
| 7 | Jane | There. I really want to ask [name] to go first and talk about… talk about the themes. | | | |

| N | Ini. | Line | Code | Impact level | Meaning/ context |
|---|------|------|------|--------------|------------------|
| 8 | Adrian | Well yes, yes, yes… | | | |
| 9 | Jane | And I am asking you to make an introductory… | | | |
| 10 | Adrian | And **where will we be**? | Taking control over conversation and the event | Current interaction – changing topic; Future interaction – clarifying tools | Once agreed to attend the meeting, Adrian shows power by asking logistics questions |
| 11 | Jane | In the training room… […] | | | |
| 12 | Adrian | Fine. | | | |
| 13 | Jane | Yes. | | | |
| 14 | Adrian | Fine. | | | |
| 15 | Jane | **Fine**? | Confirming of agreed outcome | Current interaction – objective | Double-checking the objective has been achieved |
| 16 | Adrian | **Will there be pies**? | Taking power and building on humour/ informal relations | Current interaction – changing topic; Future interaction – clarifying artifacts; Structure – drawing on relaxed culture and eating habits | Reference to the relatively informal and relaxes culture of the organisation but power distance as Adrian ask an admin-type question |
| 17 | Jane | Yes… If we get a budget [laughs]… […] Ok**, I will ask**. | Responding to the power claim | Current interaction – granting power; Future interaction – agreement to change artifacts | The request has been successful and Jane acknowledges that Adrian has the authority in the room |
| 18 | Adrian | [mumbles] | | | |
| 19 | Jane | Could we get three-four thousands [roubles] to buy pies? Could we? | Taking immediate action | Structure – Adrian would need to approve expenses | Asking for budget approval on the spot |

| N | Ini. | Line | Code | Impact level | Meaning/ context |
|---|------|------|------|--------------|------------------|
| 20 | Adrian | Could we? Well, ask how the HRs do it? | Deferring decision | Current interaction – not answering the question; Structure – bring in another system | Referring to another activity system |
| 29 | Jane | […] I will ask. | Taking on a task | Structure – an action for Jane | Acceptance of ownership |
| 36 | Adrian | […] **Send it to my calendar.** | Further confirming of agreement and power claim | Structure – an action for Jane | A balance of formal hierarchy and informal agreement to the event |
| 37 | Jane | I will, fine. But please promise. | Negotiating actions | Current interaction – balance of negotiations; Structure – personal interactions | Exchange of obligations and informal emotional language |
| 38 | Adrian | Fine. I will **even wear a white shirt**. | Making a joke and reference to shared culture | Current interaction – leave on a positive note; Future interaction – setting artifacts; Structure – reference to norms | In the company, shirts are only worn by management, hence a white shirt denotes a high level of commitment |
| 39 | Jane | Thanks [leaves] | | | |

As can be seen above, the interaction presents examples of a power dynamic

between Adrian and Jane, which draws on references to key stakeholders, rules and

norms, engaged by other departments, shared culture and humour, as Jane is trying

to persuade Adrian to be involved in a process that will ultimately help her purpose.

The short conversation resembles a dance, where actors touch on different strings –

elements of the structural, interaction and leadership activity systems – at the same

time, and through their trans-action form a direction of activity that is likely to have an impact on future organising practices.

### 4.4.4 Coding and clustering the units of meaning (Steps 2-6)

The codes above represent the 'units of meaning' (Kempster and Parry, 2014), which is the first stage of GT analysis approach. As mentioned above, the actual transcripts were colour-coded according to very broad themes that emerged through the first reading – reference to historical events, to culture and language, to goals and objectives, to agents inside and outside of the particular interactions, the signals of power distribution in the room and particular emotional events. This process was applied to all the transcripts of meetings and interviews, and at first the array of activities – the intention was to use gerunds as much as possible – was varied and referred to completely different clusters of meaning.

The next stage was creating visual representations of the activity system for each meeting – at least the upper visible parts of the triangles – that represented the meetings themselves and the larger structural and adjacent systems that they referred to, often using the additional data from the interviews and the shadowing experiences. Figure 4.2 is an example of directly observed interaction, whilst Figure 4.3 refers to the system of the future activity the Jane is seeking to create.
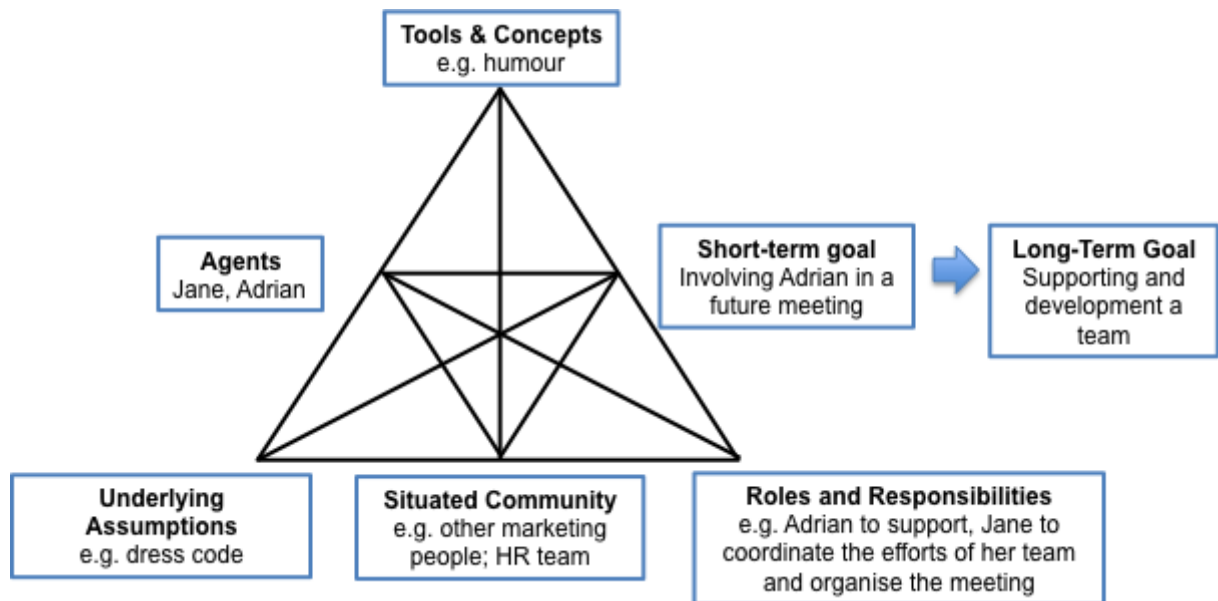
**Figure 4.2 Activity system of current interaction**
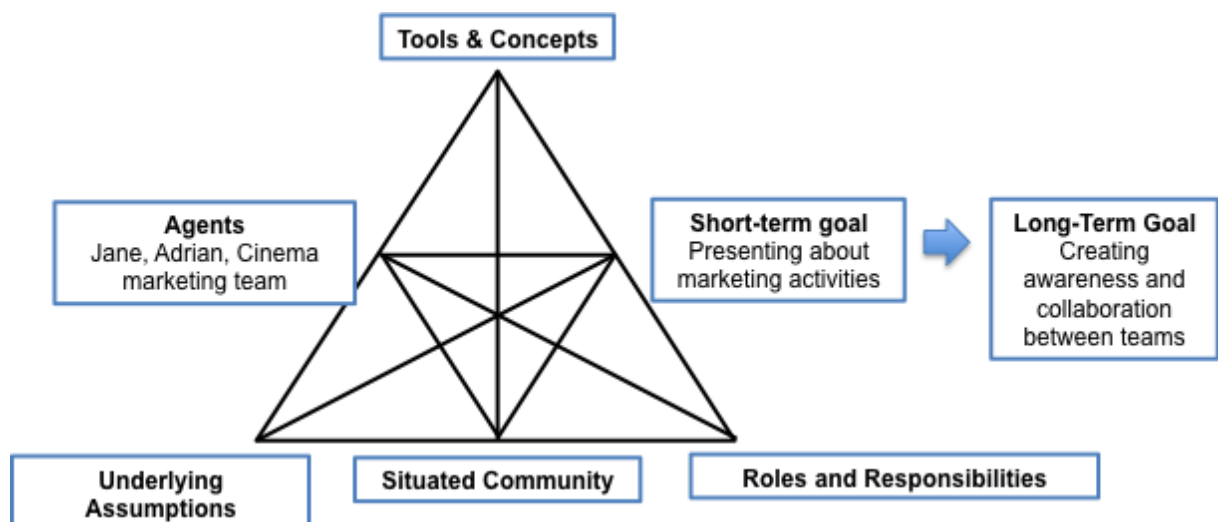


**Figure 4.3 Activity system of the future meeting (presenting marketing plans)**

Therefore, the codes are clustered by several categories:

- The levels of the activity systems they represented, i.e. incidents of this or other activities, structural changes, or leadership practices themselves

- The elements of the activity systems that the codes referred to – agents, tools & concepts, short- and long- term objectives, underlying assumptions, situated community and roles and responsibilities

Once the coding and the clustering for all the transcripts was complete, I was looking for themes within and across the clusters of meaning that explained the causal links and interrelations that emerged through the inter-actions.

### 4.4.5 Themes: meaning in context (Step 7)

The line-by-line analysis of the interactions allowed investigation of the interplay between the different levels of activity systems, and their relationship with the leadership practice. Below is a more detailed explanation of the meaning of inter-actions within the context of this meeting, team and organisational dynamics.

For example, the very *first* line where Jane phrases her request, relates to all three levels of activity:

- At the level of immediate interaction, Jane sets the goal of her contact with Adrian by stating the interest

- At the level of future activity, she defines Adrian's type of engagement (or role and responsibility) within a future activity

- By doing so, she is drawing on his reputation within the large structural activity system where his influence is undisputed and can support a team that is struggling to make cross-departmental links

Adrian does not seem to oppose the idea, but requires further information about the meeting that he is invited to contribute to. Lines 3-14 are a short exchange of utterances about the details of this meeting. In the follow-up interview Jane stated that she 'just wanted to talk to Adrian face-to-face', and therefore I am not aware whether Jane had planned all her answers before, or if she provided them on the spot, however, it showed her "owning" the event and caring about its impact for the

activities of her team. Here, Adrian and Jane form a shared understanding, an image of the future actions, and once Adrian has enough information he agrees. In addition, Jane's approach to getting him to agree in person rather than in an email refers to the organisational preference for personal contacts, and the associated power for such contacts over time-lagged communications.

Following the "formal" informative part of the interaction, the conversation between Jane and Adrian turns into exchange of phrases that provide an insight into the cultural and historical context. First (line 15) Jane double checks that Adrian has agreed to contribute, which is related to the fact that he is very busy and in the past it was not always easy for her to book his time. In response (line 16) Adrian starts a new topic, the details of which reveal his commitment (i.e. he would not be asking about food unless he really intended to come), humour (i.e. at his managerial level managers should not really preoccupy themselves with catering), and privileged position of power (as he is able to request food in return for his presence).

In line 17, Jane accepts both latter statements – she laughs at the joke, and suddenly in the room the mood is much lighter; and agrees to enquire about the food. As she has a very can-do attitude and the organisation has a certain degree of bureaucracy, she probes the structural artifacts and roles and responsibilities and asks Adrian right away about the possibility of budget allocation for the event. However, this attempt to induce/ impact his activity is not successful, as Adrian defers the request and sends her to talk to the HR department – firstly, he shows his power by *not answering* the question, and secondly, justifies it by drawing on the situated community and their expertise in the question. Through my observations I learnt that in general the Development Division has very close and warm relationships with their dedicated HR

team and therefore this is not a hard "no" with reference to the outsiders, rather, this is an indication that this is not within Adrian's roles to decide on those matters, and he believes that there are actors who have more experience with them.

The final two lines from Adrian (36 and 38) denote his positioning with the organisation. Firstly, he asks Jane to set up a meeting in his calendar, as this is normally the responsibility of junior colleagues to take carry out the admin tasks, and on numerous occasions I observed Jane and other managers make similar requests to their junior team members. It also signifies his commitment to the future action, awareness of the challenging dynamics in the marketing team and agreement to support their activity. Line 38, on the other hand, concludes the trans-action with a humorous note that directs the attention to the organisational culture, where people below senior management level wear jeans and T-shirts for work, and only managers (like himself and level below) wear shirts. For example, in the other team where I observed a change in management, the promoted individual changed his style once he was officially promoted. The fact that Adrian is prepared to wear a white shirt makes it sound even more formal, as his involvement is likely to have more impact on the audience of Jane's event.

### 4.4.6   Week summaries for each team and validation (Steps 8-10)

In order to bring together the themes from each week, I wrote high-level descriptions of the interactions I observed within every team. They tended to focus on each manager's teams and their activities, and provided a narrative of the "acting" that happened around them every week – and the themes and the codes were part of the narrative. At this point, the themes were consistent across the teams, although their application and effects varied according to the context.
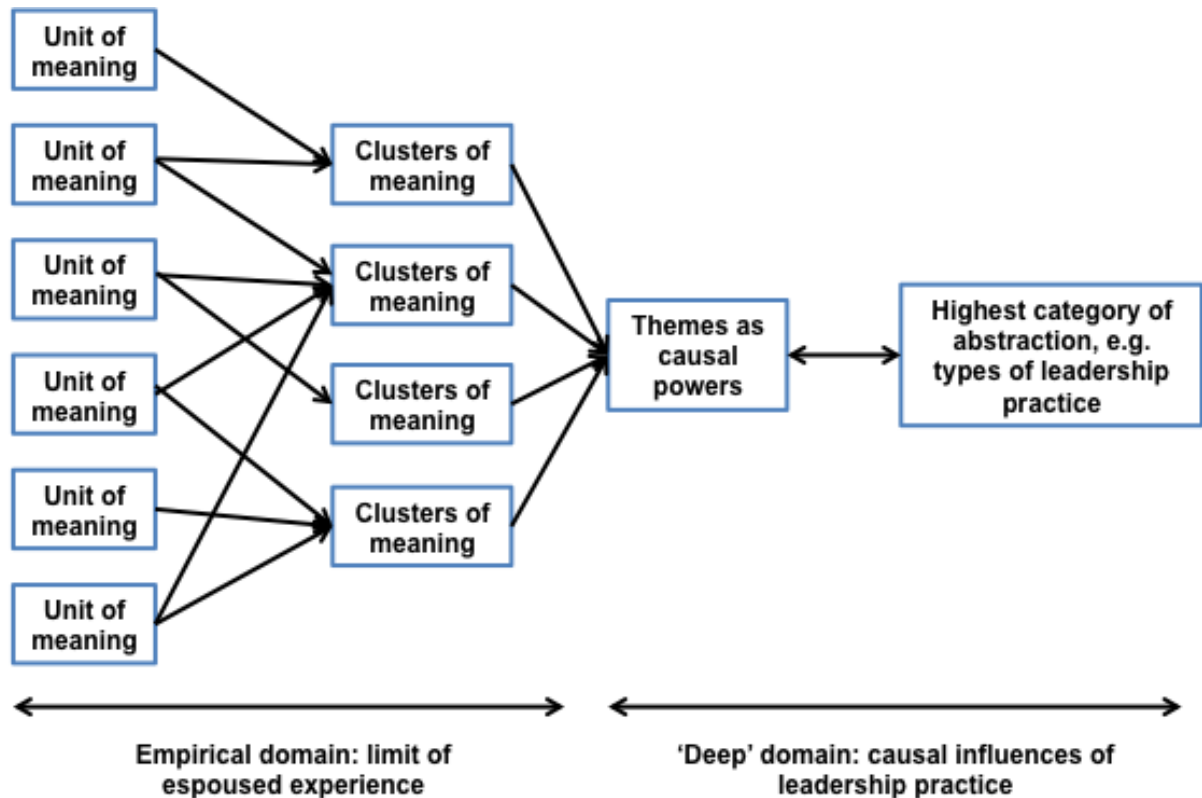
**Figure 4.4 A retroductive CR Grounded Theory approach**

(Source: adapted from Kempster and Parry, 2014)

These narratives were taken back to the participants, and resulted in two main lessons for the future use of this methodology (discussed in greater detail in Chapters 6 and 7). Firstly, as I had a limited time with the managers and covered with them the causal influences that I identified within the 'deep' domain of the leadership practice (see Figure 4.4 above), I had to draw on very specific examples from the weeks that I spent with them in order to bring the mechanisms to life. The managers found the theories interesting, and were amused by level of detail that I drew on in the remarkable examples of interactions, and joined me in making sense of those events. For example, with two of these managers I used an example of a major conflict between individuals in their teams that resulted in an 'open air' meeting in the senior manager's office. At the time, the situation was taken seriously publicly but made fun of privately and therefore I could not challenge them at the time for

ethical reasons. However, given they remembered the situation quite clearly, I drew on examples of how they jointly constructed emails to each other, and their behaviours during the 'open air' meeting. Some of my predictions surprised them by their accuracy; for example, when I illustrated humour as a instrument for claiming power and described an example of continuous failed attempts by one of the team members, her manager sighed and said that she had not been aware of the situation, and the person left the firm soon after.

However, overall the managers struggled to provide suggestions of improvement on my interpretation of the situations, since the meetings took place almost 15 months after fieldwork – and shortening the time gap between fieldwork and validation is definitely the learning from this experience. As L-A-P methodologies become more common and researchers develop the practice of their analysis, perhaps there is a space for on-going analysis and validation almost in parallel with observations (discussed in Chapter 6).

### 4.4.7   Constructing the theory of leadership practice (Steps 11-13)

As the participants generally agreed with the interpretation of the events, the next step was to write a summary of the findings into a coherent theory of leadership practice. Below I provide a brief outline on the highest level of theory abstraction, whilst the next chapter provides a detailed account of the findings and gradually introduces various elements of leadership activity and practices.

- There are three levels of activity systems within organisation – structural (referring to the objectives related to tasks, projects, processes, and functions), interactional (the on-going communication through various formal and informal meetings) and leadership activities that occur within their context.

- The leadership activity can be triggered by the tensions or conflicts in the underlying systems, that require agents to react for the benefit of future actions, which are normally manifested in disagreements, questions, instruction to change direction and verbal challenges to the status quo; but is not always triggered if there is no mutual collaborative intent form multiple agents.

- A variety of leadership practices can be employed as instruments in achieving the direction-alignment-commitment outcomes of leadership activity, such as humour, sense-making, delegation, story-telling.

- In order to gain the joint momentum, the agents draw on their power grounded in the contextual factors of both leadership activity system and the elements of structural and interaction systems.

- Therefore, all three levels of activity systems exist in constant connection and mutual influence, and leadership activity mediates the changes in both in interactional activities and structural activities (again, through interactional activity) as individuals jointly cope with the array of events within their day-to-day routines.

## *4.5.    Chapter summary*

This Chapter took the *phenomenological* approach to illuminate practice (Orlikowski, 2010) and provided an account of the methodology that was designed in order to capture, record and analyse leadership practices building on the arguments presented in Chapter 3 on use of the critical realist and cultural-historical activity theories. The design followed the preference within the L-A-P field of adopting an

ethnographic approach, and combined observations, interviews and shadowing

techniques in order to capture the rich evidence and explore meanings of unfolding

leadership activities within organisations. This data was transcribed and analysed

during the GT process, and the preliminary findings were validated with the

managers who participated in the data collection.

The next chapter outlines the leadership practice theory that emerged through the

analysis process informed by L-A-P perspective, CHAT and CR – and offers

examples of the practices that actors engage in as part of the leadership activities.

# CHAPTER 5. FINDINGS

## 5.1    Chapter overview – setting the scene of analysis

In the previous chapters I argued that leadership is a social, interactive and relational process that emerges between individuals. This emergent process enables creation, alteration, and development of the activity systems that these individuals are part of, and it happens at multiple levels of organisational structure and agency. It would be false to claim that every attempt of every individual to influence the existing structures will be successful; however, such incidents present a potential for change, and their outcome depends on the agents' powers and positions within the system.

In any organisation, every individual is involved in several activities – even if an employee is entrusted only with a one-person task that (s)he performs on their own, it is highly unlikely to be totally disconnected from the rest of the organisation. For instance, if someone is asked to carry out a piece of research on a particular topic, there is a reason for that, e.g. this information is needed in order to create a presentation about a potential new product. In turn, making this presentation for senior management team is a crucial component for them to make a decision about investing in this new product. Finally, making such business decisions can be part of the senior management's activity and the presentation is an important instrument in their decision making process.

Therefore, the higher is the order of structures, the larger is the order of activity system, the less power the first agent will have over the overall process, and the likelihood of his/her impact diminishes as we move away from his / her input an dup in the hierarchy to the decision-making level. Still, this employee will have a considerable impact on his/her own activity, and through that (s)he may sway the

decision made above. The agent may have autonomy in the execution of the task or may have to negotiate and agree every step with the manager; however, there are many factors that define the effect of his/her input.

Bearing this in mind, if we consider negotiating process between the agent and his/her manager as a potential leadership incident that may have an impact on the higher order structural activity systems, in order to fully understand the incident we will need to understand the bigger picture. In other words, when we regard leadership as an activity system, as a process that has the potential to create a change in the underlying structures, we have to consider not only the pattern of interaction during this instance, the personal qualities of the employee and the manager, their behaviour, but also must remember that it happens within the given context.

Leadership – a distinctive phenomenon of its own – is a derivative of the events that take place and does not depend solely on the individuals that hold a formal leadership position. Imagine a physics study looking at the dynamics of acceleration/ deceleration pattern of a plane. Also, imagine that similar to leadership studies, which focus solely on the leader's attributes and behaviours, scientists decide to focus only on the first pilot and his actions. From physics we know that acceleration is the first derivative of velocity, and in addition the dynamics of each particular flight depends on many factors apart from the pilot's skills; such as distance, speed, technical specifications of the aircraft, other members of the crew, weather conditions etc. If the scientists focus solely on the pilot and exclude from the scope of their research those other parameters, the data showing the amount of acceleration and deceleration will probably be a meaningless row of numbers and will not necessarily be completely explained by the pilot's navigation. From this data, even if it is possible

to build some understanding of velocity itself, the other important factors will remain out of the picture. Similarly, when looking at leadership practices that inherently emerge to transform the underlying systems, one needs to look much broader than the leaders / managers themselves or even their followers.

In this respect, CHAT framework is a useful tool for looking at the context and for uncovering those underlying structures where leadership exists, which I adapted to the organisational and L-A-P research in the previous chapters and employed as a lens for interpreting the activities occurring during the fieldwork and then for understanding leadership as an activity of its own. There are seven different groups of leadership practices related to the elements of the activity system – Agents, Tools & Concepts, Short-Term Goal / Routines, Long-Term Goal / Purpose, Underlying Assumptions, Situated Community and Roles & Responsibilities. Also, since changes occur at different levels, individuals may influence the activity of interaction itself (such as agenda) or the higher-order activities of their actual work.

This chapter is designed to present my findings and illustrates them using a selection of data collected during one of the weeks of fieldwork, and is organised as follows. Firstly, in order to illustrate the importance of contextual understanding and interpretation for capturing and analysing the situated emergence of leadership, I present a story of one of the meetings with manager Jane and a part of her team. By using this example, I explain the layers of organising activity systems that emerged from the critical realist Grounded Theory analysis – structural, interactional, and leadership – and their interconnectivity, and begin to show how leadership activity appears due to tensions within and between the contextual underlying activity systems.

Secondly, section 5.3 presents the leadership practice themes that target the tensions, organised by the element of the CHAT framework that these practices focus on. Although leadership is a process that potentially creates change in the whole activity system, the section outlines practices that correspond to the element of the system where attention comes first. It is obvious that in real-life cases one leadership episode may target several elements, however, for clarity of the argument I attempt to distil and discuss them in isolation. Also, as we start looking at various levels of analysis, the level of complexity increases, and the same object under consideration may be regarded as a different element depending on the order of activity system.

Thirdly, in section 5.4 I present three more vignettes that illustrate further the patterns of emergence of leadership practices and the contextual interplay of structures and agency over time and unfolding causal links between them. Each of these extracts sheds light on the process of moulding activity systems by their agents and highlighting recurring patterns of arising tensions and the dynamic and causal powers that guide their resolution, and each relates to the additional sections in Appendix B focussing on particular patterns of leadership episodes.

## *5.2 Process and levels of analysis – selection of lenses*

If anyone was to enter an unfamiliar office or an institution and attempt to make sense of the communication happening before their eyes between the employees, at first they are likely to struggle. Formal meetings, informal get-togethers, chats in the corridor, and even gossiping in the kitchen or at the water cooler – each interaction will relate to various tasks, projects, teams, and departments, and in order to

understand what, when, how, why and where is being said or done, they need to deconstruct the background and create a robust picture of the existing structures.

In this section I illustrate how CHAT allows us to view and analyse the complex context of organisational chaos, and to uncover the incidents of leadership within this environment. I do so through using one of the meetings I observed during the week with Jane. This meeting preceded by about a month the interaction between Jane and Adrian presented as an illustration of data analysis approach in the section 4.4.3 of the previous chapter, and is concerned with the activities of the Cinema Marketing team before Jane has decided to organise a get-together that would support their cause.

I will speak of three orders of activity systems that became apparent during my analysis. The first order is the most abstract and relates to existing structures – all those set-up activities that people may call their job description, projects, functions and processes. The second order regards the incidents of interaction between agents as activity of its own that take place within the context of the structures. Finally, the third order of analysis focuses on the leadership activities that happen alongside and within the two above.

### 5.2.1  Inside the structures…

The first step of an event analysis requires understanding the structure of the activities that take place in the organisation and influence a particular incident of interaction. As mentioned above, a large-scale structural activity may be folded into several smaller activities, which in turn can be broken down into even smaller activity systems. Therefore, depending on what I choose as the unit of analysis, at the

structural level this may mean the whole organisation, a department, a functional process, a team or a separate project.
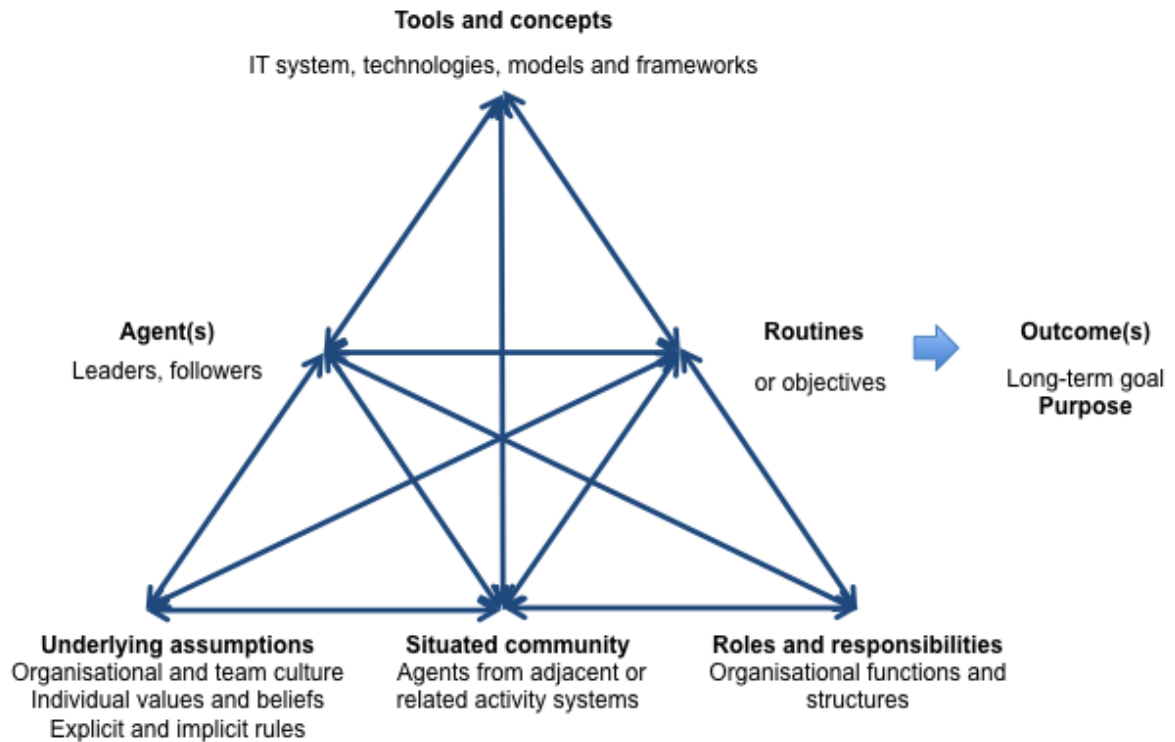


**Figure 5.1 Structural activity system**

At this order, the activity system is adapted as shown in Figure 5.1, where each element is relatively general and includes broad and abstract terms. Below I illustrate how the activity system of the Cinema Marketing department can be populated at the structural level.

> *The first four elements belong to the upper triangle of CHAT and lie on the surface – the Agents, the Short-Term Goals / Routines, Long-Term Goals / Purpose, and Tools & Concepts.*
>
> - *The Key Agents of this structural activity system are:*
>   - *Jane – manager of Department K that is dedicated to organisational development of new business tools;*
>   - *Sarah – senior specialist in the Cinema Marketing group leading the team;*

- o *Sonia – analyst who had recently joined the organisation;*
- o *Ann – business analyst from Jane's team, who she wants to involve more in their activities to help with structured analysis (in other words, she is being introduced to a new activity system)*
- o *Adrian – as Jane's manager and head of the Development Division, he has a big influence over their role and the future although he is not involved in their day-to-day activities;*

- *Long-Term Goals / Purpose. Since this is quite a high-order system, the long-term goal of the Cinema Marketing department relates to the reason for its existence and hence may be phrased in very broad terms, such as 'increase in revenues generated by the Sales team', 'development of the cinema advertisement volume' and so on. These are the abstract statements, similar to vision or strategic imperatives, that people relate to emotionally and draw motivation from.*

- *Short-Term Goals / Routines. The overall short-term goal of the department is to offer support to the Sales team so that they have a clear guidance and understanding of what they can offer to their clients. It can be subdivided into smaller operational concrete goals for each individual or groups of individuals, for example:*
  - o *Create bundles that sales could offer to their clients quicker*
  - o *Provide forecasts for better grossing films*
  - o *Create marketing materials that could be communicated to the market etc.*

- *Tools & Concepts. Tools & Concepts is all the instruments and artefacts that become part of the day-to-day activities. The material artefacts range from physical (such as office layout, desks, chairs, pens, computers) to less tangible (e.g. IT systems, Internet, various guidance documents etc.).*

*The non-material artefacts include project management tools, expertise and knowledge relevant to the activity in the focus, frameworks used for making decisions etc.*

*Next, the invisible basis of the system consists of Underlying Assumptions, Situated Community and Roles & Responsibilities. Unlike previous elements that are normally openly stated by people and can be derived through empirical observations, these are not directly visible to an outsider, although they still influence the behaviour of people involved.*

- *Underlying Assumptions is the collection of all rules and norms that inform the behaviour of the agents. In the case of the Cinema Marketing team they will include the organisational code of conduct, ethical rules, and the habitual ways of communication within the team that got established over time.*

- *Situated Community is an aggregation all the individuals who are not visible in day-to-day activities but whose interests, knowledge, needs may have an impact on the process. This notion is closely linked to Lave and Wenger's Communities of Practice. Since the Cinema Marketing team is like a hub bringing different processes together, these may include:*
    - *The Sales team*
    - *The staff at the cinemas who sell advisement time*
    - *The corporate marketing department*
    - *The clients that may want to place their ads*
- *Roles & Responsibilities are based on the formal job descriptions and learned expertise of each agent, as well as the history of their past actions in interactions. For instance, it is generally understood that Sarah and has*

*more seniority than Sonia due to their grades and seniority within the firm.*
*However, the expectations of their actions may be adjusted, for example, if*
*they happen to have a complementary skill-set (Jane commented at some*
*point that Sarah is more keen on "humanities", whilst Sonia is more driven*
*by logic and numbers, and therefore she expects the latter to take the lead*
*in those tasks).*

Similar high-order structural systems can be constructed if we choose to look at the activity of the whole department of Business Tools that Jane leads, or her other teams, or the projects that her team members are involved across the organisation, as well as the most high-order system for the organisation itself. The main requirement for choosing a unit of analysis is that an activity should involve Agents, their Short and Long-Term Goal and the Tools & Concepts used in their achievement. The "invisible basis" – the bottom side of the activity triangle – remains relatively stable for a given organisation, but may manifest itself in a particular variation.

Each of these (structural) activity systems are connected to the activity of the Cinema Marketing department and may influence the actions of the agents involved and the interactions that occur between them. For example, the Long-Term Goal / Purpose of the Cinema Marketing team should be aligned to both Sales activities and the strategic growth plans of organisation as a whole, and a change in these may result in a change of direction for their actions. On the other hand, Jane's to-do list includes tasks other than those related to the Cinema marketing team – and the pressure of getting other things done will take her attention away from it.

Every individual is likely to be engaged in several activities – those relating to their own goals and targets, several projects within their team or across the department, and some as part of the larger structural systems. The networks of these activities set challenges for agents, put demands on their time and skills, create conflicting goals, and establish links between individuals.

Therefore, the flow of interaction activities – meetings and other forms of communication – take place in an environment where individuals have to balance their conflicting goals and satisfy expectations of various key stakeholders. In turn, the practice of leadership occurs within this environment of co-existing and (at times) conflicting activities. Leadership activity emerges when agents start correcting the misalignment within or between various elements of the systems or suggests improvements and changes according to their own views and ideas.

Thus, whilst building and populating various structural activity systems is not the direct focus of my analysis, this process is crucial for understanding the on-going interactions in an organisation.

### 5.2.2 …During incidents of interaction…

The next step in picking apart the complex organisational environment is to shift the focus to the incidents of interaction that happen within the context of the high-order structure activities. I introduce the term 'incidents of interaction' to describe all the communication events that occur as part of the day-to-day routines. These include regular monthly, weekly or daily meetings and catch-ups, planned project-specific or task-specific gatherings, on-the-spot short chats in person, in the corridor or on the phone. (This would also include email exchange and other means of virtual

communication; however, they were outside of my reach during data collection and

therefore are not part of this study.)

**Tools and concepts**
Means of interaction (face-to-face, phone etc.)
Artefacts (documents to discuss in the meeting, white board etc.)
Specific language and frameworks used)

**Agent(s)**
involved in interaction

**Objective**
of the
interaction

**Outcome(s)**
Long-term goal
**Purpose**

**Underlying assumptions**
Rules of conduct in the meeting
Language used
Dress-code

**Situated community**
Agents absent from this interaction
incident but related to underlying
and related structural systems

**Roles and responsibilities**
Assumes roles in the meeting
(moderation, note taking)
Preparation for the meeting

**Figure 5.2 Activity system of an interaction incident**

These occurrences constitute a different, shorter-lived type of activity, which typically

forms in the beginning of the interaction and ends as people go back to their desks,

however, it can be analysed through the CHAT lens. There are agents that interact

with a particular goal – whether this is to exchange information, to discuss particular

issues or simply to pass the time – and there are normally artefacts involved in their

communication. The CHAT adaptation for analysing interaction activities is illustrated

by Figure 5.2, and I present its possible application for a real meeting below.

- *This meeting took place on a Tuesday morning and lasted about two hours. It*

  *consisted of two distinct parts, separated by their objectives, both related to*

  *the on-going tensions surrounding the Cinema Marketing department that will*

*later require Adrian's support, and therefore can be regarded as separate interaction activities (respective Short-term and Long-term goals):*

- *Review of a draft presentation prepared by the marketing team. Adrian has asked Jane to organise a status meeting to learn about the progress of the Cinema team so far, the accomplished goals and work in progress, and about their issues. Jane passed the task on to the girls; and this is the first time when Jane sees a draft of their report.*

- *Discussion of Cinema team's activities and communication issues with the Sales team. The Cinema Marketing team have struggled to build efficient links and collaboration with the latter, and Jane wants to learn about their experience more as she going for a meeting with Sales manager in the afternoon.*

- *Agents: In the first part, there are four people: Jane, the cinema marketing team (Sarah and Sonia) and Ann (business analyst who Jane wants to engage with the cinema marketing activity but this is only formally announced at the beginning of the interaction). In the second part, the latter leaves and the three remaining women talk for another hour.*

- *Tools & Concepts: The meeting takes place in a medium-sized meeting room, where an oval table can fit up to eight people. Jane takes a seat on a long side of the table, and Sarah, Sonia and Ann sit on the other side (see sketch below). This is quite typical of Jane: in most meetings she places herself in a position where she is 'in the middle of the action' and can see everyone. In this particular case, the windows are behind her, which means that the others*

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*are looking at her against the light. It is the first time where Ann is in a meeting*

*related to this activity, and she places herself in the middle of the other side,*

*directly opposite Jane (Tools &Concepts: strategic use of physical artefacts to*

*gain power in the room).*
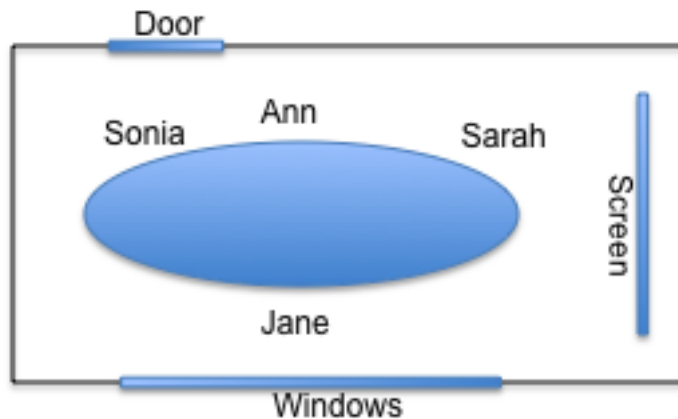


- *Most rooms in the building where I observed meetings in the week have a*

  *projector and a screen. This reflects an assumed practice for agents in Media*

  *Inc. to gather in person and collaborate – presentations, spread sheets etc.,*

  *and visual representation of the issues acts as an instrument for directing the*

  *conversation (thus, these are Tools & Concepts of structural and interaction*

  *activity systems). This meeting is no exception, and Sarah logs into her*

  *computer system to bring up the presentation file onto the screen. Since*

  *Sarah and Sonia prepared different parts of the presentation, in the next hour*

  *they pass the mouse to each other for the sections that they are responsible*

  *for (an example of pre-agreed Roles & Responsibilities for the interaction*

  *incident).*

- *From the outset, in addition to the seating plan there are several signs that*

  *point to the asymmetry of power in the system other that the. Jane is also the*

*one to open the conversation announcing the Short- and Long-term goals,*

*introducing Ann and her role (Agents), and to moderate and frame the meeting*

*(Roles & Responsibilities). However, as the meeting goes own, Ann becomes*

*a rightful and active participant who intervenes with questions, and others*

*bring in related stories, make jokes and draw on other ways from their*

*experience and history of involvement in the process…*

- *The first part of the meeting finishes, when they stop going through the slides,*
  *and Jane asks Ann to leave, as she needs to discuss matters with the Cinema*
  *Marketing team. However, the part of the meeting finishes informally, when*
  *Ann and Rob (another member of Jane's team) enter the room for the next*
  *gathering to discuss another project, which means they run out of time. As*
  *Sarah leaves to go back to her desk and address the actions taken in this*
  *meeting, Jane asks her to review a document that she had sent her in two*
  *hours so that Jane can take it to the meeting with a Sales Director (Short-term*
  *goal of the structural activity system).*

Although this description may appear simple and in fact is a rather shortened version

of the story, it sets the tone for what is about to happen. What makes it more

complicated is that depending on the level of analysis the phenomenon of 'efficient

communication' can be regarded as two different elements. Within the interaction

activity system this is the purpose of the meeting, but this activity is formed as a

result of the need in the structural activity of the Cinema Marketing team. This makes

it instrumental – and therefore at the high-order it acts is a tool in achieving the

structural goal.

### 5.2.3 …Looking for leadership practice

Finally, it is within the context of interaction and structural activity systems that I start looking for the practice of leadership. The general purpose of leadership as an activity of its own is to create new systems, develop and create links between the existing systems and change over with a view for better alignment for the future. The practices of leadership are therefore regarded as instruments that agents employ during those momentarily episodes of leadership that may change the way people think or act. It is important to remember that leadership is not a singular act – rather it is a process that emerges between the agents.

This section consists of two parts. Firstly, I will introduce the adaptation of activity system to studying leadership presented in Figure 5.3 below and explain how its elements are adapted for the analysis. Secondly, I will offer a few examples from the meeting described above and highlight the leadership episodes and practices that emerge within them.

Together these lay the ground for the following section, where I will describe the types of leadership practices that belong to the seven factors of the activity system – those relating to Tools & Concept, Agents, Objective / Routines, Long Term Purpose, Underlying Assumptions, Situated Community, and Roles and Responsibilities. It will become apparent from the story that these elements are both target of the potential change and the source of power to gain the momentum to do so. Moreover, sometimes it is almost impossible to tell one from another as they appear together within organisational discourses.

### 5.2.3.1 The system of Leadership Activity

The phenomenon of leadership emerges within the complex context of various activity systems in organisation. It arises as a result of and in response to the tensions and conflicts within or between the elements of the system and systems themselves and is aimed at their creation, alteration, and development – all those terms that imply bridging the gap between something that exists now and something that should be in the future. This means that leadership activity is both dependent on the underlying structural and interaction activity systems and the systems are in turn influences them. Here I will introduce the leadership activity system depicted in Figure 5.3 in greater detail.
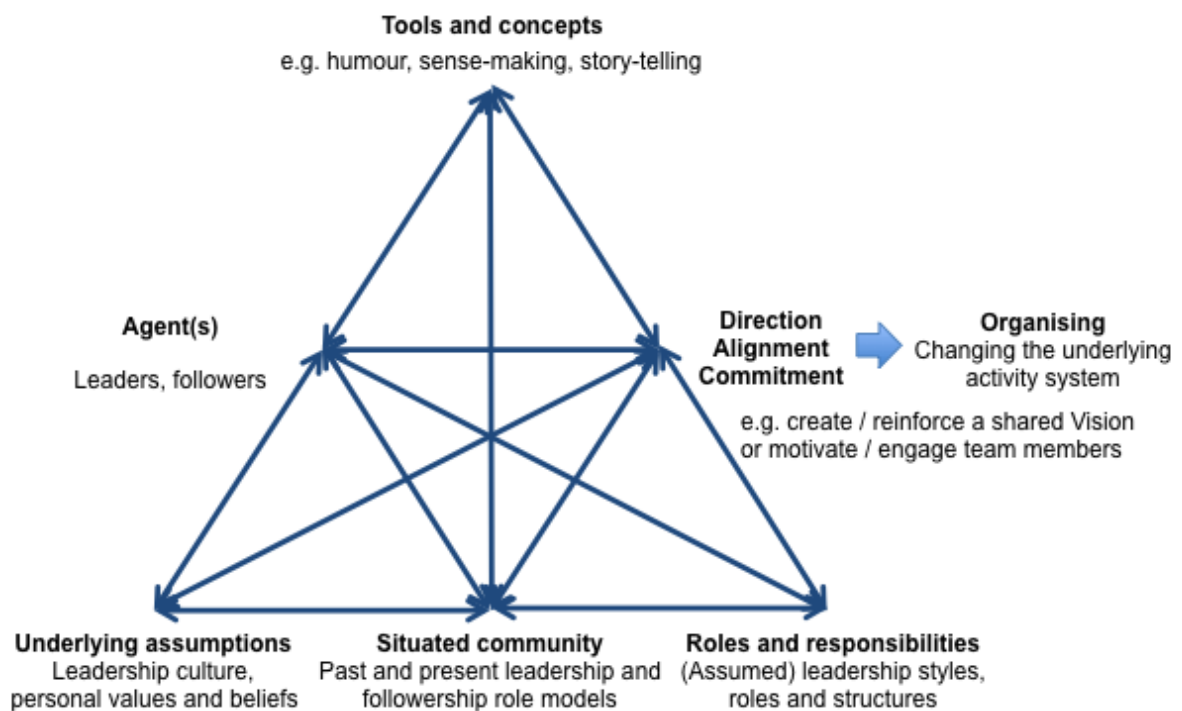


**Figure 5.3 Activity system of leadership practice**

It is not a straightforward task to define what leadership activity is. The purpose of leadership activity has a lot to do with 'making things right' – setting a shared vision for the agents; developing a short-term plan that brings this shared vision closer;

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crafting a feeling of unity and teamwork for the group of people involved in the task etc. In other words, the Purpose of leadership activity is about creating an environment and giving an impetus for the system and all the agents involved to move forward.

Therefore, the Short-Term Goal of leadership activity is about creation of direction, alignment and commitment between the agents involved in the system, which in turn will enable changing the elements of the underlying systems. The three examples of object in the previous paragraph relate to working with the three elements of the system, respectively: Long-Term Goals / Purpose; Short-Term Goals / Routines; and Agents. These factors, as well as the other elements – Tools & Concepts, Underlying Assumptions, Situated Community and Roles & Responsibilities – require a sense of unity and a collaborative action in order to be effectively addressed.

The types of desired change in these seven elements of the underlying (structural or interaction) activity systems define which practices of leadership agents draw on. In Figure 5.3, these practices reside in Tools & Concepts element of leadership activity system, since agents use them as instruments of achieving a desired effect. In the next section I will describe each type of practice separately, however, it is important to remember that systems exist as a whole, and a change in one element will create a change in all the other elements.

So who are the Agents in this activity? Leadership activity implies a change to the entire system that may involve several agents, and therefore is not a one-sided act. On one hand, if an agent – it could be the formal manager, or the most senior formal manager in the room – proposes an innovation, even if we label him/ her as a 'leader', something needs to happen in the system for the other agents to agree, and

for the whole system to absorb the change and adapt its elements. People may accept his/her ideas without any question, simply based on the authoritative leadership style, which the manager must have had exhibited in the past. Otherwise, should this happen in a more participative environment, where people are used to voicing their concerns, the team may respond with critique, questions, feedback, discussions, and negotiations – and eventually either accept the change or not.

On the other hand, the same innovative idea may come from another team member. Again, even a brilliant idea might be wasted and be gone if it is dismissed by those present in the room, particularly by the manager. Alternatively, it could be picked up be the manager, or supported by other colleagues, take over the entire room – and have an effect on the underlying system. This means that depending on the nature and dynamics of the leadership incident, the composition of the Agents element will be varied. It can be a single person 'sending a message out', or a pair working together, or a larger group of people, and for this reason it unites all those would we would normally regard as 'leaders' and 'followers'.

Whilst these four scenarios appear to have little in common except for an innovative idea, they all are examples of different system 'settings' of the basis elements of the system, namely Roles & Responsibilities, Situated Community and Underlying Assumptions – that are invisible to the naked eye and that define expectations about people's behaviours in given situations.

Similar to the higher-order systems, Situated Community is the combination of all those people who are not visibly involved in the activity directly, however, they will have in impact on the unfolding events. These could be key agents in the underlying systems – for example, a senior manager whose anticipated reaction may have a

bearing on the innovation. This could a colleague missing from the meeting, as his absence changes the power distribution and dynamics in the room. Or this could be a former colleague who was a positive or a negative leader or follower role model for agents involved, and therefore unknowingly (s)he affects the process.

Roles & Responsibilities element represents the assumed leadership roles and styles that leaders and followers have learnt in the past. In the original Soviet model, this element was called 'Division of Labour', and for the sake of explanation we may call it 'Division of Joint Leadership Labour'. Who has the right or an obligation to act in particular situations? What responses do they expect to produce? How is it decided that someone has the power to make the final decision? All these questions are addressed through comparison of current state of the system against the past examples and its desired future state.

The Underlying Assumptions hold the information about rules and norms that are attributed to the leadership activity. If it is acceptable for the team members to question their manager's proposition, this element will define how they approach it. If a manager wants to lighten up the mood in the room, the genre of his jokes will also be dependent on it. Finally, the choice of language – a particular discourse – as a mediation instrument of leadership will also have a large input from the Underlying Assumptions.

In the CHAT literature, there is no single approach to classifying language. Since the activity of leadership occurs within interaction incidents, which are impossible without communication between individuals, language becomes an important media of leadership. It channels the content of the message from one individual to another, the choice of intonation and the words may set the contextual environment for the

message. It allows people to find common grounds or may lead to gross misunderstanding. It is used for making sense of the situations and rephrasing a point of view on it. In my research, language – including body language – plays a vital role, and I frequently draw on the choice of words and relate it to the basis of the systems.

So far, I introduced the three levels of activity system – structural, interactional, and leadership – and offered a description of the contextual setting of a particular meeting, covering the elements of the first two types of systems. The next section presents particular episodes from the meeting, which offer examples of leadership activity and therefore allows us to observe the process of their alterations.

### 5.2.3.2 Examples of leaderful episodes

Here I will outline several episodes that happened during the two hours of the meeting. I introduce the term 'episodes' as the moments or events, where leadership practices may emerge. These episodes present examples of how agents make sense, negotiate and frame their actions and meaning of this actions by referring to structural and interactional activity systems. The direct speech is presented in tables, where I highlight the references to these elements, and use the following abbreviations for the elements' names:

- Long-term goals / Purpose – LTG
- Short-term goals / Routines – STG
- Agents – AG
- Tools & Concepts – T&C
- Underlying assumptions – UA
- Situated Community – SC

- Roles & Responsibilities – R&R

Also, as I refer to the elements of different orders of activity systems, where relevant, I will denote the phrases that link to structural elements with "STR", and the interaction incidents – with "IN". This mostly applies to the elements of upper triangle of the activity systems, as the basis elements remain relatively unchanged for most interactions.

### *Episode 1.  Setting up the interaction within the team context*

At the beginning of the meeting, Sarah is taking a long time to log into her system and seems to be confused by the technology. There are several small turns that occur in the next couple of lines that give an example of the power positioning, as Jane and Ann start giving her instructions on how to 'fix' it:

| Sarah | Actually, I am doing this for **the third time already**, but have not managed to learn the technology yet. | T&C-IN: explain that she has experience as an excuse |
|-------|------|------|
| Jane | Well, you will do it another ten times and will remember then. *(laughs)* | T&C: instruction for further learning |
| Ann | **I had even thought that it did not work for me until they showed me how it's done…** | T&C + AG: join in with a story of similar experience |
|  | *(a couple of lines later)* |  |
| Sarah | I think it's so slow because there are many Excel files opened… |  |
| Jane | That is not a great idea… *(**with a smile**)* | UA: Humorous judgement |
| Sarah | …about 15 files, maybe that's the reason *(giggles)* |  |
| Jane | Of course, that's the reason. |  |
| Sarah | Really? |  |
| Ann | The mouse has woken up, **it's a good sign**. This means that everything else will come alive too. | T&C – STR: show expertise in the system |
| Jane | **Do your computers hang?** | T&C – STR: inquiry |
| Sarah | Mine does. |  |

| Sonia | And mine does. | |
|-------|----------------|---|
| Jane | Hangs? | |
| Sonia | Yes, particular excel may be very slow. | |
| Sarah | **I simply don't know if we can order extra memory here…** | R&R: show that she thought about it previously |
| Jane | **You should ask Tom [team lead in Jane's team], he is about to write an email to Andrew, [head of IT Department] to get more memory and he will add you to the picture.** | T&C – STR: Jane manages instruments in her department |
| Sarah | Really? Great. | |
| Jane | So if you have less than 4GB, he will be asking to bring up to that. **I had had 2GB for quite a long time, until Grey saw that himself.**<br><br>*(the presentation finally opens)* OK, **I invited [Ann] so that she could have a look at the numbers.** | SC: A story of own experience that involves a key agent<br><br>AG-IN+ R&R-IN: explanation of a new participant in the system |
| Ann | **…or at least started looking at them.** | AG+ R&R: confirm participation + claim power by informal correction / clarification of Jane |

Firstly, the episode above illustrated how Sarah is not yet familiar with the way things work in the organisation. Both Sarah and Sonia are relatively new to the company (Sarah joined about a year before, and Sonia is at the end of her two month probation period), and thus are not fully aware yet of all the elements of the larger structural activities. In attempt to cover this and maintain some level of authority, Sarah makes similar remarks several times about her 'not knowing but trying', thus justifying her lack of action / success. On the other hand, Jane is aware of the situation, and regards their integration into the organisation as her responsibility, which is portrayed by her humorous responds to Sarah's first phrase and instructing her to use of the system more. Furthermore, throughout the presentation, she will also be correcting Sarah and Sonia's professional language, which points to the

process of formation of their activity system through alignment of their T&C, UA and other elements to those of the broader organisation.

In contrast, although Ann is better established in the organisation, she is new to the Cinema marketing activity, and there are a few examples during this meeting that point to her drive to use her existing position and have more traction in the group. In the beginning of the meeting, she steps in several times to break the ice by making remarks about her own experiences, and these pointers to her history with T&C mark her gradual inclusion in the interaction activity of this meeting, and potentially, serve to immerse herself in the structural activity of the Cinema Marketing. This is particularly obvious where Jane introduces her role to Sarah and Sonia on that day (they were not warned before), and Ann finishes/ corrects the sentence instead of her, which no one objects to, thus taking a steer in the process.

Finally, this episode presents an example of the Jane's function of overseeing different parts of the activity systems and aligning them together. The chat about slow working systems reminds Jane of her conversation with Tom on the previous day and his suggestion to upgrade the system that she approved (see below) and therefore, she asks the girls about performance of their system and instructs them to talk to Tom about it, which is an example of aligning separate activity systems to minimise agents' efforts.

### *Episode 2.   Co-negotiation of meaning and content*

Right after the episode above, the meeting starts formally, and Sarah takes first turn to set the agenda of the interaction. She makes an introduction explaining that there will be five parts, which they will cover in turns with Sonia. The meeting follows a particular format: Sarah and Sonia present the slides, whilst Jane and Ann pose

questions, challenge numbers and make suggestions about improvements based on their understanding of organisational processes as well as common sense. Also, Jane makes general comments about consistency of the term use.

| Jane | *(Interrupting a heating discussion between Sarah and Ann).* Ok, wait. You understood my question, right? If these numbers exist, I would replace SD *[an indicator]* with them. SD is an internal piece of information. Surely, **it is important to [Sales Director], but I would rather prefer we didn't use it.** | SC: Reference to a key agent – define T&C – STR |
|------|------|------|
| Sarah | So I should ask him for network plans, right? | STG-STR: clarification |
| Jane | Yes. That is, **we can continue looking at this, but I would not include it in the presentation**. That is, we don't need networks, but rather general numbers about plans for the last year. But not SD, SD is internal… | T&C-STR: Clarification of use |
| Sarah | Ann, you said that 1.8 is not relevant? | |
| Ann | Yes, it is not clear that it grew by 1.8 times. We don't have a number… | |
| Jane | **I'll agree.** Firstly, it is not clear what the blue arrow means. That is, I guess that blue arrow related to the blue diagram. But it is not clear what it is compared to, green or red? | AG: Support Ann<br><br>T&C: Unclear meaning |
| Sarah | Ok… | |
| Jane | In short, let's try to get that plan. I am sure it exists. It is not possible for them not to have it. If you can get one number without networks separation, and then instead of SD we use plan and compare plan to plan… Well, one arrow remains. | STG – STR + T&C – STR: Liaise with other system |
| Sarah | Ok, let's move on. This is what you, Ann, asked about – numbers by months and year 2013. In April… Rather, January, February, March – these are factual numbers, and April is a forecast… | |
| Jane | *(interrupts)* **May I make a comment right away?** | UA-IN: Ask permission to interrupt |
| Sarah | Yes. | |
| Jane | **Make them all in one colour scheme**. If on the previous slide plan is in red… Or is it like that? | T&C-STR: Logic use of colours |
| Sarah | No, other way round. Plan was green. | |

| Jane | There… it was blue. | |
| Sarah | Yes. | |
| Jane | Factual was green. Keep it that way... Because we have just got used to it. | |
| Sarah | **Ok**. So we can see that January over performed by 39% and in March we compared it to be 63%... | T&C: accept change. |

Overall, the example above speaks to alignment of the structural activity systems in an organisation. The discussion evolves around a presentation of the Cinema marketing team activity that is closely linked and dependent on the Sales activity system, which they are struggling to work with. Therefore, Jane and others mould the presentation to match what they think would be Sales' understanding of the activity thus using the Situated community element for justification of a number of changes. The authority in their claims and suggestions, therefore, depends on the history and the depth of their involvement and knowledge of the existing Sales structures and their link to the marketing activities; both are limited, and this constraint is reflected in the 'mistakes' in their use of terms. For example, Jane challenges the use of a particular parameter in the presentation and explains why *(T&C-STR)*. She accepts its importance for a key agent form Sales *(UA)*, thereby relating to what Sarah and Sonia did *(AG)*. However, then she draws a line between the two activities and insists on the use of their own *(T&C-STR)*. She therefore sets a task for them to get different numbers from the Sales team *(STG-STR)*.

Continuing on the vignette from Episode 1, there is also evidence of continuous shaping process of team's actions, as Jane instructs them to use consistent colour coding for the diagrams, i.e. for planned and actual numbers *(T&C-STR)*, which they accept. This illustrates the challenges of individuals that are 'learning' a particular activity system and the time required to become fully-actioning agents.

### Episode 3. The transition between interactions

The last slides of the drafted presentation are dedicated to upcoming blockbusters that the marketing team expects to be popular with the advertisers. As the first hour comes to a close, the chat gets light, girls discuss the films, and Sarah says: "Ok, that was fun, enough" and closes the presentation file, thus, indicating that the Short-term objective of the first meeting has been achieved. Jane then addresses Ann and asks her to leave the room whilst reminding about the following meeting:

| Jane | Ann, **we will let you go, ok**? | UA: polite request to leave |
|---|---|---|
| Ann | Yes, sure, I see. **What is happening with 'multi-screen'**? Will it be in this room or not? | T&C-IN: ask about location of next meeting |
| Jane | **I don't know**. | R&R: mot her responsibility |
| Sonia | I think it's on the second floor. | |
| Sarah | [To Ann]: **Sonia and I** will be communicating with you a lot. **Could you meanwhile** look for the data on TV that we need please? | AG-STR: set a new activity-> STG-STR: set a task |
| Ann | On advertisers? Sure, I'll have a look. For some reason it seems to me that the list I have already given to you has those. That is, it is clear, there is no… | |
| Jane | **Ann, tell Rob that if he wants to and if he has time, he should come to the meeting too.** | AG-IN: invite more people to another meeting |
| Ann | Ok, I'll ask – does he know about it? | |
| Jane | No, he doesn't know. I did not send him an invite. Tell him that we will be talking about Project L… | |
| Ann | Ah, second screen? | |
| Jane | Yes. If he has time and if he wants, let him come. *(Ann leaves, Jane turns to the girls)* **Sonia told me that you have questions.** | STG-IN: Introduction of next topic through past action |
| Sonia | Yes, we have questions. | |
| Sarah | We have… | |

| Sonia | The question is **kind of partially about interaction with the Sales, partially about what we work on**. | LTG-IN: Relation of the topic to their activity |
|---|---|---|
| Jane | Yes… | |
| Sonia | That is, we have ideas and suggestions. And we would like them to work quicker, to sell them. That is, we are ready to, say… | |
| Jane | No. Let you tell me **in general, what are your suggestions and what…** That is, **I will be talking with [Sales Director] today**, I don't know how… | STG-IN: Set the focus of interaction<br><br>SC: Key agent meeting |
| Sonia | *(To Sarah, who is looking for a file on the screen)* What are you looking for? | |
| Sarah | That file. | |
| Sonia | I don't think it's that important now. You can open your mailbox. | |
| Jane | Indeed… **What is in progress, and what you would like… What do you offer and what do you want them to act faster to**? | LTG-IN: A general question to learn about activity |
| Sarah | For example, **we never received a clarified brief**, yeah, about the advertisers' needs and so on. **We would like to communicate closer with the sales team**, with those who are selling… | T&C: Lack of knowledge;<br><br>LTG: Desired interrelation of systems |

Here, Jane takes cue from Sarah that the first part of the meeting is over and affirms transition between the meetings, by sending Ann off (changing the *Agents* elements), who in turn poses questions about the context of subsequent interaction activities, asking about the location of a meeting in the afternoon *(T&C-IN)*. Jane responds that she does not know and does not take the action to check location in her phone, which signals that this is not her responsibility and she expects more junior team members to deal with such things *(R&R)*. Jane also takes this chance to modify the upcoming interaction by asking Ann to invite another team member to the meeting where they will be discussing Project L (*AG-IN – and Rob will come*), a potential new structural activity.

After Ann leaves, Jane starts the new topic by referring to a past interaction of Sonia wanting to talk to her. The few following lines are about setting the scene and co-negotiating the goal of the interaction: whilst Sarah and Sonia want to talk about their frustrations from lack of communication and cooperation from the Sales team, Jane pushes for a more objective and constructive picture. In her opinion, this will enable her to have an efficient meeting with the Sales Director and build links between the two groups.

### Episode 4.    *Reframing frustration into action*

The second part of the meeting follows a particular pattern in conversation: Sarah and Sonia talk about issues, often in a rather frustrated and emotional way, and Jane sympathetically asks clarifying questions and writes down the answers. At the end, she normally tries to reframe the meaning and the story-telling by explaining Sales' behaviours and to focus the discussion on the team own activity and convert their frustrations into potential actions.

For example, Jane learns that Sarah and Sonia have not been able to hold a meeting with the Sales team to discuss their requirements. She asks whom exactly they tried to meet, and whether that person had 'accepted' the meeting invite (Yes), and whether she apologised afterwards for not coming (No), and how many times it happened. Sarah complains that they cannot even find out why she could not make it as she rarely responds to phone or emails. As Jane dismissed the gravitas of the story by saying 'Well it's just she is very busy', she moves onto the next question and suggests that they should do some preliminary calculations based on what they know…

| Jane | Coming back to blockbusters… Maybe **you should make some preliminary calculations**. That's not to… **Just imagine**. You will be chasing them for two weeks, yeah? The May bank holidays will pass. Then you will have a 15 minutes meeting, and she will say 'yes'. And then you will spend two weeks doing this. That is, maybe you should at least have a vague idea of your offer, like, small packet, large packet. What do you consider the fair price to be… **But this has to come from you, at least some sort of offer.** You should not spend two weeks calculating this, because it can all change, but at least some 'draft' to start with. | STG-STR: Direct activity; LTG-STR+ SC: A potential story of interaction, creating perspective |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Sarah | Yeah… | |
| Sonia | It's just we would like them really to sell it earlier. **We felt so let down**… | SC: Story of past failure |
| Jane | Your… **I can hear you pain**. **But you have to understand me too.** We can spend a lot of time now talking about everything, how it is difficult and not transparent, **but let's think what we can do on our side**. That is, this needs to be addresses and I hear you, and **I will think what we can do with it**. So, blockbusters. Second story was with targeting, right? | AG-IN: Relate to emotions and shift focus. STG-STR: Invite to set a goal. R&R: Promise to look for solution |

Here, although Jane empathises with the situation and lack of communication *(thus, building a stronger feeling of unity with Sarah and Sonia)*, she tries to create an impulse for the activity system that lies within her managerial responsibility – that of Sarah and Sonia – to operate on their own. To do that, she makes up a scenario, which puts their short-term actions into a longer-term perspective *(STG + LTG – STR)*. Sarah tentatively agrees, but Sonia still expresses her emotional dissatisfaction with the situation, uniting her and Sarah in the 'we' *(AG-STR)*. Jane builds a rapport by responding to it *(AG: 'I hear your pain')* but then expresses her views on the situation and separates the need for short and long-term solutions.

There are more of these examples, end every time Jane brings the conversation back to building efficient communication with the Sales team through learning about their demands and how to respond quickly to them.

The stories developed through the four episodes above are an illustration of how leadership practices emerge in the interactions of the agents and are embedded in the context of their activity and the process of communication between them. Although each episode is small, the work of framing and reframing the interaction and structural activity systems is continuous, and is constantly shifting between the orders of activity systems. In the next section, I explain the interconnectivity of the orders of the systems and their elements, and will further

### 5.2.4  Interconnected orders of activity systems

The previous section illustrates how leadership practices occur within the context of interaction process and within the context of existing organisational structures. Like derivative of a function, the activity of leadership cannot exist without the other two, and can be potentially present at any moment. The episodes above occur within the interactions, where agents come together to discuss, make sense of and negotiate what they do within the structural activities, which leads to their co-direction, co-alignment and co-commitment.
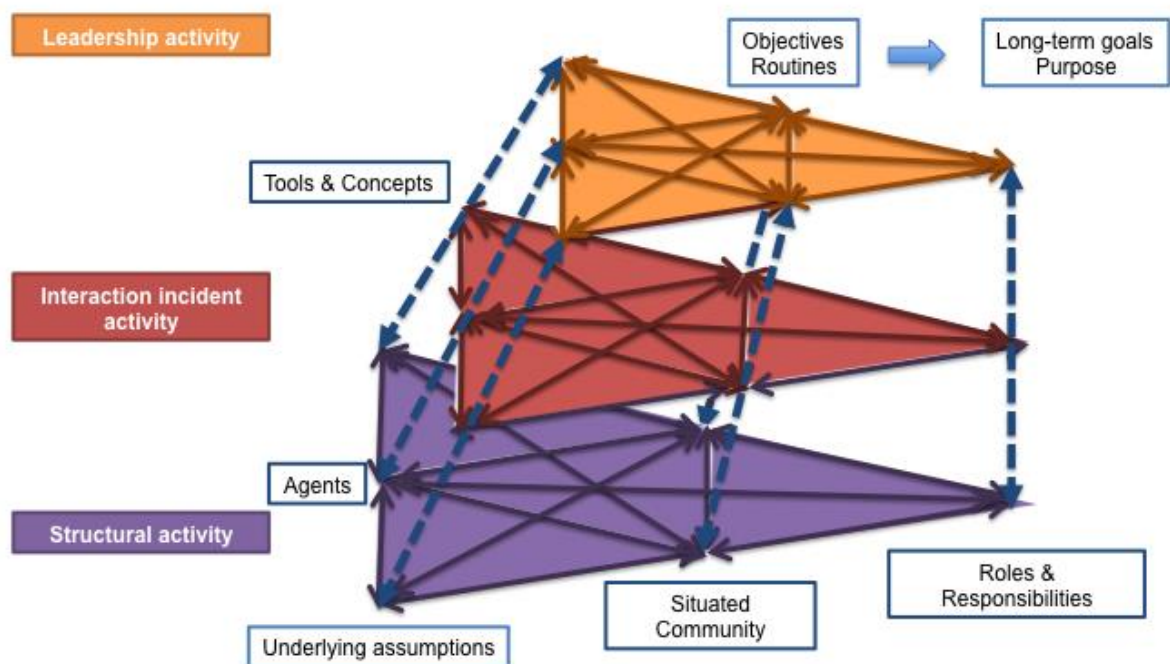
**Figure 5.4 Orders of activity systems - Leadership, Interaction, Structure**

Figure 5.4 is a visual representation of this relationship. In the bottom, there are the

structural activity systems. They are intrinsically linked with the interaction incident

systems – existing structures are the background for the action, and action in turn

changes the structures. In turn, the activity of leadership is different from the activity

of interaction – they are inherently interlinked and shape each other. All leadership

activities emerge within the interaction activities; however, it would be false to say

that all communication between agents leads to occurrence of leadership practice.

We can only study the practices of leadership by observing and analysing inter-

actions or trans-actions, and therefore the activity of leadership appears in the figure

on top. As respective elements of the layers of activity systems are linked with each

other, their elements are also interrelated and subject to change through this link,

and are in continuous flow of interrelation and interdependence. For example, the

meeting described above is set within a particular contextual arrangements of the

structural activity systems – that of the Cinema Marketing team itself, that of the Sales team activities, that of Adrian as an overseeing manager etc. The narrative exposes references to these elements of the existing structures, and whilst the first part of the interaction is mainly dedicated to the Cinema Marketing activity itself and their presentation for Adrian, there are still direct references to the Sales activities as well as broader issues of IT upgrade; whilst the second part focuses primarily on the tension between the activities of Cinema Marketing and Sales (section 5.4.7 will offer a visual representation of the latter interplay of the levels).

Leadership system is a component that enables changes to both interaction activity system themselves and to structural activity systems during the interaction events. Some practices are targeted at changing the dynamics of the interaction, like changing an agenda for a meeting, including or excluding people from the gathering, or choosing artefacts; examples of which were present above, particularly in Episodes 1 and 3. However, and they are probably more important, are those changes that refer to the elements in the structural systems, such as agreeing actions and changing ways of doing things. Normally, displaying or gaining power by altering elements of the interaction creates the momentum for a bigger effect in the higher order systems.

Although I draw a distinction between the structural and interactional application of the leadership practices, it is important to state that any structural change requires interaction between the agents. Most changes require discussion, negotiation and agreement, creating an agreement for moving forward and acting. In case someone makes a change to their own individual work (which on its own will not lead to leadership practices), it will only have an impact on the other systems when this

change has an impact on the other systems; and even if it is so organic that people do not notice it or do not talk about it directly, most likely it will create a knock-on effect through joint work.

To illustrate it, consider the episodes above that occurred during the observed meeting above. The whole meeting that lasted about two hours and consisted of several parts, each with its own beginning, main part where agents took turns to talk, and the resolution, had its own objectives and dynamics. We cannot say that the entire meeting was an act of leadership; in fact, if the habitual patterns of the meeting were that agents simply gathered to report recent developments in their respective fields without deep elaboration, there would not be any potential space for leadership episodes at all. As it happened, the set-up of the interaction activity system led to bonding, discussions, sharing stories, and joint sense- and decision-making.

There were several turns in the flow of the meeting itself, where the agents' words and phrases determined its agenda. This includes Jane's introducing Ann at the very beginning, agents making references to their experiences with various activities within the organisation, and sharing stories of past interactions with important stakeholders. All these leadership practice occurrences shaped the activity system of the interaction itself; however, they could have also had a cascade effect on the structural systems below. The episodes that had a more direct impact on the structures also took place within interaction, but directed the attention to the structural elements themselves. The employed practices reminded agents of the purpose of their activity, shaped an attitude towards members of the situated community, determined their impact on the objectives, served alignment with the accepted use of concepts, and led to delegation that altered the roles &

responsibilities element. This would not be possible without effective two-way communication; and again, not all the communication would have causes these effects.

Leadership practices will be targeted at various elements of the activity systems (Agents, Tools & Concepts etc.), but also they will relate to either incident or structural orders. Drawing on these elements – either incident or structural – will also be the source of the impetus for change. This will be explained further in section 5.3.

### 5.2.5  A note on positions and power in the systems

Before I go any further, it is important to make a general remark about the effectiveness of leadership activity and the ways agents gain momentum for the change. The leadership practices are not exhibited solely by formal managers themselves, rather any agents may (try to) enact them in interaction with their colleagues. However, as can be seen in the episodes above and will be demonstrated in the sections below, the effect of their use ultimately depends on the distribution of power within the interactions and structures they operate.

Below I discuss each type of leadership practice I will explain how each element may become the source of momentum for agents. Still, even the best ideas and intentions may be overlooked and ignored if the power distribution is not conducive to their adoption. In section 5.2.3.1, I touched lightly on the variety of dynamics in the room and their dependence on the basis of the system. Although there are obviously many possible variations of power distribution, here are the three frequent scenarios that I observed:

- Since the formal power belongs to the manager, it is possible that (s)he may have the overbearing influence during a meeting with his/her own team. This particularly applies to those managers known for authoritative leadership style and deep involvement in their teams' systems. Typically, they are not able to let go and delegate making decisions to the others, and will intervene in any discussion that takes place in the room. Often, if this is an established pattern, their team accepts such behaviour and plays along, creating space for their manager to talk and to make decisions; and may enact their own leadership practices that 'manage the manager' and enable the changes in their roles.

- On the contrary, if the prevailing format of leadership experiences is more participative and the team members are used to delegation and a wider range of responsibilities, their own initiatives will have greater effect on the occurring events. Again, the more such behaviours are allowed, the more likely they are to take place in the future. The manager may still moderate the discussion, and proposed ideas are approved implicitly (i.e. there are no objections), but the activity system is likely to be more flexible, and more agents will engage in leadership practices.

- Finally, if this is a meeting of equals – i.e. managers of different departments at the similar levels – the balance will be determined by a long list of factors, such as their knowledge of the process (awareness of the structures), expert knowledge (necessary skills to champion the activities), the attitudes of other people (based on the past experiences) and the co-negotiated process. The outcomes of the meeting will depend on the success of leadership practices and their match with the existing structure and created interaction systems.

For example, Adrian has displayed a very laid-back attitude to managing the Development Division, and generally expects his four direct reports to deal with the day-to-day activities of their teams so that he has free time to create more business ideas. These patterns are normally interrupted if they have issues that require his involvement, such as Jane asking him to support the Cinema Marketing department, or dealing with a conflict between different team that was not resolved at the levels below him. Adrian's attitude has generally cascaded down, and one the managers I observed said openly that he tried to emulate this attitude in his work. The physical distance between him and other managers further enforces this, as normally others only appear in Adrian's office during formal meetings – unlike the episode described in Chapter 4.

On the other end of the spectrum, Andrew, head of IT Department, appears to be very involved in the routines of his department, and people come in and go out of his office continuously. There is an opinion on the rest of Development Division that nothing happens in IT unless he approves it, and therefore he is copied into every email that requires acting on. At the same time, internally he is very attentive to his teams and relaxed in his communication style; for example, his assistant is often tasked with buying food and nibbles that are laid out on his table, and every person coming in to see him is welcome to it – however, this works both ways, as sometimes people would come to take food so that they have a chance to ask some questions.

The next section will present the list of 'themes' reflecting leadership practices that emerged through the critical realist Grounded Theory analysis and shows how the CHAT elements can become a source of power required for change independent of these hierarchical considerations. Each section relates to a particular element of the

activity framework and showcases the sum of all the themes observed in the data that relates to this particular element. However, it is worth making a point that in real-world cases the likelihood of agents engaging with the practices varies according to the setting and their joint positional power within the system.

## 5.3 Leadership practices in focus

The purpose of leadership activity is changing the underlying interactional and structural systems with a view for better fit or future, and therefore leadership work normally targets changing the elements of these systems. Any successful alteration naturally creates a knock-on effect, where several elements of the system or even several systems may react and adapt. For example, a successful implementation of a new vision for an organisation (equivalent of Long-Term Vision/ Purpose) is likely to lead to restructuring: changing groups of agents, instruments used and a shift of roles and responsibilities. Below I will describe separately practices that target various elements of the system, as this is where the focus of attention and actions of the agents (leaders and followers) may come at first.

As the upper triangle of the systems – 'Action' – lies on the surface and is more explicit, I will start by presenting the themes belonging to the four practices that relate to Long-Term Goal / Purpose, Short-Term Goals / Routine, Agents and Tools & Concept. The themes within the other three elements are introduced next – Underlying Assumptions, Situated Community and Roles & Responsibilities constitute the invisible and contextual basis of the system, and although they are tacit within everyday activity, their source of power and the potential impact is as important as the first elements.

When a leadership episode emerges, Agents need to draw momentum for the change. Whether this is a reliance on their managerial hierarchical authority, expert knowledge, a powerful story or dropping the right names of the people, this means that the Agents use the elements as a source of the power. The Agents must demonstrate a fit with the existing structures in order to justify their suggestion for an 'innovation' or a challenge of the status quo.

In addition, each element may be addressed at interaction or structural levels. The interaction level changes happen 'here and now' and alter the dynamics of a particular meeting between people. Although changes to the structural systems also occur through agents' interactions, their 'real' targets are those changes that affect the way people work, such as setting the goals, tasks, team and so on. For example, if somehow people have changed the agenda of a current meeting half way through the process, the practice has taken place at the Interaction Incident order of the Short-Term Goals / Routines. However, if this new agenda becomes a new routine of this very team and establishes itself as part of their future meetings, it turns into a case of a Structural Change in the Tools & Concepts element.

For each element below, I will explain the general notions of these practices and demonstrate how they may become both source and target of the change at different times, and how the leadership activity may happen targeting structural or interactional levels.

### 5.3.1 Long-Term Goal / Purpose

The first group of leadership practices are concerned with shaping the long-term goal of the activity system and reminding people about the reasons for their actions.

Broadly speaking, at this stage people engage in the discourses related to the questions 'what we do' and 'why it matters'.

At a very high structural level, this would relate to setting the organisational vision and it frequently involves an overview of the current activity system and its context (other systems). Agents engaging in these practices negotiate and answer such questions as: Why are we doing what we are doing? Why does it matter to others or us? What effects does this activity have or should have in the future? They make sense of these within the context of other systems, talking about their influence, importance and mutual impact.

At this level, breaking the long-term goal into tasks and steps will populate the Short-Term Goal / Routines element. Meanwhile, as we go down the structure levels, those high-level short-term goals in turn can shift and become long-term goals in lower level activity systems. For example, in leadership discourse mission is frequently interpreted as a more concrete shorter-term instrument related to vision. However, at lower activity system level mission itself will become the long-term goal and will be broken into even more detailed tasks.

At the interactional level, these practices are concerned with maintaining a view on the meaning of the gathering and its position within the general course of work, which in turn may define its agenda (Routine). This is easier to identity at the regular formal meetings that are carried out as an instrument for managing the smooth operation of a project or a function.

In my research, I have found that these practices are closely linked to the 'Agents' element that will also be discussed below. As individuals make sense of their past

and present actions, connect previously unconnected dots in relation to the purpose and reinterpret them, they create a stronger sense of identity. Setting long-term goals engages the agents, motivates them for on-going activity and focuses their attention on plans for the future.

Agents that manage to provide a successful interpretation of the long-term goal / purpose are likely to gain power for the momentum to change. Indeed, if they (even briefly) create a sense of an attractive shared goal, whether it is an explanation and interpretation of the established vision or a slight adjustment towards a new one, the other individuals will be drawn to it, and that energy will enable further changes.

In the example above, Episode 4 illustrates such an occurrence at the structural level. There, to make a point and shift attitude of Sarah and Sonia, Jane makes up a scenario that presents how their potential actions would fit in the bigger picture and their value for the overall purpose. This provides an overview of the Cinema Marketing system and links it closer to the Sales system, showing adjacency and their dependency. As they engages in the practice and draw on the energy from this story, collectively they switch in and start making plans for the future, and it becomes a drive for a series of small changes to the systems. Similarly, in Episode 2 Jane suggests using a particular indicator, as it would fit better their communication with the Sales team.

### 5.3.2 Short-Term Goal / Routines

The short-term goal practices focus agents' attention on measureable, quantifiable and concrete ideas on what to do next or on how to maintain the on-going activities. Together with Long-Term Goal / Purpose, they create a sense of direction and give agents clarity about their place in the wider system. A good fit between a shared

vision and short-term goals / routines provides clear motivation and energises agents for movement forward.

At the structural level these are maintained and confirmed through efficient communication between people. Agents from the same or adjacent systems may come together in formal or informal meetings to exchange their current state of affairs, assess if any plans need to be adjusted and to make sure that their activities run smoothly. In this process they check, negotiate and agree what different agents need to do within their systems.

There are various managerial instruments that introduce and enforce those short-term goals at all structural levels. These involve such routines as task management, asking people to compose and priorities their to-do lists, or to create and follow a personal / professional development plan. This can also involve carrying out regular 'status meetings', where a manager may gather information about recent developments, make sense of them and set them within the broader context of long-term goals or other systems.

At the interactional level, the practices in this element are concerned with setting the agenda of the meeting, deciding on the order of questions in consideration and so on. Whilst this may not have a profound effect at structural level, exercising authority in deciding this element frequently identifies power distribution in the room. Generally, it is the most senior person in the hierarchy who has the formal power to decide these things, or someone else may be entrusted with the 'chairing / moderation' role. However, within the dynamics of the conversation as the power shifts around the room agents with the best story may engage in this practice.

In the Episode 2 and 3 above we can see how the focus of the interaction shifts with small remarks from the agents. In Episode 2, Sarah refers the short-term goals of the interaction activity when she presents the agenda, thus setting the tone of the meeting. In Episode 3, Sarah closes the presentation as a signal that the goal has been achieving (using Tools & Concepts) and then Jane open the next discussion by referring to her earlier chat with Sarah.

On the other hand, there are plenty of examples in these 4 episodes where agents co-negotiate their short-term objectives, routines and the next actions that would serve these. For example, in Episode 1 Jane tells the girls to contact Tom and arrange for upgrade of their hardware; in Episode 2, there are several changes that Sarah and Sonia need to make to the presentation; and in Episode 4 there is a broader discussion about their activities and their fit with the bigger picture. Although these changes may refer to various structural activity systems, overall the potential transformation serve the purpose of better alignment of social activities with the intended outcomes.

### 5.3.3 Agents

The next leadership practice emerges when agents engage into the creation of a strong identity within the Agents element of the system, thus crafting the 'feeling of us'. This implies shaping the group identity, a sense of unity, a bond or a relation within the team. Its strength may vary depending on the harmony of the activity system, and in the interaction incidents may be nothing but a fleeting moment. However, even in the short chats between people there is typically some work done around the questions 'Who are we?' (or 'Who are we not?'), 'How do we relate to

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each other?' and 'What unites us?', thus linking it strongly to the Long-Term Goal / Purpose practice.

At the higher structural level, the direct managerial work is concerned with forming an effective team in order to achieve the goals. Therefore, in functional conversations it is frequently linked to Roles & Responsibilities and the dialogue around 'who does what'. This allows the agents to make sense of their group, drawing the boundaries between them and the outer world as well as between themselves.

At the lower structural level of systems, when a new activity is formed, the manager is expected to facilitate goal setting and define agents' involvement in the system. Through talking about the purpose, plans, and agents' role and importance, (s)he creates the feeling of union between them, and therefore the drive to move forwards together increases.

At the level of interaction, in the beginning of the meeting or even a phone call people will normally chat informally. They will discuss the weather, sports, politics, organisational gossip or even family – all these topics allow them to find common grounds as a foundation for a more efficient communication later on. It may also happen at the end of the meeting, or even in the middle – particularly if the agents discuss a difficult topic that may create some tensions in the room.

From that point of view, expressing good humour is a positive instrument in exercising this practice, as long as the topic is acceptable in the room, i.e. it fits with the Underlying Assumptions of the system. Telling a joke or a light-hearted story can bring the room together in seconds. On the other hand, a negative instrument of the 'Agents' practice is defining the groups' identity is through separating them from the

other agents. The feeling of 'us against them' is created when someone tells a story about another system involving agents that are deemed to be different or inferior to 'us'. The stories of both kinds (positive and negative) allow agents to confirm their place and value in the system: the more others react to their story positively, the more included they feel.

For example, in Episode 1, where the interaction activity is being set up, literally, as Sarah is struggling to open her presentation, Ann makes a humorous remark about not being able do the same task earlier, which may (or may not) help her and Sarah find more common grounds and therefore be more aligned in their communication. On the other hand, during Episodes 3 and 4, Jane works hard to create a sense of unity with Sarah and Sonia by 'hearing their pain', but also tries to reduce their negative emotions towards to the Sales representatives as this may impede future work.

At the structural level, Episode 3 offers an example of 'casual' formation of a new activity system, where Jane asks Ann to invite Rob to the consequent meeting dedicated to a new project. Whilst I will expand on this meeting further below, this incident shows how subtle is the process, as Rob may come 'if he has the time, and if he wants to'.

### 5.3.4 Tools & Concepts

As discussed above, the organisations are full artefacts, material and non-material, physical and intellectual. All those items – desks, doors, pens, computers, documents and printouts, books, pens, highlighters, phones, IT systems, frameworks and models – are an integral part of the office life, and therefore without realisation

are the most explicitly influential element the activity triangle. Therefore, the ability to influence what tools are used and how mould this element of the systems.

At the structural level, the common question that initiates a potential leadership episode is asking a question: Are we using the right instruments for current activity? Are they adequate for reaching our short and long-term goals? Should we change them? This may start the process of analysing the situation, and the instruments may be modified or dropped in favour of other tools, or new ways of working with existing instruments may be developed. Similar to other elements, the dynamics of the change depends on the difference in the opinions and power distribution in the room.

This element – Tools & Concepts – is a rich origin of drawing power at many levels, as possession and control over the resources symbolises a particular status or role within the systems. First of all, the physical surroundings matter. It is generally accepted that spacious rooms, better views and larger desks symbolise seniority of a manager. A manager's office says a lot about his/her style and involvement in the activities. They may have a separate office and operate behind closed doors or have their door always open for their team to come in.

However, during a meeting the choice of their seat at a table may also provide them with a better view of the room, and therefore, a stronger position. A person holding the pointer / mouse during a group presentation is the one who gets to speak and to moderate the conversation flow. If there is a moment where people turn to the whiteboard during discussion, the agent who grabs the pen first will be the one more likely to lead to conversation from there on.

Overall, it is the interaction incidents that may be observed directly, the elements of the action triangle are the ones on the surface, and therefore Tools & Concepts are the most noticeable part of the on-going events. In the example above, every participant comes to a meeting with a printout of the documents they prepared, and it serves as a confirmation of their right to speak, indicates their engagement in the process and may give them grounds to make authoritative statements and judgements of the situation.

The non-material instruments, in addition to the software and frameworks, also include particular slang or language used within the team, profession or organisation. Specific terms, idioms and other fixed expressions may allow better mutual understanding, cutting corners and reaching decision sooner. Therefore, one of the examples of this leadership practice group will be shaping of such commonly used glossary. It should be noted here that this might also become an instrument of inclusion or exclusion from the group, where the fit of an individual is influenced by their knowledge of the vocabulary and ease in using it.

Expert knowledge and expertise used in the meeting, although linked closely to Roles & Responsibilities element, also belongs to Tools & Concepts. This is another direct source of power for the agents, as it gives weight to their opinions and suggestions. The degree of their influence derives from the past experience (how well they had worked before) that in turn defines the expectations and respect from other agents for their analysis and problem-solving skills.

However, sometimes a simple 'tell' is enough. For example, in the Episode 2 Jane continuously refers to using consistent colours and language in the presentations, and her authority is generally undisputed in the room, there is virtually no dialogue

about this change to the system and Sarah and Sonia accept her opinion. In Episode 1, as agents joke about the system, Jane uses this opportunity to instruct the on the system update.

In general, the routines of arranging meetings and production of various reports are a particular instrument of managing the systems at high-order structural systems. Both can be interpreted as activity systems of their own, however, both are tools of maintaining smooth operations and improvement of communication effectiveness of the larger processes. In the description of a Jane's week below, there will be different types of meetings – regular monthly / weekly catch-ups, status meetings 'because it may be time', get-togethers to exchange information received from other parts of the organisation, preparing presentations for senior management etc. – however, each one of them is carried out with the purpose of stirring the underlying structural activity systems and helping the agents if there are any issues or conflict.

### 5.3.5  Situated Community

The leadership practices relating to this and the next two elements belong to the basis of the activity systems triangle. These are not directly visible in the meetings and are not obvious during observation, but they are both important in managing and developing the activity systems and rich in sources of momentum for the change.

Engagement with the Situated Community element is about being well aware of the other stakeholders in this system, well connected with the (key) agents from those systems and being able to tell timely stories that may influence the system itself. The phrase 'It is not what you know, it is who you know' is a great illustration of this position. As with other elements, the leadership work that shapes this element slightly differs at the structural and interactional level of systems.

At the structural level, Situated Community leadership practices imply establishing links between the activity systems through connecting the agents engaged in these activities. This means creating communication channels between individuals, organising interaction opportunities, and keeping their interests in mind as part of the day-to-day work. This is also strongly linked to the idea of building networks within and between the organisations. Having a close working relationship with the key agents from another adjacent team (whose activities are linked to yours) is essential for running a smooth operation between departments.

Ideally, these links should exist at every structural level of the organisation. For example, a common practice for a board of directors is to have regular meetings to catch up and to exchange news about the news and events that take place within their departments, as this helps to align the functions in one direction. If there is also effective communication between the managers at a level below, and perhaps even lower, this will aid the adjacent activity systems to co-exist in harmony (the key agents in both systems become 'Situated Community' for each other). However, if communication barriers get in the way the conflicts may have to be escalated to the higher level.

At the interaction incident level, the situated community is not physically present in the room; however, they have an impact on the emerging conversations. Agents may come in with stories of their experiences with those individuals (both positive and negative); their requests and demands that may shape the goals; and their general opinions about the issues within or between the systems. The stories always appear with a particular viewpoint, emotional judgement and opinion that will form the attitude in the room towards it. Their value is established through making sense of

the story and negotiating the interpretation of its meaning for the current and future actions.

The ability to drop a name at the right time or tell a story involving key agents both provide a source of the power to the agents in the room. This is particularly true if the others agree with their interpretation and do not dispute the important of those key agents or that story.

Throughout the Episodes above, the Sales team members are not present in the room, but there are a number of references to their activities, attitudes, and potential requirements that Jane uses to influence the activity of Sarah and Sonia. For example, in Episode 4 it would not be enough just to tell them to do things differently due to the level of emotional frustration and the accumulated negative experiences with them, hence, Jane comes up with a scenario that creates a more appealing story. Similarly, in Episode 2 Jane draws a line between an indicator that would be useful to them personally, and to the Sales team – which creates a new understanding and relation between the immediate objectives and the purpose.

### 5.3.6 Underlying Assumptions

The Underlying Assumptions is a very broad category that includes all the norms and rules of behaviour of a particular activity system, and in turn these may also be linked to those of team, department and organisation. Therefore, the associated leadership practices are also quite varied, and the element may be both the source of the power for action, and the target for the change itself.

The leadership work is about creating rules and norms, and embedding them into the system. For example, at the structural level the core values are frequently discussed

as an integral part of organisational culture and therefore' sit' within the 'Underlying Assumptions' element of the basis of activity. Should managers decide that the values should be addressed (changed, implemented etc.), a leadership practice emerges that will shape the system and they are brought into open discussion.

At the interaction level, leadership episodes emerge in response to conflicts, and the practices will be activated when the normative underlying assumptions are violated. This may be related to (im)proper language use, dress code, tardiness and other organisational rules. The events may be interpreted through comparing present to the past or to the future, telling a story that involve other agents and generally aimed evoking emotions.

In this element humour is also a powerful tool in managing the emotions. Whilst the ability to make a joke and get a positive response is an important part of the 'Agents' element, the general understanding of what is acceptable and unacceptable in the system is an indication of an individual's position in the system. A manager's jokes are always laughed at, and so are jokes of other senior members of the system. However, during a meeting, particularly a large meeting where agents are not as familiar with each other or the process is not well established, individuals will attempt to use humour to attract attention to their ideas. They take the risk of being ignored, but the reward is high if the joke is really funny (i.e. well aligned with the Underlying Assumptions), or if the manager (or another key agent in the room) grants them the power by laughing at their joke first.

In Episode 3, the situation where Jane asks Ann to leave and she does is acceptable to all agents, however, when Ann asks Jane about the location of their next meeting, Jane rebuffs and does not respond to the question. Both these instances point to the

behavioural implications of the hierarchical differences within the team, which mirrors the interplay between Adrian and Jane in section 4.4.3. At the same time, Jane is gathering evidence that may help her influence the Sales' activities and their relationship with her team; and as not turning up for meetings is generally an unacceptable behaviour in the organisation, she is planning to use that story to help her shape the future.

### 5.3.7  Roles & Responsibilities

The final group of leadership practices are those related to the Roles & Responsibilities. They are aimed at insuring cooperation between people and are concerned with allocation of tasks and separation of areas of responsibilities. The Roles & Responsibilities element 'holds' the information about hierarchy in the system and the roles of each individual, that is, the expectation of a manager's and everyone else's activities.

This practice has an impact on the distribution of power in the room, related to hierarchy or expert knowledge and experience. It also defines the agents who are expected to claim the power and the attention, and when a new agent joins a process, the whole element needs be adjusted to rebalance the system. Clarification of grey areas of responsibilities is done through dialogue, bringing in questions of expertise, past experiences and learning about people's aspirations for their careers.

At the structural level, a common instrument of change is delegation or even a direct instruction to carry out a task, which defines how parts of the process (various short-term goals and routines) are distributed between the agents of an activity system. This element is a frequent source of conflicts, as there tend to be grey areas between

individual zones of responsibility, particularly in a complicated project. Therefore, the practice of 'dividing the labour' is an integral part of leadership.

The practice related to establishing this element is essential if a new activity system is created, or a new type of meeting is carried out. At the interaction level, the focus of the Roles & Responsibilities practices shits to shaping expectations regarding the levels and ways of agents' involvement in the dynamics of communication of a particular meeting. For example, these may mean more or less speaking, taking minutes of the meeting, chairing, moderation etc.

Roles & Responsibilities is another straightforward source of gaining the momentum for change. It is the hierarchy and the seniority that largely enables agents to make 'I just said so' statements, especially if is supported by authoritative organisational culture. Alternatively, it may be a non-managerial expert in the room, whose knowledge about the subject gives him the authority to make such statements. On the other hand, it may also give the agents the power to challenge and engage in the conversation, if the culture is participative and inclusive.

An example of Roles & Responsibilities acting at interaction level, during the first part of the meeting, Sarah and Sonia present their slides in turns, in accordance with the parts that they had been responsible for. This supports the dynamic in the room, as the questions and comments are normally directed at the person presenting it, and they are expected to take future actions on the matters. However, the stories that relate to the Cinema Marketing team's miscommunication with the Sales point to a overall tension within expected roles in their joint activity with the Sales team, and will therefore be a focus of Jane and her team's actions for some time.

So far this Chapter has presented the key findings of my research that introduced the structural and interactional context of leadership emergence and the types of leadership practices that are involved in the process. The episodes in section 5.2.3.2 provide an example of the two and represent those moments within interaction, where agents jointly change their activities, setting up new initiatives or addressing tensions in existing ones. In the next section I offer three more example of stories that illustrate the emergence and recurrence of the leadership practices, the link and causal powers between the levels of activity systems, and the patterns of tensions and resolutions.

## 5.4    *Placing leadership practices in context*

In this section I tell more stories about Jane, one of the managers I shadowed during my fieldwork in Moscow. The text bellow offers a small selection of three incidents of interaction observed during a week of shadowing her, Monday to Friday, interpreting which I shall bring to life the types of leadership practices that emerged through the data analysis and were presented above. These three incidents each represent a recurring theme that kept re-emerging during the week, and whilst I offer a detailed discussion on the dynamic and role of these events; Appendix B contains further examples of the stories that relate to these three themes.

There are several reasons behind the choice for illustration – Jane's department was the smallest out of the five groups observed, and at the same time it was engaged in multiple projects across the entire Development Division and beyond. Since her teams consisted of twelve people (three of which have already been introduced), telling stories is comparatively easy, and so is presenting and interpreting the episodes in writing. However, the leadership practices presented above were equally

observed in the other teams that participated in my fieldwork, although their contextual unfolding would vary according to the situation.

The section is structured as follows. It starts with description of the Department K (the wider structures of the Development Division that it belongs to are outlined in Appendix 1) and then turns to depiction of the three additional episodes. The narrative will be interwoven with the description of Jane's team, key agents, and physical artifacts and in the activity systems. It concludes with a discussion of the dynamic in the four cases, including the one presented in section 5.2.3.2, and of the causal powers that accompanied emergence of leadership activity and its impact on the contextual activities.

## 5.4.1  Department K

Figure 5.5 depicts the structure of the Department K, its groups, hierarchy and the agents' names used below. As mentioned above, in spite of relatively small size of the department, it was connected to numerous wider long-term projects in addition to some short-term projects of their own. Throughout the week, I had opportunities to observe and interview all of them, and therefore heard stories relating to different parts of their own structural activity systems or the cross-departmental projects they belong to.
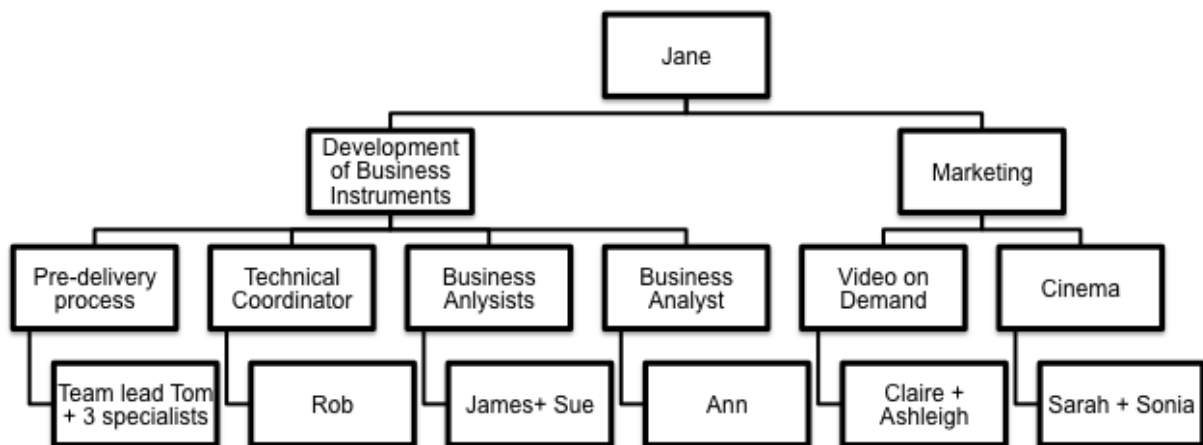
**Figure 5.5 Structure of Department K**

Since this department is relatively new and one of its main goals is establishing and aligning other activity systems, some of it parts depended heavily on Jane and her connections inside the company. From the internal presentation for Development Division, the main goal / purpose (LTG) of the department is development of business-processes as well as creation, implementation, development and support of complementary instruments:

- Development and optimisation of business processes in the field of sales capabilities (from planning and handling queries from advertising agencies to the moment of contract confirmation, simplified online sales, related processes)

- Creation, development and implementation of supporting systems

- Creation and development of new sales processes

- Analysis of effectiveness of existing processes and instruments

- Research and analysis for future development plans.

This is achieved through performing the following functions, or *routines (STR)*:

- Business analysis, gathering, formalisation and agreement of requirements, creation of technical specifications

- Project management for software development

- Testing and quality control

- Product implementation and support

- Training of external and internal users

- Data collection and analysis

- Preparation of suggestions for changing business processes, building processes in existing and new areas of company activity

### 5.4.2 General patterns and recurring themes

The company as a whole is generally young, and so are Jane and her team members, where everyone is in their twenties or early thirties. This creates a generally friendly culture with relaxed and informal communication, allowing for humour and gossip, and a generally light attitude towards work and life. Also, it is largely accepted in Moscow is that people may stay behind after office hours and work into the evening, and therefore are rarely called on being late for work in the morning. This company is no exception: although the official working hours at the organisation are 10am to 6pm, most days of the week I was the first person to unlock the doors of their office at 9:55.

Unlike other managers within this department, Jane does not have a separate office and shares a room with one of her larger teams. This is temporary as there is not enough space in the current office building and this was fixed when they moved to the new office. However, at the time of data collection her desk was by the window, with a nicer view, which symbolises her status *(example of T&C and UA).* For existing projects, there is a clear understanding in Jane's head about the roles of her team members. For new tasks, the roles are generally allocated according to

people's specialisations, interests, and development needs; either based on their volunteering or her direction *(R&R).*

Throughout the week, I shadowed Jane in all the internal meetings that took place in the main building and sat in the corner by her desk in the main space. On Monday, we started with an introductory interview where we agreed on the rules; and when there was not enough time to pose questions in between the meetings, we run through them at the end of the day.

Despite this light-hearted approach and general positive atmosphere, throughout the week there was evidence of emerging tensions and their on-going resolution. The sections below highlight individual examples of three patterns that emerged during the five days of observations, and a more detailed description of these patterns is presented in Appendix B. The first theme is concerned with the on-going alignment of activities of the Cinema Marketing group and their struggle to fit their activities with the expectations of the Sales team; and section 5.4.4 describes a follow-up meeting that sheds light on the continued process of co-directing their systems. The second theme is related to setting up of a new activity system, where Jane's team are asked to prepare a presentation on a potential business development opportunity; and a vignette in 5.4.5 offers a description of the heated negotiations that took place during the first meeting dedicated to it. The third example in section 5.4.6 is related to a practice established in Department K by Jane, where a series meetings formally dedicated to discussion of agent's personal plans document creates a space for negotiating, aligning and directing the activities within her team.

### 5.4.3  Approach to presenting

The sections below present detailed stories from three incidents of interaction and the leadership episodes that occurred in these incidents. These episodes show the emergence of the themes identified through Grounded Theory analysis, and explain how individuals mould the elements of the structural and interactional systems in real time. Therefore, the narratives that accompany each episode offer an interpretation of their meaning within the context of structures and relations, and discuss their role in the on-going activities in the department.

I do not go into analysing every line of every script; rather I focus on a number of episodes that shed more light onto the leadership practices. In addition, some episodes are presented in great detail and portray lengthy extracts with the discourses, whilst others are 'framed' summaries of what took place. I introduced the latter for those conversations, where the discussion and negotiation process are relatively longwinded and it is difficult to pinpoint the script lines where something really happens.

As section 5.4.7 will discuss the episodes in relation to each other, I keep their sequential numbering, which will continue further in Appendix B to avoid confusion. The first story in section 5.4.4 immediately follows the four episodes introduced in section 5.2.3.2 and therefore does not require detailed context setting, which I offer for the other two stories. However, I explain the set-up of each interaction, in terms of the physical layouts, the background to the topic discussed in each of them and how those relate to the dynamic of the interaction. For each episode, whether these are extracts with direct speech or 'framed' summaries of the interaction, I offer an

interpretation of the relationship with various elements and levels of analysis, that link to the Grounded Theory themes presented in section 5.3.

### 5.4.4   Re-setting the purpose of Cinema Marketing activity

The meeting described in greater detail in section 5.2.3.2 above was the first of series of interactions dedicated to aligning the Cinema Marketing team to the requirements and activities of the Sales' team, and there is a noticeable progress in Sarah and Sonia's thinking and actions through the week (examples of which can be seen in section B.2). A particular example I would like to present is a relatively short informal interaction that took place on Tuesday afternoon; a couple of hours after the morning meeting, episodes from which were used to introduce the levels of analysis. At lunchtime, Jane held a meeting with the Sales Director to discuss the issues between their teams, as Jane acknowledged that the situation would not be solved at the next level down. I did not observe Jane in her conversation with the Sales Director, but she shared with me that she recognised the need to understand his perspective, the potential future outcomes and their long-term goals.

…After Jane returned from the meeting with the Sales director (about 3.20pm), she took about twenty minutes to catch up on her desk and made a couple of phone calls. After that, she proceeds to the Marketing room and gathers Sarah and Sonia to reports the results of her conversation with the Sales Director. Sarah and Sonia are at their desks (and so is Claire), and Jane pulls an extra chair between their two desks to be able to sit and to talk without shouting, and to keep a level eye contact with them.
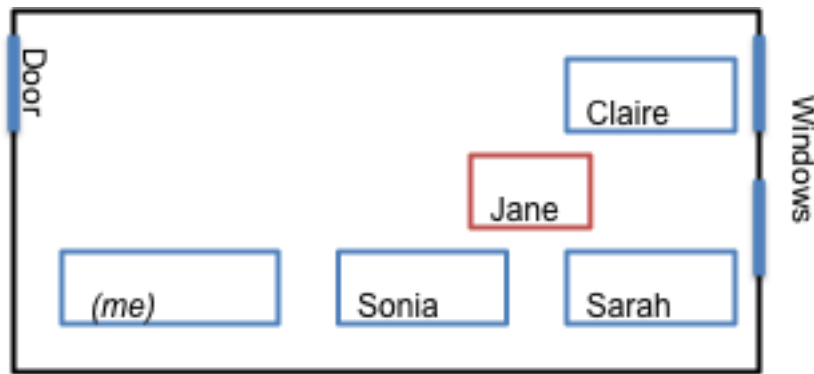
### Episode 5.  Taking out the tension

The girls are clearly anxious to learn about the outcomes of the meeting, and Jane

starts with a humorous exaggeration to take out the tension…

| Sarah | So what**?** | STG-IN: demand for information |
|---|---|---|
| Jane | **What it? All over? End of the world?** | UA: Humour |
| Sarah | **Everything is over between us** *(laughs)* | AG-IN: Humour about 'us' |
| Jane | **Everything over between us, yes, I don't know you anymore. No, it's fine.** Let's start with global… Sales Director **does not believe in the current structure**. He says there is no one who would kick everyone around for marketing tasks. And he thinks that that person cannot be external… Look, you should not confuse this. This person who is responsible is not necessarily the person doing it all… | AG-IN: Humour about 'us'. SC: Key agent's views on structure |

By making an exaggeration and joking about 'end of relationship', after which

everyone laughs, Jane and Sarah create an easier atmosphere where they all can

talk. Jane starts to set the scene by telling Sarah and Sonia what the Sales Director

views are, as they all appreciate that his views, as a key agents within the Situated

Community will shape their actions for the future. This narrative creates a context

within which the agents then discuss and make sense of what needs to happen next,

and becomes a driver for changes to the activity system of Cinema marketing.

***Episode 6.*** ***Shaping the activity through retelling stories***

Jane explains the cultural-historical context and tells the history of how and why

Cinema Marketing department emerged and how it got transformed into what it is

now *(in other words, Jane shares the long-term purpose of the current activity in*

*order to provide meaning for the agents).* The content causes Sarah to worry and to

ask whether they could be moved into the Sales department over time. Claire, who is

listening to the conversation and is currently supporting another team, intervenes into

the discussion and asks whether she also would be transferred to Internet video *.*

Jane addresses their immediate emotional concerns and denies that this will be the

case. However, another argument she brings is the story that Adrian's ideology for

Development Division is that they are not responsible for maintaining functions,

rather they should create and fine-tune products and pass them on to the dedicated

teams *(SC + R&R),* and therefore the situation is not totally clear.

This puts the rest of the conversation into perspective. Whilst at the previous meeting

Jane addressed Sarah and Sonia's immediate concerns and worked to create a

constructive environment for them to work in, this time Jane prepares the ground for

the future changes. Through telling stories about opinions of key stakeholders, she

frames the reason of the team's existence within the context of wider structural

systems, both the Sales teams and the Development Division *(LTG-STR).* After an

anxious start, this puts the girls into a constructive mood, and next Jane shares more

of concrete content of the conversation with the Sales Director.

Jane says that initially the Sales Director was very sceptical about marketing team's

efforts, but after some persuasion started listing potential tasks for them as an

experiment *(STG-STR: testing activities)* to see if this can work out, and the next part of the conversation is Jane passing on these tasks *(STG-STR).*

This illustrates that the Sales Director is not entirely convinced that the Cinema Marketing activity system matches the system of Sales. Later Jane told me that this was not an easy negotiation, as the Sales Director had very strong views and she had to negotiate a new order with him. However, at the end he was happy to test whether they can operate together and hence offers them a list of test tasks, which Jane sets carefully for the team to perform.

During that, Jane tells Sarah and Sonia: "It is important to me how this data will look like, it should be more useful than the export files from [the System]. Therefore, I am asking you to show me everything before you send it to him" *(R&R).* Jane sets a clear deadline – Thursday – for when Sarah should send her a table with all the goals split into blocks for [SD] *(T&C-STR: create a communication document + STG-STR: goal with a deadline).*

Here we can see that Jane wants them to succeed and to create efficient links with the Sales department, and she feels the need to engage with the system. Therefore, Jane changes the current process in their system (affecting the R&R) and introduces a rule that all initial important communication should pass through her, and Sarah and Sonia accept that. When I asked Jane later for the rationale behind her request, she shared her perception of marketing people being quite direct and almost pushy, and she expected that this could cause a conflict with the Sales team based on a previous similar situation that Claire was in; and therefore Jane is trying to mediate their interactions and "show them a different way".

### Episode 7.   *Summarising the situation and setting up the next meeting*

Jane, Sonia and Sarah go through a few other issues and then Jane starts

summarising the situation once more: "He did not say that he does not need us, it's

just he questions our communications and responsibility", to remind the girls of the

potentially good outcomes and what needs to be done.

| Sarah | [Jane], I wanted to ask. Look, say, we start working through these questions. In terms of communication, if I **will approach M\*\*\* or S\*\*\*... I mean...will I get answers**? | SC-STR: relationship with other system<br><br>-> UA + R&R |
|---|---|---|
| Jane | Let's make a deal with you and Sonia. Let's try doing first... well, **can you have a look at the tasks now**? | STG-STR: Urgent goal |
| Sarah | Yeah. | |
| Jane | Who does what, and by the evening write down what questions you have and from whom. And **write them down, and I will have a look**. | R&R: Role agreement |
| Sarah | Yes. | |
| Jane | Because the situation is not easy. **This doesn't mean that we will live like this forever**. But at this stage I will have a look myself, and if needed I will write to him myself. Or maybe I will need to edit it, and you will send. That's it, let's live through this stage, this month in this way. Since I am difficult to catch in the daytime, plan it so that you send all of this to me in the evenings, and I will read and edit everything by the morning. And on the following day again, you work and accumulate questions, and send them to me in the evening. Ok? | LTG-STR: Better communication;<br><br>STG: Jane to filter communication between groups;<br><br>R&R: Set the pattern |

Sarah asks a question that Jane does not have an answer to yet, which points to her

hope about the changing collaboration process between the activities. However, in

the context of this meeting this question resembles an emotional plea and in a similar

to the pattern of the previous meeting with them, Jane transforms the demand into a

task for them, and a pattern for their routine for the next month. She draws on the

situation in higher-level activities and establishes new expectations for the agents.

…. Sarah asks more questions about the situation, but Jane does not have enough time and therefore asks them to arrange a meeting for Friday, where they can have a longer conversation *(STG: Create a meeting as an instrument for communication – T&C-STR)*. Before Jane leaves, she turns to Claire who she is supposed to have a meeting with next. Jane says that she needs to send an email and will then call Claire when ready; Claire clarifies what room they are in and agrees.

### 5.4.4.1 Observations and interpretation

The meeting above lasted just over 30 minutes, and in this half of an hour there are a few shifts in the communication between the agents. The interaction in the morning, especially its second part, allowed the agents to improve alignment of their attitudes towards the tension between the adjacent activity systems, which in this particular case surfaced in the Situated Community element, and discuss potential ways of resolving the conflict. It allowed Sarah and Sonia to focus on their short-term activities without the immediate impact of their frustration of past experiences, and they had spent a part of that afternoon planning what they could do already albeit they were expecting news from Jane.

Therefore, when Jane came into their room, they were anxious to learn about the results of her conversation with the Sales Director and the implications that it may have on their present and future activities. In order to be able to discuss these things, there was a requirement for agents to take out some tension, and the humorous exaggeration in Episode 5 did just that – it gave a signal that they are still OK, even if changes will be required in the future. Once this critical moment has passed, and Jane feels that the mood has shifted, she provides context for these changes,

explaining the perspective of key stakeholders that shape the long-term goal of the system and implications for the shorter-term activities.

Firstly, in Episode 6 Jane attempts to create a shared understanding of the purpose of the department and the logic behind their interactions with the other parts of the organisation. For that, she employs a story about Adrian – he is highly respected as a leadership figure and is someone who sets the direction for the Division activities, and explains the broader principles that include setting up processes and then transferring them to operational units. On one hand, this illuminates one of the deep historical sources of the tension – two key senior stakeholders have conflicting views on how the activity should be structured. On the other hand, at the interaction level, this statement causes some anxiety about the career development in the room, and Jane had to reassure everyone that they are staying under her command, pushing the conversation back to the topic.

Eventually, the conversation translates into negotiation of the new order, and transformation of the current patterns of activity. For example, when Jane asks Sarah and Sonia to check with her everything that they send to the Sales team, this changes the assumed Roles and Responsibilities in their system, even though historically they would have felt at ease to contact them directly. However, since Jane is concerned about the success of future communications, and there is a shared desire to prove the value of the Cinema Marketing team to the key stakeholders, they agree to a change in their actions.

The last paragraph in Episode 7 presents a negotiation attempt, where Sarah checks whether the agents in the adjacent system would be changing their behaviours symmetrically. In response, Jane suggests that for the moment they should focus on

re-aligning their own activity system first, and thus creates a catalyst for a knock-on change. The change does happen – over the next couple of days, there are a few more examples of interactions where Jane, Sarah and Sonia come together to discuss their progress, which shows various stages of institutionalisation of change and the emergence of new patterns in their internal activities and their interactions with other departments.

These two interactions had a pivotal role in the processes, and there was a significant shift in behaviours and attitudes during the week that I observed. Agents were making sense and re-shaping their activities in order to match the context that they operate in, and in particular, the stories that relate to the opinions of the key stakeholders within the Situated Community. Overall, not only the Cinema Marketing team is relatively new, but also the individuals working in this team are new to the organisation, and therefore are not entirely familiar with assumed the ways of working. The latter is particularly evident in interaction due to the frequency with which the team's manager corrects their professional language and organisation-specific terms.

Whilst this example illustrated an emergence of leadership practices in relation in direct response to a tension between existing structures and their transformation, the next story offers a way of creating a new system.

### 5.4.5  *Setting up a new activity system*

This section presents a narrative of a meeting where I observed the process of setting up a new activity system. The task was passed onto Jane from the CEO via Adrian, and she was asked to evaluate a potential business partnership for development of a mobile phone application for second screen users, a new potential

market for the organisation to place their advertisements *(which represents the long-term purpose of the new structural activity system)*. The task is relatively urgent, and therefore I get to observe two meetings related to this activity in one week: on Tuesday morning Jane explains the task and initiates actions (outlined below), and follows up on the progress on Thursday morning (presented in section B.3 of the Appendix).

This is the first gathering, and Jane needs to get her team on board with the activity *(LTG-IN)*: to carry out market research, to analyse and prepare a presentation for the Senior Management that will be used for decision making *(T&C-STR)*.

The individuals that Jane chose to invite to the meeting are expected to form the agents element of the new activity system of the project *(AG-STR)*:

- Ann – due to her knowledge of the market and the organisation and related numbers.
- Rob (technical expert) – due to his understanding of the technical background and possibilities.
- Claire (senior marketing specialist) – due to her experience with internet-based video. She comes late in the meeting as she had a dentist appointment.
- Sonia – to expand her experience within the marketing stream.

The meeting takes place immediately after the review of Cinema Marketing slides, and some people stay in the same room; Jane, Sonia and Ann occupy roughly the same positions as before, and Rob takes a seat next to Jane. Claire comes in later, about half way through the meeting due to a doctor's appointment, and positions herself in the middle of remaining space.

Door

Sonia

Claire        Ann

Screen

Rob          Jane

Windows
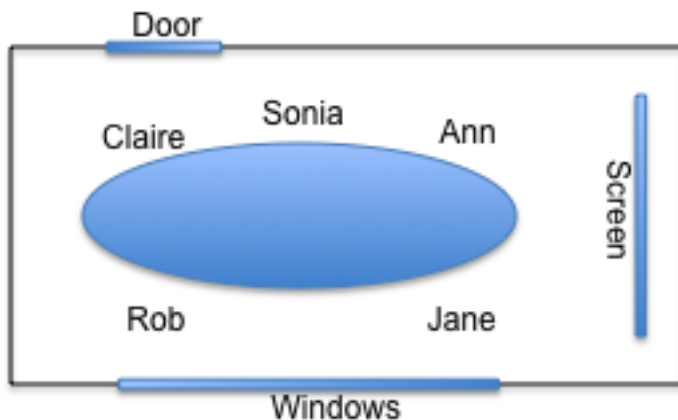
Before the meeting, Jane had sent the slides from the developers to her team and asked everyone to read them *(T&C-IN; R&R-STR)*. However, they did not open it on the screen during the meeting *(T&C-IN)*.

This interaction is characterised by several relatively turbulent conversations, as agents are making sense of their task and test the boundaries against their understanding and the opinion of their manager, Jane. Furthermore, as this is a new type of activity, the agents are negotiating their own roles in the process, which are dependent both on their past experiences, their expertise and their interests for the future actions.

***Episode 8.   Setting the goal for the meeting and for the activity***
Before the meeting, people are engaged in casual conversations, and Ann starts telling about a 'small horrible series' on a TV channel that her and her family has watched over the weekend. Jane does not interrupt the chat immediately as she walks in, instead she joins into the conversation and engages actively for a quick moment in order to build a rapport and provide a smoother transition into a new activity *(AG-IN).* Then she starts the formal part of the meeting by saying….

| Jane | **So…** | UA-IN: Start the meeting |
|------|---------|--------------------------|
| Ann | **There is a presentation…** But they have too many numbers. | T&C: information source |
| Jane | **Did you have a look at it?** | R&R: Check the task was done and that there is a common understanding |
| Ann | Yes. | |
| Sonia | Yes. | |
| Jane | You all had a look… Ok, **let me set the task**. Look, we need to create a presentation for [CEO] about 'second screen'. In particular, about this player. What benefits will [we] have from cooperation with [Company L] in long term? This is just, Ann, **this relates to your question** when you said that you had a lot of doubts…well, whether it will take off or not. | LTG + STG-STR: Why do it; <br><br> AG: Work with interest |
| Ann | Aha… | |
| Jane | There. Doubts, surely, should not be swept away, they need to be worked through too. However, our first task is to look at this from different sides and picture the benefits. That's why, you see, a part of the presentation… **That is, [CEO] has not seen this,** so we need to tell him briefly, A – what it is, its current state, plans, perspectives… and B – that is, second point, we need to tell how this has worked in the West and what positive effective examples there are. What user models there are and so on. And thirdly, why [we] should take it on. What benefits we may have. That's it. In that direction. | SC: CEO's interest and knowledge <br><br> -> impact on STG and LTG |
| Sonia | **May I ask a question? Why this business, or is there any other potential chance to cooperate with anyone else?** | LTG-STR: Exploring the wider scene |

In the lines above, Jane sets the upper triangle of the interaction activity system by checking whether they all looked at the presentation *(T&C)* and then explains the long and short-term goals of the structural activity system through the prism of the CEO interest *(SC).*

In the last line, Sonia takes an initiative by asking a further question about the wider scene, which sparks a lively discussion in the meetings about the meaning of their work *(LTG- STR - > STG-IN)*. In particular, Ann challenges choice of the potential partner and the source of their investment. Jane is hesitant to share this information, and stops the discussion quite sharply.

| Ann | No, if we… **If the question is about perspectives, this is important**. | LTG-STR: wider scene |
|------|------|------|
| Jane | **Ann, I understand.** But **let's assume** that we don't need to make a presentation now about 'second screen' in general and its future, but just about this company. And **the question why they are reliable lies outside out responsibility and our competency.** This question remains out of our focus. **Our task is to look at the model, the app, and to understand how it can be used**. That is, where is the money and where is the 'value'. Where are the benefits for [company]. This is the main thing. That is, this is not about why they are a stable company and why we should work with them. We leave this out. Maybe, **we will come back to this, but not at this stage and most likely this is not our story**. Have I answered the question? | AG-IN: Rapport<br><br>LTG-STR: Negotiate activity focus<br><br>R&R: Establish boundaries |
| Ann | So in fact **we need to look how this all can be monetised**, right? | STG-STR: Rephrase |
| Jane | Yes. | |
| Ann | I see. The question is what they will do next, because in their current state it is not possible to monetise them much. | SC: Their next plans |
| Jane | We are not talking about the present; we are talking about the future. | LTG: Rephrase |
| Ann | We do not know the future. | |
| Jane | Why do we not know it? | |
| Sonia | **It will be very good, most likely.** | AG-IN: Intervene with SC humorous remark |
| Ann | Well, if the team is serious, then yes. | |

| Jane | If they realise this all… See, here it says what they claim to happen. If the bring all of this into reality and all of this works like a clock, then how can we use it? That's the future. | |
|------|------|------|
| Rob | **By the way, the app is ok in general.** | AG-IN: Intervene with T&C remark |

As Ann pushes with questions about boundaries of the project, Jane is very careful in setting the scene without switching her off. She has to work with Ann's resistance to her expectations of the topic of the meeting and keeps referring to their place in the organisation and the process *(AG + R&R)*. Sonia and Rob support this process by intervening with short comments, thus engaging in the conversation. Sonia does so with a humorous remark supporting her manager's point of view *(AG-IN: claiming more power in the process)*; whilst Rob uses his expert knowledge of technology to make a judgement *(T&C)*.

### Episode 9.   Negotiating the course of the meeting

Jane summarises the elements of the presentation that she expects to see as the end result, and invites people to share responsibilities for different parts of the presentation (R&R: Delegation), but this does not yet sit well with everyone. Rob tries to challenge this.

| Jane | Yes… These are the blocks. Therefore**, we are thinking of them now, about the blocks**. Because practice has shown that structure may change and more than once, when you start doing it, yes, build the logic… Ok, to speed up… | T&C: rephrase current activity |
|------|------|------|
| Sonia | **Let's divide…** | R&R-IN: comment |
| Jane | Yes**, let's divide into blocks who does what**. *(pause)* | R&R-IN: invitation to volunteer |

| Rob | Maybe**, we brainstorm the ideas first**? A general 'brainstorm', and then we will select… | STG-IN: challenge the next step |
|------|------|------|
| Sonia | …what ideas? | |
| Ann | You mean the cases? | |
| Rob | On monetisation. | |
| Ann | On monetisation… | |
| Jane | No, one does not exclude the other. See, **we named the presentation blocks** and **I suggest you to decide who takes on what**. And **then we can brainstorm about the ideas. These are two independent things.** | R&R: Set the process |
| Rob | Yeah… | |
| Jane | So, **who wants to do what**? Let's voice it. | R&R: invitation |
| Sonia | I can have a look at the cases… *(negotiations start)* | AG-STR: power claim |

Jane rephrases the current state of the activity according to her understanding and invites the agents to the next step – dividing the tasks between them *(STG-IN)*. However, Rob challenges this and suggests they continue the brainstorm *(STG-IN)*. Jane drives them to divide the work first, and then brainstorm the ideas later.

In the meeting, Sonia is frequently the first one to react to the questions, as she still struggles with integrating with the system and tries to influence it before others have a chance *(AG: feel inclusive)*.

### Episode 10. Making sure the activity continues

About 45 minutes into the meeting, Jane picks up her phone and calls Sarah, then excuses herself and leaves the meeting. It turns out that the Sales Director asked her to meet an hour earlier and she needs the file that she had asked Sarah to prepare sooner, in time for the for meeting.

| Jane | So, **boys and girls**…*(others continue to talk)* I **suggest you continue brainstorming without me**, ok? Deal? **But let's first agree when we will look at the result**, because the task is urgent, as always. | UA: Friendly patronising tone -> AG<br><br>STG: Agree steps |
|---|---|---|
| Ann | When **is good for you**? | STG-STR: Initiative |
| Jane | Let's make it Thursday, at 11am. | |
| Sonia | At 11am? | |
| Jane | Yeah. | |
| Sonia | **What time is ours? At 1pm**? | LTG-STR: Fit with other meeting |
| Jane | Yes, at 1pm. | |
| Claire | What **format are we looking at**? | STG-STR: Clarify expectations |
| Jane | We are looking at an assembled presentation. That is, you… **Each one of your prepares blocks that we talked about just now. Sonia assembles it all in one presentation**… | R&R: Tasks for agents |
| Ann | But, **as far as I understand, without any formatting**. | STG-STR: Clarify |
| Jane | Yes, we are looking without formatting, just the key thoughts. But the **importance of the phrasing..** That is, it may not be formatted, but phrasing needs to be very clear, because… Well, this is sort of important. That is, I don't want there to be 'Oh I thought this way here'… Try at least with the phrasing, no need for formatting. | LTG-STR: Important factor repeated |
| Sonia | Oh, by the way, **regarding the other presentation**. Have you all received, yeah, one about [a recent conference]? That is, could you…very briefly, most important, don't worry about formatting. | STG-STR: Remind about a similar task from another system |
| Jane | So, **have we agreed**? | AG-IN: Unification |
| Claire | Yes. | |
| Jane | Sonia, **will you set the meeting for 11am**? | STG + R&R: Task delegation |
| Sonia | 11, sure. | |
| Jane | Thursday. | |
| Sonia | Yes. | |
| Jane | **For us, the same list**. | AG-STR: Select group |

| Sonia | Ok… | |
|-------|-----|--|
| Jane | Fine. Ok, then I'll leave you to it. | |

By using a positive but patronising tone, Jane separates herself from the equal conversation unfolding before *(UA + AG),* and then sets the objectives for the team to perform without her *(STG-IN and STG-STR).*

Jane is the initiator of arranging a follow-up meeting, however, the other agents take turns asking her questions to set the expectations of the meeting *(R&R-IN, STG-STR, LTG-STR),* and once she feels there is an agreement, she leaves.

Sonia takes this as an opportunity to remind others about a similar adjacent activity of hers *(STG),* as they should send her their slides with summaries from a recent conference, by checking whether they had seen her email about it. She is due to assemble that presentation *(STG-STR -> create a T&C-IN)* for a knowledge-sharing meeting, which is scheduled for the following Friday. Jane leaves the room, and the others stay behind to continue with the task.

### 5.4.5.1 Observations and interpretation

The stories above highlight a situation where a manager is facilitating the set-up of a new activity system for the agents within an existing team. Although this is not done consciously, through observation of the interaction from beginning till the end, we can follow negotiation of the new patterns for the structural system. For example, Jane was the one to pick the agents based on their past interactions and consequent awareness of their existing skills and interests, which they accept by turning up to the meeting and engaging in the process. Furthermore, there is a strong push of direction from her as Jane attempts to set the scene for the purpose of the task, and create an understanding of what needs to be done. In other words, this concerned

with the Agents and Long- and Short-term purpose of the structural activity system. In addition, the agents already were given a common term of reference – the slides from the potential business partner, that they were required to read before the meeting. Altogether, this formed the visible part of the activity triangle, both for the interaction and the structural activity systems.

However, there are tensions that emerge during negotiation of the elements. For example, in Episode 8 Ann tests the boundaries and questions the meaning of their task – e.g. why these particular providers were chosen as key to the situated community element. At this point, Jane has to explain that this was the nature of task given "from above", and therefore their task is to investigate a particular opportunity with a specific business partner, rather than to analyse a broader business case (which sets part of the roles and responsibilities).

Whilst this seems to settle at least some of the tensions about the structural activity systems, next there is a small conflict in opinions over how the meeting should go, and again, the agents accept Jane's direction as the prevailing one. Interestingly, during the meeting it was normally only one agent at the time disagreeing with the rest, and others would pitch in together with Jane to 'normalise' and co-align on the perceptions.

Over a period of time, the conversation continued in a similar way, and at some point, depicted in Episode 10, Jane decided to leave the room, making sure that the discussion about what needs to be done for the structural system have translated into short-term actions. When I asked her later why she decided to leave, Jane said that the felt that everyone had enough understanding about the requirements of the

project, and before she leaved she check that they agree on the next steps *(STG-STR)*.

### 5.4.6    *Co-directing and co-aligning through personal plan documents*

Whilst the previous section outlined a story that talked to setting up a new system, here I introduce a vignette that illustrates the role of a document – the personal plan – as an instrument of co-direction and co-alignment of activity systems overseen by Jane. The document is part of the working culture, established by Jane based on her own experiences. In her early career, she found that keeping a table with professional goal and, more detailed tasks and deadlines was helpful for her own prioritisation and time management. Therefore, she has introduced a practice in her team where everyone has to compose and to maintain one; and this should cover both their professional goals and a their personal development plan. Therefore, this practice evolves around a particular element of roles and responsibilities at the structural level. Below I present an example of a meeting dedicated to the plan, illustrate the interactions around it, and the ways it allows to shape activities that take place in Department K; and there are more examples of these patterns in Appendix B.4. Jane treats these as annual documents, and in theory they should have been updated by the team members and approved by her in the beginning of each year. However, since this is quite a large task that requires a few iterations, at least five of them were not ready yet by the end of April when I observed meetings dedicated to it in the week. For Jane, it is imperative that the agents work on these documents themselves to ensure that they feel responsible and accountable for them; however, she clarifies and comments on the content in the meetings,

The meeting below is dedicated to the personal plan of one of Jane's team members, Sue, and takes place on a Thursday afternoon. At 4.20pm, Jane and Sue gather in the large meeting room to discuss her personal and professional goals. Jane takes her favourite position at the short side of the table, and Sue chooses a side seat.
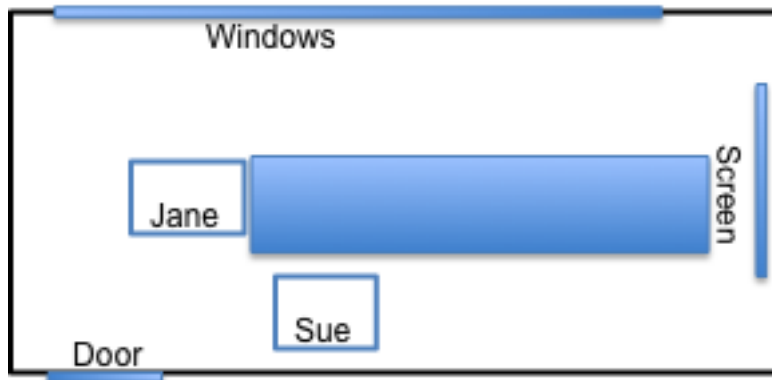


Sue comes with a printout of her goals and tasks, and their discussion generally evolves around the document *(T&C-IN)*: Jane reads out and comments on the points, and Sue notes the necessary changes. The meeting is relatively short and lasts just over 20 minutes, however, it highlights several opportunities for Jane and Sue to negotiate, clarify and agree Sue's activities and their relationship with other systems.

As illustrated in Figure 5.5, Sue and James are the only two members of the Business Analytics team and therefore perform in a similar role across projects. Some of their tasks tend to overlap, whilst others may link to completely different projects, and therefore discussion allows Jane to check for gaps and doubling of efforts over the range of the structural activity systems that they are involved in.

***Episode 11. Arranging another meeting***

At the very beginning of the meeting, Jane opens with a brief remark regarding one of the projects that involves James, as well as the technical coordinator Rob, and asks her to arrange a status meeting them to check the progress of their activities:

| Jane | **Let's arrange a status meeting**. **James said something** about a status meeting… | STG-STR: request a meeting by other's request |
| Sue | That he wanted a status meeting? | |
| Jane | **I really want one too. I keep waiting when you arrange it. And you keep not arranging it.** | AG: humorous explanation and relating |
| Sue | **Today or tomorrow?** | STG-STR: task accepted |
| Jane | Today I guess it too late. And tomorrow… Friday, right? Great, we can have it at 5 pm. Or at 4.30pm. | |
| Sue | Aha… | |
| Jane | So, **shall we have a look?** | STG-IN: prompt to move on |
| Sue | Yes. Just a second, I am just writing to James to arrange it… *(types on her phone)* Aha! | R&R: executing the task |

When Jane asks for the meeting, she uses humour and exaggeration to explain her interest in the meeting by saying that she "really" wants it, and that she is waiting for it to happen, and also to lighten up the mood. Sue accepts the task and immediately sends a message to James asking to arrange it.

### Episode 12. Creating a symmetry

One of practices that Jane is engaged in whilst managing James and Sue's activity is making sure that Sue and James's tasks are symmetric and complimentary. Early in the meeting, Jane interrupts herself from reading the document:

| Jane | Fine… There. To learn to operate in multiple project mode… To create plans efficiently... I will interrupt myself here… I want to say**… I told James that you should look at each others' goals and add if something is missing.** These goals of yours, both you and him should have them. | R&R-STR: symmetrical tasks; STG-STR: Sue to work with James |
|------|------|------|
| Sue | Yeah. We will compare and he will add mine to his *(laughs).* | |
| Jane | Listen, I would still want you to look at them. Because **we have two new tasks, one about forecast and the other one**…I cannot remember. | STG-STR: delegating two more tasks |
| Sue | James told me about forecast. | |
| Jane | And **the second one was about process description** I guess. We need to have a process map. They are about to change something, alter, plus we need to expand it, add to it and so on. And it is our task to keep it always up to date. So… **Maybe you should take on the process, and James ill take the forecast. Will you agree this with him?** | STG-STR: explaining the goal and its purpose R&R: expressing her preference for task allocation |
| Sue | Yeah. | |
| Jane | There, **you need to add this task**. | T&C-STR: change the plan |

Here, we can see how the personal plan document is used as an instrument for aligning the activities of Sue and James, and Jane stresses its importance particularly as they are about expand. It is also interesting that Jane expresses her preference for role allocation, but leaves them the details, at least in this meeting, as in one of the interviews Jane mentioned that she prefers to let people choose their own tasks according to their current skills and development interests; as long as she knows that the job will be done.

### *Episode 13. Separating responsibilities*

In one of the spread sheet lines, Jane notices that tasks are repeated in both Sue's and James's plans and asks Sue on who is really responsible for it. For this particular example, Sue says that James is responsible, but she is still involved in it. Jane

insists that Sue rephrases her task as 'support' and 'provide' to avoid confusion *(R&R-STR: clarify zones of responsibility)*.

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Jane later produces a phrase similar to the one she said to another team member, Claire before: "Talk this through with James, so that you would not have a lot of doubling. That is, everyone is participating and that's good. But one things is to participate, and the other is to be responsible for… for the final readiness of the task". A couple of lines later, when she has to apply the same principles yet another goal, she reminds her: "You wanted this yourself, to have a clearer line, didn't you?" *(LTG-STR: reminding of her own interest in this task)*

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Therefore, Jane explains the approach to changing T&C through several elements of the system. Firstly, she sets the STG by saying what needs to be done; then she clarifies R&R and explains the difference between approaches; and then reminds her about Sue's own motivation in this.

### Episode 14. Clarifying deadlines

Next, looking through some of the tasks Jane notices that the deadlines are different from those she saw in James's plan and are not as accurate as she expects.

| Jane | Aha, see what's we've got. Look at the dates! Integration of the System with [Software K] you have in December. I think James had it in September or August! | |
|------|------|------|
| Sue | Well, James separated this into stages with their own deadlines. And **I turned it into a single block**. | T&C: explain the difference |
| Jane | So, the final deadlines are the same? | |
| Sue | We need to agree this deadlines as a whole. But yes, we still don't have a clear date for everything. | |
| Jane | **Have you checked this tasks with Rob?** | SC: test against a different system |

| Sue | On integration? No, I haven't. | |
| Jane | And your own? | |

Similar to checking blurred responsibility lines above, through this conversation the agents establish that potentially Sue's and James's plans are not as aligned as Jane expects. She checks the compatibility of Sue's plans against plans of James as well as expectations of Rob (as a stakeholder to the system), testing for potential future conflicts.

### 5.4.6.1 Observations and interpretation

The examples presented in this section speak to a particular leadership practice – that of using the space for interaction dedicated to a document, which creates the environment for making sense of the joint activities, shaping their meaning and agents' responsibilities, and for co-alignment and co-direction of the future action. Therefore, this can be described as a routine way to check for potential tensions and conflicts in the activity systems that Jane oversees.

Through discussion of the statements that summarise Sue's understanding of her work, Jane can test the links and the boundaries between Sue and James's activity systems. For example, she wants them to be aware of each other's activities, but be clear who is responsible for each task, and thus the personal plan document serves clarification of the roles and responsibilities element of each of their systems. She is also checking timelines and their fit with the wider structures that Sue's activity system is related to.

A curious point is that, although historically the practice of having personal plans was initiated by manager Jane and she still uses them to oversee her team's behaviours, her team uses these plans and the time dedicated to them as a way to discuss their

questions and concerns, even though they may not be directly related to the topic of the conversation. Here, in the beginning of the meeting Jane uses the opportunity to set up another interaction to check on one of Sue's activities, and the action immediately takes place as Sue can simply contact James and ask him to do it. In other examples presented in Appendix B, Claire tries to establish her position and secure her opportunity to go to a conference, and Rob discusses his issue with the counter-parts in the IT department.

### 5.4.7   The powers of leadership practices

The three examples above illustrate variations of leadership emergence within a relatively homogenous context of a small department. These differences are driven by different structures that agents have to operate within and therefore result in a multitude of patterns of behaviour and interaction and associated changes to the structures over time.

The figures below illustrate the interplay between the levels of activity systems, for the four interaction incidents presented so far. For each episode, I offer two diagrams: the first ones focus on the elements that "light up" during the interaction, whilst the second one offers a temporal view of the sequence of focussing on the levels. The representations are rather schematic and focus in the interplay between the levels of analysis and the causal powers of the events rather than the exact nature of each transaction, and serve as an illustration of the consideration.

The first three diagrams (Figure 5.6, Figure 5.7, Figure 5.8) show the development of the two interactions dedicated to the tensions surrounding the Cinema Marketing team. Figure 5.6 illustrates how the tensions between the SC element of the structural system with the agents and their short-term goals led to emergence of the

leadership activity, and in turn, led to Jane reframing frustration into action through addressing the Agents element through compassion, as well as changing subject of the conversation to Sarah and Sonia's tasks that may address the issues.
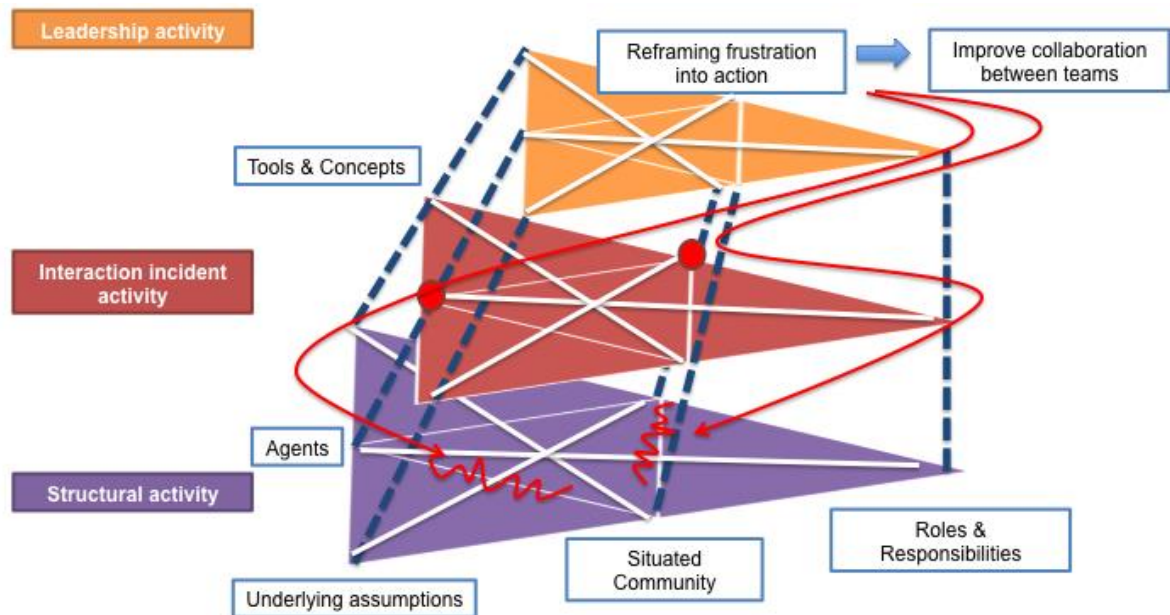


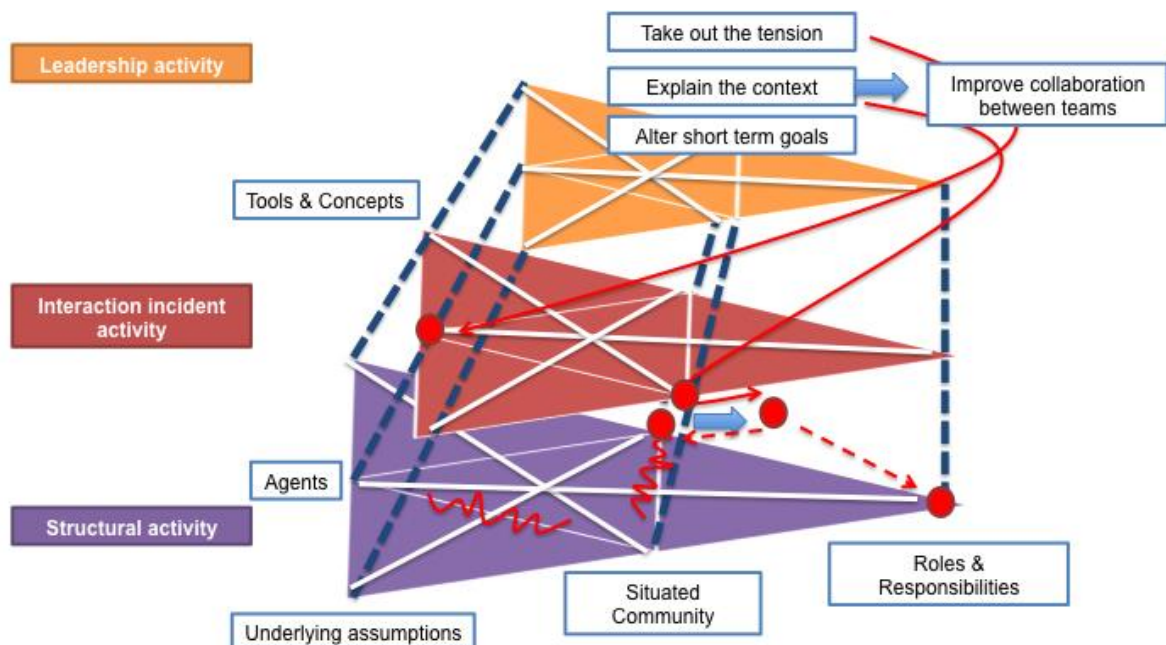**Figure 5.6 The interplay of level, Episodes 1 – 4**



**Figure 5.7 The interplay of levels, Episodes 5 – 7**

After the meeting with the sales team, Jane first addressed the emotional state of the group (focus on the Agents element of the interaction system), and then outlined the points of view of key stakeholders in Situated Community, that led to rephrasing of the contextual purpose of the team, and the consequences for the their short-term activities and ways of working (Roles & Responsibilities)
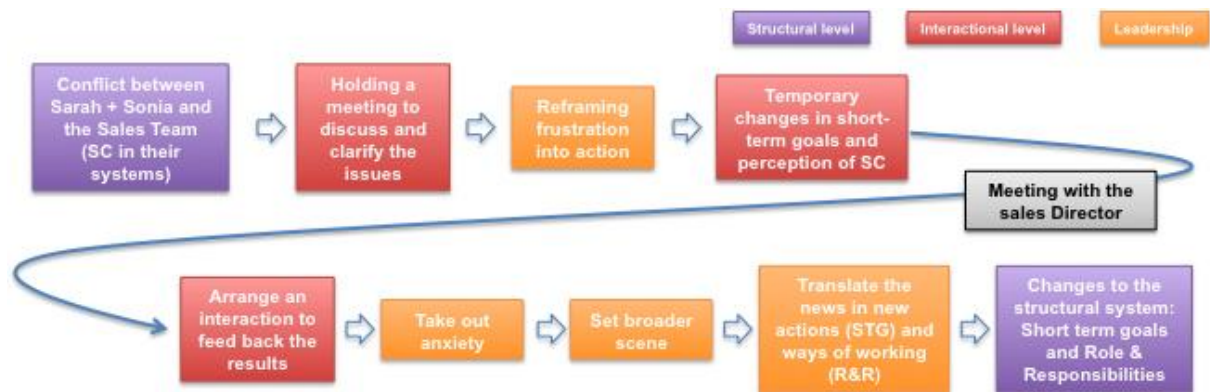


**Figure 5.8 The focus sequence, Episodes 1 – 7**

These two interactions offer an insight into the dynamics of the re-emergence of leadership practices that address the tensions between the underlying structures, the tensions they cause and the disruptions they create for achievement of the longer-term goals.

On the other hand, for the creation of the new project, the leadership practices that arise during the meeting emerge due to the momentary negotiations of the purpose, goals, and expectations of a structural system that is being set up. Figure 5.9 provides an illustration, where disagreement (or lack of agreement) of agents on the situated community element (reasons behind choosing this business partner) and the goal of the activity, lead to deviation of the conversation from "smooth" intended agenda, and explanation of the background, the importance of stakeholders and their

opinions. It also portrays how, through taking on the "managerial" role, Jane checks

clarity around the next actions and responsibilities that agents have accepted.
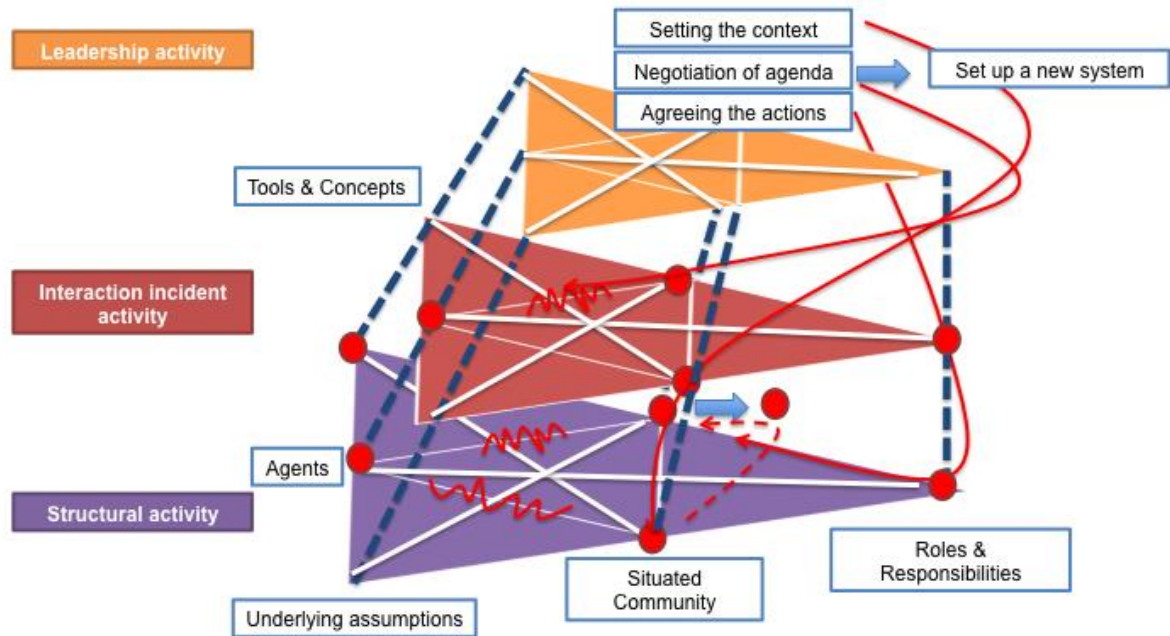


**Figure 5.9 Interplay between levels, Episodes 8 – 10**

Therefore, if we consider the temporary sequence of the interplay, the visual

representation would be that in Figure 5.10, where although the structural system

has been partially set up ahead of the interaction incident, the co-negotiation and co-

influence of the future actions unfolds during the conversations themselves.



**Figure 5.10 The focus sequence, Episodes 8 – 10**

Finally, Figure 5.11 and Figure 5.12 represent the cyclical and routine nature of the

discussions around agreement of the personal plans (please note that these do not

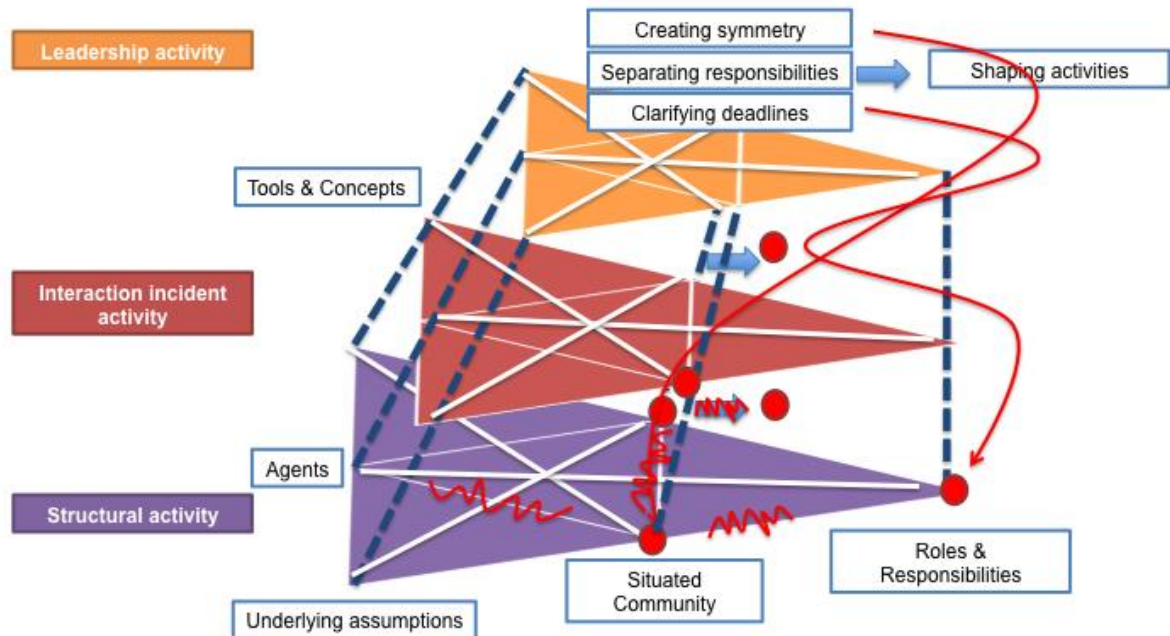cover Episode 11, which shows deviation from the meeting agenda, it would require a diagram of its own).



**Figure 5.11 The interplay between levels, Episodes 12 – 14**

Through holding meetings that focus on discussion of the document (purpose of the interaction incident activities), the agents create space where they test their perceptions about what should be done, and it's fit with the structural situated communities, wider projects, overall timelines, and so on. Obviously, the impact of the discussion is dependent on the internalisation of the changes, and their implication in practice; however, they present a case of shaping individual agents' actions to fit with the bigger picture.
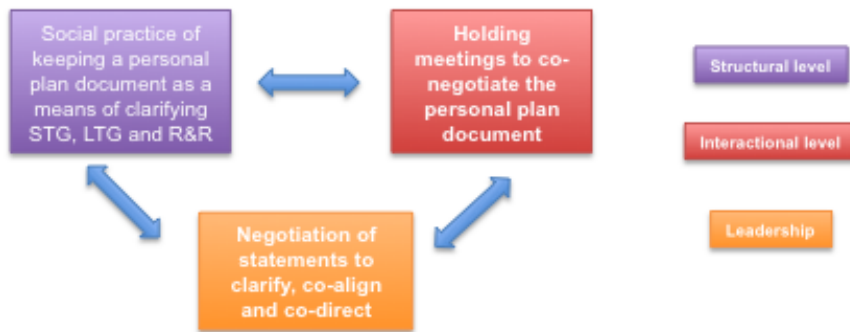
**Figure 5.12 The focus sequence, Episodes 12 – 14**

The three cases represent different spatial and temporal implications of the emerged leadership practices. In the case of the Cinema Marketing team, an issue within pre-existing systems triggered the situation, and therefore the leadership practices emerge in response to them, and are targeted as taking out the tension, and aligning the structural elements of the systems (at least those in control of Jane and her team). In case of the new activity system, the first meeting is key to setting up the activity system, and therefore whilst agents are happy to turn up for the meeting and read the materials for them, it is the join co-influence and co-negotiation of their understanding and consecutive immediate actions, both at the meeting and following the meeting, that are accompanied by the leadership work. Finally, the representation of the personal plan meetings portrays the routine nature of the operation, and the role that the document plays in routine of alignment of the systems.

Obviously, for threads of story the diagrams represent only one (or two) related incidents of interaction, and there will be further examples in Appendix B, however, a key factor in shaping these is the relationship between agents involved. In case of the marketing team, both Sarah and Sonia are dependent on Jane and her knowledge of and connections with the other activity systems, and therefore, the leadership relationships are more asymmetric in terms of their input and power in the

room. For the personal plan meetings, especially when they happen one-on-one, Jane holds more power over shaping the perceptions in the joint process of negotiation – which is different from other meetings presented in Appendix B, where Jane signs off the plan constructed by her team lead Tom and his team members. On the other hand, whilst Jane has the overall picture of the task, the agents involved are more experienced in their jobs, and therefore can challenge each other and Jane in their joint creation of the output. In case of the personal plan meetings, as these are one-on-one with Jane, she holds

These representations are examples of the many forms and patterns that the emergent leadership practices can take on the surface of the day-to-day operations, and therefore in order to locate L-A-P, the researchers need to explore the causal powers that result in the relational process of co-influencing and co-negotiating of the on-going activities, their relations, interplay and meaning within wider context.

## 5.5    Chapter summary

This chapter has provided an overview of the findings that emerged from the data that was collected and analysed as part of this research. A theory of leadership that I presented above contributes to the field of L-A-P and offers an insight into the nature and role of leadership practice as part of the organising processes that enable transformation of the activity systems within organisations. These practices with direction-alignment-commitment outcomes are likely to occur when individuals attempt to question the existing status quo, propose initiatives and actions for the future in response to tensions in the contextual activities. The leadership practices are collaborative, as the change needs to be implemented through a joint co-negotiation and co-influencing of the activities and requires a momentum that actors

gain through drawing on their positions, awareness and knowledge of various elements of the activity systems.

The stories presented in this chapter drew on the data collected during one week observing a manager and her team in a number of meetings, and it is through examination and exploration of these stories that I presented the findings of this thesis. Firstly, I introduced the three levels of activity systems that exist within organisation (structural, interactional, and leadership), their interconnectivity, and explained the necessity to understand the contextual factors in order to be able to identify, capture and analyse the emergence of leadership. Secondly, the leadership practice themes that emerged through the Grounded Theory analysis were presented and grouped by the seven elements of the activity system that they focus on. Finally, I illustrated the patterns and the dynamics of moulding the existing activity systems within three more cases – that of responding to a conflict within and between the Cinema Marketing system, that of setting up a new system, and that of using a particular practice of co-direction and co-alignment of routine activities, and provided an overview of the causal links and differences of their contextual unfolding.

In the next chapter I discuss the meaning of these findings within the L-A-P perspective and leadership theory in general, the limitations of the research and ideas for the future.

# CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION

## 6.1    Chapter overview

The research findings presented in Chapter 5 resulted from a study carried out within the field of leadership-as-practice at its current stage of development and faced the challenges summarised in Chapter 1. The L-A-P perspective attempts to bridge the gap between theoretical conceptualisations and leadership practice and to explore how leadership is experienced by individuals in everyday life (Denis et al., 2010). It draws attention to the collective, dynamic, dialectical and situated nature of the phenomenon (Denis et al., 2010), and offers an alternative starting point for leadership representations by accepting relational process as basic unit of analysis rather than actions of the individuals (Crevani and Endrissat, 2016). However, the insight into the empirical manifestations and causal powers of L-A-P remain limited due to the challenges associated with identifying, capturing and analysing the illusive practices of leadership. Chapter 2 situated the research questions addressed in this thesis within the landscape of extant leadership literature:

- *How are the practices of leadership constituted within day-to-day interactions?*

- *How does leadership practice relate to the organisational context within which it emerges?*

- *How are the dynamics of leadership interactions co-constructed?*

- *How can the practice of leadership be theorised and researched within a single framework?*

Chapters 1 and 2 also outlined the current ontological, epistemological and methodological challenges associated with the new ontology of leadership. In order

to answer these challenges, I developed a CR-informed adaptation of CHAT as a lens for studying leadership-as-practice and the next section discusses the potential contributions of my research, whilst the next chapter assesses the limitations of this approach and offers direction for future research.

This chapter is structured as follows. Firstly, I summarise main contributions offered by my theoretical and empirical research to leadership studies, and in particular, to the field of leadership-as-practice. Next, I place the produced leadership theory within the broader field of leadership studies and illustrate its value through revaluation of the existing leadership theories. Furthermore, I discuss the significance of the methodology developed in this research and the findings and how it responds to the challenges of L-A-P outlined in Chapter 2. Finally, I suggest implications of the findings for leadership development and business practice.

## *6.2      Main contributions to the field of leadership-as-practice*

The thesis offers three main contributions to the philosophical, theoretical, methodological and empirical domains of L-A-P perspective and provides basis for future research and development of leadership practice.

The first contribution lies within the theoretical and philosophical domain of leadership. The findings of this research provide an explanation of the nature and role of leadership emergence within the day-to-day organising activities and the process of co-construction of leadership practices in response to and within the challenges that individuals face in their routine actions. This is done through the lens of a framework informed by the philosophy of critical realism and enabled by cultural-historical activity theory, introduced in Chapter 3 and adapted for L-A-P perspective,

which was further enriched by the findings presented in Chapter 5. The model allows to connect activities of leadership practitioners, the unfolding leadership practice and the specific enacted practices (Whittington, 2006), places them within the cultural-historical context, and links them to on-going routines and achievement of short-term and longer-term objectives of the structural and interactional activities in organisations. It provides a systemic view of the organisations where structure and agency co-exist and mould each other, and the situated social, relational and emergent leadership practice acts are a catalyst to these changes. The findings are based on an empirical investigation of leadership practices within a particular context of a Russian organisation. I used a selection of the data to illustrate the interconnectivity of the three orders of organisational system – structural, interactional and leadership – and how leadership activity arises in response to and affects the tensions in the underlying levels. The extracts show how individuals attempt to address these tensions, and thus engage with leadership practices, which may happen with or without their conscious choice, and therefore they may not be able to articulate explicitly the 'small acts' of their own leadership activity. To support this point, in the next section I illustrate the re-appearance of the leadership practice within the cases discussed by Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a).

Secondly, this thesis offers a theoretical framework, informed by the philosophy of critical realism and enabled by the cultural-historical activity theory, and brought to life in Chapter 5 through depiction of the themes, the mechanisms and the dynamics of leadership practice that emerge within the practice of day-to-day interactions. Leadership activity exists alongside the structural and interactional activities in organisations and continuously contributes to their co-alignment and co-direction by

targeting elements of the interconnected underlying systems. The particular leadership practices that mediate the interaction of individuals also mediate the larger systems through impact on their elements – bringing the agents together, setting the goals and purpose, clarifying the roles and responsibilities within the teams etc. In turn, the ability to engage with these elements in the process of interaction or having done so in the past will lead to the agents' ability to draw on them and create the joint intention for changing the systems. Therefore, as the wider organisational structures and agency are both the source and the target of the practice of leadership, leadership-as-practice needs to be studied and interpreted within this situated context. Furthermore, this perspective provides a common language not only for talking about and researching L-A-P, but also for leadership theory in general; it offers an account of the relationship between organisational context, assumptions about the nature and constitution of leadership and their implications for leadership theory and research, which will be illustrated in the sections 6.3 and 6.4. Finally, the implications of these findings for the leadership development practice are discussed in section 6.5, where I suggest expanding the focus of leadership development activities beyond the mere enhancement of individuals' ability to engage with leadership activity itself and consider development of their collective capacity to influence the context of leadership practice.

Thirdly, this thesis presents methodological guidance for empirical research, from design of data collection methods to data analysis as a potential solution for the methodological challenges of studying leadership, and in particular, leadership practice. The intangible nature of leadership practice is challenging to identify, capture and analyse as it emerges within individuals' interactions of coping with the

day-to-day activities, where individuals may not be aware of them and therefore would not be able to talk about them. Chapter 4 provided conceptual foundations in favour of ethnographically informed data collection and a practical example of the critical realist Grounded Theory data analysis processes. In section 6.4, I reflect on the experience and offers suggestion on the future areas of research and ideas for improvement of the data collection and analysis procedures.

## 6.3 Implications for leadership research

Chapters 4 and 5 presented a theory of L-A-P informed by the philosophy of CR and CHAT, and supported by the empirical evidence. This section places this theory within the broader field of leadership and reflects on its meaning and application within the field of extant research and illustrates the crucial role of choosing the right ontological lens for leadership studies. Firstly, I address the challenges raised by Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a) in their article "The great disappearing act of leadership" and present the re-appearing leadership activity when considered through the lens of CHAT. Next, I re-view the prominent leadership theories presented in Chapter 2 through the lens of CHAT and interpret their contribution for leadership-as-practice perspective from the critical realist point of view. Finally, I discuss some implications for leadership research as practice.

### 6.3.1 The re-appearing act of leadership

This section has two purposes: firstly, it provides a direct answer to the challenge presented for leadership research by Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a); and secondly, it illustrates how cross-theoretical research that can offer alternative interpretations of the same empirical evidence and is therefore more likely to provide insight into the deep causal powers of leadership, a point that I raise in the following

sections. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a) presented six cases of R&D managers talking about their leadership definitions and descriptions of practice and identified six 'tricks' of carrying out the act of disappearance of leadership (p. 374):

- Pointing at the crucial issue, but then moving in all directions and being vague and contradictory concerning how to tackle it;

- Stating the obvious as a uniting vision and then living the vision through improving social relations;

- Limiting one's role to presenting ideas and then letting the others decide, a kind of minimalistic influencing;

- Stating one leadership principle as crucial and then contradicting it in practice;

- Doing primarily other things than the leadership argued to be very important; and

- Providing space for others and largely abdicating the influence process.

However, a different story emerges from these narratives when I consider them through the lens developed in this thesis; one that shows that even though the managers are not (fully) aware of their leadership practice, their stories indicate enactments of the leadership practices identified in Chapter 5. I am aware that this re-interpretation of the quotes is mediated by a number of theoretical constructs, including those of L-A-P, CR, and CHAT, which is different from the critical leadership stance taken by the authors of the paper. I also need to emphasise that these quotes come from interviews rather than accounts of observations of their activities, and therefore may not be representative of their actual practice. Below I provide examples of these interpretations.

### 6.3.1.1 Case 1: Making sure that the creativity is there – or not knowing how

Upon analysis of the first case, Alvesson and Sveningsson conclude that "[w]hat the interviewee actually does, apart from being cheerful and trying to put the best people and some less talented but hardworking people on the best projects, remains unclear" (p. 368). However, these two themes represent examples of leadership practices. The first theme emerging from Manager M concerns the need of 'leaders' to measure their involvement in the activity systems of their team members, since giving them space (i.e. not putting strict constraints over control of the system) leads to greater creativity and performance in inventing new drugs:

> I do believe we need managers, but I don't think, we can't manage some of the old style traditional top down management. I think it has to be about leading and developing people […] In… the…former Biotech and UBB there was very good science going on in areas were it was unlikely that they would discover drugs. The scientists involved . . . were largely proud of the quality in that. But … if you accept that Biotech and UBB is here to discover drugs, then it's wasted effort. We should put the creativity and the talent onto the most likely projects. And I think managers by leading projects and developing the scientists try to put the best scientists to the best projects. (p. 367)

The quote also highlights the historic tensions between the structural systems, which now mediate the activity of Manager M by referring to a case where agents were well performing, but the outcomes of their activity did not correspond to the Long-Term Goal of the organisation. There is evidence that this story informs Manager M's leadership activity when he states that he tries to put the best scientists to the best

projects. The other quote – about Manager M being cheerful – refers to the process of people:

> Just as a football manager couldn't tell how it's done, but the best football managers can succeed in… with the best… well not the best, sorry, and can really succeed if they get the best players. I think it's rather similar at discovery. There is a lot of people management. Trying to coach people, trying to persuade people to harness energy…(p.367)

Although Manager M is not able to give a precise account of the ways he coaches and persuades people, he is implicitly referring to working towards the "direction, alignment, commitment" outcome, that would impact the underlying R&D system by creating a shared goal, and in turn, "harness energy".

### 6.3.1.2 Case 2: A common vision – to produce infrastructure

Analysis of Manager's H's narratives about creating a shared goal leads Alvesson and Sveningsson to conclude state that "[v]ision (common purpose) then tends to be reduced to making individuals feel positive and creating good spirit in the group" and making sure that people can cover for each other – "something that does not really concern a common purpose" (p.370). Again, despite their scepticism in this interpretation of leadership, this refers to the practices of creating the "feeling of us", as well as maintaining a shared sense of purpose:

> …you have to be 'on message' all the time, having to decide what you vision, what are your values that you're working to, what's the direction that the group is going in; you personally as a manager have to live that vision. (p.369)

Then Manager H explains how she implements this long-term goal into the routine by breaking it into smaller tasks and encouraging people to take them on. She further comments that

> I think it's absolutely essential that we work as a team, I mean, as much flexibility as possible, it's a small team and I need to work on how we can provide cover for each other. (p. 369)

This relates to the leadership practice of establishing links between activity systems within their structure, and ensuring a smooth operation even if agents are not there.

### 6.3.1.3 Case 3: The team is important – leadership means abdicating from deciding

In the third case, Manager A is described as "abstaining from taking a leader position" (p. 370) as he does not impose his ideas on his team and treats himself on the same ground as them:

> …But one thing which I think is important from a leadership point of view is that those responsible for the projects also decide upon which ideas they want to pursue. It's not me who should tell them that. I tell them what ideas I have and often they say: 'that's no good, so we don't like it'. And that's perfectly OK for me. Sometimes they think it's good and then they appropriate it. But the important issue is that they as a group decide by themselves to carry on (ibid.).

Similar to Case 1, this abstract describes a context for activity where agents are used to taking responsibility over the elements of their activity system, which is perhaps a general cultural-historical characteristic of a pharmaceutical R&D business with high degree of specialisation and expert knowledge. Through his experiences, Manager A has acquired a leadership style that responds to this culture, and involves respect

and relatively flat hierarchical relationships within his team, and he continues to abide by these rules of engagement.

### 6.3.1.4  Case 4: To get people to think – without thinking how this can be done

There are internal contradictions in the story narrated by Manager J, as Alvesson and Sveningsson rightly point out that his response is inconsistent, and the interviewee goes from emphasising the importance of getting people to think, to offering them a clear recommendation, and generally admitting to not doing it too often:

> Perhaps this is a different management style, if people come to me with a problem I give them my advise with, 'I've seen this before and we did it this way.' Perhaps more normal modern management would be to ask them 'you know we have this problem, let's work on it together' until they actually think about it and not just rely on me and 'ten years ago we did it this way,' they actually think about it, the thought process is there so next time there's problem, not the same, its never quite the same, they have the thought process and they can…and if they need reassurance you can say 'well there's two ways of doing this, I favor this way and you do that and what do you think.' So there I can see that should really get them to start thinking and not just giving them your own advise, get them to think… (p. 371)

This narrative provides evidence of competing discourses in Manager J's work – even though he is aware of alternative instruments of problem solving, he is not able to apply them to practice as breaking "the problems to its fundamentals" is more time consuming, and he admits that he "tr[ies] and to it sometimes and sometimes it just goes". The story suggests that he still provides direction to his team members by offering them a solution, thus influencing their systems, however, he is struggling to

adapt to what seems to be the accepted culture of the R&D department and provide them with more autonomy over their activity systems.

### 6.3.1.5 Case 5: Leadership as management of meaning and shaping of context – or the context shaping the unmanagement of meaning

The next case describes a manager who believes it is important to connect the Long-Term purpose and the on-going activities and does so by talking to his team members for an extra minute asking them what they do. The authors agree with Manager S's definition of leadership as meaning management, but wonder whether staying an extra minute is actually enough to shape the meaning in the complex context of competing "tasks, constraints, and priorities" that "take precedence and there is little opportunity for this kind of leadership act" (p. 372):

> One must ask a scientist: 'Are there any new exciting results' and 'how did those experiments turn out'? If you just ask those questions and then proceed, you exhibit an interest for the research, but if you stay a minute longer and ask 'far, far away what do you think the candidate drug is' or 'what is the really big problem that you have to master,' it's just two examples, but to be able to convert in practice, in the little moments, when you formulate strategy or have a leadership meeting, to always have this balance…(ibid.)

Indeed, just asking a few extra questions may not be enough to contribute to sense-making activities in a team. However, the practice of showing personal interest and making time to spend with your team beyond the 'assumed minimum' contributes to the creating and maintaining the team spirit, and in turn, is likely to have an impact on ownership of their activity systems.

### 6.3.1.6  Case 6: Leadership as value talk – key value is to listen

In the final case, Alvesson and Sveningsson note that Manager F appears to place excessive emphasis on "discussions, listening and being receptive to people's point of view…[but]…nothing is said about what all this listening and communication should lead to" (p. 373). Manager F describes his managerial stance in the following way:

> They [the colleagues] can put forward a suggestion, but the suggestion is discussed so that everyone who is a member of the group has a right to comment upon it and so that everyone listens to those persons. Also, that everyone feels that: 'we're in,' and that you take a common responsibility for the work that is produced. And I mean that one has to listen to each and everyone, otherwise you're not at team…Secondly, it is extremely important that ideas exist, there are experiences outside the group. It could be a very experienced person from the GA department who has things that are needed for the project… It is also an opportunity for learning for a… new person to learn about experiences that exist. And as… project leader you have to see that everyone feels equally valuable in the group… I try to make myself available when I'm needed. (ibid.)

This abstract indicates presence of several leadership practices. Firstly, in line with the culture of the firm that assumes agents' control over the objectives of their own activity system, the team is used to engaging in conversations about ideas that can potentially influence the elements of the system. It is important that the system remains fairly symmetrical, and agents equally engage in shaping of their system(s). Secondly, this communication routine contributes to the 'feeling of us', that enables

better team performance. Next, this pattern describes the practice of situated learning, both for creation of new knowledge by the community, and immersion of a new joiner of the team. Finally, Manager F concludes on his endeavour to support his team members and 'staying close' despite the autonomy that they have.

Although in the abstracts above I deliberately did not relate the echoes of the practices to the definitions of leadership in the interviewees' narratives that Alvesson and Sveningsson drew on and focussed on the description of the manager's practice instead, I believe that the exercise supported both points that I set out to make. I offered an alternative interpretation of their findings from the stance taken in this thesis and illustrated how the developed theory of L-A-P provides a way of uncovering leadership practices enacted within the R&D context by interpreting it through a CHAT lens seemingly confused narratives of managers. By doing so, I also provide evidence supporting an argument presented in section 6.3.3 on a greater potential power of uncovering deep causal links of leadership process if different research lenses are combined. In order to illustrate this idea further, in the next section I review existing leadership theories through the lens of CR-informed CHAT and interpret them in light of cultural and historic development of leadership studies.

As a foot note to this analysis I would like to emphasise that reading this article several years ago had a great impact on me as a researcher and shaped my research interest, as it provoked reflection on the inconsistencies between agents' definitions of leadership and their apparent inability to provide a detailed, consistent and accurate account of their leadership practice.

### 6.3.2  Leadership concepts as activity systems

In Chapter 2, prominent leadership theories were classified according to their *units of analysis* and placed within the wider context of macro events. However, from the perspective of theory developed in this thesis, the representations of leadership are theoretical constructs, or *concepts*, that leadership academics and practitioners draw on to inform their research and business activities. In this section I revisit these representations, re-interpret their assumptions on the nature of leadership phenomenon using the language of CHAT, and examine them as 'Tools and Concepts' that mediate the activities of leadership research and practice. I would like to emphasise two points here. Firstly, the CHAT triangles are used to call out on the exceptional aspects of theories rather than provide a full account of the activity system, and therefore should be regarded as illustrations rather than sources of information. Secondly, although the theories below are based on assumptions different from those accepted in this thesis, as a critical realist I attempt to test their application for leadership practice, as they may hold practical adequacy and generalizability in a new context.

### 6.3.2.1  Leader-centric theories

The perspectives that place the leader as a source of leadership at the centre of theory and research implicitly operate on the assumptions about leadership activity system presented in Figure 6.1 below. The leader is the sole Agent of activity, who uses her/his personal characteristics, skills and behaviours as Tools for motivating and directing the followers towards a shared goal. The followers are mere recipients of the leader's actions and therefore belong to Situated Community, beyond the immediate focus of research. The proposition of unidirectional interactions are

represented in the Roles & Responsibilities element, whilst the Long-Term Goal

would be normally phrased as an achievement of some objective that causes a

specific change within an otherwise stable organisation. As stated in Chapter 2, this

view of leadership emerged within the context of relatively steady industrial

operations, clearer objectives and assumptions of straightforward assessment of
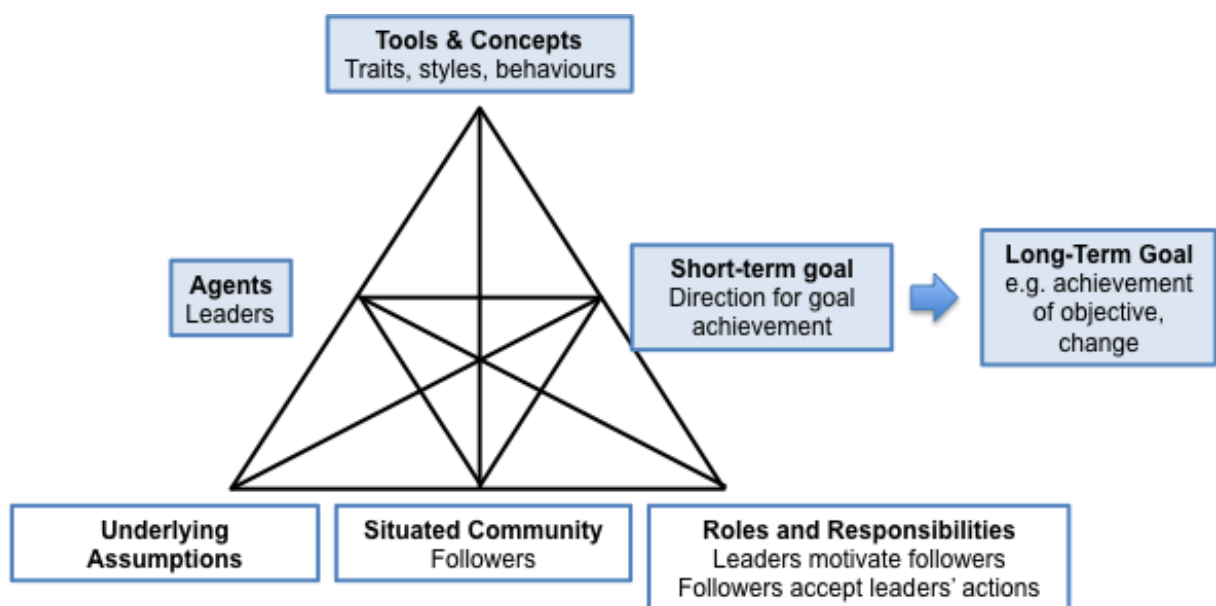
leadership outcomes.



**Figure 6.1 Leader-centric representations of leadership activity**
Although over time most elements and arrow links of this system were included in

consideration, the research itself tends to focus on the leader and his/her actions, or

on the upper visible part of the triangle. The trait theories looked primarily at the

Agents (leaders) and the Tools & Concepts (traits and other personal characteristic).

The behavioural leadership theory included into analysis the link with followers

(Situated Community) and the behavioural styles (Roles and Responsibilities). The

situational and contingency theories expanded the focus further, and drew some

attention to the Underlying Assumptions and Roles & Responsibilities elements

through making explicit assumptions about followers' stage of development and requirements.
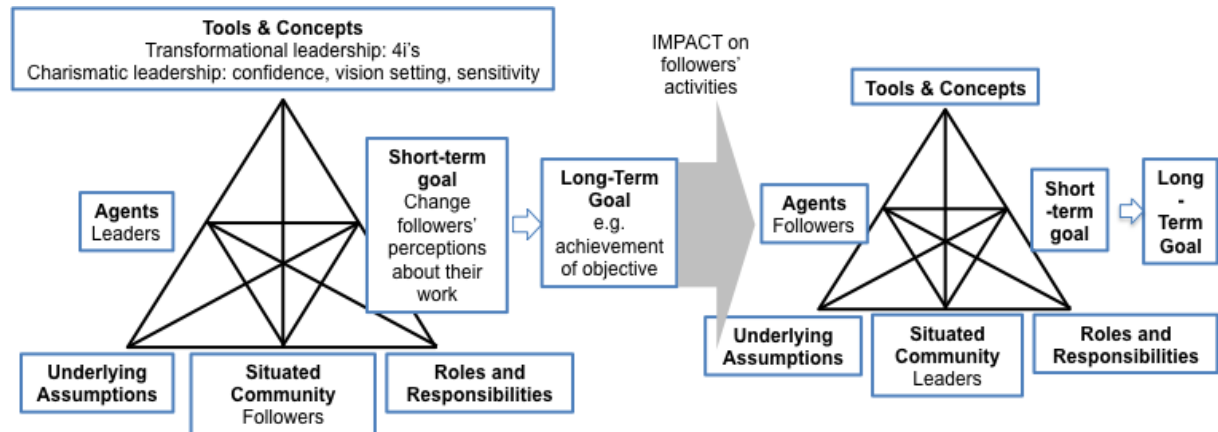


**Figure 6.2 Transformational and charismatic representations of leadership activity**

The macro-economic changes to business dynamics and challenges led to a slight change to transformational and charismatic leadership (Figure 6.2). Although they still favour the leader as sole Agent of the system, there is a much stronger focus on followers (Situated Community) and their needs, and an appreciation of the impact of leadership on wider organisational systems. In transformational leadership, the Short-Term Goal of the activity is development of the followers and building their commitment to the shared purpose, which in turn leads to enhanced performance. In charismatic leadership theory, the immediate Object of leaders' actions is to be deemed charismatic, thus transforming followers' activity systems and increasing their motivation to achieve their goals. Therefore, an implicit link between the leadership activity and the underlying structural systems appears within these theories, albeit one-directional (i.e. leadership activity has an impact on the context, but not other way round). The research mediated by the transformational and charismatic leadership theories has sought to uncover the Tools and Concepts that affect followers activities, their impact on those structures, as well as the relationship

between levels of organisation (e.g. the types of structural activities) and the preferred leadership styles at various levels (Edwards and Gill, 2012). However, the conceptualisation of leadership as individual's action rather than interaction between the leaders and followers has become a constraint for further investigation of the quality of leader-follower relationship, and their meaning within the organisational context.

Despite their inherent constraints and limited empirical support, the leader-centric theories effectively offer a list of recommendations on individual traits, styles and behaviours that may make agents more efficient in influencing the activity systems they are involved in. Understandably, the success of their application depends on the particular context and the embedded relationships, an agenda that was addressed by other representations of leadership. The theories that regard leadership as relationships concentrate on other aspects of the process, and Chapter 2 presented two such perspectives – follower-centric (section 2.3.2.1) and leader-member exchange (section 2.3.2.2).

### 6.3.2.2 Follower-centric theories

True to its title, the follower-centric approach takes an opposite view on leadership activity systems, and the 'romance of leadership' and ILT place followers as the Agents of the leadership activity system as depicted in Figure 6.3 below. The objective of the leadership process phenomenon is followers' decision to either grant their managers (or 'leaders' within Situated Community) leadership power or not, based on the their interpretation of the causal links behind the group outcomes colleagues (Meindl et al., 1985; Meindl, 1995) or the match between their past and present experiences (Lord and Brown, 2001; Lord et al., 2001). Both theories explain

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(in different ways) the cognitive and emotional processes that contribute to agents'

willingness to support the leadership attempts of other individuals based, therefore

feeding into the contextual cultural-historical factors of activity system of the

leadership practice (Underlying Assumptions and Roles & Responsibilities into the
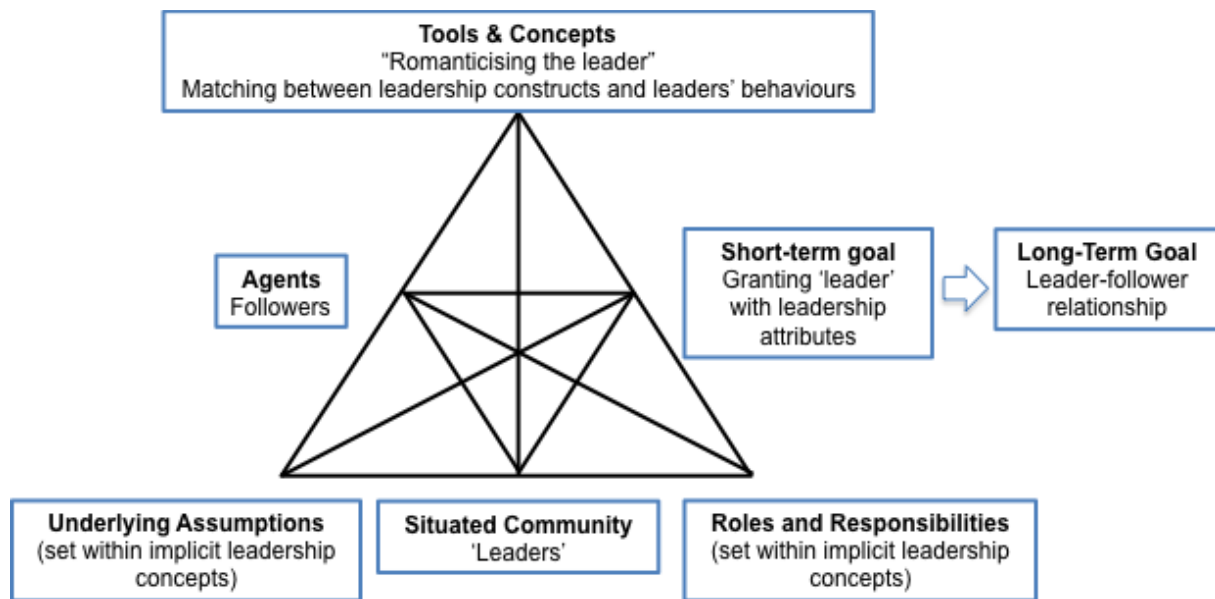
centre of analysis).



**Figure 6.3 Follower-centric representations of leadership activity**

### 6.3.2.3 LMX

Leader-follower exchange theory is the first example of a conceptualisation of

leadership activity that implicitly placed both a leader and a follower as the Agents of

the activity system, and an effective leader-follower relationship as the Short-Term

Goal of the activity (Figure 6.4 below). Since LMX focuses on the dyadic one-to-one

interactions, the Situated Community is comprised of the other team members. The

distinction between in-group and out-group relationships emphasises the impact of

contextual factors of Underlying Assumptions and Roles & Responsibilities on the

outcomes within leadership practice. Based on research discussed in section 2.3.2.2,

the Long-Term Objective of the leadership activity may be described as higher

employment engagement and commitment and performance, and impact on the

larger organisational systems, such as lower employee turnover and accelerated

career path of the individual activity systems of followers' work. However, LMX

provides a theoretical account only for a single direction of impact between

leadership and structural activities, and does have a limited application for

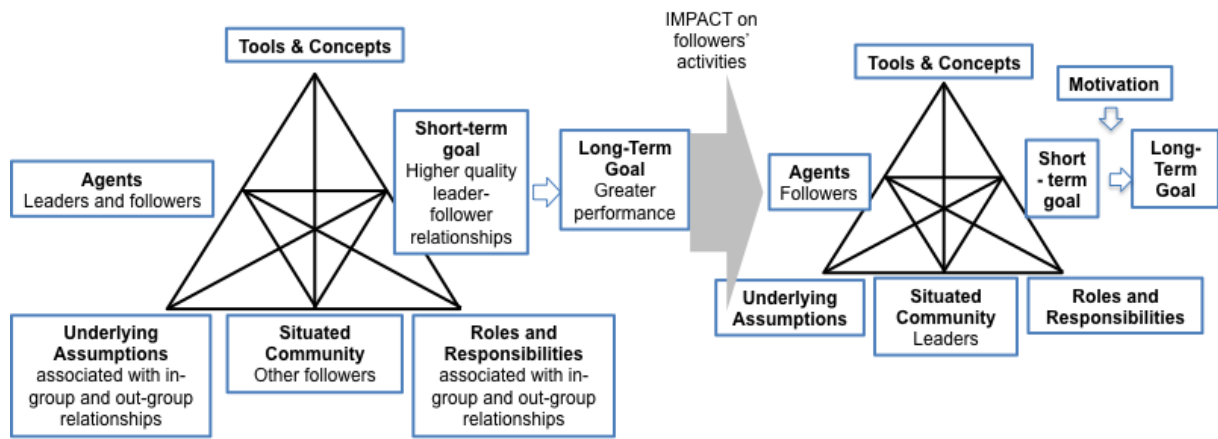conceptualisation of team dynamics as it only focuses on dyadic relationships.



**Figure 6.4 LMX representations of leadership activity**

*6.3.2.4  Leadership as a social process*

The last approach presented in Chapter 2 regarded leadership as a social process

(section 2.3.3) emerging within the context of modern business activities and

interactions. These are the theories that place leadership processes in parallel with

the other activities in organisation – either structural (i.e. explaining the process of

leadership by the features of business itself) or interactions (i.e. within the context of
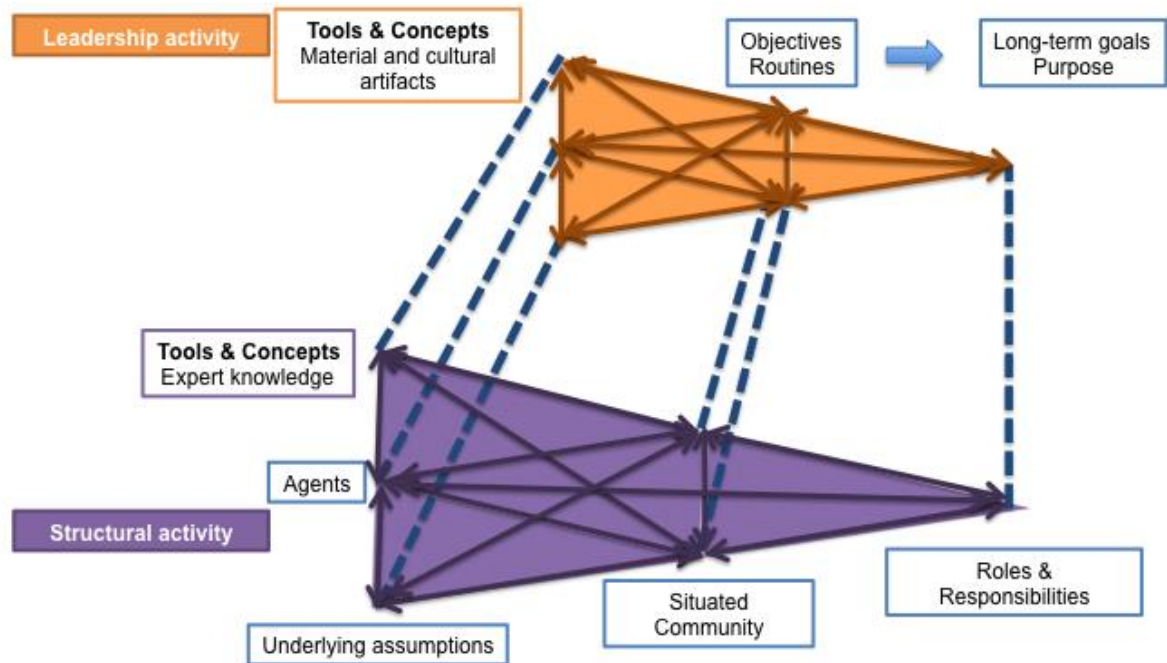
unfolding relationships).

**Figure 6.5 Distributed and shared representations of leadership activity**

It is my understanding that *shared* and *distributed* leadership theories follow the first approach, and explain leadership phenomenon as the process of collaborative interaction, an influence between people leading each other towards a shared goal within organisations described as knowledge-driven or hierarchically flat. Therefore, leadership process is located within the context of highly specialised nature of activities, and dependent on cultural and material artefacts (see Figure 6.5). Compared to the Figure 5.4 presented in Chapter 5 with the three levels of activity, this approach acknowledges two of these levels – leadership activity and structural activity – and the link between them, but does not explicitly discuss the interactional level and its impact on the other aspects of leadership.
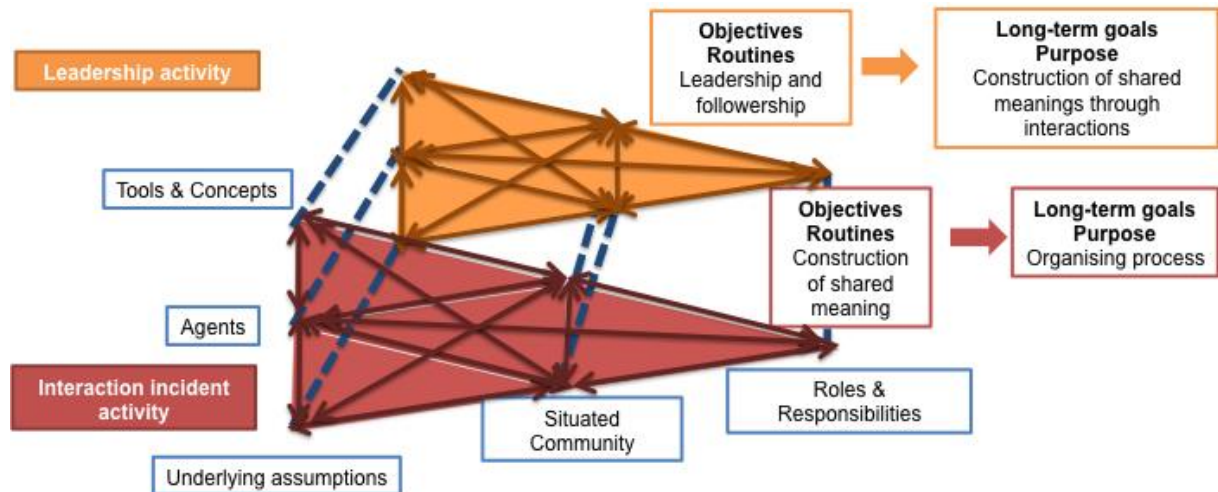
**Figure 6.6 Discursive and relational representations of leadership**

On the other hand, the *discursive* and (constructionist) *relational* representations of

leadership focus on the processes of interaction emerging within the organisation

and on the leadership activity as it unfolds within these relationships (Figure 6.6). The

main research implication of the explicit emphasis on the leadership process as it

occurs and evolves through discourses is a strong focus on analysis of discursive

interactions as a way of uncovering the processes of social construction of leadership

and followership. To bridge the gap, it has been proposed to consider leadership

practices as "purposeful interventions…that contribute to accomplishing leadership"

(Ospina et al., 2012, p. 279), and in particular, their implication for development of

relational leadership, but their full potential has not been explored.

The two sides of the contextual and social approach to construction of leadership

interpret leadership activity within the structural and interactional processes and have

each contributed to the development of L-A-P perspective.

As illustrated in this section, throughout the history of leadership exploration,

researchers have based their activity on varying assumptions about the nature of

leadership practice, and strived to complete the worldview of each paradigm. The

value and meaning of these models have been interpreted through a leadership framework developed in this thesis. The contribution of these constructs has been illustrated against the developed L-A-P perspective that provides a theoretical connection between all three levels of interaction and offers an integrated approach to leadership practice, which in turn can inform the future activity of leadership research.

### 6.3.3   The evolving activity system of leadership research

The previous section interpreted prominent leadership theories through the lens of CHAT framework and illustrated how they influence the worldview of leadership researchers, and consequently, define the research focus and the scope of findings. As depicted in Figure 6.7 and illustrated in example in Chapter 3, leadership representations become Tools and Concepts that a researcher draws on within his/her research activity system and that mediate both the process of academic enquiry and its objective, 'producing research findings'. As illustrated in the previous section, the assumptions about the activity of leadership and its elements mould the research questions that aim to contribute to understanding of this representation, but are unlikely to stimulate construction of a completely new interpretation of the process unless the researcher critically reflects on his/her theoretical stance. Therefore, theoretical Discourses that a researcher is familiar will impact both the research focus and the methods that (s)he chooses, and these conceptual frameworks will mediate the sense-making and interpretation of the data, and constriction of the theory. This leads to a provoking conclusion that un-reflexive research turns into a self-fulfilling prophecy with limited possibility of uncovering

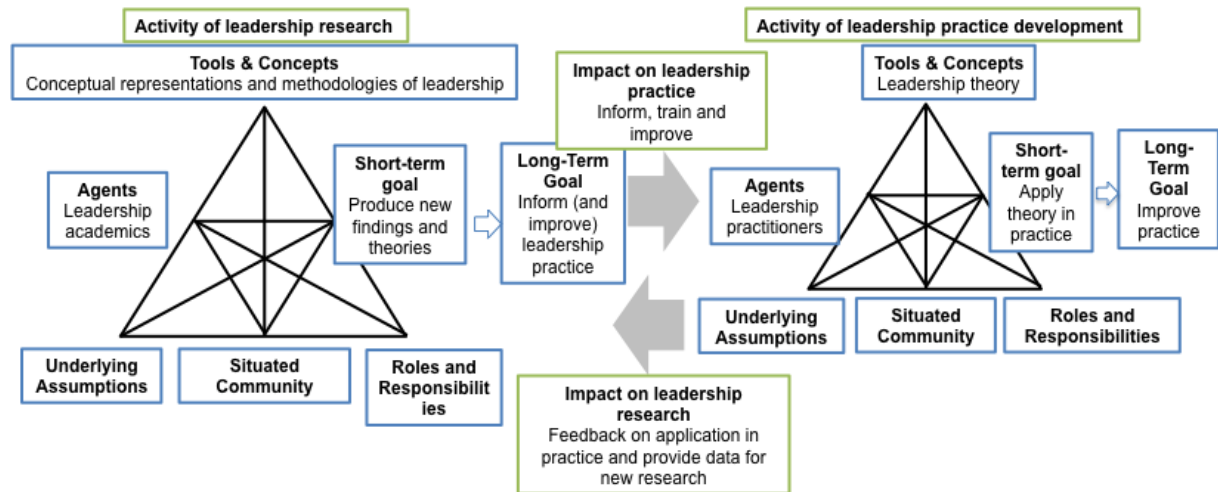causal powers of leadership within their data and consequently a lower internal validity of the findings.



**Figure 6.7 Relationship between the activity systems of leadership research and practice**

This argument has several implications for the practice of leadership research.

Firstly, it explains why it is highly unlikely that a single definition of leadership will ever be produced as suggested by Stodgill in 1974 and noted in the opening paragraph of Chapter 2. Researchers come from different academic, professional and personal backgrounds that shape their view of the organisational processes and leadership in particular, which lead to different assumptions about the activity system of leadership phenomenon. They apply these instruments to interpret diverse range of empirical manifestations of leadership in specific organisational context and create contrasting conclusions about the nature, elements and impact of leadership.

For example, I interpret a particular episode from my childhood as the first leadership lesson, which may have affected the focus of my research interests over time. During my first year at school, a Mathematics teacher advised us that in every team someone must assume responsibility to ask questions like 'What are we doing?' and

'Why are we doing it this way?' Whilst it is possible that the intention behind his recommendation was merely to ensure an equal level of understanding across the group, I associate this event with potential profound impact on my leadership preconceptions. Upon reflection on the practices of collaboration and teamwork that I experienced, I found that asking these questions tends to create a stronger team spirit; a better shared orientation on the goal and, overall, leads to greater levels of success and it is a leadership practice that I consciously engage with. However, it is also possible that observing the leadership practices that emerged from application of this 'rule' shaped my interest in collective questioning of on-going activity, and therefore, led to my interest in leadership-as-practice.

Consecutively, if we regard leadership research as a high-level structural activity system, we will see a great degree of discrepancies in the Tools and Concepts element due to the variety of contexts that agents (researchers) come from, resulting in diverse outcome of the short-term goal. The purpose of leadership research activity is informing, improving, and developing the activity of leadership (see Figure 6.7), and therefore the value of the variety of leadership definitions is best assessed by their testing in practice. According to CR, a theory deserves attention if it contributes to practical understanding of the *real* within the context that the theory is based on (internal validity), and if it speaks to other contexts on how leadership practice is shaped (generalizability). On the other hand, the criterion of pragmatism supports a theoretical construct as long as it helps agents to make sense of and improve their practice (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). Hence, I propose the criterion of *practical validity* – the extent to which a theory resonates with and helps the practitioners change and improve their leadership activity – as a potential measure of

good L-A-P research. This may be achieved by a closer collaboration between academics and practitioners, and is likely to result in an accelerated development of leadership research as well as development of leadership practice, a point I expand in section 6.5.4.

This leads to the second implication on the crucial role of empirical testing of leadership theories for evaluation and development of the research agenda. As depicted in Figure 6.7, the theories become part of the Tools and Concepts of leadership practitioners through training, development and engaging with popular literature. A new leadership *theory* may create a tension in the leadership *practice* within a given context and thus lead to an expansion cycle (I further elaborate on the leadership development process in section 6.5 below). In turn, a new empirical manifestation of leadership practice may produce incoherencies within or between the activity systems of leadership research and initiate a new the expansive cycle. The research activity is mediated by the researchers' preconceptions and experiences and thus the probability of uncovering the deep mechanisms of leadership is higher when they broaden theoretical conceptualisation and interpretations of the empirical beyond familiar constructs. This supports the argument for transparency of ontological and epistemological assumptions advocated by the critical realists and for a requirement for the academic community to develop greater self-awareness and techniques, as well as ability to change them if necessary.

The third argument I make is in favour of a more open dialogue and collaboration between scholars who have dissimilar viewpoints, as this is likely to yield a richer

explanation of the causal reality, which was illustrated above by revisiting the stories narrated in "The great disappearing act of leadership" by Alvesson and Sveningsson.

The next section evaluates the contributions of this research for the L-A-P perspective.

## 6.4    Implications for leadership-as-practice research

In section 6.3.3 above I presented leadership research as an activity system that goes through expansion cycles due to the tensions caused by the wider context of the research, the broader economic and social events, and the diverse views held by the researchers. In this sense, the "practice turn" in organisational studies created an impetus for change in leadership research requiring new ways of thinking about ontology, epistemology and methodology, a different conceptualisation of organisations and the processes of leadership, and a new language of analysis. The approach proposed in this thesis sought to respond to these challenges through a combination of various instruments. This section will discuss the theoretical and methodological contributions and evaluate them against the challenges in the L-A-P field.

### 6.4.1   Revisiting L-A-P challenges

The challenges of the leadership-as-practice perspective (identified in section 1.3) relate to the relatively recent history. In particular, aspects requiring attention are: the lack of clarity around the definition of leadership practices and their place within the broader processes of organising; the absence of consistent epistemological underpinning and methodological guidance for practical research; as well as absence of a language that would enable a discussion about these processes.
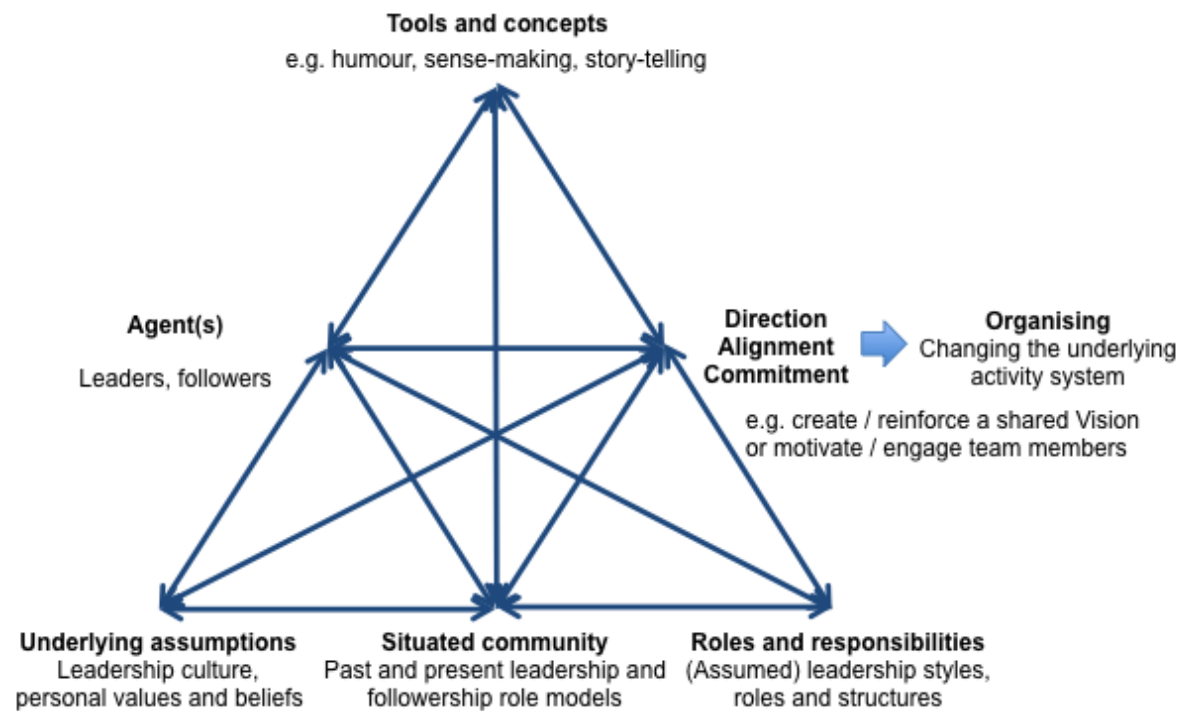
**Tools and concepts**
e.g. humour, sense-making, story-telling

**Agent(s)**
Leaders, followers

**Direction Alignment Commitment**

**Organising**
Changing the underlying activity system

e.g. create / reinforce a shared Vision or motivate / engage team members

**Underlying assumptions**
Leadership culture, personal values and beliefs

**Situated community**
Past and present leadership and followership role models

**Roles and responsibilities**
(Assumed) leadership styles, roles and structures

**Figure 6.8 Leadership practice as an activity system (repeated)**

Challenge #1 of L-A-P was separating leadership practices from the other organising processes within organisations. The general suggestion is to distinguish them by their *social accomplishment* (Nicolini, 2009), which was phrased as "collective agency in changing and setting courses of action" (Crevani and Endrissat, 2016, p. 42), or as "direction, alignment and commitment" (Drath et al. 2008). The CHAT framework adopted in this thesis conceptualised leadership practice as an activity system (Figure 6.8) that has a Short-Term Goal to provide direction, better alignment and stronger commitment for the agents within this activity system; and that way influence the broader activity systems. This activity unfolds within the other organisational processes, and is therefore inseparable from them, but emerges when there is a change in them for the future-oriented action.

**Figure 6.9 Stratified levels of organisational activities - leadership, interaction, structure (repeated)**

This also provides an indirect answer to the Challenge #2: is leadership an outcome of the collective action, its component, or a catalyst? The stance taken in this thesis suggests that leadership is all three. Firstly, direction, alignment and commitment are the *outcomes* of the collective action occurring within leadership activity system. Secondly, the practice of leadership is a *component* of the collective actions within an organisation as one of the layers of organisational activity systems (presented in Figure 6.9). Finally, since leadership practice addresses the underlying systems and alters them with a view of future collective actions, it is also a *catalyst* of their existence and development.

Next, the framework developed in this research tackles Challenge #3 and provides theoretical foundations for the *units of analysis* and defines them as those moments of interaction where agents attempt to change the on-going activities around them. This may surface in a sudden challenging question, a suggestion or an instruction to

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change the ways of working or a re-framing of the previously agreed terms and boundaries – in other words, leadership incidents surface through the signs of tensions within or between the agents and the activity systems. Whilst the initiation for a change is likely to emerge from one individual (after all we have not yet developed collective telepathic abilities), the leadership praxis will not be "enacted" unless this agent is able to engage with the leadership practices collectively with the other agents. Therefore, CHAT framework proposes several questions as points of analysis, for example: What leads to the attempts at changing activity systems and thus enacting leadership practice? What factors contribute to the success of agents' engagement with the leadership practices? How does leadership activity take place? How are the changes implemented back into higher-level systems? How are the leadership practices enacted in the contexts of different interaction and structural systems?

Furthermore, I address Challenge #4 by developing an integrated framework that links an array of factors – actors and their daily routines, material and non-material artefacts, the impact of past experiences and future prospects, and the organisational culture and history (e.g. Carroll, 2016; Sergi, 2016) – and thus offers a common language for exploration and comparison of leadership practices. The framework presented in Figure 6.8 and Figure 6.9 has been constructed both based on theory and empirical investigation, and offers a critical realist explanation of the mechanisms of leadership. Figure 6.8 offers the detailed account of the leadership practice as activity system and links all those factors into a coherent framework, Figure 6.9 provides a conceptualisation of the various levels of activities in organisation and the position and role of leadership within them. I have to be open that, as a non-native

English speaker, I struggle to distinguish the impact in choice of nouns, gerunds and verbs and the resulting codes were logical rather than intuitive. However, at the heart of leadership practice lies the attempt of chang*ing* the underlying systems and their elements – and therefore the focus of research is always on acting agents rather than a stationary position of intent.

In the next section I place the contributions of this research within methodological and theoretical aspects of L-A-P.

### 6.4.2 *Implications for L-A-P methodology*

One of the main obstacles in expanding L-A-P perspective has been a lack of clarity on the methods and techniques that should be employed for investigation of leadership practice (Kempster et al., 2016). Kempster et al. (2016) state that the "notions of undertaking experiments, issuing questionnaires, and engaging in interviews are problematic" for uncovering the situated activity with a rich history and in "continual emergence shaped by antecedents and recursive interactions" (p. 243). As these instruments are ineffective in learning about the situated practice, the general tendency has leaned towards the ethnographically informed approach to data collection that included participant and non-participant observation and shadowing (e.g. Kelly et al., 2006; Larsson and Lundholm, 2010) as opposed to (albeit rare) use of long and in-depth exploratory interviews (e.g. Denis et al., 2010; Carroll et al., 2008). It has also been agreed that the process of data analysis should be congruent with processual methodology and Kempster et al. (2016) suggest that the narrative analysis, critical incident and Grounded Theory techniques are appropriate for the task.

Kempster at al. (2016) have named CHAT as a potential method for integrating approaches for studying L-A-P, and the adaptation of the framework in this thesis has offered a solution. I have illustrated how the CR-informed adaptation of CHAT provides a strong theoretical basis ahead of and during the stage of empirical research, and can inform the critical realist Grounded Theory analysis and interpretation process. It has also equipped me with a vocabulary for L-A-P research and its various elements that helped both with the data collection and analysis.

I adopted several means of qualitative data collection on site – observations and shadowing, and on-the-spot interviews with the agents – that served the purpose of gathering rich evidence of the unfolding events through recording hours of interactions and taking dozens of pages with accompanying notes for later analysis, and making sense of them later on. As discussed in Chapter 4, the future researchers should be ready to adopt their research design based on the actual practices within organisations that they observe. Ethnography is time and energy consuming, both at the stage of preparation and gaining access to the organisations and during the fieldwork itself; however, studying unfolding leadership practice in real time requires physical proximity to the agents (Kempster et al., 2016). There is an open debate whether the observations should be participative or non-participative: one the one hand, there is a chance that if a researcher joins an activity system as an agent, (s)he may change the activity system itself. On the other hand, through joining the activity system, the researcher may be able to experience the ongoing practice of leadership first hand. Furthermore, since a researcher is never an invisible shadow, his/her activity and building relationships with the participants triggers the

process of developing identities within the process of fieldwork for the observer and the observed (Gill, 2011).

This creates a proposition for a potential adjustment of research approach for the future, which is based on the difficulties I experienced at the validation stage, where managers had difficulties recalling the events that had occurred a year earlier. Kempster and Stewart (2010) have illustrated how co-production of auto-ethnography can be used for understanding leadership development. I propose two options for adapting auto-ethnography for the future research. Firstly, auto-ethnographic dialogue with the participant could be in-built during shadowing process, thus deepening both the researcher's and practitioner's insights into the unfolding events and their causal links. The main challenge of this approach is an increased demand on the participants' time – something that managers tend to struggle with already. The second option is an auto-ethnography produced by researchers as they engage in participative observation and become members of the team in order to explore the practices first hand. However, this approach potentially can cause complex ethical challenges and will require a great level of self-awareness and familiarity with the L-A-P perspective from the researcher. In both of these cases, I would suggest debriefing sessions with the observed, and exploration of temporal, dialogic, subjective and reflexive identities through questions proposed by O'Connor (2011, pp. 259-260).

The adopted approach of data analysis included several stages of interpretation and coding. Firstly, the data was 'sieved' through the CHAT framework in order to make sense of the recorded actions and communications and identify the organisational activities within them, as well as the critical incidents of interaction. Once that was

done, I used the critical realist Grounded Theory techniques in order to code various themes in communication dynamic emerging within these narratives. Several iterations of reviews of these codes led to adaptation of the CHAT framework to include three levels of activities, which in turn helped clarify the various clusters of meaning. Finally, the emerging themes were taken back to the participants for validation. This process followed the approach proposed by Kempster and Parry (2014); although the final stage of testing the theory in alternative contexts lies beyond this analysis. In critical realist terms, the methods employed in this research led to a plausible explanation of the observed empirical events and attempted to provide a valid account of the causal links. The criterion of generalizability is to be tested through future research, and the language of CHAT potentially makes it possible to replicate the methods of data collection and analysis in different contexts. Despite the fact that I have not had an opportunity to run a comparative analysis with the UK part of the data, recollection of events during those weeks suggest that both the analysis techniques and the theory of causal power would not be dissimilar, even though the actual enactment of practices may be portrayed in different ways. The quantitative research techniques were not employed in this project, and the development of their use for further lies in the future of L-A-P exploration at the further *measurement* stage of theorisation process (Kempster et al., 2016).

Therefore, my approach provides a systemic and holistic approach to L-A-P exploration, and offers an example of its application with potential suggestions for future research. Through development of a theory as a starting point, it provides a potential common language for comparison and discussion between leadership

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practices identified in various contexts in the future. In the next section I will evaluate the proposed findings against the key ideas proposed within the L-A-P field.

### 6.4.3   Implications for L-A-P theory

The findings in Chapter 5 resonate with the current discussions within leadership-as-practice and other socially construction perspectives on leadership. They confirm the importance of several components to the leadership process, such as the dynamics of the relationships, material and non-material artefacts, maintaining the routines, power relationships embedded within the context, and the overall non-linearity of the unfolding events within the organisations. In addition, they also provide an overview of the emerging leadership patterns and a systemic lens to view the chaos of the day-to-day interactions. Finally, they illustrate the potential value of critical realism as a philosophy of science for L-A-P research to for complete the shift towards regarding leadership as a relational, processual and emergent phenomenon, whilst allowing space for both structures and agency.

The developed theory strongly supports the view that leadership practice is *dynamic*, *collective*, *situated* and *dialectic* as suggested by Denis et al. (2010). The three types of potential consequences appearing as a result of *dynamic* interaction of leaders and their context (Denis et al., 2010) echo the three levels of activity systems. Firstly, the *substantive* consequences are those concerned with structural changes of the broader activity systems. Then, *symbolic* changes are related to the "evolution of meaning among relevant stakeholders" (p. 72) and resonate strongly with impact of leadership practice at the interactional level of activity systems (an in turn, may affect the structural systems as illustrated in Chapter 5). Finally, the *political* consequences are those linked to the evolution of the leadership roles themselves, which I interpret

as the role of senior management within leadership practice, and their influence on all three levels of the systems.

The *collective* quality of leadership – its critical dependence on "a constellation of co-leaders who play complementary roles" (p. 73) – is an integral element of the CHAT theory of leadership. The leadership activity emerges only if both "leaders" (i.e. those who instigate the change) and "followers" (i.e. those who support its implementation, or "co-leaders") jointly engage in enactment of leadership practices and jointly implement changes to the interaction and/or structural activity systems. If the collaborative momentum does not appear or breaks before the change has been realised, the attempt for leadership becomes unsuccessful.

*The situated* nature of leadership manifests itself in the practical enactment of individuals' micro-interactions within specific context. According to the findings, leadership occurs through interactions within the context of multiple organisational activity systems that are embedded in their own cultural-historical context of past experiences, and mediated by the conceptual and material artefacts.

The findings also support and provide a way to conceptualise the role of material artefacts and non-human subjects in interaction and maintenance of the organisational routines in L-A-P (Carroll, 2016; Sergi, 2016) and S-A-P (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). From CHAT point of view, the 'koosch ball' described by Caroll (2016) is an instrument that the manager employs at both the interactional and leadership levels of activity systems in order to govern the conversation and create a space for a particular activity to emerge. The Document that Sergi (2016) describes as a focal point of an observed meeting is effectively an instrument at the structural level of analysis (i.e. this is an artefact of the project management process), an

objective of the meeting and the context for various leadership practices that emerge during its discussion.

Finally, Denis et al. (2008) regard the *dialectic* property of leadership as possessing a downside of leaders' actions and the potential of their strengths turning into weaknesses. Although implicitly this refers to an *entitative* approach to leadership as the authors describe actions of leaders (managers) rather than emerging relationships around them, the statement strongly resonates with the notion of tensions and contradictions in CHAT:

> …the *situated practices* of leaders rarely have unequivocally positive effects. Even apparently successful practices embed within themselves contradictory effects – a dark side – that may and often does come back to haunt leaders. (p. 81)

From the point of view developed in this thesis, leadership emerges *as a result of* the incoherencies within and between the activity systems, and they are the driving force behind the developmental expansion cycles, which in turn lead to more contradictions in the future. I believe that this offers a more holistic approach to conceptualising the chaos of organisational life and the ever-increasing pace of interactions and information flows.

Also, Chapter 5 also provided illustrations of all seven practices described by Raelin (2014) as they target different levels of the activities, although it was not limited by them. Firstly, *scanning, unleashing* and *stabilising* activities are more likely to refer to the structural changes at the high-level of leadership choices and attempts to act. Then, *signalling, weaving* and *inviting* refer to the interactional activity systems and

relating between individuals. Therefore, *reflecting* is the practice that individuals engage in within leadership activity system.

My research invites to continue further investigation of the leadership practice – and practices – situated within various contexts and explore the emerging behavioural and discursive patterns within the unfolding relationships. In the opening section to Chapter 2, I quoted Engeström (2004) as a powerful representation of my take on the challenges of leadership-as-practice perspective:

> History is made in future-oriented situated actions. The challenge is to make the situated history-making visible and analysable. For studies of managerial discourse, this implies that we should look for ways of capturing how managers discursively create new forms of activity and organisation. (p. 96)

The first sentence has been unpacked throughout this thesis, and the second sentence summarises the methodological challenge presented in Chapter 2. The third sentence directs our focus to the role of discourse in uncovering the leadership practices as they happen. CR and CHAT both reject the idea of theory-neutral observational language (Engeström et al., 1999; Johnson and Duberley, 2000), and this emphasises the role of language and discourse as a necessary step towards understanding the ways in which human beings perceive and act. From the CR point of view, discourses are the lifeblood that runs between structures, agency, social practices and their empirical manifestations (Kempster, presented at a seminar at ILA conference, 2011). This statement echoes the distinction between the levels of discourse identified by Alvesson and Karreman (2000, p. 1133), which we can place against the levels of activity systems:

- *Micro-discourse* that calls for thorough exploration of language use and social texts situated in micro-context and therefore relates to mediation of elements within one activity system.

- *Meso-discourse* is concerned with identifying broader patterns and considering general tendencies in similar local contexts. In CHAT terms this relates to discourses from adjacent systems linked by shared agents, activities or other elements.

- *Grand Discourse* level refers to/constitutes organisational reality, such as dominating language use about corporate culture or ideology. Hence these Discourses mediate with the high-level departmental, functional or organisational structures.

- *Mega-Discourses* refer to the relatively universal connection of discourses and ways of referring to a certain type of phenomenon. For example, this links to the standards or language employed by professional bodies, industry players or legal regulations.

Although I have not drawn on them openly at the analysis stage, it is possible to identify within the interaction between individuals references to the micro-, meso-discourses as they refer to the elements of the local and organisational activity systems, and to Grand and Meta-Discourses that relate to the broader context and universal theories. In this respect, the methodology of leadership and the types of practices that were presented in Chapter 5 are likely to be culture- and context-agnostic, and their particular enactment is down to the context of its occurrence.

This section has evaluated the findings within the field of L-A-P research. The next (and final) section will discuss the implications of the findings to the practice of leadership learning and development practice.

## *6.5     Implications for leadership development*

In line with mainstream research focus, the practice of leadership development has been traditionally concerned with 'fixing' the individual 'leaders' so that they perform better as a 'leader' when placed back in their organisations (Day, 2000; Raelin, 2004; Denyer and Turnbull James, 2016). Despite several calls for more attention on leader*ship* development, including amongst others investment in social capital (Day, 2000), establishment of a new leadership culture (Drath et al., 2008), and implementing the notion of situated leadership learning to practice (Raelin, 2004; Kempster, 2006), the predominant leadership development curriculum is focussed on competencies, skills and behaviours. It is assumed that once leaders are more self-aware and reflexive and equipped with the latest thinking on leadership theory, they will be more capable of affecting their own organisations. However, as Raelin (2004, p. 131) notes, "…most leadership training that is being conducted in corporate off-sites is ill-advised […] because the intent of most of this training is to put leadership into people such that they can transform themselves and their organisations upon their return". In other words, the most part of funds invested in corporate leadership development – estimated to be between $36bn and $60bn per annum globally (Burgoyne, 2004; quoted by Jackson and Parry, 2011, p. 8) – does not lead to desired effects.

In this section I take a stance that effective leadership development needs to target the practice of leadership in the workplace in a holistic manner. I do not argue that

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'leader development' is futile; rather I argue that its effectiveness is limited due to the situated context where managers are expected to apply their learning within the pre-existing relationships and structures. The relational practice-based ontology of leadership requires an alternative practice-based approach to leadership development. The section will be structured as follows. Firstly, I will elaborate on the approach to leadership practice development based on the key findings of this research. Next, I discuss the potential foci of leadership development – development of the agency through enhancing individual capabilities, and addressing the existing patterns of relationships and structures through "reweaving of webs of belief" (Drath et al., 2008, p. 650).

### 6.5.1    *Leadership development through agency and structure*

The contextual, situated and relational nature of leadership has been the main leitmotif of the L-A-P research as well as this thesis. The theory developed throughout the previous chapters provides an insight into the interrelated activity systems of leadership practice within the unfolding and evolving interactions and structures. Leadership practice emerges when context urges agents to challenge and mould the status quo position, and in turn is affected by their joint actions if a change momentum is created.

Therefore, if we regard leadership development as an activity, the objective of which is to intervene in, improve and expand the activities of leadership practice in organisations, three separate (although interrelated) foci should be considered. The first type of intervention is concerned with the expansion of leadership activity system itself: making the agents more aware of the objective(s), equipping them with more instruments to draw on in their practice, as well as potentially altering the contextual

factors that inform the activity. The other two aspects of leadership development target the likelihood and the success of leadership practice *within* the context of the interactional and structural activity systems, respectively. In critical realist terms, the three types of leadership development interventions target the social practice of leadership, the agency and the structure within organisations. Below the approaches are separated for theoretical reasons rather than practical, and in the concluding section I propose ways of bringing them together.

### 6.5.2   *Development of leadership activity*

The majority of extant leadership learning and development has been focussed with individuals and their skills and actions rather than the collective leadership capacity, and most often centred on the so-called 'leaders' in senior and middle management roles in organisations. Although "leadership development is defined as expanding the collective capacity of organisational members to engage effectively in leadership roles and processes" (Day, 2000, p. 582), the attention is normally focussed on the investment in the *human* capital rather than *social* capital. Based on the findings in Chapter 5, I suggest that a focus on the people in formal *leadership* positions is both a necessity and a limitation. On one hand, managers in organisations are focal points of power source, and therefore the potential changes in organisations are crucially dependent on their approval or rejection; therefore, the agents in *leadership positions* are required to be aware of the leadership processes. On the other hand, these theories tend to draw a fine line between 'leaders' and 'followers' implicitly denying the co-leadership process, and impede leadership development practice by neglecting the collective nature of leadership practice.

A better starting position of constructing a more balanced approach to leadership development is CHAT-informed representation of leadership practice as illustrated in Figure 6.8 above. In order to stimulate an expansion cycle for the system, a leadership development intervention needs to create or emphasise a tension within the system, which can be done by addressing its elements. A change in one of the elements may trigger a chain of consequent alterations across the system, however the paragraphs below focus on the potential role of individual components. Most of these have been covered by the extant literature of leadership development, in particular the upper triangle of the activity system.

- The first element that has the potential to affect the system is a change to the *Agents.* One of the main components of leadership development tradition is the emphasis on reflection and awareness, which in turn leads to a greater appreciation of self and others – traits, behaviours and personalities – as well as the general image of the team. Day (2000) identifies several practical instruments that are likely to trigger self-awareness, self-regulation and self-motivation such as 360-degree feedback, coaching, and mentoring. They contribute to development of leadership identity through lived experiences and the becoming of a self as a 'leader' (Kempster, 2006) for the agents in the system.

- Alteration of the *Tools & Concepts* element is frequently addressed on the management learning programmes, when individuals are presented with various leadership concepts and theories. The underlying assumption is that once individuals acquire the knowledge, they will be able to apply it in practice and become more effective at leading others and transform their teams and

organisations (Bolden, 2007), which is frequently achieved through action-plans that people are expected to follow-up once in the office. Other instruments of leadership development, such as coaching and mentoring, may provide 'anchoring' to the change plan and keep the manager on track (Day, 2000). A more collective variation of this approach is team development courses, where group as a whole 'learns' new ways of communicating and co-leading through experiential learning or facilitated discussions, and through the joint effort (context-permissive) the learning is more likely to be transferred into the day-to-day interactions. Finally, such techniques can be obtained through job assignments and action learning (Day, 2000), where individuals on their own or through shared experiences participate in other activity systems and adopt new practices through situated learning (Kempster, 2006).

- Next, drawing attention to the "*Direction-Alignment-Commitment*" objective of leadership system is an established focus of the leadership development courses that tend to start with an appealing and inspiring definition of leadership. Increasing agents' awareness on the need of a shared, collective and motivating goals and creating an open and clear around the leadership process result could become one of the *Tools* for improved practice (Drath et al., 2008), and a chain reaction of readjustment of the rest of the system.

- Another way of altering the upper triangle is increasing people's awareness of the underlying systems and the broader picture of the organisational processes and their understanding of *what*, *when* and *why* needs to be done. In general, the more agents are knowledgeable of the situation, the more opportunities they will have to attempt initiation of the change and inviting

others to join them in the efforts. In essence, at the group level leadership development requires an open negotiation, a sense-making activity (Weick, 1995) and the ability to collectively discuss the bigger scheme of things.

The previous paragraphs cover the 'visible' part of the activity triangle; however, the contextual factors of leadership practice are also potential targets of leadership development. The three elements – *situated community, underlying assumptions,* and *roles and responsibilities* – are the result of agents' past interactions, experiences and observations, be it with the agents they are interacting with now or those of the past. Although Implicit Leadership/Followership Theories provide an insight into the formation of these elements, they do not offer a clear-cut advice on leadership development; instead, I draw on application Situated Learning theory for these cases.

- The *situated community* of leadership activity system is comprised of all the people (or their images) that the agents had leadership interactions with. These are the notable people of the past – role models, team members, good or bad managers etc. that shaped agents' understanding of the leadership processes. The intervention into this element can be achieved through uncovering the critical episodes of leadership conception (Kempster, 2006) and allowing individuals to critically evaluate their impact on the practice today. Another way of challenging of the Situated Community element is introducing new potential role models or discussion of the cases that agents may choose to relate to, particularly as a team exercise.

- The same principle of uncovering the critical incidents and challenging their impact applies to both *roles and responsibilities* and *underlying assumptions*

that underpin the leadership practice. In order to change them, the agents need to identify their current composition and re-negotiate a new and (hopefully) more effective contract behind their actions.

Although the suggestions above are all valid from the theoretical point of view, their application in practice is likely to be challenged by the fluid and transient nature of interactions at work. The leadership activity systems are not stable and emerging, and are likely to form slightly different patterns with every constellation of agents in the room. Of course, it is easier to design and implement a leadership development intervention if this is a relatively stable team, well acquainted with one another and that has a history of joint actions they can rely on. However, even if such leadership interventions successfully target leadership activity system of a group of agents, or awareness/composition of the system for one of them, their transition to practice is dependent on the social practices and structures in the organisations. The impact of re-framed individual or joint attempts of leadership on the organisational context is contingent on the flexibility of the context that they unfold within, both interactional and structural.

### 6.5.3 Development of leadership context

The previous section offers a way of addressing the elements of leadership activity systems that is consistent with approach described by direction-alignment-commitment perspective (Drath et al., 2008). Indeed, Drath and colleagues describe the process of reweaving the portions of underlying webs of belief through questioning "old beliefs in light of a more comprehensive set of beliefs better adapted to critical conditions" so that leadership practices lose the "internal consistency" and are reconfigured to accommodate new beliefs (p. 650). This improves collective

capacity of achieving DAC outcomes (Drath et al., 2008). However, although the authors acknowledge that this intervention is required at the team, network, community and organisational levels, they do not provide any advise on how to achieve this in practice.

The existing evidence within leadership research and practice have seen plenty of examples of ineffective leadership training, where the effort invested in leadership development does not translate into improved leadership outcomes in organisation (Carroll et al., 2008; Denyer and Turnbull James, 2016), and the theory development in this thesis offers an explanation behind this situation. Firstly, leadership development intervention needs to affect the leadership activity system itself, which is dependent on the number of agents and their power position within the system to affect it. Secondly, the (potential) changes need to translate into the interactional systems that these agents belong to, and the new ways of communicating and relating need to be established to accommodate for these changes. Finally, the organisational structures require a degree of flexibility in order to accommodate for potential changes to leadership and interactional activity systems.

In the ideal world, all three systems would go through a simultaneous change and would include most of the agents and their adjacent activity systems. However, the chaos and complex structures of modern organisations will dissipate the change energy and direction, and so will the situated organisational context of the larger activity systems. Therefore, in order to enable the success of leadership development interventions, the organisations are required to "reweave" their webs of believe at those levels. Networking as a leadership development instrument has been acknowledged as a way of building the social capital of leadership capacity of

an organisation (Day, 2000), effectively targets the *situated community* element of the broader activity systems and can provide individual agents with more power to create change in their own systems as well as accelerate spreading of leadership learning in organisations. The other two elements – *underlying assumptions* and *roles and responsibilities* – can be affected through development of a leadership culture that is permissive to change and supports creativity and alterations of behaviour (Drath et al., 2008) and a relatively low level of regulations and bureaucracy in organisations.

In other words, unless agents are provided with an opportunity for situated application of their leadership learning, the effect of leadership intervention will not affect the leadership practices in situ, and therefore will not translate into improved organisational performance. This creates a quest for development of a new practice of leadership development – or a leadership-as-practice development (Denyer and Turnbull James, 2016). The next session will provide some ideas on how to do this.

### 6.5.4   *Leadership-as-practice development*

As discussed in the previous chapters, a successful leadership development intervention must satisfy several criteria. Firstly, it must create the space for individuals to challenge their existing webs of beliefs, improve their awareness of the factors influencing their individual and joint behaviours, and lead to development of new patterns that would be more effective within their context. Secondly, in order for learning to translate into practice, the intervention needs to be appropriate for the context that agents operate in (Carroll et al., 2008).

Denyer and Turnbull James (2016) propose a set of principles underpinning leadership-as-practice development, which summarise the implications of this thesis outlined above (pp. 264-268):

- Reviewing and renewing the leadership concept held by learners and their organisation

- Surfacing and working with leadership processes, practices, and interactions

- Working in the learners' context of their organisational problems and adaptive challenges

- Working with the emotional and political dynamics of leadership in the system

They propose that collaborative leadership learning groups (CCLGs) are particularly suited as a base for leadership development programmes. This approach assumes creating a group within an organisation that focuses on the "learning about collaboration and shared leadership practices" within a safe environment, that can address the work challenges they face collectively, and that jointly determines the learning outcomes they want to achieve (p. 269). Within this programme, leadership-as-practice development becomes an instrument of "collaborative identification, formulation, and resolution of shared organisational learning needs" (ibid.).

A similar approach to leadership development is offered by Kempster and Smith working paper) through construction of a "programme community of practice" (PCoP), adopted on an executive education course for entrepreneurs of small and medium enterprises. They advocate that by creating a course where owners and managing directors of relatively small ventures determine the learning curriculum which is driven by their lived experiences and joint reflection, feedback and sense-

making, individuals are able to transform their leadership practice and, consecutively, the processes in their organisations. Although in L-A-P terms this emphasises development of an isolated agent rather than the whole organisation, small businesses are greatly influenced by their owners, and therefore a change in the entrepreneurs' behaviours is likely to have a larger impact on the organisation compared to a corporate structures.

In section 6.3.3 I advocated for a lesser distance between leadership research and practice. The advantages for the research activities are straightforward and include a closer look at the organisational events and on-going routines, and a deeper insight into the unfolding practices and their causal powers through joint sense-making with the participants involved. In turn, for the practitioners such exploration of leadership practice can challenge the old ways of doing things and beliefs and create the space for changes to their practice. If such research is done at a large scale, it can stimulate the creation of CCLGs as offered by Denyer and Turnbull James (2016).

Overall, L-A-P development requires a more systemic, situated and dynamic approach to leadership development, a safe environment for the practitioners to identify, challenge and modify their leadership practice, and an opportunity to transfer this learning within the context of their organisations.

## 6.6    Chapter summary

This chapter has discussed the main research contributions and their implications for the leadership field. Firstly, I answered to the challenge presented by Alvesson and Sveningsson by illuminating the traces of leadership practices in the narratives of their interviewees, reviewed the existing theories of leadership through the lens of

CHAT and placed the findings of this thesis against some long-standing challenges of leadership research. Secondly, I evaluated the potential contribution of this thesis to the emerging field of L-A-P and the described how it addressed the current gaps and challenges within this perspective. Finally, I reflected on the application of the findings for the practice of leadership development in organisations. The next chapter will conclude this thesis by summarising the main arguments and reflecting on their limitations and implications for future research.

# CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION

## 7.1    Chapter overview

The research above was driven by my motivation to investigate the processual, relational and contextual phenomenon of leadership, and to contribute to the emerging field of leadership-as-practice. The resulting theory has offered an insight into the theoretical and methodological considerations and was supported by the empirical evidence from one organisation in Russia; thus, expanding the number of *tools and concepts* that leadership researchers and practitioners, including myself, can draw on. Therefore, in this final chapter I summarise the key aspects of the developed representation of leadership practice and comment on its potential use for the future. In the first half of this chapter I focus on the developed theory and summarise the research questions and the ways they were addressed, the emerged findings and their contributions, and identify research limitations that provide direction for future research. I conclude with implications of this theory for the field of leadership research and practice, as well as for my own learning and development as a female professional in business and academic context.

## 7.2    Research questions and answers

This thesis is set within and informed by the L-A-P perspective, a relatively recent leadership representation that emerged following a broader "practice turn" in organisational research (Carroll, 2016). This approach addresses the long-standing research gap – that of lack of understanding of how leadership is experienced by individuals – and invites researchers to investigate the phenomenon within everyday interactions (Denis et al., 2010). Therefore, although there are several variations and interpretations of L-A-P, the main focus remains on the collective actions and

relations as they unfold within organisational context (Crevani and Endrissat, 2016; Raelin, 2016a). The perspective rejects the classic "tripod" entitative ontology of leadership based on the leaders, followers, and a shared goal (Bennis, 2007) in favour of a relational and processual ontology that focuses on leadership as a social process emerging between individuals as they cope with the chaos of day-to-day activities, and leads to direction-alignment-commitment outcomes (Drath et al., 2008), which in turn required development of new practice-focussed epistemology and methodology.

This thesis responds to these challenges and explores the following research questions on leadership practice through the lens of CHAT:

- *How are the practices of leadership constituted within day-to-day interactions?* (Question #1)

- *How does leadership practice relate to the organisational context within which it emerges?* (Question #2)

- *How are the dynamics of leadership interactions co-constructed?* (Question #3)

- *How can the practice of leadership be theorised and researched within a single framework?* (Question #4)

These questions were addressed within the current state of L-A-P and challenges in the field, such as lack of clarity on the relationship between leadership and other organising processes and the difficulties in identifying what leadership practices are within the context of operations; and the absence of a theory that would unite all the various components that add to the complexity of unfolding relationships and inform

methodological choices for a practical investigation (see sections 2.4.3 and 6.4.1 for a more detailed discussion of challenges and my response to them, respectively). As illustrated in previous chapters, in order to address these issues I developed a framework drawing on the assumptions of social theory of CR (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 2008) and CHAT (Engeström, 1987; Blackler, 1993) .

Question #1 was addressed though development of an integrated theory that regards organisations as comprised of myriads of folded, related and adjacent activity systems, which form the daily activities of individual agents, teams and whole communities. These activity systems – at structural, interactional and leadership levels – represent the stratified mechanisms that are interlinked by causal powers and constantly shape and are shaped by actions of the agents. One of the central concepts of CHAT is natural existence of tensions and conflicts that arise within and between activity systems and result in the emergence of leadership practice when agents address these contradictions and reach a higher degree of direction, alignment and commitment in their activities, thus impacting the underlying structures. By adapting CHAT to critical realist organisational research, I provided a framework that speaks of the constitution of leadership practice, and unites *agents*, their *objectives* and *routines*, and the *tools* they employ, and sets them within the cultural-historical context of *situated community*, *underlying assumptions* and assumed *roles and responsibilities* of the systems.

This leads to the answer to Question #2. Chapter 5 offered visualised examples of the interconnectivity between the three levels of activity systems, and illustrated how a tension on the structural or interactional levels may result in emergence of leadership activity, and their re-emergence as agents co-consider and re-negotiate

similar issues. At the same time, all elements of the activity systems are constantly mediated by the discourses from the local activities and Discourses from the larger-scale structures, and therefore contextual understanding and interpretation of agents' actions within wider backdrop is crucial for exploration of appearance and effects of leadership practice.

The activity of leadership unfolds within the context of interactions that have their own system elements and dynamics, and the success of an attempt for leadership depends on the agents' distribution of power and the momentum that they can collectively create. Therefore, the answer to Question #3 refers to the contextual factors, such as the organisational culture and traditions, awareness and authority of agents within their and other systems, and the history of past interactions within the teams – in other words, a great focus is required on studying the elements of activity systems themselves.

Finally, by adapting CHAT to organisational research and leadership field in particular, I provided a framework and a language for conceptualisation of L-A-P, and a methodological guidance for empirical investigation of leadership. These principles were applied in Chapter 4, where I argued for an ethnographic approach combining observations as the primary source of data, and shadowing and interviewing techniques as a additional information gathered to enrich contextual interpretations of the data. This process has the potential to enable collection of the data with sufficient detail to be analysed using a critical realist version of Grounded Theory techniques to uncover the contextual factors as well as leadership mechanisms and the interplay between the two. Altogether, this provided an answer to Question #4.

## 7.3    Contributions and implications

This thesis has offered an explanation of the process of emergence, social construction, and role of leadership-as-practice within a particular context, and therefore its main contributions relate to the theorisation and methodology of leadership research. Firstly, it offers a theory that provides a consistent explanation of emergence of the situated, social, relational, and emergent leadership practice and its role within day-to-day organisational life using an example of the patterns and themes observed in an organisation in Russia. Secondly, it presents a theoretical framework that allows examination of leadership practice alongside its context comprised of structural and interactional activities systems, and exploration of their interconnected causal powers and effects. Thirdly, it provides guidance for empirical investigation of the elusive practice of leadership, including preparation to data gathering and an analysis processes.

Chapter 6 illustrated the implications of this approach to the fields of leadership research and leadership development. Through re-examination of extracts of data and extant research through the lens of development theory, I illustrated the possibility of re-appearance of the disappeared act of leadership (section 6.3.1) and uncovered leadership mechanisms through reinterpretation of the existing theories of leadership (section 6.3.2). Furthermore, I reflected on the value of the findings for the field of L-A-P and provided some ideas on its implications for future research. Finally, taking this approach to leadership development, a focus on the relational and processual ontology of leadership shifts the emphasis from individual capabilities to collective capacities; and therefore brings forward those instruments of leadership

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development that favour learning about the collective nature of the phenomenon and enable agents' abilities to jointly influence surrounding structures and patterns.

Despite the contributions that this study provides for the leadership research, it also suffers several limitations that can be addressed by the future research agenda, which will be covered in the next section.

## 7.4 Limitations and future research

Due to the limited history of L-A-P and its current challenges, in major part methodological, the research carried out as part of this PhD thesis had to be exploratory and original. Therefore, although I strived to develop a robust approach for research design, fieldwork, analysis, and theory building processes, it would be highly problematic to cover all the aspects of the developing theory. Below I consider the potential shortcomings and offer ways to address these limitations in the future research agenda. They cover both the gaps in the scope of my research and general reflections on the improvements for the research design and process.

The first limitation of this research is lack of explicit exploration of the d/Discourses within the situated interactions that I observed. The potential benefits of employing discourse analysis have been discussed for general organisational studies from the critical realism perspective (Fairclough, 2005), for the relational and processual perspectives of leadership (Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012), and within the L-A-P field itself (Kempster et al., 2016; Ramsey, 2016). As discussed in section 6.4.3, discourses are the "lifeblood" that mediates the elements of the activity systems (Kempster, 2011) and provide links at the four levels identified by Alvesson and Karreman (2000): micro-discourses of *the* activity system, meso-discourses of the

adjacent and closely related activities, Grand Discourses flowing from the organisational levels, and finally, the universal Mega-Discourses that lie beyond the organisational phenomenon. Although at the data interpretation stage I was aware of the various d/Discourses as I was reading into the scripts of the interactions, I did not employ the discourse analysis techniques, and therefore would strongly support future exploration of their role and variations within the practice of leadership.

The second gap in the scope of this research is lack of examination of identity construction within leadership practice apart from a reflexive account on my identity becoming as a researcher in section 4.3.2.1. The process of leadership becoming is inherent to the unfolding relations and interactions (Carroll, 2016) as people regard others and themselves as 'leaders' and 'followers'. This process is central to leadership learning within the situated context that individuals operate in (Kempster, 2009) and each space of action potentially commences identity work process, where competing discourses help individuals to make sense of the events occurring around them (Carroll and Levy, 2010). Therefore, future research agenda would greatly benefit from conceptualisation and research of the process of leadership becoming within practice of leadership, particularly linked to the d/Discourses flows between and within activity systems. In addition, although my initial research interest was sparked by the study of Russian leadership identities and their meaning for the day-to-day practice of interactions within Russian context, I have not investigated the link between the findings from my earlier research (Takoeva and Turnbull, 2012) and the observed interactions, which forms a more specific area of future research.

The next item on the research agenda is exploration of leadership practice in various contexts. CR approach states that a Grounded Theory inferred from several contexts

will lead to a greater internal validity whilst testing a complete theory in a new setting can prove its generalizability (Kempster and Parry, 2014), and both arguments support this direction of research. Although my initial design involved comparison of leadership practices within two contexts and I carried out fieldwork in the organisation in the UK, this plan was later abandoned due the time constraints. The theory presented in this thesis is based solely on the data collected within one department of an organisation in Moscow. Large-scale studies such as the GLOBE (House et al., 2002; House et al., 2004) and Hofstede's dimensions (Hofstede, 1983) provide a high-level comparison of leadership cultures; however, it has been argued that culture is only one of the many factors that shape leadership process (Jepson, 2010a) and thus a comparative research would provide a contribution to the field of in-depth cross-cultural leadership studies. Therefore, I advocate for future exploration of enactment of leadership practices and their comparison within and between different contexts – be this organisation, industry, or country.

Finally, I propose a change to the research design that involves closer collaboration and joint reflexive sense making activity between the researcher and the practitioner in 'real time' of fieldwork. As discussed in sections 6.4.2 and 6.5.4, I believe such participative observations would bring three potential benefits. Firstly, it would eliminate the challenge that I experienced at validation stage due to the time gap between fieldwork and discussion of the findings with participants. Secondly, this approach would allow to bring closer and almost merge the stages of data collection, analysis, and validation, thus, enabling a deeper exploration of the causal powers behind observed events. Finally, it would enable an ongoing leadership development

processes by identifying and challenging the existing webs of beliefs, which is the first step in the process of improving leadership practice (Drath et al., 2008).

## 7.5 Concluding remarks on the theory and practice of leadership

Despite the limitations described in the previous section, I trust that the addition of the theory developed in this thesis has the potential to inform and affect several activity systems when considered within their *tools and concepts* element. Namely, I believe that it provides energy and direction for the future research within L-A-P perspective, food for thought and a call for action for the leadership practitioners, and has definitely become a major component within for my own development in business and academia.

### 7.5.1 Leadership as…

Chapter 2 commenced with a classic and fair quote from Stodgill (1974) stating that "there are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept" (p.7) and throughout consequent chapters I strived to illustrate the factors and the mechanisms that contribute to this state of affairs. The intangible and elusive nature of leadership manifests itself in a variety of ways depending on the contextual activity systems and the practices that surface for the attention of the researchers, who interpret them according to their leadership worldview, own experiences and degree of reflexivity in their own research practice.

The CHAT-informed representation of leadership has the potential to unite the leadership research foci to date and expand them further in the future. Discussion in

Chapter 6 placed prominent conceptual views on leadership against their historic background and portrayed them through CHAT framework, pointing out how they influence the choice for units of analysis, research focus and potential findings. Equally, I evaluated them against the L-A-P framework where the activity of leadership is situated within the myriads of structural and interactional activity systems, and offered a potential explanation of their fit within the model.

To start with, Grint (2005) identified four approaches to viewing leadership – leadership as Person, Results, Position, and Process that loosely relate to the elements of Agents, structural Short-term goal, Roles and Responsibilities, and the overall flow of activity system. Next, Kempster et al. (2011) elaborated on the concept of leadership as Purpose, which is captured by the impact on structural Long-Term elements. Furthermore, Jackson (2014) expanded the range of lenses to include the Place referring to the situated nature of leadership. This point has previously been illustrated by Parry and Hansen (2007) who presented an argument that of organisational stories can play a role in the leadership processes in a firm. The critical leadership approach implicitly regards leadership as a Perception (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012) by emphasising the mediating role of leadership theories in practice. Another long-standing debate is focussed on the role of Power in leadership (Edwards et al., 2015) and concerns itself with the sources and processes of influence exhibited within leadership interaction. Finally, the materiality of the model draws attention on the symbolic meaning and role of physical objects and conceptual frameworks within the leadership process.

Although CHAT-informed representation of L-A-P invites to explore all these elements in conjunction with each other, it does not produce a new theory of

leadership per se; rather it offers a language and a reference grid for the future leadership research. It calls for a research agenda focussed on the aspects of leadership in situ and deepening understanding of the causal links in order to fill in the research gaps, such as exploration of the processes of identities becoming, the role of material and non-material artefacts and the mediating role of d/Discourses. As illustrated above, this variety of re-appearing activities of leadership can be explored through ethnographic methods of data collection and CR Grounded Theory analysis techniques, (Parry, 1998; Kempster et al., 2016). Overall, I suggest that the developed framework as an instrument of leadership enquiry is comfortable with the existing lenses and elements of leadership theory, encourage further examination of the rich variations of leadership practices, and would welcome theoretical and empirical expansion of the model.

### 7.5.2   Leadership for…

In addition, the theory developed in this thesis offers thought-provoking implications for leadership practitioners. Presenting leadership as relational and rooted in day-to-day practice, L-A-P perspective diminishes the role of a single individual, the 'leader', and rejects the heroic image of the phenomenon. Leadership is no longer explained as something *done* by 'leaders' in organisations, rather it is a process that emerges between people within their daily activities and communications, and any person at every level of organisational hierarchy is able to contribute to the leadership practice within their set of activity systems.

As illustrated in Chapter 5, leadership practices are often initiated by making a suggestion to improve or change the process, by questioning the status quo, and the final effect of such attempt to engage in leadership practice depends on the context.

Therefore, if added to the *tools and concepts* of leadership practitioners, L-A-P perspective can empower more individuals to see themselves as 'leaders' and foster moulding the activity systems around them. L-A-P 'toolkit' comes with a variety of instruments that they may draw on to gain the leadership momentum. It also provides guidance on the ways of gaining power and authority within their activity systems, such as building knowledge of the subject matter, getting to know the right people, or being aware of the underlying assumptions and referring to them in order to produce joint action through direction, alignment and commitment.

Furthermore, this thesis provides an insight into the importance of collaborative process and the situated nature of learning for leadership development. When there are no more 'leaders' and 'followers', the development of leadership practice needs to address the leadership process in its entirety. There are numerous approaches that managers may choose from in order to inform and improve their leadership activity, which can be triggered by addressing at least one of the elements of the system. However, although addressing elements of the leadership activity system and the reweaving webs of beliefs that inform the activity is a more or less straightforward task, transfer of learning and placing it within everyday context that poses most challenges. Denyer and Turnbull James (2016) outline four principles of L-A-P development, which can be addressed by a more elaborate design of situated leadership interventions such as creation of collective leadership learning groups (ibid.), programme communities of practice (Kempster and Smith, working paper), and a closer collaboration between researchers and practitioners.

### 7.5.3 Leadership in…

Finally, the thesis is part of my learning within the field of leadership, my development and personal reflection. The findings of L-A-P theory have satisfied my main disquiet with the extant leadership theory, that of an asymmetric focus on the leaders, which did not match my own observations. They explained the causal powers behind my experience of applying my first leadership lesson, which involved asking challenging and clarifying questions within the groups that I had worked with. It illustrated why I often found myself regarded as a 'leader' within these teams, and potentially, how we jointly managed to achieve higher results compared to other groups.

Although the findings have not been rigorously verified in other contexts, the developed theory has inevitably become the concept that has informed my own activities. For example, I find myself reflecting on my role in unfolding interactions as a young Russian professional working in the UK with academic background in leadership, and am frequently able to identify some of the tensions and conflicts that impact the activity systems around me, both in my teams and the client organisations, and this knowledge directs my attention and efforts. I appreciate the value of the context and continuously attempt to draw on various elements, tools and artefacts to engage in leadership practice and shape the activities around me (although the attempts are not always successful due to the limited time I have spent with the firm), which tends to lead to more efficient results – even if it is not followed by recognition of *my* role within the collaborative actions of many.

Furthermore, the theory has influenced my activity system as a leadership researcher, as answering the research questions expanded my agenda further. For

example, I am keen to compare leadership practices within various contexts, particularly of the two countries that I have worked in, and to explore how previously identified Russian leadership identities manifest themselves in action.

Overall, the PhD project has been a major activity in my life, and the resulting knowledge will inform and impact my onward journey in understanding leadership and the other practices of the social world.

## *7.6    The re-appearing act of leadership*

This thesis started with the promise of re-appearing act of leadership and illustrated how we can uncover the rich abundance of leadership processes in organisations through the lens of leadership-as-practice. The theory invites us to look at the right place and the right time and injects energy needed to observe, explore and interpret the ever-unfolding relational activity of leadership. If we follow this route, we will be able to see how agents attempt to address the surrounding chaos of organisational life and the tensions and conflicts that surface in their daily actions, and to change the activities that they oversee and belong to through joint and collaborative momentum enabled by the leadership practices.
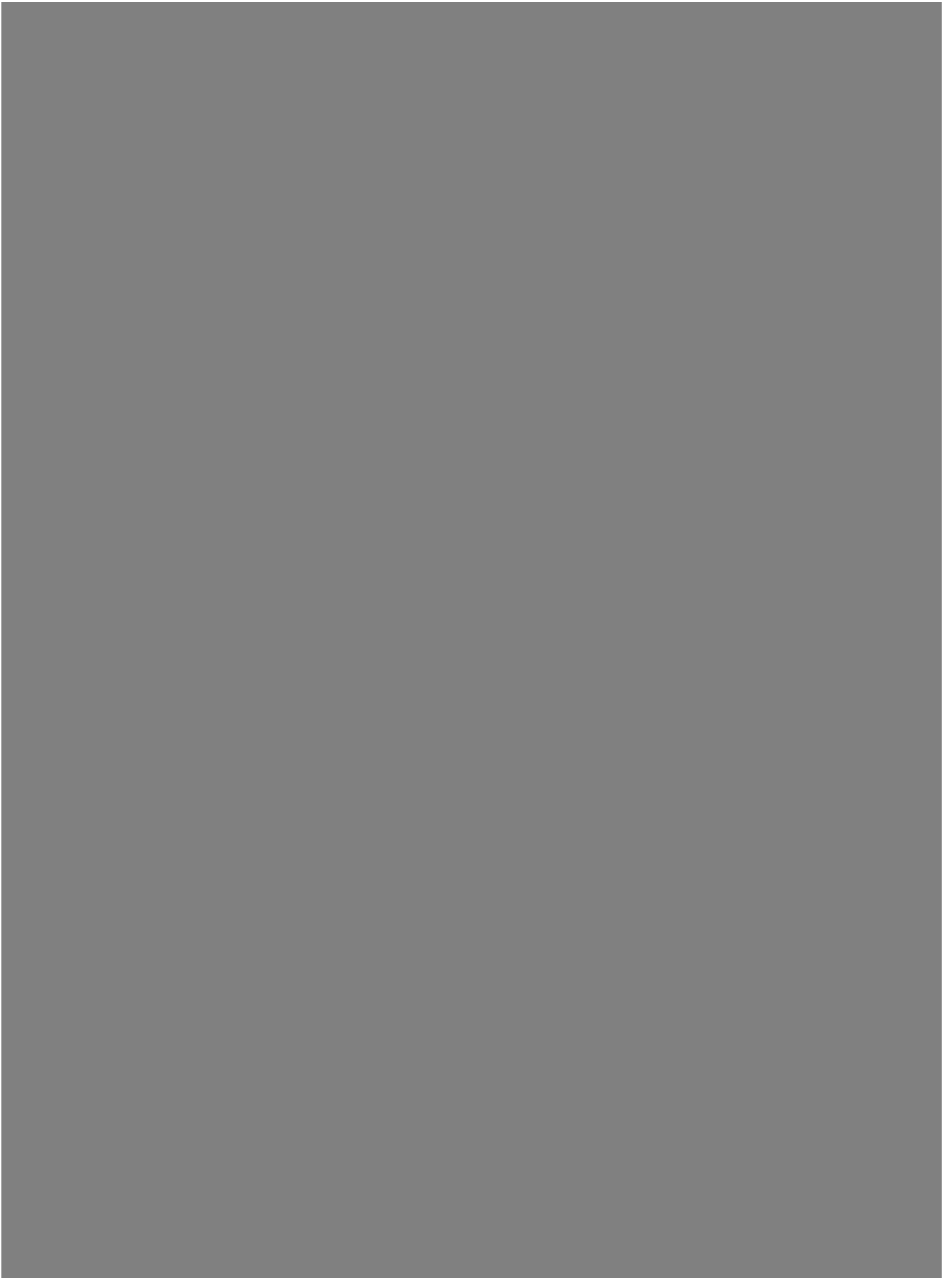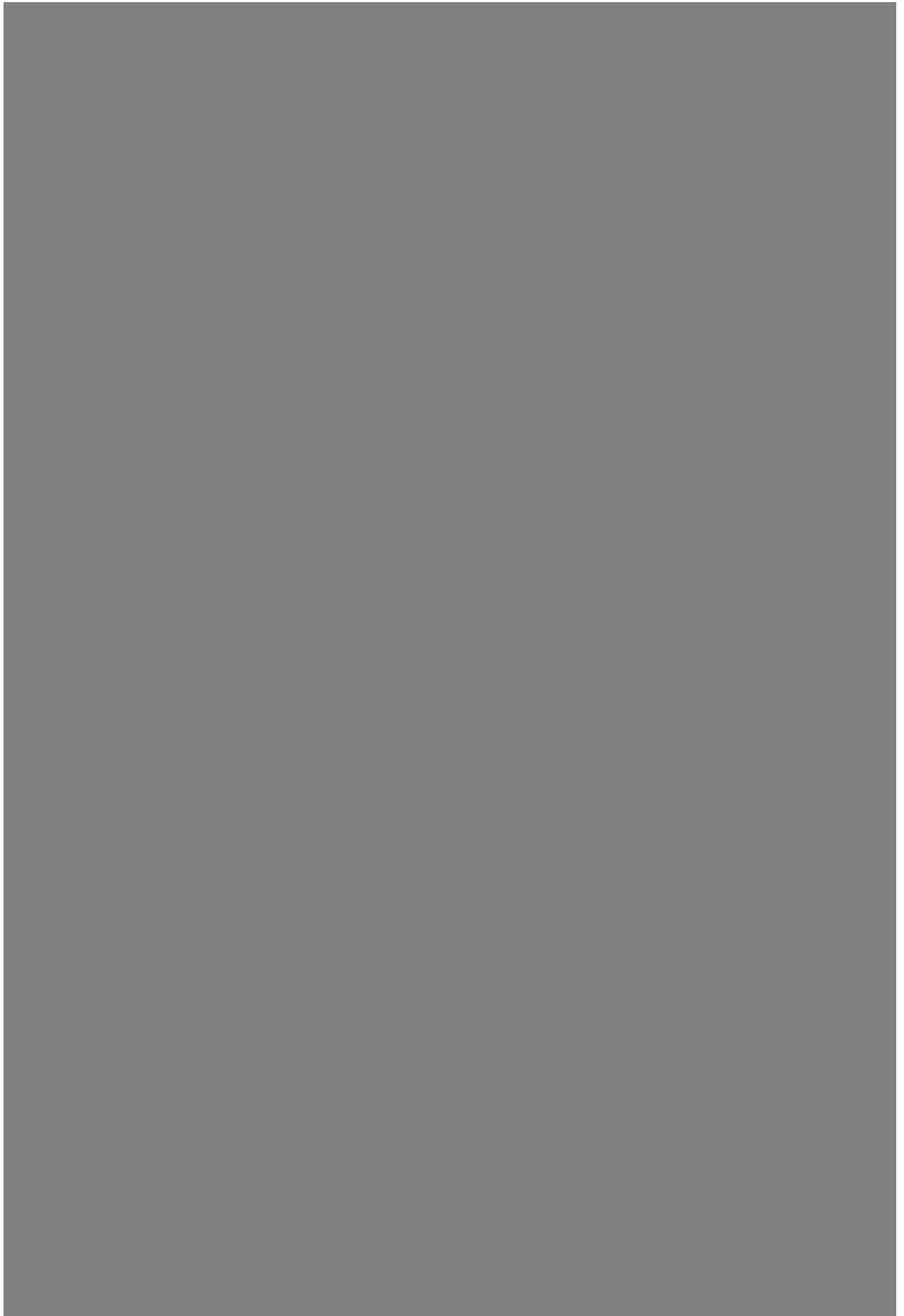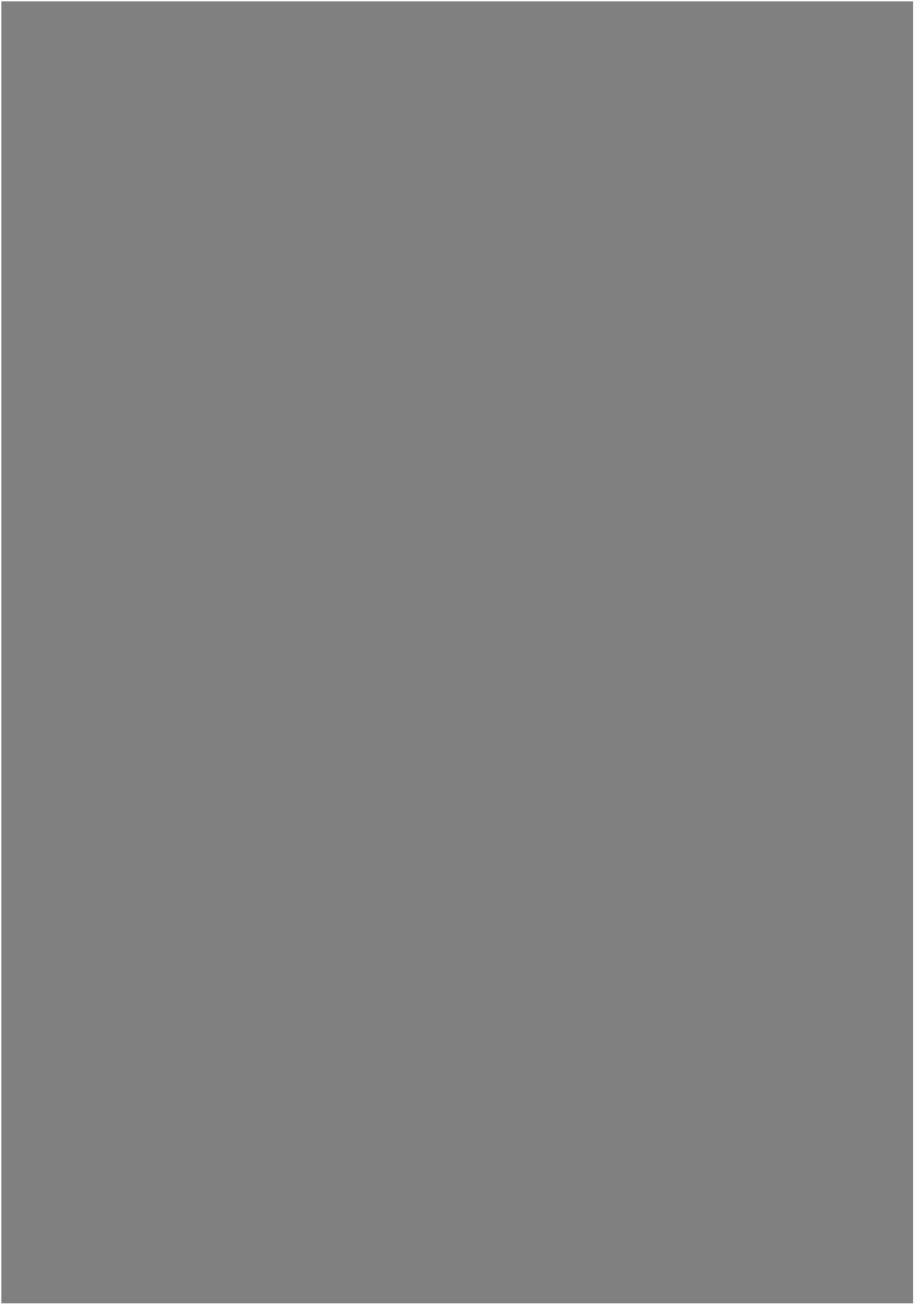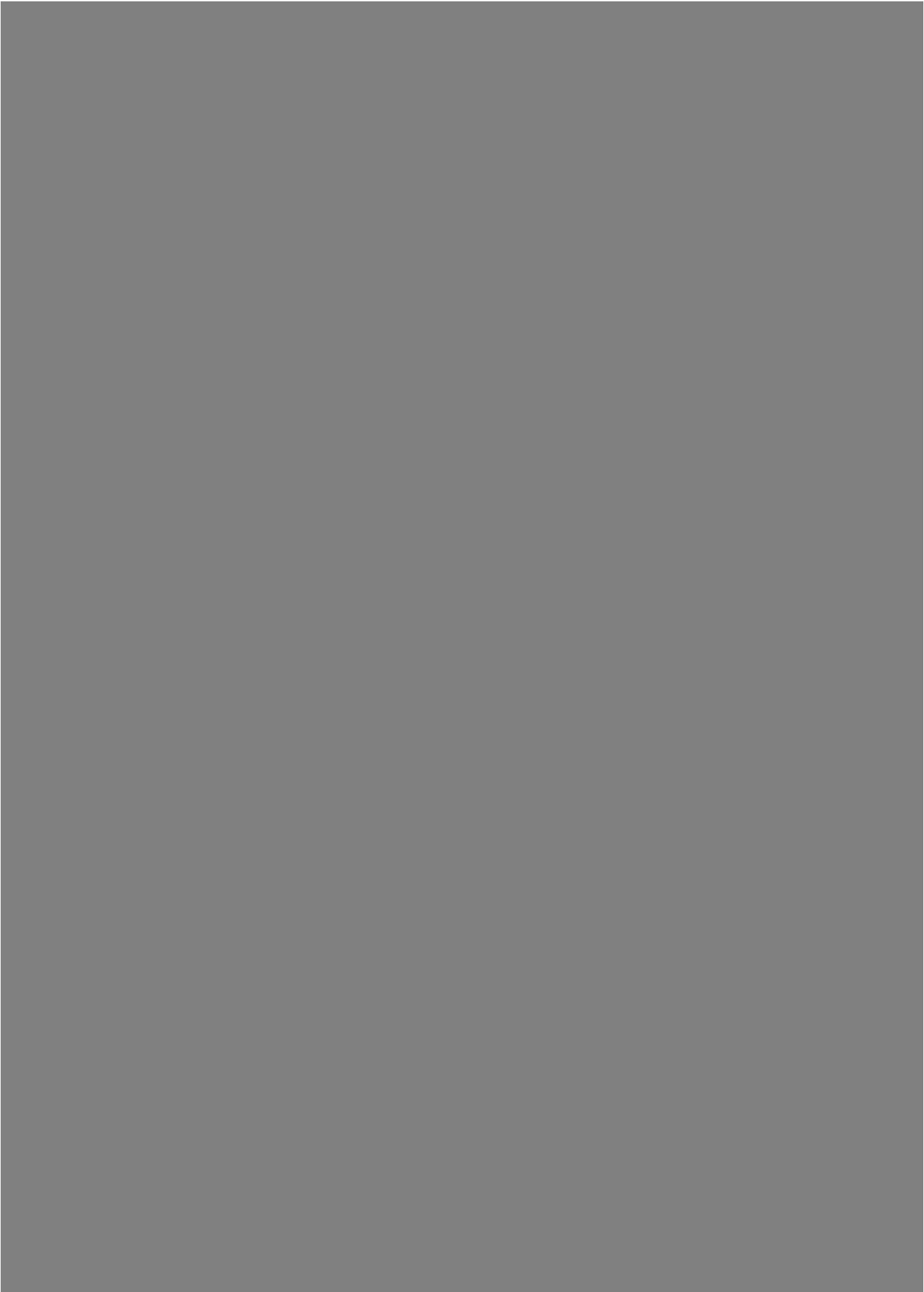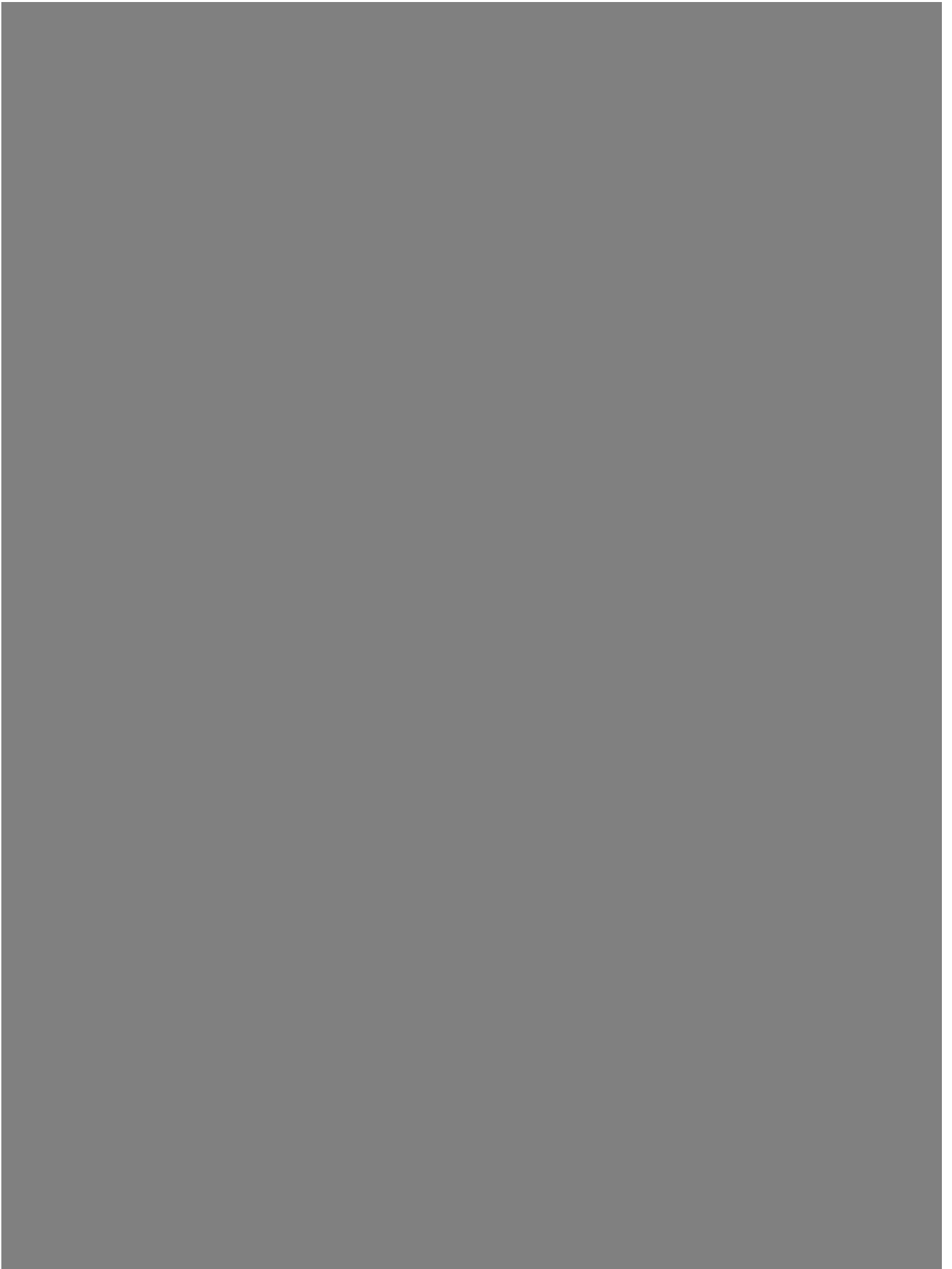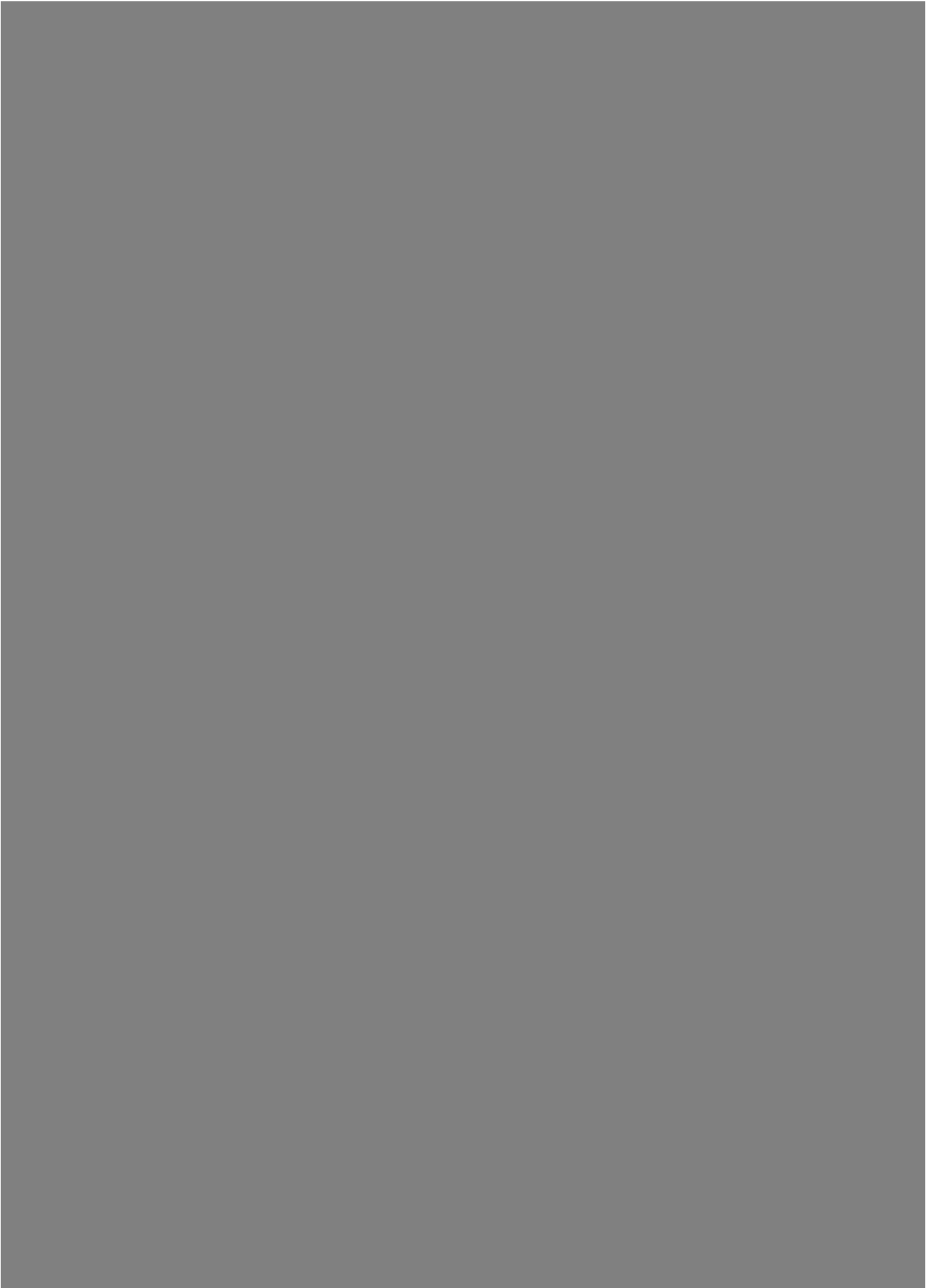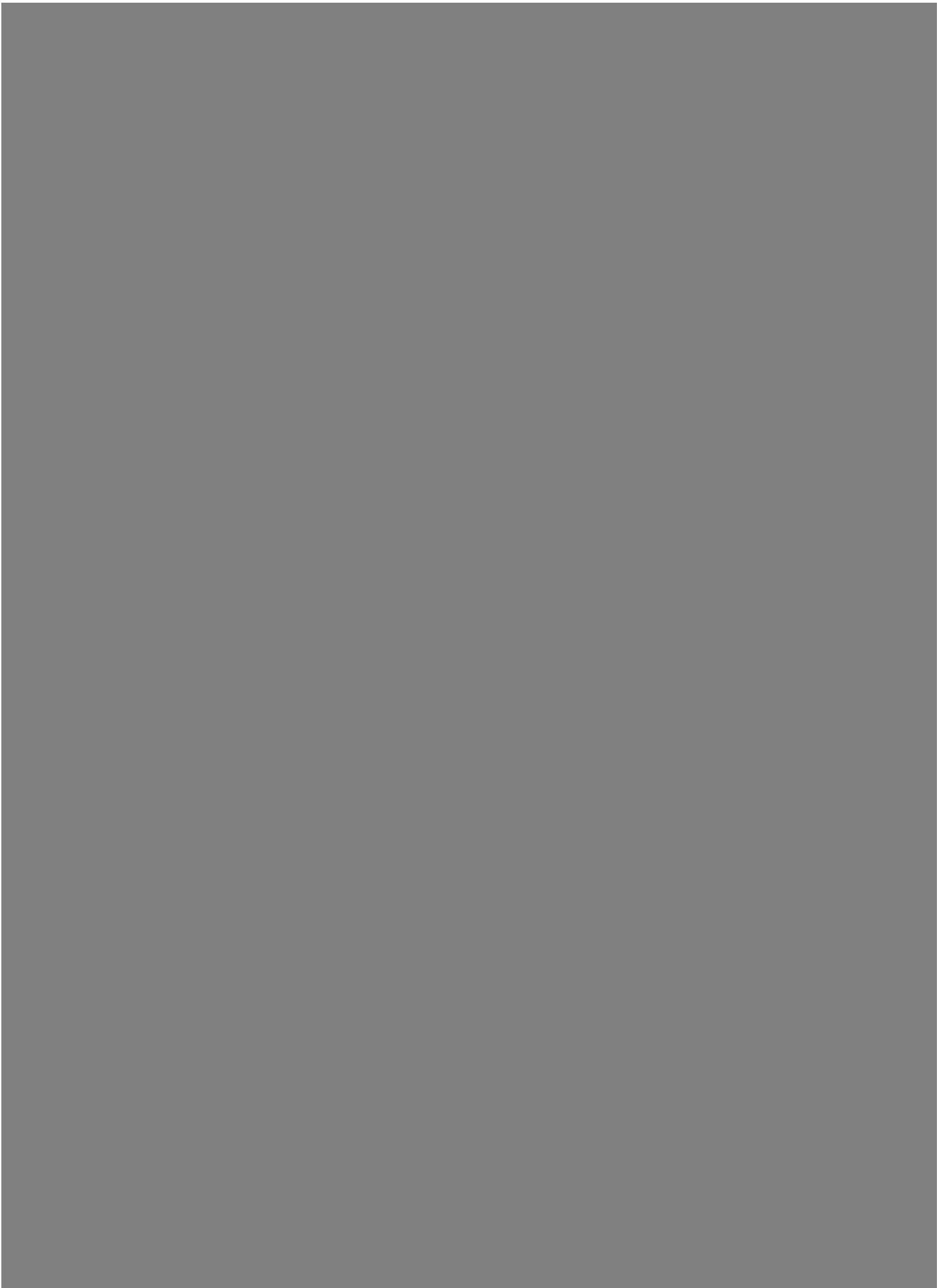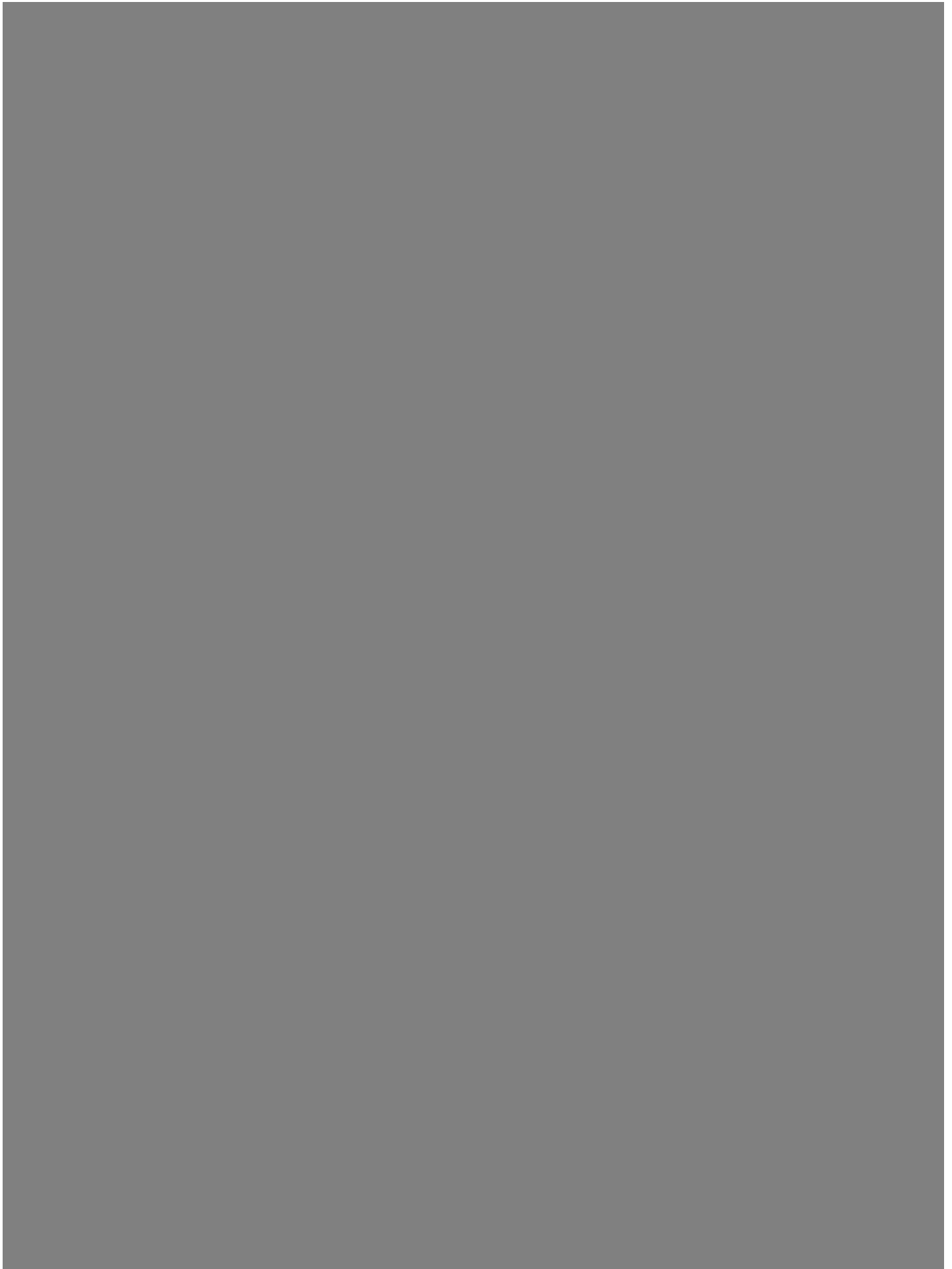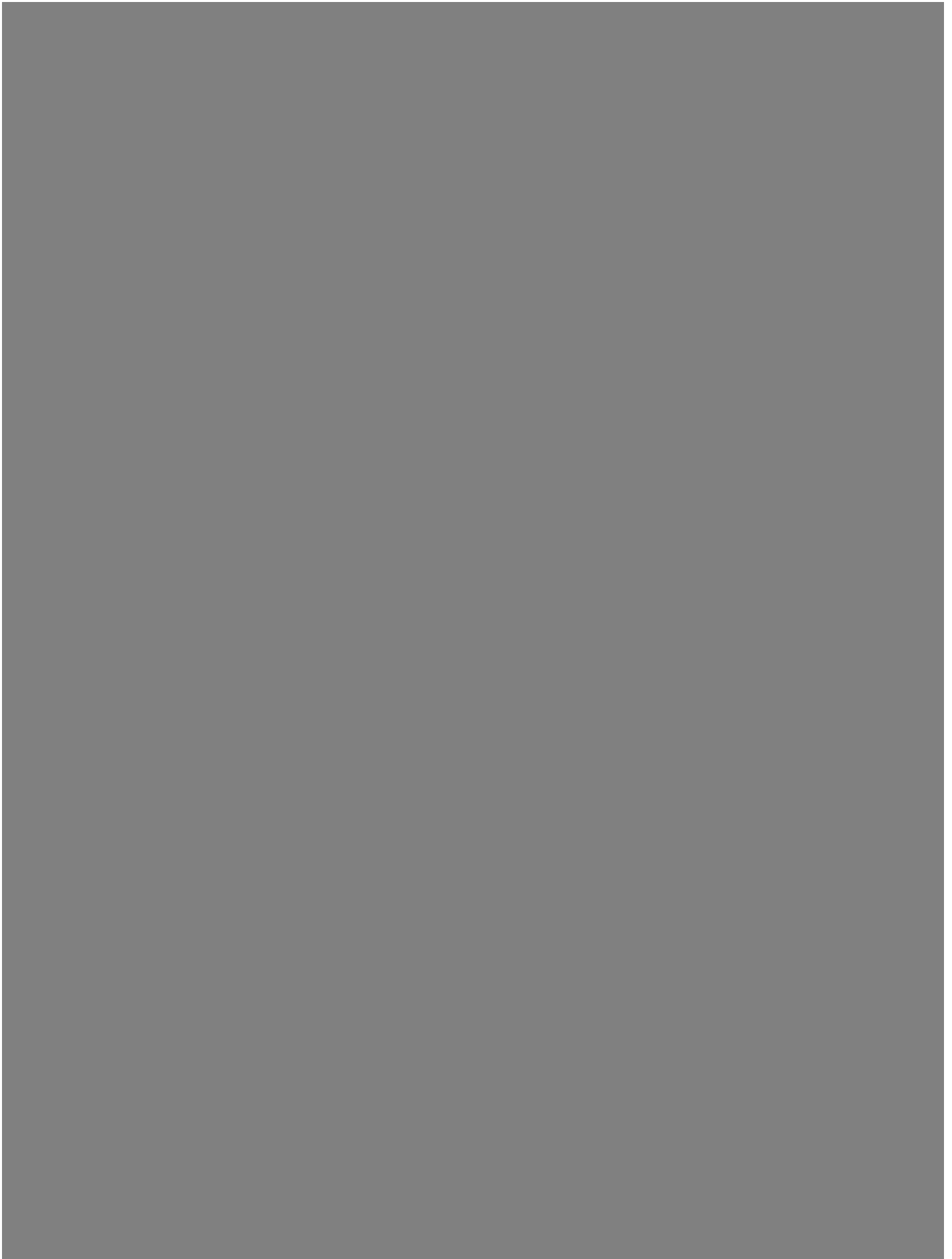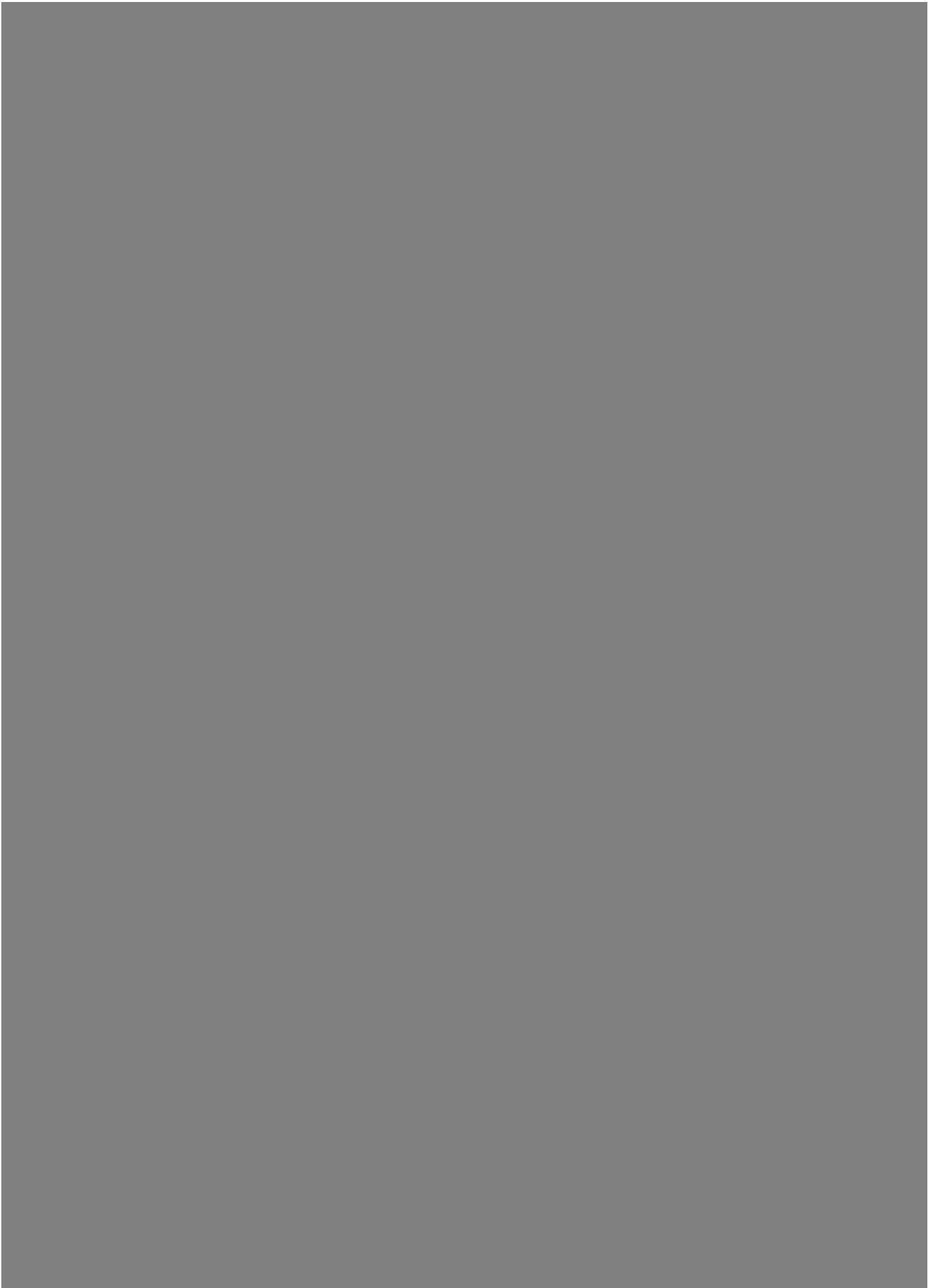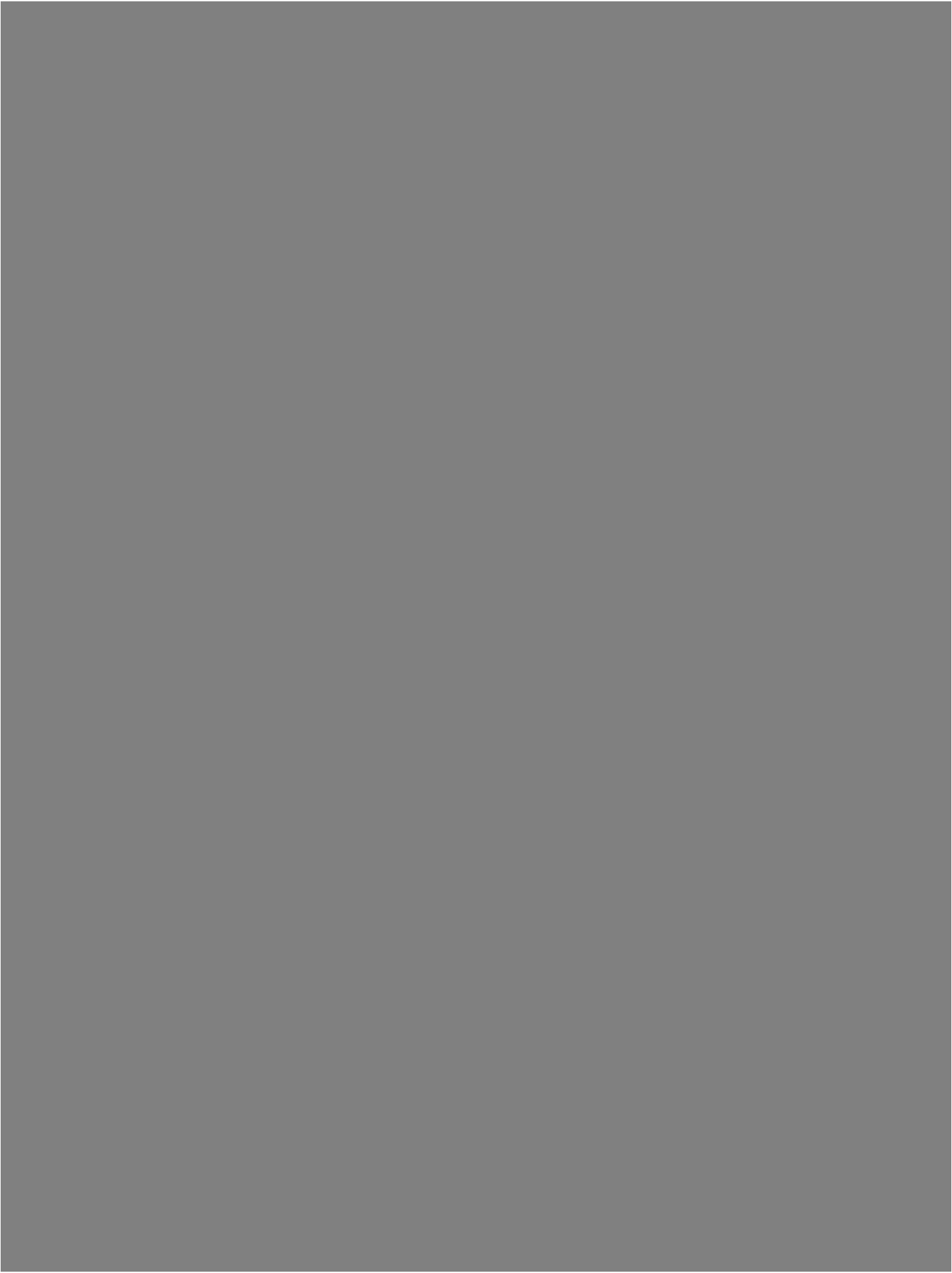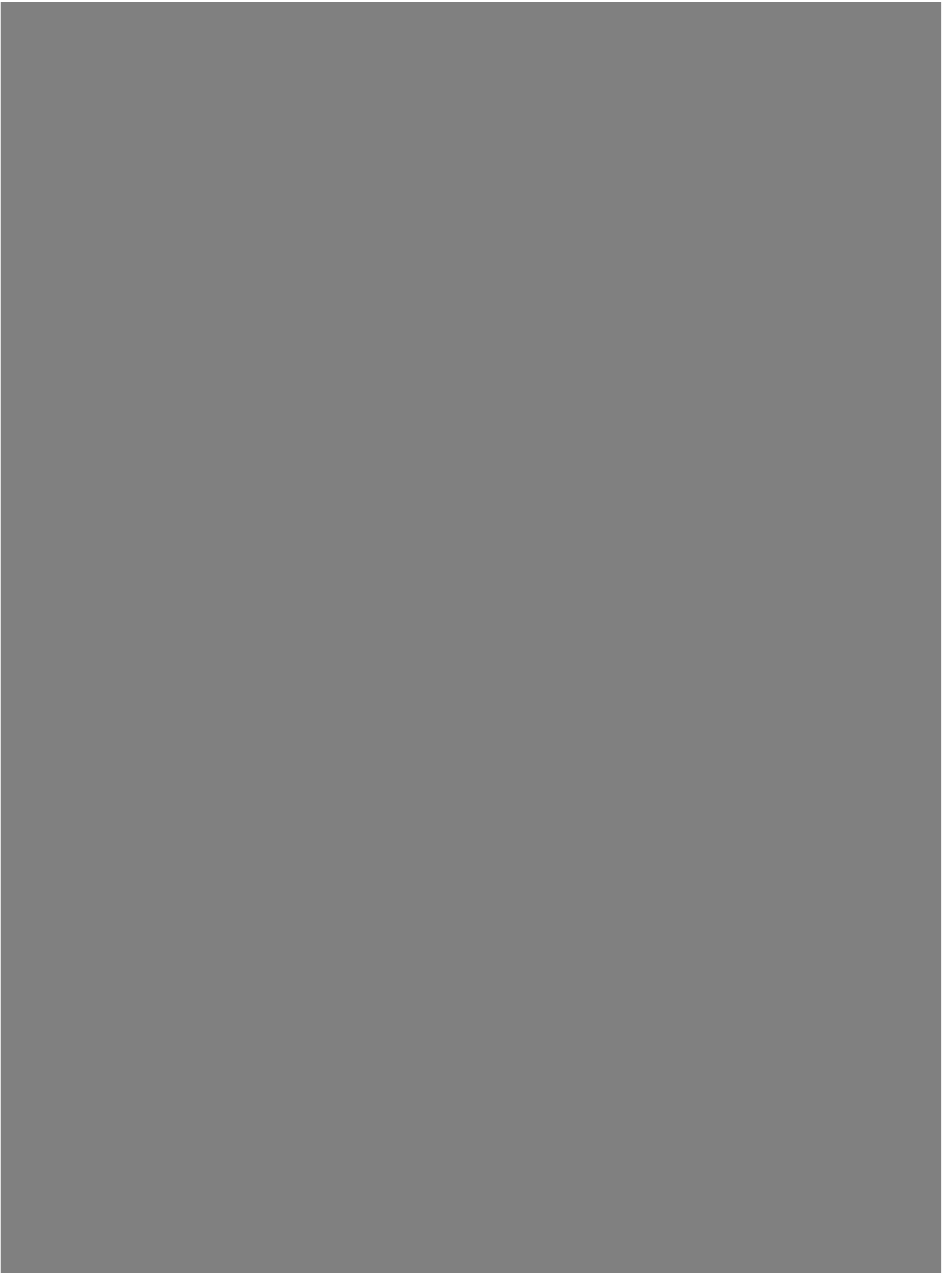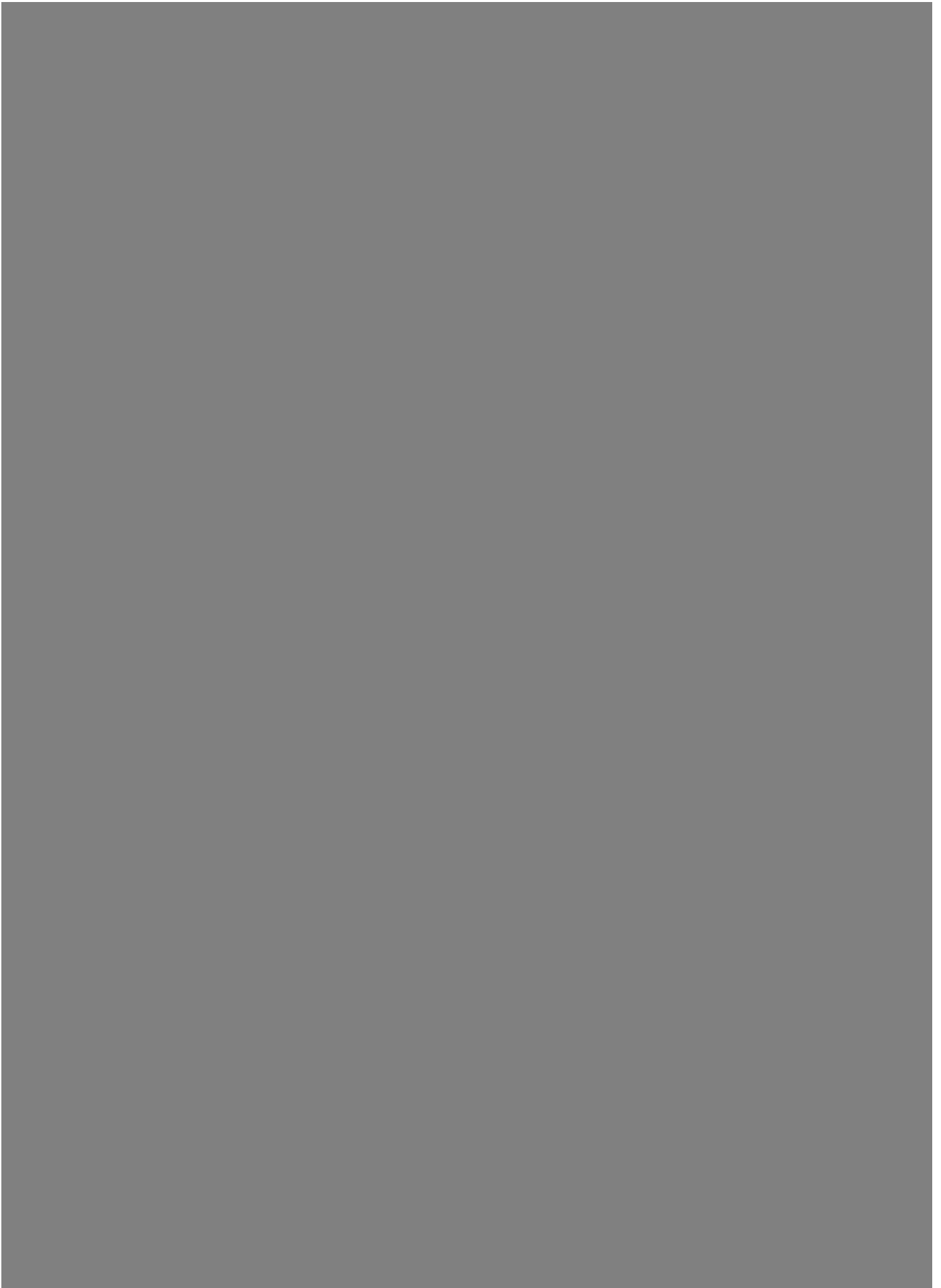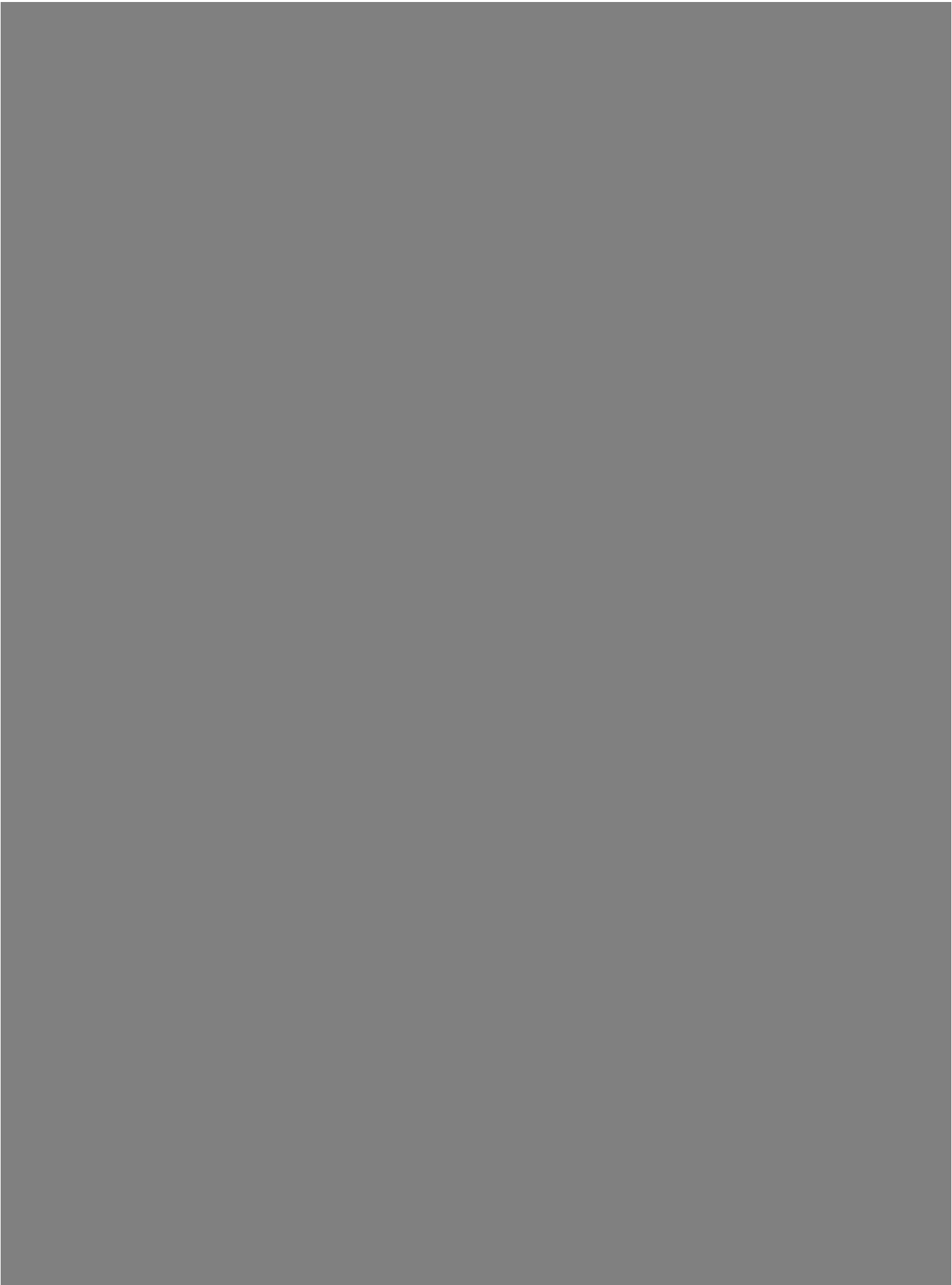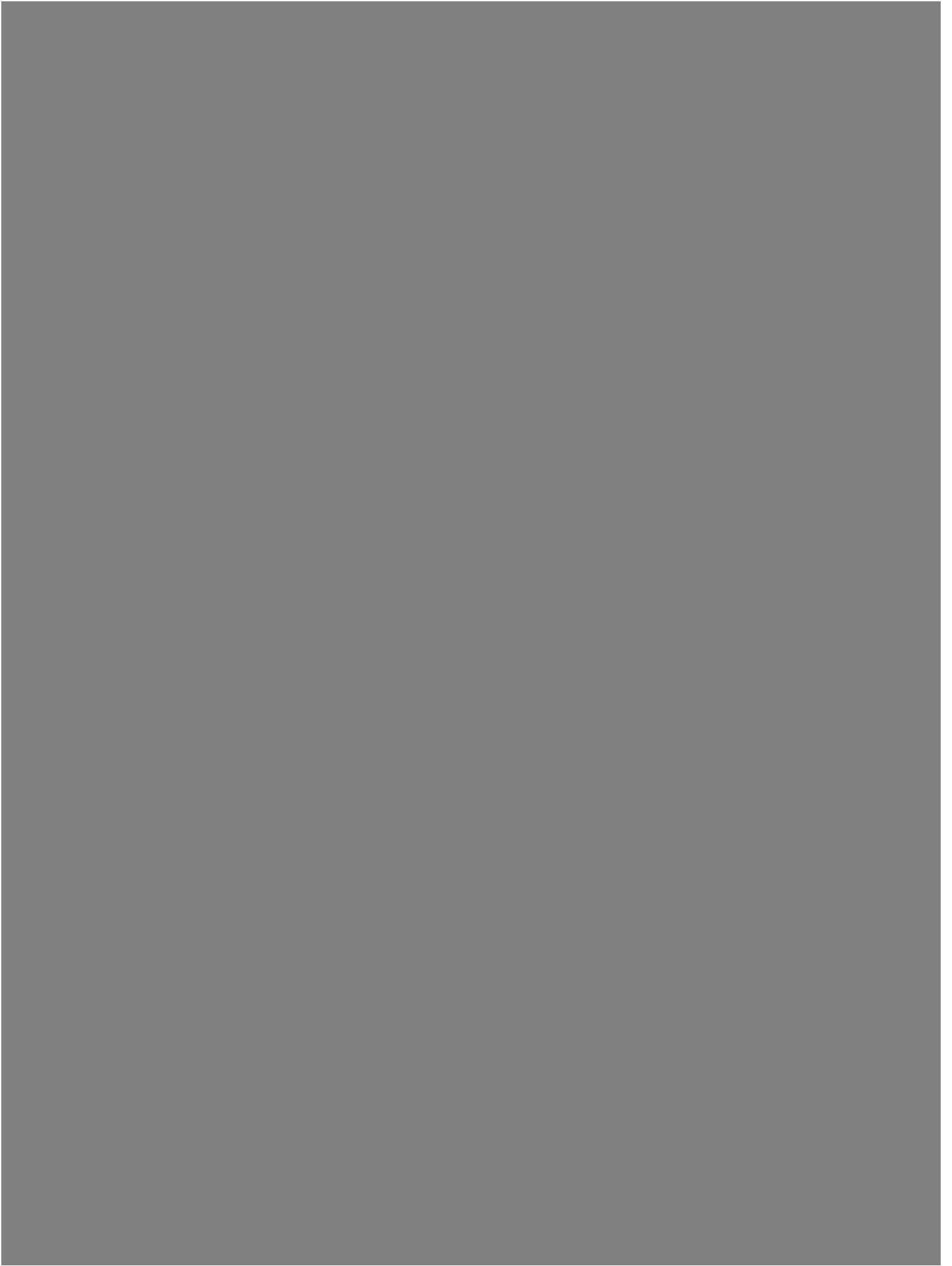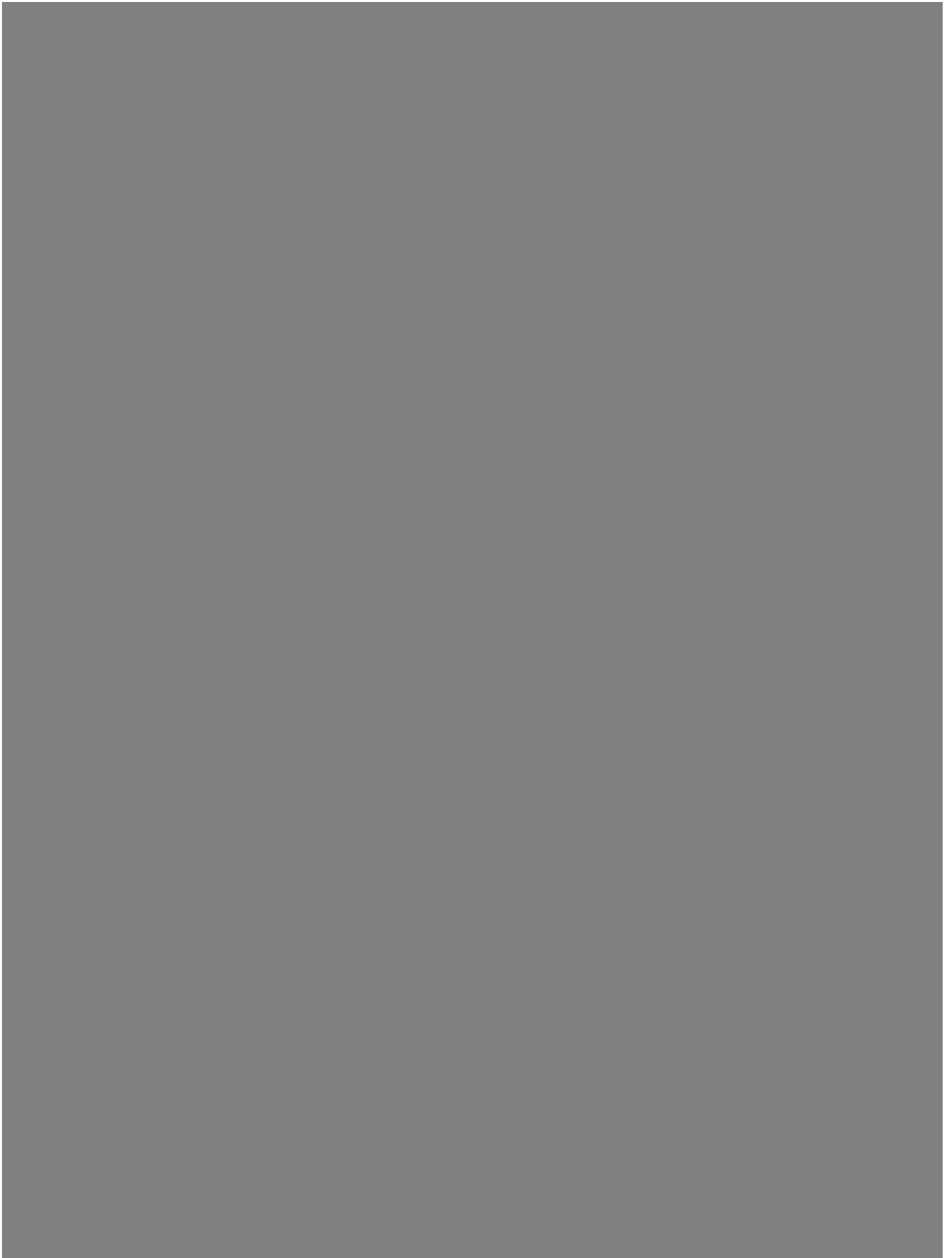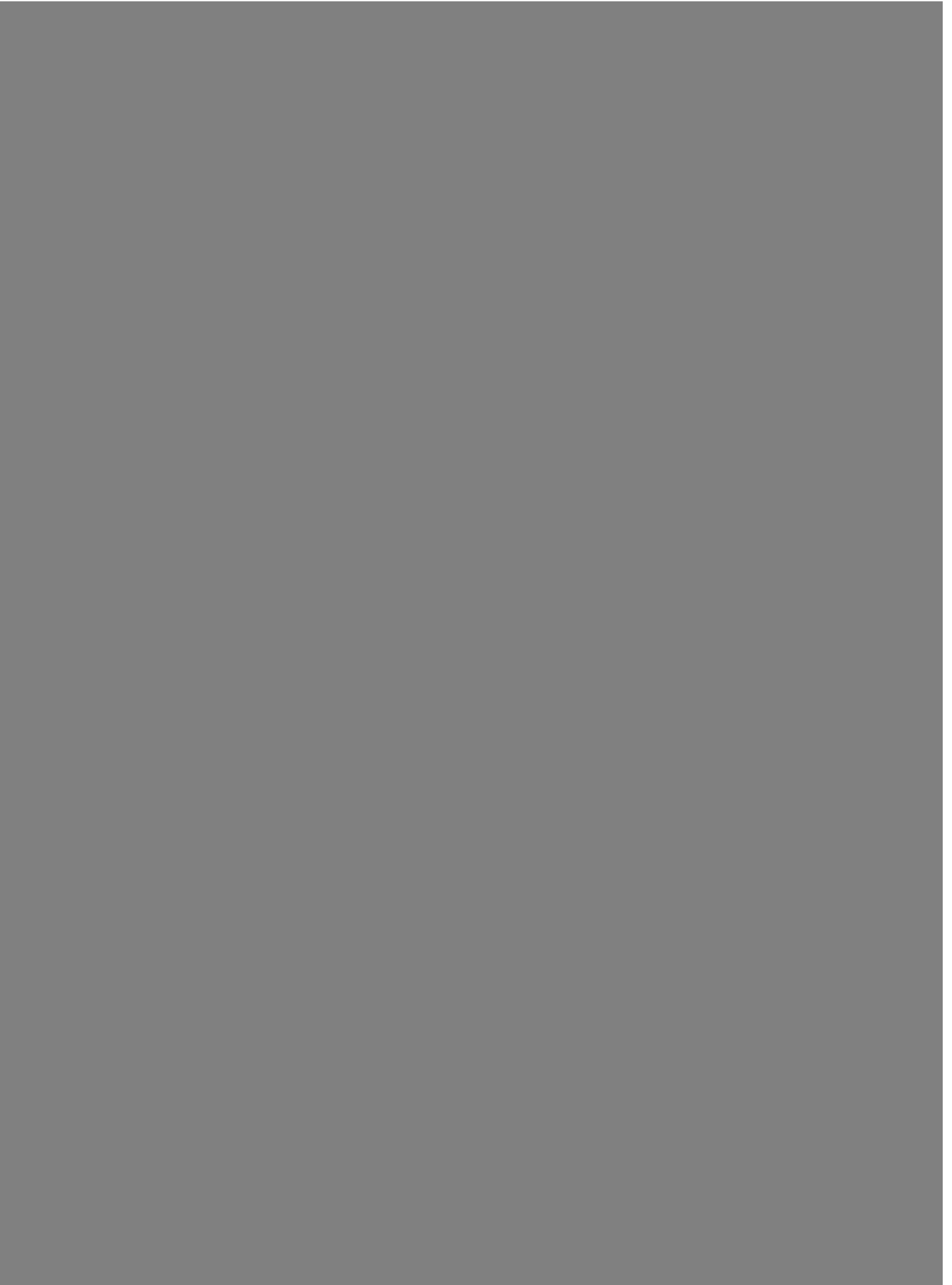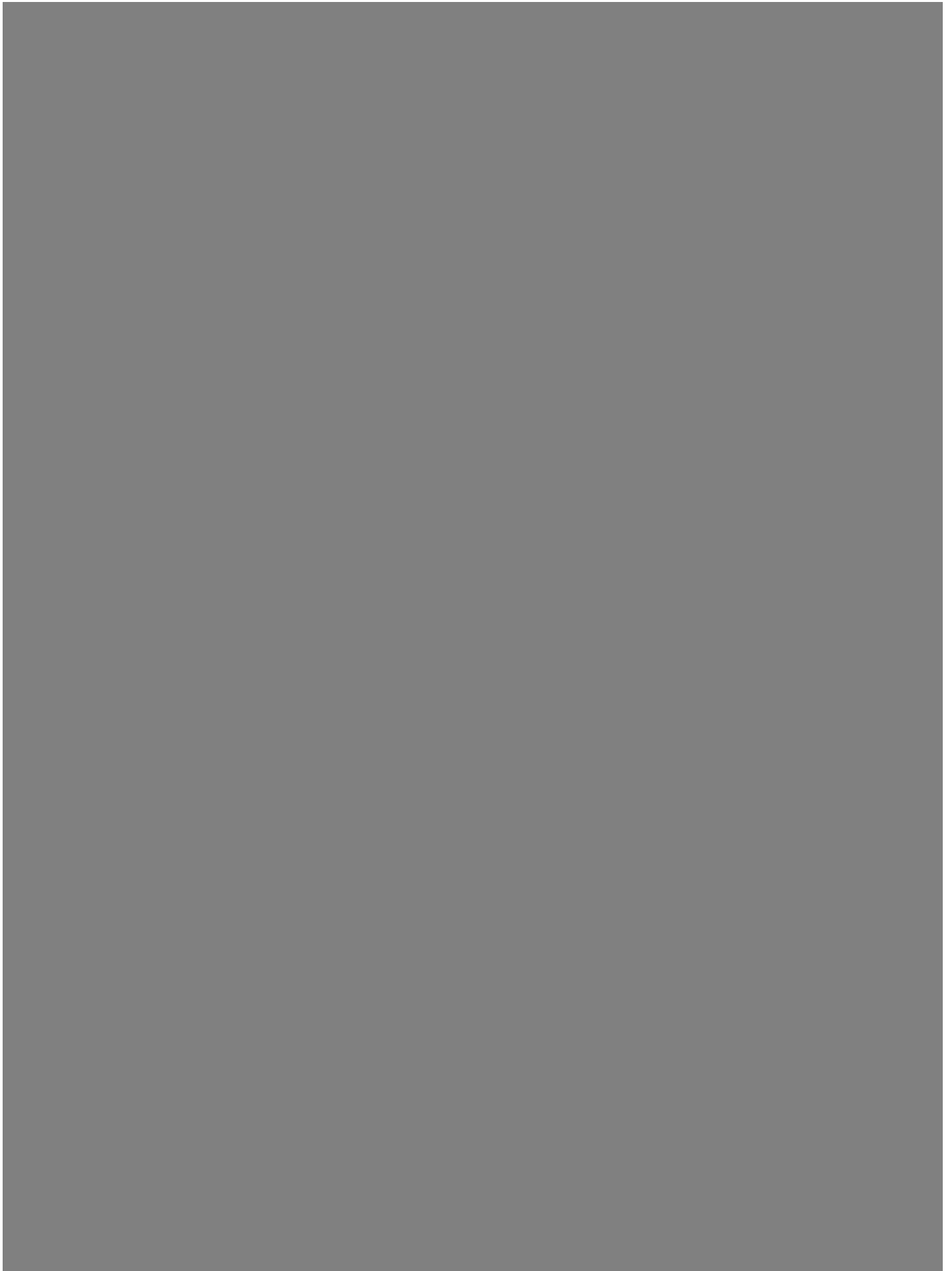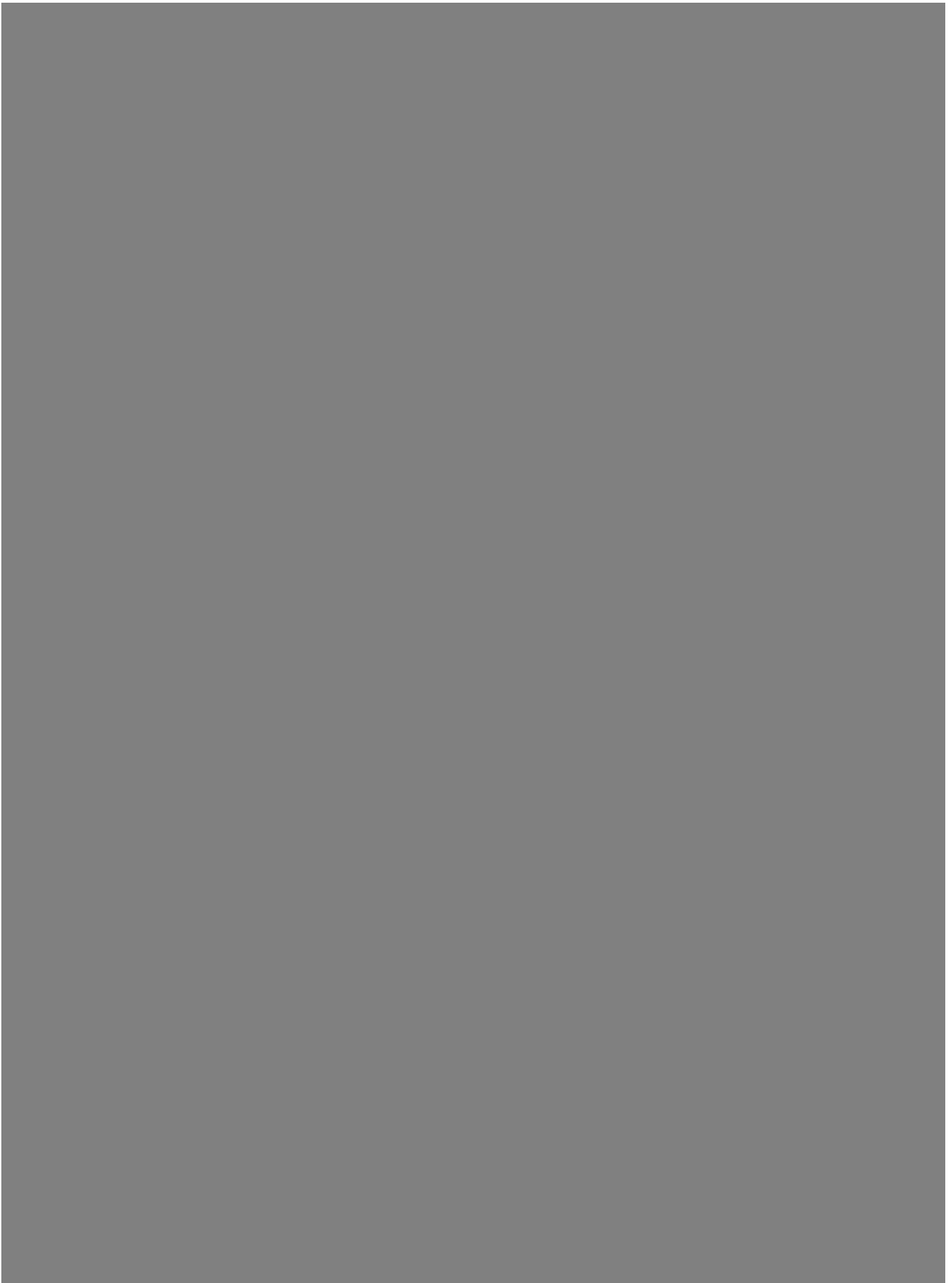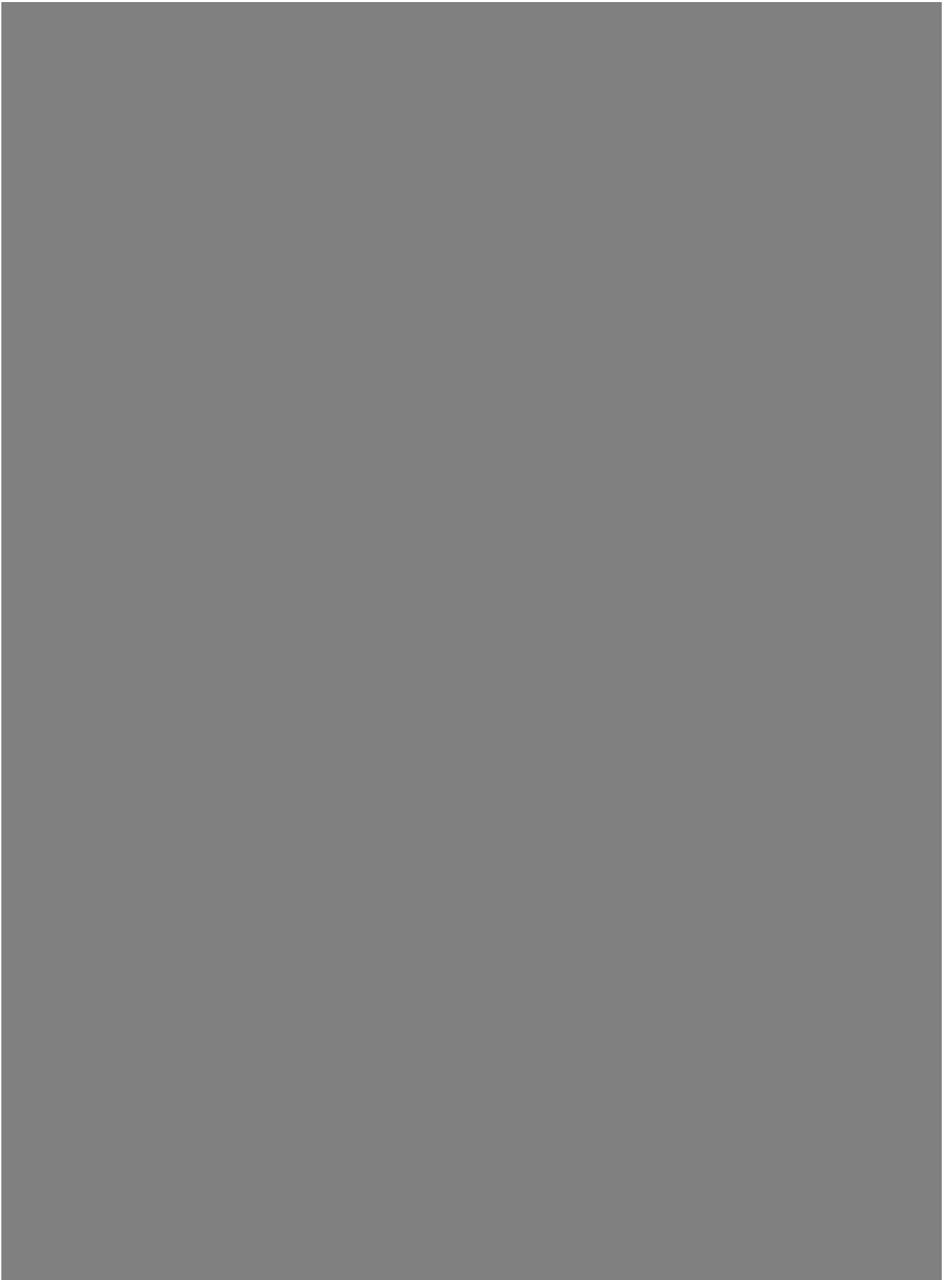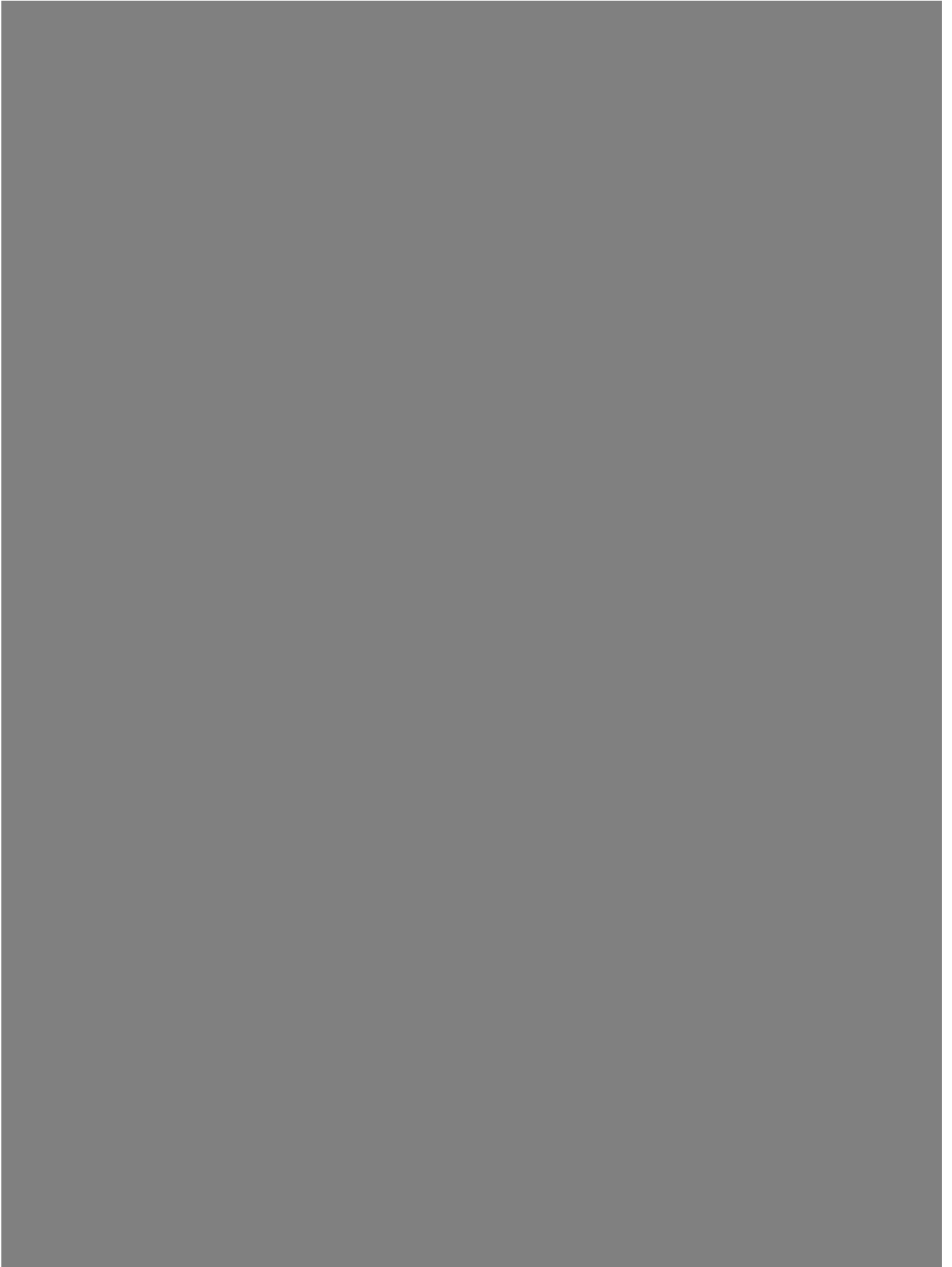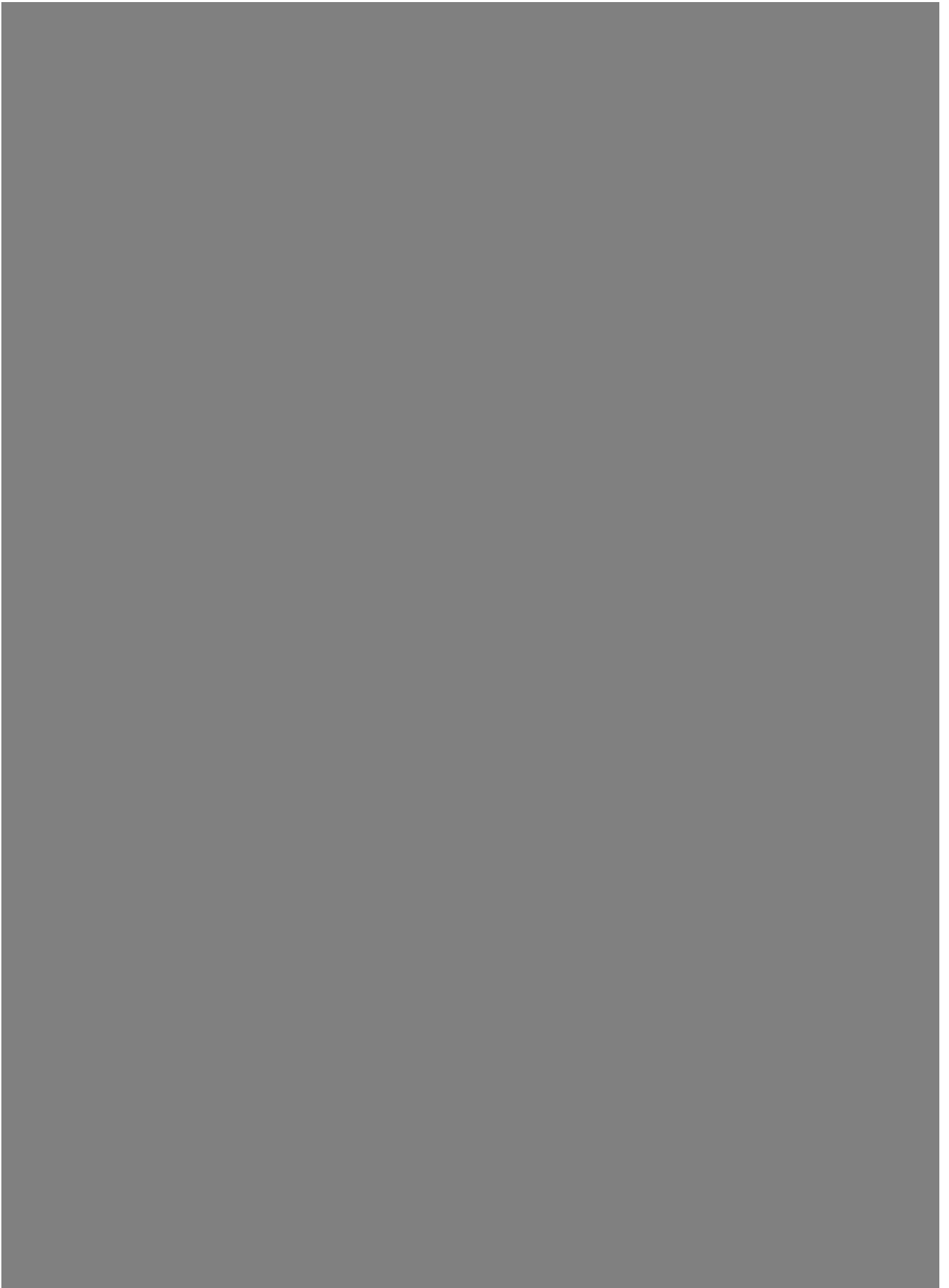
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