

Candid and Cautious: Tuning as Identity Work  
in the Boardroom

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## Abstract

Studies of socially constructed identities in organisations are not in short supply. Viewing identity as processual means individuals engage in work *on* identities. Currently, a vast literature exists on many occupations and professions. However, there is a tendency to focus on the outcomes of these processes (identity as a product), rather than the processes themselves. ‘Working on’ identities in a workplace setting invariably involves a myriad of tensions or identity struggles – captured in the commonly used metaphor of *identity work*. Adopting a social constructionist methodology, interviews and observations are conducted with a neglected organisational grouping – board members governing in New Zealand.

This thesis adds to scholarship in the ‘selves-identities’ of atypical workers – those working in a governance context. Embedded in the accounts of board members are three discourses of *silence, betwixt and voice*, leading to a series of research contributions. The interplay of tensions between discourses results in multiple, conflicting identities and surface *tuning* as a new way of engaging in identity construction processes. Identity work as tuning includes small, multiple, incremental processes – *micro interactions* of tuning in, tuning out and tuning up. Featuring identity work as tuning made up of micro processes, rather than grandiose identity building efforts of constructing, is a novel idea to contribute to a topic requiring further exploration on processes of identity formation. Discovering the intricacies of micro interactions ignites micro power dynamics infused within the tuning process. Power relations as *everywhere* as opposed to within the possession of a few is an original finding in a board governance setting. It redefines our conceptual understanding of power in the boardroom. Lastly, these contributions assist the practitioner community involved in developing and training boards and board

members, board dynamics and interactions, as well as in understanding group processes, such as groupthink. Board evaluation processes addressing performance issues, team working relationships, board culture deficits and inducting new board members will gain insights from this study exposing the nuanced complexities of deciding to remain quiet or speaking up in board proceedings.

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## Prologue

After graduating with a degree in Housing Management and Policy from Bristol, I eagerly embarked on a career in social housing, believing I could change the world for the vulnerable and needy with my new-found knowledge. However, I faced a number of ‘clashes’. The expectations of a housing manager were clear cut – keep your eye on the operational stuff and at the same time think strategically about what your contract area does. Not surprisingly, this created confusion and questioning: Should I be more strategic than operational? When should I be strategic, and could I be operational and strategic at the same time? If so, how? And, lastly, how could I possibly be strategic, forward thinking and innovative in the inner workings of a highly bureaucratic environment and tied by a rigid job description? My job role clearly prioritised day to day operations, and opportunities to participate in and influence strategic decision-making processes were limited. The common catchphrase – “we feel like schizo’s” was a private joke amongst the housing managers. We all faced uncertainty about who or how to be in our role, but I didn’t seek clarity on this ambiguity.

Another frustration, and one far more acute for me, was in my direct dealings with tenants (later to be reconceived as ‘customers’). On the one hand, I and my departmental team were the ‘supporting and caring council’, and on the flip side, we were heavy handed tyrant landlords willing to slap notices of eviction on tenants for the non-payment of rent. The ‘evictees’ in most cases would re-enter the housing system as homeless, and go through the same ordeals again, caught in a vicious, downward circle where nothing changed. These moral issues plagued me and stayed at the forefront of my mind. It seemed mindless to sanction punitive measures against the already disadvantaged.

The ‘Best Value’ regime introduced by the then Labour government integrated more money conscious measures into the council’s operations and interactions with its

customers. We had to act as *the protectors* of the ‘public purse’, yet still fulfil the council’s legal obligations as a social landlord. I had to be politically astute, and constantly ‘on my toes’ when dealing with Members of Parliament (MPs) and local councillors of different political affiliations, forever mindful of what I could say to some and not say to others. I felt as though I was constantly walking on eggshells. When misspending, government cutbacks, and financial irregularities occurred, the ones that suffered, that took the ‘brunt’, were our vulnerable, needy ‘customers’. Repairs backlogged, regular maintenance checks went unattended and the weekly rent collections axed. These measures left me uneasy and confused about who to be as a social housing manager. The ‘social’ was rapidly diluting and disappearing before my eyes.

As part of a senior management team (SMT), I was ‘privy’ to sensitive information and forbidden to divulge it to my staff. This caused split loyalties. My dilemma was, do I risk my job by paying allegiance to my team, or keep completely ‘schtum’? On the other hand, in the close working relationships I built with staff members, confidences were upheld, and delicate details remain unspoken to this day. The middle management ‘layer’ in organisations is notoriously tricky to navigate and I felt acute pressures from above and below. All these tensions, frustrations, contradictions and more spilled over, bringing an end to my ten-year career when I ‘jumped ship’ to become a management consultant.

Being a management consultant, otherwise known as ‘the body baggers’ is ‘dirty work’. I soon became disenfranchised and again felt acute dissonance in the work I was doing, how I was doing it and resigned. After spending my years of accumulated airmiles, I set out on becoming an educator. This new role heralded the end to presenting at four-hour council committee meetings and reporting on the progress of projects to boards of directors as a consultant. But this is not where my worry about who to be in the workplace ends, as my identity story is still a work in progress!

# Chapter One

## Introduction

Identity is arguably more fundamental to the conception of humanity than any other notion. That is a strong statement, but consider some of the key questions that we might use to assess the reach of the concept: What other issue is quite so important than answering the nebulous question, Who am I? What other concern is quite so captivating than dealing with the ongoing, lifelong project of assessing identity and figuring out how one relates to others and the surrounding world? What other question so influences understanding and action so heavily (if perhaps out of conscious awareness)? I can think of no other concept that is so central to the human experience, or one that infuses so many interpretations and actions, than the notion of identity.

(Gioia, 1998, p.17)

### Introduction

Identity as a “lifelong project” and a process of “figuring out” feature as core components of my prologue stories, and this study and analysis of board member identity formations. Gioia (1998) conveys the immensity of identity in our lives, claiming its importance to “one of the most complex and fascinating of human creations, *the work organization*” (italics added) (Gioia, 1998, p. 17). The organisational context of interest here is *board governance*. There is an undeniable fascination for identity within the organisation and management studies literature (OMS), despite taking time to percolate into organizational research, starting from around 1985, according to Gioia (1998). Alvesson et al. (2008) claim identity “can be linked to nearly everything” (p. 5), and more recently A.D. Brown notes interest escalating, as reflected by a 600% increase in published studies on identity (A.D. Brown, 2019). Even with this saturation, governance settings are almost immune from studies of identity, making this doctoral research unusual and rare. Governance

studies of boards place significance on effective behaviours, skills, traits and competences rather “than answering the nebulous question, Who am I?” (Gioia, 1998, p. 17).

In this introduction I outline my approach to studying identity in the way I have. I give an overview of the issues surrounding the origins and choice of research questions for this study. I will also briefly mention my methodological orientations supporting the foundations of this inquiry, and lastly provide an overview of each chapter contained in this thesis.

### **Research Objectives**

My choice to study board member identities was not accidental. Ironically, it did not arise from readings of the identity literature to discover an absence of board member identity studies, rather it arose from problematisation (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). As I am unable to lay claim to ‘auto’-biography in this study as I have never been a board member, my insights came from other sources. In the UK I worked alongside council committee members in local authorities, and newly appointed boards in housing associations and trusts. Many family, friends, and work colleagues served as board members. I had also researched governance in social housing and board members’ training and development needs (Hutchinson & Ward, 2012; Ward & Preece, 2012). My recollections of the conversations about the work of a board director, limited partly due to confidentiality reasons, are stories of factions, relational problems, moral dilemmas, and the constant splitting of themselves between various board roles, ordinary day jobs and personal life. My curiosities lay in a series of questions about board members. For example, are they the same person in their ordinary day job and on the board? How do they manage the different facets of paid work and volunteer board work? How do they adjust and switch to their

position of board member? What switching of identities takes place and what are the processes? Lastly, how do they see themselves as board members?

These questions and others were the beginnings of my journey into identity related research. I was seeking out the “compelling connections with questions of how to live and how to act” (Wetherell, 2010, p. 4), which underpin many contemporary understandings of identity. I was no longer interested in the prerequisites of the role itself, such as the knowledge, capabilities and competences covered in my co-authored article (Ward & Preece, 2012), but more inquisitive to dig deeper, and crucially, for the purpose of this study, to know more about what it is like being a board member. This led to my focus on ‘how’ identities are shaped and ‘what’ processes are adopted, rather than ‘what’ identity *is* formed. This focus takes form in the following research questions: What identity resources do board members draw on, and what identity tensions and struggles do they narrate in constructing identities? Additionally, what identity processes are most salient in the formation of board member identity? Finally, what does this tell us for the practice of board work.

### **Identities in Organisational Settings**

In versions of ourselves or identities, “everything we do, say or think reflects and shapes how we define ourselves” (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 19). In revealing my own candid stories describing my earlier occupations I convey several ‘woolly’ descriptions in response to the notoriously complex question, Who am I? (Gioia, 1998). My descriptions of two different occupations, as a social housing manager and management consultant, feature inherent tensions or *identity struggle* (Svenningson & Alvesson, 2003). The label or fixed ‘identity’ of a social housing manager suddenly gets torn apart into different ways of ‘being’ or expectations of ‘becoming’ (balancing frontline operations and requirements

to be strategic). I am energetic verging on activist, or perhaps a ‘do-gooder’ with altruistic values. My descriptions of angst and uneasiness offer different versions of myself, before dissipating into other accounts of disillusionment, disenfranchisement, and disappointment. In interactions with others (i.e., MPs), I am guarded by what I can and cannot say. Struggle is at the core of *doing* identity as individuals navigate contradictions, dilemmas, and internal conflicts such as anxiety and doubt, resembling the ‘schizophrenic’ identifications suggested by A.D. Brown (2017). There is a sense of irony that as housing managers, we felt like ‘schizo’s.’ The longevity of this struggle is evident in my different work roles today, including my role as an academic (see Epilogue), echoing the words from Alvesson et al. (2008, p. 19) – “We cannot escape identity construction.”

The study of identity and its benefits has not been popular in governance settings, with only a small emerging interest in social identity theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Two explanations for this are the dominance of agency theory applied to understanding boards (Dalton et al., 1998; Daily et al., 2003), and issues with access to boards and their members to conduct empirical research (Leblanc & Schwartz, 2007). The value and significance of identity as an area of academic inquiry is summarised by Ashforth et al. (2008, p. 334):

The concept of identity helps capture the essence of who people are and, thus, why they do what they do – it is at the core of why people join organizations and why they voluntarily leave, why they approach their work the way they do and why they interact with others the way they do during that work.

Their view describes identity at the heart of what we know about ourselves, and our understanding of organisational life and is helpful in answering the ‘why’ questions. As I

regard identity as “a more open project” (Alvesson, 2010, p. 195), I conceive and think of identity as processual in nature and formed by board member accounts of how they describe themselves and their work in relation to others. Analysing board member discourse creates opportunities for an “up-close and in-depth view of the intricacies which inform the processes of identity construction in organizational settings” (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 302). Foregrounding a discourse-analytic approach steers away from classing identity as the “essence of an individual (or collective)” and “objectifying identities as observable entities” (Ybema et al. 2009, p. 304). Taking inspiration from van Maanen (1995), Ybema et al. (2009) say “identity is a matter of claims not character; persona, not personality; and presentation, not self” (p. 306). Regarding identity as “claims” or “persona” or “presentation” means *work* is required. This effort or work on identity is popularly known as *identity work* (Svenningson & Alvesson, 2003), and explains the “ongoing iteration between social and self-definition” (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 301). This leads to the idea of identities as “complex, recursive, reflexive, and constantly ‘under construction’” (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 301). Consequently, I class identity as subjective, which means it is “contextually bounded and socially invented” (Gioia, 1998, p.18). Early works from Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934) feature multiple identities and identity as a relational concept, aligning with my understanding of identity, as opposed to identity as a core fixed ‘self’.

Hence, this thesis adopts a social constructionist orientation to study identity. I analyse the discourse or *identity talk* (Alvesson, 2001; Snow & Anderson, 1987) of board members via interviews and boardroom observations to advance understandings of identity construction processes, identity struggle, and board dynamics. Discourse informed identity features a body of studies exploring “how identities are formulated, embraced or resisted, inscribed or proscribed” (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 303). The language used to describe ourselves and

others is rather more than “a simple medium for mirroring of objective reality” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a, p. 142). Conversely, “the same statement may have different meanings” (p. 142), or one word can change meaning. Additionally, the same word or phrase used by the same person can mean different things, as Alvesson and Kärreman show in an example of the word ‘leader’. These scholars also use the ordinary example of “It is 9 o’clock” to show its different meanings, such as announcing the start of an event, or quite plausibly as a chastisement meaning “You are late”. I, therefore, treat language as having performative capabilities and view both language and discourse as a “shaping force” that can be used in a host of different ways to “...clarify, unite, do identity work, and so on” (p. 142). This notion echoes the work of J. L. Austin (1962/1975) in *How to do things with words*, on the performative qualities of language. Reinforcing the point of how I ‘see’ language is the quote repeated by Wetherell from Goffman’s (1981) *Forms of Talk*, which classes language as sticky jam because it simply gets everywhere, “lingering on every surface” (Wetherell, 2010, p. 14).

### **Significance of my Study**

Although I join an army of students, researchers, and academics and others studying identity, my approach to identity as processual and discursive in nature is seen as a “new complication for identity studies”, with the field of identity viewed as “a site of continuous unsettled argument” (Wetherell, 2010, p. 4). I engage with scholars in a wave beyond “examining what identity is to how identity is discursively constructed” (p. 13). I do not seek to define board members based on the usual frames used within social sciences and humanities of class, gender, religion, nationality and so on. Instead I am guided in a new direction of identity studies, “from investigating experience to investigating how accounts of experience were constructed following more sophisticated analyses of the workings of

language, self-description and human meaning-making” (p. 13). It is these “workings of language” (discourse) that interest me in studying the identity formation processes of board members.

Therefore, my study offers several new insights to the study of constructing identities (identity work) and board dynamics. Firstly, scholars adopting a social constructionist paradigm to study identity processes have relied on Svenningsson and Alvesson’s (2003) definition and reporting of “forming” or “repairing” or “maintaining” identities. Identity work or identity *construction* has grabbed all the attention (McInnes & Corlett, 2012). The image of *building* identities into a ‘form’ (or outcome or type) prevails in studies on identity work, rather than the illumination of processes. I suggest an alternative to thinking about *constructing* identities into formations, by proposing a tension between voice-silence provoking identity work. Accepting identity as a ‘work in progress’, never fixed and always in flux, I discover the process of *tuning* as a feature of board member identity efforts or *identity work*. Within the voice-silence discourse, I illuminate the idea of an ongoing and flowing process without the need for the building up or the building of ‘an’ identity into a finished item or product (identity). Conversely, board member identity efforts centre on micro processes featuring a series of small, micro, multiple, continuous and concentrated actions as they shuffle between a desire to be vocal and staying silent. Within these micro processes, power is visible, not as power in the possession of individuals, but rather as an interactive, complex and relational process. These findings favour the idea of the “shakiness of identity formation” (Svenningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1167), the fluidity and fragmenting of identity, as opposed to the core debate on the coherence and distinctness of identity (A.D. Brown, 2015). Hence, the idea of identity work as tuning offers an alternative.

Secondly, applying an identity frame in the way I have complements our current understanding of board dynamics based on behavioural theories. The scrutiny of board member identity work facilitates a glimpse of more nuanced understandings of their secretive and “behind closed doors” (Pye & Pettigrew, 2005, p. S33) activities, or following Pye’s (2001) study of 12 UK boards, “back-stage”(p. S33). Additionally, applying a processual lens to identity raises colliding and at times conflicting board member identities (i.e., dissenting and rebelling). This reveals power dynamics at a micro-local level, indicating power as displaced, distributed and interactional. Lastly, these insights assist practitioners engaged in board learning, evaluation and development to understand the complexities of cohesive team/board working, conflict management, dysfunctional group processes and performance enhancement.

To summarise, this thesis is about the tensions faced by people doing their work and more importantly, how these tensions disturb and unsettle who we are. We become preoccupied with questioning who we are and how we should act in undertaking our work activities, and this is inescapable, and ongoing. This is the essence of my thesis, as I explore the processes of board member identity construction forged around voice-silence discourse and what the tuning process can tell us about their work. Taking social constructionism as my overarching paradigm, I navigate my research questions by collecting empirical research material from board member interviews and direct boardroom observations, using discourse analysis to advance understandings of identity construction processes, identity struggle, and board dynamics. I now attend to outlining the structure of my thesis.

Chapter Two reviews the literature on identities informed by a discursive approach since my methodological claims lie with discourse. I outline my assumptions and framing of identity based on this position. I raise and discuss longstanding debates within identity studies in the OMS literature, relevant to the objectives of my study. To understand the

complexities of board member identity constructions, I draw from the concept of identity work as the main theoretical approach underpinning a processual view of identity. In this discussion I consider the notion of identity struggle to illuminate tension within processes of identity formation. Hence, my treatment of identity could be considered counter-intuitive – something we do not possess or hold, rather identity as illustrated from the discursive accounts of board member identity work.

In Chapter Three I tackle a diverse and wide scholarship on board governance by focusing on relationships, interactions and the ‘social side’ of board work. In providing context to the study of identity work in a governance setting, I organise the board governance literature into three waves, depicting a gradual inclination away from agency theory and its assumptions. Within this chapter I detail what is currently known in a body of research named *board dynamics*, illuminating the relational aspects of board work. The literature on board dynamics is a core component of my discussion, opening up research at the individual board member level of analysis my study is concerned with. Acknowledging the absence of discursive accounts of identity in governance settings, I present an outline of emerging interest in alternative methodologies such as the constructionist paradigm in which my research is positioned.

A voice-silence discourse surfaced from board members talking about themselves and others. Thus, a growing interest in voice and silence in organisational settings is discussed in Chapter Four. I make connections in this literature to studies on identity constructions, albeit there is a dearth of voice-silence scholarship in both identity and governance studies.

In Chapter Five and Chapter Six I include my methodological and method choices, along with the challenges I experienced undertaking this study. For example, access issues and maintaining confidentiality when researching ‘elites’, as opposed to employees. I build in

the inclusion of reflexive comments and thoughts throughout both chapters, demonstrating the need for ongoing reflexivity to show trustworthiness in qualitative studies.

I detail the analysis of my findings in Chapter Seven, Chapter Eight and Chapter Nine using discourse analysis. Each chapter features one of three discourses: *silence, betwixt and voice*, including the discursive clusters emerging from these. I provide a commentary throughout each chapter, using participant excerpts to offer salient points and incorporate relevant theoretical insights.

Finally, Chapters Ten and Eleven conclude this thesis. In revisiting my aims and hopes in conducting this research, I tie everything together in Chapter Ten. I revisit the aims and findings, discussing key contributions to theory and practice. In my conclusion chapter, Chapter Eleven, I note the potential opportunities for future research as an outcome of conducting this study. My ongoing identity struggle and personal thoughts mark the closing of this thesis in an Epilogue.

## Chapter Two

### The *Slipperiness* of Identity

Much writing about identity treats it as *something* that simply *is*. Careless reification of this kind pays insufficient attention to how identification works or is done, to process and reflexivity, to the social construction of identity in interaction and institutionally. Identity can only be understood as a process of ‘being’ or ‘becoming’. One’s identity –one’s identities, indeed, for who we are is always multi-dimensional, singular and plural – is never a final or settled matter. Not even death freezes the picture: identity or reputation may be reassessed after death.....

Jenkins (2014, pp. 18-19)

#### Introduction

Jenkins shatters traditional beliefs about identity in the above excerpt. He suggests the nature of identity as a process, rejecting conventional descriptions of identity as “*something* that simply *is*”. By using italics for the ‘*thing*’ in “*something*” and “*is*”, he is purposeful in drawing attention to the essentialist ideas of identity as an object, item, quality or entity. In contrast, this inquiry is influenced by social constructionism, conceptualising identity as fluid, and identity construction as a dynamic discursive process (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

The format of this chapter is as follows. As I view identity as discursively constituted, I base my theoretical underpinnings on several assumptions, and join a number of prominent conversations (A.D. Brown, 2015). I clarify my use of the term identity first. Next, I comment on the ‘doing of identity’ or “making identities” (Simpson & Carroll, 2020, p. 503) through the popular metaphor *identity work*. I draw on three significant debates on identity in organisations relevant to my study throughout this chapter. Classifying identity construction processes as highly dynamic is the idea of *struggle*, emphasising the

impermanence and unpredictability of identities articulated in board member discourses of voice-silence. As I am unable to draw parallels from research on board member identities due to the uniqueness of this study, I opt to discuss an analogous group to conclude this chapter – the chief executive officers or “managerial elites” (Pettigrew, 1992, p. 163) in an organisation’s upper echelons.

### **Identity and Identities in Organisations**

As a field of studies, identity is notoriously difficult to navigate. With diversity in approaches, traditions and long running deliberations, the field is characterised as “increasingly vast” (Miscenko & Day, 2016, p. 216) and “fuzzy” (p. 218), and producing a definitive review is seen by some as a “misplaced aspiration [...] due to the extensiveness and disparity of the literature” (Knights & Clarke, 2017, p. 340). Identity in management and organization studies (MOS) is the subject of “intractable debates” (A.D. Brown, 2019, p. 9), with others claiming “identity studies constitute a field of great theoretical and methodological complexity—a site of continuous unsettled argument” (Wetherell, 2010, p. 4). Identity has gained notoriety as a “slippery notion” (Alvesson, 2010, p. 194). Further, Alvesson and Robertson (2016, p. 8) refer to “popular but ‘slippery terms’ such as identity” and Wetherell (2010, p. 16) “the infinite slipperiness of description”, while Snow and Anderson (1987) observe identity is “laden with considerable ambiguity” (p. 1338). Finally, identity is seen as “non-discrete and non-substantial phenomena” (Alvesson, 2010, p. 196), hence the naming of this chapter – *the slipperiness of identity*, echoing a field and concept with the same attributes.

Whereas I am conscious of the “minimal consensus on most identity-related matters” (A.D. Brown, 2019, p. 8), there is a necessity to convey definitional clarity. Corlett and co-authors observe the “multiple languages that have spawned around the issue of identity”

(Corlett et al., 2017, p. 269). At first, the term identity appears intuitively simple. From a rudimentary dictionary definition, the noun is “the characteristics determining who or what a person or thing is” (Oxford Learner’s Dictionary, n.d.). Synonyms are ‘self’, ‘selfhood’, ‘ego’, ‘personality’, ‘role’, ‘individual’, and ‘character’, representing a “panoply of concepts” (Wetherell, 2010, p. 5), with scholars reluctant to provide “one overarching definition of identity” (Wetherell, 2010, p. 3). Instead, identity is reduced to a ‘thing’, e.g., female or academic, echoing Jenkins’ thoughts on identity when viewed as “*something*”, as factual and concrete, and the mainstream understanding of identity today. In philosophical terms, Coupland and A.D. Brown (2012) acknowledge these as “objectivist and essentialist conceptions of identity” (2012, p. 1). Also known as reductionist, they align with functionalist traditions or “a technical interest”, and the dominant idea of identity from “three philosophical positions and variants” in management research (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 8).

Sometimes the terms ‘self’, ‘subjectivity’ and ‘identity’ can mean the same thing. Leary and Tangney (2012) discovered the term ‘self’ used in five distinct ways, with other scholars discovering more, leading to a “conceptual morass” (Leary & Tangney, 2012, p. 5). In a recent review of identity metaphors, R. Oswick and C. Oswick (2020) identified over 200 identity related terms from five articles. Sveningsson and Alvesson claim “self and identity are partly overlapping terms” (2003 p. 1168). Fortunately, there are common understandings of sociological approaches to identity and psychological stances towards identity and self. The former address the production of the self as a non-solitary affair, and the latter psychological view considers an individual’s developmental accomplishment of identity. My interest is with the former, and throughout this thesis I adopt the same approach as Alvesson et al. (2008, p. 7), as I use the word identity not as a substitute for, or to mean the same thing as, “roles, attitudes, beliefs” – unless otherwise stated. Thus,

identity as something distinct. I lean towards a post-modern approach, looking to unsettle longstanding entrenched identity categories (i.e., gender), as I want to “explore the full range of ‘being’” (Cerulo, 1997, p. 391). Therefore, I consider identity as “always in-progress” (A.D. Brown, 2019, p. 9), which means drawing from the concept of identity work explained next.

### **Building Identities in Organisations – *Identity Work***

Scholars persist in carrying out reviews in the hope of untangling the complex, ‘muddled’ field (see early examples from Alvesson et al., 2008; Ashforth et al., 2008; Ybema et al., 2009). One of the earliest evaluations is Cerulo (1997), mapping identity research since 1980. She draws out “anti-essentialist inquiries” (p. 387) in a review of the sociological and social psychological literatures. Here, identity is “continually renegotiated via linguistic exchange and social performance” (p. 387), and in my inquiry I “prioritize discourse over the systematic scrutiny of behaviour” (p. 400). Taking work identity and identification, Miscenko and Day (2015) recognise the growing interest, resulting in a literature of a “somewhat haphazard fashion” (p. 216), and organise the identity literature along two dimensions – “level of identity inclusiveness” and “static/dynamic approaches”. The latter, ‘dynamic’, is my where my study sits on the continuum interested in “identity dynamics” (Pratt, 2020, p. 881).

Making sense of a hefty and dense literature, Corlett et al. (2017, p. 261) propose a “broad-based review”, identifying three “registers” to offer what they term a “heuristic device” for various *theoretical traditions, levels of identity* and *methodologies* featured in the diagram that follows.

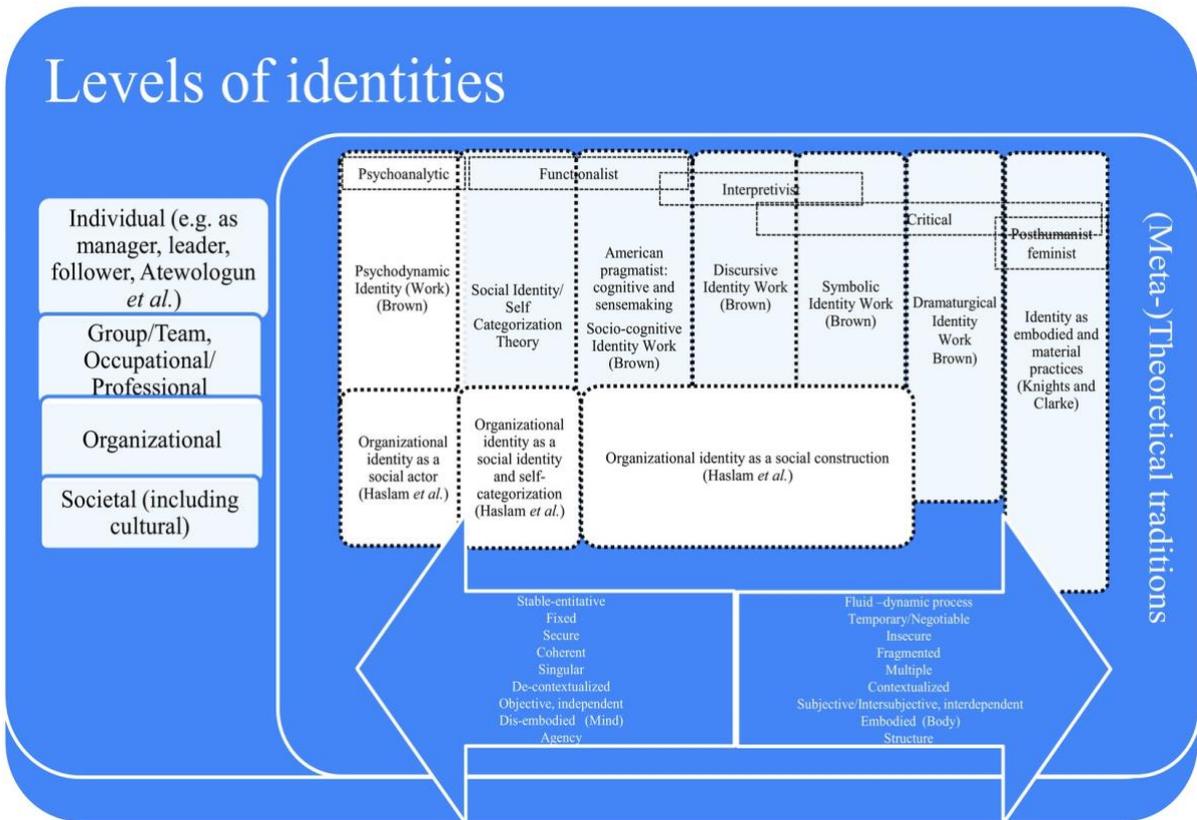


Figure 1: Registers of identity research from Corlett, C., McInnes, P., Coupland, C., & Sheep, M. (2017). Exploring the Registers of Identity Research: Editorial. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 19(3), 261- 272. On-line Wiley. Reprinted with permission.

Demonstrating “holistic interpretation”, Corlett et al. (2017, p. 261) hope for “cross-fertilization” and “harmony” between “theoretical traditions, levels and methods” (Corlett et al., 2017 p. 261). However, they appreciate the difficulties due to “contrasting assumptions” or dualities of individual identity, such as “stable-fluid”, “fixed-temporary/negotiable”, “coherent-fragmented”, and “singular-multiple” (p. 265), to name a few. The analysis encourages the “generative potential of engaging with that which remains elusive and problematic” (p. 270). Diagrammatically, my approach to identity is a “fluid-dynamic process”, “temporary/negotiable”, “insecure”, “fragmented” and “multiple”, showing a tendency to gravitate towards the *interpretivist* tradition, and sitting

alongside and overlapping with *critical* notions of identity. Common to these traditions is something labelled *identity work*.

The concept of identity work explains processes and activities in the formation of identities, and outputs or types of identities. Within this framework a combination of three elements exist in *processual oriented identity theory* (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Firstly, *construction* refers to the ‘putting together and building’, next, *regulation* means the control mechanisms influential within the process of construction, and lastly, *self-identity*, which are the versions of ourselves as an outcome of the identity work we undertake.

Uncertainty exists about the exact origins of using the phrase ‘identity work’ (A.D. Brown, 2020), but scholarly communities trace its roots to a homeless study in America (Snow & Anderson, 1987). The ethnographers Snow and Anderson immersed themselves for 12 months on the streets of Texas in the United States, labelling identity work as the “range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self concept” (p. 1348). They list different types of identity work as *face work*, *physical setting and props*, and lastly *identity talk*. Living on the streets with nothing means “talk is perhaps the primary avenue through which they can attempt to construct, assert, and maintain desired personal identities” (Snow & Anderson, p. 1348).

Alvesson and Wilmott (2002) state ‘engagement’ in identity work is continuous and consists of activities, detailing specifics such as “forming”, “repairing”, and “maintaining” amongst others. One year later, a seminal piece from Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003)

provides the most cited definition of identity work used today:

Identity work refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness. (p. 1165)

Similarly, to Alvesson and Wilmott (2002), Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) claim individuals' activities are "constructions", leading towards the self as coherent and distinct. A later definition by T.J. Watson (2008) notes constructions as "the mutually constitutive processes whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity..." (p. 129). T.J. Watson, however, furthers the conversation to include distinctiveness as consisting of "various social-identities" alongside "personal self-identity", reinforcing the tension between 'inward' and 'outward' as a "struggle to come to terms with" (p. 129).

Revisiting the work of Corlett et al. (2017), they mirror a number of significant debates proposed by A.D. Brown (2015). Five prominent opinions put forward by A.D. Brown (2015) condense theorising and research around identities in organisations. I draw from three of these debates relevant to my treatment of identity as "in movement, becoming or radically decentred" (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1167). These are *coherence and fragmentation*, *structure and agency*, and lastly *stability and fluidity*. Two remaining debates, *positive and negative identities* and *authenticity and identities*, gravitate towards "secure positive self-meanings" (A.D. Brown, 2015, p. 9) and individuals striving for "an inner, authentic core" (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 305). Since the definitions of identity work discussed earlier mention the coherence and distinctiveness of identities, I start with this debate first and establish my positioning.

## **The Coherence and Fragmentation Debate on Identities in Organisations**

Adopting social constructionism to define identity means considering a debate suggested by A.D. Brown (2015), which asks the question: are identities coherent (unified), or alternatively, to what extent are identities 'broken and shattered' or fragmented? Coherent identities are not the same as unitary, single or uniform (A.D. Brown, 2015), or indeed "resembling a coherent and 'finished' product" (Knights & Clarke, 2017, p. 345).

Clarifying this point further, Caza et al. (2018), referring to Weick et al. (2005), affirm "coherence does not imply "truth" but rather the ability to create a story that integrates one's observations and holds up to scrutiny" (Caza et al., 2018, p. 899).

Alternatively, to what extent are identities 'broken and shattered' or 'fragmented' forms part of this conversation. This notion suggests action by people as they attempt to pursue a coherent 'self'. But whether people can ultimately achieve a complete sense of coherence through undertaking identity work has been debated intensely by academics and is controversial (A.D. Brown, 2015). A.D. Brown's (2015) definition of coherence describes "individuals sense of their own continuity over time, clarity in awareness of the connections between their multiple identities, a sense of completeness or wholeness, and embrace of the essentially integrated nature of their selves" (p. 27). For T.J Watson (2009), the essence of identity work is the achievement of "a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal-identity" (p. 431). Motivational aspects of identity form the foci of this debate, as individuals feel the need to reduce identity contradictions and associated angst. However, questions remain on the feasibility of this based on the forever fluctuating social content, such as society and workplaces.

In Caza et al.'s (2018) adaptation of the definition of identity work based on four foundational definitions, they omit a sense of coherence, whereas the seminal work of Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) maintain "successful identity work increases coherence"

(p. 1187). As mentioned, the majority of foundational definitions of identity work have ‘coherence’ at the core. Wrangling over whether identities (or selves) are rational and joined together – “unified (though not necessarily unitary) and coherent” (A.D. Brown, 2015, p. 27) or “fragmented and (possibly) contradictory” (p. 27) – is the hub of this debate, dividing philosophical understandings and definitions of identity. Nonetheless, it should be noted that “fragmented work does not necessarily imply (equally) a fragmented identity” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1187). As I foreground ambiguity in my perception of identity, rather than gravitating towards ‘integration’ and coherence, I, therefore, align with “meaning-giving tensions”, as cited by A.D. Brown from Beech (2008, p. 71). Treating identity in this way echoes what it is to be human, that is insecure and inconsistent – mirroring the world we live in. Studies exploring the stresses and strains – or “tensional nature of identities” (A.D. Brown, 2015, p. 28) align with my study, as I take a “complex, encrusted and uncertain view on identities and their construction” (p. 28). My stance is, individuals engage in identity work to reduce confusion and anomalies pertaining to who they are and how they should be in the workplace (i.e., boardroom), with the primary aim of fitting in. However, my concern is with the process of constructing, rather than what is eventually ‘constructed’ – the outcome – in this case, board member *identity*. Hence, the necessity to view identities and the work on them as in a constant state of movement, ‘becoming’ and generally fragmented. In doing so, this study responds to repeated calls, as recent as 2020, for more empirical studies of identity work processes (Alvesson et al., 2008; A.D. Brown, 2015, 2020; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

Noting a ‘turn to work’ in organisation and management theory (OMT), Phillips and Lawrence (2012) raise different forms of work, such as *emotion work* (Hochschild, 1979), signalling a shift in thinking towards ‘the work’ that is “worked on” (Phillips & Lawrence, 2012, p. 224), i.e., *identity* or *emotion*. The authors comment that as distinct from

‘expressed’ emotions, “a powerful aspect of Hochschild’s writing on emotion work is that it is people’s ‘real’, felt emotions that are worked on” (p. 224). Hence, the notion of identity as *work* results in *identity work*, a term viewed as the most common metaphor in use for describing identity formation (A.D. Brown, 2015). Scholars observe differences in the usage of the term (A.D. Brown, 2015; Pratt, 2012). Although a ‘standard’ term meaning how individuals “strive to shape their personal identities” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165), it is used interchangeably with other expressions. As mentioned previously, from the study on homeless Americans (Snow & Andersen, 1987), ‘identity talk’ or *identity construction* can mean the same as identity work, along with *identity management* (T.J. Watson, 2008). T.J. Watson (2008) sees identity as dynamic, and not as an end achievement (outcome), by suggesting *identity project*, as others have done, “as a way of dealing with ‘agency’ aspects of *identity shaping*” (T.J. Watson, 2008, p. 126, emphasis added), linking to a critical body of research on control, resistance and identity regulation (Alvesson et al., 2008; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). This points towards a second significant deliberation on identities in organisations – *structure and agency* issues.

### **The Structure and Agency Debate on Identities in Organisations**

The main theory guiding understandings of identity in organisations is social identity theory (SIT) (Alvesson et al., 2008), believing “individuals freely undertake processes of self-categorization and identification” (p. 16). Yet, two extremes exist regarding an individual’s role in identity formation; identities are either “chosen”, or they are “ascribed” (A.D. Brown, 2015, p. 23). Exercising freedom and independence, or acting as “autonomous beings” (A.D. Brown, 2015, pp. 25-26) in creating identities is questioned, with some identity scholars deciding on identities as *regulated*. In other words, identity researchers present the subject-object binary working in a tension between ‘the subject’,

which has more agency on the part of the individual, and the ‘object’, concentrating on the regulation and control of identities situated in a group of studies interested in *identity regulation*.

The shaping of identities through ‘regulation mechanisms’ is the third most popular conceptual lens for researching identity in organisation studies (OS) (Alvesson et al., 2008), with the spotlight on “how identities are enmeshed in relations of power” (A.D. Brown, 2019, p. 13). Earlier work from Alvesson and Willmott (2002) defines identity regulation as “the more or less intentional effects of social practices upon processes of identity construction and reconstruction” (p. 625), detailing nine potential modes of organisational control.

Organisational discourse is earmarked as a key instrument of control in how individuals are produced alongside “organizational processes” (A.D. Brown, 2019, p. 14). Within a governance context, Ng and de Cock (2002, p. 42) emphasise from their study on Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and board dynamics:

The formal, regulated setting of a board room setting imposes specific modes of discourse that senior organizational actors have to employ in order for their opinions and argumentations to be seen as legitimate and worth attention.

Such ‘shaping’ activities, as illustrated by Ng and de Cock (2002), are board protocols and expectations, which according to Alvesson and Willmott (2002, p. 627) are aimed at modifying the “insides of employees, including managers,” with the ultimate goal to “manage meaning and instil values and emotions” (Costas & Kärreman, 2016, p. 63). The employee thus becomes “a managed identity worker” (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002, p. 16). Studies portray the idea of organisational control as prevalent in identity construction

in many ways, beginning with Kunda's (1992) concept of 'engineered selves', while Casey (1995) speaks of 'designer selves', Du Gay (1996) brings in 'enterprise selves', and Alvesson and Willmott (2002) class identity as being 'manufactured'.

Our understandings of governance discourses and their effects are poor (Carroll et al., 2017). What is known are board members' expectations of exercising 'interests', such as stakeholder and shareholder, as well as 'duties', for example duty of care, along with 'codes of conduct'. Furthermore, legal, financial, ethical and fiduciary accountabilities amongst others need careful attention. All of these may be 'unsuspecting' forces operating as potential forms of identity control, working as "a kind of invisible identity cage" (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 17) to "facilitate social domination" (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 16). Alternatively, one rare study indicating three discourses of board governance is from Carroll et al. (2017). Here, the dominant discourse is conformance, emerging from the talk of 60 semi-structured interviews with chief executive officers (CEOs) and board members. The authors define conformance as "the pursuit of conformity, compliance and control" (p. 611), and was their main thinking about how they carry out governance.

Progressing the structure-agency debate further, discussions centre on identities as "neither simply chosen nor merely allocated" (A.D. Brown, 2015, p. 26), providing middle ground along the continuum of the structure and agency debate. Instead, identities arise from a "continuing dialectic" of 'structure' and 'agency' (A.D. Brown, 2015, p. 26), supporting Alvesson's (2010) idea of individuals as "being active and guided by both meaning and goals", thus viewing the individual "as a meaning-maker" (p. 197). Additionally, the structure-agency debate is "not just two opposite fixed points", but according to Alvesson (2010) can be "a variety of possible views" (p. 197), meaning there is a "degree of agency". I reject a hardcore line, such as the Foucauldian view whereby individuals are "cultural dopes" (A.D. Brown, 2015, p. 26). But I agree opposing forces act in creating

identities as both “‘improvised’ and ‘crafted’” through the process of identity work, and as they are “pragmatic, often emotionally charged and generally social” (2015, p. 26).

### **Processes of Identity Construction**

Basing the core idea of identity as ‘made’ or something that is “worked on” (A.D. Brown, 2017, p, 296), as opposed to ‘inherited’ (essentialist view of identity), it is not surprising that scholars are preoccupied with identity formation *processes*. The types of processes individuals engage in when constructing identities attract academic interest (A.D. Brown, 2015). An array of identity construction processes have been examined, although amongst traditional and conventional occupations and professions in organisational contexts rather than atypical workers (A.D. Brown, 2020), or those classed as independent workers (Petriglieri et al., 2019). Currently, at the time of writing, no published study addresses board member identity work. Processes featured in Du Gay’s (1996) study addressing cultural shifts from bureaucratic ethos to entrepreneurial orientations, noting “‘making up’ new ways for people to be” (p. 119). Creating a new – and positive – identity through a variety of processes is a prevalent body of research amongst studies of ‘stigmatized work’ or ‘dirty work’ (Hughes, 1951, 1958, 1962), or ‘dirty worker identity’. Employees tackle spoiled or tainted identities by eliciting ideological techniques of “recalibrating, reframing and refocusing” (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 421) to secure positive versions of themselves and is another popular debate of positive and negative identities (A.D. Brown, 2015).

The use of ‘re’ as a synonym for ‘again’ is explored and investigated in a number of studies of different identity construction processes. In a study by Beech (2011), senior managers undertook ‘re-constructing’ identities, applying three practices of experimentation, reflection and recognition. Middle managers are engaged in ‘reforming’

their identities during organisational restructuring (Thomas & Linstead, 2002). In another study by Beech, 're-narration' is prominent amongst those with creative careers (Beech et al., 2012). A few scholars feature outlying identity processes. For example, instead of the common line of inquiry as 'constructing', H. Nicholson and Carroll (2013) propose *deconstruction* – 'undoing' of identity in aspiring leaders in New Zealand attending a leadership development programme. Individuals working in the consultancy industry 'discard' the "unwanted corporate self" (Costas & Fleming, 2009, p. 355). Lastly, British bankers pursue 'deflecting' identity related issues in "teflonic identity manoeuvring" (Alvesson & Robertson, 2016, p. 7).

This list is by no means exhaustive, but supports Caza and colleagues' (2018) observations of the literature around the core question – "How do individuals engage in identity work?" (p. 895) and is unmanageable and disorganised. Although earlier attempts by A.D. Brown (2015, p. 14) go some way in offering a helpful summary and indicate immense interest in different processes of identity formation:

'claiming', 'affirming', 'accepting', 'complying', 'resisting', 'separating',  
'joining', 'defining', 'limiting', 'bounding', 'stabilizing', 'sensemaking',  
'reconciling', 'stabilizing' and 'restructuring'.

Whilst A.D. Brown provides an overview of the array of different processes, he concludes there are currently no common processes assigned to identity construction efforts, and there remains a lack of understanding of the influential factors in these processes (A.D. Brown, 2015, 2020). Currently, I am unable to trace studies naming identity work processes described as 'tuning'. As illustrated, numerous studies have materialised addressing occupational groups and professions engaging in different identity activities, practices, tactics and stratagems. But Beech (2011), echoing numerous other scholars

(Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Pratt et al., 2006), says more research needs to be conducted on processes of identity formations. Alvesson et al. (2008, p. 24) note “in-depth empirical studies analysing actual processes of identity construction and regulation continue to lag behind”. The same deficit is noted by Ibarra’s (1999) study on junior professionals experiencing career transitions.

Lutgen-Sandvik’s (2008) research states that the terminology of ‘construction’ and ‘production’ of an individual’s identity is, in fact, the same as *identity work*. Recently, Ashforth and Schinoff (2016) differentiate between the two terms ‘construction’ and ‘identity work’, claiming the former offers “a broader range of identity motives for the individual other than restricting this to ‘coherence and distinctiveness’” (p. 113), thus citing the seminal definition of identity work by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) discussed earlier. More recently, other attempts explaining identity construction processes by different metaphors other than ‘work’ have emerged (see R. Oswick & C. Oswick, 2020). In my framing of identity as a process, the metaphor *identity work* is drawn upon in this study, representing the dynamic interrelated aspects of the identity construction process (‘construction’, ‘regulation’ and ‘self-identity’). I align with the thoughts of Clarke et al. (2009) who reject ideas of identity constructions as “relatively coherent or completely fluid”, but rather as incorporating “contrasting positions or antagonisms” (p. 324).

In a quick succession of identity reviews (A.D. Brown, 2015, 2107; Caza et al., 2018), the terrain receives further scrutiny. Both reviews by A.D. Brown (2017) and Caza et al. (2018) provide greater clarity and categorise identity research. Drawing from Meads’ ‘Parliament of Selves’, A.D. Brown states this as the reason why so much identity research clusters around “‘types’, ‘forms’, ‘kinds’, and ‘templates’” (2020, p. 3), rather than the processes of doing identity. Caza et al. (2018) revise the definition of identity work from

Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003), aiming to create “ a holistic picture of the identity work literature” (p. 890). They include ‘modes’ or activities (*cognitive, discursive, physical, and behavioral*) in an attempt to reduce “conceptual vagueness” (p. 891). In addition, in their revised definition, types are categorised as *collective, role, and personal self-meanings* (italics in original):

Identity work in occupations and organizations consists of the *cognitive, discursive, physical, and behavioural activities* that individuals undertake with the goal of forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, revising, or rejecting *collective, role, and personal self-meanings* within the boundaries of their social contexts. (Caza et al., 2018, p. 890)

While using the same verbs as Sveningsson and Alvesson’s (2003) earlier definition, ‘forming’, ‘revising’ and others, they omit ‘coherence’ and ‘distinctiveness’ as an outcome. This is because while the scholars recognise these as the most common motives of identity work, there are other “dominant motives attributed to identity work” (Caza et al., 2018, p. 899). The authors propose four dominant theoretical approaches utilised by scholars to research identity, while A.D. Brown suggests five intertwined approaches in understanding “constructions of self” – identity work as discursive, dramaturgical, symbolic, socio-cognitive and psychodynamic (A.D. Brown, 2017, p. 296). Such studies attempt to bring orderliness and clarity to the “labyrinth of the identities literature” (A.D. Brown, 2020, p. 4). I opt, as do Snow and Anderson (1987), Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003), and T.J. Watson (2008) to classify identity constructions through talk/discourse, referred to by A.D. Brown (2017) and Caza et al. (2018) as *discursive identity work*.

Discursive identity work is informed by discourse analysis comprising of different approaches (see discussion by Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004). Discursive approaches

according to Ainsworth and Hardy (2004) are ways to “examine the complexity of processes of construction of identity” (p. 155) because identity is not treated as a “discrete entity”, but rather as ‘becoming’ (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). The “tactics/activities” (Caza et al., 2018, p. 895) of identity work is a recurring theme in identity studies.

Academics assess, evaluate, examine, and scrutinise the multiplicity of different processes, which Caza et al. (2018) claim is “unwieldy” (p. 895). Addressing the ‘how’ or “the processes underlying identity work” (Caza et al., 2018, p. 895) as the foci of my study, features a longstanding debate evaluating whether identities are static or liquefied.

### **The Stability and Fluidity Debate on Identities in Organisations**

Another area of contention is the degree to which identities are unchanging or sinuous. The range of possibilities is that identities as fixed and secure; next, believing identity processes are ongoing, but not continuous; and last, the extreme of identities as “perpetually fluid and shifting” and thus everlasting and endless (A.D. Brown, 2015, p. 26). Jenkins at the start of this chapter reinforces this latter view of identities as highly fluid, and continuing even after death (Jenkins, 2014). Scholars attempt to trace the historical origins of the “broad-sweeping shift from ascription to achievement”, where identities are less prone to be “ascribed by birth and legitimized through religion and family status” (Collinson, 2003, p. 530). Instead, identities “are much more ‘open’, no longer fixed at birth by, for example, religion, class and/or gender” (p. 530). That is, however, not to say ascription does not continue to impact “in shaping identities, and the ‘accident of birth’ maintains an important influence on life opportunities” (Collinson, 2003, p. 534). According to Knights and Clarke (2017), we have become absorbed and influenced by the Enlightenment ideas of a “fully autonomous self” (p. 338), and instead we should consider “by virtue of its construction, identity is inherently precarious and

ephemeral because of its dependence on the unpredictable and uncontrollable social confirmations of others (Knights & Clarke, 2017, p. 338).

Societal changes (economic, social and political) impact and heighten worry around subjectivity. A human response is to seek out stability and harmony, due to our “fundamental concern for order” (Collinson, 2003, p. 533). Achieving this is “by attachment to particular notions of self” (Knights and Willmott, as cited in Collinson, 2003, p. 532). This approach is counterproductive and futile because further insecurities arise from such attachments. In fact, “the more we prioritise order, the more we are likely to be threatened by change” (Collinson, 2003, p. 533). The result is self-defeating according to Collinson (2003). Knights and Willmott’s work informed by Foucault’s power/knowledge states “subjectivity is understood as a product of disciplinary mechanisms, techniques of surveillance and power-knowledge strategies” (1989, p. 554). Later work involving Willmott stresses “it is naïve to assume that identity can be pushed in any direction without inertia, pain, resistance and unintended consequences” (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 638). Exploring the dynamics of identity regulation in organisational control, the authors establish identity can never be classified as fully secure, instead “processes of identity (re)formation” are said to be “fluid, unstable and reflexive” (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 638).

The above is a plausible line of enquiry, although philosophical diversity exists along the continuum *stability and fluidity*. A.D. Brown (2015) comments that psychologists strive for secure and stable identities, while discursive sociologists are only willing to accept stability as momentary. Rather, I identify with a post-modern stance of identities as “kaleidoscopic processes of becoming [...] reassembled through discourse” (A.D. Brown, 2015, p. 27) and “increasingly precarious, insecure and uncertain” (Collinson, 2003, p.

530). I align my ideas with post-structuralist views of identities as “the fragile outcomes of a continuing dialectic between structure and agency” (Clarke et al., 2009, p. 347).

Taking a processual approach to identity regards identity as action-oriented and activity based, which means it is unfolding or “constantly ‘under construction’” (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 301). Therefore, processes are about ‘movement’ and the *fluidity of identity*, as opposed to identity stability, or “freezing identity” and treating it as a “freezable thing” (Gioia & Patvardhan, 2012, p. 52) – not even for a second. This means I am not interested in naming or labelling board member identity or identifying a final ‘settled’ identity, but concerned with the processes at play in the dynamic workings of identity construction. I steer away from processes driven towards “a sense of completeness or wholeness” (A.D. Brown, 2015, p. 27), as illuminated in the coherence versus the fragmentation of identities debate.

### **Tension and Identities**

There may be little consensus about identity work processes, but scholars do agree *tension* is a common denominator. According to Beech et al. (2016, p. 508), individuals “often find themselves struggling” when doing identity work. In fact, “struggle”, “work”, and “emotional labour” describe the identity processes of individuals (A.D. Brown, 2020, p. 43). ‘Struggle’ is one of seven images referred to by Alvesson (2010) for identity in organisational research. In another image, individuals are ‘self-doubters’ shaping their identities from insecurity and anxiety, with the outcome of identity constructions as “ultimately shaky” and “irreducible ambiguity” (p. 198). With less emphasis on *insecurity*, individuals are ‘strugglers’ engaging in “active efforts” ... “fighting through a jungle of contradictions and messiness” (p. 200). Further, Kreiner et al. (2006) define identity tensions/struggle as “the stresses and strains experienced by an individual” (p. 1034).

The reason why identity is portrayed as struggle, says Carroll (2016, p. 97), is because “in that intersection of expectations, individuals feel the need to represent themselves with coherence and distinctiveness while at the same time being aware of palpable contradictions, precariousness, fluidity, multiplicity, and fragmentation”. Carroll maintains this “complicates choices of who to be and what to say and do in any moment” (2016, p.97). As my study shows, this appears to be amplified in a meeting context around ‘what to say or not to say’. A.D. Brown (2015) notes a percentage of scholars gravitating towards illuminating the tensional characteristics of identities (Beech, 2008; Knights & Clarke, 2014) with lines of inquiry focusing on the originators of tension.

Scholars assert identity tension and struggle as instigated from multiple identities, as claimed by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003, p. 1183):

A variety of managerial identities are possible, between which there are tensions and contradictions, hence the constant struggle bringing about temporary views of the self, where certain identity versions dominate over the others, depending on the context.

In their study of American episcopal priests, Kreiner et al. (2006) found tension arising between personal and social identities. Antagonistic discourses are also identified in a study of UK managers showing “conflicting demands” evident in identity constructions (Clarke et al. 2009, p. 328). Clarke et al. (2009) worked with “multiple antagonistic discourses” (p. 324) based around three juxtapositioned discourses of *emotional detachment* and *engagement*, *professional* and *unprofessional* and lastly, *business acumen* against *people caring*. Such “contrasting positions” (p. 324) or antagonisms are explored elsewhere. For example, Ghadiri et al. (2015) researched how corporate social responsibility consultants coped with the tension between “the concomitant search for

profit and social responsibility” (p. 594). Other studies of the creative industries identify tensional triggers and responses (Beech et al., 2012; Gotsi et al., 2010). Clarke et al (2009) note “dualities inherent in managers accounts of their selves” (p.324) and is an area for further exploration. This point is supported by Kreiner et al. (2006) concerning the processes of identity negotiation. ‘Negotiating’ tensions and associated demands is prominent in my study arising from expectations about when to talk, when not to talk, and where to talk.

Tension can be triggered by change, trauma or crises (see workplace bullying from Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008 – i.e., intense remedial identity work) resulting in intense and sporadic episodes. On the other hand, tension can be constant throughout processes and forms an integral part on ongoing identity construction (Beech et al., 2016). This situates struggle not as a phase, or *in transit* (Beech et al., 2016). Beech and co-authors’ (2016) research on indie musicians showed “identity-in-the-work”, where musicians invested “so much of their sense of self into their work” (p. 509). They conclude without constant struggle, the musicians wouldn’t be who they are. Struggle is seen not as an outcome or a trigger for identity work but an essential part of the identity construction process. Unlike other studies and philosophical views, struggle is not *a problem* requiring a solution.

While views remain divided about tension and its function, I accept identity work as both “dislocated” and “tensional” (A.D. Brown, 2015, p. 28).

### **The ‘Elusiveness’ of Board Member Identity Work**

My thesis invigorates scholarship on individuals working “at the margins of organizations” or “various kinds of boundary spanners” (A.D. Brown, 2020, p. 17). I am able to track one scholar whose research holds vague relevance to my study – Quintin Bradley. He addresses the identity dynamics of the tenant-director as representatives on not-for-profit

social housing boards in the UK (Bradley, 2008, 2011). Apart from his work, identity work studies rely on conventional roles, occupations and professions. For example, selecting the first letter of the alphabet to illustrate the variety, ‘A’ for accountants (Morales & Lambert, 2013), elite athletes (A.D. Brown & Coupland, 2015), aeroplane pilots (Ashcraft, 2005), army personnel (Thornborrow & A.D. Brown, 2009), and finally academics (Knights & Clarke, 2014). If I was to continue working my way through the alphabet, there is a noticeable absence of research investigating board member/governing identity construction processes. At the time of writing, no published study is available on board member identity work, making this study unique. Therefore, I rely on insights from a handful of studies describing ‘elite’ identities, since these are the most comparable.

In the absence of scholarship on governing/governance/board director/member identity work, it is helpful to draw on the term “managerial elites” (Pettigrew, 1992, p. 163). The broad term describes positions of authority to include, “Chairman”, “President”, “Chief Executive Officer” and “Managing Director” and “boards as directors” or “inside or outside Director” (Pettigrew, 1992, p. 163). T.J. Watson’s (2008) idea of the outward facing aspect of ‘who we are’ informs identity work in studies exploring identity constructions of organisational elites. Studies by Hendry (2012), Lok (2010) and Probert (2015) explore the identity work of chief executive officers (CEOs), enabling insights and learnings from those operating at this organisational level.

Obtaining research material from archived media stories, corporate governance reform reports and semi-structured interviews of institutional actors, Lok (2010) investigates the mediating role of identity work in processes of institutional change. His research matches scholarship centring on identities in relation to other processes of organising. Using identity work as a conduit in this way enables explanations about how individual-level (micro) actions impact the meso-macro level. Individuals in his study demonstrate intense

activity between who they thought they should be (matching up to organisational and stakeholder expectations) against who they wanted to be (expressions of individuality – ‘self-identity’). Because of the blurring between identity at the individual and organisational level, a further line of enquiry suggested by Lok (2010) is, “Are they talking and acting as representatives of their organisation or ‘as themselves’?” (p.1332). The conundrum of answering the question ‘who am I’ amidst a complex web of both internal and external relations emphasises the crux of their identity work.

In an unpublished PhD thesis, Probert (2015) investigates the role transition of new CEOs. Her findings show CEOs embarking on this role face acute identity demands and tensions (Kreiner et al., 2006). The interplay between organisational identity alongside the individuality of a CEO presents as the core of their identity work. Again, complexities of this nature are addressed in Hendry’s (2012) study of 40 Financial Times Stock Exchange (FTSE)100 UK CEOs. Hendry argues CEOs deal with the “glare of media and institutional shareholder attention” (p. 4) therefore, challenging assumptions of CEOs having more freedom of “movement and expression” (p. 4). Instead, CEOs are pressurised into constant identity work to satisfy a plethora of audiences and in meeting their own needs. Four different identity outcomes surfaced, the most prominent being that of leader and strategist. The leader identity means the CEO felt under constant surveillance and scrutiny, facing a constant battle to meet expectations from outside and inside. An example is how some CEOs were reluctant to be spontaneous with employees. They felt employees would be guessing what they were thinking or reading between the lines (looking for hidden messages) in what they said. This left them cautious about thinking aloud or hesitating to “pass casual comments” (p. 27). All three studies remind us that employees at this level of the organisation are exposed to the same “grand discourses as any other actors” (p. 4), and

potentially more so as they face increased scrutiny. Their role stresses the outward facing and more social aspect beyond the organisational boundary.

New Zealand mirrors the UK and Australian governance model of a unitary or one-tier board of directors. Boards can include both executive directors ('inside' director who is also part of the organisation) and non-executive directors (NEDs or 'outside' director). Influenced from an Anglo-American model New Zealand boards refute the idea of a dual/combined role of a chair and CEO. Instead, the CEO and chair are different people sitting on the board. Board members are different from a CEO, due to the fact they can hold multiple board positions in several organisations. Additionally, the context (small firm or family firm) defines the expectations of board members. Thus, my study represents an atypical 'worker' yet to be explored using an identity lens.

Similarities from the studies of elites can be considered in the work and working environment of board members, and how this visibility influences the identity work process. Board members are expected to endure much more public scrutiny and media attention (wanted and unwanted). Corporate scandals and financial crises have triggered the necessity for organisations to be much more transparent. Board members are not immune from the spotlight. They are expected to provide more information to stakeholders, regularly and vigorously evaluate their own collective and individual performance, establish a whistle-blowing policy to enable wrongdoings to be exposed in a safe way, and be familiar with handling issues around conflicts of interest. While this list is not exhaustive, it illustrates a main point; that is, how the increases in transparency could undoubtedly inform a large part of their identity work. These transparency activities form part of an array of expectations on what it means to be a board member.

Other specifics provide potential resources for board member identity constructions. Alvesson et al. (2008, p. 15) term these “cultural resources”. They can include, but are not limited to, memories or desires (Knights & Willmott, 1989; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), and dress (Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997; Humphreys & A.D. Brown, 2002). Crafford et al. (2015) provide a useful typology of identity work strategies within an array of contexts. Such resources and strategies are an attempt by the individual to define and create versions of themselves that are appealing and meet the expectations of others. Beech et al. (2008, p.964) state “Identity resources are things that can be used to establish or maintain an identity position” and provide suggestions of numerous resources.

Examples from Beech et al. (2008) for identity construction are applicable to the work of a board member. These include ‘hard-to-access status’, ‘expertise’, ‘networks’ and ‘influence’. Studying the identity work of board members reveals a multitude of resources they can draw on in comparison with other organisational actors due to their unique positioning. For instance, symbiotic dyads (Chair – CEO) (Kakabadse et al., 2006) and the collective – the whole board. However, I should mention this study is not concerned and preoccupied with how board members see themselves as a collective, but rather how the collective (the board) informs identity work efforts. This is emphasised by Alvesson et al. (2008, p. 6):

Collective visions of self, such as group and organizational identities, become not so much the ‘main show’ as important resources in the formation of personal notions of self.

A board members’ organisational positioning is worthy of consideration in triggering identity work because they operate beyond organisational reporting lines and authoritative structures. Studies show those with precarious positions or peripheral to an organisation

“become their work, or more precisely they become *in* their work” (G. Petriglieri et al., 2019, p. 37).

Being classed as ‘insiders’ or ‘outsiders’ can be a resource for identity work, as demonstrated in a study by Wright (2009) on internal consultants. Exploring the work of ambiguous organisational membership, internal consultants are classed as “both within the organisation but also separate from it” (Wright, 2009, p. 310). As a result, they “actively seek to construct their identities as both organizationally distinctive but also inclusive” (p. 321). This results in consultants negotiating four boundary types particular to their role – structural, knowledge, political and interpersonal. Their distinct knowledge and specialist expertise roles distinguished them from other organisational employees, as this extenuated and reinforced their ‘outsider’ position. This may be similar to board members who are appointed for their specialist knowledge in legal, finance and accounting matters. Wright (2009, p. 316) comments on this point, writing “the mystique of an internal consultant’s expertise could heighten their claims to a distinct and elite identity”. The reason was their persuasive and influential abilities when dealing with managers in the organisation. However, the consultants struggled to come to terms with feelings of being ‘social outcasts’ as an outcome of their positioning and revealed “a contrasting negative or ‘spoiled’ identity” (p. 320). Wright’s (2009) study emphasises how individuals use identity work tactics to manage organisational boundaries.

Boundaries can be both intangible (emotional-psychological) and tangible (physical) Nippert-Eng (1996). Cross et al. (2013) classify a number of boundary types such as *vertical* (rank, class, seniority, authority, power), and *horizontal* (expertise, function, peers, competition), or *stakeholder* (partners, constituencies, value chain, communities). All of these can relate to board member identity work and act as triggers to engage in identity formation of some sort. Numerous activities are undertaken by individuals and groups to

manage boundaries and studies have detailed a variety of *boundary work tactics* in occupations and organisational settings (Ashforth et al., 2000; Knapp et al., 2013; Kreiner et al., 2009). The suggestion of strong links between identity work and boundary work is evident in these studies.

To sum up, contemporary workplaces offer the ideal landscape for identity work to occur as constant change presents people with conflicting demands and pressures. As tensions and contradictions exist, struggle is apparent from the choice's individuals make between competing discourses and desired identities (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Thomas & Linstead, 2002). The governance discourse is distinct from mainstream organisational discourse. For example, board member activities operate within a highly regulatory environment where there is focus on the separation of specific duties, roles, tasks, functions and responsibilities. Board member involvement is situated amongst a discourse of strategy, liabilities, accountabilities, diligence, compliance, risk and specialist expertise, where rationality and logic are promoted. As will be illustrated in the next chapter, their work is informed from an array of theoretical stand points.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter my positioning of identity is defined from a social constructionist view. Recognising the world as tumultuous, identity is unsettled as a consequence. This positioning leads to several enduring debates on identities in organisations. I explained my theoretical stance on identity, drawing from three prominent debates. By emphasising the non-stability of identity and arguing identity as shaped by discourse and a work in progress, I elaborated on discursive identity work as my chosen approach. I join a group of scholars treating identity, irrespective of whether individual or organizational, as *process* and *becoming* rather than content. Considering identity in this way means 'an ideal' is

never achieved, i.e., a board member identity. Instead, individuals continuously engage in processes of identity construction, navigating tension, apprehension and uneasiness.

Currently, studies of identities in organisations mainly concentrate on types and outcomes as opposed to process. Finally, only a glimpse of analogous roles is available to understand the construction processes of elite and atypical workers. In the next chapter I discuss *the elusive board member*, explaining board governance and board dynamics, which address board member relationships and interactions crucial to understanding identity dynamics.

## **Chapter Three**

### **The *Elusive* Board Member**

Groups often perceive risks differently from the way individual group members do and collectively fail to see problems where they really exist. Groups tend toward conformity in perceptions and attitudes, even when they are obviously wrong. Groups are prone to framing decisions in ways that none of the good decision makers on the board would do individually. And groups often waste time on unimportant details both when more important activities await and when meeting time is severely limited. No group is immune to these destructive patterns, which makes understanding them critically important from a governance standpoint.

(Merchant & Pick, 2010, abstract)

#### **Introduction**

Differences exist between the way individuals (board members) behave and how groups of individuals act (boards of directors), as articulated in the excerpt by Merchant and Pick taken from their book *Blind spots, biases, and other pathologies in the boardroom* (2010). Merchant and Pick (2010, p. 14) pose a bewildering problem for boards – *social loafing*, where the “highly accomplished and respected people who compose most boards could appear to have been simply inattentive, disengaged, or disinterested in the performance of their board duties”. Similar passivity in relation to the group processes inferred in the above quote is described as ‘undiscussability’ (Argyris, 1985), groupthink (Janis, 1972) and pluralistic ignorance (Westphal & Bednar, 2005). All feature a common denominator – a reluctance to speak or for whatever reason “preventing board members from asking tough questions” (Hambrick et al., 2008, p. 384). I address group influences on individual behavioural tendencies in the next chapter under the guise of the silence and voice literature.

This thesis presents individuals as ‘identity workers’ or “the individual as an identity constructor” (Alvesson, 2010, p. 208) as discussed in the last chapter. In other words, identity is an immersed activity where individuals construct versions of themselves as a socially embroiled process. It is imperative, therefore, that I give a ‘flavour’ of context – *board governance*. My aim is to illustrate the development in scholarship on board governance and the work of board directors, hence this chapter is divided into three parts. Undertaking this review means considering a breadth of theory relating to understanding ‘who are board members’ and ‘what work do they do’.

Assisting with the organisation of this chapter, I draw my inspiration from a number of governance scholars, notably Morten Huse and Jay Lorsch who, along with others, make sense of this vast literature in recent publications (Gabrielsson et al., 2019; Huse, 2018; Lorsch, 2017). Before my ‘review’ of the literature, I say more on the key terms and definitions necessary for navigating the terrain of board governance. I arrange the literature into three waves. First, I mention what I call the *mainstream studies*, of which 54% are informed by Agency theory (Huse et al., 2011). This grouping of studies explains the roles and relationships of boards within a wider external network and environment. Next, I categorise a diverse group of studies informed by an array of theories, and name these the *conduct studies*. Despite difficulties in accessing board directors due to confidentiality and potential researcher influence (Leblanc & Schwartz, 2007), this cluster shows scholars enduring these hardships, and succeeding in prising open the *black box* – a popular metaphor for this secretive and private environment (Daily et al., 2003). Collectively known as studies of *board dynamics*, this wave emphasises the relational and social aspects of board work. Informed by contingency, behavioural and systems approaches amongst others, the aim is to get closer to board processes, behaviours and interactions. Thirdly, surfacing in recent years is a final grouping of research I name *niche studies*.

These studies divert from understanding boards from a functionalist perspective, appealing calls for methodological diversity. My thesis aligns with this group, as I pursue a social constructionist perspective to my methodology. Lastly, towards the end of this chapter I will draw out some salient points concerning the paradoxes and atypical work inherent within the work of board directors to provide additional background detail.

### **Board Governance and Board of Director Studies**

Board directors or board members *govern*. The term *governing* is defined as “an integrative function involving multiple diverse participants and external constituent groups whose interests board members represent” (E. Solomon & Huse, 2019, p. 322). Therefore, board members are positioned at the nucleolus. In Huse’s (2018) *Value-creating boards* he remarks, “The term ‘boards of directors’ is not straightforward” (p. 2). The reason being is the use of different synonyms for the term ‘boards of directors’ (p. 2), such as “boards”, “boards of executives”, and “boards of supervisors”, reflecting Anglo-American influences and international governance codes. To avoid unnecessary complications, I will be consistent in my usage, adopting, as does Huse, the term ‘board’ to mean the same as ‘boards of directors’. As my research is addressing the individual-director level – i.e., ‘board director’ as individual, I will alternate between using the terms *board director* and *board member*, applying the term *board chair* to differentiate when required.

Defining what board members do is problematic due to differentiating theoretical viewpoints, but Pye and Pettigrew (2005) offer a simple summary:

...their role and position is unique within organizations, as also is their organizing. They meet only six times a year, yet their decision-making is considered vital to their organizations and organizing. (p. 33).

When comparing board members to other organisational actors, such as managers, their position and role is different. Pye and Pettigrew's (2005) over simplistic definition hides the complexities of 'their role' and *what they do*. Scholarly discussions debating 'role', note the following:

CG[Corporate Governance] research offers different interpretations of the concept of board roles. This contributes to the lack of clarity as to what is considered by board roles/tasks/functions in relation to individual director role and contribution, and ultimately leads to the methodological issue of distinguishing between board and individual level of analysis. (Petrovic, 2008, p. 1374)

Ambiguity arises from "language used to describe the roles can be highly variable" (G. Nicholson & Newton, 2010, p. 208) because 'roles' can be at two levels – *board level* and *individual(director) level* (Petrovic, 2008). In both cases, Petrovic (2008) comments, board roles are "blurred" and "many board members are uncertain about their roles" (p. 1375). Within identity studies, the term role and identity can be used interchangeably, or indeed together as in Stryker's "role-identity" (or now commonly known as 'identity theory' (Lok, 2020, p. 746). I see clear demarcations between the meanings of role and identity, but I am also aware they can be inextricably linked in processes of identity construction (Simpson & Carroll, 2008). I discuss more on 'role' in the second identified wave of board governance studies.

What directors do at the board-group level is contested terrain. Zahra and Pearce (1989) propose a series of three roles as do J.L. Johnson et al. (1996), albeit different roles. An integration of a two-role model from Hillman and Dalziel (2003) and a combination cited by G. Nicholson and Newton (2010) further complicate clarity. Although, the commonly

held belief is boards undertake three roles, namely strategic, control, and service/institutional (J.L. Johnson et al., 1996; Zahra & Pearce, 1989). Such deductions are distilled from earlier versions, for example Mintzberg (1983) offers seven, and Hung (1998) six. Irrespective of the quantity and arguments, the debates about different types of board roles suggest an impact on how board members think, act and behave. The same lack of agreement and consensus exists in analysing the individual director role. Petrovic (2008) observes there is a tendency for studies to feature “how boards are supposed to work” (p.1387) and these are “prescriptive” in nature (p. 1381). This leaves a discussion centring on *board dynamics* – identifying key qualities, attitudes, skills, interactions and behaviours of board directors (discussed in the next section).

Slight differences are apparent in the terms used to describe boards and board members, ranging from an “elite institution” (Pettigrew & McNulty, 1998, p. 197), “highly complex”, “the ultimate instrument of power” (p. 198), and an “elite group” (Hambrick et al., 2008, p. 384). Additionally, they have been called the “strategic apex” (Mintzberg, 1979, p. 15), “episodic decision-making group” (Forbes & Milliken, 1999), and lastly, “corporate elites” and the “executive ranks” (Hertz & Imber, 1995, p. 4). Researchers are warned they will encounter a “foreign territory” (Hertz & Imber, 1995, p. 5). Each description is guided by different theories dictating the role of a board and its directors. Next, I turn to address the main theories, separating and discussing the scholarship into *waves*.

Analysing the work of board members and who they are leads me to identifying three different passages within the literature on boards of directors. I am purposeful in my use of the term ‘wave’, as this explains a disturbance or variation occurring. My reference to the ability to disturb is to signal a change of direction in theoretical focus with the aim of “demystifying” the contents or internal workings of the black box. As Leblanc (2001)

comments, “board process or how board of directors actually functions is a ‘black hole’, both theoretically and empirically” (as cited in Petrovic, 2008, p. 1386). The idea for naming different theoretical frameworks as waves comes from reading other review works. For example, four typologies from a 12-year review of literature by Gabrielsson and Huse (2004). Plus, subsequent reviews from Huse et al. (2011) drawing from the work of Gabrielsson and Huse. Dailey et al. (2003) and Hambrick et al. (2008) push for changes, identifying clusters of empirical board research requiring more qualitative input, similar to McNulty et al. (2013). Finally, Zattoni and Pugliese (2019) advocate qualitative and mixed methods to know more about the “nuances and complexities” about the “black box of board dynamics” (p. 114) to provide directions for future research and best practice guidance. Each wave outlines major theoretical influence(s) and/or concepts. I pay attention to language, assumptions made and the nature of these studies from an ontological and epistemological perspective, incorporating what this says about the role of the researcher. Thus, I am able to draw conclusions about working in board governance.

### **Wave One: Mainstream Studies of Boards of Directors**

An abundance of theoretical viewpoints influence understandings of boards and their directors. Mainstream theories discuss the different interests of various governance actors. For example, resource dependency theory (RDT), elaborates and justifies the appointment of external directors (see Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978 and Hillman et al., 2009 for a review). The power of managers (executives) over board members is addressed in management hegemony theory (Lorsch & MacIver, 2004; Mace, 2004), whereas stewardship theory (L. Donaldson & Davis, 1991; T. Donaldson & Preston, 1995) relies on shared interests. Here, partnership working between boards and management exists, and boards of directors add value to strategic decision-making. Despite this heterogeneity, agency theory continues to

dominate the landscape of research on boards and board directors, enjoying near exclusivity, according to Huse (2018).

Agency theory centres on the controlling role of the board to monitor and scrutinise organisational performance. Adolf Berle and Gardiner Means developed the theory of the firm in the early thirties, based on the earlier work of Scottish economist and philosopher Adam Smith (1776). Berle and Means (1932) in their published work *The modern corporation and private property*, made several assumptions about firms. Some four decades later, M.C. Jensen and Meckling (1976) developed what is known as agency theory, focusing on differences in interests between owners (principals) and managers (agents). The theory explains how relationships between principals and agents are organised and should operate. One belief is agents (managers) are boundedly rational (Simon, 1982), meaning they “will satisfice rather than profit maximize” (Stiles & Taylor, 2002, p. 14) (see detailed explanation and review of agency theory by Eisenhardt, 1989). Safeguarding against the self-serving actions of managers-agents and arising conflicts of interest, the board is one of the controlling mechanisms and their central role is monitoring management (M.C. Jensen & Meckling, 1976). The ‘independence’ role for boards promoted by agency theory describes them as acting as “rational legal entities” and “as servants of the shareholder” (Lorsch, 2017, p. 8). Classing the board as a ‘servant’ in law reflects the board’s requirement to work under the direction and control of the shareholders. These beliefs emphasise the necessity for separate ownership and control (Berle & Means, 1932) if organisations are to be effective.

While Eisenhardt (1989) notes the versatility and benefits of agency theory, in essence “board members are supposed to be independent from managers and shareholders, and agency theory presents how to align the interests of managers and shareholders” (Huse et al., 2011, p. 12). ‘Independence’ under agency theory puts boards of directors at a

distance, classing their activities as ‘low’ and as simply acting as representatives of the owner-principals (for an overview of comparative theories, see Stiles and Taylor, 2002, p. 11). This calls into question concerns about power.

Empirical research undertaken by Lorsch and MacIver (1989) establishes that in a normal environment (free from crises), the CEO has power, leaving the board’s role as limited. Such circumstances mean the board acts as a ‘rubber stamp’ for managerial decisions. This issue, along with others over time, means agency theory has become less attractive in explaining the effectiveness of boards and their operations. Another matter, besides dissatisfaction with the dominance of agency theory and its simplicity, is the theory’s interpretation of boards as “*just legal rational entities*” (Lorsch, 2017, p. 8) (italics added to suggest ‘only’ or ‘no/nothing more than’, meaning of little significance or inconsequential). Additionally, what boards *should* do is mismatched, as theory doesn’t transpire into practice, leading to a confusing ‘fact or /and fiction conundrum’ (Mace, 1971). Questions emerge concerning the tenuous links between boards and effective firm performance. Board activities are likened to a mystical horse like creature – a unicorn, a “legendary species” and impossible to locate (J.L. Johnson et al., 1996, p. 433). Using these images triggers ideas about the board and its members as a myth, scarce, mysterious, unique and sacred, possessing ‘illusory’ effects. This leads me to naming this chapter and describing board members as *elusive*, which is compounded by the absence of studies featuring board member identity work.

A growing unease towards large scale studies from secondary sources, mainly US centric, of the ‘usual suspects’ (i.e., cited as board size, number of outside directors) (Finkelstein & Mooney, 2003) positions the researcher as ‘detached’ and aloof. Finally, changes in corporate governance triggered by global financial irregularities implicating board practice, actions and/or non-actions, and with high profile media attention (i.e., Enron),

have steered a different course for governance. Collectively, these factors acted as a ‘wake-up call’ for corporate governance scholars and practitioner communities. Extending their energies beyond the agency theory problem, conversations turned to addressing social and psychological aspects. Classifying boards as “dynamic social systems” (Lorsch, 2017, p. 3), and acknowledging the “human side of corporate governance” (Huse, 2007, p. 8), means taking on a behavioural perspective challenging assumptions of “agency-theory-based input-output studies of boards of directors” (p. 8). Lastly, the emphasis is placed on addressing and understanding the contextual factors of boards (Gabrielsson et al., 2019). This renewed surge in interest and new direction results in the desire to get ‘in’ and ‘around’ the boardroom, forming a body of scholarship on board members behaviours, and relationships, in other words – *dynamics*. This research is grouped together in the second wave of studies I term ‘conduct studies’, which I discuss next.

### **Wave Two: Conduct Studies of Boards of Directors**

The ‘conduct’(behaviour) or ‘what’s done’ studies address *who* are board members, *what’s* happening in the boardroom, *how* do board members do their work and lastly, *how* do boards work. By combining the ‘who,’ with the ‘what’ and ‘how’, this wave provides insights into the ‘inner workings’ of the boardroom from a myriad of theoretical concepts, or as observed by McNulty and colleagues (2013) in their review of qualitative studies, an “eclectic range of theories spanning several disciplines” (p. 183). However, after appraising 25 years of qualitative studies in corporate governance, only a minority of studies combined two or more disciplinary traditions. The majority, using one discipline from economics and law, align with the dominant paradigm – agency theory, hence the need “to develop richer and more intriguing theoretical frameworks to interpret governance phenomena” (McNulty et al., 2013, p. 189). Recent efforts to minimise

disciplinary and theoretical myopia is reinforced by other commentaries on the field (Kumar et al., 2019). Calls to scholars ask for the inclusion of social psychology, sociology and management traditions, to name a few, in an effort to widen research interests. Considering boards as “complex social systems” (Lorsch, 2017, p. 3), *behavioural/board dynamics* research means studying the conduct of individual board directors, paying attention to board member behaviours, the roles board members play in the boardroom, personal characteristics, and their contributions to the board as a group. Board dynamics assesses relationships amongst “individual and collective behaviours” (i.e., levels of analysis), addressing “individual behaviour and effectiveness, and board behaviour and effectiveness” (Pye & Pettigrew, 2005, p. S29), and also “the dynamics stemming from actors, their motivations and their interactions” (Huse, 2018, p. 7). Survey based methods are used extensively in researching dynamics such as diversity and demographic comparability (Westphal & Zajac, 1995; Westphal & Bednar, 2005; Westphal & Stern, 2007). Whereas high on the agenda for other studies is the key question of “how are relationships formed and developed” both “in and around the boardroom” (Pettigrew, 1992, p. 178), focusing on the “lived experience of directors” (Roberts et al., 2005, p. S8). Investigating direct engagement, action and encounters, researchers term *boards-in-action* research (Samra-Fredericks, 2000a, b). Here academics don’t just rely on interviews; instead they venture inside the boardroom, either observing as a ‘fly on the wall’ using audio-visual equipment, or alternatively as a participant observer considered to be ‘one of the lads’ (Huse & Zattoni, 2008; Huse et al., 2005).

Studies I classify in this group gravitate towards a micro-view of the individual-director rather than board-level analysis. In other words, “inter-relationships” (Pye & Pettigrew, 2005, p. S33) such as between the chair and CEO dyad (Kakabadse et al., 2006).

*Relational* is one resource amongst many in constructing identities or “self-narratives at

the nexus of temporal, personal, relational, cultural, and professional identifications” (Fairhurst & Sheep, 2020, p. 426). Ybema (2020, p. 61) states “the essentially *relational* character of identity construction becomes manifest, revealing how individuals understand their selves in relation to others” (italics original), and illuminates “positioning the self within an intricate web of relations” (p. 61). My interests lie with relational aspects of identity rather than temporal, stressing “the interplay of sensemaking, discursive interaction, and negotiation” (Fairhurst & Sheep, 2020, p. 426).

Groupthink or “herding danger” (Van den Berghe & Levrau, 2013, p. 217) at the start of this chapter describe board members acting collectively rather than independently as individuals. The majority of understandings of board success rest on a “group/governance mechanism” (Petrovic, 2008, p. 1373) comprising of board composition and structure. Scrutiny at the individual level is an underexplored area of how board member competencies correspond with board success. Identifying skills, attitudes, knowledge and expertise assists in answering the key question of how effectively a board governs the company. However, as noted by Petrovic, a problem exists in “distinguishing individual and collective inputs and outputs” because scholars rarely separate the two, with the group/collective level more widely researched (Petrovic, 2008, p. 1373). Nevertheless, whether a successful board originates from board members’ contributions and behaviours, or a board’s role directs the actions and behaviours of board members (Huse, 2005), results in a fascination in board director qualities and ways of behaving (Petrovic, 2008). Ways of conduct are intermingled within a complex dynamic where the relationship between boards as a collective and the individuals themselves is simply “inescapable” (Van den Berghe & Levrau, 2013, p. 217), meaning they rely and influence each other constantly.

This ‘knottiness’ between levels of analysis means what directors do at the board-group level is contested terrain. Petrovic (2008) observes a tendency for studies to feature “how

boards are supposed to work” (p. 1387), and they are “prescriptive” in nature (p. 1381). This leaves a discussion centring on *board dynamics* - identifying key qualities, attitudes, skills, interactions and behaviours of board directors. In J.L. Johnson et al. (1996) review and research agenda on boards of directors, the authors claim there is no unified version of “a specified role set for directors” (p. 409). They comment, “Clearly, the proposition of multiple, and in some cases contradictory, roles for the board of directors is differentially supported as a function of the chosen theoretical perspective” (J.L. Johnson et al., 1996, p. 410).

Despite the lack of differentiation between roles (collective and individual), Petrovic (2008) catalogues essential qualities of board directors. Drawing from a variety of studies in corporate governance, she itemises “interpersonal and communication skills” such as the ability to question and challenge (Petrovic, 2008, pp. 1381-1382). In addition, board members require knowledge of the organisation, and strategy. Lastly, attributes listed amongst the many are “motivation and commitment” (Petrovic, 2008, p.1382). Petrovic (2008) highlights the processes board members should engage in, such as participation, open communication and thinking for themselves (pp. 1384-1385). While traditional skills and expertise (for example finance and accounting) are vital, the need for board members to be technologically savvy is acknowledged. This means keeping up to speed with global digitalisation trends (Rigolini et al., 2019). In summary, there is no definitive ‘inventory’ of skills, attitudes, and capabilities, but rather a far-ranging plethora of talents, skills and abilities, whether a corporate board member, non-executive director or senior manager (Jackson et al., 2003).

Board members acquire the necessary skills and competencies either by bringing prior knowledge and experience into the boardroom, and/or training and development. The former typically occurs via a recruitment process (W.A. Brown, 2007; Jackson et al., 2003;

Ward & Preece, 2012). Developing standards of good practice for boards and directorates in sectors and industries around the world are professional institutes such as The National Association of Corporate Directors (NACD) and The Institute of Directors (IoD) (Huse, 2000). Guidance is offered for operating and working as a board member and these professional bodies endorse job/role descriptions for board members. They offer training, networking and development opportunities, as do private specialist consulting/training companies, focusing on executive development – top teams and boards (Jackson et al., 2003). Associations, institutes and best practice provide ways of itemising necessary board member skills and competencies. In doing so, they frame governing as an unproblematic and static affair/activity. Taking a prescriptive approach (Petrovic, 2008) or reductionist approach to the work and activities of a board member means side stepping ambiguities and complexities. As echoed by Cunliffe (2009), governing mirrors management studies and practice due to “trying to simplify a complex, ideological, political and social process to a set of principles, roles and techniques justified by a supposed rationality” (p. 27).

Whatever skills and competences are identified, “technical rationality” prevails (Cunliffe, 2009, p. 30). Defining the key features, functions, activities and roles board members perform, or are expected to perform, adopts characteristics of rationality, systematisation and objectivity informed from a realist standpoint (Cunliffe, 2009, p. 30). This means rejecting emotional expressions and influences, an area severely unresearched in governance studies (Brundin & Nordqvist, 2008). At the individual level, a director can fulfil a number of roles. An early study from Stewart (1991) addressing the chairman’s role identifies five roles, including the role of a chair as ‘consultant’, ‘coach’ and ‘mentor’. Similarly, Widmer (1993) suggests as well as the term ‘trustee’, there are additional roles for individual board members – ‘figurehead’, ‘representative’ and ‘expert’. Huse (2007) gives an overview of board director characteristics based on the *board capital* construct

from Hillman and Dalziel (2003). Both *human* (expertise, experience, etc.) and *relational* (social networks etc.) capital are included in the definition of board capital. Using board capital as a basis, Huse (2007) divides the characteristics of a board into two categories: *competence and knowledge* and *other characteristics*. Competence and knowledge are further separated into seven aspects. Within the seven, he is able to identify specific knowledge competencies such as firm-specific and function-orientated. He chooses to base his framework on the idea of the board acting as a resource for the organisation at a collective level (resource dependency theory). Drawing from the seven categories, he is able to identify numerous roles board members play. These are wide-ranging and include but are not limited to mentor, lobbyist, negotiator, analyst, evaluator, advocate, collaborator and decision maker (Huse, 2007, p. 288).

In contrast, Leblanc and Gillies (2005) categorise not just the functional but also the dysfunctional board member behaviour types. These include critic, conformist and cheerleader; the latter deserves some explanation. The cheerleader board director is known not to participate in board discussions. Gaining notoriety for being non-performers, they are labelled as “sleepers” with their main activity as praising others (Leblanc & Gillies, 2005, p. 193). Likewise, a ‘silent seether’ type in an earlier study by Dunne (1997) acknowledges someone with a lack of confidence despite having intelligence. The outcome of extant research on individual board member roles is a large volume of studies presenting a head spinning array of roles board members and chairs perform. Confusion can also arise, especially when Widmer (1993) suggests board members may also perform these multiple roles simultaneously. Discussions on roles, whether functional or dysfunctional, stress the normative and functional side of governing discussed in the literature.

Addressing ‘what’s done’ in the boardroom or seeking to “probe the behavioural and relational dynamics on boards” (McNulty et al., 2013, p. 192) means governance scholars turning to behavioural theories such as social identity theory (SIT) and self-categorization theory (SCT), developed by psychologists Tajfel and Turner (1979). See studies by Hillman et al. (2008), Withers et al. (2012) and Zhu and Yoshikawa (2016) on board members. Table 3.1 reveals peripheral interest in identity matters.

Table 3.1 An Overview of the theoretical lens suggested by Alvesson et al. (2008) used to illustrate the gaps within a governance context

<b>Approach</b>	<b>Haberman’s cognitivist interest</b>	<b>Conceptual lens</b>	<b>Main emphasis</b>	<b>Seminal articles</b>	<b>Governance/Board member</b>
<b>Social Identity Theory (SIT)</b>	Technical	Functionalist	Improving organisational effectiveness & solving problems	Ashforth & Mael (1989)	Hillman et al. (2008) Withers et al. (2012) Zhu & Yoshikawa (2016)
<b>Identity work</b>	Practical-hermeneutic	Interpretivist	Understanding human and organizational experience	Sveningsson & Alvesson (2003)	None
<b>Identity regulation and control</b>	Emancipatory	Critical	Reveals problems associated with cultural and political irrationalities	Alvesson & Willmott (2002)	None

Alvesson et al. (2008) provide major reasons why social identity theory is popular. They say it is designed simply “to provide solutions”, whereas identity work and interpretivist studies in general aim for understanding human (and organisational experience) (p. 17). A social identity lens in the study of boards offer answers to causality problems, such as what is the likelihood of directors leaving their board position in an organisational crisis (Withers et al., 2012). Alvesson et al. (2008, p. 14) elaborate further, suggesting identity

work offers insights into “understanding how individuals deal with their complex and often ambiguous and contradictory experiences of work and organization”, and this is something we only have very limited knowledge of in the board context. Currently, there is a need to integrate identity studies in governance (Huse, 2018; Kumar et al., 2019), specifically the “consequences of their [board members] social or role identity on board behaviours and decision-making (Zattoni & Pugliese, 2019, p. 114).

Alongside leadership, cultural dynamics and the need for boards to be sustainably innovative, diversity is included in a holistic framework aimed at supporting boards to work effectively (Dsouli et al., 2013). Also, fuelled by questions about whether male-dominated boards are in fact effective, calls addressing diversity issues on boards have arisen (Sonnenfeld, 2002). Diversity on boards does not only include issues of gender, but a combination of factors covering social and demographic features like ethnicity and age. As voiced by Finkelstein and Mooney (2003), other factors include personality traits, communication style and the “guts to disagree” (p. 107). These attributes take us away from the usual suspects of say board size, and combine expertise, education, knowledge, and personality characteristics as the covert/invisible diversity factors. Conversely, tangible and overt diversity elements are ethnicity, age and gender. The latter addresses the inclusion of females/women on boards, which has transformed the landscape of board research. Within this scholarship, the foci are explaining their contributions and benefits to boards (Terjensen et al., 2009). However, there are mixed responses, with disagreements on influence and impact towards board effectiveness (Nielsen & Huse, 2010).

Next, following the ‘who’, in terms of skills, background, pre-defined roles, and diversity issues, is the ‘what’ and the ‘how’, addressing ‘happenings’ in the boardroom. These studies describe and explain board processes, with a move away from concentrating on structural arrangements to behavioural and relationship-building processes such as

group/team dynamics and board process – ‘how do boards work’. As defined by Pye and Pettigrew (2005, p. S32), this is “board process: that is, actually how a director and group of directors engage with and work with each other, so shaping the future organization and consequent measures of performance and evaluations of effectiveness”. Striving for the holy grail on boards seems to be about getting the right board ‘chemistry’. Interest has linked gender representation, cultural and ethnic mix as solutions for teamworking capabilities of boards to increase performance. As suggested at the start of this chapter, individual board members working as a group can run into difficulties or ‘pathologies’ (Merchant & Pick, 2010) along the way. Hence a large literature exists around team behaviours, especially what creates a collegial working team and what prevents it. The literature delves into team behaviour theory, including team/group dynamics, team culture, team development theory, team conflict group relations theory and finally, one I will say more on is the team production model of corporate governance (Blair & Stout, 1999; Kaufman & Englander, 2005; Machold et al., 2011). The team production model receives attention because this is a move away from the dominant beliefs of corporate governance and boards of directors formulated from the agent-principal idea. In essence, the model does not identify a ‘principal’, but instead sees a complex ‘production’ inviting many stakeholders into value creating, rather than isolating it to maximising shareholder value. The team production model upsets the balance and changes the assumed conduct of boards of directors.

Answering requests from Dalton and Dalton (2011) to improve our understanding of how boards of directors work are scholars in Australia and The Netherlands (Bezemer et al., 2014, 2018; Pugliese et al., 2015; Veltrop et al., 2020). Deploying micro-level scrutiny to study interactional episodes in the boardroom, they progress understandings of board behaviours and dynamics. Through a series of propositions, a longstanding dilemma about

the effects of director contributions on board outcomes is tackled. In their latest study, using a mixed methods approach, the scholars determine how board members interact with the CEO, combined with the impact of the chair's behaviour in meetings. Their findings specifically determine the engagement of directors with the CEO during occasions of disagreement. Board members interactions are measured along a continuum, from voicing their opinions to total withdrawal from discussions. Here the idea of the board member remaining silent surfaces. Instances of silence and secession are found to be a direct consequence of the chair's style of leadership, thus establishing effective board dynamics to include psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson & Lei, 2014). This links back to the culture of a board; the level of psychological safety determines if a board member speaks or does not speak. In this study silence is seen as unfruitful and the cause of "difficult boardroom dynamics" (Veltrop et al., 2020, p. 13), and, therefore, a hindrance. Even though silence is regarded as an obstacle, their research offers a rare glimpse, albeit unintended, on silence and voice behaviours as a consequence of dynamics.

As illustrated in this grouping, a variety of research streams exist, from levels of analysis, to roles and behaviours and the consequences of board interactions. For a synthesis of different research streams on boardroom behaviours, including interactions as discussed above, see Zattoni and Pugliese (2019), who detail interactional studies alongside "board power, accountability and strategy" and "social dynamics, psychological factors, and group processes" (p. 113). Notwithstanding an avalanche of studies referring to, and explaining board dynamics and behaviours, the outgoing editors of the journal *Corporate Governance: An International Review (CGIR)* urge scholars to take on unorthodox theories and deliver vigorous empirical research by different methods and analysis of innovative research data (Kumar et al., 2019). One suggestion from them is "text and discourse analysis" (p. 7). Some novel ways have materialised, such as agenda items as a

unit of analysis (Fear, 2014) and advances to capture ‘just-in time’ board meetings (Veltrop et al., 2020). Other opportunities to plug research gaps include the emotional component in board work (Brundin & Nordqvist, 2008), something that is evident in identity work processes but underappreciated in the identity construction literature (Winkler, 2018). Finally, in the last wave of studies, I identify a group thought to be independent or “stand alone” (Zattoni & Pugliese, 2019, p. 111). This is due to their theoretical and methodological diversity, presenting a less myopic view of boards of directors at the moment, and rising to the challenge of new theoretical advancement for board governance studies.

### **Wave Three: Niche Studies of Boards of Directors**

My research on board member identity formation is positioned in a third wave of board governance studies I call niche studies. Resuscitating board director literature beyond the “seeing and hearing” (Samra-Fredericks, 2000a, p. 244) in conduct studies is a collective featuring the smallest, the newest, and most ‘specialised’, hence the label, ‘niche’. These studies assume ‘reality’ is socially constructed, giving attention to personal experiences, shared meanings, narratives and language. In this section my focus is on unravelling what is currently known about discursive informed research relating to board members.

Niche studies emphasise and meet calls for qualitative research, where the focus is on ‘talk’, and in some cases ‘talk-in-interaction.’ The latter has a tendency for academics to gravitate towards analysing conversations from board meeting data, using conversational analysis (CA). This is employed in a number of imaginative ways. For example, Cooren (2007) utilises an archived documentary, *Corporation: After Mr. Sam*, produced by the National Film Board of Canada in 1974 and based on board meetings that took place five years earlier. Consisting of a series of episodes, the documentary maps the ongoing

business life of Sam Steinberg, a Canadian entrepreneur. Organisation communication (OC) and Language and social interaction (LSI), representing the “interactional turn” (Cooren, 2007, p. xii) are used to analysis board meetings dealing with the succession of Sam. Within these studies, an excerpt hints at identity work:

To the extent that people identify with a group, they are faced with a choice to either shape their emotions into the categories expected and recognized by the group, or live with contradictions between their inner states (and more importantly, their expressions of those states in social interaction) and the feelings acceptable to the group. We suspect that individuals largely navigate between those positions, sensing at times that they are going through the motions of expected feeling expressions or having to actively suppress their true feelings in the interest of conforming to expectations.

(Fitch & Foley, 2007, pp. 125-126)

Here, a dilemma exists for the board in the documentary scenario of replacing Sam the entrepreneur. Individuals contemplate meeting the expectations of others and the repercussions on their choices is made visible in a dialogue from Fitch and Foley (2007, pp. 125-126). Also, hiding emotional responses for the sake of going with protocols is highlighted. There is a real tension here with a sense of impasse and being perplexed. Fitch and Foley also mention later that “no one challenges or disputes” (p. 125). Refraining from questioning, together with their above account, reinforces the suppression of emotion and potential face saving strategies (Goffman, 1969), identifying board members actively experiencing the stresses and strains of identity work.

Uncovering feelings using talk-based ethnography of boards/top management teams (TMT) is research from Samra-Fredericks (2000b). In a series of papers generated from

her PhD, she combines ethnomethodology with conversation analysis (CA), continuing her research on managerial elites (Samra-Fredericks, 2000a, 2000b). Her research is described by Zattoni and Pugliese (2019) as outlier research of behavioural dynamics, and I place her studies in-between, straddling both the second wave (conduct studies of behavioural dynamics) and the third wave of those making ‘ripples’ due to their methodologies, which include discursive formats. Other studies employ a plethora of ethnographic methods, such as audio and videotape recordings, along with work shadowing, non-participant observations of board/TMT meetings, and interviews. Aiming to capture the “observable and reportable aspects of boardroom/TMT interaction” (Samra-Fredericks, 2000a, p. 246) or “*real time interpersonal routines*” (italics original) (Samra-Fredericks 2000a, p. 251), utilising CA provides micro-level analysis.

Hough et al. (2014) use sensemaking in a not-for-profit study on the board’s monitoring role. Earlier studies by Annie Pye adopt a sense-making approach to corporate boards (Pye, 2001, 2002, 2005). In another study Maitlis (2004) identifies four successful processes of sense-making in the behavioural dynamics of the CEO-board relationship. Although no single universal definition of sensemaking exists (A.D. Brown et al., 2015) generally sense-making theory simply is “the making of sense” (Weick, 1995, p. 4). While it is widely accepted there is an interplay between identity and sensemaking (Vough et al., 2020), none of the current studies venture into the selves-identities of board members. Whereas these isolated studies utilising sensemaking focus at the board level, one study opts to scrutinise the CEO – chair dyad (Kakabadse et al., 2010). Tracking a “chemistry narrative” using narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993) to reveal “disclosed stories concerning boardroom dynamics” (p. 298), Kakabadse and colleagues discover “deep friendship” (p. 285) from sensemaking accounts, which is a key ingredient for flourishing chair-CEO relationships.

Studies such as Kakabadse et al. (2010), using narrative analysis along with discourse analysis, are miniscule in number. Narrative constructions of governance matters possess similarities to discourse analysis. Both approaches are sensemaking devices and use language in constructing or making sense of phenomena (A.D. Brown et al., 2015). Adopting a Ricoeurian approach to narrative, Ng and De Cock (2002) analyse research material comprising two transcribed interviews, board minutes for almost two years, and field notes from one of the authors, who was a CEO and a non-executive director (NED) in a case study organisation. Storytelling analysis (Boje, 1991) identifies key characters in an organisational take over through a sequential log of key events (Ng & De Cock, 2002, p. 43). The authors aim is to:

...tell a complex story of storytelling, with human actors busying themselves with plotting, performing, accounting for what they do, and thus producing reality as they know it. Our interpretation functions as a meta-account on the importance of storytelling and is meant to guide the sense making process of both managers—practitioners and academics—practitioners, but we certainly do not want to impose a ‘correct’ reading.

The above informs us of two things. Firstly, it identifies the actions and activities of board members as “plotting”, which is not widely accepted as an activity or role covered in previous studies. Secondly, it highlights the authors’ account is one account and not meant to be seen/read as truthful or true, reflecting the nature of constructionist research. This study also accentuates how individuals “linguistically structure the world” (Ng & De Cock, 2002, p. 43) through narrative accounts enabling them to be “creators and interpreters of meaning” (p. 24). Ng and De Cock make a valid point for myself and any researcher, irrespective of their research interest, saying researchers “must rid themselves

of the assumption that quality data must be objective, reliable, accurate, etc. and must be prepared to engage personally with the emotions and the meanings that reside in the text....” (p. 27).

Limited studies use discourse analysis of governance matters. Fear (2014) used organisational discourse analysis, specifically “story as metaphor” (Fear, 2014, p. 318) to analyse patient stories in board meetings of health boards from the UK National Health Service (NHS). The governance scholar, Morten Huse recently published findings from a study addressing prevalent gender discourses in several European and Scandinavian countries, with the addition of Australia, about Women on boards (WoB) (Huse, 2018). In another study deemed unique, New Zealand academics examine board governance discourse (Carroll et al., 2017). The scholars concentrate on gathering “authentic voices” (p. 609) from 25 board chairs and 35 CEOs based in organisations spanning all the sectors. Discourses from analysing “language, imagery, speech effects and syntactical constructions” (p. 610) illustrate four ways of “talking about governance” (p. 610). These are discourses of *conformance*, *deliberation*, *enterprise* and *bounded innovation*. The latter discourse of bounded innovation shows the most tension in the work of a board director. Their study catalogues a rich tension, with board members wishing to be creative set against constraining conformist ways. This study promotes the idea of a board director’s role as infused with tensions created from governance paradoxes, highlighting the complexities of being a board member, along with the uniqueness of different paradoxes in comparison to managers.

### **Paradoxical Board Work**

Organisational life is bursting with contradictions and paradox (Farjoun et al., 2018; Lewis, 2000), and board work is no exception (Roberts et al, 2005; Sundaramurthy &

Lewis, 2003). Recently, E. Solomon and Huse (2019, p. 334) comment, “Directors face complexities, opposing forces and inherent conflicts in fulfilling their governing responsibilities”, and Carroll et al. (2017) note, “Paradoxes cause tension” (p. 608). Identity studies highlight the stresses, strains and dualities of tensions arising from the contradictions, and reinforce this belief, as discussed in the last chapter. Numerous paradoxes and dilemmas exist in governance, such as the broad pairings of *mission versus management*, *trust versus control* and lastly, *internal versus external* (Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003). Sundaramurthy and Lewis (2003) illuminate “control-collaboration tensions” and where this paradox originates from – “perceptions of opposing *and* interwoven elements” (p. 397). Rectifying and managing paradox involves “developing understandings and practices that accept and accommodate tensions” (p. 397), rather than emphasising the divisions.

In a study addressing the conduct (attitudes, behaviours and skills) of non-executive directors, Roberts et al. (2005) detail a series of “couplets” (p. S12). A board director’s role combines aspects of control-collaboration in forming accountability, suggesting effectiveness is based on three sets of contradictory behaviours: “engaged but non-executive”; “challenging but supportive”; “independent but involved” (pp.13-15). Paradoxes in the work of board members are not isolated to corporate governance, as Cornforth (2003a,b) and Mullins (2014) note their existence in the governance of public and non-profit organisations too.

Finally, a study by E. Solomon and Huse (2019, p. 323), they probe the impact and consequential nature of “paradoxical tensions and trade-offs” based on data from a questionnaire analysis of Norwegian companies.

On the one hand, they are required to abide by legal mandates and formally adopted policies for oversight and control, and face institutional pressures for playing an active role and enabling change. On the other hand, they face external and internal pressures, including within the boardroom, to avoid potentially controversial activities, such as monitoring that may lead to conflict. Additionally, they need to maintain relations, collaborate, and establish trust with powerful participants who exercise their will, to ensure the continuing flow of information, connections, and other resources needed to govern adequately. This is, in fact, one of the paradoxes of governance, whereby governing boards rely for information on those whom they are supposed to monitor.

Ultimately, this excerpt illustrates dealing with paradoxical complexities presenting as dilemmas for board members. The main one is the interplay between the CEO and the board. Transparency advocates openness between board members, the board and other stakeholders, while at the same time they are restricted by confidentiality and sensitivity of information and communication. Unravelling who to be amidst socially and publicly available discourses, inherent paradoxes, and expectations is complicated. Navigating expectations more often than not manifests in what Hay (2014, p. 510) refers to as “an emotionally charged process of identity work”. Board members are in a unique position in comparison with other organisational actors, occupations and professions. As illustrated, this uniqueness and inherent tension provides a rich terrain to study the processual nature of identity. But, even though resources are abundant, identity work processes have not received scholarly attention.

Governance paradoxes highlight not only a territory enabling identity work, but distinctiveness around governance roles and working 'normalities'. The requirement to be independent but involved means independent in the sense of not an employee of the organisation. Other features of board work/board members include a number of other peculiarities, making board members atypical in comparison to other organisational actors, professions and occupations, and even uncharacteristic compared to atypical workers. They have collective board responsibilities along with individual board member obligations. Their classification as a group (collective) is markedly different from other work groups in an organisational setting (Reid, 2014). Board members engage in a variety of dyads and stakeholder relationships that deviate from the employee-employer norm, many of which extend beyond the organisational boundary. Some are required to work at a 'distance' from the organisation, acting in an independent capacity ('outside director') and external to the organisation itself, and many may have multiple board appointments spanning across industries, sectors and even countries. Some carry out the role on a voluntary basis and part-time, with their primary workspace confined to the boardroom by scheduled board meetings on an annual basis. Certain requirements ask them to disseminate information through interlocking directorates (Hillman & Dalziel, 2003). A list of what board members do appears endless, and includes a variety of associated tasks, such as selecting, hiring and subsequent monitoring and evaluating of CEOs, combined with defining strategy, mission, business models and implementing strategy, but this is not an exhaustive list (J.L. Johnson et al., 1996; Pearce and Zahra, 1991). Therefore, making any comparison with other organisational members seems virtually impossible. As understandings of atypical identity work are minimal (A.D. Brown, 2020; Petriglieri et al., 2019), this study aims to increase what is known.

## Conclusion

My aim in this chapter is reviewing extant literature to offer a contextual backdrop on boards of directors' identity work. By organising the scholarship into a series of waves, I attempt to piece together board governance research. Completing this puzzle started with outlining agency theory. Currently, this theory informs the majority of scholarship and understandings of boards and their directors. Next, follows discussion of an explosion of inquiries into social and relational aspects of board members investigating board dynamics and interactions. Collectively, the first two waves of scholarship present functional and prescriptive understandings of board members. Lastly, an emerging body of studies draw from sensemaking and discursive approaches. These inquiries offer a change in direction and align with my chosen philosophical approach. The atypical work of a board member is explained, together with the identity work of elites considered to be an organisational grouping known as managerial elites to provide further context. This information, together with the three waves of studies, maps the landscape and terrain for board members engaging in identity work. The next chapter will address the anomaly referred to at the start of this chapter as silent behaviour, and its close counterpart – *voice*, since this study treats the movement and tension between silence and voice as identity work.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Conceptualising Voice and Silence in Organisational Settings**

Silence itself - the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers - is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies.

(Foucault, 1978, p. 27)

#### **Introduction**

In the above excerpt, silence sits alongside “the things said” (voice). Silence and voice are intertwined. Foucault continues “there is not one but many silences” (p. 27) with little distinction between them, and “there is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say” (p. 27). Silences “are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (Foucault, 1978, p. 27).

I suggest a discourse of voice-silence as a dialectical tension, manifesting in identity work as tuning. In this chapter I elaborate further by reviewing the voice and silence literatures. Management scholars interested in voice and silence remain preoccupied with types, forms, motives and consequences (two notable reviews of both concepts are Morrison, 2011; Morrison, 2014). My intention is to probe further and present a flavour of the voice-silence relationship. I first define voice and silence, being mindful of the disparity in disciplinary fields. As I treat voice and silence as conjoined in constructing identities, the last section of this chapter examines their associations to identities.

Voice and silence are fields of study in organisation studies (OS) and continue to receive new scholarly attention (Budd et al., 2010; Knoll et al. 2016; Van Dyne et al., 2003). For Brinsfield (2014, p. 115), voice equates to “forms of communicative *expression or participation*”, while silence represents “forms of communicative *suppression*” (italics as original). Brinsfield et al. (2009) propose almost 20 key concepts in voice and silence research, with Brinsfield (2014) providing a similar updated list comprising nearly 30, and claiming more exist. The authors differentiate constructs of voice and silence according to three components: *levels of analysis* (i.e., individual, group), *direction* (i.e., upward, external) and *situation or event* (i.e., responding to job dissatisfaction). For an historical mapping of typologies since 1970 based on seminal contributions, see Brinsfield et al. (2009, p. 9). Overall, an impressive assemblage of theory and ideas involving voice and silence exists for the workplace.

Psychologists can treat voice and silence as a duality, the same as light and dark, good and evil, and peace and war. The duality arises when individuals consider whether to express their ideas and concerns or decide to remain silent. Questions such as, Can I speak? (having a voice), Do I speak? (exercising voice), What do I say? (content of voice), and How will others respond to what I say? (reactions to voice) are typical dilemmas and decisions in daily working and personal lives (Greenberg & Edwards, 2009, Morrison, 2011). Different disciplinary specialities generate alternative attitudes to both concepts, for example, Organisational Behaviour (OB) and Human Resource Management (HRM).

While scholars agree this creates a rich and diverse literature, with emerging recognition of “the confluence of literatures on voice and silence in organizations” (Ashford et al., 2009, p. 177), voice maintains maturity (Brinsfield et al., 2009; Knoll et al., 2016) as silence has yet to sustain equal growth (Morrison, 2011; Van Dyne et al., 2003). Currently, studies on silence in organisational contexts is “more recent and more sparse” (Morrison & Milliken,

2003, p. 1354). Supporting this view are others investigating being silenced and the untapped potential of silence in organisation studies (Bigo, 2018; A.D. Brown & Coupland, 2005).

### **Conceptualising Voice in Organisational Settings**

The term *voice* is expressed by an economist in *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* (Hirschman, 1970), Hirschman claims individuals have three responses towards substandard services in society. They can choose to leave, and no longer use the service (exit), or resist and take action (voice), or alternatively do nothing and keep quiet (loyalty). Hirschman's idea of voice as "any attempt at all to change rather than to escape from objectionable state of affairs" (p. 30) informs much of our understanding on individual voice, noted as a framework of exit-voice or the 'quit or complain' concept (Budd et al., 2010).

Although several definitions of voice exist (see Morrison, 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2014), there are distinct similarities between them. Morrison (2011) profiles six definitions, mostly from the American scholar Linn Van Dyne (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998; Van Dyne et al., 2003). Morrison explains commonalities between definitions as "an act of verbal expression" (Morrison, 2011, p. 375). However, choosing to exercise voice is entirely up to the individual – thus "discretionary", and if they do then it is "constructive in its intent" (p. 375). Consensus among definitions includes an individual's intention to promote "improvement and positive change" rather than moaning. Van Dyne and LePine's (1998) definition clearly expresses a need to "constructively challenge the status quo" as opposed to "merely criticize" (p. 109). Pointing out faults, criticising and complaining is another voice concept from Kowalski (1996).

Brinsfield et al.'s (2009, p. 4) simplified definition of voice is "the expression of ideas, information, opinions, or concerns", and equally simply, 'silence' is the "*withholding* of

ideas, information, opinions, or concerns”. Whereas, Morrison (2011) stresses, “It is not, however, just any form of speaking” (p. 376). Taking an overarching conceptualisation from several definitions, Morrison (2011) concludes voice is the:

...discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions about work-related issues with the intent to improve organizational or unit functioning. (p. 375)

Morrison’s (2011) definition includes the idea of *proactive behaviour*, which is “activities that are self-initiated, future-orientated, and aimed at improving the situation or oneself” (p. 375). Her definition covers *what* is to be communicated as “work-related”, similar to Premeaux and Bedeian (2003) who include “workplace matters” and “job-related issues” (p. 1538), and *how* these will be communicated (ideas, suggestions, etc.). Definitional debates deduce voice behaviour as consisting of three distinct qualities: personal risk, delicate political considerations, and interpersonal dynamics (Ashford et al., 2009, p.177).

Wilkinson and Fay (2011) note the elasticity of terms attempting to define voice, and especially the term *employee voice*, with associated terms such as “participation, engagement, involvement, or empowerment” (Wilkinson & Fay, p. 65). Budd et al. (2010) add *democracy*, but terms and their meanings vary depending upon the disciplinary tradition (for example, political science, psychology and industrial relations). Practising voice initiatives in workplaces often results in terms such as ‘involvement’ and ‘participation’ frequently being used interchangeably (Wilkinson & Fay, 2011).

A detailed model of employee voice by Morrison (2011, p. 382) integrates two fundamental judgments employees engage in when deciding to speak up: *perceived efficacy* of voice (is it worth my while?) and *perceived safety* of voice (is it too risky?) (italics in original). The impact of employee voice on the organisation or group and/or

individual can be either positive or negative, or both. The framework details other factors such as *contextual* (e.g., organisational structure and culture) and *individual* (personality, experience and tenure). There is a dual purpose to deciding to speak up, comprising of “improving the situation or oneself” (Morrison, 2011, p. 375). This correlates to voice as proactive behaviour, or as having “ProSocial motives” established from “altruism and cooperation” (Van Dyne et al., 2003, p. 1360).

A substantial amount of academic endeavour focuses on the ‘how’ - ‘*voice mechanisms*’ in organisational settings (Budd et al., 2010, p. 305) and their effectiveness. For example, Labour process theory (LPT) includes collective bargaining and works councils.

Considering voice as a set of practices generating working environments with greater employee involvement is high performance work systems (HPWS). Methods include focus groups which advocate enhanced organisational performance (Harley, 2014). Added complexity arises when considering voice as informal versus formal and the role of voice when asking *who* – upward voice (Morrison, 2014).

Motivational behaviours of individuals yield different meanings and types of voice. A seminal example from Van Dyne et al. (2003) recommends three separate types of employee voice – *acquiescent*, *defensive* and *prosocial*. The first two centre around “motives of disengagement” (p. 1361), as opposed to prosocial and other behaviours. The scholars also mirror three distinct types of silence, (acquiescent silence, defensive silence and prosocial silence) – discussed in the next section. Consequences, good or bad, usually follow voice types, behaviours and action. Segregating outcomes of voice into ‘organisation’ or ‘employee’ is common, but substantiated on a paucity of research attention (Morrison, 2014). In other words, scepticism exists about working environments benefitting from employees sharing views, ideas and concerns, or whether difficulties arise in decision-making because reaching a consensus is virtually impossible due to

information and opinion overload (Morrison, 2014). Nor is it well defined if employees voicing views and opinions is career enhancing or career debilitating (Seibert et al., 2001; Whiting et al., 2012).

Despite different theories informing voice in organisational settings, the focus is upon why individuals engage in voice, voice processes and outcomes, with most of the literature conceptual or “laboratory experiments” (Morrison, 2014, p. 191). Budd (2014) advocates escaping “excessively narrow” industrial relations conceptualisations of voice, preferring a broader idea including “individual and collective”, and “union and non-union”, but also “work autonomy” and “business issues” (Budd, 2014, p. 477). Research bias towards voice as behavioural means greater scope for encouraging hypothesis testing, predictions on “inhibitors” of voice and empirical research generally (Morrison, 2014). Extending voice studies to include the group level boosts understanding about relationships and ideas of voice “shaped by social and relational factors” (Morrison, 2014, p. 191). This points the way to exploring voice (and silence) as a temporal phenomenon and as a process, because “the decision of whether to speak up is a process, one that often unfolds slowly over time” (p. 193). As Brinsfield (2014) comments, “voice and silence may indeed be two sides of the same coin, but in order to fully understand the nature of the coin it is necessary to examine both” (p. 115). This infusion is reinforced by Morrison (2014, p. 193) for whom “silence may be just the early stages leading to voice”, and where silence is a similar construct to voice (Morrison, 2011). I will now turn my attention to explaining silence.

### **Conceptualising Silence in Organisational Settings**

Silence is routine, mundane and an inevitable choice for individuals in their workplaces. Morrison and Milliken (2003) detect this cautionary behaviour of employees occurring most of the time, as they “choose the safe response of silence” (p. 1353). But this prevalent

‘default’ position and its ‘visibility’ has not resulted in widespread research efforts.

Although there is a rising curiosity about silence as a construct in its own right in organisational settings (see examples within the last five years – Bigo, 2018; Knoll et al., 2016), in general silence is assumed as a difficult concept to define and study.

Silence is an elusive concept for several reasons. One explanation is the variation in theoretical traditions and disciplines resulting in different forms, types and definitions of silence. In other words, what is meant by silence is highly ambiguous and contested.

Although Brinsfield (2014) recognises the term employee voice is “widely understood as verbal communication aimed up the organisational hierarchy with the intention of improving a situation” (p. 124), silence appears as a legitimate and “compelling alternative to voice” (p. 114) for employees. *Employee silence*, therefore, is often described as the antithesis of employee voice. Secondly, classing silence as behaviour poses challenges for researchers. As Morrison and Milliken (2000, p. 721) say, it is “hidden from view”.

Additionally, within workplaces specific topics are typically known as the “undiscussables” (Ryan & Oestreich, 1991). Consequently, matters often silenced in working environments, such as personal problems or managerial ineptitude, are precisely what they are – issues unable to be discussed, mentioned or talked about (Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

Drawing from a lay definition to define silence is unhelpful. As a noun its meaning is “complete quiet”, and as a verb, “to stop someone or something from speaking or making a sound” (Macmillan Dictionary, n.d.). The consensus from organisational scholars is not to take a rudimentary view of silence as the ‘absence of sound’. Supporting this belief is Van Dyne et al. (2003), who question the notion of silence and voice as “polar opposites” (p. 1359). Van Dyne and colleagues argue “withholding important information is not simply the absence of voice” (p. 1359) and employee silence is “not necessarily the antithesis or

absence of voice” (p. 1360). Such comments provoke investigations, and dominating the literature is *why* do individuals choose silence over voice, and *what* issues do individuals feel unable to voice comfortably.

Early thoughts about the causes of silence originate from social psychologists proposing *pluralist ignorance*. Briefly, pluralist ignorance occurs when group members privately reject a group norm. Individuals opt to withhold their thoughts and feelings because they think most group members accept the norm rather than reject it like themselves. However, their assumption is wrong. Other members reject the norms too, hence they are all oblivious – ‘ignorant’ (Allport, 1924). Another concept explaining individual silent behaviour as opposed to collective is the exit-voice-loyalty (EVL) framework discussed previously in defining voice (Hirschman, 1970). Here *loyalty* means “a conscious and passive state where one stays and suffers in silence” (Brinsfield, 2014, p. 121).

Following Hirschman’s research, other concepts were evolving to explain the presence of silence, specifically in group decision-making. Janis’s (1972) seminal work concludes harmful decisions are an outcome of *groupthink*, describing how individual preferences for group harmony preside over expressing doubts, voicing disagreements or rocking the boat – acting as conflict avoidance behaviour. Other popular and widespread silence concepts in the trends drawn from seminal works since 1970 are plotted by Greenberg and Edwards (2009).

Research on silence stretches beyond group behaviours and dynamics to an organisational level. Using the phrase *climate of silence*, Morrison and Milliken (2000) refer to the “widely shared perception among employees that speaking up about problems or issues is futile and/or dangerous” (p. 708). Generating and sustaining silence in the organisational context is fuelled by “powerful forces” (p. 721) comprising of managerial attitudes and

beliefs. Shifting focus away from individual level decision-making processes about whether to speak up to “collective-level dynamics”, Morrison and Milliken (2000) approach silence as a dominant “en masse” response (p. 707). The silence occurring in “employees collective sensemaking activities” (p. 708) is unable to be justified as “unconnected individual choices” (p. 708). By conceptually framing “systemic silence” (p. 707) in this way as a discursive formation of two shared beliefs (speaking up is pointless, and it is potentially unsafe to do so), Morrison and Milliken (2000) create opportunities for vital empirical research (Vakola & Bouradas, 2005).

Scholars’ interests in silence shift from an organisational level of analysis to the individual – *employee silence*, a concept addressing causes of suppressing useful information. Pinder and Harlos (2001) provide a comprehensive definition of *employee silence* as “the withholding of any form of genuine expression about the individual’s behavioural, cognitive and/or affective evaluations of his or her organizational circumstance to persons who are perceived to be capable of effecting change or redress” (p. 334). Employee silence here is a “response to injustice” (p. 333). Pinder and Harlos (2001) discard thoughts of silence as the absence of voice, like Van Dyne et al. (2003), but rather see it as “a form of communication” (p. 334) and “act of communication” (p. 333). Communication studies and linguistic theory include silence as a legitimate form of communication alongside speech, designating it as “probably the most ambiguous of all linguistic forms” (Jaworski, 1993, p. 24).

Disengaged employee behaviour is labelled as *Acquiescent silence*, and fear based silence as *Quiescent silence* (Pinder & Harlos, 2001). Similarities exist between Morrison and Milliken’s (2000) findings on the reasons for silence in organisational settings with Pinder and Harlos (2001). Furthering this scholarship, Van Dyne et al. (2003) create additional silence categories in addition to Acquiescent Silence, namely Defensive Silence and

ProSocial Silence. These parallel categories of voice (Acquiescent, Defensive and ProSocial). Van Dyne et al.'s (2003) basic premise is individuals possess different reasons to be silent (and to voice), with distinct forms of silence and voice, thus classing "employee motives as critical characteristics of silence and voice" (Van Dyne et al., 2003, p. 1362).

Explanations of employees' motivational tendencies for silence and specific issues employees are silent about feature in the literature. Added reasons besides self-protection against fear related reprisals range from employee personality preferences (Premeaux & Bedeian, 2003), to cynicism and scepticism (Donaghey et al., 2011). Instead, silence can be part of an individual's impression management strategy, termed "defensive impression management" (Fuller et al., 2007, p.136.), because they "refrain from voice in situations where it might harm their image" (Fuller et al., 2007, p.136.). This is the opposite of engaging in voice for the purpose of enhancing image, which I discuss later in association with voice and silence connections to identities.

Assuming employees cannot raise and discuss any issue or problem with bosses is misleading. Hence, Milliken & Morrison's (2003) study aims to investigate specific issues for "silence or information holding" (p. 1454). Scholars report employees feel uncomfortable disclosing personal information to superiors about sexual orientation. In a study of 37 gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) pastors, some remained "closeted for the majority of their careers" (Creed, 2003, p. 1508). Mundane and ordinary issues such as pay, careers, and harassment receive selective voicing, to name a few. Employees make assumptions about how others will react if they voice such concerns, wanting to avoid the negative label "troublemaker" (Morrison & Milliken, 2000, p. 716). Again, this raises self-presentation, relevant to 'self' and protecting self-image.

Appearance and perception anxieties draw attention to the significance and impact of silence not only to individuals, but groups and organisations. Individuals suppressing personal concerns and emotions are susceptible to stress. On the other hand, organisational silence can be destructive, damaging and dysfunctional, and potentially threatening to an organisation's survival. Silence can be classed as an inhibitor of learning, growth and innovation (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Anglo-American culture generally regards silence in any form as negative and unwelcoming. Hence, the impetus for research studies concentrating on remedying the *problem of silence*. Attempts to resolve silence are entrenched in three fields of study – *employment relations, industrial relations and human resource management and* guide antidotes to silence in organisational contexts. As well as traditional areas of negotiating and bargaining in union processes, there is non-union employee representation on boards (Dobbins & Dundon, 2014). In the human resource management field, speaking up initiatives promote voice, and authors recognise the necessity of voice interventions (Milliken et al., 2015). Focus groups techniques are popular as well as “speak-up programmes” (Wilkinson et al., 2014, p. 9), and collective models of workplace partnerships add to the plethora of modes (Johnstone, 2014).

Organisational research classes silent individuals, those without voice, as passive and powerless. Management studies aim for “ways to overcome silence and facilitate voice” (Knoll et al., 2016, p. 163). Conversely, an array of other literatures offers alternative positive meanings of silence, specifically the ethics and communication literatures. The latter acknowledges the value of silence, as opposed to ‘pauses’, as a key feature of social interaction and “a rich and powerful tool of communication” (Jaworski, 1993, p. xii). In ethics the necessity for professional and commercial confidences and trade secrets is acceptable and valued (see Van Dyne et al. (2003) for a full discussion on the ethics and communication literature).

Questioning core assumptions in the employee silence literature so far as “communicative choice” (individuals hold the illusion of freedom to choose whether to voice or not) and a “product of employee motivations” are Donaghey and colleagues (2011, p. 51). They challenge the “unitarist premises” of silence (p. 52), instead offering the “power-centred role of management” (p. 64), as illuminated in the employment relationship in non-union employee representation (NER). By including the idea of “management ‘silencing’ workers”, silence is framed as “a relational dynamic – focusing on the phenomena as something derived from either management or workers” (p. 61), creating a “dialectical interpretation of employee silence” (p. 51). Managerial activities can be insidious in institutional structures and “perpetuate a climate of silence”, having the effect of “organising them[employees] out of the voice process” or “curtailing or suspending voice in organisations” (Donaghey, et al., 2011, p. 63).

As well as understanding the meaning of silence from the motives of employees, contextual factors influence the meaning of silence. Daily life acknowledges national and international atrocities by silent behaviour – *a minute’s silence* as a gesture of respect. Studies involving educators and students in the classroom illustrate the dynamics of silence and a variety of meanings. Student silence can show confusion, disengagement, shyness, and cultural tendencies (Gilmore, 1985; Jaworski & Sachdev, 1998; Lui, 2002), whereas silence from the teacher can signify discipline, control, the exercise of dramatic impact or deliberately slowing of the pace of the class. In a newsroom meeting scenario, Gravengaard and Rimestad (2012) found editors’ silence a form of rejection of journalists’ ideas and courtroom silence can allude to guilt (J.V. Jensen, 1973). Currently the meaning and dynamics of silence in boardrooms is untouched.

Paradoxically silence can be “deafening” (the silence is deafening) (Bigo, 2018, p. 2), as well as “quiet protest” (Fletcher & T.J. Watson, 2007, p. 163), the automatic response of

“habituated silence” (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009, p. 167), along with “not mere inactivity” (Jaworski, 1993, p. 81). Silence can do things such as healing, and wounding – *the silent treatment* (J.V. Jensen, 1973). My interest is not about what silence *is*, but rather how it works alongside voice in constructing identities. In theological circumstances individuals take a vow of silence signalling contemplative thought and journeys of spirituality (Waistell, 2018). In the Arts, silence is a form of expression, but in political environments it is a way of oppressing others (Jaworski, 1993). To understand its meaning, a diverse array of theoretical perspectives is on offer – semiotic, pragmatic, educational, literary and philosophical. For example, Leach’s theory of taboo (1964), and P. Brown and Levenson’s theory of politeness (1987) mentioned by Jaworski (1993) to name a few, and dispels the common misconception of silence as the absence of sound.

Literatures within OB and HRM treat and understand silence through basing the meaning of silence on the motives of employees. There remains a paucity of research on silence in the OS field (Bigo, 2018; A.D. Brown & Coupland, 2005). By categorising silence as fixed and static or treating both voice and silence as “separate, multidimensional constructs” (Van Dyne et al., 2003, p. 1382), opportunities arise for researching correlations, statistical analysis and measurements, rather than the relational or social process. Currently there is an overreliance on models and conceptual understandings rather than empirical findings (Knoll et al., 2016). I am loathe to separate the two constructs. Rather than treating them as a dichotomy, as ‘contrasts’, my preference is to treat them as two things intrinsically tangled and entwined, thus written as voice-silence or voice/silence to denote their inseparability. My rationale is based upon my inquiry treating voice and silence as a focal point for identity work as a tension for board members. Thus, my interest is answering the question – how are identities negotiated from discourses of voice and

silence? The last section of this chapter discusses their relationship, and specifically – what can the interplay of voice and silence tell us concerning identity?

### **The Voice/Silence Relationship and Identity Connection**

The voice/silence relationship is tenuous and described in many ways, for example by Van Dyne et al. (2003, p. 1359) as “separate, multidimension constructs” and the deceptively simple “polar opposites” (p. 1359), and as “bipolar” by Knoll et al. (2016, p. 165). These descriptions imply disconnection rather than unification. Other accounts from a communicative perspective juxtapose “*speaking* and *silence*, seeing these as antitheses generating a dialectic” (Scott, 1993, p.17), and that “silence, like speech, is an intensely human phenomenon” (1993, p. 12). For Moaşa, voice and silence are “strategic communicative resources” (2013, p. 575) and “so interrelated and intertwined that they presuppose each other” (p. 575) acting as a “dualism” (p. 576), thus echoing Scott’s (1993) “silence interacts with speech; each is vital to the presence of the other” (p. 13).

Practically, it seems impossible and unworkable to separate the two because individuals face a commonplace scenario. As described by Brinsfield (2014, p. 126), “they simultaneously want to speak up yet remain silent”. Scott (1993, p.14) distinguishes silence, like speech, as “aspects of the exchange” and “silence and speech may be simultaneous as well as sequential”, leaving Brinsfield (2014, p.126) declaring the complexities “of these opposing and potentially distinct forces for voice and silence is not well understood”. For Brinsfield (2014, p. 115), they can be approached as “two sides of the same coin” making the relationship contingent, just as life cannot exist without death. When considering these complexities and future directions for research opportunities, he questions whether they are “distinct constructs” or “simply opposites with the presence of

one implying the absence of the other?” (Brinsfield, 2014, p. 126). Further understanding is needed to how they relate to each other in organisations (Morrison, 2011).

Three possible combinations pertaining to the voice/silence relationship in organisational settings are summarised by Knoll et al. (2016) as (1) Voice and silence as opposites; (2) Voice and silence as parts of a continuum; and (3) Voice and silence as independent variables forming four quadrants. Making the decision to speak up or opting to stay silent is described by Knoll et al. (2016, p. 173) as “just one point in an unfolding social process”. This singular decisional act requires understanding from “past experiences, observations and narratives” (p. 173), thus avoiding “linear causality” (p. 175). According to Knoll et al. (2016) relationships are explained by multi-level approaches applying an “input-mediator-output-input model” (p. 176) encompassing levels in an organisation (organisational, individual etc.) within a broad context (for example, political, historic, legal). This method specifies the processes leading to voice and silence, indicating proximal and distal outcomes.

Nonetheless, challenging the ways different types of silence and voice work as “separate and multidimensional” (Van Dyne et al., 2003, p. 1360) features in a narrative account of a UK construction company (Fletcher & T.J. Watson, 2007). Their preference in adopting ‘types’ of silence and voice as *dimensions* means voice and silence “working simultaneously with each other” (p. 171). Hence, relationships “shape and are shaped by voices and silences” (Fletcher & Watson, 2007, p. 159). By embracing a social constructionist approach, “loud voices and quiet voices, shouts and silences, forceful utterances and whispered mutterings all play their part in the shaping of everyday life” (p. 156), reflecting the emerging nature of social and organisational realities. Emphasis in this study is on the “relationality” of voice and silence in constructions, and the constructions they focus on are relationships (personal, working and community). However, the

likelihood of conceptualising voice and silence as relational, intertwined and interactive is rare. Even rarer is the idea of voice and silence acting as a tension to fuel identity construction.

One stream of scholarship building on motivational responses of refraining and engaging in voice is *identity performances* or *self-presentation*. Goffman's (1969) self-presentation, also known as *impression management* are strategies and processes individuals use to control how they are perceived by others. An individual's aim is to create, or sustain, or defend, or often enhance their social identities. In a study of healthcare workers, Fuller et al.'s (2007) findings demonstrate adopting an impression management perspective, meaning voice can be used to benefit one's 'self' rather than 'prosocially' as portrayed in the majority of literature. Differentiating between assertive (engage in voice) versus defensive (refrain from voice) impression management, they claim "voice may, in some situations, serve impression management purposes" (p. 135) and voice behaviour "may serve the purpose of making a positive impression on others at work" (p. 136). Another study details silence as an unintended outcome of interviews with graduate trainees in a UK retail firm. Constructions of silence were "power effects" and also an impression management strategy. The trainees employed "discursive practices" (A.D. Brown & Coupland, 2005, p. 1063) showing, amongst a variety of discoveries, how they were silenced, coped with and resisted the need to be silent.

A study delving into the use of voice and silence in gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) ministers' career experiences considers their position as that of 'tempered radicals' (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). Creed (2003) interviews ministers motivated by a vocational pursuit of faith, yet wanting to live by their identities of GLBT. The ministers strategically used voice and silence during their careers in many ways, such as "self-protection and the preservation of their professional status" and "being true to themselves

and their values” (p. 1526). Their “spiritual discursive context” (p. 1528) provides resources for constructing identities that subsequently influence their use of voice and silence. Creed (2003) stresses the need to see voice and silence as “acts that contribute to a project – the constructing of selfhood” (p. 1528), rather than “discrete acts” (p. 1528). Nine forms of voice and silence surface (e.g., helping others find their voices, lying with good conscience and forcing discussion on the issue). The fusion or “mix” (p. 1511) is noted as “sometimes discordantly, sometimes harmoniously” (p. 1511). Tension surfaces as a “common concern for the ongoing struggle over when and how to speak up and when to remain silent” (p. 1504). Creed (2003) sees silence and voice as tangled in many ways and “highly ambiguous” (p. 1529). GLBT ministers are depicted at times as “transgressive and subversive while at others, acquiescent and collusive” (p. 1529). This illustrates the range of use in voice and silence and its effects.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I started by explaining extant research on voice and silence as separate entities, before moving on to describe their relationship. Currently, both literatures show an over reliance on voice and silence as behavioural options, a necessity to prove reasons for these behaviours and lack empirical studies. In the absence of studies in OS, I drew from related fields such as OB and HRM. Promoting oneself and hiding oneself by impression management strategies provides new insights into the use of voice and silence around social and ‘performance identities’. Only a few scholars are addressing flexibility, evolutionary and adaptive characteristics of voice and silence in discursively constructed research. Having reviewed what is known of identity as processual (Chapter Two), noting the lack of processual identity research activity in governance settings (Chapter Three),

next I explain my methodological choices towards illustrating how discourses of voice and silence act as a process of board member identity construction.

## Chapter Five

### Methodology, Philosophy and Epistemology

At the outset, dialogues on social construction draw from numerous sources across the sciences and humanities – sociology, literary study, history, anthropology, women’s studies, psychology, communication, cultural studies, and more. As I see it, these dialogues largely function in three significant ways – as *metatheory*, as *social theory* and as *societal practice*. As a metatheory (or theory about a theory), social constructionism not only challenges empiricist accounts of knowledge, but indeed stands as an impediment to all first philosophies of knowledge. For the constructionist, all claims to knowledge, truth, objectivity, or insight are founded within communities of meaning making – including the claims of the constructionists themselves.

(Gergen, 2001, p.2)

#### Introduction

Embracing social constructionism as my chosen research paradigm appeals to me in several ways. Challenging the origins of knowledge (“stands as an impediment to all first philosophies of knowledge” – as above) is one attraction. Another is the role individuals play in ‘reality making’ “within communities of meaning making”, rather than acting as by-standers. By dividing this chapter into two distinct parts, I will firstly clarify the philosophical features of a *social constructionist epistemology*. This view of the world rejects ontological beliefs about reality as already created and external to the individual. Secondly, foregrounding discourse in this study supports constructionist assumptions of realities constructed through language. I justify my chosen discursive approach, basing my theoretical underpinning of *constructionism* as my methodology – *discourse analysis*. A separate chapter (Chapter Six) explains the practical procedures and methods derived from using a constructionist approach to generate and analyse my research material.

## **Adopting a Social Constructionist Perspective**

Researchers draw on worldviews, theoretical perspectives or *paradigms* to address problems, interpret knowledge, and to understand their role in creating this knowledge (Kuhn, 1970; Patton, 1990). Social science researchers study phenomena basing philosophical assumptions on a framework of questions that include *ontology* (What is reality?), *epistemology* (What is the relationship between the knower and what can be known?), and *methodology* (What are the ways we can use to find out what can be known?) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The basic crux of social constructionism is *reality is socially constructed*. This rudimentary statement is hugely deceptive and following scrutiny, “simplicity rapidly dissolves” (Gergen, 2009, p. 3). The ‘quick disappearance’ is due to social constructionism challenging established beliefs about the nature of knowledge and reality. In addition to realities as socially constructed through language, a further feature is knowledge as maintained by social processes, and lastly humans as reflexive beings. In contrast, staunch positivist beliefs originating from the philosophy of science, dating back to the 1800s and Auguste Comte (1798–1857), believe in *empiricism* (Burr, 2015). Empiricism understands observation and measurement as the heart of scientific achievements. Reality is already created, ‘out there’, and external, waiting for discovery, testing and verifying as either true or false by researchers.

Tracing the origins of social constructionism is tricky. Influences range from psychology and sociology as the ‘usual suspects’ mentioned in the opening quote, to the lesser known Buddhism (Gergen, 2009). Scholars point unanimously to the work of Berger and Luckmann (1967) on the sociology of knowledge as a significant and important contribution of the twentieth century, and guides understandings of social constructionism. But, ongoing influences bring a “variegated mosaic” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008, p. 4),

manifesting in an approach of “growing complexity and richness” according to Burr (2015, preface), and with a number of variants (Cunliffe, 2008). In fact, Hacking (1999) offers cautionary advice against treating social constructionism as a single concept, instead suggesting using it as an ‘umbrella term’ and proposing “grades of commitment” (p. 19).

Scholars use the terms social constructionism and constructionism interchangeably, along with interpretivism, while others use constructionism and constructivism to mean the same, leading to confusion. *Constructivism* as opposed to *constructionism* hold major differences. *Constructivism* emphasises the internal mental processes of individuals, while *constructionism* looks towards outward processes such as language in making sense of the world. Hacking (1999, p. 48) attempts to offer a definition of constructionism:

Hence by constructionism (or social constructionism if we need, on occasion, to emphasize the social) I shall mean various sociological, historical, and philosophical projects that aim at displaying or analysing actual, historically situated, social interaction or causal routes that led to, or were involved in, the coming into being or establishing of some present entity or fact.

Despite this definition, Burr mentions the difficulties, claiming “no single description” is easily obtainable and it is “open to question” (Burr, 2015, p. 61).

Taking a working example of a university and drawing from Berger and Luckmann’s (1967) work is useful to illustrate several features of social constructionism and how I will work in this ‘mode’. A university is not just a building made from materials of stone, brick, mortar and steel (objective reality). The public, students, academics, and other stakeholders agree on the building as a university. However, there remains a variety of discourses about universities and the higher education sector, such as employability,

internationalisation and globalisation. Hence, the reality of a university is constructed through interactions and negotiations with others, becoming the accepted norm. Therefore, social constructionism embraces a relativistic view of reality and social constructionists cannot describe reality by any “single array of words, graphs, or pictures” (Gergen, 2009, p. 61) or as an objectifiable truth. As a ‘language conscious’ researcher I exercise caution when using the term *reality*. Ontologically, I see reality as something that is neither singular, fixed or ‘out there’. I see only multiple realities influenced continually by historical, cultural and also linguistic orientations. Reiterating this point, Gergen (2009, p. 60) states “all meaningful activity is constructed, and these constructions are highly malleable and continuously in motion”.

Adopting this view does not deny there is a physical (objective) university building, but what distinguishes it from any other building is the language and meanings individuals and groups associate with it. Social constructionists are primarily interested with the meaning of interpretations. For instance, a university as a learning institution, an educational space, engages in research endeavours and is organised by semesters or terms. These activities and meanings distinguish a university from a bakery or bank. This excerpt shows language and meanings are integral to constructing social reality and this also includes identities:

The things that make up the social world—including our very identities—appear out of discourse. To put it another way, our talk, and what we are, are one and the same....without discourse, there is no social reality, and without understanding discourse, we cannot understand social reality, our experiences or ourselves. (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 2)

The next section will explain how realities are constructed through language acting as the focus of inquiries for constructionist researchers. It is through language we construct shared beliefs about who we are, and make sense of the world we live in.

### **The Linguistic Turn, Language, and Discourse**

Different ‘turns’ in philosophical research signal radical shifts in thinking. For example, in the sixties the *discursive*, also referred to as the *linguistic turn* (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a; Rorty, 1992), heralded the philosophy of language. In the 1980s the *interpretive turn* (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) marked interest in ongoing processes to better understand human behaviour. The influential capabilities of the linguistic turn in organisational studies was modest (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a). Alvesson and Kärreman (2000a) claim a “reflexive deficit” (p.140) still exists despite ‘the turn’, meaning the prevalent view is “that words represent and correspond to objects” (p. 137), irrespective of whether they focus on “people’s inner lives” or “external lives” (p. 138). The significance of language oriented studies manifests to an even lesser extent in studies of governance actors. Gergen (2009) suggests a “Hobbesian view of governance” (2009, p. 86), where drawing from Thomas Hobbes pessimistic theory that without any form of restrictions such as governmental control, man is naturally self-centred and individuals will always be in conflict with each other – hence agency theory dominating this landscape.

Before the linguistic turn, language was seen as “representational” and acting as “a conduit for the transfer of predetermined communicative messages” (Heracleous, 2004, p. 176). In short, language is classified as “simple” rather than “complicated” (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000a, p. 138), or “language-as-mirror logic/practice” (2000a, p. 140). Nevertheless, the linguistic turn did bring “attention to the way language shapes or constructs actors first order interpretations and actions and thus its role in shaping social

practices and social reality” (Heracleous, 2004, p. 176). Primarily the turn offered the opportunity for scholars and researchers to reflect “the wider or deeper social conventions of language usage” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a, p. 140) as they interpreted language as “speech acts”.

The term “speech acts” or language as “performative” is synonymous with the work of Austin (1962/1975). In *How to Do Things with Words*, he presents how certain statements (utterances) create an act. According to Austin (1962/1975), by saying something, we ‘do’ something. Even “the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not *normally* be described as, or as ‘just’, saying something” (p. 5). An often quoted example is “I name this ship the...”. Austin (1962/1975) is attributed with the theory of performatives, categorising five types of performatives, for example “behabitives” such as “apologize” (p. 83), which explain “a kind of performative concerned roughly with reactions to behaviour and with behaviour towards others and designed to exhibit attitudes and feelings” (p. 83). However, this approach focuses towards the micro-level, rather than identifying broad collective patterns of discourse. Thus, speech as action focused and a situated symbolic action. The appeal of Austin’s (1962/1975) work at the time was categorising words into behaviours and actions, rather than the pure communicative, passive and transparent efforts of language.

Moving to another influential scholar and the use of language I come to Wittgenstein’s *language games* (1953). Contributing to the philosophy of language, he emphasised the constructive nature of language. The term ‘language games’ refers to the ways groups and communities develop ways of speaking within and inside their ‘collective’. His work heralded a move away from thinking about language as fixed and imposed and towards language as a fluid structure. Wittgenstein (1953) viewed language as a social practice where words themselves can have multiple meanings depending on their context.

Undertaking discourse analysis as I do in this study means language is “both constructed and constructive” and “the same phenomenon can be described in several different ways” (Kärreman, 2014, p. 203). The idea of multiple variations in accounts through the construction of discourses receives attention next.

### **Discourse and Discourse Analysis**

Constructionist research and discourse analysis is the idea of language playing a pivotal role and leads to discussions about discourses. Heracleous (2004) mentions discourse can be related to other terms such as language and narrative, but I subscribe to the idea of language as the “raw material of discourse” (p. 176). This enables a clear differentiation between the two terms. Discourse analysis is predominantly about how people *use* language in communication. Having only limited practical experience of analysing data using a discourse-analytical approach, I admit that I was perplexed by the volume and variety of information relating to discourse methods and theory at the start of my doctoral journey. Within this unfamiliar territory I had more questions than answers, but gaining clarity has been an emergent and patient process arising from my ‘discourse discoveries’, explained more fully in the next chapter. My starting point here is, how can you define something so nebulous as discourse?

Various definitions are ‘on offer’. Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) claim there is “no clear consensus as to what discourses are or how to analyse them” (p. 1). This places me in a quandary – if there is no agreement how do I select a definition to work with? A common-sense definition of discourse is a “general idea that language is structured according to different patterns that people’s utterances follow when they take part in different domains of social life” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 1). Examples quoted are *medical discourse* and *political discourse* (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). However, this explanation didn’t give

me an understanding as to what discourses do, only how they are formed, which is from “people’s utterances” (p. 1). T.J. Watson (1994) hints at discourses providing the opportunity for individuals to make sense of problems, describing them as “a connected set of statements, concepts, terms and expressions which constitutes a way of talking and writing about a particular issue, thus framing the way people understand and act with respect to that issue” (p. 113). Revisiting Jørgensen and Phillips (2002), understanding the world and its components is key to their definition of discourse, which outlines “a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)” (2002, p. 1). The earlier work of Alvesson (1994) refines and reduces this definition, using the term “themes of talk” when talking about discourses. On the other hand, Hardy (2001) is keen to portray the active and responsive nature of discourse. Informed from I. Parker (1992), she talks of discourse as “a system of texts that brings objects into being” (Hardy, 2001, p. 26). It is important to clarify what is meant by “texts”. A text is not purely a written account, but can also be spoken language, non-verbal language, a novel or visual artefacts, amongst other things. I collected data from two text sources, transcribed interviews and field notes generated from observing board meetings. Again, Hardy (2001) citing I. Parker (1992) identifies other features of discourses as producing “a material reality in the practices that they invoke” (2001, p. 26). If this is what a discourse is and what they do, the next question is where are they located? Hardy notes discourses are “embodied in *texts* but exist beyond the individual texts that compose them” (p.26). This suggests meaning extends beyond the sentence level and is not just derived from the language/words itself. What is important to discourse analysts is treating “texts” as the discursive unit of analysis, as talk and discourse are the object of study not the individuals expressing the discourse – i.e., the board members themselves.

## Discourse Analysis

Not only do different definitions exist for what discourse is, but I am presented with an array of ways to analyse discourse. Hardy clarifies what is meant by *discourse analysis*, which is the “systematic study of texts” and these texts are significant as all texts “contain the clues to discourses” (2001, p. 26). Within this process, researchers are “not only readers, but also producers, of discourse” (2001, p. 32). Ainsworth and Hardy (2004, p. 168) emphasise this point, saying “our words have the same status as those we have analysed”.

Burr offers two basic, broad yet informative approaches to social construction theory and research. The first is the “micro structures of language use in interaction” (micro social constructionism) and the second is “the more macro linguistic and social structures in framing our social and psychological life” (macro social constructionism) (2015, p. 24). Other scholars, notably Alvesson and Kärreman (2000b), extend and incorporate these forms into a typology along a continuum of “formative range and discourse/meaning-relation” (2000b, p. 1129). Using this continuum and drawing from the earlier work of Potter and Wetherell (1987), they propose four approaches of discourse analysis: micro-discourse; meso-discourse; grand Discourse and mega-Discourse. The use of the ‘d’ and ‘D’ in these four versions is purposeful.

In differentiating the types of discourse analysis, Alvesson and Kärreman (2000b) present the ‘d’ and ‘D’ of discourse. It is important to note the differences between the two – discourse spelt with a lower case ‘d’ (*discourse*) and the use of a capital ‘D’ (*Discourse*) when referring to and talking about D/discourse analysis. In scholarly circles they are also known as *little* ‘d’ discourse and *big* ‘D’ Discourse. The main distinction is when using and adopting a small ‘d’ approach to analysing texts, researcher’s attention is towards the micro. This means the study of interview talk, naturally occurring talk (conversations) and

other linguistic expressions. At this level of analysis, as commented by Kärreman (2014), the “conversations or the interviews themselves become the context of the accounts” (p. 204). Alternatively, what we mean by big ‘D’ discourse is informed by the work of Foucault where power relations are the subject of interest. The aims of researchers are to highlight inequality and power abuse and critical discourse analysts address “the ways that can liberate humans from the various repressive relations...” (Alvesson et al., 2008, p.9). Although this is not where my interest lies, that is not to deny this was not evident.

My interests lie with an approach situated between the micro and mega, that of the *meso approach to discourse*. This is the close range/determination approach – where “discourses offer important clues to other kinds of practices than pure language use” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b, p. 1137). The ‘clue’ I am interested in is “constructing the subjectivity of the person and framing his action” (p. 1138). The focus in my analysis will be to look for accounts that “say something about norms of expression, ways of producing effects (e.g., impressions, identity work, legitimacy) or something else where accounts must be interpreted in terms of what they accomplish rather than what they mirror – as action....” (p. 1146). I show the “muscularization of discourse” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2009, p. 251) in a process of “deep grounding” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a, p. 147) conveyed in the next chapter on methods, with reference to ways of doing discourse based on treating texts as endotextual, exotextual and exo/endotextual (Barry et al., 2006).

Being ‘language sensitive’ offers a variety of possibilities and approaches to the study of discourse. My chosen approach is to adopt *discursive pragmatism*, another version of discourse analysis. In doing so this fits with my attempts to establish insights into the processes adopted in board member identity constructions as I am drawn to identify “interactive aspects of the construction and reproduction of particular selves (social identity)” (Kärreman, 2014, p. 209). By studying board members’ descriptions of identity

work which were “more or less connected to discourse” (Kärreman, 2014, p. 209), this meant treating identities as being “heuristically” understood. It also suggests identities are studied “in terms of talk, meaning and practices” (p. 209). Taking a discursive pragmatism stance meant being in a position where I could be “discourse-near” yet at the same time “not discourse-exclusive” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a, p. 142). This allows for the treatment of language as a “shaping force” and also “context dependent” (p. 142). As such, my role as a researcher is in “reconstructing vocabularies-setting relations” (p. 142) based on discursive pragmatism.

Discursive pragmatism allows the researcher scope and flexibility. I was not tied to offering comprehensiveness and “completeness” to the phenomena I am studying (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a, p.147), as my ultimate aim is the gaining of insights into the rich social realities of board members. In line with Alvesson and Kärreman (2000a, p. 147), I take a ‘slice’ or ‘slither’ of something specific (“a meeting, an interaction”) to study board member discourse rather than opting for an exhaustive account in saying everything about everything. Hence my approach was to ‘isolate’ the interplay between silence and voice portrayed by board members as they described their identity work. In doing so my efforts concentrated upon exploring the discursive construction of identity.

By understanding the “themes of talk” (discourse), I am able to arrive at an understanding of people within their work settings. For example, Alvesson’s (1994) discourses portray advertising workers as being “free” and also “unconventional” (p.555). This provides clues about what the job is about beyond the normative and functionalist competencies views.

By adopting a social constructionist approach there are, as Burr (2015, p. 6) stipulates, “no ‘essences’ inside people that make them what they are”. Referring to psychologists, she states they attempt to explain the causes of human behaviour in “psychological states and structures rather than in social processes” (p. 7). Hacking (1999) also vouches for this

deficit in how product over process is widespread, and process is often overlooked in the construction of identities.

### **Constraints of my Philosophical Approach**

Novelty is expressed in the opening quote to this chapter when describing social constructionism. Indeed, Gergen refers to social constructionism as “revolutionizing the practice of research in the human sciences” (2009, p. 58). Below Burr (2015, p. 2) reinforces social constructionism confronting taken-for-granted knowledge:

It invites us to be critical of the idea that our observations of the world unproblematically yield its nature to us, to challenge the view that conventional knowledge is based upon objective, unbiased observation of the world.

She mentions the practices or “the goings-on” or “social dealings” (p. 5) between individuals in their day-to-day lives that provide “shared versions of knowledge” (p. 5), and these collective versions and activities produce several possible social constructions of events, or multiple meanings. Both Gergen (1985) and Burr (2015) refer to social constructionism as a *movement*. A movement suggests a collective of action orientated people, something as ‘growing’, ‘evolving’, and ‘responsive to change’. This movement gives new meaning to psychological constructs such as ‘self’, changing perceptions towards the self as produced by social discourse rather than intrinsic to the individual.

Gergen (2009) sees social constructionism as “a process of dialogue, a dialogue that is ongoing, and to which anyone – even you as reader – may contribute” (p. 2). Being part of the social constructionism ‘collective’ is appealing, with some suggesting it “has been trendy” (Hacking, 1999, p. 35). In the preface of his book *The social construction of*

*what?*, Hacking (1999) states social constructionism is “radical” and a “truly liberating idea.” He reminds and cautions us against such optimism, remarking “unfortunately social construction analyses do not always liberate” (Hacking, 1999, p. 2). Hacking illustrates this point with the disorder anorexia, featuring several examples in his book. This is because constructionism offers concepts as being “transient” and “flourishing only in some places at sometimes” (p. 2), which he notes is of little help to those suffering from eating disorders.

This point warrants further investigation. Indeed, scholars offer, as Hacking does, critiques of the popular social constructionist mode (see Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009; Burr, 2015). Additionally, academics critique the critiques. For example, Haslanger (2003) reviews Hacking’s (1999) *The social construction of what?* Therefore, appropriately I draw on relevant debates in considering my philosophical and methodological choices in this thesis. I should point out that in Hacking’s (1999) critique of social constructionism he proposes three philosophical issues (or “sticking points” of contingency, nominalism and stability of scientific beliefs) between constructionists and realists (or essentialists). First, I mention the idea of ‘construction’ as a “skewed” metaphor (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 36). Next, aligning with the aim of this thesis as to how identities are constructed by individuals, I draw on discussions and debates surrounding identity and subjectivity, notably from Burr (2015).

Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) revisit the earlier work of Berger and Luckmann (1967), as others have done (Hacking, 1999), asking the question – What is ‘construction’ in the term social construction? For Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) the metaphor of construction “limps along” (p. 36), because ordinarily ‘construction’ signifies a planned process of activities with the outcome of “an artefact” (p. 36). When adding the dimension ‘social’ to construction – *social construction*, confusion can arise. This is because ‘social’

constructions are not classed as planned activities. Hacking (1999) reinforces this, mentioning socially constructed phenomena are not all 'natural' but indeed *social*. This is a major flaw in the work of Berger and Luckmann (1967), as pointed out by Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009). As a consequence, natural phenomena can be presented as "intentionally planned" and "almost manipulatively created" (2009, p. 36). Burr (2015) is at pains to point out that in the underlying epistemological position of social constructionism there "can be no such thing as an objective fact"(p.9), or even a 'true' account of phenomena.

Questions are asked by scholars surrounding the "primacy of the individual" in the construction process, referring to Berger and Luckmann's (1967) contention that "the study of society must focus on how individuals construct society" (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 36). An individual's part appears to be undeniable, but Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) offer instances where the individual has not been "where everything begins and ends" (2009, p. 36). My stance is that individuals are themselves created by "text/discourse" and this is "thus primary" (p. 36). Individuals are the outcome of language, as supported by Burr (2015, p. 224):

The constructive work that produces us as persons takes place in social interaction of all kinds, and language as a key constituent of social interaction is therefore of great importance.

This statement links to a previous more popular debate of realism versus relativism and the potential "impossibility of specifying a reality that exists beyond language" (Burr, 2015, p. 225). Such discussions raise problems about determining the 'truth' about moral and societal issues. Such dilemmas have prompted critical realism based on the work of Bhaskar, where reality consists of "the *empirical*, the *actual*, and the *real*" (Alvesson &

Sköldberg, 2009, p. 40). My aim is not to generate knowledge that is permanent and generalisable, but rather to unlock a myriad of possibilities. As Gergen (2015) reminds us, no one paradigm is superior but instead they offer alternative meanings and understandings.

Finally, the table below represents a holistic view of this chapter and the following chapter, detailing the chosen methods aligning with a social constructionist paradigm.

Table 5.1 Overview of research philosophy

<b>Research paradigm</b>	<i>Chapter 5</i>		<i>Chapter 6</i>	
	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Data collection methods</b>	<b>Data analysis</b>	
Social constructionist	28 interviews 3 observations	Face to face, Skype and telephone semi-structured interviews (all transcribed) Observing 3 board meetings - field notes	Discourse analysis	

## **Conclusion**

This methodology chapter explains the fundamental principles and implications of using social constructionism as my chosen research paradigm. I outline social constructionism’s core features and my choices working from a discursive perspective in understanding how identities are constructed using discourse analysis. Methods such as discourse analysis are based on the idea of reality as socially constructed. The aim of social constructionism is to derive understandings, as opposed to finding the *truth* (positivist stance) or offering explanations. Within the field of governance and board director literature, the use of anything other than a positivist paradigm is a rarity. In Chapter Six, I move on to discuss the methods I chose to identify, recruit, interview and observe board members at ‘work’, along with a more detailed elaboration on how I used the meso-discourse analytical approach to analyse my research material.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Research Methods**

#### **Introduction**

The last chapter explained how social constructionism and discourse theory underpin this study. In this chapter I discuss how these approaches inform my choice of research design and methods. I begin with a reminder of my research questions. Next, strategies for identifying, selecting, interviewing and observing board members are outlined. The practical challenges of accessing board members and entering the ‘off-limits’ setting of a boardroom receive attention. Throughout this chapter I comment on my role as a researcher, adopting reflexive practice to support trustworthiness. Alternative ways to ensure ‘credibility’ in qualitative studies of this nature are mentioned, informed by the work of Sandberg (2005). In this chapter I also elaborate further on the constraints of my research design and methods. Lastly, I explain ethical and confidentiality matters when gathering, producing, storing and organising research material.

#### **Revisiting my Research Questions**

In the introduction to this thesis I record my curiosities about board members, posing a series of questions. One overarching question in this study is, *What is it like ‘being’ a board member?* Formulating research questions associated with the ‘doing’ of identity was not as straightforward as I perceived. I was mindful that “established methodologies and norms for producing and publishing research tend to emphasize and normalize narrow and cautious research questions” (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013, preface). Researching identities from a sociological outlook directed me to the scholarship of Mead’s theory of symbolic

interactionism (Mead, 1934) and Goffman's (1969) impression management and face work. Both Mead and Goffman's findings include how social interactions play a role in constructing identities, differing from mainstream beliefs of identity as originating biologically, and fixed.

'Being' is a key word, in my all-encompassing research question – *What is it like 'being' a board member?* – and I articulated this to prospective participants in my invitation to them. A dictionary definition of *being* is 'existence' (as a noun) and 'be' (as a verb). On the surface, my initial guiding question asking *What is it like 'being' a board member?* appears modest, but it invites complexity when considering identity – 'how to be'. At the beginning of Chapter Two, the opening excerpt by Jenkins conceptualises identity as 'being' or 'becoming' (Jenkins, 2014). My inquiry pursues processual beliefs at its core and in doing so "privileges process over end-states, *becoming over being*" (Nayak & Chia, 2011, p. 283, italics in original). 'Being' here referred to by Nayak & Chia (2011) as a static entity. Hence, this study aligns with a body of scholarship relating to constructing identities discursively because "we are all the time engaged in making constructions of phenomena" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011, p. 28), thus treating identity as 'becoming' (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). With this in mind, 'becoming' features in crafting my questions, as I carefully considered "the logic behind the formulation of a research question is a critical rethinking of a particular theoretical tradition, a vocabulary and the construction of an empirical terrain" (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011, p. 38).

Therefore, innovative research questions are significant in finding new conceptual avenues in research says Alvesson and Sandberg (2013, p. 1), while "a fundamental step in all theory development is the formulation of carefully grounded research questions". The current scholarship on board governance is normative, depicting board members as restricted to the *tasks* they undertake, the performance of *roles, skills and competencies*

required, and undertaking numerous *functions*. In other words, assumptions prevail about the work of a board member as organised, rigid, compliant and ‘straightjacketed’.

Conversely, descriptions of identity work are distinguished as fluid, dynamic, ongoing and possibly contradictory (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; T.J. Watson, 2008). This theoretical point guided the design of my questions as to what identity resources board members draw on, and what identity tensions and struggles do they narrate in constructing identities. Additionally, what identity processes are most salient in the formation of board member identity? Finally, what does this inform us of the practice of governing?

Hence, ‘gap-spotting’ did not determine my research questions, rather problematisation did (Alvesson, 2011a, Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011, 2013; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011).

Problematisation challenges the status quo, opening up mainstream beliefs to scrutiny and questions existing assumptions around a theme. Interests and inspiration for research can arise from personal experiences, empirical material, society and extant research (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013). I would like to think my research questions not only reflect my curiosity as a researcher, but also as displaying “imagination”, “critical scrutiny” and “careful attention” (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013, p. 3), and above all academic curiosity.

### **Identifying and Recruiting Research Participants**

My strategies for identifying and recruiting research participants are influenced by knowing “few social researchers study elites because elites are by their very nature difficult to penetrate” (Hertz & Imber, 1995, p. viii). As I mention in Chapter Three – *The elusive board member*, the metaphorical term *black box* is used to describe the secretive and inaccessible workings and processes of the boardroom and its members (Daily et al., 2003; Leblanc, 2001). Thus, I needed careful and thoughtful planning if I was to enter the echelons of organisations to interview board members, otherwise known as “managerial

elites” (Pettigrew, 1992, p. 163). Early landmark studies successfully interviewing and observing board members (for example, Mace, 1971), and recent studies within Australasia (Carroll et al., 2017; Cikaliuk et al., 2018; Bezemer et al., 2018) indicated to me this was not impossible. Even when undertaking ‘participant observations’ – serving board members as researchers can be given access once “permission was granted by the formal (minuted) meetings” (L.D. Parker, 2008, p.71). However, typically two factors explain the unwelcoming of ‘outsiders,’ into the boardroom; confidentiality and concerns over the ‘observer’ effect (Leblanc & Gillies, 2005; Leblanc & Schwartz, 2007). Hence, the need to develop a practical and workable recruitment strategy for interviews and observations of board meetings was paramount.

The notoriety and reasons surrounding the challenge of access did not help with my levels of optimism. Having emigrated to New Zealand in late 2012, my opportunities to build a large network of contacts were sparse in comparison to my established networks in the UK. However, my positivity levels grew after discussing access issues with two New Zealand PhD students who successfully negotiated interviews and observations (Crow, 2016; P.L. Grant, 2013). Surprisingly, P.L. Grant (2013) had no issues recruiting participants, and when interviewing them gained candid and open responses. It seemed that perhaps “an opportunity to appear as the fly on the wall is not [...] entirely beyond the realm of possibilities” (Useem, 1995, p. 36).

I decided to select participants from the not-for-profit sector as my starting point. This was because of my affinity, interest and knowledge of the sector. I spent almost 10 years working in public and not-for-profit organisations in the UK, and published two articles on governance and the development needs of board members in these sectors (Hutchinson & Ward, 2012; Ward & Preece, 2012). Living and working in New Zealand, I noticed the prominence of the not-for-profit sector in comparison with ‘big corporates’. This

prevalence of *common good organisations* (CGO), more so than in the UK, meant a rich and vibrant landscape in which to position my curiosity (McMorland & Eraković, 2013). Plus, three acquaintances serving as board members in not-for-profits acted as a ‘spring board’ to potential ‘leads’. Through these conversations and introductions to contacts, a recruiter offered to place an advertisement in a monthly e-newsletter accessing thousands of aspiring and current board members across all industries, in the North Island and South Island. I also gained affiliations with institutes and groups, for example, the then New Zealand Leadership Institute (NZLI), and the now previous New Zealand Governance Centre (NZGC). Lastly, as boards are cautious about letting researchers (i.e., outsiders) ‘inside’, with confidentiality issues a factor in this reluctance, I ascertained non-profits as having a lower threshold with respect to divulging sensitive financial and commercial information which, therefore, made access easier than corporate or for-profits.

Agreeing with the ethos of ‘quality over quantity’ is one strategy I adopted to recruit participants within doctoral time constraints. As Alvesson (2011b) remarks, researchers’ efforts should be to gain “rich, perceptive and insightful accounts” (p. 50) from “highly qualified” participants who hold the “right experiences and an ability and willingness to communicate these” (Alvesson, 2011b, p. 50). My aim was not to accumulate a high volume of interviews, but to select ‘qualified’ people based on two criteria: holding a minimum of a year’s board experience on a not-for-profit board, and currently serving on a not-for-profit board at the time of the interview. In doing so, I purposely excluded board members who were not holding current ‘active’ positions, despite having a wealth of board experience. The one-year minimum service condition gave the assurance of recruiting board members who had attended at least four or more board meetings in the year, thus possessing the necessary ‘insider’ information of the role and its mechanics.

Some contexts or participants (i.e., homeless people) are defined as ‘hard to reach’ groups. I maximised my success rate by applying the snowballing (referral) technique (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997). Sampling techniques are complex, with snowballing and convenience sampling closely resembling each other. Bryman (2016) distinguishes between the two, saying convenience sampling is “by virtue of its accessibility” (p. 187). Unfortunately, as I wasn’t a board member myself, a ‘convenient’ sample was not accessible. Instead, I relied on “special kinds of introductions” (Hertz & Imber, 1995, p. x) such as the recruiter contact, and negotiating through ‘gatekeepers’, either CEOs or chairs. Fortunately, I did not encounter a “myriad of organizational gatekeepers” (Hertz & Imber, 1995, p. 1). Plus, giving assurances about abiding by confidentiality claims helped to “establish confidence that the research will not undermine the organizations competitive edge and goals” (Hertz & Imber, 1995, p. x).

Fortunately, New Zealand has a ‘localised’ board member community compared to other countries, due to its small population size (4.8 million in 2018 based on the latest census figures (<https://www.stats.govt.nz/topics/population>)). In addition, elites are known to hold “interlocking directorates” (Pettigrew, 1992, p. 164), spanning across multiple organisations, industries and sectors. In other words, one board member contact can ‘spiral’ into double figures depending on their number of board appointments, thus, making the referral method preferable to a randomised approach. If I chose a random method this would mean locating and accessing public documents of registered charities, a time consuming approach that is haphazard, and at worst unfruitful. Hence, recruiting participants via referrals immediately following ethics approval obtained at the provisional stage of my candidature was crucial.

Once potential participants were identified, they received an email invitation and information sheet, known as the ‘Participant Information Sheet’ (PIS) (see Appendix One).

My 'audience's' accessibility is said to be typically inhibited by "rigorous time schedules" (Hertz & Imber, 1995, p. 1), so I was keen to describe my research as novel and interesting. I decided to frame my research invitation around a familiar social scenario for many New Zealanders, that of meeting someone at a barbecue (BBQ). I asked the potential participants to respond according to how they would answer the question, "*What do you do?*" – when socialising at a BBQ, hoping this would prompt details about themselves, descriptions about their board work and other relevant matters. While the scenario of a BBQ may be a stereotypical image its purpose was multiple – as an eye-catching introduction to my research, and to convey a less than ordinary research project about board members. For example, I was not addressing popular themes of board governance such as board protocols, accountability, adding value, stakeholder engagement, to name a few. It was just as important to clarify what my study was not about as what it was about. By using the hypothetical BBQ scenario, I wanted to arouse interest and subsequent acceptance of my invitation for interview.

### **Interviewing Board Members**

One of the most popular ways of gaining insights into constructing identities is by asking questions (Alvesson et al., 2008). My epistemological position sees research interviewing as a "knowledge-producing activity" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 55). Interview accounts yield the 'sense-making' of individuals and sensemaking is "grounded in identity construction" (Weick, 1995, p. 17). Interviews provide a platform, acting as a "source of information about individual and organisational sense-making" (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 21). Both discourse and narratives are significant as they are "a useful interpretive lens with which to understand identity formation because they act as devices for people to make sense of past events and actions" (Garcia & Hardy, 2007, p. 366). My research

design included two types of interview: the ‘initial interviews’ from multiple referrals, representing the main body of research material; and secondly, ‘reflective’ or follow-up interviews that took place after my direct observations of three board meetings.

Following ethics approval (see section later in this chapter on ethical considerations and implications), I ‘tested’ my questions and interview format in two pilot interviews with people referred to me through a work colleague teaching governance. Using the pseudonyms of William and Albert, I trace my learnings and insights gained from these interviews. These were, deciding suitable interview locations, re-designing my questions, developing my interview style and lastly, pinpointing indications of identity work enacted by board members.

Arranging pilot interviews gave me an indication of the logistics for setting up interviews – where and when, and how – either through a third party (Personal Assistant (PA)) or directly via ‘to-ing’ and ‘fro-ing’ of emails, texts or phone calls to agree times, locations and dates. I indicated on the PIS and email correspondence to participants an estimated duration of one hour for the interviews. William’s interview occurred at his place of work and was handled in a very formal way, with all correspondence and contact channelled through his PA. With his consent the interview was audio-recorded on my password protected iPad device. However, although I met Albert at his place of work expecting to interview him there, he preferred to be interviewed elsewhere. Albert’s interview took place in an uncrowded café in Auckland’s central business district (CBD), where handwritten notes were taken after Albert’s request not to be recorded.

After the second pilot interview in the café, I decided that although this was a relaxed setting there could only be a choice of three locations for interviews: the participant’s place of work; at my place of work (Auckland University of Technology – AUT); or The

University of Auckland where I was studying for my PhD. I communicated this information in my introductory email along with the inclusion of the PIS and consent form (see Appendix One and Two). On two occasions, I refrained from conducting interviews due to the suggested location – one in a person’s home, and the other at a McDonald’s fast food outlet. Fortunately, on both occasions the interviews were able to be rearranged and were subsequently conducted via Skype call and a telephone conversation. Although there can be benefits of interviewing participants in their home, I was mindful of protocols laid down by The University of Auckland. Further, I carry an ‘old legacy’ of working as a housing manager where home visits must be in pairs due to safety issues. I declined the other suggestion of carrying out the interview at McDonald’s because of recording quality issues for the transcriber, and likely distractions in a busy food outlet by a major route into the city of Auckland. Reflecting on Albert’s interview in the café, my preference was for recording the lengthy conversation with a recording device rather than note taking. Later when setting up the main interviews, some participants suggested and preferred a Skype call from their homes due to their busy schedules, and transport and parking issues in the city of Auckland. Using Skype was also convenient for participants located outside Auckland, for example in the South Island.

Where it is virtually impossible to meet face to face to interview research participants, researchers rely on using computers and the internet to interview participants, and this is on the rise (for example, see James and Busher (2012)). However, some qualitative researchers do not favour the use of telephones and communications media. Alvesson (2011b, p. 10) states:

Telephonic and electronic interviews are seen as much poorer and not relevant in most cases where complex phenomena are being investigated,

but are economical and can perhaps sometimes also be used for brief follow-up interviews in research aiming for 'richer' interview material.

Alvesson (2011b) acknowledges the benefits and sometimes necessity of telephone interviews, and academics have debated at length the merits of face to face (in person) versus telephone interviewing (Gubrium et al., 2012). I did favour the use of telephone and Skype as a viable option for the reflective interviews, which were a "follow-up interview" of less than an hour's duration, thus making meeting for a face to face interview of say 35–40 minutes an inconvenient and potentially burdensome exercise for participants.

However, overall my preferred 'medium' was a face-to-face interview and for the interview to be recorded and later transcribed by a professional transcriber using a conventional style. In Skype calls there is a 'hybrid bodily presence' where the interviewer and interviewee are able to see each other, detecting bodily cues and facial expressions.

While this was not my concern, as I was not observing behaviour, it did mean the experience almost paralleled face to face interviews. I noticed minimal negative impact comparing face to face to Skype. On two occasions, unintended telephone interviews occurred, one due to Skype failure (interview with Felicity), and the other with a participant based in Wellington who did not have a Skype account (Yvonne). Despite my reservations I was able to turn these interviews into what Alvesson classes a "warm situation" (2011b, p. 15), assisted by the fact of speaking to participants by phone prior to the 'interview' and so avoiding a 'cold call' situation. I was also mindful in all interviews that "the first few minutes of an interview are decisive" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 154), and where initially participants may be hesitant in allowing "themselves to talk freely and expose their experiences and feelings to a stranger" (p. 154). I also emailed the required documentation and answered queries to assist in the 'breaking of any ice'.

My observations, thoughts, feelings and assumptions prior, during and after the pilot interviews and what I was “struck-by” (Corlett, 2012; Cunliffe, 2002) featured in conversations with my supervisory team. Addressing my ‘struck-by’s’ intensified learning and self-reflexivity. As a consequence of my reflexive practice, I modified my interview questions, interview style and approach. First, the order of the questions didn’t flow, and second, I felt the way I asked the questions seemed ‘stilted’ and ‘robotic’, and less like the conversation I aspired to. Questions were subsequently discarded or re-designed. For example, a specific question addressing board decision-making processes was replaced with more open-ended questions such as, “Tell me what a typical board meeting looks like?” This gave participants the opportunity to recall any poignant moments or insights rather than been ‘ring fenced’ into talking about decisions. Another ‘struck-by’ was how William’s talk included what I can only term as ‘board speak’. He mentioned ‘liabilities’, ‘commercial judgement’, ‘penalties’, and ‘dynamics’, giving me my first taste of governance ‘language’. These would later act as triggers to extend the conversation and ask probing questions. For the list of questions following a semi structured format see Appendix Three.

Mirroring other studies on identity, I did not use the term ‘identity’ in my PIS or the questions I asked participants (Carollo & Guerci, 2018; Ellis & Ybema, 2011; Gotsi et al., 2010). I applied the same rationale as these researchers, which was to “avoid guiding responses” (Carollo & Guerci, 2018, p. 254), instead allowing participants the freedom to talk about themselves in an unrestricted manner. During my initial discussions when setting up and arranging interviews, I was forthright about my study and how different it was to the majority of governance type studies. For example, I explained I was not researching board behaviours, personalities or skills, but as stated in the PIS – *Who you are?* and, *What is it like being a board member?* I mentioned the findings would emerge

out of their stories and my subsequent interpretation of these. I felt this was important to convey, as I did not have a hypothesis to test or a research question, such as “Why is it problematic for a team to be effective that meets only 4 times a year?” My focus and aims were to encourage a “describing orientation” (Sandberg, 2005, p. 60) through the use of the “‘what’ and ‘how’ questions rather than ‘why’ questions” (p. 60). I wanted to find out *about them* – what it was like being a board member, and in turn what complexities, contradictions, tensions, ambiguities lie behind, within, underneath the role of a board member. Inviting participants to talk generally about themselves is the crux of identity work. As emphasised in a study of aged employees in Australia, “older workers talked about themselves, that is, engaged in identity work” (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009, p. 1206).

Not only did I refrain from asking direct questions pertaining to identity, but I also avoided ‘cliché’ questions, or asking questions that elicit predictable answers. For example, I didn’t ask the typical question – ‘What challenges do you face?’, which ordinarily can evoke a catalogue of issues and problems. Instead I asked the question, ‘What is at the forefront of your mind right now?’ and ‘What keeps you awake at night?’. I heeded the advice from a conversation with Professor Dan Kärreman that predictable mundane questions will only yield predictable and mundane answers.

I had greater flexibility in the reflective interviews, where I was able to ‘tailor’ questions following the observed meetings. I followed Alvesson’s (2011b) recommendation to “try to find a balance between keeping a line and being open and willing to revise research questions and interpretations” (p. 47). Experimenting with this approach made me feel like a tightrope walker. However, the benefit of the semi-structured interview format is to allow participants to talk at depth and at length. The twenty-one initial interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour 35 minutes.

## **Developing my Interview Style**

Following on from adapting the questions, another learning from the pilot interviews was developing my interview style. I started the interviews with warmup questions, which enables a settling in period for both interviewee and interviewer. I also embraced “openness and relational flow over rigidity” (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2012, p. 247) in my style of interviewing. Using this approach encouraged rich descriptions, new insights, and, in this case, the surprise of an ongoing dialogue of voice-silence. Inductive research is renowned for contributing novel ideas due to its ability to be more open than the deductive method. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) verify “social constructionist texts and studies have great merit of often being both fun to read and interesting, as well as exciting in their contents” (p. 35). Similarly, the method is advantageous to explore “unusual settings and unexpected perspectives – precisely the situations in which novel ideas probably exist” (Eisenhardt et al., 2016, p. 1115). Additionally, due to its emergent nature, qualitative research is “often designed at the same time it is being done” (Gephart, 2004, p. 455), further reinforced by Alvesson (2003), who says “data may guide the researcher to understand specific phenomena and develop theory” (p. 13).

Avoiding an interview approach called “McDonaldized ‘tourist interviewing’” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 341) was at the forefront of my mind. I regard an interview as “a complex social situation” and a “human encounter” (Brinkmann & Kvale, p. 71) and my role is to encourage the interviewee throughout the course of the interview. During this process, I did not strive to become the participants’ “best friend” (Alvesson, 2011b, p. 86) as in the romanticist approach to interviewing. But I did employ active listening, meaning I was “being attentive”, “supporting”, and “doing everything to build trust” (p. 86). On occasions, I needed to reassure participants about anonymity and confidentiality when they

expressed concerns over New Zealand as a ‘small town,’ with only two degrees of separation, which makes individuals and organisations easily identifiable and traceable.

Journaling is recommended to “keep track of the temporal vicissitudes of an interview journey” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 139). The “researcher can keep a work journal as a record of his or her learning throughout the investigation” (p. 139). Plotting my interview progress and insights meant finding time before and after the interview to record my thoughts. For example, before interviewing Oliver I dealt with a tricky work issue. This played on my mind at the start of the interview. In another example, I felt an acute feeling of embarrassment as I interrupted a participant who was talking non-stop. When I interjected to break the flow and enter the conversation, they seemed to be thrown off. In another, before starting the interview, Malcolm informed me they only had until 11.25am as they had to leave the office and be in their car at 11.30am to drive to a personal appointment (I was at their place of work). I then felt I was always having to ‘clock watch’, glancing up at the clock on their wall several times. When I directed my glance over his head, it must have looked as if I was not paying attention and listening attentively.

In William’s pilot interview and the first two interviews, I felt the formality and impersonal nature of a question and answer session. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) propose two contrasting metaphors for interviewers depending on the epistemological conceptions. These are either a “miner or traveler” (p. 57). Depicting the interviewer as a miner implies “knowledge is waiting in the subject’s interior to be uncovered”, aligning with positivist ideologies (p. 57). In other words, the interview is a process of “knowledge collection” rather than a process of “knowledge construction”. In my epistemological stance I take on the “interviewer-traveler” style (p. 58). Enthused by the work of Bauman (1996), Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) note the traveller metaphor can be split into two types – the pilgrim or the tourist. Irrespective of the different goals of pilgrim and tourist, the traveller

is on a trip of exploration, “roaming freely around the territory” (pp. 57-58). I was able to engage with participants, encouraging them to share their stories. I saw myself as a traveller, where the interviewing stage or “the journey” itself, whether each separate interview or the entire twenty eight, initiated reflection which exposed “previously taken-for-granted values and customs” (p. 58). For example, my beliefs about board members were challenged, and my ideas of board meetings as forums for rigorous and even at times heated debate and dialogue. My imagined board members would not hold back, be hesitant, shy and demure. In fact I believed the opposite, thinking of them as experienced, articulate and confident at all times

During the first two interviews, I felt I was a miner. Revisiting my journal entries, I used the words, ‘awkward’, ‘tense’, ‘clumsy’ and ‘haphazard’. There were several reasons for this. I was feeling nervous, anxious and excitement at commencing my data collection phase, slightly intimidated at the thought of interviewing high calibre professionals in light of their public standing in the New Zealand business world, and lastly, at the time I had not conducted research interviews for over 12 months. Things progressively changed. For example, after my third and fourth interviews, I noted – ‘flow was better’, ‘smoother’, ‘enjoyable’, ‘natural’. However, as Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) describe, the “interview is a special form of conversational practice” (p. 59). Gradually, over time, I felt there was more of ‘a conversation’ happening in interviews, although this positive trajectory did not always follow a smooth upward trend. Interviewing Anthony overwhelmed me due to his references to historical events in New Zealand. He discussed political incidents going back decades I was unaware of due to not being a native ‘Kiwi’. Despite this lack of insider information, he emailed me afterwards commenting, “You had good questions, and it was nice to talk *with you*” (my emphasis added). For my last interview, I noted “awkwardness”, feeling “bewildered”, and an overall sense of being perplexed, as almost

every question I asked, they asked one back, resulting in a stilted back and forth interview. Even though I asked open questions, they offered short answers. I definitely did not feel I had achieved one of the quality criteria for interviews suggested by Brinkman and Kvale (2015, p. 192), namely “the shortest interviewer’s questions and longest subjects’ answers possible”.

Apart from refining the mechanics of interviewing and testing my interview questions, the pilot interviews also gave a glimpse, albeit only fleeting, of the potential identity work activities of board members. Prior to this, I could not assume identity work as a foregone conclusion. A.D. Brown (2020, p. 5) comments on identity work placing individuals in positions of “strategists,” as they “engage actively, reflexively, and in relation to significant others”. I was also aware that in one study identity work appeared to occur under the radar, where bankers displayed only peripheral interest in identity efforts (Alvesson & Robertson, 2016). This was different to other studies, where identity work is reported as an ongoing process and even heightened in crises, such as workplace bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008).

Briefly, Albert and William compared themselves to ‘professional’ directors. Albert likened them to swallows, as they ‘fly in and fly out’ avoiding emotional attachment to the organisation. Professional directors are increasing in numbers. They are a new breed, who are happy compromising their integrity to achieve a successful portfolio career. Both distanced themselves from the expectations of what is meant by the term professional director. Albert commented that underneath the label of professional director, they are only lawyers and accountants anyway. Building reputations is fundamental for professional directors in gaining prestigious board positions. Angst and resistance to changes in expectations of board members’ work and a newly defined image was a significant area voiced in the two interviews. My impression was Albert and William were definitely not

professional directors – or wanting to become so. More significantly they talked of the way professional directors operate, which was not as they did. Frustrations were aroused, as they seemed to see them as the ‘new kids on the block’. William talked about his work alongside others such as the senior management team members (SMT), saying that the SMT develop the strategy and “that’s their *victory*”. He expressed the CEO and board working together so they “can share the *glory*”. Other board members also used battle analogies of glory and victory in their interviews. William’s battle scenario suggests he saw his role is one where he must ‘attack’ and ‘defend’ his position and actions when working with relevant others.

Given a growing interest in diversity issues on boards, specifically gender driven studies, I aimed for a broad balance between male and female. In total, 12 males and 16 females were interviewed, as shown in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1 Interview participants by gender and mode of interviewing

	Face to face interview	Skype	Telephone
<b>Initial interviews</b>			
Male	8	2	1
Female	7	1	2
<b>Reflective interviews</b>			
Male	0	0	1
Female	1	0	5

The initial interviews commenced in April 2017, finishing three months later in July. The reflective interviews occurred after each board observation. Demographic details were canvassed from all interviewees. However, not all demographic information is available for the seven reflective interviews, despite follow ups. Therefore, the demographic information details of the 21 participants in the first set of interviews is as follows.

Seventy-seven percent identified as New Zealander, European New Zealander and/or Pākehā. The latter is a Māori term given to New Zealanders originating from European descent. A total of 10% identified as Samoan and the remainder preferred not to disclose their ethnicity. The 21 referred participants were evenly split between the genders with 11 males and 10 females. Seventy was the age of the oldest participant, and 36 the youngest. An overall average age of 48 years was recorded, with one participant preferring not to disclose their age. The average age for the women of 56 years was five years higher than for the men. All participants recorded some form of 'educational qualifications,' with 19% holding PhDs. A further 33% recorded master's level achievements, such as a master's in Marketing, with two declaring an MBA. At the time of their interview, the highest number of boards currently served on was five – which was reported by two participants. A total of 33% were serving on three boards at the time of interview, with only three board members indicating board experience outside of New Zealand. When asked about their years serving as a board member in any capacity, either as chair or board member, the total for the 21 participants was 232 years. Five participants recorded over 20 years' experience. At the time of interview, eight participants were serving as chairs of one or more boards. Current and previous board experience spanned industries, sectors and the length and breadth of New Zealand. Varied occupations were recorded, but the dominant occupations were executive directors, managers and consultants.

Included within the total 28 interviews were two CEOs, as they accepted the invite from me circulated at the board meetings I observed. However, both had substantial board experience and were currently serving on NZ boards in the capacity of chair or in ordinary board member roles. In particular, one of the CEOs interviewed had been instrumental in securing two of the observations of board meetings.

## **Reflective Interviews**

Board members were asked in the first set of interviews to recall their first board meeting and reflect on other events. Some were able to recall and retell stories from 10 or 20 years ago and had no problem in articulating feelings surrounding these events. In the reflective interviews, I asked participants to look back on the board meeting they had attended, and I had observed. Of the total of 28 interviews, seven were reflective or follow-up interviews. They were shorter in duration than the 21 initial interviews, with an average length of approximately 30 minutes. Invites were accepted from attendees at all three board meetings I observed. Interviews were arranged at the convenience of the participants within days after the board meetings. As with initial interviews, all the reflective interviews were recorded and transcribed. The purpose of the reflective interviews was to hear about the “goings-on” from the meetings, specifically the interactions and incidents in the meeting, and anything else that struck them as memorable.

Participants were asked to reflect on the meeting, with the opening question – ‘How was the meeting for you?’. Little prompts throughout the interviews were needed, but in general they were asked to talk about any critical moments during the meeting, emotional incidents they encountered, and times when they wished they had said something but didn’t. By asking the question – ‘Tell me about any times when you wanted to say something but felt you couldn’t?’, I avoided negative connotations, accusations and potential stigmatisation that may have arisen from asking them directly about being silent. This was pertinent as I had attended the meetings and was aware of how much each board member contributed. Adopting the unstructured interview method at times gave board members the opportunity to reminisce, recollecting key moments. This gave me the opportunity where necessary, to probe contributions to, and interactions at the meeting. In the reflective interviews I experienced a more conversation-like style, more open and

exploratory, as participants were candid in freely commenting on the meeting and on those around the table. I needed to exercise caution when interviewing six of the participants, as they were from two board observations. It was important to safeguard confidentiality and avoid any “slip-ups” (Gatrell, 2009, p. 113) or divulge details from other participants during interviews, when discussing the responses or non-responses of other board members in the meeting.

Although not all demographic details were returned by participants undertaking a reflective interview, the available demographic information showed similar patterns to the 21 initial interviewees. The dominant ethnicity matched the 21 referred interviewees at 71% New Zealand/European-Pākehā, with the remainder classifying themselves as Māori or Samoan ‘Kiwi’. One board member in the reflective interviews had achieved a PhD qualification. The oldest recorded age was 66 years, and this interviewee was female. One member had over 30 years’ board experience. As part of this reflective grouping, one person was interviewed twice, both in their capacity as a CEO on one of the three boards and as a board member of another.

Within emergent inductive research Eisenhardt et al. (2016) discuss the differences between three inductive approaches – *building theories*, *interpretivist studies* and *ethnography*. While interpretivist studies are mainly centred around a ‘naturalist view’ where, according to Eisenhardt et al. (2016), this approach is “often used to examine concepts such as identity, sensemaking and sensegiving” (p. 1114) and interviews “give voice to informants” (p. 1114), ethnography captures ways of working and includes observations. The addition of the interviews after the board observations in this study provided the opportunity for me as the researcher to capture identity as a “situated practice and cultural formation” (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 20). This approach is beneficial for allowing a degree of immersion in the research setting, in this case to gain familiarity with

a significant working space of board members – the board meeting, together with developing a framework for the reflective interviews.

### **Observing Board Members ‘at work’**

Governance studies using interpretivist approaches currently rely on “participants’ retrospective accounts gathered through semi-structured interviews” (C. Watson et al., 2020, p. 2) rather than *real time* accounts, or otherwise known as boards-in-action (Samra-Fredericks, 2000a,b). In a recent review of direct observational data on governing, C. Watson et al. (2020) remark on the meagre amount of studies. Among the studies they document, the majority place the researcher as an outsider – non-participant. To understand board members’ identity work processes, I believed it necessary to secure observations on governing boards in meetings, as this represents the board members’ work scenario and where “governing is legitimised” (p.3).

While observations complement interviewing in this inquiry, my study takes an “emergent-relational view of people” (T. J. Watson, 2020, p. 284), with individuals as “always in a process of ‘becoming’” (T. J. Watson, 2020, p. 284), also described as “emergent identity” (T.J. Watson, 2008, p. 134). Researchers see individuals engaging in identity work “as social beings whose individuality only becomes possible as a result of relating to other people” (p. 284). My decision to include direct observations is based on the idea presented by T. J. Watson (2020) that “whilst individuals in part make their own lives and identities, they do so in a societal and cultural context where there is a continual interaction between the ‘self’ aspect of identities and their ‘social’ aspect” (p. 285). I observed board meetings as the board members’ social context. However, I was precluded from ‘hanging around’ (Whyte, 1993), which occurs in other studies of identity work, for

example the earliest such study, where researchers observed and integrated with American homeless people over many months and years (Snow & Andersen, 1987).

### **Negotiating Access to the Boardroom – ‘Getting in’**

Researchers study people in different types of social settings, either quasi-public, quasi-private, or private (Lofland et al., 2006). The boardroom is known as a ‘private place’ and ‘closed’ setting, only accessible by invitation. Lofland et al. (2006, p. 41) categorise private settings as “corporate offices, clubs, and exclusive secretive groups”. Researchers negotiating access to observe board proceedings need what Lofland et al. (2006) call “strategic enterprise” and “maintenance”, as well as the ability to “exploit existing social ties” and “identify key gatekeepers”( p. 42). As I did not have the “the badge of membership” (p. 41), I realised that negotiating and securing observations would only be effective if I came “armed with connections, accounts, knowledge, and courtesy” (p. 41).

Whether conducting one-off observations as in my case, or continuing fieldwork over several months or years as an ethnographer, “getting in” according to Lofland et al. (2006, p. 33) can be challenging especially as an outsider. I should point out I recognise board members do activities outside of the boardroom, but the board meeting is regarded as their main activity. Incidentally, Samra-Fredericks (2000a) points out from her study that sometimes decisions happen away from the boardroom environment, instead occurring off site, or maybe off limits in car parks and corridors, to name but a few. Additionally, board members attend functions, awaydays, meetings, and prepare for meetings such as by reading the board papers, which take a required amount of time to read and digest (Petrovic, 2008, p. 1385). Despite these other activities a board meeting is the primary activity of board members, and provided a “distinct scenario” (C. Watson et al., 2020) for my aim of observing board members in action.

Gaining entry to certain hierarchies in organisations is known to be problematic for the researcher:

Studying up into the higher reaches of an organization or class structure can also be difficult to negotiate because “gatekeepers” often protect the occupants of these lofty strata from intrusion or disturbance and as such, access may require working with, through, or around gatekeepers. (Lofland et al., 2006, p. 26)

Fortunately, following twenty one completed interviews, I was in a prime position to follow up leads and possibilities for observing meetings. During the initial interviews, participants asked if I intended to attend board meetings as part of my study. This was fortuitous as it resulted in tentative offers. Some participants were either chairs of boards or held multiple board positions, so acted as the ideal gatekeepers, as referred to by Lofland et al. (2006). Although arranging access was a lengthy process, and far more time consuming than I had originally anticipated, I secured three observations in total. According to Lofland et al. (2006, p. 26), when the researcher decides to enter a private space, “access typically takes greater work and strategic enterprise than is the case in many other contexts”.

The process of guaranteeing “getting in” to three organisations featured emails back and forth, arranging meetings and discussions with CEOs, telephone conversations, an introduction to organisational members first before the board meeting, and additional supporting letters for reassurances over confidentiality. I was not asked to sign a confidentiality waiver form or official legal documentation, as can be the case with entering this domain (Hertz & Imber, 2005; Leblanc & Schwartz, 2007). My research featured as an agenda item for consideration in one organisation before negotiations could

occur after agreement from the board, resulting in a four-month wait. A chair of one organisation had accepted the invite and arranged a date for me to attend, but later retracted because of a sensitive trans-Tasman incident that was gaining media attention. It was inevitable this would feature in lengthy discussions and include sensitive details in the meeting. As a contingency fortunately I had been in ongoing discussions with other organisations, meaning a ‘replacement’ meeting was secured with only minor time wastage. In the end, all three observations were obtained from participants who I interviewed, and with an element of determination to achieve this. As Bryman (2016, p. 435, citing Kolb and Van Maanen, 1985) notes, “sheer perseverance pays off”. Anonymous details in Table 6.2 show the date of the observation, and size and demographic features of each board. The numbers of males and females do not reflect those present at my observations, but rather are details taken from website information and after cross checking with the chair/CEOs where required. In one observation, a board member was required to phone into the meeting to satisfy quorum arrangements so that a decision could be made. Two of the meetings at the time of my observation had male chairs.

Table 6.2 Board characteristics

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Date of observation</b>	<b>Size of board</b>
A	November 2017	6 (2 male and 4 female)
B	December 2018	15 (8 male and 7 female)
C	March 2018	7 (3 male and 4 female)

The organisations for which the boards were appointed ranged by industry type, embraced interests in New Zealand as a bicultural society, and were not-for-profit in status, or a mix with some partially funded by the New Zealand government. I am both candid and

cautious in providing ‘organisational bio’s’ due to the possibility of disclosing information that could trace the identity of all three organisations and their board members. Therefore, I purposely limit factual information and reserve details of industry type and their main activities, as even providing basic descriptions could narrow down the possibilities of such organisations active in New Zealand. Therefore, industry type was excluded from the above descriptions, and any accompanying identifying information.

Once I secured my first observation date in November 2017, I followed recommendations to conduct a pilot observation as I had never carried out observational research previously. Lofland et al. (2006) advise the undertaking of pilot observations, in the same manner as I did the interview pilots. As an essential stage in the research process, this ensures problem areas surface and can be tackled, in turn assisting with the design. I chatted with colleagues whom I knew had carried out observations, but not in a governance setting. I consulted Lofland et al. (2006) as the main source of practically based guidance to assist in designing this stage of the research. However, I was not becoming part of this social situation for any length of time, nor could I just hang around an open plan office or manufacturing site. As well as considering how could I get to a board meeting to observe for a pilot, other considerations were: how was I to minimise any potential researcher influence – if at all, what was I observing, and how should this be recorded without the aid of audio or video equipment. I decided it was unlikely I would be able to run a pilot at a real time board meeting, due to the scarcity of offers and the logistics.

Opting to trial my observational skills and protocols in a reception area at my place of work was my first idea. I sat in one of the reception chairs for 45 minutes. I found sitting on my own ‘watching the world go by’ to be a self-conscious activity. Looking up and around the reception area and then putting my head down to make notes made me feel self-conscious. I let the receptionist know what I was doing, and why, and gave assurances the

data would only be used for my personal learning on how to record information as an observer. One of the ‘golden rules’ is I needed to distinguish between making *notes* and making *observations*. This meant, as suggested by Lofland et al. (2006), drawing from earlier work on ethnography by Emerson et al. (1995) to “avoid confusing evaluative assertions with descriptive jottings” (Lofland et al., 2006, p. 110). Although the reception area was a helpful environment, unfortunately it did not mimic a meeting setting for anything remotely like a board meeting. Rather than try and gain access to general meetings through my workplace, comprising of say three or four people, I decided to watch a couple of YouTube videos of committee meetings recorded in American neighbourhoods. Although I had attended council committee meetings as a social housing manager, I felt the videoed meetings would be more like what I was likely to see and observe. After watching two videos I came to the conclusion that not a lot happens. They were orderly, and uneventful with the chair of each meeting running the meeting like clockwork, and every now and again inviting individuals around the table to contribute.

### **Observing as a Non-Participant**

Undertaking any type of ‘watching’ requires the researcher to be both “systematic and inquisitive” (Harvey & MacDonald, 1993, p. 148). Lofland et al. (2006) describe “field work” – as often “time-consuming, arduous, and often emotionally draining” (p. 9).

Securing and arranging access to attend meetings on predetermined dates, and the *writing up*, as opposed to the recording of “jotted notes” (Lofland et al., 2006, p. 109) took longer than actually attending the meeting itself. Typically, ethnographic research extends over a period of time, sometimes years (i.e., L.D. Parker’s studies of Australian not-for-profit boards 2007a, 2007b, 2008). I was, as termed by C. Watson et al. (2020), a ‘fly on the wall,’ carrying out direct observations as the role of complete observer or non-participant

observer. Gold (1958) cites popular ‘degrees of involvement’ of observers, with the total absence of any type of involvement. I was a ‘known investigator’ from the outside, which means I carried out the observations known to everyone but was not part of that group, as opposed to covert observations. I was unable to ‘go native’.

I was comfortable being a “total researcher” (Gans, 1968) or, as more commonly referred to, a non-participant observer, accepting I could simply be no other kind of observer in this context. But this assumption was disrupted in all three of the board meetings in different ways. First, in the coffee/comfort breaks in two meetings, I was able to mingle, although my preference was to remain in the shadows. Some board members purposely approached me, inquisitively asking how I was finding the meeting so far. However, this was not the case with one board, as my role changed significantly. In two of the meetings I was permitted to attend the ‘Board only time’, scheduled just before the meeting started. In one organisation during this time, the board members and myself were gathered closely around the end of the large board table. The chair involved me, explaining noteworthy points, and providing guidance around the meeting format. There was lots of eye contact with me, nodding and general acceptance from others as to how the meeting was to spin out. At that point, I felt as though I was ‘one of the lads’ (Huse & Zattoni, 2008) included in a plotting scheme. I felt unease at having crossed a boundary. In the main meeting itself there were other incidents where the chair stopped to explain things to me. My seating and location in this meeting were different to the other two meetings. Here I was seated at the board table, positioned between the CEO and a board member, despite my reluctance to do so. It seemed, however, unpolite to decline outright. Lastly, in another meeting I was positioned in a corner slightly away from the CEO and chair on one side of the table. During the meeting the chair swung back on his chair, turned to me, and remarked in a jokey fashion, “Don’t make a note of that.” Everyone laughed. This remark was a surprise and I didn’t

know whether to laugh too, so reacted with a coy smile. This incident made me realise I was not as inconspicuous as I had hoped, as my presence was acknowledged.

### **Recording and Writing up Observational Research Material**

Deciding what to record and what not to jot down was necessitated by one major factor. This factor was to simply not to change, inhibit, or influence the meetings proceedings. I was extremely conscious this event was live and in real time, and could not be repeated. I recorded as much detail as was feasible without drawing attention to myself, so this meant not looking up and down, as though I was writing down everything everybody said and did. This was impossible anyway due to quickly moving events, several board members talking all at once, personnel entering and leaving the meetings, and clusters of conversations between board members sat next to each other. These observations were far different from the pilot videos I watched of committee meetings. This meant I had to be selective in my jotting down. The notes I made acted as “aids to memory” or “aide mémoire”, (Harvey & MacDonald, 1993, pp.150-151), to assist with the writing up straight afterwards. I made a sketch of the boardroom, seating arrangements, and noted codes for each board member. Along with the physical artefacts, I jotted down sensory things. Even when the chair was explaining matters and asking for decisions, board members around the table were whispering to their neighbour, on their electronic devices or phones, reading papers, or listening attentively. All these activities were recorded, along with any verbatim dialogue. To remain inconspicuous and to minimise participants feeling restrained or self-conscious, I used a small A5 size notebook only, with the aim of being as neutral and unobtrusive as possible. My aim was to blend into the background, making as little noise and movement as humanly possible. I wanted to reduce my impact on the group, so they would forget I was there for the entire board meeting and act and behave as

‘normal’. A CEO from one organisation gave reassurance that this was like any other board meeting and nothing out of the ordinary, meaning I had not influenced the proceedings in any way, which was a relief. The majority of the board members only met me for the first time at the meeting and seemed to forget I was there and lose any inhibitions they may have had towards being ‘watched’. This impression is echoed in a recent study where videotaping a board meeting didn’t cause concern or interfere with proceedings (Veltrop et al., 2020).

Following the advice of Harvey and MacDonald (1993, p. 151), as the researcher you should “never sleep on your observations”. This tip meant declining an offer by one organisation to attend their Annual General Meeting (AGM) straight after the board meeting. Instead, I headed back to my office to begin the writing out of my field notes. Observing the board meetings was at times draining on an emotional level. I was observing intensely and continuously for between two to four hours. While there were short bathroom and tea breaks, absorbing the goings-on and making notes inconspicuously was a demand I had never experienced before. My primary reason for undertaking the observations was to capture “how actors work, act and interact in their natural environment as they go about their daily activities” (Silverman, 2011, pp. 54-55). The jotted notes from my A5 notebook translated into 27 A4 pages of handwritten commentaries after each meeting. It was in this writing I could include my thoughts and feelings and other relevant evaluative points to create a series of boardroom narratives that I include in the three findings chapters.

### **Discursive Analysis of Interviews**

I was acutely aware that analysing research material is the “most decisive and demanding work effort” (Alvesson, 2011b, p. 59). Using a discourse analytical framework means the

researcher requires the strength of the Greek god – Hercules. In other words, I needed to do several things, primarily “categorize, interpret and creatively use the interview material” (Alvesson, 2011b, p. 59). Adopting a discourse-analytic orientation meant embracing an alternative mindset for me, away from the familiarity of content and thematic analysis. According to Wood and Kroger (2000), keeping an open mind facilitates in locating multiple possibilities from the research material.

Initially, rather than waiting to read all the transcribed interviews together, I listened to the recordings in between receiving the transcribed scripts, noting points of interest. In their study of unemployed professionals, Gabriel et al. (2010) advocate re-listening to recorded interviews as a useful starting point to gain ‘closeness’ and to group together narratives. Therefore, in the first phase, I identified broad ‘narratives’ from the participants, which, as suggested by Eisenhardt et al. (2016, p. 1119), “often involves a more holistic assessment of the data” to enable the identification of “broader patterns of meaning”. I was aware that conducting discourse analysis has been typified as “loose and undisciplined” (Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. 91), but at the same time requires “careful and systematic work” (Wood & Kroger, 2000, p.91).

Numerous points of interest emerged from the research material, such as talk about working with others, preparing for board meetings and their motivations for undertaking the role amongst others. Typically, social constructionist work, according to Alvesson and Robertson (2016), “considers the whole (informed understanding of the context) as well as the part (the narratives themselves) and attempts to consider the ‘deeper’ picture” (p. 16). Overall, I was ‘struck-by’ (Cunliffe, 2002) the ferocity of talk about saying nothing in meetings (being silent), and stories about being silenced in meetings. Even though I asked a question about remaining silent in meetings, I did not expect the variety of implicit ways silence permeated throughout the research material.

The image of board members who do not meet very often, probably only four or five times a year, and who say nothing in meetings rather than contributing was puzzling, and something I could not ignore. Initially, I sifted through the interview material identifying “available vocabularies, metaphors, genres, and conventions for talking about issues – cultural scripts” (Alvesson, 2003, p. 20). (See Appendix Four for patterns of talk centring on silence). Next, chunks of interview material were syphoned off into word documents for analysis. Paying attention to syntax, images and pronouns, amongst others. However, this did not mean I only worked “with a text” (endotextual) (Barry et al., 2006, p. 1091). I also worked “outward from a text to its context (exotextual) (p.1091) leading to the formation of four discursive patterns on silence. For example, board members elaborated on describing their experiences of joining a board for the first time, irrespective of whether they had 20 years’ board experience. Words such as ‘innocent’ and phrases such as ‘green behind the ears’ hinted at vulnerability, forming a silence discourse cluster of novice silence. More implicit ways of *talk about not talking* emerged than explicit, such as ‘I had to bite my tongue’, meaning the board member had to force themselves to be quiet and say nothing.

This process was iterative, messy, frustrating, confusing, exhausting, but also enlightening and magical. Richards (2015, p. 144) claims “the ultimate excitement and terror of a qualitative project is that you can’t know at the start where it will end”. This statement resonates deeply with me. Wood and Kroger (2000) caution discourse analysts, stressing the need to keep an open mind and avoid any tunnel visioning. Trying to be open to every possibility in the research material occurred as I wrote *out* my findings (as opposed to writing up, Wood & Kroger, 2000). This process involved large pieces of paper covering the entire length of my home office wall, post-it notes mapping out clusters of discourses in a wall ‘collage’. This method is similar to others, such as memo-ing to create analytical

summaries (O'Toole and Grey, 2016). One benefit of this is creating a holistic, non-linear picture of the findings.

This 'visibility' enabled the identification of a cluster I labelled *Breaking the silence*. Within this cluster, the term 'voice' was spotted throughout their descriptions and juxtapositioned silence, resulting in an 'Aha' moment in the analysis phase. *Breaking the silence* led to a second discourse of voice. Whether to say something at board meetings, or to refrain from speaking presents as a dilemma for board members. Noting a tension between silence and voice, I knew tensions were a key part of identity work and identity conflict. This finding is crucial as scholars note the importance of binary oppositions for individuals' identity construction (Ybema et al., 2009). Identifying a total of seven discourse clusters around silence and voice, an additional discourse later morphed into an in-between – 'betwixt' discourse comprising of three clusters, 'arching' or stuck in the middle of silence and voice.

To elaborate, this whole process is typified as time consuming as I had to go back and forth between the discourse clusters over a time frame of just over a year. Therefore, I am reluctant to detail and explain a series of 'steps', as discourse analysis is renowned for not being formulaic. As time went on and I engaged more with the 'data' (research material) alongside the literature, I entered a deductive phase (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). The eventual outcome is ten discursive clusters depicting the talk from board members from three discourses – silence, betwixt and voice.

### **Reflexivity and the Role of the Researcher**

Interpreting the research material is a key component of my research philosophy and, therefore, reflexivity is imperative. Participants are "discourse users", interviewers are "discourse producers" (Coupland, 2001), and our "own comments, discussion and

reflections” are also “data” (Richards, 2015, p. 52). Reflexivity is not a method *per se*. According to May and Perry (2017, p. 150), it is a “critical ethos and set of dispositions”. Informing these descriptions is social constructionism as, “based on the notion that our social realities and sense of self are created between us in our everyday interactions and conversations – through our oral and written language” (Cunliffe, 2004, p.410). The assumption of reality as socially constructed means the interview is a socially constructed activity, and alters traditional views of what an interview is. Alvesson (2003) propose researchers view interviews as a social act, as opposed to just a ‘human encounter’ or ‘an instrument’ (p. 24). This approach means self-consciously reflecting on your role as a researcher within the research process, in other words, analysing ourselves in the process – *reflexivity*.

‘Who I am?’ as a mature PhD student, a British female migrant to New Zealand, an ex-management consultant, or a senior lecturer will all play a part in the construction of this thesis, as I form part of the interpretive process. Richards (2015) points out:

Thinking about reflexivity alerts you to the need to reflect on the baggage you take in, your biases and interests and areas of ignorance. But it also alerts you to the fact that you yourself are part of what you are studying. This is not something requiring apology and it is certainly not in your power to rectify. (p. 53)

Reflexivity is not just about *what* and *where* these influences or “baggage” originate from, but *how* they impact on the research. This aspect means that reflexivity is a practice of “critical questioning of experiences” (Cunliffe, 2004, p. 418). This is debated in many disciplines, notably, the organisation and management fields by both Chia (1996) and Hardy and Clegg (1997). Cunliffe (2004) encourages researchers to scrutinize our

assumptions, and Richards asks us to consider “hunches”, “insights” and “tentative thoughts” (p. 53). Thus, as Hatch (1996, p. 15) describes, we “write ourselves into the discourses of our audiences”.

If we avoid examining our assumptions, the danger is becoming “complacent or ritualistic in our thoughts and actions” (Cunliffe, 2004 p. 408). Alvesson and Spicer (2012) take this a step further, calling it stupidity. Cunliffe names such examinations a “reality-constituting process” characterised by the “ongoing”, and

...never fully under our control, because it emerges in the spontaneous, taken-for-granted, nonverbal/verbal, subjective, un/conscious ways in which we respond, react, and negotiate meaning with others. (p. 414)

Demonstrating reflexive awareness means “critically reflexive questioning” to bring to the surface “contradictions, doubts, dilemmas, and possibilities” (Cunliffe, 2004, p. 414). The critically reflexive perspective “is not just thinking about thinking but thinking about self from a subjective perspective” (Cunliffe, 2004, p. 418). What is needed is for “us to be attentive to our assumptions, our ways of being and acting, and our ways of relating” (p.418). May and Perry (2017) remind researchers that “reflexive thinking does not seek closure and cannot be confined to one element of the research process, bracketed or appended” (p. 150).

I amassed pages and pages of handwritten notes prior to and after interviews and board observations. I also ‘logged’ occasions in other areas of the research process, detailing poignant moments, oddities, contradictions and anything that appeared to be worthy of exploration. Here, I followed Richards’ (2015, p. 54) advice that the “goal is to write reflexivity often, easily, rapidly and on impulse”. Random examples detail how during an interview a board member mentioned on more than one occasion that working in the not-

for-profit sector requires being passionate. However, I recorded I could not feel the passion from them in their account of their not-for-profit board work. This approach involved recording my “hunches” and “insights” and “tentative thoughts” (Richards, 2015, p. 53), and led me to consider if they were telling me what I needed to hear. I also recorded disappointment from my first interview as I could not fathom out descriptions of identity work. Initially, I jumped quickly to the assumption of silence in the boardroom as being negative and a board member being silent shows disinterest. This negativity mirrors findings and outcomes from the MOS literature (A.D. Brown & Coupland, 2005; Waistell, 2018). However, board member discourses suggest otherwise. The reason I was struck by silence as an oddity was my assumption that board meetings were places and spaces of deliberation, robust challenge, and filled with confident ‘experts’.

Cunliffe’s (2002) ideas are helpful in the practicalities of doing reflective work. For example, as mentioned previously I used the idea of ‘struck-by’ throughout the analysis stage. In a few interviews I was ‘struck-by’ the frequent use of the word ‘frustrated’ or ‘frustrating’ by participants describing board experiences and stories. It never occurred to me that annoyance and frustration would feature to such an extent. The biggest surprise, or struck-by is board members talk of being silent, being silenced and feelings surrounding this. Silence was something I never dreamed of finding in the stories of board members, a totally unexpected outcome and not what I had expected. This turned into a contradiction when board members talked about having a voice, asking questions and expressing views and opinions.

To elaborate, the idea of reflexivity is more than just looking back (reflection), but includes the active engagement of the researcher throughout the whole research process, going beyond the interview to extend to the analysis and writing up phases (P. Johnson & Duberley, 2003). This point is where the researcher gains awareness of their values,

assumptions, biases and limitations and how these can impact on the research process (Deetz, 1996). Hatch (1996) explains that the researchers themselves also tell stories and are instrumental in what stories they ultimately decide to tell. Reflexive practice involves the constant questioning of the relationship between others and ourselves as researchers. Next, the necessity to demonstrate ‘credibility’ in qualitative research is discussed in crafting qualitative trustworthiness.

### **Ensuring Trustworthiness in Constructionist Studies**

Demonstrating the quality of constructionist research designs has received considerable attention. Encouraging debate surrounding rigour and quality in qualitative research is Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) work on “alternative ‘naturalistic axioms’” featuring “credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability” (Richards, 2015, p. 164). In qualitative research, validity and reliability are problematic concepts as they hold ontological beliefs about an objective reality identifiable with a positivistic philosophy (Sandberg, 2005). Consequently, scholars offer several suggestions to alleviate this issue. Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993) propose three alternative criteria to validity and reliability – *authenticity*, *plausibility* and *critically*. Referring to the work of Guba and Lincoln (1994), they recommend that qualitative research be evaluated applying the principles of trustworthiness and authenticity. Sandberg (2005) outlines four criteria that can be used to effectively justify knowledge in interpretive research: *communicative validity*, *pragmatic validity*, *transgressive validity and reliability*, informed by the work of Husserl (1931/1962), Heidegger (1992), Berger and Luckmann (1967) along with others. I used Sandberg’s (2005) framework during my study and in general his work acted as a source of guidance.

Sandberg offers three ways of accomplishing *communicative validity* in the research process. The first, adopts ideas from Apel's (1972) "community of interpretation" (Sandberg 2005, p. 54) and assumes the researcher and participants know what they are doing and the purpose of the research before interviews begin. In offering written and verbal explanations of what my study entailed and what it wasn't about before interviews and observations, I "contributed to establishing a fruitful community of interpretation for the subsequent interviews" (Sandberg, 2005, p. 54). I answered questions about my research from participants either by telephone, text or email, and the invitation to take part in the research detailed essential information for interested participants (see Appendix One).

Another way of reaching communicative validity is by conducting interviews as a "form of dialogue" (Sandberg, 2005, p. 54). Following the two pilot interviews I mentioned earlier, I recognised the necessity to steer away from being a 'miner of information' in my interviewing approach towards a more conversation-like, fluid and elastic approach. The miner approach to interviewing is "unlikely to achieve high communicative validity" (Sandberg, 2005, p. 54) because this is "a one-sided activity when the researcher merely poses questions and the subject answers," (Sandberg, 2005, p. 54). By using carefully chosen questions and ensuring these were free from obscurity and ambiguity, I was able to aim for high communicative validity. Further, these questions were used together with probing questions, such as 'How did that [board] appointment happen?'/ 'Anything else you would like to add?' / 'Tell me more about that'. My focus was on eliciting their descriptions of events, incidents, encouraging storytelling, asking for examples or providing clarification. The interview environment should create an atmosphere where participants are able to ask questions, clarify points and feel unobstructed in telling and sharing their stories. In the reflective interviews, I drew on follow-up questions about the

meetings proceedings, asking for clarification on points of interest or any confusion on my part.

Additionally, communicative validity is achieved by “coherent interpretation” (Sandberg, 2005, p. 55) when analysing research material. I adopted an iterative process where “a text can be understood only in relation to its parts and, conversely, the parts can be understood only in relation to the text as a whole” (p. 55). My starting point was the prevalence of talk about silence. Through a refining process, I identified different ‘strands’ of talk about silence, such as ‘novice silence,’ as detailed in a previous section in this chapter on discourse analysis. I did not carry out this process in isolation, as I consulted with my supervisory team on the discoveries I made. For Sandberg (2005), viewing “truth as intersubjective” means researchers “discuss our findings with other researchers and professionals in the practice being investigated” (p. 55). Hence, intersubjectively is established by “ongoing negotiations with others about its meaning” (p. 55). Fortunately, belonging to two academic institutions, and working for others in the past, has meant I can readily discuss my research with numerous colleagues, ex-colleagues, PhD students and ex-PhD students, attend conferences, plus meet new acquaintances holding board positions, thus being exposed to “different communities of interpreters” where “knowledge claims can be refined or challenged as limited” (p. 56).

In response to communicative validity limitations of not being able to “provide enough attention to possible discrepancies between what people say they do and what they actually do” (Sandberg, 2005, p. 56), a second area termed *pragmatic validity* is recommended.

One way I tried to achieve this was through the use of follow-up questions, such as, ‘Can you explain more about when ‘x’ mentioned ‘y’?’ (from the reflective interviews). Thus, I addressed “testing knowledge produced in action” (p. 56). Follow-up questions are a direct way of checking pragmatic validity and beneficial because they “embed the statements in

concrete situations” (p. 56). An indirect way used by Sandberg (2005), drawing from Kvale (1989), is to deliberately misinterpret a participant’s response, evoking a strong reaction and thus leading to further elaborating and clarifying by the participant. I refrained from this approach for three reasons. First, I was fearful of entering into the territory of leading questions and realised only a highly skilled and accomplished ‘interviewer’ could pull this off convincingly. Plus, I felt an easiness about this as a potentially deceitful way to ‘mine’ for descriptions. Finally, my participants were candid and open in their accounts, sharing more details than I imagined. Another way to ‘authenticate’ interpretations pragmatically is participant observations. For reasons outlined earlier, I could only be an ‘outsider’ observer in the boardroom, so was not fully and actively participating in ‘the culture’. However, I was able to ascertain the interpersonal dynamics of voice and silence and gain a sense of the culture from the three direct observations. The benefit of observing was being able to compare what I saw with my interpretations from the interview material, in particular for ascertaining the interpersonal dynamics of voice and silence.

Finally, *transgressive validity* is where the researcher will look during the analysis for not only the obvious, but also the inconsistencies and contradictions – or, as described by Alvesson and Robertson (2016), the “consideration of what is *not* being said, which naturally relies upon a comprehensive theoretical understanding” (2016, p. 17). These authors also claim that the credibility of their research, in which their participants were exceptionally candid, was partly due to having developed “high trust relationships with participants” (Alvesson & Robertson, 2016, p. 14). This relationship along with ‘following’ the participants over time and providing opportunities for participant stories combined to produce “good research around self and identity themes” (p.13). The major

contradiction was the dilemma for board members about whether to risk saying something against not voicing their views. This quandary was not something I expected to hear.

Transgressive is not just about locating “coherent interpretations” (Sandberg, 2005, p. 57). The researcher is encouraged to search for “ambiguity, complexity, and multiplicity” (p. 57). As mentioned above, I did this by spotting “differences and contradictions” (Sandberg, 2005, p. 58) based on Lather (1993). My own assumptions of board proceedings and board members were challenged, as I had assumed meetings would be highly engaging, with high energy and dynamic debates, and lengthy discussions and even disagreements at times. I did not expect to uncover muted responses and a tension around refraining from talk, and showing and exercising a degree of constraint. Finally, Sandberg comments on reliability as researchers need to “demonstrate how they have controlled and checked their interpretations throughout the research process: from formulating the research question, selecting individuals to be studied, obtaining data from those individuals, analyzing the data obtained, and reporting the results” (p.59). Detailing these has been my aim in this chapter.

### **Constraints of Chosen Methodology and Research Design**

At the end of the previous chapter, I detailed the implications of choosing a constructionist methodology for this study. While advantages exist, such as gaining in-depth insights of particular phenomena, issues prevail concerning ‘credibility’ and ‘validity’. As my main research material is from interviews, this is not without problems. This method is criticised by empiricists for being too subjective, as well as on the grounds it “only reflects common sense” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 197), or seen as subject to “script-following and moral storytelling” (Alvesson, 2011b, p. 91). Additionally, the interview process is questioned by some in terms of its reliability as what participants say cannot be regarded

as “objective ‘truths’” (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008, p.115). I should emphasise that establishing the truth is not my concern as a constructionist researcher. This raises an indirect concern – *generalisation*. Studies of this type are informed by values, beliefs, and specific time related contexts. As a consequence their aim is not to provide general ‘results’ to be replicated, which can be viewed as a limitation. To conclude this chapter, I detail approaches to demonstrate ethical robustness.

### **Ethical Challenges, Implications and Considerations**

Entry to board meetings by researchers for observational purposes is often refused, and board members can be reluctant to accept invites for research interviews (Leblanc & Schwartz, 2007). Further, even if access is gained, using observations and interviews to gather research material is known to be potentially intrusive (Richards, 2015). Such methods can have a direct impact on the lives of individuals, more so than impersonalised on-line surveys, and anonymised reports incorporating statistical findings. Therefore, I must address the core guiding question, ‘Is this ethical?’ as I assemble my research material (Richards, 2015). Answering this question means considering informed consent and how to safeguard the confidentiality of participants and organisations.

Before the participants could consent to taking part in the research, they needed to be assured I was following ethical protocols. For example, in the participant information sheet and consent form sent to all participants (see Appendix One and Two), I gave assurances on matters such as the right to withdraw, and to refuse to answer a question. Other activities also required ethical assurances such as the data collection, data storage and retention, and the eventual destruction of research materials, along with how the materials would be used and disseminated within the academic community. I placed emphasis upon aspects of confidentiality and anonymity, in particular when disseminating the research

outcomes. To safeguard individuals, I gave a guarantee they would not be named in any research reports, publications and conference presentations. Such information will be disguised by the use of pseudonyms, change of gender, and also by avoiding the use of any idiosyncratic comments that could identify individuals or the organisations they serve, and even the product or service they offer.

In comparison to interviews, carrying out observations can present the researcher with different “complex ethical issues” (Silverman, 2017, p.72). To satisfy The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, I designed two different sets of consent forms for the observations (see Appendix Five). Either the chair or CEO would agree to sign on everybody’s behalf, or each board member would individually opt in or out. I also gained consent from senior management team members who came into the meetings to present their reports. In all three board observations, individual board members agreed to signing personal consents, and overall only two individuals declined or simply failed to complete and return the form. This meant I had to ‘write out’ their ‘part’ in the observational notes I made throughout the duration of the meeting.

I knew I was going to hear sensitive company and financial information in the interviews and in the board meetings I attended. This happened in all the board meetings across different matters, from discussing staff members’ performance issues to projects requiring more funding. Two concerns were uppermost in my mind: ensuring the anonymity of all research participants, and this included SMT members in board observations; and ensuring the well-being of the participants when asking questions. An additional concern was ensuring non-disclosure of sensitive company and financial information from the observations. In one board meeting, the board members agreed to tap on their glasses of water if they wanted me to leave the meeting due to a sensitive issue being discussed. The occasion never arose, but it gave each board member the option to do so. The three

observational organisations did not require me to sign any confidentiality agreements, although one required me to write assurances in a personalised format to the chair of the board verifying the nature of my study, and what information would be disseminated and to who.

Conducting two interview pilots was effective in ensuring ethical research practices were established and maintained. Reviewing the questions assured me that none were perceived by the interviewees as insensitive or threatening in any way. Confidentiality was particularly important for the seven reflective interviews as relationships were discussed and the actions and behaviours of others. Therefore, I disguised names, places, locations, and sometimes genders, or omitted occupational status when referred to so as to ensure the identities of the individuals and organisations cannot be traced. My earlier experiences of conducting research in the UK, applying ethical procedures and systems in those universities were different in comparison to New Zealand. After attending an ethics workshop for doctoral students at The University of Auckland, I realised a greater sensitivity around ethics due to past unethical medical incidents in New Zealand.

Fortunately, I was guided by the ethical protocols, regulations and obligations for research with human participants set out by The University of Auckland, securing ethics approval on 7 May 2015 (014510) for conducting the interviews and observations, with an expiry date of 7 May 2018.

Ethical issues surrounding the paying of participants in studies is controversial. While I did not consider paying participants, I considered the spirit of the cultural context of New Zealand and embraced the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi – partnership, participation and protection. This was also important because each board had Māori and Pasifika representatives. The Treaty principles align with my ethos of a mutually beneficial transaction between researcher and participant, not one way in favour of the researcher. At

the beginning of the board meeting or at the end, I was able to elaborate on the research relationship as being ‘equal’, and based on ‘integrity’. There are three broad areas to an equitable partnership under Māori research ethics (Hudson & Russell, 2009). The last area is ‘benefit sharing’ – *Reciprocity*. In this spirit, I offered each board member from the observations and interviews a written summary of my thesis, and to present my findings at a future board meeting. I gave koha (a gift) to each board. One board chose to receive a cake to share during the tea break of the board meeting some months after the observation. For another, I made a charitable donation, and the third observation requested an art piece to hang on the boardroom wall.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the research design, describing the research procedures in detail. My research inquiry did not pursue a traditional, or safe option such as gap-spotting. Rather my direction was guided by a willingness to challenge assumptions and demonstrate academic curiosity. I explained interviewing in-depth as the principal medium for gathering research material. I then considered the challenges of direct observations of a known problematic and ‘private’ venue. Discourse inquiry was chosen to reflect the paradigm preference for undertaking this study, highlighting the socially constructed nature of the world we inhabit. In line with reality as socially constructed, the role of the researcher throughout the research process was discussed. Criteria for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research gained attention, specifically how a reflexive approach is a necessity for justifying the knowledge produced within constructionist studies. Lastly, I described the measures I put in place to meet the obligations and guidelines offered by The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (UAHPEC) for ensuring ethical considerations are adhered to in the research process. In a

series of three chapters, next I outline my findings around three discursive themes: silence, betwixt and voice.

## Chapter Seven

### Silence Discourse ‘Shutting Up’

#### Introduction to Findings Chapters

The aim of the last two chapters has been to justify both my methodological and method choices. In the following three chapters, I present my analysis and findings comprising of ten discursive clusters. These are embedded in board member accounts of silence and voice, and categorised as follows: Chapter Seven – silence, Chapter Eight – betwixt silence and voice, and lastly, Chapter Nine – voice. The three discourses combine research material from 28 semi-structured interviews and 3 direct board observations. Using a discourse-analytical framework, the discourses offer a variety of ways about describing board member identity work.

The ten discursive clusters in Table 7.1 feature in a linear and formulaic way for ease of reference.

Table 7.1 Diversity of discursive clusters board members engaged in

<b>Chapter 7</b> <b>Silence – ‘shutting up’</b>	<b>Chapter 8</b> <b>Betwixt – ‘whispering’</b>	<b>Chapter 9</b> <b>Voice – ‘speaking out’</b>
Being closed down	Whispering & Body language	Speaking out and up
Going with the flow	Beyond the boardroom	Asking questions
Holding back	Searching for a voice	Being alone
Newcomers’ silence		

However, presenting information in this way (three separate chapters) does not make visible the fluidity and motion interlocking the three main discourses of – silence, betwixt

and voice. The inclusion of the 'betwixt' discourses acts as a conduit between the silence and voice discourses. For example, the 'beyond the boardroom' theme of talk (discourse) describes board members choosing not to say anything in the board meeting, but being able to voice their concerns away from the boardroom, hence a combination of silence and voice.

Each discourse is presented in a separate chapter and formatted in the same way. This format was deliberated with my supervisory team, and comprises firstly, a collection of words, short sentences and phrases to 'set the scene' and give a flavour of the discursive cluster. Next, comparative excerpts (or accounts) reflecting the discourse are presented. A final lengthier excerpt appears for in-depth discussion, and in some cases they offer contrary insights. Next, I feature written narratives originating from my board observation field notes. While both narratives and stories "are not the only discursive devices enabling us to understand facts, to link them with meanings....." (Gabriel, 2004, p.62), they offer a sense-making mechanism and tie to my methodological 'roots'. Finally, I draw together each discourse section in a summary. Wherever possible I refer to the research participants by their pseudonym names or as 'board members', rather than 'interviewees' or 'participants'.

**Silence Discourse One: Being Closed Down** – "I was closed down by the chair" (Roger)

The first silence discourse describes how board members interacted with each other and details the suppression of voice, and the explicit and implicit ways board members were silenced in meetings. Board members and chairs controlled meetings in terms of how much could be said (volume and quantity), and what could be talked about during discussions (content and subject matter). This silencing of others conveys oppressive conduct, with the impact of stifling identities – who they could be or wanted to be. In

contrast to moments of silencing others in a non-controlling way, encouraging those who remained silent to speak up features in descriptions, thus achieving equitable contributions from all board members in board discussions. This discourse is contradictory, as some board members/chairs act as suppressors, but at times this is for altruistic reasons to support and encourage others to contribute.

An array of words and short phrases next describes how board members are suppressed, especially talkative board members. I was surprised at the ferocity of words used.

Well, hey guys, we're out of line. This has to stop here.  
...and not be worried if I get shot down because at least I've just given my opinion.  
I normally talk through ideas before I table them off-line rather than get shot down...  
  
Chastised by the chairman, got lectured on, shut it down, I was closed down, cut him off, reined in, corral, you need to stop, make them stop

Verbs such as *shooting* and *cutting* conjure up destruction, physical harm and even an air of violence. The verb 'to close' is synonymous with slam and shut ("shut it down"). To close something or someone down is a final action, such as bringing an end to an organisation or business through bankruptcy, liquidation and receivership. These actions do not suggest a temporary suspension with the hint of a second chance that can be resurrected later, but the exact opposite – to dissolve, wind up and dissipate and even terminate.

Where the term shooting can mean in the literal sense to 'put an end to' and 'kill off', the phrase "get shot down" means to be jeered at, mocked or ridiculed either for something you have said or actions you have taken. A common phrase used is to *shoot something down in flames*, which is to refuse to consider something as being worthwhile or feasible, normally in relation to an idea or suggestion made to others. Having ideas silenced in this way can potentially be humiliating.

The actions of *closing, shooting down, and stopping* evoke a sense of enforcement and regulation upon others, perhaps when a wrongdoing has been committed or discovered. Refraining others from doing something is demonstrated by the word choices of “reined in”, “corral” and “chastised”, which signify the reprimanding and restraining of others in some way. Controlling others by reining them in means pulling them back from being at the forefront or being too dominant during discussions. I was intrigued by the use of the word *corralling*, as I normally associate this term with the managing and organising of animals as opposed to people. I understand the word to mean the gathering of animals that have strayed, and to corral them is to confine them and restrict their movement. This would suggest board members ‘wandering off’, not literally but during their discussions, perhaps on irrelevant matters that are off track (“We’re out of line”). They, therefore, need to be brought back to the confines of the group discussion where harmony and agreement can be restored.

Preventing speaking and the expression of thoughts and ideas is at the core of this discourse and illustrates who and how to be when governing. The following accounts display feelings associated with being silenced and how members coped with having their views curtailed. There are two distinct strands within this discourse: overt and covert ways of controlling versus the compassionate and conscious actions of silencing others in an attempt to involve all board members in conversations, for the purpose of full participation and eliciting the views of others.

### ***Excerpt One***

The use of the phrase ‘get shot down’ in the first two sentences discussed previously demonstrates how opinions and ideas can be either criticised or simply rejected, thus potentially leading to board members being fearful to speak out, and therefore remaining quiet. The excerpt here expands upon this and describe how board members speech is

curtailed with regard to how much can be talked about (quantity) and what can be talked about (content). They show the explicit nature of controlling talk in a meeting, contrasted with the implicit ways used to do so.

**Edward**

I got chastised by the chairman of the school board I was on and got lectured on how I shouldn't be asking questions about management because that's for management and we're governance.

**Roger**

I mean, part of the reason why I left one board was; they were heading towards a financial cliff and they weren't prepared to discuss it, and therefore, didn't realise that this was coming. I find that intensely frustrating; and that every time I tried to raise it at a board meeting, I was closed down by the chair.

**Edward**

Our first chairman let him away with it. The second chairman had no patience for it and said, "You're going to have to get to a point quicker." He'd cut him off mid-flight and say, "Two more minutes to get to your point." It was a waste when you've got limited time. Often we'll have to be in a taxi back to the airport by a certain point and you're just trying to manage the time.

**Terry**

We've got quite a big board, we've got 12 people, and so my role is to make sure that everyone has the opportunity to contribute where they want to and some people who would like to contribute more are normally reined in. They say their piece and the, "Well, you've said your piece and we now want to hear from so and so".

**Samantha**

..I was finding in a couple of board meetings, I would say something and people would be like, "Oh, yes okay, we'll think about it," and then I'd come back to another board meeting and somebody else that was not me would say exactly the same thing, and they would just take it on board, like it was their idea that they had endorsed. And I was completely overlooked. And I have encountered times when there's been an unconscious bias, even for women.

**Helen**

Even if what I'd said, and this happens all the time and I'd said and repeated it in about four different ways to try and get heard or understood, and thinking 'gosh, I must talk riddles', then suddenly, usually a male or a very political led powerful female but usually

a male suddenly expresses this great idea which is exactly what I'd been trying to communicate, but that took things forward.

In the first two accounts, Edward and Roger are dealt with harshly because of what they want to discuss. In the first from Edward, he conveys his feelings by the use of the terms *chastised* and *lectured*. These are both emotive words to describe the actions of others, usually depicting the child-parent, child-teacher scenario. He was being silenced about the appropriateness of his questions. Others, notably the chair, recognised he was not aligning with the conventions and culture of the board because the questions he asked were about management and not governance. In other descriptions, board members talked about crossing the line between governance and management. This suggests talk of managing and management as *taboo* (Leach, 1964) As a consequence, Edward receives both a chastisement and lecture. Both of these terms indicate a severe telling off and reprimand as opposed to a gentle warning. In the excerpt, the term chastise seems synonymous with lecture, and used in this sense, “lectured on” means to give someone a stern talking to and berate them. It also indicates the potential of raising one’s voice to reinforce the inappropriate conduct, in this case of enquiring about management issues. The actions of the chair point towards punishing Edward and involve criticism. This action is not a private lambast but a public one during the board’s proceedings. Asking questions also features as a separate discourse cluster and is discussed in Chapter Nine on ‘Voice – speaking out’.

Edward appears to be confused about what questions are appropriate to ask (questions about management are not allowed), and of whom. Clear boundaries are reinforced about who to be (“we’re governance” rather than management). This short account shows the conduct of relationships as not harmonious and hints at authoritative conduct by chairs in the handling of such issues. There is also a flavour of adversarial conduct from the chair

acting in a reportedly hostile and antagonistic way. I cannot help but wonder if Edward felt belittled and embarrassed by the chair's actions in front of others in the meeting, which shows a relationship dynamic between chairs and their board members. Further, the reinforcing of boundaries maintains a governance board identity with limitations on discussions towards management issues.

Similarly, Roger raises issues others do not want to discuss, illustrating their reluctance to engage and interact. They may deem the issue as 'undiscussable' (Argyris, 1985; Ryan & Oestreich, 1991). The outcome is he is "closed down by the chair". As mentioned earlier in the introduction to this discourse, the term "closed down" is a final end to something. This behaviour towards others is regulatory and controlling. His repeated attempts to raise the issue ("every time I tried to raise it") are thwarted by others. The irony is he is raising issues about the financial position of the organisation, and he perseveres as he believes the organisation is facing financial trouble ("heading towards a financial cliff"). This suggests a stubbornness and head in the sand mentality ("they weren't prepared to discuss it") from others in the meeting. Roger's episode places him in a position of not being who he wants to be, or meeting the expectations of his role. In attempting to challenge and give a warning signal and alert others who may not be aware ("didn't realise that this was coming"), he was probably acting in the best interests of the board and organisation regarding this matter. Every time he raised it at a meeting, as board meetings are several weeks apart, he was "closed down by the chair". Roger admits to being "intensely frustrated" because an open dialogue could not be maintained. He faced months of this ongoing saga until finally he resigned ("part of the reason why I left one board"). This situation reflects the frustration arising from being ignored and prevented from expressing views. Such incidents raise an 'internal battle' – the struggle of what to do, how to react

and how to be in meetings. But on this occasion, Roger spoke out to warn others about a danger, showing a moral stance.

In contrast to what cannot be discussed (undiscussables) at the board, Edward's second account, together with Terry's, describes stories about how others in meetings are curtailed in the amount of talking they are permitted to do. Edward elaborates about the interruption and ultimatum given by the chair ("He'd cut him off mid-flight and say, "Two more minutes to get to your point"). Firstly, the speaker received a warning about how much they have said already ("You're going to have to get to a point quicker"). Edward agrees with the chair's actions, supporting the idea that time is precious and people cannot waste it talking about unnecessary or irrelevant matters. This instance involved censoring how much can be said, as opposed to the above which is censoring what can be said (asking the right questions, talking about financial issues). This approach also shows the explicit control and management of others in the meeting and restricting thoughts and ideas – with time acting as a pressure and catalyst. Terry talks about reins (a device to control a horse/animal), and how members are "reined in" who want to give more than can be accommodated within the time constraints. Using this term as opposed to *stopping* conjures restraint and controlling tactics as preventative measures. Terry alludes to the abrupt manner used to prevent members talking anymore, having "said your piece". This phrase describes how people have been in a position to express their opinions, and Terry makes the judgement they have done this adequately before others are given the opportunity to do the same.

Both Edward and Terry show identities as being carefully manipulated and the censoring of who to be. Preventing spontaneity in preference for keeping to the script (agenda) mentality was triggered by the limited amount of time available. The idea of time is

discussed in other accounts, for example Malcolm refers to board members “broadcasting” and taking up “airtime”, who he says are selfish and time wasters.

While the above discusses the open and explicit ways of silencing board members, the implicit nature of silencing individuals from two experiences features next, as told by Samantha and Helen. Both members suggest their ideas go unnoticed because they are female, and as an outcome they feel ignored. Helen doubts herself and believes she isn’t communicating effectively (“repeated it in about four different ways to try and get heard or understood”/ “I must talk riddles”). However, eventually someone else who is the opposite gender to her (“usually male”) makes the same suggestion (“great idea”), and which is understood and accepted in the meeting.

In a reflective interview following a board observation, Samantha compares the observed board meeting with another one where a different environment exists. She illustrates how her contributions are side stepped and given only cursory attention (“Oh, yes okay, we’ll think about it”). At a later date her ideas are voiced by others and accepted (“they would just take it on board”) leaving her feeling neglected (“completely overlooked”). In Helen’s case the use of “to try” signals her efforts to get her point across without success, but she concludes “that took things forward”, indicating the meeting was progressed irrespective of who thought and communicated the idea. On the other-hand, Samantha feels disregarded and possibly in a helpless state as she believes some individuals are unaware of their discriminatory tendencies (“unconscious bias, even for women”). Samantha may have experienced it as an isolated incident, while for Helen this is a regular occurrence (“this happens all the time”). Helen likens the actions of males and “a very political led powerful female” as being similar. For Samantha the use of the pronoun “they” means we cannot distinguish their gender, but nevertheless she communicates these ‘others’ as potentially males having unconscious stereotypes against women.

The main narrative from Helen and Samantha's stories illustrate the implicit way board members views were silenced in contrast to an explicit scolding (Edward's account of being "chastised"), being "closed down by the chair" (Roger), and restrained ("reined in") (Terry). Whether the subtle and implicit ways used were conscious or unconscious is a matter of debate. Next, a 'middle road' is illustrated, where the harshness and brashness of being told to 'shut up' are pondered and deliberated at length, with more diplomatic ways being utilised to ensure those with a tendency to be talkative are silenced, allowing quieter members to contribute.

### ***Excerpt Two***

Andrea provides a reasoned and indirect approach to prevent too much talk and eliciting the views of others who may prefer to say nothing.

#### **Andrea**

Again my experience as a board chair. If there's a particularly contentious issue being discussed, I'm quite particular or purposed to trying to allow it to run its course; as opposed to injecting and either cutting off or stopping or redirecting. I am keen while people are voicing their opinions to allow the time for that to happen. Often I'll be sitting there thinking, "At what point do I step into this?" or "How long will I let this run so that people get the chance to air their views?" And it was a matter of watching the time and thinking, "This is our big meeting for strategic discussion, then we just need to have 30 minutes and let people get their stuff on the table." For the next 30 or 40 minutes let them go to that. If people start to recycle their stuff, which is often the case, and I feel like they've been heard; then saying, "We've heard that aspect of your argument or your perspective." I'll acknowledge that. "Have you got anything new or additional that you want to add to that?"

Otherwise some people will just continue to say their stuff until someone actually does make them stop.

In terms of being silent it would be to just make sure that people get the chance to be heard and feel that they've been heard.

I really like to listen to everybody's perspective; that everyone's had a chance to talk. It's important to me to make sure that everyone has had the chance. Again another strategy was we've heard from four people, have you got anything you want to add to that, or new

perspectives? So just making sure that people have the chance to speak up. So it's important to listen, ensure that people have had their opportunity to speak.

I do find it really important and again a bit more of a liking things done [inaudible] is at the end to be able to say, "So how do we want to summarise this? What are the three key points that we want? What are we deciding here? What's our outcome? Are there two or three actions? What's our decision and what are our actions?" And being able to be clear we've had the discussion, come down to those two or three things and removing xyz and that thing closed. So there's a progression there rather than [inaudible]. So what we are doing with that, or what was the plan? So it's getting a final decision and being clear that the group is owning that decision too.

In trying to prevent people from talking in a meeting, Andrea takes a much more considered approach to how she acts, rather than rushing in with a knee jerk reaction and "shooting" or "cutting off" people, as mentioned from Edward and Terry earlier. Her concern is for everyone to have a voice and her dilemma is how can she facilitate this process. Her verb usage of "allow" and "to let" indicates she is wanting something to happen, in this case board members to "have the chance to speak up". She allows time for this to happen in an emergent way ("allow it to run its course") and is keen to not use the tactics described by Roger and Edward previously ("as opposed to injecting and either cutting off or stopping or redirecting"). She reflects on a series of questions around how to effectively operate an all-inclusive meeting ("At what point do I step into this?"). At this time her actions centre around activities such as "watching", "listening" and "thinking", indicating a subdued stance as a board chair. She ponders questions such as "How long will I let this run so that people get the chance to air their views?". Her searching questions weigh up her level of involvement and influence in the discussions. She is exercising caution in remaining quiet and debating when she should intervene, to allow "people get their stuff on the table".

As well as resisting talking herself and possibly compromising her role as chair, she employs another strategy which is to be more direct towards those members who repeat

themselves (“if people start to recycle their stuff”). She makes this judgement call when she feels they have been heard and respectfully acknowledges their contribution (“We’ve heard that aspect of your argument or your perspective”), but asks an open-ended question to elicit additional information (“Have you got anything new or additional that you want to add to that?”). She singles board members out to draw them into the discussion by again acknowledging the contribution from some and then inviting less vocal members to talk (“we’ve heard from four people, have you got anything you want to add to that, or new perspectives?”). Andrea attempts to move towards a collaborative way of working by effectively controlling how much and when people talk, including herself, giving every opportunity to board members to voice their views, and especially for those who may normally opt to be silent. She reinforces this collegial way of working towards the end of the excerpt by using terms such as “our decision” and “our actions”, and also by the use of the pronoun ‘we’ in questions she poses (“What are we deciding here?”).

### ***Observational Narrative***

This narrative is from organisation A where I spent four hours observing a board meeting. It illustrates a board member ‘being closed down’ and the potential consequences of this interaction.

*It was 2pm on a hot sunny afternoon. I was going to spend the next four hours observing a board meeting. The pace of the board only time meeting surprised me, it was fast, high energy, fun and dynamic. A dramatic change in tempo descended at the beginning of the full board meeting as proceedings began in a more slow and formal way but speeded up at intervals throughout the agenda items. On one occasion Audrey, who had been vocal in the board only time meeting shifted to a more passive and inactive role during the full board meeting. She asked a question about budgets. Her question was thwarted by the chair rapidly. Her query was gobbled up in the heat of the conversations flying around the room, mainly between the chair and Samantha. Audrey reattempted the question a second time to receive a quick, barely audible and abrupt response from the chair. She failed to state her question for a third time.*

Actions by the chair are highlighted in this meeting I attended. Audrey's query received a quick 'brush off' and is side stepped in favour of other 'matters'. Whether chairs do this unintentionally or intentionally is not known, and I was unable to probe further as chairs did not accept the invite for a follow-up interview after the observations. In this incident, someone who had been interactive, vocal and engaging in the board only time meeting, may have decided to reduce their involvement in the full board meeting, thus potentially affecting the subsequent dynamics of the meeting and outcomes of decisions. A valid question is, why did I notice these split-second interactions? This incident would have only been about a minute in duration at the most. The reason is that I felt the chair was being impolite. Audrey may have not felt the same, or others may not have either. She may have been attempting to maintain 'face' due to this interaction and felt it unnecessary to ask again.

## **Summary**

The discourse 'being closed down' illustrates the ways board members are silenced in the boardroom during discussions and how some feel about this experience. This has also shown the interactions taking place between board members as being potentially confrontational, but on occasions also collegial (as in the case of Andrea). On the one hand, board members are adjudicating and compromising, some using forceful ways of controlling others, with those on the receiving end of these actions, who are passive, controlled, and kept in line, thus conforming. The discourse has also shown the versatility of other identities, such as assessing, evaluating and negotiating when to remain quiet, when to silence others, and whether to speak up themselves.

I am curious here about how conformity plays out in members' identity work, and how, if any resistance is shown. For example, when are they conformers, or flouters of the rules

and norms? While there is a prevalence in the board director literature of the performing of tasks, duties and functions, both passiveness and conformity are not normally associated with the work of board members. In a recent study by Carroll et al. (2017), conformance was a main discourse emerging from the conflicting roles of boards. The expectation of those attending meetings is to add value (performance-value-governance), to voice their concerns (as Roger tried to do), to express ideas and opinions, and to contribute and work in a collaborative manner. Attempts at getting members to conform to the expected norms (of when to speak, not speak and what to speak about) are evident in this discourse, potentially suggesting risk averse conduct. This depicts board members as more rule abiding as opposed to rule breaking. The next discourse centring around silence reinforces conformity, as members chose not to speak in favour of going with the majority (going with the flow).

### **Silence Discourse Two: Going with the Flow – “We’ll keep quiet” (Malcolm)**

This discourse explains and describes the tendency for members to say nothing and agree with the collective decisions made in meetings. However, as the excerpts show, there are occasions when board members may disagree with the majority decision and this presents a dilemma of whether to remain quiet or speak out. This situation involved an ongoing tension about how and who to be in the boardroom. The ‘going with the flow’ discourse has the characteristics of being emergent and organic. A synonym is ‘laid back’, and within the context of a meeting and the decision-making process, the need to align (and at times the need to conform) with the majority appears in the interactions and relationship dynamics between board members.

Accepting silence and refraining from speaking out is captured in the following variety of words and separate excerpts.

...there was a very clear, don't rock the boat.

...you're rocking the boat on it.

Go with the flow, they'll sit there and go with the flow, they don't say it and they simply go with the majority, rubberstamp all of the recommendations, go along with the party line, live with it, go with the majority, unified response, just agreeing, agreeing with everything, consensus, operates on a majority consensus, go with the whole, you have to go with that decision, so just let it go

The excerpts illustrate accepting silence and refraining from speaking out through the use of words suggesting the collective, "majority", "consensus", and "unified". Consensus conveys harmony and solidarity. Identities are being aligned to the board as a team, as reflected in the use of different terms, such as "rubber stamping" to mean automatic approval for some decisions without lengthy discussions and disagreement and, "party line" to indicate a collective policy or mandate about issues. The verb 'to go' is frequently used and suggests action and movement. The addition of "with" and "to go with" is frequently used to mean accepting something, such as someone's idea or plan.

Choosing to use the phrase "rock the boat" refers to being mindful about instigating problems. Being warned not to "rock the boat" means being advised subtly not to upset the status quo or upset anyone or cause trouble. This approach is another way of communicating 'keep quiet and say nothing' at this moment. Not rocking the boat signals preferences for a conflict free meeting, with potential of groupthink outcomes (Janis, 1972; Merchant & Pick, 2010) and face saving strategies (Goffman, 1969). 'Going with the flow' signifies motion and movement, expressing relative ease and lightness and can mean being 'in the zone'. This phrase and associated words are referred to by board members to mean keep proceedings going smoothly without any major conflict or controversy. Board members are reluctant to challenge and question, keeping strong views or opinions to

themselves to simply “go with the majority”. An inherent dilemma for board members is when and if to go with the flow during the decision-making process.

### ***Excerpt One***

Yvonne, Robert and Andrew show their experiences of going with the flow next. Yvonne offers her stance on enabling ‘going with the flow’ by not offering to speak or provide counter arguments within a discussion. Robert on the other hand is only willing to accept the majority decision if he can have his differences recorded in the minutes. Andrew illustrates a previous tendency to fall in line with others due to lack of courage to speak out.

#### **Yvonne**

I’d say the most difficult thing is when you think a board has made a bad decision. This relates to a board where I’m a member and not the chair; where you think the board has made a bad decision and it’s going to play out and you haven’t been able to present the arguments in a way that’s been effective if the arguments haven’t been heard, and you’re really worried that the decision is wrong and it’s going to have bad consequences.

But I mean if it’s a difficult decision then people will have strong views. I think my job is to make sure I’ve taken those into account before contributing and sometimes I’ll pull the punches on what I’ll say. Sometimes you just think this isn’t worth providing controversy I suppose.

#### **Robert**

So, I think it sometimes can get frustrating but sometimes you also have to move on and say, well, okay, the majority said that. I think the key thing in those cases is even while you don’t agree, it is key that (for me) that your point gets noted in minutes so therefore there is a record, while it went through, Robert was concerned about this part of it or whatever. So, I think it’s very key that the minutes on those cases are accurate and do have those recorded in case anything came up.

Q: Has there been any occasion in a board meeting when you chose to be silent for whatever reason?

A: No, no, I don’t think so. I think, generally, I always either would debate something or if I didn’t agree, as I said before, I’m always a person to put my case forward, for right or for wrong. I believe if you want to be an active board man, you want to be on a board,

you cannot sit there and be silent, you need to be part of the process, so whatever that may be. So, I think if a board member sits and is silent, I have a question.

**Andrew**

Probably now on the boards if you wanted something to be considered for change I'd have the courage to speak up now and go, "What do you think about this?" whereas initially I would have just gone, "Okay, roll with the buck, go with the flow here."

It's a difficult question. Why I say this is because I think you've always got the ability to change stuff. If you're going to be silent things don't change and if you don't say things, things don't change. If you don't agenda things, things won't change. Sometimes people want things agenda'd. We've got other chairs who are happy to if something pops up, "That's a good point, let's put that in the agenda", and make it so it gets minuted and talked about.

Yvonne gives contrasting views on being a board member versus the role of a chair in the decision-making process. On the one hand, she talks about her board member role when she has been unable to communicate her side of the debate ("haven't been able to present the arguments"), but the reason is not known for her being unable to communicate her side of the story. She is left in a helpless state of being worried about the eventual decision and impact this may have ("really worried that the decision is wrong and it's going to have bad consequences"). Her dialogue doesn't express any attempts to resolve the situation she is in; instead her silence leaves her anxious about how matters will turn out ("really worried the decision is wrong").

Then she switches into her role of being chair and accepts the views of other board members will be forceful ("strong") but decides she has two courses of action. One is to act in a way where she won't say everything she wants to (compromising), and she may not be completely honest to avoid confrontational issues or hurting someone's feelings ("I'll pull the punches on what I'll say"). This is reinforced further by her comment to simply remain silent ("isn't worth providing controversy I suppose"). Here, she feels there is be no value in saying anything to disrupt the discussion. This links with comments about

not wanting to “rock the boat” and the only option available is to keep quiet. Her comment about not wanting to raise issues and speak out on anything controversial seems to point towards a defeated feeling and a sense of helplessness, with a preference for falling into line with everyone else and so she settles for not voicing her opinions.

While noting disagreements and concerns is not a primary issue for Yvonne, it is important for Robert, who is candid in explaining his actions when he does not agree with a decision. He seems to loosely accept that the consensus has to be maintained (“move on and say, well, okay, the majority said that.”). However, he requests his alternative views to be formally recorded (“it is key that (for me) that your point gets noted in the minutes”). Only then is he prepared to accept the majority decision of the board. His description of others remaining silent suggests he is dissatisfied (“you cannot sit there and be silent/So, I think if a board member sits and is silent, I have a question”). This statement seems to justify his actions in speaking up when he disagrees with a decision. He condemns the silence of others, allowing him to act the opposite way, especially when he does not agree with the overall board decision, or if indeed he is right at all (“I’m always a person to put my case forward, for right or for wrong”).

Lastly, Andrew expresses the need for discussion points to be recorded so a conversation can occur (“make it so it gets minuted and talked about”) otherwise there may be the danger of issues not receiving attention. He emphasises the need for discussion as opposed to the downsides of remaining silent; change will not be realised (“If you’re going to be silent things don’t change and if you don’t say things, things don’t change”). He recalls how his ability to stand up and challenge in the boardroom has been an evolving process (“I’d have the courage to speak up now”). He uses courage, instead of the word confidence. I associate courage with bravery, when an individual faces fearful events. His initial preference was to fit in and adhere to the rest of the board (“Okay, roll with the

buck, go with the flow here”). Although the term “roll with the buck” is related to a game of poker, maybe ‘pass the buck’ would have been a more suitable phrase indicating passing the responsibility to someone else in this situation, leaving the rest of the board to make a decision. Alternatively, ‘roll with it’ means to keep things ticking along just the way they are and not to upset anything, which links to not ‘rocking the boat’ in meetings. His account reflects moving from a position of not saying anything, to a position of voice, assertion and confidence gained through courageous behaviour. If board members decide to follow the “party line” as opposed to speaking out, the next excerpt describes the need for individual’s to fully accept their choice of action.

### ***Excerpt Two***

Excerpt one shows the choices available in deciding who to be as a board member; someone willing to fall into line (don’t rock the boat/go with the flow), or someone able to accept their different views, but only on a partial basis. That is to say, an insistence on appearing to go with the majority but nevertheless have their own opinions heard and formally minuted (Robert) and not act like “cultural dopes” or victims (A.D. Brown, 2015, p.26). This indicates agency in the direction and shaping of identities. In Anthony’s excerpt, he contradicts himself over remaining silent and speaking out in the decision-making process.

#### **Anthony**

I think there are times where it is better for somebody else to make the point. If you think that the outcome that you support is going to be best approached by not speaking, then that’s the wise thing to do and let the thing have its own course. I don’t think it is wise at all to ever be silent in the face of something you disagree with. You may decide that the time of the disagreement might be different. So, for example, you might get into a position where you say to yourself, well I don’t like that but in fact if the rest of this is pretty much all right then I’d probably live with it. Do you know what I mean?

I mean, you can’t expect to know everything about everything and therefore you’ve gotta take the view of somebody else seriously about some things you might feel strongly about.

Actually, if the rest of it's pretty good and you just don't like this bit, well then sometimes you just have to swallow it and say okay let's go with the whole.

So, all of those things there are illustrations of bold decision-making but clear practices. You can go: I'm a great person for taking really large leaps but I wanna know what we've got in front of us. You need to be able to have the skills and interrogation of data, finance of the marketplace, of the relationships that you're dealing with, willing to be able to make big calls, and sometimes if a call is too big then you have to decide for yourself, and this is a really interesting piece in a governance arrangement, you have to decide for yourself whether you're gonna put yourself behind this better than 100%. But nothing occurs in our field without leadership and unless you're prepared to take risks around leadership, if you're a person that sits back and lets everybody else do the bidding, you won't ever be in a space where you will have created innovation above what was context at the time.

Q: So, are you saying that part of being a board member is being a good leader?

Absolutely, and it's about recognising leadership skills you haven't got yourself and backing them up. That's really important too because you really do get a smell test around a board table if somebody's got tickets on themselves such that they think they can be better than the other people who are in this organisation, and therefore unless things are always done the way they want them to do then nothing's ever good enough. Part of the deal about being a board person is being able to have your say and then to live with the outcome.

Opening his dialogue, Anthony tells us of how being silent can be advantageous when others can contribute more effectively than himself ("I think there are times where it is better for somebody else to make the point"). This suggests he is accepting of his own vulnerability and limitations. He reinforces this belief by claiming remaining silent is sometimes a better option ("..by not speaking, then that's the wise thing to do..") so as not to hinder the emergent approach to the solutions ("..and let the thing have its own course.."). He points out that, on other occasions, trusting other people's opinions more than your own is necessary ("you've gotta take the view of somebody else seriously about some things you might feel strongly about"). He continues, adding he doesn't believe in keeping quiet if you disagree with something ("I don't think it is wise at all to ever be silent in the face of something you disagree with"). However, he provides a caveat to this statement, saying that you may only disagree with a small part ("well I don't like that but

in fact if the rest of this is pretty much all right”) and so the part you don’t accept you have to simply “live with it”.

The term ‘living with it’ means fully accepting your actions and decisions to say nothing and remain quiet. It can also mean simply tolerating and enduring something you may not fully agree with. He later says you have to be prepared to “swallow it and say let’s go with the whole”. Here he emphasises going with the majority for a decision, even if there is a slight doubt in your mind (“just don’t like this bit”). He claims the governance role (“really interesting piece in a governance arrangement”) is about how you have to “make big calls” and use your judgement to accept the decisions made (“you have to decide for yourself whether you’re gonna put yourself behind this better than 100%”). He mentions one group of people in the boardroom as those who lack a general sense of leadership and have a tendency to a laid back approach (“if you’re a person that sits back and lets everybody else do the bidding”). The use of the word bidding is often associated with competitive environments such as auctions or the stock exchange. Deals are made as bidders compete to influence the cost or worth of something. Finally, he believes the agreement (“the deal”) in place for board members is to be in an active position of voicing your views and standing by those irrespective of the outcome (“Part of the deal about being a board person is being able to have your say and then to live with the outcome”). This, however, does not uphold the previous comments he makes about stepping back and refraining from speaking out. Anthony’s excerpt illustrates the dilemma within the decision-making process of remaining silent and going with the flow, irrespective of your own views. This quandary can leave you feeling uncomfortable and awkward. It can also leave you feeling you have not done what is expected of the role. One of those expectations is to raise your opinions and ideas as part of being a collective and “being able to have your say”.

### ***Observational Narrative***

I follow up on Audrey's story from the previous narrative.

*Following on from the 'brush off' incident in the 'being closed down narrative' with Audrey her whole energy and approach to the meeting changed. Audrey was sat next to the right of me. Her board papers were placed in front of her and she shuffled these about, making small marks on some of the text with a silver pen. Her interactions were now nods and nodding, with noticeably less verbal input from her for the remainder of the meeting. She was not asked any direct questions by the chair, and remained noticeably silent.*

Audrey's change in behaviour was noticeable following the overlooking of her question by the chair. She decided to communicate in non-verbal ways. Nodding to agree and no challenges were made by her to disagree or raise further questions. Her decision to do this appears to situate her in going along with the board proceedings and not opting to confront any of the subsequent decisions made. This was noticeable to me as her input in the board only time meeting and at the start of the board meeting had been active. Of course, it may only be a coincidence of her change in behaviour following the chair's brush off.

However, the incident made me think about the complexities and challenges of chairing a meeting, and of how fragile and flexible interactions with others can be.

### **Summary**

Being anxious and frustrated were feelings voiced by board members in these excerpts.

Yvonne adopts an almost fatalistic approach and considers whether saying anything is worthy of any consideration even though others are voicing strong views. Being courageous is required if you want to speak out as opposed to being silent (Andrew).

Dilemmas are evident in whether to speak out when you disagree, or whether you should remain silent and accept the way things are. Identity work is a process of showing and meeting the expectations of being an individual. As Anthony relays, "Part of the deal about

being a board person is being able to have your say...”, but it’s also about working within a collective collaborative group and meeting the set of expectations around acting as a majority and aiming for consensus. This shows the fluctuating demands placed upon board members working on a board.

Going with the flow reinforces choices board members face in every board meeting. I am curious about whether going with the flow represents accommodating identities – those where compromises are made, or is it simply about conforming to board norms and culture, or rather a strategic choice. Do board members go with the flow to resist conflict scenarios and head-on challenges – conflict avoidance? Are they presented as risk-averse? Does not taking risks mean they ‘fuse’, embed and immerse themselves within the collective board. This leads to confusion about how to act and be in the boardroom and presents as a continued struggle. ‘Do you merge in with the group?’ is a plausible question for board members to ask themselves, and conveys deliberation upon your own and others’ interpretation of what members should do. Do they speak out and voice their disagreements or simply choose to say nothing as the safer option? The next silence discourse (‘Holding back’) seems to add weight in considering how feasible it is for individual concerns to be heard, where members explain and describe their tendency to hold back and remain silent rather than speaking out.

**Silence Discourse Three: Holding Back** – “I probably would hold my peace” (Terry)

In the first silence discourse of ‘Being closed down’, board members refrained from speaking in meetings, leaving their concerns unheard. Following this the ‘Going with the flow’ discourse showed the careful considerations members exercised when contributing to the decision-making process, adhering sometimes to not ‘rocking the boat/board’.

Tensions surfaced between not saying anything and considering the importance of being

part of the majority, rather than as an individual (minority) – speaking up and contributing as a member.

While ‘going with the flow’ had an air of peace, submissiveness, and acceptance of going with the majority, the discourse of ‘Holding back’ details work of restraining and preventing action (talking) with the desired outcome of keeping silent. Members exercised restraint themselves rather than being restrained by others, as shown in the first discourse of ‘being closed down’. The preference to not speak in this discourse is characterised by a different set of words and phrases.

We just have to pull back and say occasionally that’s probably the one that really shot me between the eyes.

The role of the chair is crucial in pulling things back in.

I don’t think you should withdraw from a key debate and just not say anything.

Hold my peace, only so much I can say, rather than jumping to conclusions, check myself, bite my tongue, hold your tongue, holding back a bit, hold back, let’s just stop, sit on my hands, avoid any discussions of personalities, control how much I say, got to be careful, pull back, afraid, curtail

The array of words and short phrases illustrates tentativeness, with the most prominent verbs being ‘hold’ and ‘pull’. Generally, to hold something back means to not give your opinion, provide information or divulge ideas. One reason for keeping quiet can be to avoid voicing negative details, otherwise known as ‘keeping MUM’(Conlee & Tesser, 1973). Alternatively, ‘pulling’ back suggests backtracking, going backwards or even retreating, which hints at not being progressively active and involved, but submissive. This is in contrast to the third sentence which indicates expressing ideas as paramount, as not being part of something and not talking is not an option (“I don’t think you should withdraw from a key debate and just not say anything”).

The first sentence is dramatic as reference is made to “shot between the eyes”, meaning they were caught off guard, with a sudden realisation about something resulting in pulling back and halting. This suggests acting spontaneously and reacting is not something that is favoured (“rather than jumping to conclusions”). Caution needs to be exercised (“got to be careful/curtail”), and refraining in terms of what and how much is said (“control how much I say/ avoid any discussions”), and is a key theme in the following excerpts.

### ***Excerpt One***

Exercising self-control in what can and should be said in meetings is evident in this discourse from Oliver, and from two reflective interviews from Harry and Hannah.

#### **Oliver**

I have to very deliberately often control how much I say.

I think it was probably more evident, me having to sort of bite my tongue and go along with the party line; that was much more evident when I sat on X’s[disguise] board and I would often have to check myself as to what I was about to say and where that came from; what was the inspiration for that? Is it as a trustee or is it as a musician[disguise] Should this be said in this forum or not? These sorts of things.

#### **Harry**

I like to think, if I’m going to say something, I’m going to make it worthwhile. Whereas some people have an attitude of speaking for the sake of speaking. But I’m naturally shy, so that also comes up. Other people are more open and frank and blatant. But I’m more reserved, in fact, in the board reviews that we’ve done, one of the comments that I got was that I should speak up more often, because I normally have a lot to offer. I was brought up with the old saying that, ‘Empty vessels make the most noise.’

Q: How did you feel about that comment.

I’ve took it on board and I think I’ve tried to...I’m never, ever going to be one of these naturally overflowing people. I’m naturally reserved and I try to exercise judgement, so you can’t have both. But I took it as a compliment actually, rather than a criticism.

Some of the people make their comments coming from their particular perspective; you’re better to bite your tongue, and sometimes get home from the meeting and look at it, and I still see the dents in my tongue where teeth have been resting. But if you react you only lower yourself to that level, and its not conducive to a satisfactory meeting. Discretion is the better part of valour.

**Hannah**

But I had a feeling like, ‘Oh, I feel like I should talk to someone who’s more involved in that community.’ But I didn’t. So what I learned during this experience, is sometimes to listen to my gut instinct. Does that make sense at all? And there have been other moments, even during meetings, I’ll think of something and have a feeling and I’ll just be quiet and not listen, and another board member will also identify it. So I think its building that confidence in myself as well.

Q: Trusting, like you say, your instinct, your intuition.

Yes. And having the confidence to be able to voice it as well I think. But that’s coming with experiences. In the end the project....Nothing disastrous happened in the incident that I’m telling you about, but it was a learning experience for us, and for me too.

.....and I guess I really do need to verbalise sometimes what I’m thinking and feeling; because I was glad that X[disguise name] pointed that out. And I will be discussing that when we have our sub-committee meeting, further down the track.

Both Oliver and Harry recall times when they had to control how much they say in meetings. They refer to holding and biting their tongue, which means the opposite of speaking your mind. In Harry’s case, he is very expressive in figuratively articulating how he must restrain himself from retaliating to others’ views (“particular perspective”) by actually biting his tongue so hard his teeth marks are visible on his tongue in the indentation that is left (“I still see the dents in my tongue where teeth have been resting”). The reason why he holds back from reacting to contrary views from others is because he doesn’t want to be classed the same as them (“only lower yourself to that level”). He desires to be different and doesn’t want to demean or degrade himself by following the same actions as others. He wants to retain and hold onto his identity. He doesn’t want to stigmatise himself or taint his identity. He uses the saying “discretion is the better part of valour” to mean holding back and being careful to avoid risky situations, which he believes in these circumstances is the most sensible thing to do.

Harry is open and self-aware about his own competencies and traits, admitting he is an introvert (“I’m naturally shy/I’m more reserved/naturally reserved”) and does not talk for

“the sake of speaking”, whereas he uses “overflowing” to mean a person who is extravert and gregarious. His personality type was raised in his performance review and says he took the discussion in a non-personal way, accepts himself the way he is, and is not open to change. In backing his stance, he quotes an old proverb that “empty vessels make the most noise”. This saying means those who lack knowledge are foolish and talentless (an empty vessel) but can be the ones who talk the most and want to be heard, while the silent types such as himself are full of knowledge. Hence when you strike a full vessel of something the noise is barely audible compared to an empty one which vibrates loudly (talks too much). Is he bolstering his self-image here and engaging in impression management? – or what Goffman calls face work (Goffman, 1969). Whereas Harry is candid and open about how to be in the boardroom and accepts who he is when working as a team, Oliver appears to be highly confused and uncertain. Oliver is in doubt about what, when and where to say things (“Should this be said in this forum or not?”). He tells of his dilemma of having to exercise self-control (“check myself/deliberately control”) frequently (“often have to”), and is unsure about what perspective he should be giving his views from (“Is it as a trustee or is it as a [occupation]”). This means he has to withhold himself from talking (“bite my tongue”), the same as Harry, in favour of accepting the majority’s thoughts (“go along with the party line”). I wonder if this is an incidence of groupthink? (Janis, 1972).

Hannah’s reflective interview mirrors some of Oliver’s confusion in what to do in a meeting, suggesting she should trust her intuition more to help her (“listen to my gut instinct”). She presents a regretful note in her story about not doing certain things such as “talk to someone who’s more involved” and “I really do need to verbalise sometimes what I’m thinking and feeling”. What is holding her back is her confidence levels (“I’ll think of something and have a feeling and I’ll just be quiet...”) as her ideas have been raised by

others. This is similar to Andrew who required courageous behaviour. She realises she must be patient as her role is a “learning experience”.

All three have the commonality of holding back what to say in meetings for a variety of reasons. Next, Terry talks about how acting individually is not tolerated in his meetings and where emotions need to be kept in check, and secondly, how he must resist the temptation to go rushing into decisions and hold himself back. Terry applies the imagery of war and battle to talk about his self-restraining behaviours.

### *Excerpt Two*

#### **Terry**

It certainly has happened like that. I think we’re probably much more relational now. I’m on very good speaking terms with the whole board. If I know there’s someone struggling with an area, focus on the person, work it through. But they need to know that they’re a part of a board, a decision that’s made by the board is a board decision. They can no longer operate as an individual person like just a parent or someone else can. Like it or not, while they’re on the board they represent the board, so they have to curtail some of their personal expressions of their own feelings. I think that’s pretty well understood. It’s not too often that we have to deal with it now.

There’s just a lot more nurturing I guess goes on. Again, sometimes I’ve got to learn to sit on my hands. I know I do ‘cause I’m ready to march in there and just make a decision. I know that that won’t get across the line so you’ve just gotta gently introduce something, manage people.

Yeah. I think the 12 people, if everyone says their piece over absolutely everything, again, you’ll blow your meeting times out. If somebody has said something either more or less what I think or it’s something that I’m not gonna die in a ditch over I probably would hold my peace. For me particularly as chair, I know I bring a lot of influence into that board if I give an opinion. So, if there’s something that doesn’t really matter then I’d rather it be this but you lot all want that, fine. So, just hold my peace. Keep my powder dry [inaudible] so when I do come out I have to come out swinging and let you know I’m absolutely insistent we need to talk this one through. You guys need to hear my heart on this.

Unlike some of the thoughts from board members about having your own voice, Terry is adamant members must act as a board (“while they’re on the board they represent the board”) when making decisions rather than operating as “an individual person”. This

means having to suppress their emotions (“personal expressions of their own feelings”), which alludes to as almost numbing yourself as an individual so you can fit into the board regime. Terry offers a ‘fait accompli’ when commenting “like it or not” in reference to the suppression of personal feelings, communicating this cannot be changed or reversed. There is no choice in the situation, it may be unpleasant and not favoured by everyone, but this is the way things are and have to be. According to Terry this appears to be widely accepted (“I think that’s pretty well understood”).

Terry explains his tendencies to take over the decision-making process (“to march in there and just make a decision”) and acknowledges the need to hold back more when interacting with others (“just hold my peace”). He uses the words “piece” (says their piece”) and “peace” (“hold my peace”) as opposites. The phrase “everyone says their piece” describes how board members are able to voice their views and opinions – “their piece”, their ‘bit’, whereas the expression “hold my peace” means to say nothing and remain silent despite wanting to say something.

Some of his language alludes to war time action, such as soldiers who “march in”. Then the mention of ‘blow’ and ‘out’ (“blow your meeting times out”) relating to an explosion. The normal association made with warfare is people losing their lives (“die in a ditch”). By using the expression “I’m not gonna die in a ditch” originating from the saying ‘die in the last ditch’, he suggests how loyal soldiers would be willing to fight to the last ditch. They would resist all the way to the very end, and fight to the death rather than give in and surrender.

He situates himself as the chair and shows how he is prepared to go with the majority on occasions, compromising, and keep his influential views on hold (“...but you lot all want that, fine. So, just hold my peace”). He then reinforces this by stating he will “keep my

powder dry”, which is another wartime phrase meaning to be cautious and be prepared to fight at a moment’s notice. The gunpowder was kept dry so it could be effective and work when it was dry, as opposed to damp. Terry is getting himself prepared in case he needs to hold some serious debates (“I have to come out swinging and let you know I’m absolutely insistent we need to talk this one through”). The use of the phrase “come out swinging” relates again to a combat image as he portrays himself as a person with strength and resilience, and able to conquer and overcome difficulties by fighting back. The alternative phrase of ‘come out fighting’ is to react to something in a forceful way. He can be acting aggressively, or in contrast passionately. For Terry it is the latter as he follows this with, “you guys need to hear my heart”. Alluding to the emotion of passion contradicts his earlier comments about suppressing feelings in the boardroom.

Another board member used the term “keep my powder a bit dryer” (Gillian). At first, this term may seem out of place, but conveniently describes how members are always on alert and have to be ready to either hold back from interfering in the proceedings (be silent but ready and prepared), or alternatively considering and ready to ‘fight’ (voice their concerns and views).

### ***Observational Narrative***

Openly holding back from saying something in a board meeting environment is described in this narrative.

*Five board members, the CEO, a company legal representative and myself were in a small oblong room which was sandwiched in between other meeting rooms. One side of the room was floor to ceiling glass overlooking the carpark, while on the other a half frosted glass ‘wall’ made visible workers busy in their open plan work stations. I sat in the corner resting my note book on my lap. A change in the proceedings occurred before lunch as we entered a phase of funding decisions. A portable white board was used by the CEO to map figures and details to evaluate funding applications. Sebastian (the chair) had frequently offered opportunities for comment and discussion throughout the meeting. He*

*asked direct questions to the group, and also asked direct questions to each board member. While discussing one organisations funding request he asked Hannah for her suggestions. Hannah answers, “I don’t want to go first.”*

Hannah acts assertively and by-passes an opportunity to provide details, showing how asking questions of others may not get the desired response – an answer. Whether she was holding back because she did not have any worthwhile input or because she was waiting to hear other responses is not known. Maybe she lacked confidence and did not want to be signalled out as mentioned in her excerpt earlier when she discussed relying on her intuition. This was an isolated moment in my board observations when a board member stepped aside (held back) in favour of allowing others to contribute before them.

### **Summary**

Similarities exist between this discourse of ‘holding back’ and ‘going with the flow’ as board members decide not to say anything. In ‘holding back’ there is more emphasis on exercising self-control. ‘I’ is frequently used to refer to the ways they have to restrain themselves. Their preferred option is to ‘dissent’ and hold back opinions, resulting in being silent, and in some cases allowing others to talk. This discourse shows the internal ‘battle’ and pressure to not saying something when at times you may want to. Exercising judgement is a key component and how to work alongside others, about what to say and not say, acting as an inherent tension.

**Silence Discourse Four: Newcomer Silence** – “I was sussing out what the hell this is all about” (Elizabeth)

Identity scholars recognise the intensity of identity work can vary. Carroll and Levy (2010) mapping identity work in a leadership development programme mention intense identity work occurring where there is “contextual instability” (p.214). Participating in

meetings may not always be uncertain for individuals, but for many board members intense uncertainty arose when joining a board for the first time, resulting in concentrated identity work (Lutgen- Sandvik, 2008).

Board members used a variety of terms to describe themselves as being new to a board position, for example, “newbie”, “young upstart”, “new broom”, “green behind the ears” and “innocent”. Synonyms associated with these terms and phrases are blind, apprenticed, naïve, untrained, inexperienced, uninitiated, and unfamiliar. Taking this latter term of ‘unfamiliar’, members recognised absences of something. For example, Derek spoke of his absence as a “lack of understanding and awareness”. Other aspects of unfamiliarity were “unknown people” and “unknown expectations” (Elaine). Andrea confessed she “didn’t understand” and “not content that I’m familiar with”. Elizabeth states, “I didn’t really know much about what my role was...”. Other terms associated with being new were “imposter” and “foreign”, which suggest feelings of being fake, out of place and isolated. Both terms convey doubt and fear about the position they find themselves in. Words used to describe feeling the opposite of being a newcomer were “seasoned” (Andrea) and “fully fledged” (Helen), which conjure up experience, longevity and maturity.

Feelings and emotions associated with being new to a board were mostly negative in tone, such as “rude shock”, “overwhelmed”, “intimidating”, “daunting”, “very tense” and “difficult”, leaving them “uncomfortable” and “nervous”. One board member, Andrew, described his first meeting using the biblical term a “baptism of fire” to mean having to deal with problems, making mistakes and learning the hard way from the beginning. Elaine and Anne likened their experiences as “almost like graduating from uni and starting again” (Elaine) to portray the new experience and novelty and uniqueness of starting an

educational journey. Only a few board members could recall their first board experiences as being “positive” and “exciting” and a feeling of being proud and privileged (Oliver).

Being a new board member, either for the very first time or as a newcomer to subsequent board positions did not evoke asking questions as an outcome of being in an unfamiliar terrain, but rather a contemplative stance to ‘working it all out’ and being silent. The activity associated with being new is characterised by the different verbs, words and phrases noted in the following.

Sitting back and being able to observe a little bit when you first get on the board.

I was sussing out what the hell this is all about.

I was sussing out the lay of the land.

Use the first meeting or two to listen and learn

Probably more figuring stuff out, figuring who everybody else was and where you might fit in, grasping, thinking, sitting back, listen and learn, do a lot of listening, watch and listen, observe a little bit, soaking up all the information, it was learning, it took me a while to orientate myself

What is noticeable is the sedentary nature of some verbs used, denoting a static and passive, almost stationary approach to being new. The verbs “listening”, “observing”, “thinking” and “sitting” illustrate these activities and portray little engagement or involvement with others. The activity of listening is used by board members to pay attention, and “watching” relates to observing and to being alert to what happens and what is going on. The above indicates activities of ‘to watch’ and ‘to listen’ in an attempt to understand what is happening rather than enquiring (asking questions), talking and having conversations. There is a quietness and stillness to these actions, whereas other verbs such as “figuring”, “sussing out”, and “grasping” point towards the activity of trying to comprehend something and working towards a solution to a problem.

All the terms relating to being a new board member contrast significantly to terms and verbs used throughout other conversations from the interviews, such as “debating”, “probing”, “injecting”, “approving”, the majority of which indicate active action and progress and doing, getting things done. Other words used to describe their activities when they were not new were “battling”, “hijacking”, “fighting”, and ‘driving’. These specify effort and hard work and defending your position. They are literally ‘action packed’, indicating progression and an air of excitement, for example achieving something and being involved. In contrast, the newcomer verbs seem to suspend the person in a state of limbo, having not quite worked things out but in the process of doing so. This discourse offers a very clear distinction on who to be as a new board member, either for the first time or when joining a new board.

***Excerpt One***

Elaine, Malcolm and Edward offer further insights into their dilemmas and difficulties associated with being a newcomer.

**Elaine**

Again, it was split almost 50/50 between the long-term board members and the newer board members and I think the other challenge was because I was still new to the board, the question was, how hard do I push? I could see that there was resistance, there was a very clear, don’t rock the boat.....So, the question for me and for the other new members was, how hard do we push and how aggressive should we be because we have not been through that process before, and it was a regular process for that board? Rightly or wrongly we deferred to them. That was very much to do with us being very newly on board and trusting in their judgement but not fundamentally agreeing with it ourselves as being the right path to take.

Interestingly, six months down the track our gut feels have proven to be right.

**Malcolm**

So, the only time I would have not said anything, when I look back and think perhaps I should have done, is when I’ve been new on a board, where I’m thinking, “Hmm, I’m new, I’ll just let that pass, I’m going to go through the keeper,” and even though, my gut – I’ve got the sense there’s something else here, I’m too new, I’ll just let it go.

The difficult challenge is when you're new on a board and you can sense a lot of things aren't right, but you don't want to jump to conclusions too quickly, so what you wrestle with, but more than keep yourself up at night, is how do I ask questions.

**Edward**

A: Probably breathe through your nose for the first meeting.

Q: Tell me why?

A: Just to get a feel. You won't get a real idea until you sit through one or two meetings just how the board functions. So I guess just getting an idea of the protocols, who leads a lot of the discussion, who's got expertise in different areas, where there's any politics on various points and indeed in terms of the relationships. Just sort of get an idea of the lay of the land and who's influential and who you need to keep on side. You don't garner a lot of respect I think if you go wading in there saying this, this, this and this needs to change right away. I think by all means make a contribution if asked on different things, but I think it's not a role where you're going to change the world on your own; you're directly dependent on getting your other board members on side, so it's worth doing a bit of time and getting an idea of how they tick.

From the outset challenges with being a new board member were multiple for Elaine. She talks about her dilemma – “how hard do I push”. This question can be translated into ‘*What do I say or do and what do I not say or do?*’ because she feels she is getting the message, a “very clear” message of keeping things the way they have been and the long standing members want the status quo kept intact (“don’t rock the boat”). She is weighing up her position as being new to the board with other new board members, alongside who are “long-term board members”, describing a “split almost 50/50”. She uses a lot of ‘how’ questions to work out how to be and what to do (“How aggressive should we be?”). Here “aggressive” is used instead of assertive – the latter is a milder and less confrontational form of being forthright. However, it appears the longer serving board members’ judgements are to be trusted and pursued more than the newer members (“Rightly or wrongly we deferred to them”). In the end, the new board members’ decision would have been the correct decision to take (“Interestingly, six months down the track our gut feels have been proven to be right...”). So, remaining quiet as a collective of new board

members was the wrong action to take regarding this decision and I wonder if this is a case of pluralist ignorance? (Westphal & Bednar, 2005).

The sense of regret, disappointment and probably annoyance Elaine conveys is also portrayed by Malcolm. The idea of intuition, “gut feels”, being ignored resulting in remaining silent was attributed to being “too new” by Malcolm. In the excerpt, Malcolm reflects on when he was a new board member and regrets not speaking up “and think perhaps I should have done”, but instead decides he will “let that pass” and “just let it go”. These phrases mean not to act, or react and to keep quiet, sweep aside and ignore.

However, he does this despite his intuition (“my gut”) telling him otherwise. The term “keeper” refers to the chair of the meeting and his phrase is likely to mean take direction from the chair, from a more experienced person, the same as Elaine. This indicates experience is valued more than being new with a fresh set of eyes and perspectives.

Malcolm pursues the idea of knowing things are not quite right based on his sense of things in another part of the conversation. Again, being a new board member makes him doubt himself and hold back from doing anything (“Don’t want to jump to conclusions too quickly”). He says he struggles (“wrestle”) with knowing how to ask questions. Using ‘how’ and not ‘what’ is significant. If he was asking *what* questions he should ask, he would possibly be asking the type of questions appropriate for the environment he is in. However, asking “‘how’ do I ask questions” means he is requesting guidance on not only what he should be asking, but also how can he voice his questions being a new member and probably knowing little about the people and the board dynamics.

Following on from Elaine and Malcolm who attempt to make sense of their environment and act accordingly, Edward offers advice about composing yourself before your first board meeting (“breathe through your nose for the first meeting/ just to get a feel”).

Sensory perceptions are used here to gauge and assess the situation. In all the excerpts, the newcomer board members decide the best course of action is to stay quiet, even though their intuition says otherwise. Edward advises against “wading in there” (discussed more fully next) and only saying something if you are invited to do so (“...by all means make a contribution if asked”). ‘Inviting’ or being asked is a friendly request suggesting a polite and formal approach, as opposed to spontaneity and being impulsive.

In determining “the lay of the land”, Edward is referring to working out the nature and organisation of something. However, this step is only part of the process as he says respect can be easily lost if you “go wading in there saying, this, this, this and this”. The term “wading in” or ‘into’ means to engage in something energetically at first, or alternatively to jump into something without a lot of thought. It can also signify someone who is clumsy and thoughtless, who takes forceful action before thinking. Here he is warning against doing this and holding back initially, and only if asked a question (“if asked”) should a contribution be made, otherwise he advises the benefits of “doing a bit of time”. The phrase ‘doing time’ can mean the same as spending a term in prison as a form of punishment. Here, he may be referring to spending a small (“a bit”) amount of time serving on the board (“sit through one or two meetings”) and working out how everything works (“how they tick”) before you are in a position to contribute fully.

The conversations indicate a trusting of others more senior/experienced, even though some board members join a new board with a substantial business acumen. When placed in a new board context, their feelings can mimic those of their first day at university and two board members refer to themselves as “young” and “innocent”. This seems to place them in a vulnerable position and impacts on how to be when joining a board. In this position of being unable to voice what they want, instead they act in a cautious way even though as mentioned in these excerpts their hearts (intuition) indicate the contrary.

## ***Excerpt Two***

Andrew was able to recall his first board experiences on a number of his boards and thus provides a ‘compare’ and ‘contrast’ story.

### **Andrew**

It was probably the first board I was at, it was the first time I had been a member, so there’s a lot of documentation that once you’re on the board that sort of gave you I guess a bit of understanding of what the board does as such. But since then that board have put a lot of investment into governance training. Through the company director’s course in Australia, they’ve got company directors into the board for training at various stages. I guess that’s opened up my eyes a little bit to those sort of things; that I’ve applied to other boards as well.

Fundamentally, when I first got on the board I really didn’t have much of I guess an understanding as I do now about a board functioning, how you get decisions made. There’s lots of things I’ve learnt along the way.

I guess one of the things towards the end is that you can actually change a lot as a board. When I first went on I thought you’d have to find your place and you wouldn’t get a voice until quite a way down the track, but that’s really changed.

What I didn’t anticipate when you’re appointed on the board is you’re appointed on for a reason and I didn’t have I guess a thorough understanding of that initially the reason you’re appointed is for your skills and people want you to talk up straight away, because you’re wasting your time being there if you don’t. It didn’t take long but I guess I had to find my feet as what boards do and how they work and getting to know people and the dynamics of the group; who does what.

When I first got on board I said, “What do we do?” and they said, “We sit there, we talk about these policies and then we may change a word to this and that changes the procedure.” But the after a while you sort of think the actual gravity of the documents you are changing affects many people. So I think my view has changed more to, if you read something and it doesn’t make sense it’s got to be changed.

The first one on the Australasian board I was a real newbie in terms of I’d just got my role here as head of department role. I was sitting on there. People didn’t know what you could do; so they didn’t know your capacity to contribute. Whenever I’d say something it didn’t have anything to hold it up, so it wasn’t until probably a year or two down the track that I’d done quite a bit of work and that people get to know actually this person can do this or do that. So my first board meeting in my Australasian role I was very quiet. And the other reason is because on the board I personally didn’t know anybody. This was the first time I’d met everybody on that board. I think flying to [location removed] actually to have that meeting. It was very foreign to start with on that board..... So it is also getting over that hump to start with and then people getting to see you as a professional and seeing that

you can contribute effectively. Once they saw I could contribute effectively that broke some of the barriers down.

Early on yeah, because I didn't know how to contribute or if you contributed whether it would be valued at all. I think once you work it out and once people know that you know what you're doing you tend to speak up more.

I always remember, just one of those university boards, for a while I sat on our faculty board when I first started doing my role. I'm still very young even though I've nearly finished this role. So I was sitting on this board with a lot of very established academics and at the end of every meeting one of the more senior guys if you hadn't contributed he'd go around, "What do you think 'Henry'? What do you think of this and that?" So that was a difficult situation; I didn't enjoy that, because sometimes the stuff you're talking about you're not in the know about what we're talking about so it's hard to contribute.

Andrew describes his variety of new board experiences in several ways, including being "a real newbie" and sometimes the role feeling "very foreign", which points towards him feeling he is from another planet, almost like an alien. In an interview with Helen she feels as though she is "from outer space" mirroring Andrew's thoughts, although she isn't a new member using this expression. This strangeness and unfamiliarity is emphasised in how he attempts to gain some credibility on one board after a considerable length of time ("so it wasn't until probably a year or two down the track that I'd done quite a bit of work and that people get to know actually this person can do this or do that"). He admits to being almost blind in the first instance of becoming a member on one board when he refers to being made aware ("opened up my eyes a little bit"). These feelings are accompanied by actions such as "I was very quiet", and a continual process of searching. He refers to the verb "finding" as part of the process of settling into his new working environments ("find your place/find my feet"), which indicates how he was trying to fit into the board and be in tune with everyone else ("getting to know people and the dynamics of the group"). He expected it would take him longer to "get a voice". I cover more on the discourse of finding and securing a voice in the next chapter.

He only feels comfortable speaking up when he knows others in the room are aware how capable he is (“...people getting to see you as a professional...”). This provides him with the confidence to speak out rather than remain silent. However, he has found it difficult and unpleasant (“...didn’t enjoy that...”) at times to join in debates and conversations when he is put on the spot about subject matter he is not knowledgeable on (“What do you think Andrew?”/ “you’re not in the know about what they are talking about so its hard to contribute”).

Andrew highlights the intense struggles he has to overcome as a new member, particularly in relation to speaking up and acting and being seen as a true and authentic professional. His use of the phrases “getting over that hump” and “some of the barriers” illustrate his learning journey and orientation to a new working environment. Both phrases suggest a lot of effort and energy were needed in navigating his way around the boardroom. He acknowledges the hurdles and obstacles (“barriers”), which he has encountered on his way in aiming to get over the worst part (“over the hump”). He is illustrating transitioning into the role and intensive identity work needed to do so.

### ***Observational Narrative***

A contrary response is conveyed by Tommy from the newcomer discourse below.

*I was sat in the corner with a small table in a large colourfully decorated boardroom. Sat around the square table were 12 individuals (chair, CEO, company secretary and board members). If board members were uncomfortable with discussing sensitive issues while I was observing a strategy was agreed for them to tap on their glass of water with their pen indicating I was to leave and would be called back in. Board members raised their hands and addressed the chair as “madam chair” if they wanted to ask a question. Early on at the start of the meeting when the strategy report was being delivered, a board member (“Tommy”) announced “I’m a first term trustee,” before asking a question, resulting in a stirring of chatter and interactions from everyone in the room all at once. The CEO placed her head in her hands, while the chair interjected with “that is quite operational.”*

This incident illustrates several interesting points that are interconnected with other discourses. For the purpose of this discourse of newcomer silence, Tommy acted in a way contradicting the majority of feelings about being new to a board. Tommy was assertive and made it known to the board he was newly ‘elected’/ ‘recruited’ before he raised an issue. The reactions of the board may not have been the response he anticipated. Here, while discussing the strategy of the business, he asks a question addressing a management –“operational issue”. As with Edward, the clash between governing and managing is illuminated, with management seemingly classed as an undiscussable (Argyris, 1985). This meeting also highlights the formality of proceedings in board meetings, such as the norm for addressing the chair and a thought-out plan agreed if confidentiality issues arose while the meeting was being observed.

## **Summary**

Uncertainty and doubt are evident within the process of being new to a board. Members felt inhibited by their perceived lack of experience and information about their immediate environment. This new working arena seemed to negate their previous employment and experience status, reducing them to the level of an apprentice type identity, which cascaded into everything appearing to be new and requiring learning. Despite their business acumen, this placed them as holding a novice identity. However, there were occasions when their intuition would surface, but this was ignored in favour of believing others with more experience on that board should be followed. This approach seems to devalue their own inclinations in favour of others.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **Betwixt Discourses: ‘Whispering’**

#### **Introduction**

A series of discourses lie outside of the main silence and voice discourses, acting as a bridge between the two. This ‘middle ground’ or betwixt includes three clusters. Three betwixt discourses board members drew on were, ‘whispering and body language’, ‘beyond the boardroom’, and finally ‘searching for a voice.’ First, an in-between discourse arose from occurrences of members wanting to say something but preferring to communicate via body language with the inclusion of whispering. For example, whispering was observed in the board observations and referred to in the interviews. The act of whispering, of speaking softly and quietly to avoid being heard by everyone perhaps to keep something a secret is to still voice something, but not in an overt way such as speaking out and up (voicing). Secondly, for a variety of reasons some members could only voice certain concerns outside of the boardroom and opted to remain silent within the meeting space about certain issues. The third discourse in this group centred on the search for a voice to be identifiable within the boardroom. This was a work in progress and discussed frequently by board members as they navigated a new working terrain. Getting to know their voice meant being in a state of transition characterised by searching. The idea of in between, or ‘liminality’, is a theme in identity studies (Beech, 2011), and is said to be more evident in today’s uncertain climate.

**Betwixt Discourse One: Whispering and Body Language** – “Again, sometimes I’ve got to sit on my hands” (Terry)

Board members gave multiple accounts describing nonverbal communication occurring in the boardroom. They also referred to parts of their body when talking about voice and silence. They were not overtly vocal nor completely uncommunicative, hence this fits well in the in-between of discourses of silence and voice. This showed a reluctance to speak out but at the same time wanting something acknowledged and communicated. Their preference was to remain silent and use nonverbal cues. While at first to include body language may seem like a departure from analysing themes of talk (discourses), I am reminded by Cunliffe (2008) of the notion of “embodied beings” and will discuss this briefly in the summary section at the end.

The sentences, words and phrases below convey a diverse array of signals while remaining ‘silent’.

You just shake your head sometimes.  
Again, sometimes I’ve got to sit on my hands.

Show a wry smile, raise my eyebrows, smile and shake hands, they’ll just glance at you, I didn’t say anything I just smiled, a note pushed to me, read faces, furrowed brow, whispering to me, roll their eyes, slide it across, I did quietly say it, people avoiding eye contact, people started looking at the floor, so I left quietly, cross your arms, stepping on management toes.

While the purpose of the interviews was not to record and analyse the tone of what was said or body gestures, there were numerous silent cues mentioned in the discussions and from my direct board observations. These actions and signals were instead of saying something, indicating the preference to remain silent, but still wanting to communicate

something. Many such signals have a subtlety all of their own, for example a “wry smile” as opposed to just a smile means to scoff or sneer at something or someone, and possibly indicating the person is irritated or annoyed. In this vein, the raising of eyebrows can be a display of being shocked or disapproving of something, and the rolling of the actual eyes can convey annoyance or boredom. These are all explicit signs and messages in lieu of saying something to others.

### ***Excerpt One***

In excerpt one board members talk about preparing for board meetings and the contributions of all members who attend those meetings.

#### **Harry**

No, I think that generally our board meetings are fairly cut and dried, because of all the preparation work that’s been done at the various committee levels. That’s where it’s all sorted out and the fine details discussed. So it doesn’t leave a lot of opportunity for discussion or dissent, which is good. Not to say we act like a rubber stamp, but the important thing is that all views are canvassed and enabled to be heard.

Occasionally in a meeting you see- I don’t know whether it happened that particular day – but you get somebody wanting to be heard and ask a question; if they’d read their papers, they would have read it in the papers. I normally just show a wry smile and raise my eyebrows when that happens. [inaudible] just blowing my own trumpet, I put a lot of time into preparations for meetings, and I think I’m recognise, amongst my colleagues, as doing good preparation beforehand.

#### **Andrew**

When I said before I haven’t come across too much conflict, I think that’s because that’s what’s going to happen on some of these boards. You’re never going to sit around and have 20 meetings a year and everybody smile and shake hands saying, “Yeah that’s fine.” It would have to be pretty intense for me to say there’s massive conflict because I’d expect a little bit of disagreement.

I also think it shows that somebody’s done a bit of pre-reading for a meeting, when they’ve got an idea and they’ve thought about it and they’ve brought their opinion to the table. Because all too often you go to a meeting and you know when people haven’t done the pre-reading because they’ll just glance at you.

#### **Felicity**

In general, terms the role of the chair is crucial in pulling things back in, letting things go long enough that everyone’s had the opportunity to say, I think, also ensuring that

everyone has contributed, so being able to read faces and know when someone's furrowed brow means that they've really got something to say but they might be keeping quiet, and calling them out on it, but then not letting it go too long, getting to a point of resolution and moving on to the next thing. So, I think that role is crucial.

First, in a reflective interview after my observation of a board meeting, Harry points out the lack of preparation from others. He is able to gauge this accurately because some board members ask questions that can be answered by reading the board papers. He suggests preparation is key and expected of board members, so lengthy discussions can happen. Otherwise there is little room for alternative viewpoints ("doesn't leave a lot of opportunity for discussion or dissent"), but that does not mean everything agreed to is rubber stamped ("not to say we act as a rubber stamp"). On the occasion of other members asking questions that point towards not having read the papers fully, or misunderstood them, he doesn't say anything to these individuals but instead shows a "wry smile" and raises his eyebrows, thus giving an indication of his disapproval. He makes it known that he can live up to the expectations of the role by commenting that his colleagues hold him in high regard for doing the groundwork before the meetings ("I think I am recognised amongst my colleagues as doing good preparation beforehand"). He feels if he is in a position to do this then why can't others, so he is judging others by his own standards. This shows tensions between members in undertaking their required work.

Similarly, Andrew talks about the pre-reading and board preparation work required for the role. He comments that those who do the work are visible and obvious as they are prepared to share their ideas and opinions in the meetings (voice and participation), which can stimulate debate ("I'd expect a little bit of disagreement"). Others have nothing to say and just glance at him. Avoiding eye contact or just glancing usually means individuals are anxious, uncomfortable or have something to hide.

Lastly, Felicity talks about the ability to scan the room and pick up on body language (“so being able to read faces”). Her aim here is for equitable contributions and she is able to notice and read furrowed brows, which may indicate “they’ve really got something to say but they might be keeping quiet”. This can be turned into an opportunity to invite further contributions to the meeting (“calling them out on it”), therefore, building a more collegial way of working.

One way or another, the body language described in all three accounts indicates an unwillingness to speak up, holding back and possibly ‘going with the flow’ on occasions, all preferences point towards remaining silent while meetings are in progress. At times, the facial and body cues chastise and indicate to others dissatisfaction with how they are being as a member.

### ***Excerpt Two***

Next, Helen conveys a story about receiving feedback from her fellow board members.

#### **Helen**

Even if what I’d said, and this happens all the time and I’d said and repeated it in about four different ways to try and get heard or understood, and thinking, ‘gosh, I must talk riddles’, then suddenly, usually a male or a very political-led powerful female but usually a male suddenly expresses this great idea which is exactly what I’d been trying to communicate, but that took things forward.

So, that gave me confidence that I’m not from outer space that my perspectives are important and I need to work on or, and a question to myself constantly is, ‘do I need to work on how to articulate that or is this just part of the dynamic process that you need to make work and in to change [inaudible].

So, part of that too was that sort of feedback loop but direct feedback like colleagues whispering to me, “Good on you for saying that, that’s what I wanted to hear but I was too scared to,” or, “didn’t know how to say it, “or “it’ll be better coming from you than me.” That sort of thing.

Helen was feeling like an alien but has managed to relay those feelings (“I’m not from outer space”) in response to her ideas being carried forward by another board member. Here she identifies ‘other’ by gender, “usually a male or a very political-led powerful female”. She seems to be saying being a “very political-led powerful female” is the same as being male. The last excerpt is poignant as Helen talks about being more confident, self-aware but questions her own capabilities (“...do I need to work on how to articulate that...”). What is helpful to her own development process is receiving feedback from others. She receives praise from others as they whisper to her about speaking out in a meeting when they were reluctant to do so (“I was too scared to/didn’t know how to say it”), or unable to articulate it as effectively as her, or were stuck for words. This activity indicates how others choose to voice their support by whispering rather than speaking out and provides clues as to why members would choose to act in this way.

### ***Observational Narrative***

Here, I could not help but notice the ‘going’s on’ in this meeting.

*While the chair moved to a new agenda item on a new promotional idea to be considered for the coming year, board members were ‘active’; organising and shuffling papers, pouring water and drinking, scrolling on their iPads, looking at their mobile phones, conversing to the person next to them, amongst other things. At the same time a card was making its way around each of the board members, who wrote something in it before passing it on. The busyness subsided, and the noise reduced so the chair was audible. One board member communicated to another without talking. The board member read something on a piece of A4 paper passed to them. This carried on for a few turns more. About ten minutes passed and while the CEO was talking whispering occurred rather than the note passing. Everyone else in the room was quiet and listening to the CEO. In another sequence the board member refuses some food or a snack offered by their ‘neighbour.’*

I chose this narrative as it explains several things. On the one hand, I observed whispering occurring, and secondly, ways of communicating by nonverbal means (writing on pieces of paper). It was not until the end of the meeting that this board member voiced some

information about a cultural matter raised. The narrative shows the distinct ebb and flow of meetings, the going's on and activities individuals engage in. In this scenario board members kept verbal expressions to a minimum. There was no distinct pace throughout this meeting, rather, in one moment everyone is 'busy', and it appears chaotic and haphazard. Next, a lull appears when the majority of board members are listening and doing little else at the same time.

### **Summary**

It was only after I scrutinised the transcribed interviews that I came across the implicit ways silence can be portrayed through body language. Using different cues seemed to symbolise restraint and the preference to remain quiet, but certain cues communicated something. Conscious behaviours or 'embodied acts' or the material aspects of identity work are subject to identity investigation from researchers. The "wry smiles" and the "furrowed brow" acted as substitutes for saying something and were obvious displays of the emotional expressions and gestures referred to in identity work. I am reminded of a study of street entertainers – live statue's by Aslan (2017) who mime their art and offers alternatives beyond the narrational-discursive approach to study identity work.

### **Betwixt Discourse Two: Beyond the Boardroom - "Yeah but we wouldn't say it at the table" (Kevin)**

The second in-between discourse relates to the best place to voice concerns. Here members were prepared to talk and speak, but not in the space of the boardroom. On occasions, they chose not to offer their ideas and dilemmas about certain matters. 'Board only time' is a common best practice and could be identified as 'beyond the boardroom'. A short meeting held either before or after the full board meeting, it excludes the CEO and other management team members. The purpose of the meeting is for all members to address any

immediate concerns arising before or after the main meeting without ‘management’ being present. The terms and words below taken from the interviews are indicative of the conversations occurring in beyond the boardroom discourse.

So, I had in that case an offline conversation with the chair...  
...they might come up to me just quietly at lunchtime and say....  
I can say something afterwards.

Not at the table, closed doors, outside, privately, can’t articulate, didn’t feel comfortable in raising that at the table, somebody else offline, behind the scenes

The above raise the issue of what can and cannot be discussed in the boardroom and what may be better tabled away from board proceedings. Not everything can be expressed within the confines of the meeting, so some members chose to not voice certain issues within the confines of the board meeting and remained silent until they left the boardroom.

The boardroom is anecdotally and metaphorically termed the ‘black box’ by lay people and scholars alike (Daily et al., 2003). The term refers to the lack of knowledge about processes in and around the boardroom. This discourse reveals how members were happy to discuss and voice certain issues, but not while they were in the boardroom, hence a betwixt position of silence in the boardroom but speaking up beyond the boardroom. Some members referred to these conversations as occurring “offline”. The literal meaning of ‘offline’ is not being connected or served by a computer system, however the meaning here is discussions occurring independently of the system – the boardroom. The common phrase “not at the table” was also used, indicating discussions and negotiations didn’t happen in the boardroom but elsewhere. Referring to something as being ‘on the table’ means ideas are open and available for people to see and hear. Alternative discussions and conversations occurred “at lunchtime”, “afterwards” and “privately”.

The following incorporate the awkwardness, difficulties and frustrations of being a board member who has to find the appropriate space to have conversations, and the place where this is not welcomed is the boardroom itself.

### ***Excerpt One***

#### **Anne**

So I left quietly; I got up and left quietly and went to the ladies room and stood there for a few minutes, just sort of [*expresses groaning noise*] and then I went back in and carried on. I wouldn't cry or anything. So people would have known that I went outside to compose myself. I wasn't going to sit there and look at him. I wasn't going to attack him. So I went back in and it was so awkward; it was really awkward because we were having what was maybe lunch afterwards and you have to interact with other people. You couldn't talk about it, so it was the elephant in the room. It was very difficult. We didn't talk for years afterwards. He never apologised.

#### **Elaine**

Before it....

This seemed to be accepted by the older, by the long-standing board members. One made a comment to me outside of the meeting and said, "Keep on asking your questions, keep on challenging, don't give up, I'm behind you all the way, you're new, you're young and you can ask all of those great things and I'm a hundred percent behind you," which was a lovely comment to have and gave me some insight into the level of frustration that there was and perhaps the sense of not getting anywhere and kind of giving up.

#### **Elizabeth**

But, interestingly towards the end, my one-on-one conversations with a few of those board members showed they were getting frustrated with the CEO and the chair because not enough was happening on the diversity front. That they were wanting to hold the CEO more to account in that regard. It was in the strategic plan and yet he wasn't doing anything; it was deferral, deferral, deferral. And they were getting frustrated. And we were discussing that privately amongst ourselves; which is not a good practice for governance you know. People should be able to bring to the table their concerns. Anyway, I had left and I was quite happy to go. If I had been a legitimate board member, proper; I would have rocked the boat.

Anne talks about an historical incident, which involved leaving a meeting due to a dispute with another board member. She left to go and compose herself due to the event ("...went to the ladies room and stood there for a few minutes..."). She talks about having to restrain

her emotions ('I wouldn't cry or anything' / "I wasn't going to attack him") and calm down outside of the meeting. She didn't say anything in the meeting or retaliate. The event came to be regarded as the incident no one could mention ("You couldn't talk about it"). Even though it was obvious and witnessed by everyone in the room, it was now "the elephant in the room" in this board context. At the time the incident occurred, no one intervened or acted, and for this board it remained an uncomfortable event no one is willing to discuss. Referring to something as 'an elephant in the room' describes an event or topic that everyone knows about or witnessed (it is obvious because an elephant is huge), but people in the room – 'board meeting' will not discuss or mention it. The event or incident becomes 'taboo' (Leach, 1964).

Anne details how her incident is not mentioned by the whole board, whereas Elaine provides a story about how established and long-standing board members do not raise questions or provide support in meetings. The long-standing board members remain quiet while the newer board members voice their concerns and ideas which is contrary to the newcomer silence discussed earlier. Outside the meeting, a long-standing board member admits to not saying anything in the meeting, although agreeing with the communications Elaine has made ("I'm one hundred percent behind you"). She is encouraged by long-standing board members to ask questions because she is in a better position to do this due to being younger and a new recruit ("you can ask all of those great things/ you're new, you're young"). Acceptable ways of operating in the boardroom, and its cultural norms and routines, are engrained in the long-standing board members.

Next Elizabeth talks about how discussions of diversity in meetings have been stalled several times ("it was deferral, deferral, deferral"). She confesses to debating these issues outside of meetings ("privately amongst ourselves") or in "my one-on-one conversations" to indicate the private nature of the discussion. She mentions "people *should* be able to

bring to the table their concerns” (my italics), which indicates a necessity or obligation to do so, but here they don’t always. At the time, she didn’t feel in a position to say anything in the meeting because she didn’t class herself as “legitimate” or a “proper” board member. If she had felt more legitimate, she claims she would have said something (“I would have rocked the boat”). This approach would have disrupted the harmony and status quo.

### ***Excerpt Two***

In these accounts so far, insecurities and reluctance to voice feature, overlapping with the next major voice discourse in Chapter Nine. Next, Anthony talks about the feeling of being intimidated as one reason for staying quiet, but he is referring to ‘others’, not himself directly.

#### **Anthony**

Well, you’ve got to be able to say what you think you are seeing from your own point of view and lots of people can’t do that. Lots of people who are on boards cannot articulate what they think they’re seeing. They can do it in a private capacity. They can share their anxieties with their mates or with somebody else offline so to speak, but they cannot bring themselves to articulate in a context where there will be likely oppositional views. They can’t describe the thing they think they’re seeing. So, generally they don’t say it and they simply go with the majority.

Now it’s interesting that this happens even in the highest level of governance is that people get intimidated by other people, by their views, by the way in which they’re confident about their views, by the experience they bring to it. All of these things often intimidate particularly new people coming into the space which happens in both not-for-profit and for profit. But the key thing I’ve always said to every single new board person who’s ever come into a board I’ve been part of and they’ve asked me about it, I’ve said the most valuable thing you bring here is your judgement. The thing that doesn’t matter what your experience is, and the more varied the experience the better, you must smell a rat and name it if you smell it.

In giving an evaluation of others, Anthony summarises that some board members cannot voice their opinions because they are fearful of receiving criticism (“oppositional views”).

He claims they cannot even force themselves to speak out in the meeting (“cannot bring themselves”). However, they are more than willing to discuss issues with their friends away (“offline”) from the board (“share their anxieties with their mates”). In assessing others’ abilities, he mentions some members have difficulties interpreting and making sense of what is happening around them, which hinders their ability to be open in the meeting and so they would rather have discussions “in a private capacity” away from the meeting.

He reflects on why some members behave in this way and talks about inexperienced and new members being deterred from talking in the meeting – due to many reasons. One reason is the wealth of knowledge and experience of other ‘longstanding’ board members, as referred to by Elaine. Another is they feel intimidated by the opinions of other members and lastly, how confidently these opinions are expressed in this forum (“by the way in which they’re confident about their views”). Anthony attempts to dispel the myth of experience, emphasising that a board member, whatever their level of experience, must be able to do two essential things – one is to “smell a rat and name it” and the other is speak up and “provide your judgement”. Here Anthony uses the phrase to “smell a rat” to mean having the sensory ability to identify someone or an action that may be harmful and immoral. He continues, saying if a misdemeanour is discovered then you have to speak up about it and make everyone aware of its existence, rather than keeping quiet. Anthony stresses the contribution of “judgement” as being precious and the necessity for this to be practiced. By judgement, he means the ability to make sensible informed decisions, and he believes – irrespective of their experience – members can achieve this trait.

### *Observational Narrative*

Unlike other narratives from my observations, pinpointing one for this discourse cluster is different. I opted to keep my observations to the confines of the boardroom rather than include shadowing or ethnographic aspects as Samra-Fredericks (2000a) had undertaken. Her study involved events such as interactions in car parks. This means an inability to provide a narrative relevant to this cluster, other than what I watched in the meetings.

## **Summary**

One major surprise from this discourse was discovering the reluctance of members to speak up in the board arena. I base this on my own assumptions that to be a board member, your full contribution and ideas are required. My preconceived notion of being a responsive and contributing member is undone by this discourse. I was also surprised that insecurity and intimidation were the reasons revealed for not being forthcoming in meetings, and even more shocked to hear that experienced board members (whom Elaine refers to as 'long standing') were also reluctant to be vocal within meetings.

While I appreciate the anxieties of being a newcomer to any situation and remaining silent, I still have difficulty in understanding the unwillingness of experienced and knowledgeable members to contribute. My own view of board meetings as forums for rigorous debate and conversation has been challenged. My thoughts now turn to understanding how members had views and opinions but chose not to voice them in boardroom. Why is the obvious question, but it is not accompanied by a readymade answer. I revisit Anthony's conversation and recall how members did not want to face the prospect of being challenged and positioning themselves in a conflict situation, or one that was potentially embarrassing. This could be because members are managing their 'impressions' and do not want to fall foul or look stupid in front of other members.

Goffman's (1969) work on 'back stage' and 'front stage' personas resonates with me and provides clues on impression management strategies deployed by board members.

**Between Discourse Three: Searching for a Voice – “You go onto a board in terms of being able to add value, finding your role, finding your voice” (Elaine)**

Searching for, securing and developing their voices was discussed by members throughout the interviews. Within the creative industries, people constantly work on finding their voice. Musicians, writers and artists who find their voice express their artistic views and ideas comfortably, readily and accessibly. In the literal sense, finding your voice as a singer means to simply tune the vocal cords. Related to this phrase is 'find your tongue', meaning after a prolonged period of silence a person has managed to say something. The question of 'how to be heard' also resonates with the finding of your voice. Indicative words and phrases are as follows:

Find your voice and don't be concerned if you don't find your natural place or fit in the board in the first few meetings.

Grab their voice and express it, I guess I found my voice, what I've drawn on to find my voice, be confident in owning your voice, I had a voice, get a voice, enable the voices to be heard, you're not hearing me, we've got more of a voice

In the excerpts above, voice is referred to as belonging to others, "their", and personal voice with "my". "Finding", "grabbing" and "getting" a voice are all activities related to securing a voice. To find something or search for it may mean it has been lost and you have a desire to retrieve it, or else you are looking to acquire it for the first time. Securing a voice and being heard is seen as part of the process of belonging on the board ("natural place/ fit in"). Once you find your voice you can own it ("be confident in owning your voice"). This perspective treats a voice and being heard rather like a commodity – something that if you search hard enough for it, you will eventually find this. In the

following excerpts the journey and endeavours towards finding a voice and being heard are described in board members' accounts.

### ***Excerpt One***

#### **Helen**

I think as a developing board member and what I've drawn on to find my voice and to help other people do, is whilst I've never done, I haven't got a certificate or a qualification in governance, I've been teaching that stuff forever and you're designing courses and bringing experts in to teach it, because all these things I'm not getting paid. I am not in position, both philosophically or financially to pay ten to twenty thousand dollars to get a qualification, so I'm constantly not appointed to boards where there is pay.

Be confident in owning your voice and extracting, using it as soon as possible. If there are some issues, complications, if it doesn't feel safe or it's not clear how to do that, let's talk about it.

New board members are in a critical position to re-ask the hard questions that those sitting around the table have been trying to address and they've almost stopped talking about. Come in and ask them, get your voice and yes, it's fine, and I know I did this, actually this was part of finding my voice and it's very powerful and it's got new board members are coming in and some of them are all confident, and yes it's okay to say, "This may be a naive question," but don't say, "but," say, "and I'm going to ask it", not but so that you're always [inaudible].

#### **Samantha**

I was 30 at that time. There was a significant age gap; I was the only female and the only Pacific Islander. At that time it was a major confidence boost just to say something, because I felt so inadequate with the fact that I would share my opinions, just because of the experience in the room. It was quite a learning experience, for me, that when you are selected onto a board, that your vote is just as equal as everyone else's around the table. And then, although there's politics that may happen around votes or decision making, your vote is still the same vote as the other person next to you.

So, if you want to make your opinion or voice be heard, then you are totally entitled to do that, and not to feel inadequate that you're not worth as much as others. [inaudible] perspective, especially with nuances, like with females, or being from a minority group, that wealth of knowledge that I had and difference of opinion when I first started was quite scary for me, because I didn't know whether to impress [inaudible] or whether to negate. Because [inaudible] that my diversity had a completely different perspective on some issues that were being discussed. So, it took a lot of confidence to be able to say, "No, we can have differing and diverse perspectives, if that makes for a better board."

**Andrew**

When I first went on I thought you'd have to find your place and you wouldn't get a voice until quite a way down the track, but that's really changed.

So the dynamics when I first in it was very Australian. New Zealand is very small and there wasn't really an equal voice; there wasn't equality in the documentation either. So sorted that out over the time and we've got more of a voice. But the dynamic I guess was, whether it's stereotypical or not, that New Zealand is so small that they're on this board but they're on the board because they have to be on the board; rather than it sort of being viewed as a necessity.

So that was the dynamic I got coming in and I think a lot of that had stemmed from the reason I ended up on the board; is that the person who was booted off the board, for want of a better word, had caused a lot of troubles and they'd just had enough of them.

Helen is able to track her own personal journey of self-expression and influences, remarking gaining a qualification in governance did not feature within this process. She divulges this choice originates from her belief system. She is able to share her development in gaining her own voice and reflects that the asking of questions is part of her approach. She talks about supporting and encouraging others along their journey, especially new members, by emphasising the need for newcomers to “re-ask the hard questions that those sitting around the table have been trying to address and they've almost stopped talking about”. Here she indicates the need for a new injection of energy and new perspectives to be brought to the table from new board members. She wants new board members to not hesitate in asking questions and to act in a confident, positive and assertive way, which is echoed by Tommy's observational narrative, as a new term board member, as he is willing to stand up and be noticed. Helen's view differs considerably from the actions new board members accounts (see new board member silence discourse).

Similarly, in this excerpt, from her reflective interview, Samantha maps her own journey of finding her voice. She illustrates one extreme of being frightened (“scary for me”), and another where she eventually has confidence (“took a lot of confidence”). Intimidation is

evident as she compares herself with the more experienced board members in the room. However, although she feels devalued and belittled in comparison to others, she then contradicts herself. She states “your vote is still the same vote as the other person next to you” indicating an equal position irrespective of your knowledge. She talks of having the right “to make your opinion or voice be heard”, and “you are totally entitled to do that”. But she is undecided in how to act in her position as being a minority female (“I didn’t know whether to impress or negate”).

Finally, Andrew offers an alternative way of finding your voice. He discusses the approach to finding an equal voice, and mirrors some of what Samantha says about “same vote” when she talks about ‘voice’ and being heard. He made assumptions when joining a board (“first went on”) that fitting in (“find your place”) and securing a voice (“get a voice”) would take more time (“way down the track”) than he originally anticipated. He uses the verb ‘to find’ when talking about his voice. To find something means you are successful in obtaining something, and Andrew talks of finding “your place” and “a voice”. A place is a particular point, position, an area of space, and location. He thought obtaining his ‘place’ (position, role) was going to take more time than it actually did. His preconceptions and ideas were proved wrong, as he is suggesting he has found his place and voice a lot sooner than he originally anticipated. Andrew talks of being recruited to an international board. He comments about the inequalities he noticed in views and opinions (voice) and in the paperwork (documentation) (presuming he is relating this to the agenda and board papers). This was only a temporary thing as this problem has now been resolved (“sorted that out over the time”). He refers to “we’ve got more of a voice”. This could mean there are others apart from himself on the board who are New Zealanders, or that he is one person representing New Zealand. He refers to himself as “we” and uses “they” to

mean others. It is plausible to deduce that he is representing New Zealand and so refers to himself as “we” to mean belonging and attached to a country.

He questions “but they’re on the board because they have to be on the board”. It is not clear in this statement who he is referring to other than making the suggestion of board members being representational. His excerpt shows how time is a factor in obtaining a voice, and is part of the process of finding your voice.

Next Philip converges talk about ethnicity with finding the voice he is most comfortable with.

### ***Excerpt Two***

#### **Philip**

I think I’ve discovered this as well which is an unfortunate trait for this country, a trend for this country is that we don’t have many Pacific New Zealanders in governance. It’s a very sad indictment where in that governance decision making level you’re not getting that perception. And I wouldn’t even count myself as a Pacific New Zealand voice because my professional life has always been in the mainstream.

Q: Okay. That’s interesting.

A: Every role I’ve been in I’m not in that role because I want to be a Pacific voice, I’m in that role because I’ve got a certain skillset and were leading that project or leading that organisation. But when I’ve been on a governance role people have asked for that voice as well. So, discovering that, that there’s a shallow pool of governance people. However, there’s also fantastic people coming through. I mean, most good Pacific New Zealand leaders are currently, which is generational change, but currently either (1) in the business sector, and (2) in the mainstream business sector. They just need an entry point back into their communities. But it’s globally. I mean, you find that across the world. I mean, in Canada 20 years ago they created those. When you’ve got one of the biggest Tamil communities or other South Asian communities and you don’t have... I mean, 30 years ago they figured out, oh gosh, we don’t have the voices. But the people that ended up getting were all people who didn’t jump up and say: Oh look, I’m a Tamil or I’m an Indian Canadian, they just happened to be.

Philip provides his views on the lack of minority groups on boards in New Zealand. Although he identifies with one minority group – ‘Pacific New Zealander’ – he does not recognise this voice as belonging to him and would prefer not to voice it. Instead, he prefers to identify with his professional voice. He explains his dilemma of being asked to represent the views of Pacific New Zealand and also provide a voice regarding his professional skills and leading capabilities. Here he is able to exercise two voices due to his ethnicity, but there appears to be a tension. He must decide when and how to voice either his ethnicity or his professional voice. He has secured his voice and can label his voice but exercises a choice in terms of which one he prefers to use.

### ***Observational Narrative***

As mentioned in the ‘beyond the boardroom’ narrative, it is difficult to locate one for this discursive cluster. Visible signs and conduct from my observations on searching for a voice are problematic to track. Attempts to find a voice link to a key debate of identities in organisational settings believing individuals search for an authentic self (A.D. Brown, 2015). While pursuing ‘authenticity’, individuals encounter identity dilemmas and liminality (Beech, 2011), echoing the in-betweenness of this discourse.

### **Summary**

The first two discourses emphasised communication, either nonverbal in the boardroom or communication occurring away from the boardroom. The third discourse signals a need to explore the existential question: Who am I, as board members search for a sense of belonging, fitting in and to locate their ‘true’ selves. It conjures up ‘soul searching’ with relentless efforts to find their voices, be in touch with their core self, or find belonging and purpose. This discourse also raises diversity issues in the boardroom around ethnicity and gender in the boardroom too.

## Chapter Nine

### Voice Discourses: ‘Speaking Out’

#### Introduction

The antithesis of silence is voice. Speaking ‘up’ and ‘out’ feature as prominently as being quiet in board member accounts. Revisiting the literature on silence and voice in Chapter Four indicates the need for silence to be ‘resolved.’ Specifically, the Human Resource Management literature addresses employee engagement strategies for encouraging contribution and eliciting workers’ views and opinions. Board governance studies extensively promote active participation from board members during discussions and decision-making, and a willingness to question and challenge others (W.A. Brown, 2007; Forbes & Milliken, 1999; Ingley & Van der Walt, 2003; Kiel & Nicholson, 2005; Nadler, 2004; Roberts et al., 2005). Three discourses feature in ‘voice’ accounts. First, the expectation of board members to have a voice and speak ‘out’ to give diverse views, contribute and offer opinions is regarded as part of their role, particularly when moral issues are encountered. Second, asking questions is seen as a common activity around how to be in the boardroom and perceived as a crucial task. Asking questions involved considerations such as, *when* to ask questions, *what* to ask, and *how* to pose a question(s). Lastly, as a consequence of speaking ‘up’ and ‘out’ – airing your views, board members describe feelings of isolation and detachment in the last discourse of “being alone”. Embedded in these accounts is the use of terms such as ‘engage’, ‘contribute’, ‘participate’, and ‘involvement’. The term ‘voice’ featured frequently in board member accounts, as illustrated in the following three discourses.

**Voice Discourse One: Speaking Out and Up** - “I guess I’ve never had trouble speaking up or speaking out” (Kevin)

It is sometimes more desirable to remain silent and reserved in meetings, which as a newcomer involves intense identity work as illustrated in Chapter Seven in the discourse on newcomer silence. While members revealed the uncomfortable feelings and difficulties of speaking up to express their own views as a new member on a board, they spoke ‘out’ with relative ease and minimal hesitation in voice discourse one, ‘Speaking out and up’. To speak ‘up’ or ‘out’ simply means to give an opinion in public. Often expressing views can be about protesting or defending something. ‘Speaking out’ as opposed to ‘speaking up’ is synonyms with ‘sounding off’ or ‘spouting off’ – meaning to speak at length or loudly. Other words and phrases used in this first discourse are:

There will be times where you’ll have different views or opinions  
Differences of views and opinions are actually what we’re here for  
Being able to speak up when you see something that isn’t right  
Members speak up very strongly about decisions

We can speak out, speak up more, the courage to speak up now, when to speak, giving my penny’s worth, conflicting opinions, personal opinions, vent their opinions, people are voicing their opinions, important to get diverse views, very strongly held views, I had to say, we had to say, they had a say as well, now I’m a little bit more forthright, have to assert yourself, very, very engaged, engage in the conversation, heavily engaged, actively involved, rules of engagement

The verb ‘to vent’ is used (“vent their opinions”). To vent something often means to express emotion or frustration, as well as the need to display strong emotions (‘I need to vent’). I think of a vent as a small opening or valve, which when opened releases steam or liquid quickly and forcefully. Applying this image to a person conjures up releasing pent up feelings and thoughts. Another expression is ‘to get it off my chest’. To be able to get something out in the open unhindered is liberating. Attempting to stop someone venting is not an easy task. Venting is action-oriented and in combination with phrases such as

“members speak up very strongly about decisions” and “very strongly held views” indicates a strength of conviction. The word ‘strongly’ demonstrates action powerfully and even forcibly. Combined with “bit more forthright” and “assert yourself”, it reflects board members’ perception of the need to project yourself forward.

Board members also described how they needed “courage”, to be “forthright” and the ability to be assertive in meetings. Being brave and undeterred illustrates another dimension to being a board member. As well as the views and opinions of board members being categorised as “very strongly held”, they are “different” and “diverse” and even at times “personal”. Expressing alternative ideas and views could result in “conflicting opinions” and disputes, indicating challenge and debate is happening. These actions are considered as essential – “important to get diverse views”.

The verbs ‘venting’ and ‘voicing’ appear alongside the need ‘to give’ (“giving my penny’s worth”). The phrase ‘to give your penny’s worth’, also referred to as ‘to give two pennies worth’, describes someone giving their opinions regardless of others wanting to hear them. Additionally, ‘had’ as in ‘to have’ is expressed often, but with different pronouns – “we had to say”, “I had to say”, “they had a say as well” and “just had to say”. This conveyed to me an immediacy to saying something and voicing opinions.

As mentioned from the voice literature, engaging employees in workplaces is deemed to be a step towards a positive work culture. If organisations are able to address issues, allowing expression of views and opinions, rather than leaving problems unaddressed, this manifests in the elimination of toxic working environments. The phrase “rules of engagement” was used by the board members. This phrase has associations with war and military manoeuvres. The ‘rules’ refer to what someone can and cannot do in a warfare scenario. The conduct of army personnel is strictly controlled, including the use and degree

of force directed against the enemy. The metaphor aligns with other war imagery from the pilot interviews and Terry (holding back) and reinforces the idea of standards and norms prevailing about what can be said, who can say it, when to say it, and in what way (i.e., how forceful should the view be).

### ***Excerpt One***

Having established the need to raise issues and speak up in board proceedings, below Olivia, Elaine and Lesley indicate the reasons why some board members will speak up and out. All mentioned their motivations and a compulsion to speak out when faced with moral issues and ethical dilemmas.

#### **Olivia**

But I know myself, I think lack of confidence in areas. I think sometimes you keep yourself a bit numb, where in actual fact chances are if you've got a question pretty much someone else has probably got that same question too at the table. So getting it out on the table is very important.

I don't think I've been in a situation where something's happened that I thought was unethical and I didn't speak up. I think as a whole, people on the board, that I've been involved with anyway, generally do have a positive outcome focus. They want the best for the stakeholders they're representing.

The only time I have never said something is [inaudible]. If a bit of courage – and this is when I was younger – I'd say "Excuse me, what does that mean?" These days I'm a bit more forthright in it, which is cool; just age and experience etc. that helps you out.

#### **Elaine**

When a budget was presented that I just thought wasn't achievable and it had some areas that I had read concerns, the meeting had gone way over time, we were out of time, we were way out of time, people are tired, it's in the evening, they've had a long day, we've had a lot of in-depth discussions, you can get a feel around the table that no one really wants something major brought up at that time, and yet I felt duty bound that I couldn't just sit there and not say something. So, yes, a number of times, on one particular board rather than the other, and that also comes down to the split nature of the board and it being very much in transition. Decisions being relitigated on that board.

#### **Lesley**

Absolutely. A board needs to generally be run by consensus; it shouldn't ever need to go to a vote. There will be times when a vote is needed, of course, but a good board should

get everything out on the table, and people will accept other's views, and make a decision on that basis. And I accept that; you're not the only voice. I suppose the only time that I would be concerned, is if I felt that perhaps a decision was made which was not in the best interests of the organisation. Maybe from a risk perspective, or a spending perspective.

A lot of what we do is real judgement call; there is no right or wrong answer. But if I felt that we were going down a track where I didn't think it was, say, financially prudent for the organisation, I would – and I have done this before, not at that meeting, but I've actually said, "Could you please record that I'm not comfortable with this," but accept that the board has made a decision.

Olivia states she would not hesitate to speak out if faced with a moral issue. She recognises the need to voice concerns ("getting it out on the table") and asking for help ("Excuse me, what does that mean?"). The reason she seeks answers is feeling a lack confidence due to her experience and age, and she also refers to "keeping yourself a bit numb". Referring to being "numb" indicates being emotionally detached or not knowing how to feel in a situation. Throughout her interview, she referred frequently to being guided by her "moral compass" when making decisions.

The account from Elaine confirms that when encountering unethical instances, rather than say nothing, the requirement or the ability to speak up is a necessity. Elaine confesses to having been outspoken a number of times, and this occurred more frequently on one board. She provides a scenario towards the end of a meeting that has run over time, when everyone is tired and ready to leave. The raising of a financial issue leaves her feeling uncomfortable, so rather than "just sit there and not say something" she feels compelled to speak out. She refers to being "duty bound", which means morally or legally obliged to do something – you feel it is your duty to do it. This tells us no matter what the circumstances, such as being "way out of time", Elaine will always be guided by what she feels is the right thing to do, and that is to speak up and raise the issue to everyone.

Both Lesley and Olivia refer to the importance of airing issues (“a good board should get everything out on the table” – Lesley). This is another way of saying there should not be any secrets or issues classed as taboo, or keeping concerns to yourself and hidden.

Speaking up and acting in the best interests of the organisation and stakeholders is paramount for them too. As Olivia mentions, “they want the best for the stakeholders they’re representing”, and Lesley will even go to the lengths of having her dissatisfaction formally recorded, saying “Could you please record that I’m not comfortable with this,” but accepts “that the board has made a decision”. This shows agency on her part and the confidence to do so.

She shows her part within the decision-making process, accepting she is “not the only voice” and is required to act in the best “interests of the organisation”. However, things are not black or white (“no right or wrong answers”). From a philosophical perspective everything we know is relative, whatever answer we give will be analysed by others, some may agree, some will disagree, while others may have no opinion at all. This is what Lesley is alluding to here.

Where she felt strongly about a financial issue that could potentially harm the organisation, the same as Roger, she has spoken up (but not within the meeting I observed). Similar to Robert in ‘going with the flow’ she asks her voice and concerns be recorded. This seems to be acting in a contradictory way, agreeing with the board’s decision and at the same time having her concerns openly and visibly recorded against the outcome of the decision. However, she is not prepared to go with the majority decision and say nothing. She opposes the decision and gets this physically recorded as a contingency against future outcomes from the decision. Lesley shows her ability to act as a lone voice by this conduct, as elaborated on in the third discourse of voice.

### *Excerpt Two*

Terry feels compelled to intervene on his first board meeting to quell the unsatisfactory behaviour he is facing.

#### **Terry**

Yeah. It was quite contentious. The reason I'd been asked to go on there is somebody had resigned from the board having become quite disaffected with what was going on. Some of the conduct of certain board members were just way out of line. There was a lot of aggression. There was a lot of pent up frustration. This is just all [inaudible] all that over the table and that what was the meetings were like in the first one. I said, "This is just not acceptable." I was just a member there. I wasn't the chair. But I probably assumed the chair for a very short period of time and said, "This is not gonna happen," and, "We're gonna have to resolve this." I probably used a bit of my management experience because I've done this job for 30 years, I've been around very, very contentious issues and very militant unionist type stuff and all that came to the fore. Things did settle down a bit but I still would put the control of the meeting at the feet of the chair. They've just got to control the meeting. And when people are not in line with the board policies, we do have standards of conduct and every one of my board members signs it at the beginning of every year and we go through it and what's expected and we can point back to it and say, "We're not really aligning to this." My first one was a baptism of fire.

Being outspoken at their first board meeting was not usual behaviour for board members, as described in the newcomer's silence discourse in Chapter Seven. Terry likens his first board meeting to a "baptism of fire" as he faced severe challenges. The problems were unsavoury behaviour that was disruptive and confrontational. He was "just a member" at this difficult introductory meeting. However, instead of sitting back to assess how the dynamics worked, he took up the role of pseudo chair ("I probably assumed the chair for a very short period of time"). Unlike Olivia, he was able to draw on his knowledge of conflict management ("I've done this job for 30 years") to confidently converse with the dysfunctional board ("a lot of aggression/pent up frustration"). He was able to 'speak out' his dissatisfaction as a new member ("This is just not acceptable") and articulate the necessity to cease the disruption and confrontational attitudes.

Although he exercised agency and stepped beyond his role as a board member in this instance, he believes that responsibility for the conduct of meetings should be left with the chair (“I still would put the control of the meeting at the feet of the chair”). His beliefs contradict his actions of facilitating as though he was a chair as a solution to resolving the bad and unruly behaviour he encountered. He assumed the authority as though he was chair, making several direct statements to prevent any additional unruly actions from others (“This is not gonna happen”). Terry is a follower of rules and was able to immediately notice when these were being contravened (“out of line”). He believes that behaviours of a governor can be categorised into good and bad, showing a functionalist approach to the activities of board members. He mentions “standards of conduct” that set the scene for what should happen and by whom in meetings. ‘Standards’ suggests rigidity and conformity. Terry outlines the ideal conduct of a board member based on what is acceptable and what is not. It could be seen as a predetermined role with the outcome that the individual is passive. In talking about how he controls the board and expectations around conduct he says “my board”. The use of “my” signals something belonging to him. The critical stance I am taking towards identity as being something continually on the move, shaped and fluid sees the individual as active within the work they do on their identities. Here Terry indicates he is a controller of others and prepared to step into different territories (beyond his role). But as well as laying down the rules and standards, he also is seen to be flaunting them as he intervenes and assumes the role of a chair when he wasn’t in that designated position at that time.

### ***Observational Narrative***

The unexpected happenings are captured in this narrative on speaking out and up.

*The meeting started briskly to a flurry of activity as the first agenda item was introduced. The chair offered congratulations to a member of the organisation for receiving an award. Just before she was about to finish, a board member(Harrold) interjected. He pointed out*

*a spelling mistake in the set of board papers. However, three other board members said everything was correct and as it should be, one stated he was mistaken. At this comment Harrold apologised and then laughter broke out around the room. Much later on in the meeting, towards the end Harrold raised another typo. A board member agreed and he replied with “At least I got this one right this time,” again laughter erupted but even louder between everyone.*

In the three board meetings I observed laughter frequently occurred. I was surprised at how many quips happened and the extent of ‘banter’ in the meetings. These episodes changed the atmosphere and tempo of the meeting. I also was not expecting comments about trivial and small matters such as spelling errors to be raised. I assumed board members would be speaking out and up more frequently about formal organisational and governance matters. This leads to questions such as how are effective decisions made without challenging and robust opinion sharing and what place can humour have in board proceedings?

## **Summary**

In relation to being actively engaged and involved in the board meetings and proceedings, voice discourse one gives an indication of the types of issues being raised and why board members opt to speak up and out rather than remaining silent. One prominent discourse within the whole voice discourse is the necessity to not just give views and opinions, but to ask questions. This is covered in the second discourse next.

**Voice Discourse Two: Asking Questions** - “You know, in other words no questions a dumb question” (Mandy)

The previous discourse cluster illustrates how speaking out happened over different concerns (i.e., dysfunctional behaviour, financial issues). In this second discourse, board members favour asking questions when speaking up and out. This was a prevalent and

entrenched activity, indicating the investigative nature of their work. By using probing questions and being inquisitive, board members display a disruptive side, rather than going with the flow, as in silence discourse - Chapter Seven. In this discourse cluster they are prepared to unsettle the harmony of the board and ‘rock the boat’, where others have refrained from doing so (holding back cluster).

Parts of sentences, words and key phrases relating to this are discussed next.

Asking difficult questions because that’s about your only tool in the tool kit.  
They would challenge the Executive Director in the meetings  
As long as everybody’s asking the questions in relation to that strategy

Asking questions for clarity, just asking good questions, asking a lot of questions, there’s no shame in asking, you’ve got to be asking questions, eliciting certain information, you’d start to enquire, asked to contribute, asking me for my views, he wanted diverse views, they also weren’t afraid to challenge, I challenge colleagues about that, provocateur of new ideas, to be challenging of its status quo

This cluster emphasises how asking questions is a core activity, as board members explain their approach to asking questions, and how they are asked to contribute and engage through the use of questions. Board members are expected to ask a lot of questions and they termed questions as “probing”, “difficult”, “hard”, “powerful”, “suitable”, and “certain”. This adds a whole new layer to the complexity of speaking up when asking a question. Asking questions is a valuable commodity and an essential piece of equipment (“tool in the tool kit”) needed to be a board member. By using this analogy, a board member’s role can be likened to the job of a builder. The use of tools in a job allows the close examination of things and provides the ability to perform tasks to the required standard.

Using the word “challenge” to explain how board members would draw others into a confrontational situation was mentioned on several occasions. The result is board members

disagreeing and readily speaking out to voice their concerns. Anthony saw one of his many roles as a “provocateur of new ideas” (“I’ve become more nuanced about what different roles you play depending on where you are in a board”). This shows deliberate actions to incite others into action or sharing their views. Anthony remarks he does this not “because I think it’s entirely right, but “cause I wanna test the metal of what the status quo looks like”. Here he plays the role of ‘devil’s advocate’ in meetings to force others to speak and debate and does not want to settle for harmony.

The phrase “no shame in asking” means not to be embarrassed about asking questions at a meeting as nothing bad will come of this even if others may not approve. Maybe in some environments, board members are worried about how they will be perceived if they ask questions in general, or certain questions. The following excerpts will expand on the notion of speaking up and the asking of questions.

### ***Excerpt One***

The asking of questions is described by Malcolm, Felicity and Mandy. Malcolm discusses the importance of asking the ‘why’ question, Felicity articulates her endeavours in searching for the most appropriate questions, and lastly Mandy demonstrates the need to ask questions even if the answers are apparent.

#### **Malcolm**

The more negative ones where would be... See when I've been on a board, I've got a reasonably strong character and therefore characteristic and therefore I suppose that's why my memory is probably more positive when I've been able to help a constructive conversation. Generally, that's not by making statements, it's by just asking good questions, hold on, why are we doing this? As everyone out there saying, even when you're not chair, sorry, I'm just not comfortable moving on yet, I'm not sure we've fully discussed this.

#### **Felicity**

It's probably about asking questions that people haven't thought of, being able to bring in, as I say, the network, the genuine network where you can see a fit for someone to fill

the gap or bring advice or experience to the table, and just being support for a CEO or a general manager of whatever the head of the operation is titled, being someone, something of a sounding board for what can be a relatively lonely position at times.....

So, yeah, those are the things that would come to mind. I admire directors who ask questions that you didn't think to ask and it's like, "Oh my goodness, why didn't I think of that? It's so obvious." So, when I read the board papers I'm always looking for the question that no one else is going to find, and from my perspective, being able to do that is adding value because even if there is a straight up answer there's going to be times and I have experienced there being times where you see nobody's thought of it and it's an issue. So, yeah, I guess that's my perspective on adding value.

**Mandy**

So, you've got to be asking questions, even if you think you know the answer, so to speak or you think you know an answer or you feel very strongly that there's a course of action that could be taken, you have to ask questions to illicit those thoughts. So, as a Board member it can be actually frustrating because you can see, or you feel that somehow there's a real important issue here, you've got to kind of tackle it by getting other people, the management team to understand that it's an issue. So, it's a leadership challenge in a very different way. Yeah, so that's what I feel it's like.

Firstly, Malcolm positions himself as having the strength of character to be able to bypass the chair and speak out to ask the 'why' questions. He is comfortable in voicing his dissatisfaction and concerns to others, and openly admitting he is not happy ("I'm just not comfortable"). As an assertive board member, he is willing to take control of a debate and interrupt the conversation if he feels he needs to ("hold on"). He will offer an apology ("sorry") in case others in the room are offended by his actions. He is conscious he is holding up the meeting and preventing it from progressing any further, but needs to ask his question rather than just making a statement. This highlights agency as he is not accepting the predetermined role of 'going with the flow' or succumbing to 'rubber stamping' conduct in the boardroom. It shows he is active in shaping who he wants to be regardless of the conventions of the role and how others respond.

Next, Felicity talks about adding value in a number of ways and one of those activities is asking questions. However, not just ordinary questions but unique ones (“asking questions that people haven’t thought of”). She holds others in high admiration (“I admire directors who ask questions that you didn’t think to ask”) who have the ability to ask novel and intriguing questions. She expends a lot of energy on thinking, searching and creating questions (“I’m always looking for the question that no one else is going to find”). She positions herself as a detective (asking those not so obvious questions), and as a sounding board and networker to bring added value to the board. Adding value and contributing are key aspects of her expectations around who to be (sounding board, networker and supporter). For Felicity speaking up is about being novel, unique and thought provoking, rather than settling for predictable outcomes (“straight up answer”).

In contrast to Felicity who is active in her approach to thinking, searching and asking specific questions, Mandy expresses compulsion and urgency around asking questions (“you’ve got to be/you have to ask”). This can be despite answers being visible and obvious (“even if you think you know the answer”). She uses questioning in this way to “illicit those thoughts” and to reduce the frustration she feels when others don’t understand there is a problem (“there’s a real important issue here, you’ve got to kind of tackle it by getting other people, the management team to understand that it’s an issue”). However, the asking of questions is not universally accepted by everyone, and doesn’t appear to be in everybody’s toolbox, as shown in the next excerpt.

### ***Excerpt Two***

Elaine is able to compare two boards she serves on when referring to the asking of questions.

**Elaine**

I would challenge the general manager whenever they... the general manager came across as very defensive and was generally uninterested in pursuing or even researching new opportunities that the board members came up with or new ideas or suggestions for improvements, and didn't give reporting on time, other things that made it difficult to operate at the strategic level.

This seemed to be accepted by the older, by the long-standing board members. One made a comment to me outside of the meeting and said, "Keep on asking your questions, keep on challenging, don't give up, I'm behind you all the way, you're new, you're young and you can ask all of those great things and I'm a hundred percent behind you," which was a lovely comment to have and gave me some insight into the level of frustration that there was and perhaps the sense of not getting anywhere and kind of giving up.

The other board I'm on is quite a stark contrast to that even though they're both in the not for profit sector. This one is very much structured along the lines of a corporate board, very good minuting, the agenda is very clear. The expectations of the board members are very clearly set out. A lot of contextual material is provided. High standard of reporting. Everything sent through in plenty of time. Board members get a lot of notice. It's very well structured. The meetings very rarely go over. They meet less frequently, they meet fifty percent less frequently than the other board. Roughly the same number of board members.

Elaine contrasts her board experiences. Referring to the first board, she expresses her disapproval of it as a dysfunctional board and how this was the norm for some long serving members ("didn't give reporting on time, other things that made it difficult to operate at the strategic level"). She talks of ideas and suggestions being ignored ("and was generally uninterested in pursuing or even researching new opportunities that the board members came up with or new ideas or suggestions for improvements"). For the other board she describes a perfect scenario of a board meeting, reinforced with phrases such as "very good minuting", "very clearly set out", "high standard", and "very well structured". The excerpt shows the willingness of some members to challenge and ask questions, such as herself as a novice, as well as illustrating the reluctance of others to do the same.

Both her age and length of time serving on a board are raised by others as linked to her willingness to speak up and ask questions ("you're new, you're young and you can ask all

of those great things...”). There is also a sense of despair and gloom that the support Elaine receives outside the meeting (“I’m a hundred percent behind you”) could not be vocalised in the meeting (“One made a comment to me outside of the meeting”). In some meetings board members are reluctant to voice their questions, leaving this for others to do. Elaine senses the way others feel, which is helpless. Many feel unable to change anything so have virtually given up trying (“and perhaps the sense of not getting anywhere and kind of giving up”). This excerpt informs us about the interactions between others, showing others to be inactive and unresponsive.

This excerpt contradicts the newcomer behaviour of remaining quiet. Although some are unwilling to voice when first joining a board, others will take the plunge and do this regardless. Elaine is presented as a new set of eyes with the ability to ask questions, which contradicts the newcomer stance of waiting until the board dynamics have been figured out. The use of questioning can unsettle and disrupt the status quo by challenging as opposed to accepting. Isolated board members have the capacity to disrupt and be instigators of change, and progress things with an energetic, fresh and new feel.

### ***Observational Narrative***

The ‘art’ of questioning is illustrated in this narrative.

*The board room was a small oblong gold-fish room. On one side there was visibility through frosted glass into an open plan work area where employees moved around between each others work stations. Sebastian, the chair commenced the meeting with “minutes, decisions, actions and conflicts” He then asked for the minutes of the previous meeting to be “moved” and they were immediately by Veronica. He then asked for “any conflicts, amendments and changes” The first part of the meeting proceeded at a slick and swift pace. Moving onto the strategy progress report Sebastian states “I take it as read from anyone..any questions from others...any comments?” Timothy asks a question, “how much did we ask?” Sebastian laughs commenting “I cannot read my own writing.” Everyone joins in the laughter.*

*Questioning was a constant feature of Sebastian style of chairing. In another episode the CEO asks a question “What is the best way to go from here?” Sebastian bounces straight back with “what are the options?”*

This board meeting is chaired differently from one described by Elaine. It was also chaired differently from the other two I observed. Sebastian displayed skilful chairing through the use of questioning. He would ask counter questions, open questions to the whole board and invite views from each board member. His style enabled participation from everyone present. He continually probed for information, facts, opinions and details. When one or two board members were more vocal, he would ask, “any questions from others”? Studies indicate the need for active participation in meetings, and the leadership style of the chair is crucial in the shaping of all board relationships. These studies have a tendency to focus on the chair-CEO dyad, rather than as identified by Veltrop et al. (2020) how the chair leads the board in times of CEO-board disputes.

Another consideration from the narrative is again humour, as seen in the ‘speaking up and out’ narrative and its influence and impact in board meetings. Also, the humility played by the chair, as he confesses to not being able to decipher a figure. This means he is not in a position to give an answer to a question from another board member. This is probably something we would not expect from a chair, or other board members.

## **Summary**

Thinking and figuring out what questions to ask and when are a core part of board members contributions and interactions with others. This discourse cluster indicates views about the use of questions and who is more likely to question and why. The difficulties and dilemmas of doing this are also conveyed. In the following discourse the consequences of asking questions, and standing out are articulated.

### **Voice Discourse Three: Being Alone - “It can be quite lonely” (Edward)**

Usually as part of a team, feelings of isolation and loneliness are minimalised. However, within the last discourse cluster of voice, board members comment about the tensions and stresses they experienced about speaking up and sharing their views. Whilst airing views, alternative perspectives and concerns is an expectation of the position, acting in this way can be un-collegial resulting in angst and unwelcome exposure within a group setting.

Words, phrases, parts of sentences addressed being “alone”, “lonely” and “the only one”.

A lone voice, my own view, not alone, not a lone wolf, I was not an outlier, a bit lonely, quite lonely, I was out on my own for some months, the only one, the only one doing any work, I mean I think they probably knew I didn't agree, I didn't agree with all of it

To do something on your own means you receive no help or support from others, which can be reflected in the emotion of ‘loneliness’. This feeling was common when ideas and concerns were expressed that did not align with the board (“I didn't agree”). The association between speaking up and disagreeing, thereby placing yourself as a minority, was evident. Some board members sought reassurances and confirmation they were “not alone” or “an outlier” as this was an uncomfortable position to be in.

In the following Roger talks about feeling ostracised, Elaine attempts to avoid being in the minority and Yvonne illustrates that performing ‘her job’ leaves her feeling lonely.

#### ***Excerpt One***

##### **Roger**

That's why I resigned. Again, if you feel- my own view is that if you're on a board that you are constantly in disagreement with; or frustrated with the decisions, then why stay? There will be times where you'll have different views or different opinions, but as long as there's nothing that's- and so there should be. I think a board should have some great discussions and some different views, and so it shouldn't necessarily be harmonious; but at the end of the day, the role of the chair is to bring the board together into a place that

people are comfortable with. But if it's something that's so core to the being of the organisation, then there is no point being a lone voice.

**Elaine**

Probably the saving grace there was having a great chair who was extremely supportive and openly asked for feedback, which was fantastic, and knowing that each of the other new board members was of, if not a similar view to mine, exactly the same view as mine, so knowing that I was not alone, I was not a lone wolf, I was not an outlier, that gave me a lot of comfort and that also, to the point that I thought maybe it's just a matter of riding it through until we've got a majority and until we can influence things for more change.

**Yvonne**

I tend not to be a compliant board often; I often ask a lot of questions and don't necessarily take the received with them; because I think that's my job as a board member. Sometimes that can be a bit lonely; it can also be a bit, "Mm, am I wasting people's time, am I flogging a dead..." you know all those sort of questions that you have if you're on your own in a group.

Roger starts his story about how disagreeing with others led to his resignation from a board. Immediately, he has shown his agency in exercising this choice. When explaining the events leading up to his resignation, he is hesitant about revealing his emotions. He commences a sentence "Again, if you feel-...", then stops abruptly mid-sentence. He may have been wanting to say 'if you feel sad, upset, annoyed or angry' but decided not to continue and instead rationalises his decision to leave. Roger has not followed the 'party line' and simply gone with the majority decision, so encountering a series of disagreements. Having these disputes has left him frustrated and "a lone voice".

The term "lone voice" can also be referred to as 'a voice crying in the wilderness'. Both describe a person who is prepared to voice a danger or a truth that is important but nobody else seems to be paying attention. Hence you are in a neglected, inhospitable or abandoned area – a wilderness, or in the political sense – 'a position of disfavour' having lost your power. Expressing these issues or ideas can make the person unpopular and feel ignored. Roger is motivated to act in this way by his belief that "great discussions" are not based on

being amicable and cordial. The sharing of differing views is what board work involves (“and so it shouldn’t necessarily be harmonious”). He continues to do this despite placing himself in a position of “constantly in disagreement with” until he becomes fatigued and resigns (“then why stay?”).

In a difficult meeting Elaine remarks the only thing good about it (“the saving grace”) was the actions of the chair. In contrast, Roger conveys dissatisfaction about the actions of the chair. This would suggest Roger is deflecting responsibility to the chair for how he felt as a “lone voice” (“the role of the chair is to bring the board together into a place that people are comfortable with.”). Elaine describes the chair as “great” and “supportive”, which helped her to speak up. In her case the chair was eliciting views and opinions from board members (“openly asked for feedback”). This gave her the opportunity to see how in tune or out of tune she was with other board member views. She says they were all on the same page (“similar/exactly the same view as mine”). She distinguishes herself as being one of a number of new board members (“other new board members”). This could suggest factions and possible divides amongst members on this board. She is wanting reassurance and confirmation (“gave me a lot of comfort”) that her views and subsequent decisions are in line with others as she doesn’t want to be ‘*alone, a lone wolf or an outlier*’. The word *lone wolf* mirrors Roger, although in this conversation she now knows that she is not a lone voice or outlier, which is the opposite of how Roger felt. An outlier is a person (or thing) situated away from, or detached from a main body/group. They will differ from all other members of a group and be classed as distant, isolated and at the edge (existing outside). Elaine has received confirmation she is not in that position because the other new members think the same as she does.

Perhaps as a new board member she doesn’t want to be seen as outspoken and wants to toe the party line with others, or is unsure of herself. Her last sentence conveys her reasoning

for acting as a collective of new board members, as they (“we”) are wanting to secure a majority at some point, and are prepared for “riding it through until we’ve got a majority”. Using the word *until* suggests having to wait for a time when the new board members “can influence things for more change”. Within this board, Elaine sees herself as distinct from other more long-standing board members and this excerpt clearly shows the dynamics at play between the new and other board members. She sees herself as currently not in a position to make the necessary changes she and other new board members would like, and so is not showing agency.

At times within the decision-making process you may not be in a position to act, but instead have to ride it out (“riding through”) until such a time when you can act. You have to therefore exercise patience, endurance and tolerance and gauge the timing of your actions. This phrase *riding it through* or ‘riding it out’ means to succeed in surviving, getting through something such as a bad or difficult time. You have to endure something that is unpleasant. In this conversation, Elaine and the other new members are allowing others to voice their views and influence even though they do not agree. She was prepared to sit things out until another time to voice and influence matters on the agenda.

Next, Yvonne purposely categorises herself as a *rule breaker* leaving her feeling lonely. Yvonne confesses to not always agreeing with others or obeying the rules (“I tend not to be a compliant board”). Her view is her role should be to ask the questions no one else appears to be asking. She mentions her position as being “a bit lonely” due to asking these questions. Yvonne appears uncertain and questions her own actions as she could be “wasting peoples time”. The phrase she began but didn’t finish, “flogging a dead...[horse]” means ‘to continue a particular endeavour that is a waste of time as the outcome is already decided’. She is wasting her effort and time on something she will

never influence, change or win. Acting this way makes you feel vulnerable, a minority and exposed as you are “on your own in a group”.

### ***Excerpt Two***

#### **Yvonne**

So you can feel quite lonely if say the mood of the meeting is very buoyant and hopeful about what’s going to happen in the future and you need to say, “But what about,” or “But if we do that then this will be a consequence.” The sort of but roll. Or it could also be, “Look we haven’t thought about...” an opportunity that might arise as a result of the decision. So it's kind of taking on a question or an assertion or hypothesis that hasn’t surfaced yet, and people are feeling quite comfortable in the decision that they’ve made and you’re rocking the boat on it. You’re saying, “But...” or “We should spend a bit more time on this.” That can be quite irritating for people who feel they’ve worked through something; and yet it can also be very important to ensure that the decision is properly tested before it's made, particularly if the decision really matters.

Later in the conversation, Yvonne describes acting the role of ‘agitator’ in meetings. She is acting as the lone voice that Roger was uncomfortable with, and which Elaine didn’t want to become. She is trying to balance how to be – between acting in a way that may negatively impact on others and be seen as annoying (“irritating for people”) and pushing for robust decision- making (“ensuring that the decision is properly tested”). She illustrates being the one member who is prepared to offer an alternative voice and interject if necessary (“But what about...”).

She feels compelled to speak out (“need to say”). Needing to do something reflects the necessity and an obligation to act, as opposed to ‘wanting’ which conveys a wish and desire to do so. Yvonne sees her role as exposing things that have previously being hidden (“hasn’t surfaced yet”). She is the ‘agitator’ and ‘disrupter’, or could be identified as a ‘trailblazer’ in attempting to unlock hidden mysteries or unearthing questions and assertions that would otherwise remain dormant. This is emphasised by her knowing the

role she has taken on; one of upsetting the status quo or harmony – “rocking the board”. She appreciates the importance of acting as a lone voice – “it can also be very important to ensure that the decision is properly tested before its made”. Roger did not expect every meeting to be harmonious, but he was not comfortable being the lone voice and the disrupter, to the point of leaving his position due to always being the member who would offer disagreement and alternative perspectives and not fall in with the majority easily. Elaine, on the other hand, sought reassurances about being like the other members, and wanted to avoid being the lone voice.

### ***Observational Narrative***

Drawing from my field notes to establish the ‘loneliness’ of board members was problematic. Classing an ‘outlier’ as someone who is aloof and detached by their actions is difficult, unless you include being silent. There were only a few board members who either remained completely silent for the whole board meeting or only spoke on one or two occasions. Determining an outlier as an individual who acts out of sync from others by speaking out of turn, or contrary to others views for most of the time was not evident in the three observations made.

### **Summary**

The discourse of a “lone voice” presents a contradictory position for board members with regard to the need to raise issues to help robust conversations, discussions and decision-making. Careful consideration is given to how this is done, how well this is accepted and received and ultimately if it is worth the effort. The conundrum for board members is – does the effort of speaking out against the majority outweigh the benefits gained through doing this? The deciding issue here is whether forging out on your own is worthwhile and if board members are able to cope and manage the feelings associated with doing so. Of

the three, Yvonne is in the position to rationalise and justify her rebellious ‘ways’. Raising concerns, pointing out difficulties, and standing up elicits emotional ‘fall out’. The last discourse of feeling lonely illuminates a strong emotional component. Identity work is infused with emotion and involves emotion work (Winkler, 2018). Previous accounts from Terry (holding back) prefers emotions are kept under wraps, and Anne’s reluctant to be emotional in the meeting (beyond the boardroom) make me wonder what emotional labour (Hochschild, 1979) is encountered by board members. I dwell on to what extent emotional labour occurs and how the expectations of governing shapes their feelings and emotions.

### **Conclusion to Findings Chapters**

In the preceding chapters I analyse three main sets of discursive resources board members draw on to construct versions of themselves. I document board member identities as a product of discourse: silence/betwixt/voice formed from ten discursive clusters. Each discourse has its own characteristics but overlap each other to construct board member identities. The three discourses inform us of how board members view themselves, the judgement calls they make in meetings, relationships with others and more significantly how individuals are a product of discourse. The next chapter will detail how these findings contribute to theory of processual approaches to identity, board dynamics, and how this informs the practitioner community including those governing and supporting board members.

# Chapter Ten

## Discussion

### Introduction

This chapter discusses the meanings and significance of my findings presented in the last three chapters. I start by revisiting the aims of this thesis and the methodological approach I used in this inquiry. I address the ‘So what?’ question by mapping research contributions both theoretically and from a practice perspective, before moving onto ‘What next?’ in the conclusions chapter (Chapter Eleven). Throughout the following sections I weave a series of ‘nagging’ questions that emerged from this study. These questions appeared while undertaking the *writing out* and the *writing up* phases as I was analysing the research material from the interviews and observations. During this chapter I discuss my main findings in relation to earlier research, balanced alongside a need to convey relevance to the practitioner community.

### Board Member Identity Work Research Aims

For as long as I can remember, I have always been interested to know why people do the work they do, and specifically how the work they do influences their sense of self.

Workplaces are an important context, as work life is “central to identity construction while posing various threats to identity stability” (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008, p. 100). Extending this fascination to my PhD topic I interviewed board members in New Zealand, who described the work they do, and in doing so presented versions of themselves. This is the essence of identity work (A.D. Brown, 2015; Snow & Andersen, 1987; Sveningsson & Alvesson,

2003). I steered away from researching identity types of board members. Instead my research aim was to understand what activities, strategies and resources informed their identity formation efforts. In particular, I was keen to explore the processes foregrounding their identity constructions and what this could inform us about governing.

As I discovered, investigating processual approaches to identity leads scholars to a number of metaphors (e.g., ‘play’ from Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010), but identity *work* is positioned as the most popular (A.D. Brown, 2015, 2020; R. Oswick & C. Oswick, 2020). Identities stemming from individuals engaging in identity work are slippery, loose and difficult to pinpoint (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). I selected discursive identity work from among a possible five types (A.D. Brown, 2017). It is underpinned by a social constructionist stance (A.D. Brown, 2017; Caza et al., 2018) and known for its reliance on “in talk” (A.D. Brown, 2017, 2020; Caza et al., 2018).

### **Unearthing *Tuning* as Identity Work**

As mentioned, I am guided by philosophical principles from social constructionism and believe people are active in shaping their identities. From a study about developing leaders, Carroll and Levy (2010, p. 215), citing Fairhurst (2007, p.104), state “identity work and construction attempt to view identity as a verb, a thing in motion, a working subjectivity”. In foregrounding identity movement using verbs, I revisit activities described by board members in three discourses of silence, betwixt and voice. These activities are refraining from speaking up as an individual in the boardroom, a tendency to remain aloof and subdued when attending a meeting for the first time, feeling cautious about what to say in a meeting, deciding whether to voice a concern or accept the majority stance, and wariness about raising some issues which are deemed better discussed outside of the meeting. Occurring frequently, these activities cause angst and form the reality of

board member identity work. Summarising identity, Kärreman and Frandsen (2020, p. 411) comment, it “tends to become most visible when it appears or feels problematic, such as when individuals face uncertainty....” As detailed in the discourses, board members serving on boards in New Zealand experience reservations about whether to speak up or stay silent in meetings they attend.

Based on these activities, I term board member processes of identity constructions as *tuning*. The labelling of identity formation processes as tuning was not immediately obvious, and I deliberated at length about the choice of verb. However, influential in my decision-making process was spotting an overwhelming angst and anguish emerging from board member discourses. Some struggled to raise their hand and voice concerns, but others did so freely. Overall a large number preferred to ‘melt into the shadows’, opting to be unassuming and silent and blend with the majority. This signalled to me a complicated flow of multiple activities, without an end settling point. Initially, the verb of *balancing* seemed a good fit, as in a balance between what could be said and what could not be said. However, this seemed too simplistic, because it fails to address the occasions when board members talked about when they were silenced by others and when covert communication happened (see the betwixt discourse clusters). Balancing is also an activity towards ultimately reaching an equilibrium. This raised questions: What was being balanced? Was it their identity? If identity is about balance, this would suggest a fixed state of equilibrium, and in turn a secure and stable identity. On the continuum of stability and fluidity (A.D. Brown, 2015), my adoption of a processual approach to identity means I identify at the extreme of identity fluidity. Balancing is, therefore, inappropriate to describe the process board members engage in. Alternatively, the verb to ‘fluctuate’ seemed to represent the discourses of the two extremes – silence and voice. Although this

offers restricted movement from one extreme to another, it didn't appear to capture variances or in between-between as a middle point discourse.

I revisited definitions and descriptions of identity work by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003). They detail an array of popular processes such as “forming”, “repairing”, “maintaining” and “strengthening”. Another list suggested by A.D. Brown (2015), discussed in Chapter Two, didn't spring up any ideas. In short, none were suitable to describe the movement of board member identity work informed by ten discursive clusters from silence, between and voice discourses. Lastly, after further thinking I considered the tension between saying nothing and speaking out as a series of activities and as a constant dilemma. I identified movement and activity in and out of a collective – the board. The verb ‘tuning’ thus aptly describes an endless list of movement possibilities and tensions, such as to tune in, to tune off and out, and tune up. Next, I discuss three tuning connotations in relation to board member descriptions of themselves.

The ten discursive clusters offer a range of possible variations for tuning as a process. However, it was not a simple case of matching the variations of tuning (tuning in, tuning out or tuning up) to each separate cluster, because disparity exists within each cluster as shown in Table 10.1.

Table 10.1 Illustration of discourse clusters and identity work as tuning

<b>Discourse clusters</b>	<b>Tuning in</b>	<b>Tuning out</b>	<b>Tuning up</b>
Silence- Being closed down	*	*	
Silence- Going with the flow	*	*	
Silence- Holding back	*		
Silence – New comer silence	*		*
Betwixt- Whispering & body language	*	*	
Betwixt- Beyond the boardroom	*	*	
Betwixt- Searching for a voice			*
Voice – Speaking up & out	*	*	
Voice – Asking questions		*	
Voice – Being alone		*	

The first two silence clusters show similarities in movement for tuning in and tuning out. The ‘Being closed down’ cluster reflects disciplinary action, explaining how out of tune board members are regulated (told to be quiet) to act in accordance with others (bring them into tune). This discourse illustrates the regulation of identities (who to be and how to act) in the managing of meetings and portrays tensions around working relationships. Tuning processes work in this discourse in the following way. I identify a ‘see-saw’ movement between those out of tune (willing to speak up, talk a lot) and when they are brought back into line (silenced and brought back in tune with others). At the same time, there are members who must speak out (be out of tune) to control the outspoken and talkative (bring into tune). Tuning identities in this manner works in a back and forth, complex and cross over way, where small movements occur from one position to another and back again. This shows the connectedness of how to be alongside others in a meeting environment, and the dynamic nature of interactions and relationships.

In the holding back cluster, there is a tendency to want to be out of tune (speak out about concerns), but the dominant flow of movement is towards suppressing those who wish to speak out. Actions gravitate towards wanting board members to be part of a collective (the

board), rather than out of tune as an individual. Alternatively, newcomer silence features board members making sense of the new world around them. Their struggles centre on how they are perceived by others as they make efforts to see how they can fit in with the dynamics on the board. This is achieved by remaining silent until the “lay of the land” can be worked out (this phrase was used by Gillian, Edward and Helen), thereby appearing to be in the background. Blending in with the scenery meant they were in tune with others, even if at times they didn’t want to be, or disagreed.

I limited the activity of tuning to tuning in, tuning out and tuning up. I omitted ‘tune off’ as it represents a total dislocation and unresponsive stance to what is happening, even to the point of ignoring. This appeared to me to be extreme and doesn’t match my treatment of silence. If someone is silent, it doesn’t mean they are ignoring everything around them. They may well be tuning in and working out how they can fit into a new working environment, rather than completely ignoring their work setting and context. As detailed in newcomer silence, board members were actively trying to get a grasp of the dynamics going on around them. Joining a board means not always saying what you want to say, but more commonly not knowing what to say and how to contribute at first, presenting a new set of dilemmas for identity work within an unfamiliar environment.

Three clusters of betwixt discourses conveyed all three movements and actions of tuning (tuning in, tuning out and tuning up). First, in whispering and body language a blurring occurs between tuning in and tuning out. Communication and activities (non-verbal communication) are attempted between individuals rather than in the presence of the full board. Hence, they are not acting in tune with board conventions and protocols of contributing to board proceedings, but are in tune with a few other board members as they communicate between themselves. Similarly, a blending movement happens in the beyond the boardroom cluster. They are not fully out of tune, because dialogue takes place outside

the board meeting. Again, these conversations break with agreed protocols, but show contributions between a minority taking place in another location, so are mildly in tune. Further, tuning up is also occurring as board members use each other as sounding boards, and test what can be said or not said external to the boardroom, preparing themselves for what can be said in the formal boardroom setting. The strongest movement of tuning up appears in the searching for a voice discourse cluster. Board members are neither in tune or out of tune as they attempt to figure out their inclusion and alignment with the board as an ongoing process.

The first two discourse clusters of the voice discourse are weighted towards tuning in and tuning out. Often speaking out amongst others is to convey concerns and views, and therefore out of tune with others. Sometimes speaking out was seen as a necessity or requirement as part of their 'job', meaning they were in tune with the expectations and requirements of the role, and protocols in place. A degree of challenge is offered for robust dialogue to occur. This is similar to the asking questions cluster. However, this cluster conveys asking questions as dominant and out of tune, rather than in tune. Feelings expressed by members convey those asking questions and challenging are acting contrary to the collective majority. Therefore, a strong flavour of out of tune rather than in tune is signalled. However, some thought asking questions was a necessity and in line with expectations of the role (in tune). Lastly, as a consequence of contributing to board meetings by speaking out and asking questions, board members expressed feelings of isolation and loneliness despite being in a collective. Feelings of being 'out on a limb' and 'out of sync' prevail when wholly out of tune with others. This aligns with Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) view that primarily identity work is pursued by individuals and groups to fit in with the organisation. Further, it is activated when the individual pursues the elimination of "discordant elements" (Down & Reveley, 2009, p. 383).

The process of deciding to speak out or not say anything plays out as majority and/or minority individual/collective, matching with tuning in and tuning out processes. In tune represents as being in harmony and an ideal position to strive for. A notable anomaly is how silence clusters are classed as in tune. Scholarship in the group processes literature feature occasions when aligning (in tune) with the majority is ineffective (groupthink) and damaging for decision-making outcomes. Next, tuning as identity work reveals multiple, ambiguous and contradictory identities as descriptions of board members are redefined.

The activating and illuminating of identity dynamics as tuning is shown in Table 10.2 for each main discourse. Identities portrayed in this way are fluctuating, changing and shifting. Hence arising tension or *struggle* inevitably manifests, as “identities are contingent and perpetual works-in-progress” (Clarke, et al, 2009, p. 347). Clashing and contradictory identities are highlighted in bold within each cluster, and between the different discourses.

Table 10.2 Multiple and contradictory board member identities

*Identities*

<i>Silence discourse</i>	<b>Controlling</b> , constraining, limiting, rejecting, defeating, curtailing, reprimanding, preventing, censoring, manipulating, <b>facilitating</b> , enabling, encouraging, promoting, accepting, <b>assenting</b> , compromising, conforming, <b>dissenting</b> , tolerating, retreating, suppressing, <b>refraining</b> , inhibiting, searching
<i>Betwixt discourse</i>	<b>Rebelling</b> , defying, non-conforming, <b>restraining</b> , <b>desiring</b> , questioning, identifying
<i>Voice discourse</i>	<b>Agitating</b> , rule-breaking (rebellious), venting, <b>shaping</b> , challenging, <b>morally compelling</b>

Numerous contradictory identities feature in Table 10.2. Highlighting the contradictions in each discourse shows the extremes. For example, silence discourse moves from controlling to assisting and supporting (facilitating) and assenting (agreeing) to nonconforming (dissenting). Next, betwixt starts with rebelling, balancing between curtailing actions (restraining) to wishing (desiring). The voice discourse also sees rebelling and not complying (dis-obeying), towards a lesser aggressive identity of shaping (forming) with a compulsion to act on moral grounds. Both discourses of betwixt and voice have rebelling, nonconforming activities. These can be contrasted with their opposites, such as accepting and assenting (or following) in the discourse of silence. There is another contradiction in silence of encouraging, denoting supportive tendencies towards each other, whereas in betwixt restraining activities take place, suggesting preventative actions and conduct. Such descriptions of board members elaborate the “nuances and the complexities surrounding board behaviour” (Zattoni & Pugliese, 2019, p. 114).

### **Music, Musicology and Tuning**

To conceptualise identity work as tuning, I turn to the field of music and musicology to elaborate on an alternative process of identity construction. The excerpt below gives a sense of board members working *together* and others keen to ‘go it alone’:

*Some boards are like orchestras where no-one stands out, except the chairman and the chief executive who is, let’s say the first violin. But others really have the quality of an ensemble, like a quintet, where there’s a more fluid sense of shared leadership. And then you have the ones who are really a bunch of soloists.*

The excerpt originates from a report authored by The Governance Institute at Henley Business School (Kakabadse et al., 2017) addressing perceptions of conflict in boardrooms. Considering a board and its members as resembling musicians in an orchestra is not particularly novel or new. The use of metaphors generally, and specifically music metaphors to understand management theory is widespread (Morgan, 1997; C. Oswick et al., 2002). Similarly, thinking of the board as a group of musicians allows understandings of the different roles members can ‘play’. As addressed in Chapter Three, the roles of board members are linked to board dynamics as defining behaviours and interrelationships, rather than identities.

The musician metaphor is helpful in presenting the idea of individuals being in tune with each other. For example, individuals can be in tune (“where no-one stands out”) with the majority, or tuning out (“soloists”), as on your own and in a minority. The orchestral metaphor presents a number of clearly defined roles arising from working on a board (*first violin, quintet, soloists*). These roles define who board members are and what they do. One of these roles is to work in a collaborative way as a decision-making group, reaching optimum synchrony for effective decision-making. Next, I turn to the process of tuning to describe the identity construction efforts of board members, which are far from linear, sequential or role ‘bound’.

According to Beard and Gloag (2016), there are clear distinctions between what we mean by music and musicology. Music is the practical activity, while musicology features as a process involving three things – “study, inquiry and reflection” (2016, p. 14). Musical scholars Beard and Gloag (2016) and J.W. Solomon (2019) provide concise information on everything belonging to the study of music. J.W. Solomon describes music theory as “how music is put together, and how it works” (preface). What is noticeable within their contributions is the absence of the word *tuning* as a concept. Instead, these scholars offer

explanations on everything from notation to tonal harmony, chords, melody, pitch, keys, scales, and the list goes on. All these elements contribute to *making tunes* – of which tuning is an essential part. To a non-music person such as myself, the array of terms and meanings is to say the least mind boggling and some of the information looks (to me) like mathematical algebra. It feels like learning a new language. However, to explain tuning, next I step back from the myriad complexities of making music and turn to the meaning and science behind tuning musical instruments and other artefacts.

Starting with an etymology dictionary definition of the word *tune*, I surveyed several online dictionaries (for example, Merriam-Webster and Cambridge). I can locate the origin of the noun *tune* as the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and the verb *tuned* and *tuning* in use a century later. Deriving from the Anglo-French word *tun, tuen, tone*, the noun relates to ‘unison’, ‘harmonious relationships’, ‘adjustment of frequency’, and ‘agreement in pitch’. As a verb (tuned, tuning) it means ‘to adjust’, ‘to adapt’, ‘to bring’. Using the latter ‘to bring’, the word ‘attune’ means to *bring into harmony*. Additionally, the verb phrases ‘in tune’, ‘tune out’, and ‘tune up’ are worthy of exploration as these are the micro movements in the whole process of tuning, and subsequently board member identity work.

The majority of definitions explain tuning as a process of adjustment and as already mentioned, to ‘bring into harmony’ or realise an end state. Most examples reference music and musical instruments. For example, to say something is *in tune* means playing notes that are at the right pitch. Relating this to individuals means someone who agrees with others. On the other hand, *out of tune* means the exact opposite – not in pitch and disagreeing with others. It can also refer to an individual’s focus and attention as turned away altogether. To *tune in* also means to watch, listen, pay attention to and become or make oneself aware. This suggests an active presence and focus, while tuning out brings to mind someone who is detached, distant and unresponsive. Finally, *tuning up* is active in

the sense of adjustments being made to enable the right things to occur at the right time. One example is replacing parts on an engine to make it function properly, thus tuning solves a problem.

There are many references to the fine-tuning of engines, and the Cambridge Dictionary describes tune (as a verb not a noun) as a 'slight change to an engine' (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). When something is 'slight' it is small, minimal and almost negligible, however these tuning actions are required, and are not at all insignificant or valueless, as their size or proportion might suggest. These actions are a necessary *part of* the process. Next, a synonym for fine-tune is *calibrate*. To calibrate something is to assess and measure it with the aim of adjustment to achieve a level of accuracy. Precision and attention to detail are needed throughout the calibration process, with complicated technical devices and instruments used. In relation to engineering or mechanics, tuning is about making small adjustments or changes to achieve improved performance and function.

Reverting back to the metaphor of musical instruments being played in an orchestra, being in tune involves the equipment, including vocal cords, required to be constantly in tune. Environmental conditions affect the tuning and retuning process, for example the weather affects temperature and humidity in the concert hall or rehearsal space. During a concert, players must listen constantly to ensure they keep in tune, and make adjustments accordingly if they appear out of tune. This is a constant minute by minute process, or indeed at times second by second, throughout the entire performance. All the roles that make up the orchestra must pay careful attention, so as to be in tune and play the correct melody. I can only think of this as complicated and exhausting but at the same time an exhilarating process when achieved. Tuning is therefore a constant and continuous process of alignment or calibration, without a definitive format, or formulae or end point. Each role

plays a key part in bringing the performance together in every ensemble. To play a melody successfully and make music, the different roles must be aware of each other's performance and be continually listening to remain in tune for the total performance. If anyone is out of tune at any point, then corrective measures are needed quickly, and spontaneous action required.

I consider tuning to be an active process, typified by movement and working towards something, and involving many facets. The concept of tuning relates to complex 'equipment' comprised of many parts (an orchestra of many musicians), and requiring frequent small, precise adjustments to allow it to work well and precisely, and to perform and function. I now take and develop this idea to discuss tuning as identity work throughout the rest of this chapter.

Upon discovering tuning as identity work, I became acutely aware of how the word is used in everyday conversation. I was conscious of using the term when I communicate, how it appears when others talk and express themselves, and its use on social media, TV and radio. As I note, tuning is often associated with music. There are popular sayings referring to music such as 'face the music' (deal with the consequences), 'blow your own trumpet' (self-promotion) and 'like a broken record' (repetition of a message or story). Tuning also features in a number of expressions. By far the most common phrase I have used is 'He/she has changed his/her tune again' to mean someone has changed their mind, opinion or view about something. This corresponds with 'dance to another tune' when someone changes their behaviour, or 'sing to another tune'. I've witnessed people commenting about something being 'in tune with the times' when it is trendy and fashionable. In terms of authority and control, the phrase 'call the tune' is used to describe an individual who makes important decisions. This saying is abbreviated from 'He who pays the piper calls the tune', meaning the person who pays or who has monetary wealth can assume control

and influence. These observations show how tuning is part of everyday language, but it wasn't until my findings revealed tuning as identity work that I noticed the common use of the term.

In summary, having elaborated on tuning as the process of identity construction for board members' identity work and discussed this in relation to musicology I now consider how tuning processes of identity work offer contributions to both theory and practice.

### **Theoretical Contribution – Identity Work as Tuning**

Gaining clarity on tuning as a process of identity construction through the constant tension of remaining silent or participating verbally or non-verbally (tuning in, out and up) establishes an obvious finding – *board members engage in identity work*. Considering their hierarchical position, they are not immune and this matches occupations, professions and employees (managers) engaging in identity work in organisational settings. The assumption all individuals are open to identity work in their occupational settings is, however, misleading. In a rare study, scholars discovered identity work as non-existent, with bankers attempting to avoid this at all costs by a process of non-stick (teflonic) identity manoeuvring (Alvesson & Robertson, 2016).

The field demonstrates a wide variety of processes within studies of identity construction. However, the majority focus on considering the *outcome* of identity construction efforts, as a type, or form (A.D. Brown, 2015, 2017, 2020). This idea of identity work is based on the common metaphor of *constructing* – building up or towards something (identity). Here, identity work is done by individuals to have a sense of fitting in and move towards a sense of coherence (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). A few studies offer a different approach based on the idea that identity work is not always about building (constructing) something distinct, as it can easily be about dismantling or relinquishing something, breaking it up, or

doing away with it altogether, i.e., discarding (Costas & Fleming, 2009). However, while these forms of process allow us to consider alternatives, they suggest a compressed flow of one large movement. An exception is Beech (2011), who addresses three practices of experimentation, reflection and recognition in identity reconstruction, whereas other studies consider one overarching process. This leads to a question: What can an alternatively conceived process such as tuning inform us about individuals engaging in identity construction efforts?

To answer this question, three discourses of *silence*, *betwixt* and *voice* emerged from board members talk of governing. As a consequence, the complexities of board member identity work can be described as a process of interrelated practices of tuning *in*, tuning *up* and tuning *out*. These practices or interactions are characterised as micro (small) and fine-tuning, or as a series of calibrations. Each calibration (micro interaction) is part of a design feature, in this case *identity construction*. Tuning has multiple interconnected micro processes. These processes emphasise the *micro* or *bite sized snippets* of identity work occurring in-between, adjacent, and in opposition to each other. This interplay eventuates as multiple and conflicting identities in a boardroom setting, as illustrated in Table 10.2 of this chapter.

I am aware tuning is an unusual and alternative process compared to those described in the extant literature. Identity work as tuning offers the opposite interpretation to existing identity processes – the idea of small movements, and a continuous flow of calibrations within an overarching process of tuning. Tuning is not about constructing and building movements to form something with an end goal. Taking this forward, I do not align with theoretical beliefs of identity work being pursued to reach ‘coherence’/coherent sense of self (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) and ‘distinctiveness’, where the elimination of tension, or problems and identity threats (identity conflict) is an individual’s main motive

for undertaking identity work. My focus is on the movement within and flow of the process (Gioia & Patvardhan, 2012; Simpson & Carroll, 2020). I do not seek to understand how board members manage, cope or eliminate tensions between silence and voice. Instead, my concern is how the constant tension and dilemma of deciding to remain quiet or to speak up, acts as an ongoing ‘force’.

The literature documents resources informing identity work and the reasons why individuals engage in identity work (A.D. Brown, 2015; Caza et al., 2018). Currently, there is minimal interest in exploring the interplay between silence and voice acting as a resource for constructions of identity. One exception is a study from Coupland and A.D. Brown (2005), who inadvertently noticed talk about silence from graduate trainees’ experiences. The combination of speech and silence were part of a graduate trainee’s impression management activity. With an “ambiguous status” (Coupland & A.D. Brown, 2005, p. 1052) as a newcomer not fully immersed in the culture, and novice, they are more likely to be silenced by their bosses. Comparing the experiences of trainees around silence with those of seasoned board members with decades of business experience is interesting to say the least.

In Chapter Three I detail the work of a board member from different theoretical positions. What is obvious is the potential to draw from tensions as triggering identity work, for example the main paradox between control and collaboration (Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003). Paradoxes and tension also feature in identity work encounters. Alvesson (2010, p. 201) claims that usually when individuals are confronted with “a basic conflict, dilemma or contradictory forces”, this provokes identity work, and individuals become identity constructors. Despite the availability of potential tensions, board members opted to talk about *not talking* in a boardroom environment, creating self-understandings through discourses of voice and silence as novel.

Different environments and spaces are said to be ‘vessels’ or hosts for concentrated identity work. Identity construction includes “processes of negotiation” (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 303) where individuals “negotiate the complexity of ‘being’” (Thomas & Davies, 2005, p. 700). Traditional sites or locations of identity work, i.e., organisational settings have altered, or individuals are not employed by an organisation (atypical workers). Scholars ask questions about those with no organisational identification – described as atypical or bounderyless. For example, what does having limited organisational ‘roots’ mean for engaging in identity work. A study by Petriglieri et al. (2019) claim those with reduced or no organisational affiliation do engage in identity work, and this is characterised by “stark emotional tensions” (p. 1). My study supports those with ambiguous and vague organisational membership as engaging in identity work, and captures board members’ identity work within a mundane resource – a board meeting.

Limited studies exist drawing on a meeting environment to explore identity work. Notable exceptions using this mundane and regular organisational routine within organisational life are Kärreman and Alvesson (2001) and McInnes and Corlett (2012). Taking the role of observer participants in newspaper meetings, Kärreman and Alvesson (2001) produce a close-up view of the socially constructed reality of organisations and social identities. Featuring observations of an interdepartmental meeting, McInnes and Corlett (2012) study naturally occurring talk (conversational analysis) to illustrate five forms of identity work. Taking an ordinary work situation, or as categorised by some – *mundane*, to study identity work is not widespread (A.D. Brown & Lewis, 2011; Winkler, 2013). Other studies offer novel settings to study identity workspaces, for example, the reconstruction of male identity on an oil-rig platform (Ely and Meyerson, 2006) and The French Diplomatic and Consular Institute (Baylon, 2016). At the time of writing there is no scrutiny of the boardroom as a “holding environment” (Petriglieri et al., 2019, p. 1). These spaces, or

holding environments provide opportunities for intense identity work where individuals can experiment with temporary identities or, as denoted by Ibarra (1999) in a study on career transition, ‘provisional selves’.

This prompts scholars to rethink locations of identity work, described by Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) as *identity workspaces*. The authors cite other alternatives as conducive to identity work, such as business schools. Both educational establishments and personal and professional development programmes, such as leadership development (H. Nicholson & Carroll, 2013) or academic fellowship programmes (Haynes et al., 2014), offer support for:

the individual in the cognitive, emotional, and social process of elaborating, experimenting with, and consolidating the meanings associated to the self.

(Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010, p. 46)

Three prerequisites exist for a space to be deemed an *identity workspace*, or as Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) remark, become ‘an institution’. The first is ‘*a sentient community*’ (a professional group relating to each other). A community of board members who relate and identify with each other, especially through networks such as The Institute of Directors (IoD), acts as a sentient community. A coherent set of ‘*reliable social defences*’ (a community that holds individuals together to minimise stress and anxiety) is the second prerequisite. The board is required to manage and cope when instances arise that may cause anxiety, perhaps where misappropriations have occurred. Last are ‘*rites of passage*’ (encountering and dealing with things for the first time as a group). There are many occasions where ‘rites of passage’ can feature in board work, such as formulating new policies, embracing new legislation requirements and appointing CEOs. Haynes et al. (2014) comment such spaces encourage “community sense-making” (p.390) to occur

between individuals and support identity narratives. This extends the conventional idea of the board meeting as functional space.

Currently the function of a board and its members is portrayed according to a set of established assumptions for the ‘all powerful’, ‘all knowing’, ‘expert’ board member. I notice this as being less clear and obvious, and in fact almost non-existent in the discursive accounts. Since power is infused in discourse, I question where this power lies, what role does it play in the silence/voice tension, and what this can inform us of governing. My thoughts turn to understanding power dynamics extending beyond the CEO/chair dyad, and how they are evident in board members’ versions of themselves. This is discussed next as my second main contribution.

### **Theoretical Contribution - Micro Interactions, Board Dynamics and Power Dynamics**

Having recognised board members engage in identity work, originating from the complexities of tuning as a novel identity work process, I turn to my second main contribution. My second contribution unpicks what we know of board dynamics and the interplay of power. I illustrate how the tensions of silence and voice create struggle, and feature as a source of identity work resulting from the immersion of power. In discursive identity work I am mindful that “our representations entail particular kinds of power relations” (Burr, 2015, p. 20). As a researcher addressing identity formation embedded within discourses, I had a choice to foreground power. Mirroring the suggestion of Phillips and Hardy (2002) I set about “developing an understanding of constructive processes rather than power and politics per se” (p. 21). I chose a discourse-analytical framework enabling the prominence of identity construction processes rather using critical discourse analysis (CDA). These grand or ‘mega’ discourses (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b) are

“Foucauldian-informed work” with the aim of “unmasking the privileges inherent in particular discourses and emphasizes its constraining effects...” (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p.21). However, I did not turn a blind eye to how power is embedded within identity work as tuning, and now refer to the work of the French philosopher Foucault to further this discussion.

Michel Foucault is one scholar synonymous with the term *power* (Foucault, 1975/1995, 1978, 1979, 1980/2001). His ideas of power turn from the popularised and understood idea of ‘sovereign power’ (elite power) to ‘disciplinary power’. He sees power as relational, not as a thing but as *everywhere*. The idea of power as widely dispersed and ‘common place’ goes against popular views of power as belonging to certain individuals and groups in society – *the powerful elites* (sovereign power), and those holding positions of power. Instead he sees power operating at micro levels and therefore omnipresent. Additionally, he says wherever there is a power relation then there is the potential for resistance. As there is a link between discourse and power, I am keen to know how this plays out in the context of the boardroom.

Drawing from the works of Foucault, Burr (2015) talks about how discourses “produce our knowledge of the world” (p. 91). Foucault describes symbiotic relations between “Power/knowledge” that cannot be separated and treats power and resistance as the same – *inseparable*. For Foucault the two fit together – even in their written format (“Power/knowledge”). For Burr and Foucault alike, “We can use power in our own struggle to change ourselves and our lives” (Burr, 2015, p. 91). Therefore, power is perceived as a productive and positive force rather than viewed as negative and repressive, as when power can prohibit.

Foucault's ideas intrigue me when contemplating power in the boardroom. Boards are the 'powerhouses' of the organisation, or as described by Pettigrew and McNulty (1998, p. 198) "the ultimate instrument of power". Yet the study of power of the "powerful" (somewhat of a paradox say Pettigrew and McNulty, 1998, p. 197 – which I agree with) has seemed to elude scholars. Commonly used phrases in the literature are 'power play', 'power struggles', 'power bases' and the 'balance of power'. A few studies centre on the latter (balance of power) *in* the boardroom and also *around* the boardroom (Pettigrew & McNulty, 1995). Studies categorise boards into power types based on CEO-board relative powers, such as a quantitative study from Pearce and Zahra (1991). In a later study, Pettigrew and McNulty (1998) talk about the "mobilisation process" of power (the use of power) and how sources of power are "embedded" within cultural and structural conditions (p. 212). They note the "ebb and flow of power relations" due to macro (around the boardroom) and micro (inside the boardroom) influences (Pettigrew & McNulty, 1998, p. 212). Roberts et al. (2005) remind us that most research on power and influence originates from composition and structure, as opposed to its relational aspects, making socially constructed accounts of power a rarity in governance studies. However, they do suggest empirical research on board behaviours opens up the likelihood of exploring "the dynamics of power and influence, collaboration and control" (p. S8). The second wave of studies from Chapter Three – conduct studies of board governance, explore board dynamics focusing on behaviours, conduct, interactions and relationships, and largely omitting the relational and social dimension of power.

Instead, interest in power typically talks of a variety of 'power bases'. Each base has its interests – economic power, voting power, or political power. In Chapter Three, in the mainstream studies described in wave one of the board governance literature, the defining theory informing most understandings of boards of directors is Agency theory.

Governance scholars Finkelstein and Hambrick (1996) comment on agency theory being a theory about power. The general view is seeking to alleviate any misuse of power between owners and managers. Additionally, board members ‘possess’ power through a number of sources (position, expertise, information and reward) (Pettigrew and McNulty, 1998, p. 202). Positional power as expert, typically lawyers or accountants on boards conventionally describe those who *possess* power and exert power ‘over’ others. The majority of our understandings of power in the boardroom are supported by Foucault’s idea of sovereign power (hierarchical control and authority), and boards are the visible agents of power. Studies in governance inform us of an area neglected by scholars – *power* in the boardroom as relational/socially constructed. Addressing power as a web of social relations recognises it as more complex than positional power. The idea of power as ‘productive’ requires exploration. I will next move onto illustrating the relational power dynamics from board member discourses.

Accepting power as a social process rather than positional divulged some surprises. A board members’ ‘position’ is reversed from ‘subject’ (agentic qualities) to ‘object’ whereby power is done *to* them rather than *by* them. This brings into play the regularity effect of power upon those traditionally thought to exercise and possess power. This scrutiny allows for the inclusion of others in the power dynamic of the whole board, rather than power being isolated to the CEO/chair dyad. From time to time research participants mentioned the word *power*. They attached power to something in a number of ways, either referring to someone who uses power to control others (*power trip*), in relation to a quality in some one (*powerful female*), the types of questions to be asked (*powerful questions*), as an attribute of something (*power of the network* and *decision-making power*) and lastly, to illustrate the competitiveness in the boardroom (*power struggles*). Classing identity work as tuning, comprising of small ongoing movements, gives the opportunity for power

dynamics to surface via the metaphor – “power as micro-interaction” (Firth & Carroll, 2017, p. 125).

Some scholars have questioned assumptions about the presence of power in leadership studies. Firth and Carroll (2017) provide three root metaphors of power in leadership as “power as causality, power as mandate and power as micro-interaction” (p.125), the last is relevant in how power can be treated in the process of tuning. Drawing from the work of Foucault mentioned earlier, Firth and Carroll (2017) see “ micro power-relations” (p.132) as flipping the notions of sovereign power, whereby power isn’t interest based but ties into micro-level practices of power relations. For example, a study by Samra-Fredericks (2005) illustrates how power relations emerged from naturally occurring talk in organisational elites. The notion of micro-interactions aligns with the small, frequent and minute interactions of board members as they decide what to say, what not to say, and whether to ask questions, to intervene, and what to draw attention to or not draw attention to.

To illustrate from the ‘holding back’ silence discourse, hesitancy is exercised by Andrea as the chair. She resists the temptation to talk. She does this to give opportunities to others to “get their stuff on the table”. To facilitate the process of who can speak and who cannot speak, she steps away (relinquishes) her positional power as chair. In the same discourse cluster, board members act in a dissenting way as they hold back from expressing opinions in favour of siding with the majority in the room and being in tune with everyone else.

This can be seen as ignoring or resisting the protocols for sound decision-making, and thus acting in a non-conforming way. Alternatively, in his first board meeting Terry takes on the role of ‘de facto’ chair.

Firth and Carroll (2017, p. 133) comment “micro-interactions are shaped by discourse and concurrently discourse is constructed through micro-interactions”. As a consequence, “its

everydayness brings power down from its elitist heights” and power “becomes inescapable” (Firth & Carroll, 2017, p. 134). Hence, in each discourse power dynamics are made visible. The discourses illuminate the constant power dynamic and struggle in board member descriptions. Struggle takes a number of forms, posed as a series of questions; do I speak; when is the right time to speak; where do I speak, do I voice my disagreement; and do I say nothing rather than cause upset. This questioning sheds light on the dynamics, relationships and interactions in a board meeting.

### **Practice Implications of my Contributions**

Having discussed my main theoretical contributions of a novel identity work process of tuning, and the implications of this process for board dynamics, including the ‘visibility’ of power amongst relations in the boardroom, I now move to how this can help practice. The academic community on board research is already involved in the transfer of knowledge to the practitioner community, but scholars say more can be done (Huse, 2005). The discovery of board members engaging in identity work through micro interactions of power offers an abundance of opportunities for the governance practitioner field. The practitioner community seeks to optimise performance and effectiveness at the board level. The identity work of board members as a process of *tuning* – to tune something to tweak for optimal performance, I can only think of as a serendipitous finding. I now address how my main contributions could support and assist the governing of boards.

Firstly, and linking to the recruitment of new board members, orientation or induction processes are an area for improvement. My findings present a specific discourse on the intricacies of ‘newness’ on a board in discursive accounts of ‘newcomer silence’. Dread and interpretation feature in these accounts. This suggests the need for CEOs and chairs to revisit and revamp introducing new members to boards, including onboarding and

orientation policies and procedures. Strategies should be implemented to address the fear and anxiety blocking the voices of those new to a board, or at least attempt to understand more about reticence. The danger of leaving this area unaddressed is compromising the board's decision-making processes.

Second, both research and practice make suggestions on resolving conflict in the boardroom. The consequences of not doing so are predominantly negative and undermining of board performance. Given that some of the causes of dysfunctional boards could be around relational aspects, including power dynamics, my study is useful in supporting performance hindering processes. Groupthink, pluralist ignorance and other group processes feature as barriers to effective boards, so highlighting the nuances of how power plays out in board meetings through micro interactions rather than being 'positional' could lead to improving aspects of board dynamics generally.

Third, board chairs are critical in facilitating effective board meetings. My findings indicate a need to restore a 'balance of voice' in meetings. Achieving this can happen in two ways – developing and supporting the individual voice and facilitating the collective voice. To enable this to happen would mean upskilling chairs to recognise when out of balance is happening and how to manage different personality types and diversity issues in the boardroom.

Four, current evaluation processes could, if they do not already, feature ongoing reflexive work. Incorporating reflexive practice into any setting is known for its wide-ranging benefits, such as increasing self-awareness to help in developing better relationships, and providing greater awareness of any influences at play. Another advantage is enhanced learning from incidents and experiences. This leads to greater accountability and trustworthiness. Paying attention to these aspects, means reducing instances of potential

groupthink and unheard voices. Therefore, it is prudent for boards to be mindful of their own reflexivity, to eliminate cultural deficits, damaging norms and routines.

## **Conclusion**

In this discussion chapter, I have pieced together the extant literature on identity work with the aim of understanding the process of identity construction of one group of atypical ‘organisational’ actors – *board members*. Whether talking about tuning a mandolin or a Mercedes, board members’ identity construction processes are characterised by small movements and slight changes (fine tuning), originating from three discourses of silence, betwixt and voice. These calibrations or micro interactions work constantly together as an ongoing process. Identity work as tuning offers the idea of an overarching process, but with micro processes within it. Tuning does not describe the building of identity outcomes, but rather the practices relating to the many movements of engaging in identity work in the confines of a meeting. Tension surfaces from the interplay between silence and voice to reveal power dynamics. The outcome is reconceiving power as not sitting with a chosen few, but instead inverted – with power cascading to all in the boardroom. These contributions assist the practitioner community working alongside, developing, evaluating and guiding boards of directors. Next, I turn to my concluding points and include opportunities for furthering this conversation.

# Chapter Eleven

## Conclusion

### Introduction

By synthesising my thoughts, I aim to wrap up this thesis. I return to the aims of this project and summarise the key methodological features. Detailing the main findings enables me to comment on their significance, before making new connections to potential areas of research prompted by the findings and contributions of this study – *What next?*

### Returning to the study – aims, methodological features and findings

Undertaking this study originates from a deep fascination in how the work individuals do shape selves-identities. When listening to stories from people about their work, I am absorbed. I am even more curious about the different tales from individuals who do not have a 9–5 job. Board members I met in the housing work I did with housing associations were juggling board roles and other occupational roles. One gnawing question I had was, How did they know who to be? Individuals working in organisations forge identifications with the organisation. This research scholarship is popular (Ashforth, 2016; Ashforth et al. 2008; Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; A.D. Brown, 2017; Whetten & Godfrey, 1998). My research question was to delve into how board members engage in processes of identity construction. I was keen to know what resources they drew upon, given their work complexities extending beyond the 9–5 occupational job role and ‘normal’ organisational associations.

## Key Methodological Features of my Study

Chandler (2016) proposes three approaches within sociological and psychological understandings of identity as psychoanalytical, social psychology and social constructionism. Psychoanalytical approaches focus on unconscious workplace behaviours concerning thoughts and feelings. Social psychologists study individuals from the aspect of group belongingness, by researching ‘role identity’, ‘personal identity’, ‘social identity’, and ‘collective identity’ (see *Identity* by Angie Andriot and Timothy Owens from the Oxford Bibliographies series 2014 for in depth analysis of these theories). Lastly, my chosen philosophical view of social constructionism pays attention to “discourse and belonging in ways that might be more fluid than suggested by the idea of a group with boundaries” (Chandler, 2016, p. 8).

Social constructions of identity present the individual as *negotiated* (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2001). Certain individuals face more identity demands in their work than others due to a mix of social, organisational and job-related aspects, leading to a process of “identity negotiation” (Kreiner et al., 2006, p. 1031). Governance discourses from the research material obtained from interviews and observations convey identity as socially constructed and “constituted through linguistic acts and practices” (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2001, p. 64). Discursive resources act as a channel to converge our sense of who we are, or as suggested by Alvesson and Robertson (2016, p. 9) – ‘What is important for me?’ Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) note identity work emphasises the “dynamic aspects and on-going struggles around creating a sense of self and providing temporary answers to the questions such as ‘who am I’ (or ‘who are we’) and what do I (we) stand for?” (p.1164), and as mentioned by A.D. Brown (2019, p. 9) “How should I relate to others?” Taking one of five approaches to identity work – *discursive identity work* (A.D. Brown, 2015; Caza et al., 2018), my findings concur with not addressing identity in the singular sense, but rather

as *identities*, (plural and multiple) and hence dynamic. Additionally, as individuals face “identity-provoking situations” (Beech et al., 2016, p. 507), identity is “an ongoing state of flux that we enact on an ongoing basis via our constructions and actions” (Gioia & Patvardhan, 2012, p. 53).

In my use of the identity work lens, my aim is similar to Gergen’s (1991) use in his book *The Saturated Self*. He says, “it is most appropriate to view this book not as a picture of the world, but as a form of lens, a way of seeing things” (p. xii, preface). This sentence resonated with me because my aim is not to capture a picture – *a static outcome*, but rather to use the lens of identity to indicate how board members’ identities are formed, answering calls for more nuanced understandings of processes in identity constructions. See, for example, the special issue of *Scandinavian Journal of Management* (Ainsworth & Grant, 2012) and A.D. Brown (2020).

### **Summary of the Findings**

Organisational life necessitates identity be considered as a “more open project” (Alvesson, 2010, p. 195), with T.J. Watson remarking “Identities, or subjectivities, are caught up in contradictions and struggles, tension, fragmentation and discord” (2008, p. 124). Despite board members being surrounded with complexities, paradoxes, and an ambiguous organisational link, they bypass these as tensions and potential routes triggering identity work. Instead socially enacted and discursive identities demonstrate tensions arising from the interplay of voice and silence. Descriptions from three discourses indicate tuning as an alternative process of identity construction, based on the dilemma of whether to talk or not in board proceedings. Activities comprised of, but are not limited to, standing out from other board members to verbalise concerns, or to challenge others and ask awkward questions, alongside assuming a nonverbal stance and becoming ‘invisible’ within the

collective. Encountering conflicting identities from board member discourses confirms the multiplicity of identity as a consequence of engaging in identity work, and more importantly surface power dynamics. Examining governance inspired discourses thus creates the opportunity to think about alternative descriptions of board members, and power. This illuminates the complexity of relationships inside the black box and will be of interest to the practitioner governance community.

### **Evaluation of the Importance and Significance of my Study**

This study has significance for two scholarships. It adds to the scholarship of identity work processes, and complements what we currently know of board dynamics by including power dynamics. Board dynamics studies address the interactions and relationships between board members, and the power dynamic in the CEO-chair relationship. My study encourages thinking about power as traversing across all board members. In the tradition of the “hard sciences” (Burr, 2015, p. 3), governance studies have tended to favour knowledge based upon objectivity and view the world in an unbiased way. Omitting a “meaning-centred stance” (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 9) leaves a deficit in board governance studies on “the complex, unfolding and dynamic relationship between self, work and organization” (2008, p. 9). My study is able to add to the conversation in this area. Next, I discuss the consequences of my findings towards further lines of inquiry.

### **Future Research Opportunities**

Discourses of silence and voice acting as a tension and fuelling identity work receive closer examination in this chapter as I consider future research avenues. I recommend ideas for potential and future avenues of research as a consequence of undertaking this thesis. The idea of processes as central to identity formation has been re-evaluated by

scholars within the OMS field, with calls to look closer at processes (A.D. Brown, 2015, 2020; T.J. Watson, 2008) and “temporality” (A.D. Brown, 2015, p. 31). A problem-solving theme currently dominates in many processual studies of identity work. This approach centralises identity as an entity with an understanding of processes as working towards an ‘outcome’ – the what, essence or type of identity. However, my interest lies with “the accomplishment” rather than “the identity produced” (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2001, p. 65). These accomplishing efforts – *identity work processes* occur in different ways. I join a group of scholars interested in shifting emphasis towards the dynamism of processes. In my study, I have identified with moving away from “the mere sequentially of a process that moves from one fixed and stable identity to another” (Simpson & Carroll, 2020, p. 503). Like these authors, I appreciate that “engaging a processual ontology [...] attends to the emergent movements and flows of actually doing identity work”. Thus, my contribution to identity as process offers a series of micro and interrelated processes informed by tensions of silence and voice in board member discourses. I will now turn to an interrelated finding based on discourses of silence and voice as a resource for identity work represented as *struggle* and the manifestation of micro power dynamics

Studies on identity work centre on talk, speech, and the spoken word, apart from those addressing the embodiment or aesthetics of identity (see for example, street mime entertainers by Aslan, 2017). Silence is a neglected area when addressing identity dynamics. This is surprising since scholars claim silence permeates customs, traditions, society and language (Clair, 1998). This is raised by Coupland and A.D. Brown (2012, p. 2), drawing from their earlier study on trainee graduate silence (A. D. Brown & Coupland, 2005), when they comment, “Moreover discourses are not just associated with opportunities for speech and action, but can also silence and silencing is a further

processes by which identities are fabricated.” Thus, my research can further inquiries in this area.

How could this be developed? Drawing from the work of Foucault as a starting point for example, as cited in Bengtsson and Fynbo (2018, p. 21), “When power is played with silence, argues Foucault (1972: 118), ‘everything is never said’; oral oppression may veil silent resistance, and silence can be just as powerful and important as the conspicuous ‘natural language’. Silent power is relational, and what we ‘don’t say’ cannot be ‘disqualified as being of no importance’ (Foucault, 2001[1980]: 223).” This marries with the idea of the complexities of power and silence evident in the identity work in my thesis and diverts current attention away from the negative connotations associated with silence in a boardroom setting (Veltrop et al., 2020). My study suggests silence – talk about not talking – is as an important feature in identity work, especially when negotiating relational power dynamics. Additionally, while only a glimpse of non-verbal behaviour in the betwixt discourse is illustrated (whispering and body language), this could act as a spring board for closer scrutiny relating to calls for more embodied understandings of identity (A.D. Brown, 2020; Knights & Clarke, 2017).

Another opportunity for research is around diversity. Studies of board governance promote greater diversity to alleviate tight knit boards, unintentional problems, and pathologies such as social loathing and groupthink (Merchant & Pick, 2010). A line of inquiry based on my research findings would be suited to delving into diversity issues around contributions and board engagement, specifically relating to gender. Key questions would frame around the prominence of females in contributing ideas, voicing concerns and challenging the status quo, rather than resisting verbally and ‘going with the flow’, or being hesitant in speaking up and out. My study could bring to the fore who (male or female) shows tendencies to refrain from speaking, to silence others and to prefer

conversing outside of the board meeting. This line of inquiry would establish variances in contributions and engagement in meetings based on gendered discursive accounts. It would therefore contribute to a more nuanced account of the workings of diversity related issues and add to what is already known.

My positioning is well-defined from a social constructionist view, recognising the world as “turbulent and multifaceted” and as a consequence “identity becomes destabilized” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003 p. 1167), emphasising the “constructed quality” of identity (Sveningsson & Alvesson 2003 p. 1165). This means I am interested in what processes come to the fore, what acts as a catalyst or resource within these processes, and how this informs governing. Processual approaches to identity feature as ‘becoming’ (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Scholars point to the process of ‘becoming’ in identity work as infused with emotion (Hay, 2014; Winkler, 2018, 2020). Tension manifests where pressures and demands provoke “self-doubt and self-openness” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165). Subsequently this releases a combination of emotions and “uncertainty, anxiety, questioning” (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 15). Incongruences are heightened between “self-understandings and the social ideals promoted through discourse” (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 15), or, as articulated by Pratt et al. (2006, p. 235), “work-identity violations”. Emotions are now receiving attention in the board governance literature, but remain largely underexplored (Brundin & Nordqvist, 2008. Emotion features in research about what motivates employee to speak up in organisational settings (A.M. Grant, 2013). A. D. Brown (2020) comments on the need to move towards noting the emotional characteristics in identities. Questions in governance studies can steer towards discussing identities in relation to other processes of organising, and in particular challenge traditional rational decision-making processes within a governance context by building in an emotional component.

Finally, more could be done to bring other governance ‘actors’ into the socially constructed nature of identities concerned with governing. There is scope for involving developmental facilitators in board evaluation processes and to assist with training needs in an ongoing process with boards. The CEO, company secretaries, legal representatives attending meetings along with external stakeholders, shareholders and funding bodies is another avenue. Reaching beyond the perimeters of the boardroom walls embraces the social constructionist ethos of constructing meaning and understandings from others to provide shared assumptions about reality.

## **Conclusion**

My primary aim in undertaking this study was to gain insights into the crafting, shaping, forming, constructing and ‘becoming’ of board member identities among those serving on New Zealand boards, conceptualised metaphorically as *identity work*. I chose this approach in preference to categorising fixed identities as an outcome of ‘construction work’. This is an important distinction, as my underlining epistemological position of social constructionism advises understandings and knowledge are generated as a product of how identity is represented or produced through language. As a consequence, nothing is fixed, permanent or final, not even knowledge. I am therefore able to present different definitions of board members governing from discursively analysing versions of themselves based around discourses of silence, betwixt and voice. There is a strong interplay between the three discourses, and power viewed metaphorically as a micro interaction. Taking these findings in a new direction focuses on, but is not limited to further scrutiny of the role of silence in identity construction processes, as linked to power dynamics informed by the work of Foucault. Additional examination should be pursued on silence and voice regarding gender variations to assist with the scholarship of diversity within a governance

context. Finally, the role of emotion within processes is a useful avenue to explore considering emerging interest in a board governance setting and, lastly, encompassing additional 'actors' understanding the complexities of governing from a social constructionist stance. Next, this thesis comes to an end with a continuation of my own identity struggle as a doctoral student in the Epilogue.

## Epilogue

I reflect on my earlier commentary in the prologue describing my identity ‘battles’. Hence, this final written piece addresses my identity dynamics during this doctoral journey.

I also engaged in a lecturing role while enrolled as a doctoral candidate. At specific points and often, both roles became “undiscussable” (Argyris, 1985). At work, colleagues were hesitant to mention ‘The PhD’, and for a while it became a taboo subject. Sometimes my preference was to talk extensively about my latest PhD progress rather than the subjects I taught. Much research exists on academic life and work. In a comprehensive text by Frost and Taylor (1996), *Rhythms of academic life: personal accounts of careers in academia*, the contributors catalogue familiar patterns and pressures for university lecturers and professors. Educators need to carry out a balancing act, or plate spinning, to juggle scholarship, teaching and service expectations. I find solace in these readings along with inquiries into academic identity work and conflict (Clarke, et al., 2012; Epsom, 2013; Knights & Clarke, 2014).

I am aware my position is slightly different, although not uncommon, as a long-standing lecturer embarking on doctoral study. Completing a PhD is likened to a training period, initiation or apprenticeship. I, therefore, spent and continue to spend a long phase as “in-between two identity constructions: when they are neither one thing nor the other” (Beech, 2011, p. 286). My identity is typified as “partial and incomplete” (p. 287) and I am considered to be in “a state of in-between-ness and ambiguity” (p. 285) and “liminal” (p. 287). This extended ‘liminal period’ also encompasses tensions in my role of a lecturer. Epsom (2013) summarises my thoughts about traversing between research and teaching, where I have indeed found myself ‘negotiating identities’ on many occasions. From depicting my previous roles as a social housing manager and then consultant, to my current

position of student and lecturer, the continuity of my engagement in identity work remains a constant feature.

Pursuing a doctoral journey means creating knowledge and sharing this with an audience – the world. A Doctor of Philosophy is from the Latin – (Ph)ilosophiae (d)ocor, which translates to ‘philo’ for friend or lover of ‘sophia’, meaning wisdom. This brings to the fore my thirst for all things to do with learning, knowledge and ideas. I ascribe to the thinking that “knowledge is not something that people possess in their heads, but rather, something that people do together” (cited by Hardy et al., 2001, from Gergen 1991, p. 270). Furthering knowledge feels like being a pioneer. Bringing an identity lens to board governance reveals the ‘nitty gritty’ of board life, and complements existing knowledge. It disturbs thinking on governing and challenges assumptions about board members and their work. I am mindful that undertaking a PhD is itself a socially constructed phenomenon. The production of this thesis has been “through a complex process of social construction” (Hardy et al. 2001, p. 532) and it incorporates reflexivity from the wider research community.

There is some inevitability that as a student studying identity related matters, I will continue to be curious about identity. Since 2016, with dramatic world events continuing to bring political and environmental issues to the fore, the typical existential questions are heightened for me. I concur with Wetherell (2010, p.4) who remind us identity needs “heavy-duty reflexivity”. As I am not immune from identity stresses and strains this continues – and even more so as I grapple to make sense of the global pandemic, as the world is poised at a crossroads in the history of humanity.

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## **Appendices**

Appendix One: Participant Information Sheet

Appendix Two: Participant Consent Form

Appendix Three: List of Interview Questions

Appendix Four: Silence Summary Sheet

Appendix Five: Observations - Consent Form and Participant/ Organisation Information Sheet

## Appendix One

# Participant Information Sheet

(Board member interviews)

**Project Title:** Understanding the work, practice and experiences of being a board member

**Name of researcher:** Carolyn Ward

### Researcher details

I am a part-time PhD student within the department of Management and International Business undertaking a study focusing on board directors experiences.

### Project description and invitation

When were you last asked the question “What do you do?”. Perhaps this was at a recent social gathering/BBQ and from some-one who doesn’t know you. As a researcher I am interested in how you respond to this question when talking about your board member role. How we describe ourselves, and in particular how we define ourselves through the work we do is significant in considering who we really are. We are continually asked questions about our opinions, views, feelings and thoughts concerning the nature of our work. This research will therefore aim to capture your experiences of being a board director.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet which invites you to be interviewed for this research project. You have been invited for an interview as you have been identified as having experience of serving as a board director.

### **Project procedures**

I would appreciate any assistance you can offer with my study, and in particular I would like to interview you for approximately 60 minutes to learn more about what it is like being a board member.

### **Data storage/retention/destruction/future use**

If you consent to audio-recordings, these and other research data such consent forms will be securely stored for six years. During this period of time the data, including electronic files and written materials will be securely stored as the University of Auckland. All electronic records are password protected. After six years all this information will be destroyed using the University's secure documentation service. My intended use of the research data I gather from you is to provide an in-depth insight into the work, practice and experiences of board members so I would anticipate disseminating these findings to conferences and academic publications.

### **Right to withdraw from participation**

I would like to audio record our interview and this would only be done with your written consent. You can request the recorder to be turned off at any time during our interview. You can also withdraw your interview two weeks after the interview. As I will be using a transcriber for the interview material they will also sign consent forms ensuring that they agree to a strict condition of confidentiality.

### **Anonymity and Confidentiality**

You will not be named in any research reports, publications and conference presentations. I can give further assurance regarding anonymity and confidentiality by disguising the participant details I refer to by using pseudonyms, change of gender and also avoid attributing any idiosyncratic comments that may link to the identity of a participant.

If you consent to your interview being audio-recorded I can offer you an electronic copy of your recorded interview, and also the transcript of your recording if you wish. This transcript and recording will remain the property of the researcher and the participant, and will not be shared with any third party. Given the topic of this study and the nature of the data collection methods, adverse consequences, physical or psychological risks to the research participants are highly unlikely.

### **Contact details**

For any queries regarding this research please feel free to contact us.

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### **Ethical concerns:**

The Chair, University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, The University of Auckland, Office of the Vice Chancellor, Private Bag 92019, Auckland. Telephone: 09 373-7599 ext 83711. E mail:[humanthics@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:humanthics@auckland.ac.nz)

Thank you for reading this information sheet. I would greatly appreciate your assistance in this research and I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

## Appendix Two

### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

#### Board member interviews

#### THIS FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF 6 YEARS

**Project Title:** Understanding the work, practice and experiences of being a board member

**Name of researcher:** Carolyn Ward

I have read the Participant Information Sheet, have understood the nature of the research and why I have been selected. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.

- I agree to take part in this research
- I understand that I am free to ask for the recording to be turned off at any time.
- I understand that I am able to 'pass' on any question without needing to give a reason.
- I understand that I am free to leave a recording at any time without needing to give a reason
- I understand that while I am not able to edit my transcripts, I am free to withdraw participation at any time, and to withdraw any data two weeks after the interview
- I agree/do not agree to be audio-taped
- I wish/do not wish to have my tapes returned to me
- I wish/do not wish to receive a summary of the findings
- I understand that a third party who has signed a confidentiality agreement will transcribe the tapes
- I understand that data will be kept for six years, after which they will be destroyed

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix Three**

### **List of Interview Questions**

#### **Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

Initial information will be gathered on demographics - age, gender, ethnicity, length of board service, number of boards, sector/industry on a separate form.

#### **Two warm up questions:**

1. How did you become a board member?
2. What attracted you to the role in the first place?
3. What were your expectations/thoughts about being a board member before you actually became one?
4. Now that you have experience of being a board member how does the reality compare with your initial thoughts?
5. How would you describe yourself as a board member to someone you have just met for the first time?
6. Can you recall your first board meeting? Tell me about that. [If they cannot recall this then ask: Tell me about your recent board meeting.]
7. What does a typical board meeting look like?
8. Tell me as much as you can about your most memorable board meeting.
9. Describe to me the surprises you have experienced with being a board member.
10. What keeps you awake at night regarding your work as a board member?
11. Can you tell me about a time when you chose to remain silent?
12. What advice would you give to someone taking on the role for the first time?
13. Can you tell me any other stories about what you do as a board member?
14. Anything else you want to add about the experiences you have had as a board member we may have missed?

## Appendix Four

### Silence Narratives

Narrative participant	Being silenced	Silence from others	Novice silence	Veteran silence	Silencing yourself	Debate silence	Considerate silence	Passive accepting	Breaking the silence	Non-expert silence	Expert silence	Silencing of information	Silencing the professional	Emotional silence	'Turn an eye'
A	*	*		*											
B									*						*
C		*			*	*						*	*		
D			*												
E			*	*		*	*								
F		*						*							
G				*	*										
H		*						*		*	*				
I		*	*	*							*	*			
J							*		*						*
K			*	*			*	*	*						
L			*	*								*			
M															
N			*												
O	*			*		*	*		*			*			
P	*	*	*							*	*		*		
Q			*				*								
R			*							*					
S							*	*							
T												*			*
U		*													

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## Appendix Five

### **PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM – Observations**

**(Individual participants/board members)**

**THIS FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF 6 YEARS**

**Project Title:** Understanding the work, practice and experiences of being a board member

**Name of researcher:** Carolyn Ward

I have read the Participant Information Sheet, have understood the nature of the research and why I have been selected. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.

- I agree to take part in this research and to be observed by a researcher
- I agree that the researcher take hand-written notes during the board meeting
- I understand that I am free to ask the observer to stop writing notes and/or leave the room at any time without needing to give a reason
- I understand that I can withdraw data without giving reason up to two weeks after the date of the board observation
- I understand that the Chair of the board has given their assurance that should I decline participation or withdraw from the research my relationship with the board or the organisation will be unaffected
- I wish/do not wish to receive a summary of the findings
- I understand that data will be used for the purpose of writing a doctoral thesis and future academic publications
- I understand that data will be kept for six years, after which they will be destroyed

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I would like the opportunity of taking part in a short reflective interview about this board meeting and my work as a board member – Yes/ No

If 'Yes' Please provide email: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone No: \_\_\_\_\_

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COMMITTEE ON 7 May 2015 for three years, Reference Number 014510

## **PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM – Observations**

**(Organisation- Chair)**

**THIS FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF 6 YEARS**

**Project Title:** Understanding the work, practice and experiences of being a board member

**Name of researcher:** Carolyn Ward

As the main contact for this research within my organisation, I have read the Participant Information Sheet, have understood the nature of the research and the reasons for selection. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.

- I agree that a board meeting will be observed by a researcher
- I agree to invite appropriate individuals (board members) to participate in this research
- I agree that the researcher take hand-written notes during the board meeting
- I understand that I am able to ask the observer to stop notes and/or leave the room at any time without needing to give a reason
- I understand that I can withdraw any data without giving any reason up to two weeks after the date of the board observation
- As the Chair I give my assurance that should individuals decline participation or withdraw from the research this will not affect their relationship with the board or the organisation
- I wish/do not wish to receive a summary of the findings
- I understand that data will be used for the purpose of writing a doctoral thesis and future academic publications
- I understand that data will be kept for six years, after which they will be destroyed

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS  
COMMITTEE ON 7 May 2015 for three years, Reference Number 014510