

Master's Programme in Management and International Business

Whose Agents Executive Search Consultants Are?

A Qualitative Study of How Executive Search Consultants Position Themselves and Whom They Construct Themselves to Serve from These Positions

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Abstract

Executive search consultants play a crucial role in society as they are responsible for searching and recruiting top positions in organizations. They have two main stakeholders to please: their clients and candidates. The Agency Theory, which examines the relationship between principals (such as clients) and agents (such as consultants), provides an interesting starting point for research in this context.

In my theoretical and methodological framework, I decided to use the reformulated version of Agency Theory since executive search consultants try to please at least two possible principals (clients and candidates) in their work, and it recognizes that agents may serve multiple principals. In my framework, I combined it with Positioning Theory to analyze these agent-principal relationships in this executive recruitment context. Based on this theoretical framework, this thesis examines how the consultants position themselves in their speech and who they construct themselves to serve from these positions.

The research material for this study consisted of interviews with Finnish executive search consultants. During the analysis, I identified six distinct positions in which the consultants positioned themselves: professional, servant, gatekeeper, career advocate, moneymaker, and observer. In these positions, executive search consultants constructed themselves to serve either clients, candidates or themselves.

The relationships between the positions and the principals constructed in them reveal the complexity of the executive search consultant's role in executive search recruitment and in the client-consultant-candidate triad. These relationships present a dilemma, raising the question of whose agents executive search consultants are and where their priorities lie in these relations.

Keywords Executive search, executive search consultants, Agency Theory, Positioning Theory, social constructionism

Tekijä Heidi Ollitervo

Työn nimi Kenen agentteja suorahakukonsultit ovat? –Laadullinen tutkimus siitä, kuinka suorahakukonsultit positioivat itsensä ja ketä he rakentavat itsensä palvelemaan näistä positioista

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Tiivistelmä

Johdon suorahakukonsulteilla on keskeinen rooli yhteiskunnassa, koska he ovat vastuussa organisaatioiden ylimpien johtajien etsimisestä ja rekrytoinnista. Heillä on kaksi tärkeää sidosryhmää, joita heidän tulee miellyttää: asiakkaat ja ehdokkaat. Siksi päämies-agentti -teoria, joka tutkii päämiesten (kuten asiakkaiden) ja agenttien (kuten konsulttien) välistä suhdetta, tarjoaa mielenkiintoisen lähtökohdan tutkimukselle tässä kontekstissa.

Teoreettis metodologisessa kehyksessäni päätin käyttää päämies-agentti -teorian uudelleen muotoiltua versiota, koska suorahakukonsultit yrittävät miellyttää työsäään vähintään kahta mahdollista päämiestä (asiakasta ja ehdokasta), ja tämän teorian mukaan agentit voivat palvella useita päämiehiä. Yhdistin sen kehyksessäni positiointiteoriaan analysoidakseni näitä agenttien ja päämiesten välisiä suhteita johdon rekrytointikontekstissa. Tämän teoreettisen viitekehyksen pohjalta tässä tutkielmassa tarkastellaan, kuinka konsultit positioivat itsensä puheessaan ja ketä he rakentavat itsensä palvelemaan näistä positioista käsin.

Tämän tutkimuksen tutkimusmateriaali koostui suomalaisten suorahakukonsulttien haastatteluista. Analyysin avulla tunnistin kuusi erillistä positiota, joihin konsultit asettuivat: ammattilainen, palvelija, portinvartija, urakehittäjä, rahantekijä ja tarkkailija. Näissä positioissa suorahakukonsultit rakensivat itsensä palvelemaan joko asiakkaita, ehdokkaita tai itseään.

Näiden positioiden ja niissä rakentuvien päämiesten väliset suhteet paljastavat suorahakukonsultin roolin monimutkaisuuden johtajien rekrytoinnissa ja asiakas-konsultti-ehdokas -suhteessa. Suhteiden välillä näkyy dilemma, joka herättää kysymyksen siitä, kenen agentteja suorahakukonsultit todellisuudessa ovat ja missä heidän prioriteettinsa näissä suhteissa on.

Avainsanat Suorahaku, suorahakukonsultit, päämies-agentti -teoria, positiointiteoria, sosiaalinen konstruktionismi

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1 Introduction

In this chapter, I present the background of this study and the research problem that I am aiming to solve in this Master's thesis. Lastly, I introduce the overview and structure of this thesis.

1.1 Background

Multiple groups of stakeholders play important roles in the recruitment process. These groups include recruitment professionals, clients seeking to hire new employees, and candidates who may or may not be suitable for the client's requirements. Given the varying roles and interests of the different actors involved, the recruitment industry provides an intriguing research setting.

There are various types of recruitment, headhunting being one of them. Headhunting involves a consulting company conducting a search for potential candidates on behalf of a client company (Jenn, 2005). In headhunting, consulting companies do not necessarily publish open job advertisements for people to apply. Instead, they seek suitable candidates through various channels, such as finding and contacting them directly.

Executive search, a form of headhunting, involves the professional recruitment of senior placements, including mid- and top-level managers and corporate board members (Jenn, 2005). In executive search, the consultant seeks suitable candidates for these senior placements through different channels and contacts them directly on behalf of the client. In practice, executive search consultants assist corporate decision-makers in identifying, evaluating, and recruiting competent individuals for top positions (Coverdill and Finlay, 2018).

In 2022, the value of the headhunting business in Finland alone was approximately 103 million euros (2023). According to Keronen (2008), around 80% of top executives and 40% of middle managers in large Finnish companies were recruited by executive search consultants, highlighting their significant role and power in this job market. These numbers also

demonstrate why executive search consultants can be considered gatekeepers for high-status roles (Faulconbridge et al., 2009). Furthermore, these figures emphasize the significance of comprehending their standing in the job market more thoroughly through academic investigation.

In the field of headhunting, executive search consultants are seen to hold a lot of power as they play a key role in elite labor markets functioning as a bridge between the clients and candidates. Especially, from the candidates' view, executive search consultants have power over their career progression as they can make decisions that impact their careers. From the clients' point of view, in turn, executive search consultants have the power to find the talent that they see fit for the client to fill the open position at the organization.

However, it is important to note that while executive search consultants hold significant power in the labor market, they must still persuade both clients and candidates to act in a manner that would result in the best outcome from their perspective (Baldo et al., 2019). This means that the executive search consultants need to please and serve their clients by providing them with good candidates for the open position. In addition, they might need to convince the potential candidate to switch their job for the open position at the client company. Therefore, this triadic relationship that the executive search consultants have with their clients and potential candidates provides a complex and intriguing setting for research.

1.2 Research Problem and Research Questions

The relationship between executive search consultants, their clients, and potential candidates is a complex interplay that requires consultants to navigate between the needs of clients and the aspirations of candidates. Baldo, Valle, and Olivas-Lujan (2019) propose investigating this triad through the lens of Agency Theory, noting that there is currently a research gap regarding these complex relationships. They view Agency Theory as providing a structured framework for analyzing the nuanced relations and interactions among these parties.

The traditional Agency Theory presents agency relationships as contracts in which one party is designated as the principal and, the other, as the agent acting on behalf of the principal

(Perrow, 1986). However, this theory has been criticized for not taking into account the fact that there might be several principals for whom the agents can act in a particular situation, and therefore, dismissing the importance of context (Shapiro, 2005). In executive search consultancy, consultants can serve at least two possible principals: clients and candidates. Niska (2015) suggests that Meyer and Jepperson's (2000) reformulated version of a principal-agent theory recognizes that there can be multiple principals, and therefore, it can be used to overcome the shortcomings of traditional Agency Theory in research.

Since the reformulated version of Agency Theory only provides a theoretical approach for examining the relations between executive search consultants and their clients and candidates, it is beneficial to combine it with another theory that also provides a specific methodological approach for research. Positioning Theory, which draws on theoretical perspectives from social constructionism and is seen as part of critical discursive psychology, studies how individuals construct different types of positions for themselves and others in their speech (Davies and Harré, 1990). This theory can be used in conjunction with Agency Theory to analyze complex principal-agent relationships in research.

From the perspective of social constructionism, the focus of the research is on the processes in which something acquires its character and meaning (Gubrium and Holstein, 2008). Social constructionism emphasize that the meanings we give to different things are created in cooperation (Gergen, 2009). From this relational perspective, whenever we interact, we contribute to a common definition of meanings about how things are and what reality is like, and thus, we discursively construct our social reality (Gergen, 2009). Critical discursive psychology shares this approach to reality construction and provides a standpoint for examining the construction of different principals and agents through talk, using the concept of positioning from Positioning Theory.

In my theoretical framework, I combine the reformulated Agency Theory with Positioning Theory to examine the nuanced relations and interests between the executive search consultants and their clients and candidates. Integrating these two theories allows me to gain deeper insight on this complex triadic relationship, for which there is a need for further research (Baldo et al., 2019), than would be possible for merely relying on Agency Theory. More specifically, through identifying and analyzing the different positions of executive search

consultants and mapping them to specific principal-agent relationships, this study aims to shed more light on how executive search consultants construct their roles and allegiances between the potentially conflicting interests in the triad. Based on this research problem, I have formulated the following research questions:

- 1) how do executive search consultants position themselves in their talk? And,
- 2) whose agents do they construct themselves to be from each of these positions?

To answer these research questions, I will use interviews done with Finnish executive search consultants (Koivunen, 2015a). By combining Agency Theory with Positioning Theory, this thesis will provide a new theoretical and methodological approach to examine executive search consultants and their triadic relationship with their clients and candidates. Thus, this thesis will contribute to the academic discussion initiated by Baldo, Valle, and Olivas-Lujan (2019) and address the research gap identified in their article. From the practical and social point of view, by answering these questions, this thesis will also shed light on the role that executive search consultants have in the elite labor market in Finland.

1.3 Overview of the Thesis

Chapter 2 introduces literature on executive search and previous studies about the topic. The purpose of this chapter is to help the reader better understand the characteristics of this business field and the context of this study. Chapter 3 presents the theoretical and methodological framework for the study, beginning with an overview of Agency Theory, including both the classical and reformulated versions. The chapter also discusses executive recruitment from the perspective of Agency Theory. Next, there will be an introduction to positioning theory. This theory represents a social constructionist approach to research, which is natural for critical discursive psychology. Lastly, I will draw together my theoretical and methodological framework and explain how I will use it to solve my research problem. In Chapter 4, I will present and discuss my data, methods, ethical questions, and analysis. In Chapter 5, I will introduce my findings. Chapter 6 summarizes the research, discusses the findings and their contributions to previous research, presents the implications of the findings, discusses the limitations of the study, and proposes suggestions for further research.

2 Literature Review on Executive Search

In this chapter, I will describe the executive search business and present some research done in this field that is important from the perspective of this thesis.

2.1 Executive Search as a Business

As discussed in the introduction, executive search consultants are seen to work as labor market intermediaries between clients, who need new talent for their top positions, and possible candidates (Coverdill and Finlay, 2018). As executive search consultants' clients are virtually entirely companies, search firms identify people for positions rather than find suitable jobs for individuals (Finlay and Coverdill, 2007). Therefore, a big part of an executive search consultant's job is to actively seek and initiate contact with potential candidates for open searches (Clerkin and Lee, 2010). As the most appealing candidates are frequently those that are most content with their current situation, it also takes time and effort from the consultant to convince these people to possibly change their jobs (Finlay and Coverdill, 2007).

In addition to using time for searching and discussing with potential candidates, executive search consultants are constantly seeking new assignments from companies. Cold calls, marketing calls, and calls from previous clients are the most commonly used methods that the consultants use for acquiring search assignments (Clerkin and Lee, 2010). These search assignments are vital for the consultants as they are their primary source of income.

Headhunters can be paid by clients in two ways: through a contingency fee, which is only paid if one of their candidates is hired, or through a retained fee, which is paid regardless of whether the client hires one of the presented candidates or not (Finlay and Coverdill, 2007). When it comes to high-level positions such as executives, search firms are typically paid a retained fee. In such cases, only one search firm is chosen, and the fees often exceed one-third of the candidate's expected first year's salary (Finlay and Coverdill, 2007).

2.2 Executive Search Recruitment Process

The executive search recruitment process begins with identifying the customer's needs. The needs may arise due to changes in executive management or a requirement for new skills within the organization. Once the need is identified, the customer typically contacts several search companies (Koivunen, 2015a). At this point, executive search consultants aim to establish a relationship with the organization in question (Tienari et al., 2013). Once the customer relationship has been established, the recruitment process begins. The steps outlined in Koivunen's (2015a) and Tienari et al.'s (2013) executive search recruitment process are combined and presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Description of the Executive Recruitment Process (Koivunen, 2015a, Tienari et al., 2013)

Steps of the recruitment process	Description of the steps
1. Profiling	The executive search consultant defines the skills and qualifications that are expected from the successful applicant in collaboration with the client.
2. Search	The executive search consultant and their team search for people who fit the defined profile in different channels. They create a so-called long list of candidates.
3. Executive search consultant interviews	The executive search consultant contacts a limited number of candidates picked out from the long list and interviews them. The consultant forms a short list of the possible candidates for the client.
4. Client interviews	The client interviews suitable candidates from the shortlist.
5. Selection	The client makes the decision and negotiates an employment contract with the selected candidate.
6. Follow-up	The executive search consultant contacts the client and the selected person to find out how things have worked out after the selection process.

The first step in the executive search process is called profiling. It involves a joint effort between the executive search consultant and the client to establish a shared understanding of the required skills and competencies for the position, as well as the criteria for assessing candidates' suitability (Koivunen, 2015a, Tienari et al., 2013). The initial briefing meeting is crucial to the entire process as the consultant gains a comprehensive understanding of the client company's culture, ethos, strategy, and future objectives (Mileham, 2000). This

understanding is essential to ensure that potential candidates possess the required technical capabilities and personal traits and can adapt seamlessly to the new work environment with minimal interruption (Mileham, 2000). Therefore, the profiling phase establishes the groundwork for the succeeding steps in the recruitment process.

Next, the executive search consultant and their team begin the candidate search through various channels. The ultimate goal at this step is to construct a large 'long list' of potential candidates through a systematic and thorough search procedure (Koivunen, 2015a, Tienari et al., 2013). Headhunters typically use a variety of sources to compile a long list of potential candidates. These sources include the consultancy's internal database, which contains contacts from past engagements such as clients, candidates, and referrals, as well as data gathered from public sources such as newspapers and social networking sites (Peltokorpi, 2021, Mileham, 2000). According to various studies (Khurana, 2002, Faulconbridge et al., 2009, Hamori, 2010), headhunters, particularly those with a retained fee, search for candidates for top-level positions using global databases, referrals from other search firms, and personal networks. At the beginning of the search, retained headhunters may also compile a list of potential candidates for the position (Khurana, 2002).

After generating the long list, the next step is to contact individuals whose qualifications best match the defined profile (Koivunen, 2015a, Tienari et al., 2013). The consultant will provide a brief description of the role to the candidate and, if they express interest, will proceed to interview them (Mileham, 2000). During the consultant's interview stage, the candidate is provided with additional information regarding the client and job details. The consultant also assesses the candidate's abilities, experience, and personality to determine if they are a suitable fit for the client's needs (Mileham, 2000). If the candidate meets the client's requirements, they are added to the shortlist (Koivunen, 2015a). To ensure a successful appointment, the consultant must align the candidate's personality, experiences, and objectives with the client's specific needs (Mileham, 2000). This alignment is crucial to the recruiting process's success, ensuring that the chosen candidate is not only technically qualified but also a good fit for the client's organization.

After conducting interviews, the most suitable candidates from the shortlist are invited to meet with key executives at the client organization. This allows for in-depth discussions

about the position and a personal interview with the client (Koivunen, 2015a, Tienari et al., 2013). The decision-making power is then transferred to the client, who may conduct multiple interview rounds to ensure the right candidate is selected. Sometimes, the consultant may attend interviews to assist with discussions. (Mileham, 2000)

The customer selects the candidate to be hired based on the interviews. If none of the presented candidates meet their requirements, the search process will start from the beginning again. Once a suitable candidate is found, the customer negotiates the details of the employment contract with them. (Koivunen, 2015a) Several months after the selection, the executive search consultant typically conducts a follow-up by contacting both the client and the selected person to determine the success of the recruitment (Tienari et al., 2013).

2.3 Value that Executive Search Consultants Create

Executive search consultants are usually seen as brokers or third-party agents who need to secure a match between their clients and possible candidates to succeed in their job (Finlay and Coverdill, 2000). Burt (2000) explains that the power of headhunters lies in their ability to bridge structural gaps, serving as a necessary link between two parties who would otherwise be unconnected. In other words, executive search consultants can be seen to work as labor market intermediaries between clients and possible candidates (Coverdill and Finlay, 2018). As stakeholders of the executive search consultants, clients and candidates differ in their needs, and there are different ways that they create and bring value to these relations.

According to Finlay and Coverdill (2007), headhunters usually have more information about the external labor market compared to clients and candidates. This is the most obvious source of value in these relationships. When it comes to the client, executive search consultants know the labor market and, therefore, can provide both expertise and efficiency advantages (Hamori, 2004). Executive search consultants typically possess large amounts of data on potential candidates, enabling them to be more efficient in searching for candidates compared to the human resource department of an average company (Hamori, 2004). According to Bonet et al. (2013) another benefit related to efficiency is that headhunters are better at reaching hidden passive job seekers and developing a higher quality client-candidate match

by analyzing candidates reliably and filtering out low-quality candidates. Thus, the information and expertise they have about the market, allows them to create value by being more efficient with time, contacting and evaluating the right candidates.

Companies often prefer to buy talent rather than develop it, especially when executive search processes are infrequent and newly hired employees lack necessary competencies (Williamson, 1981). This is because developing the skills and knowledge required for a top position within the company can be more expensive and time-consuming than recruiting a candidate from outside (Finlay and Coverdill, 1999). Therefore, executive search consultants also create economic value for their clients.

From the candidates' perspective, executive search consultants can enhance their careers. According to Finlay and Coverdill (2007, 2000), executive search consultants play a sponsor role in executive career success by proactively and aggressively identifying and initiating contact with potential candidates. Clerkin and Lee (2010) conducted a study on the contacts between executives and search firms. They found that contacts initiated by search firms were strongly associated with career success measurements, such as promotions and perceived career success. Furthermore, their study revealed that being identified as an elite executive by an executive search firm may be significantly more important than executives initiating interactions in terms of executive career success. Thus, these results emphasize the significance of executive search consultants for individuals' careers and the value they provide.

However, according to Finlay and Coverdill (2007), the primary responsibility of an executive search consultant is to find candidates for clients, rather than jobs for candidates. Therefore, it is important to note that they may not be creating value for all candidates who aspire to be executives. These consultants define who is considered talent and has access to executive roles (Coverdill and Finlay, 2017, Finlay and Coverdill, 1999). They do that by taking over the initial screening and assessment of the candidates (Lim and Chan, 2001). Thus, their contribution to career success is limited to those deemed fit for executive roles. For others, their role as gatekeepers can even be detrimental.

According to Khurana's (2002) research, headhunters play a crucial role as intermediaries, benefiting both clients and candidates. Khurana (2002) identifies three main elements that

characterize headhunters' intermediation: coordinating, mediating, and legitimating. Coordinating refers to headhunters' role in coordinating the activities of key decision-makers within the client company. Mediating refers to confidentially facilitating communication between individuals with fragile egos, career concerns, contractual restrictions, and a motivation to maintain their reputation. Legitimation involves signaling to all parties that the process is being handled professionally and with their best interests in mind. It also serves to legitimize the selection of the candidate for different stakeholders. (Khurana, 2002) Particularly in terms of mediation and legitimation, the value that executive search consultants add to the recruitment process, seems to be psychological and social, providing a safe and trusting environment where people can talk freely about their career concerns and aspirations and trust that the process will be handled professionally.

It should be noted, however, that the executive search process and value added by the executive consultant varies and depends on several factors. As Peltokorpi (2021) found in their study, there are factors such as the size of the search firm, the experience of the consultant, and the importance of the client organization to the consultant that influence the work of search consultants. In high-value projects, the search process tends to be more thorough.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that executive search consultants create value for themselves in the process, as they are brokers or labor market intermediaries benefitting from managing the relationship between candidates and clients (Burt, 2000, Finlay and Coverdill, 2000). From this perspective, executive search consultants can be viewed as self-serving intermediaries who use their privileged position to gain benefits from these relationships. Their advantages arise from their control of information within the network, as clients and candidates typically have limited access to the full range of information available and must rely on the intermediary or headhunter to facilitate communication. This control over information flow has implications for agency theory, which helps conceptualize how headhunters exploit information asymmetries in the client-headhunter-candidate relationship (Baldo et al., 2019).

In summary, executive search consultants play a pivotal role as brokers in the labor market, facilitating connections between clients and candidates. In these relationships, they create value in a variety of ways. It should be noted, however, that their role in the labor market

does not always benefit everyone. In addition, it should be noted that they capitalize on their position to derive benefits from both sides, primarily through information control and the resulting information asymmetries in the client–headhunter–candidate relationship. This complex triadic relationship raises questions about how the consultants see themselves in this setting and who they see themselves to serve in their work. To better understand that, a theoretical framework combining Agency Theory and Positioning Theory can be used.

3 Theoretical and Methodological Framework

In this chapter, I present the theoretical and methodological framework that allows me to analyze the executive search consultant's role in the recruiting business. My theoretical perspective combines Agency Theory with Positioning Theory to answer the research questions outlined above. The chapter begins by introducing both the classic and reformulated versions of Agency Theory. Next, I present Positioning Theory, which is based on discursive psychology and draws on social constructionism. Finally, I combine these two theoretical approaches to present my theoretical and methodological framework.

3.1 Agency Theory

Here, I present both the classic Agency Theory and its reformulated version. The reformulated Agency Theory provides a basis for understanding the complex and multidimensional relationship between executive search consultants and their working environment. Additionally, I present the literature about executive search consultants and their triadic relationship with their clients and candidates.

3.1.1 The Classical Agency Theory

Agency Theory, also known as principal-agent theory (Eisenhardt, 1989), is a common tool for studying authority and responsibility relationships in economics (Shapiro, 2005). A principal-agent relationship is typically described as an arrangement in which the principal gives an agent the power to act on their behalf. The agent, in turn, receives compensation for their service (Shapiro, 2005). In this context, the relationship between actors is understood as a mandate relationship, where the principal assigns tasks and the agent performs them. However, the principal may never be certain of the agent's capacity or willingness to efficiently complete the allocated tasks while meeting the established expectations (Shapiro, 2005). One common way to understand the principal-agent relationship is to view the owners of the company, such as shareholders, or the board as the principal, and executives, such as the CEO, as agents (Shapiro, 2005). In the context of executive search, the client can be seen as the principal and the executive search consultant as the agent.

The agentic relationship is characterized by the independence of both the principal and the agent, who are considered rational-economic agents seeking to maximize their own benefit (Jensen and Meckling, 1976). As a result, their interests may not always align, and they may sometimes prioritize their own interests over the other's. This can lead to tension and mistrust in the relationship. The divergence of interests and goals between the principal and the agent can be either known or hidden. The term 'moral hazard' is used to describe this type of situation when the principal cannot observe the actions of the agent (Shapiro, 2005). In the relationship between client and executive consultant, the client cannot oversee all of the consultant's actions, and they may have different interests. For example, the client may want a thorough candidate search to secure the best possible candidate, while the consultant may want to find the most suitable candidate with the least effort possible.

Another important aspect that characterizes the relationship between the principal and agent is the asymmetry of information. This means that one or both parties may possess information that the other does not (Shapiro, 2005). For instance, the agent may have crucial information that the principal is unaware of, or vice versa. In the executive search, the information that the consultant has about the labor market might be relevant for the client as well when they decide if one of the candidates is good enough for the open position. Similarly, the client may possess information about the position or the firm that they have not disclosed to the consultant, but which could be beneficial for the consultant to know when researching candidates.

Finally, the classical Agency Theory assumes that there is always only one principal and one agent in the relationship (Shapiro, 2005). In the context of executive search, this would mean that the client is the only principal and the executive search consultant is the only agent. However, as discussed earlier, in executive search, there are clients and candidates who could both be considered principals whom the consultants serve. Candidates can also be considered principals, as the consultant's relationship with potential executive candidates may be important for future searches. Therefore, executive search consultants must take their interests into account in their work. The classic Agency Theory does not fully capture the complexity of these relationships.

3.1.2 The Reformulated Agency Theory

The classical Agency Theory has been criticized for various aspects (Niska, 2015). The first criticism is that it only recognizes one principal and one agent in the relationship. According to Shapiro (2005), there can be more than one principal and agent in a given situation, as opposed to only a single agent and principal. This can be seen, for example, in the executive search context with clients and candidates.

It is important to note that when there is more than one principal, one agent may have to handle possibly competing and conflicting needs of different principals, and conversely, when there is a single principal, it may have to deal with competing and conflicting interests of different agents (Shapiro, 2005). For example, in the context of executive search, this means that the executive search consultant has to deal with the competing or conflicting interests of at least two principals (clients and candidates).

The second criticism is that classical Agency Theory assumes that people are only interested in maximizing their own returns (Shapiro, 2005). If it were the case that each agent acts only in their own self-interest, collaboration or co-agency would be a challenge. Thus, Perrow (1986) claims that the classical Agency Theory ignores the possibility of other-regarding or altruistic behavior of team members. Therefore, it should be acknowledged that agents may serve other purposes in addition to/beyond their own self-interests.

In addition, the classical version of Agency Theory usually only considers the principal's perspective when discussing self-interest and opportunistic behavior (Niska, 2015). The original version focuses on how the principal can ensure that the agent does not act opportunistically, although, according to Perrow (1986), it is important to recognize that the relationship between the principal and the agent can be compromised by the opportunistic behavior of the principal. For example, the principal may misrepresent the payment that the agent would earn from the job (Perrow, 1986). Therefore, it is necessary to include the perspective of the agent as well, rather than viewing the agency relationship solely through the eyes of the principal (Niska, 2015).

The third criticism of classical Agency Theory relates to its dismissal of the influence of the context in which principals and agents operate. According to critics of the theory (Niska,

2015, Perrow, 1986), the environment influences the formation of different interests as the interactions between agents and principals always occur in some context. Furthermore, the context should be acknowledged because the roles of principal and agent are not static (Niska, 2015). According to Shapiro (2005), actors are often both agent and principal at once, sometimes even within the same hierarchical structure or transaction. In executive search, for example, this can be seen in how the executive search consultant can act as a principal for their research team members while also acting as an agent for the client, meaning that in this context, they are playing both roles at the same time in slightly different contexts.

Based on the criticisms that classical Agency Theory has received, Meyer and Jepperson (2000) expanded the use of the principal-agent relationship (Niska, 2015). First, according to Meyer and Jepperson (2000), modern agency is a "legitimated representation of some legitimated principal" (p. 101), which means that an agency relationship is more than just an agreement between principals and agents. This means that agency can also be authorized with a legitimate principal recognized by the cultural system, taking into account context and structure.

In addition, Meyer and Jepperson (2000) recognize that people can act in their own interests, both as principals and agents, and in the interests of others, as agents for external principals, because, according to them, "cultural system constructs the modern actor as an authorized agent for various interests (including those of the self)" (p.101). Thus, Meyer and Jepperson (2000) acknowledge that actors do not serve only their own interests. In other words, according to Meyer and Jepperson (2000), in addition to serving multiple principals, an actor can also serve different types of principals, such as self, other actors (individuals or groups), non-actors (such as pets and nature), and abstract principals (such as values and morals). An actor can also easily switch between these different principals, for example, acting on behalf of oneself in one situation and on behalf of a group in another (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000).

3.1.3 Executive Recruitment and Agency Theory

Because the reformulated version of Agency Theory recognizes, among other things, that there may be more than one principal or agent in the relationship, it serves as a good basis for discussing and examining executive search and the triadic relationship between consultants, clients, and candidates.

Typically, the role of the executive search consultant is defined and characterized by discussing it from the perspective of the executive search consultant's relationship with the client. However, candidates are also important players in the triad. First, they can be seen as a kind of product that the executive search consultant is trying to market to the client, and second, they also have power and voice in these relationships (Finlay and Coverdill, 2007). Candidates, for example, are interested in knowing whether the executive search consultant's client could be a possible new employer for them. They are also trying to make a decision that is in their best interest based on the information they receive. Therefore, executive search consultants must also sell the client to the candidate. Since they have to sell both the candidates to their clients and their clients to the candidates, they have to make a "double sale" (Finlay and Coverdill, 2007). This creates a double agency problem for the consultant, meaning that they have to act as an agent for two different principals (Child and Rodrigues, 2003).

According to Baldo et al. (2019), the assumptions that permeate Agency Theory are typical of this triadic relationship between the client-executive search consultant-candidate. The assumption that individuals tend to focus on their benefits and are self-interested, which can lead to conflicting goals between the parties, is evident in these relationships. For example, in terms of the self-interest of the candidate, they may participate in the search process only to assess their market value as a potential candidate and use it as leverage to negotiate a better salary with their current employer (Finlay and Coverdill, 1999).

The assumption of information asymmetry between the parties can also be seen in these relationships, as all parties may have information that they may not share with the other parties, either by choice or by accident. An example is the ideal candidate profile that the client and the headhunter discuss. The headhunter may not get all possible information from the client about the actual ideal candidate, as there may be some information that the client does not want to disclose or is not even aware of, such as the "hidden profile" (e.g., biased

perceptions about gender, education, etc.), but which will influence their final choice (Baldo, 2014).

Another example is the high importance of confidentiality, which implies an imbalance of information between the parties because the parties cannot disclose information to others even though the others would benefit from knowing that information. In particular, if the headhunter cannot disclose important information about the client to the candidate, the candidate cannot make an informed decision about whether the client company and the position available there would be desirable for them (Volpe and Tucker, 2004).

Baldo et al. (2019) suggest that each actor in the executive recruitment triad (client-executive search consultant-candidate) holds power and control in the process. They argue that the recruitment process should be studied using Agency Theory. As discussed earlier, the classical Agency Theory has some limitations for which I will approach this triad from the reformulated Agency Theory perspective. I will examine these relationships from the executive consultants' perspective, taking into account the possibility of other principals besides the clients and candidates they serve.

3.2 Positioning Theory

Here I introduce Positioning Theory, which I combine with Agency Theory in my theoretical and methodological framework in this thesis. I begin by introducing social constructionism, from which Positioning Theory can be seen to derive its epistemological approach to research. Following this, I introduce discursive psychology and critical discursive psychology, which are commonly associated with Positioning Theory. Finally, I introduce the concept of position as defined by Positioning Theory.

3.2.1 Social Constructionist Approach to Research

Positioning theory draws on social constructionism and relies on its epistemological foundations to understand the nature of reality. Therefore, it is important to understand what

social constructionism is and what its epistemological assumptions mean in the context of this research.

The underlying common premise in social constructionist research is that reality is constructed in processes (Gubrium and Holstein, 2008). According to Burr (2015), four epistemological assumptions are associated with social constructionism:

- 1) a critical stance toward information taken for granted,
- 2) viewing information as historically and culturally shaped,
- 3) that knowledge is constructed and maintained in social processes, and
- 4) perceiving knowledge and social activities as integrated.

Thus, in social constructionism, the focus of research is on language, especially the use of language (Burr, 2015). According to Potter and Wetherell (1987), language is used as a tool to describe reality and to construct and structure different social worlds. Potter and Wetherell (1987) also emphasize how language can be used to construct different worldviews and how the language used at the same time already represents a kind of image/structure, i.e. a construction of the world. According to Gergen (1985), the construction of knowledge is guided by different cultural and historical principles, which are also reproduced in the construction of knowledge. For example, the different categories we use are not unambiguous truths, but have been shaped over time and in a particular cultural context to be what they are today, and thus are always bound to time and place. For example, being a consultant can be understood in slightly different ways and have different meanings at different times in history and in different cultural contexts.

It should be noted that social constructionism's way of structuring the world and its phenomena is often at odds with our intuitive logic or understanding (Burr, 2015). For example, Burr (2015) describes how we easily feel and describe that a person has a certain type of personality, although from a social constructionist perspective, it can be questioned on what basis it can be claimed that a person has a certain nature. According to Burr (2015), we should approach the categorizations we create with critical caution because things and people could just as easily be classified in other ways. For example, when it comes to executive search consultants, we might easily categorize them as professionals who serve their clients. From

a social constructionist perspective, however, this categorization should be approached with caution and criticality because it is only one way to categorize them.

According to Gergen (1985), social constructionist research is interested in how social reality is constructed through the use of language and what meanings are created in the process, but it does not attempt to draw conclusions about reality beyond this process of construction. As such, social constructionist research does not deny the existence of the "real world," it just does not take a position on it or seek to draw conclusions about it, which is something that critics of social constructionist approaches have missed or misunderstood (Edley, 2001b). Thus, instead of examining objective truth and objective reality, social constructionist research examines different representations of reality and the meanings attached to them that arise in different processes of interaction to which we have access through talk (Gergen, 1985). According to Juhila (2016), such an ontologically mute approach to research is called epistemic constructionism. In this research, I approach reality from this epistemic constructionist standpoint.

Furthermore, social constructionist approaches can be divided into micro and macro level approaches (Burr, 2015). The macro approach focuses on the constructive nature of discourses that both derive from and relate to structures, and how these structures shape social and psychological life. The micro approach, on the other hand, focuses on everyday speech and texts, and how people accomplish things in them (Burr, 2015). This research is based on critical discursive psychology, and more specifically on positioning theory, meaning that the approach is more on the micro level.

3.2.2 Discursive Psychology and Critical Discursive Psychology

Positioning theory is commonly viewed as a perspective in discursive psychology. Therefore, it is crucial to comprehend the subject matter studied by discursive psychology and its research methodology. The roots of discursive psychology can be found in Potter and Wetherell's book *Discourse and Social Psychology* (1987), where they developed a social psychological approach to discursive research that is situated in the field of discourse analysis. Jokinen, Juhila, and Suoninen (2016) define discourse analysis as "*the study of language use*

and other meaning-mediated activity, which analyzes in detail how social reality is produced in various social practices" (p. 17).

However, discourse analysis itself is not a direct research method, but rather a loose theoretical framework that allows for different methodological applications and research focuses (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Discursive psychology applies the principles of discourse analysis to psychological topics and focuses on language. More specifically, discursive psychology focuses on speech and text produced by people. It studies how people construct things such as identities, attitudes, memories, and feelings in a given context. However, language is not approached or seen as a channel to some hidden psychological reality (Edley, 2001a).

Today, discursive psychology itself is seen as more of a micro-analytic approach to research because of its similarity to the conversation analytic research tradition (Edwards and Potter, 1992). Edley and Wetherell (2008) have criticized discursive psychology for not paying enough attention to the cultural and historical context of the interactional situation. According to Wetherell (1998), only by considering the cultural context can one understand why a description or statement is presented in a particular situation. Thus, according to Edley and Wetherell (2008), studies should pay attention to the details of the speech as well as to the broader cultural-historical context surrounding it. Thus, they have developed a direction called critical discursive psychology that combines these micro- and macro-level approaches.

In critical discursive psychology, the meanings created in interaction are seen as taking shape within the framework of the cultural and historical world. Critical discursive psychology recognizes that there are different ways of talking about things in culture (Edley, 2001a). Some of these ways of talking have become more dominant and thus more accessible, making it easier for people to use them in their speech. Although some of these ways of talking about things are more available in the specific cultural and historical context, a person is still seen as having the agency to use these different ways of talking that are available to them (Edley, 2001a). Thus, from the perspective of critical discursive psychology, people are seen as both products and producers of discourses (Billig, 1991).

Critical discursive psychology is a research field that aims to answer both the 'what' and 'how' questions. The "what" question relates to the content of reality, while the "how" question relates to the construction of reality and its use. To address these questions, researchers can use interpretive repertoires, subject positions, and ideological dilemmas as methodological tools (Edley, 2001a). In this thesis, I use the methodological tool of subject positions to examine how executive search consultants construct themselves in their speech. The concept of a subject position, or position, in short, comes from Positioning Theory.

3.2.3 The Concept of a Position

In positioning theory, according to Davies and Harré (1990), an individual is seen as emerging “*through the processes of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate*” (p. 48). Moreover, people are seen as actively producing social and psychological realities, and these productions shape and are shaped by multiple discourses that may even compete and contradict each other (Davies and Harré, 1990). Positioning theory thus combines micro- and macro-level considerations in interaction (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006).

According to van Langenhove and Harré (1999), positions are seen as a more dynamic alternative to the static concept of role. This is because positioning theory recognizes that there are different encounters and many different ways of constructing the image of oneself and others, and that these ways emerge and change in the course of interaction (Davies and Harré, 1990). In practice, this means that people can move from one discourse to another in conversation and their stories can vary. The use of different inconsistent and/or contradictory discourses allows for different positions to be taken and given. This means that there are different subject positions available in talk that people use for themselves (reflexive positioning) and give to others (interactive positioning) (Davies and Harré, 1990). Thus, in the light of positioning theory, who an individual is is an open question with variable answers.

According to Davies and Harré (1990), different subject positions allow people to experience and understand the world in a particular way because each of these positions opens up a particular view of ourselves and the world and at the same time limits the other ways of experiencing and understanding the world. In addition, different positions postulate different rights and duties for people (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999). An example of this would be Niska et al.'s (2014) example of how the position of an expert enables giving advice when the other participants are positioned as non-experts.

From the perspective of positioning theory, executive search consultants construct different versions of reality and, at the same time, limit others when talking about their work and the recruitment process. This is due to the different discourses used and the different subject positions available. By using these different discourses and positions, they construct different types of versions of themselves (reflexive positioning) and others (interactive positioning) in their talk. In this thesis, the focus of the analysis is on reflexive positioning and thus on the versions that the search consultants construct of themselves.

3.3 Summary of the Theoretical and Methodological Framework

In this section, I will explain the concept of agency and how it can be combined with the concept of position in research. Finally, I will explain my theoretical and methodological approach to my research problem, which combines Agency Theory with Positioning Theory.

3.3.1 Combining The Concept of Agency with the Concept of Position

Analyzing positioning is one method for studying the construction of agency (Niska, 2015). The concept of agency is diverse and lacks a clear, simple definition (Burr, 2015, Hitlin and Elder Jr, 2007, Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). According to a constructionist viewpoint, agency is constructed through interactions between individuals and their environment (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). From the critical discursive psychology's perspective, agency is constructed and defined through relational processes. It is both the product of the process and the ability to produce (Niska, 2015). Therefore, people can be seen to have agency not only within positions but also over them (Niska, 2015).

When agency is viewed as a product of the process, it can be understood as one of the characteristics or features of the positions constructed in the interaction situation (Niska, 2015, Hydén, 2005). In other words, the positions adopted for oneself and indicated for others can be seen as agentic or non-agentic (Reynolds et al., 2007). As an example of its application to a specific context, Reynolds et al.'s (2007) research shows the ways in which women construct both agentic and non-agentic positions for themselves in relation to being single. This study demonstrates how women can position themselves both as agents who have chosen to live a singleness lifestyle (agentic actors) and as victims of structural constraints (non-agentic actors). Additionally, the study shows how women position themselves as agents who are serving their own interests, thus demonstrating an agency for the self.

Positions may also entail obligations, expectations, limitations, and opportunities for agency (Davies and Harré, 1990). Reynolds and Wetherell's (2003) study provides a practical example of this. In the study, women discussed being single and, in doing so, constructed contradictory positions for themselves that offered different possibilities for action. Women positioned themselves as both strong and independent, as well as vulnerable and problematic. However, from the perspective of strength and independence, wanting a relationship can be viewed as problematic, thus limiting their options.

When considering agency as a product of a process and applying Meyer and Jepperson's (2000) reformulated Agency theory, agent and principal can be understood as types of positions that are made available in the talk (Niska and Vesala, 2013). Furthermore, agents and principals can be viewed as occupying either agentic or non-agentic positions. As demonstrated by Niska (2015), a public sector business advisor may position themselves as a victim of policymakers' steering or as an agentic expert. Furthermore, these positions can both limit and facilitate actions in a given interaction situation (Davies and Harré, 1990). For instance, an expert's position allows for the giving of advice, while a non-expert's position typically constrains them from doing so (Niska, 2015).

When, in turn, agency is viewed as the ability to produce, it can be understood as people's ability to make choices about the discourses they use and thus the versions of reality and themselves that they construct in their speech (Davies and Harré, 1990, Harré and van

Langenhove, 1999). However, it is important to note that these choices are made within the context of discourses enabled by the sociocultural environment (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999, Davies and Harré, 1990). In other words, agency is limited as some of the discourses and positions are more dominant in the culture.

When combining Meyer and Jepperson's (2000) reformulated Agency theory with the view of agency as the ability to produce, actors can be seen to have agency over whom they serve, as they can choose from multiple plausible principals (Niska, 2015). Therefore, actors demonstrate their agency when selecting which principals they serve in their talk. However, cultural systems and discourses provide and limit the options available to speakers when choosing how to express themselves (Niska, 2015). Therefore, actors' agency is constrained by these structures.

These different views on agency and positions can also be applied to executive search consultants. The positions of agent and principal that executive search consultants construct for themselves, their clients, and candidates can be seen as both a product of a process and the ability to produce. Furthermore, these positions can be seen as either agentic or non-agentic, limiting or facilitating actions for the executive search consultants. In addition, they can be seen to have agency over choosing these positions both for themselves and the client and candidates. However, cultural systems and discourses limit their options.

3.3.2 Theoretical and Methodological Perspective on the Research Problem

Executive search consultants can be seen to create value for all parties involved in the triad between the client, executive search consultant, and candidate in various ways. When considering this triad from an Agency Theory perspective, as suggested by Baldo et al. (2019), the question arises as to whose agents executive search consultants are. To address this question, I have created a theoretical framework that combines Agency Theory with Positioning Theory, utilizing a social constructionist approach to this research issue.

The reformulated Agency Theory provides a strong foundation for understanding the nuanced roles of executive search consultants. This theory goes beyond the limitations of

classical Agency Theory by taking into account the influences of context on agent-principal relationships and acknowledging the potential for agents to serve the interests of multiple stakeholders (Shapiro, 2005). In the context of executive search, this means recognizing that consultants may simultaneously serve the interests of both clients and candidates, and potentially other principals, such as organizational goals or broader societal values.

Positioning Theory, with its focus on the construction of social reality through language and discourse, offers a methodological concept of a position for analyzing how executive search consultants construct their roles in interaction with clients and candidates. By examining the subject positions that consultants adopt in their discourse, this research can uncover how they navigate their complex roles and responsibilities. This approach enables an examination of how consultants position themselves as agents who serve their principals in the context of executive recruitment.

Combining these two theories together, allows me to analyze whose agents executive search consultants construct themselves to be in executive recruitment and who are they serving in their work. First, the concepts of an agent and principal from Agency Theory can be seen as positions that the executive search consultants construct for themselves and others in their talk. Second, these positions of agent and principal can be seen to have agency for someone or something, meaning that from these positions executive search consultants can be seen to serve something.

Finally, this theoretical and methodological framework offers a view of roles within the executive search process by integrating Agency Theory and Positioning theory. Executive search consultants are constantly negotiating within a network of complex relationships, where their roles and the interests they represent are actively shaped through ongoing interactions. This theoretical framework emphasizes the importance of analyzing the conversations consultants have about their work in order to fully understand their perception of themselves and their role within the complex relationship between different actors in recruitment. Taking a multidisciplinary approach provides a comprehensive understanding of how executive search consultants navigate their multiple roles and build their professional identities, offering new insights into the multifaceted nature of the recruitment industry.

4 Data and Analysis

In this chapter, I will present the research methodology of this study. First, I will describe the research material I am using for this research. Second, I'll describe the specific method I'll use to conduct the analysis. Then, I will discuss the research ethics related to my study. Finally, I will describe the analysis process.

4.1 Research Material

In this study, I use the qualitative research material (Koivunen, 2015b) collected by university researcher Dr. Tuija Koivunen from the University of Tampere. The research material was collected for the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health's research project called Equality for Managerial Career Development (Tasa-arvoa johtajien urakehitykseen, TASURI). The research material was collected between 25.11.2014–24.2.2015. The material was published in the Social Science Data Archive (FSD) operated by the University of Tampere in 2015 (Koivunen, 2015b), from where it is available for research purposes.

For this TASURI research project, people working on recruitment for listed and state-owned companies operating in Finland were interviewed. Participants included executive search consultants, top executives (i.e. CEOs) and board chairpersons. The purpose of the project was to identify good and bad practices regarding gender equality in executive recruitment. Based on the interviews, a report Gender Equality in Executive Recruitment (Koivunen, 2015a) was published. The main findings of this report are related to gender equality in executive recruitment.

In total, there are 19 transcribed interviews in the research material. Since the focus of this study is on the executive search consultants, I chose only the interviews with them. There were a total of six interviews with executive search consultants, all of which were selected for this study. These six executive search consultants were selected for the original study on the basis that their clients are companies recruiting senior management (Koivunen, 2015a). Four of the executive search consultants interviewed were men and two were women.

All interviews were conducted face-to-face at the consultants' workplaces. The interviews were semi-structured, as the interviewees were asked questions in a freely chosen order and in a conversational manner. The interviews with the executive search consultants were conducted using an interview framework tailored for them (Koivunen, 2015a). This interview framework can be found in Appendix 1. In this tailored interview framework, for example, questions related to the progress of the recruitment process were more specific than in interviews with company executives (Koivunen, 2015a). The interviews with the executive search consultants lasted between 52 and 77 minutes.

In the interviews with executive search consultants, the focus was on two topics in particular: first, the executive recruitment process, and second, gender equality in this process. From a process perspective, questions were asked about what the process looks like, who does what and when, who makes the decisions, and what requirements and competencies they look for in executives. From an equality perspective, questions were asked about possible differences between male and female candidates.

This data set fits my research objectives as it provides a unique opportunity to gain access to the conversation of the Finnish executive search consultants. The interviews provide insight into how the executive search consultants describe the executive recruitment process and thus offer an opportunity to analyze how the consultants position themselves in the process. Although the context of gender equality in executive recruitment is not the main focus of my study, it can provide some interesting insights into how the search consultants position themselves in the triangle (consultant-client-candidate) or outside of it when talking about the recruitment process from this perspective.

4.1 Method

Since the research material consists of transcribed interviews and the research goal of this study is to provide a deeper understanding of the agency of executive search consultants, I naturally use a qualitative research method. More specifically, as discussed in the theoretical and methodological framework section, I use the concept of a position from Positioning Theory to examine this phenomenon from a social constructionist perspective.

An important aspect of qualitative research is to understand that the purpose of qualitative research is not to produce conclusions that can be empirically generalized, but to try to understand and describe a particular event and to give it a theoretically meaningful interpretation (Eskola and Suoranta, 2008). In addition, in qualitative research, it is often the way interviewees give meaning to things and the possible differences and similarities that can be observed in the meaning-making that are of interest, rather than the opinions of individuals (Ruusuvaori et al., 2010). In this thesis, I am interested in how the executive research consultants position themselves in their talk and who they construct themselves to serve from these positions. The research material is well suited to this research interest as the interviewees talk about the executive recruitment process and in doing so they also make sense of their own part in this process.

In qualitative research, it is common to collect data using purposive sampling, which means that the researcher selects a sample that is most useful for the purposes of the research (Eskola and Suoranta, 2008). This method is used when the researcher wants to gain detailed knowledge about a specific phenomenon rather than making statistical inferences, or when the population is very small and specific. The research material at my disposal was collected using the purposive sampling method because the purpose of Koivunen's (2015a) study was to gain a better understanding of the executive search process and to see if there was anything that could be done better in terms of equality. Therefore, only people such as executive search consultants, top executives (i.e. CEOs), and board chairs were interviewed. The way this research material was collected serves my research interest, as the executive search consultants selected for the interviews were selected on the basis that they work in executive search in Finland.

The purpose of qualitative research is to build theoretically sustainable interpretations through a thorough analysis of the data rather than to show cause-and-effect relationships in the data, and therefore the coverage of the material in qualitative research is more important than the size of the material, and therefore it is also normal to focus on interviewing a small and limited number of people (Eskola and Suoranta, 2008). The material I have chosen for this thesis is very comprehensive in terms of my research interest, as it contains more than 6

hours of transcribed speech in which executive search consultants talk about the executive recruitment process.

In the analysis process, I chose to follow Braun and Clarke's steps in thematic analysis because thematic analysis is a useful and theoretically flexible method for analyzing qualitative data. It is a popular method within psychology and is said to provide a good starting point for the analysis process (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest, thematic analysis has limited interpretive power and as such is best used with a specific theoretical framework to anchor the analytic claims. I use this method to find the positions that research consultants construct in their talk and then further analyze and interpret these findings using the concept of agency. Thus, I use thematic analysis to provide a systematic approach to the data and the analytical process.

In addition, Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasize that in qualitative research it is important to make the analysis process as transparent as possible so that the research can be critically evaluated. By using thematic analysis in my analysis process, I will be able to better illustrate the course of my analysis and better justify the solutions and interpretations I have made during this process. Thus, my purpose in using thematic analysis is to enable a critical evaluation of my analysis and interpretations.

Although I strive for the most justified analysis possible, in qualitative research it is always important to consider the position of the researcher, which inevitably influences the research (Eskola and Suoranta, 2008). Therefore, it is good to note that the interpretations I have presented in this thesis are from the position of a master's student in business. Thus, someone with a different background might have come up with a different interpretation of the data. However, it should be noted that both interpretations would be equally meaningful as they would bring different aspects of the studied phenomenon into discussion (Eskola and Suoranta, 2008).

My thesis differs from the Koivunen's (2015a) research, which is based on the same interview material. First, my research differs in terms of theoretical and methodological approach. In my approach, I combine agency theory with positioning theory, and I take a social constructionist perspective in my analysis. Second, my perspective is not limited to the study

of equality, although it is clear that these issues may also emerge in this study. Thus, with the chosen theoretical approach, research questions, and method of analysis, I aim to enrich the picture of executive recruitment created by Koivunen's (2015a) research.

4.2 Research Ethics

The ethical issues of my research are related to the collection of material, its preservation, and its use. The Research Ethics Advisory Board (2019) has defined the ethical principles of human research. According to these principles, subjects must have the right to participate in the study voluntarily and to refuse to participate if they wish, to interrupt and cancel their participation at any time without negative consequences, to receive information about the content of the study, the processing and implementation of personal data, and to receive an understandable and truthful picture of the goals of the study and participation.

According to Koivunen (2015a), all interviewed persons participated in the original study on a voluntary basis. In addition, they were offered information about the background and purpose of the study, as well as the methods of processing, storing, and using the material. Written permission was obtained from the interviewees to archive the transcribed interviews for future research use. Before giving permission, the interviewees were allowed to review the interview transcripts if they wished. As all interviewees gave permission to archive their transcribed interviews for future research use, the material could be downloaded from the Social Science Data Archive and used for this thesis.

According to the Ethical Principles of the Research Ethics Advisory Board (2019), the personal data of research subjects must be handled appropriately and removed from published material. In addition, when publishing research, care must be taken to protect the privacy of those who participated in the research and those mentioned in the publication. With respect to this research material, all names of companies and individuals were removed during the transcription phase to ensure anonymity (Koivunen, 2015a). In addition, the audio tapes of the interviews were destroyed immediately after transcription. In the data, pseudonyms were used for repeated names of individuals and companies to protect the privacy of third parties.

As a researcher and data processor, I also adhere to these principles of research ethics (2019) by, among other things, ensuring that the quotations I use do not contain any indirect identifying information (e.g., detailed work history or unique life events) that could identify the interviewee or any third party mentioned in the interview. In addition, I will properly dispose the material from my computer after completing my research. I will not disclose or distribute the material to anyone outside of this thesis process.

I think it is important to bring out the fact that although the research participants have given their written consent to archive their transcribed interviews for future research use (Koivunen, 2015a), they have not directly given their informed consent to this study, which takes a close look at their language use. According to Koivunen (2015a), interviewees were concerned that individual sentences or statements could be extracted from their interviews and used against them or the companies they represented. First and foremost, anonymizing the interviews and removing identifying information prevents such misuse. In addition, as the author of this thesis, I would like to emphasize that the interest in this research is not focused on specific individuals, the companies they represent, or the speech of a specific individual, but rather on the way the interviewees talk about themselves and their profession in general. I would also like to highlight and emphasize that in this study I am not interested in the psychological structures of the interviewees or the facts they knew, but only in the processes visible in the interaction of the interview situation.

4.3 Analysis

I began the analysis process by familiarizing myself with the data, following Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (2006). I read the data several times to find what was interesting in the material. At this point, I had not read or familiarized myself with the literature related to executive search, but I was familiar with the theoretical and methodological concepts that I could use. However, I had not yet decided which theoretical concepts I would use in my research. Rather, I wanted the data to show me what was interesting in it. Therefore, it can be said that I started the analysis process data-driven.

As I was reading the data, I noticed that it was interesting that when describing the recruiting process, the search consultants seemed to actively position themselves in different positions in their talk. With this idea in mind, I began to look at the literature on search consultants and found that this was something worth exploring further. I chose my research questions based on what was interesting in the data and what was not yet known about executive search consultants. Thus, the process was abductive in that both empirical findings and theoretical insights influenced the construction of the research questions and the analysis process itself.

Once I was familiar with the data, I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) next step and began to generate initial codes. I did this using qualitative data analysis and research software called Atlas.ti. At this stage, I did not name the positions yet, but coded the parts according to what the consultants talked about when they seemed to engage in positioning. In practice, the codes looked like "working with the client," "competing with other consultants," etc. In other words, I coded the interesting parts of their talk.

Next, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) model, I began to review the codes and look for themes within them. I used Positioning Theory as a theoretical framework to guide this analysis. At this point, I focused on identifying how participants discursively constructed their positions. In practice, this meant looking closely at the language used by the interviewees and how they represented themselves, for example, when they talked about working with the client, what kind of words and metaphors were associated with that, such as "helping," "servant in the house," and so on. As I progressed, I observed recurring patterns in the codes that indicated similar ways of talking about certain issues. These patterns suggested themes, and I noted how the consultants presented themselves differently across these themes. Therefore, I categorized the themes based on the variations in how the research consultants constructed their positions within the themes.

After finding these themes, I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) model and started to review the themes and positions. First, I checked whether the themes and positions I had found were coherent and clearly distinct from each other. In addition, I paid attention to who or what the consultants were constructing themselves to serve in the different positions. After reviewing the themes and positions, I began to reread the data to see if the positions made

sense in the data and if they were clearly distinct from each other. I also checked to see if there were other positions in the data set that I had not identified in the first round.

After reviewing the themes and positions, I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) model and began to define and name them. At this stage, I identified the essence of what the different positions were about and began to organize the data extracts into a consistent and coherent account. I also began to construct the narrative for my written report of the analysis. Finally, after defining and naming the positions, I began to write the report. As I wrote the findings, I also went back to my research questions and built the story and argument around them.

5 Findings

In this section, I present the findings of my analysis. From the interview data, I identified six distinct positions that executive search consultants constructed for themselves. These positions were: professional, servant, gatekeeper, career advocate, moneymaker, and observer. In these positions, the search consultants constructed themselves to serve different types of principals. These positions and the principals the consultants constructed themselves to serve are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Executive search consultants' positions and principals whom they serve

Position	Principal
Professional	Client
Servant	Client
Gatekeeper	Suitable candidates
Career advocate	Candidates
Moneymaker	Themselves
Observer	Themselves

For illustrative examples from the data, I have chosen speech extracts that best represent the data set. Therefore, the quotes from the interviews are not evenly distributed. The selected quotations contain the same symbols that were used in the pre-transcribed dataset that I used. These symbols and their explanations can be found in Appendix 2.

The interviews were conducted in Finnish. Since the language of this master's thesis is English, I had to translate the chosen illustrative examples of the data from Finnish to English. As in critical discursive psychology, language use is at the center of the research, so it was important to capture the different nuances of the interview language as carefully as possible. Therefore, I used Google Translator to help me with the translations. All the original data extracts in Finnish can be found in Appendix 3.

5.1 Executive Search Consultant as a Professional Who Serves the Client

In the data, I found a position of a professional that the executive search consultants constructed for themselves in their speech. From this position, the consultants constructed themselves to serve the clients. In this position, they constructed themselves as experts who have special knowledge about the executive market and are therefore needed by their clients. In addition to expertise, experience was also another important aspect of this position. From a professional position, one of the most important aspects of the executive search consultant's job was to understand the client and their needs and organization. This was constructed as one of the key features of the position and it also allowed consultants to bring new ideas and different types of suggestions to the process. This, in turn, was seen as adding value to the executive recruitment process.

A professional position could be identified from the interviews in many different contexts. It was particularly used when interviewees talked about the beginning of the executive search recruitment process, and it was particularly used in the context of profiling. By using this position, the interviewees created the need for executive search consultants and highlighted the importance and benefits of using executive search consultants in the executive search process.

Extract 1:

I3: But when it comes to headhunting for board members, we have one clear factor that determines whether the job comes to the headhunters, it's that committees themselves handle the board member search when it is easy, quite often. But when specialized knowledge is needed, usually always when we receive a board member search, it's about a narrow sector of expertise. [...]

Here the interviewee explains board searches and their role in these processes. In this excerpt, the executive search consultant constructs a professional position for themselves by highlighting their own expertise, knowledge and ability to handle challenging recruitment processes, setting themselves apart from more conventional search methods. They emphasize the need for specialized knowledge in board searches where the company is looking for

a candidate with a “narrow sector of expertise”. This constructs executive search consultants as professionals who can find people with specific expertise and thus help and serve the client. It also constructs the need for this type of expertise and justifies why executive search consultants are needed in executive search.

Extract 2:

I6: For example, direct consultants are increasingly used in the recruitment of listed companies, which is good, because a good executive search firm does not rely on the same individuals, but strives to find resources that can bring something new.

In this extract, the interviewee talks about why it is beneficial to use executive search consultants in executive recruitment. Here, the interviewee establishes an image of themselves and their firm as professionals who don't recycle the same people, but instead seek to find new talent and bring something fresh to an organization. The "find resources" metaphor portrays executive search consultants as people who can identify potential candidates who can add value to the organization. Therefore, as professionals, they serve the client and add value by bringing something new to the table. This also serves as a justification for why executive search consultants are important and needed in the executive search process.

Extract 3:

I3: But we do assist a lot in those ideas, you know, when we're involved in those discussions, we always bring more breadth to the conversation, we expand on it. And it's because of our experience, that when many boards or board members seek one CEO for a specific company during their tenure, we, on the other hand, search for multiple CEOs in a year, so we naturally have a different perspective on these markets and people compared to someone who doesn't do it as work. That's why we have a really good understanding of that market.

This excerpt is from a section in which the interviewee talks about the beginning of the executive recruitment process when requirements are discussed with the client. This data extract shows how the consultant relates experience as part of the professional position. The interviewee does this by emphasizing their role in bringing breadth to these requirements discussions and then emphasizing that their experience gives them a different understanding

of the executive market than clients who may only be looking for an executive once during their tenure as a board member. The interviewee also associates experience with a good understanding of the market, creating an image of credibility and expertise. The constructs of expertise and experience are then used to highlight how executive search consultants, as professionals, serve the client by bringing breadth to the discussion of requirements. It also subtly implies why they should be hired in the first place.

Extract 4:

I4: [...] *And then, in the profiling phase, by challenging the one who gives the assignment. For example, often you hear things like 'we need someone good for this position'. So what does 'someone good' mean to you and what are the elements in it? You have to somehow get the profiling phase right, in my opinion. Well, it's the most important thing, that's where it's defined whether we succeed or not. And then, if you just politely listen to the client and what they list, you have to try to understand what it means to you, that someone is a good people manager, what kind of elements are there in that. And what it means in your company to be a good change leader, what they need to know. What kind of people resist change, what challenges are there. To break it down as much as possible first, so that you really understand the situation of the company and what type of elements are needed in leadership. [...]*

In this data extract, the interviewee responds to the question about the possibility of improving gender equality in executive recruitment. In the answer, the interviewee talks about the profiling phase. In talking about the profiling phase, the interviewee positions themselves in the professional position by emphasizing the importance of asking questions from the client that clarify what the client actually wants. The interviewee constructs this phase to define whether or not the consultants will be successful in the assignment. In addition, the interviewee makes a distinction between listening and understanding, emphasizing that as a professional executive search consultant, it is not enough to just "politely" listen to the client, but to understand what different things mean in practice for the client and their organization. All of this creates an image that as a professional executive search consultant, it is their responsibility to ask clarifying questions and to understand the client and their needs and what different things mean to them. Therefore, the core of their job is to serve the principal, who is the client, and not, for example, gender equality, although at first it seems that the

interviewee would say that it is possible to improve gender equality by challenging the client, but later it is related to being a professional and better understanding what the client needs and wants.

Extract 5:

I4: [...] *But a headhunter can definitely, in a way, awaken thoughts in the client, and arouse what else it could be that they want. But it's really important that you understand specifically the business and the client, and you have some understanding of the organization. So that you truly understand that if you bring up something a little different, it actually fits there.*

Here the interviewee talks about executive search consultants and whether they know better than the client what the client wants. In the excerpt, the executive search consultant establishes a professional position for themselves by emphasizing their role in understanding the client and challenging the client's thinking. The metaphor of “awaken thoughts in the client” is used to construct the image that the client may not know exactly what they want, but they need a professional to help them see it. This implies that the executive search consultant will challenge the client's thinking and bring out new and different perspectives. In constructing this image, the interviewee also stresses the importance of understanding the client's business and organization. This underscores the executive search consultant's expertise and comprehensiveness, and establishes their professional position where they can present alternatives that the client may not have considered. By understanding the client's needs and organization, and by offering unexpected alternatives, the executive search consultant constructs themselves to serve the client.

Extract 6:

I1: *It's important for us to clarify and help the customer understand what is realistically possible. Because everyone feels bad, everyone has a negative feeling if the final solution is not achieved or if it fails for some reason. That's why we need to have a proactive approach, so that we can support the process of achieving the final solution both in terms of getting it done initially and making sure it succeeds.*

This excerpt shows how managing client expectations is part of the professional position. In this extract, the interviewee responds to a question about whether it is sometimes difficult to

work with clients and their demands. In answering, the interviewee positions themselves in the professional position and constructs it as one of actively managing clients' expectations by bringing out what is realistically possible. In this way, the interviewee constructs themselves as the experts who know better than the customer what is possible, and they use this expertise for the customer's benefit. The interviewee also emphasizes that, as professionals, they must take a proactive approach to managing these expectations in order to get the job done and be successful.

Extract 7:

I1: [...] *You can't stall, because in our situation, in my opinion, we are happy to use all the time that is given to us, the best possible time, but after that you have to respect that time window. It can't be, these need to be kept. These processes, however, need to be kept upright. And we have a central responsibility for that. It disrupts the functioning of the entire organization if these schedules start to slip. I say this, especially when it comes to the CEO, that for any organization, every day without a proper CEO is very bad. And this process must serve that purpose. [...]*

In this excerpt, the executive search consultant establishes a professional position by emphasizing the consultant's role in making critical decisions within the organization, managing timelines, and supporting the organization's operations. In this excerpt, the interviewee emphasizes the importance of schedules in the executive search process and the organization's need to find the right solution quickly. They emphasize that the organization's operations can suffer if timelines are not met, especially in the case of CEO recruitment. They also express concern that the organization's operations will suffer without the right CEO, which reinforces the executive search consultant's professional role in finding solutions and supporting the well-being of the organization. They construct an image of themselves as reliable and professional experts who play a key role in ensuring the organization's success by ensuring that the recruitment process stays on schedule.

5.2 Executive Search Consultant as a Servant Who Serves the Client

I found that in the interview data, executive search consultants positioned themselves as servants. In this position, consultants constructed themselves as servants to their clients. In

this position, executive search consultants constructed themselves as servants who clients use to find suitable candidates for their open positions. From this position, executive search consultants seemed to follow client instructions and do what was asked of them. This position portrayed executive search consultants as practical doers. Finally, in this position, they emphasized their commitment to meeting client expectations and requirements to the best of their ability.

This position could be identified from the different metaphors used by the interviewees. In particular, metaphors such as "tool", "a servant in the house" and "let the cobbler stick to their last" made this position stand out from the talk. All of these metaphors emphasize the consultant's position as a servant that clients use to find suitable candidates for their open positions. These metaphors also emphasize that the executive search consultant's role is to meet the client's expectations and needs and to act according to the client's instructions. The final decision is always made by the client.

Interviewees positioned themselves in this position when talking about the recruitment process and how it works. They also positioned themselves in this position when they talked about equality in the recruitment process. This position allowed them to escape responsibility when talking about gender equality in the executive recruitment process.

Compared to the position of the professional, the executive search consultant in this servant position seemed to be limited by the client's predefined instructions. In addition, in this position, they did not take responsibility for decision-making, did not actively participate in defining qualifications, and did not challenge the client's thinking. In this sense, the servant position seems to be more passive and portrays consultants as workers who do what they are told. In addition, this position portrays executive search consultants as subservient to the client's wishes and needs, compared to the position of a professional, which emphasizes the role of executive search consultants as experts who help the client better understand their own needs.

Extract 8:

I1: We cannot negotiate with the client, we can only provide our opinions and perspectives and they take them into consideration if they accept them. This is typical

work for us, we are tools, instruments. Our task is to ultimately produce reasoned alternatives, and the client makes the final decision because they bear the responsibility, and then the ultimate choice. We are clearly a servant in the house. This should be remembered. In this respect, we just bring those perspectives to the table, and we don't try to take control because we don't live with the final decision, nor do we bear the ultimate responsibility. In this regard, roles are quite clear. [...]

In this extract, the interviewee answers the question about negotiating with the client. The interviewee says that they cannot negotiate with the clients, but only share opinions and views for them while they are making decisions. The clients can take these opinions and views into account if they see fit. In this extract, the interviewee uses the metaphors of "tools" and "instruments" to describe executive search consultants. These metaphors construct them as assistants or facilitators of a particular task or function. These metaphors also construct executive search consultants as lacking autonomy and decision-making power. By using these metaphors, the interviewer emphasizes their role in serving the client. The interviewer also emphasizes this by comparing themselves to a "servant". As a servant, the role of the executive search consultant is to present the client with justified alternatives, but the final decision is always made by the client, because they bear the responsibility for their choice and have to live with it. In this way, the interviewee justifies their role as a servant at the client's service.

The next extract further describes the power dynamic between the consultant and the client:

Extract 9:

I3: [...] most of the time the headhunter does what they are instructed to do, and if they don't do the job according to that profile, then the client asks what's wrong, why are you presenting such candidates.

In this extract, the interviewee describes the role of the headhunter and says that most of the time the headhunter does what they are told. The interviewee mentions that if the headhunter does not do their job according to the client's wishes, the client will question it. This gives the impression that the headhunter's role is to always follow the client's wishes and make suggestions about candidates according to the profile given by the client. This emphasizes

the power dynamic between the client and the executive search consultant, and constructs the consultant's job as ultimately being about serving the client by finding candidates that meet the client's needs and requirements. This gives the impression that executive search consultants are just practical workers who do what they are told to do.

Extract 10:

I3: In other words, we do what we are instructed to do. Sometimes, for example, in the case of recruiting board members, one might wish that there would be a board member recruitment that would say 'find a suitable and good board member for our company', and then we could start thinking about what kind of person that is and then consider it broadly. But it doesn't happen, instead it's described quite precisely what the person needs to know and that's it. And we work accordingly. That's just how it goes.

In this extract, the interviewee describes how headhunters do what they are told. In this extract, the interviewee describes how consultants sometimes wish they were given more freedom to define what the candidate should be like, so that they could think for themselves about what kind of person would best fit the client company. However, according to the interviewee, the requirements are described very precisely and they are instructed to work on the basis of them. This constructs the headhunter's job as one of following given instructions and requirements without the freedom to make broader considerations. Thus, this servant position portrays executive search consultants as having a limited type of expertise, as they do not seem to have the autonomy to use their own judgment, but instead must simply follow what they are told. Finally, the interviewee constructs this as just the way things are, which gives the impression of limited possibilities for change, which also highlights the condescending nature of this position.

Extract 11:

I3: But, as mentioned, our clients are rational people, they know what they want, and they are mostly right about what they want [laughs]. There's not much room for us to argue.

In this data extract, the interviewee describes clients as "rational people," suggesting that they are intelligent and know how to make sound decisions. The interviewee also describes clients as being "mostly right" about what they want, which justifies why executive search consultants should not try to change their opinions or views on things. The interviewee also describes that there is not "much room" for consultants to argue. As servants, consultants do not have much room to speak or the opportunity to disagree with the decisions of the principals. This seems to construct executive search consultants to follow the wishes and demands of clients without much resistance, which in turn constructs clients to have a lot of power in this relationship.

Extract 12:

I1: *However, we are practical doers in the end. Let the cobbler stick to their last.*

In this data extract, the interviewee uses the metaphor "let the cobbler stay to their last," which constructs the servant position of executive search consultants as being about focusing on practical activities and task performance. This metaphor also suggests that executive search consultants should stay within the confines of their own area of expertise and not do things for which they are not qualified or skilled. Thus, the interviewee sees their own role as a practical operator and communicates that their role is to focus on what they know best and not to interfere in other areas or tasks. This statement, in turn, explains and justifies the servant position of the executive search consultant.

5.3 Executive Search Consultant as a Gatekeeper Who Serves the Suitable Candidates

From the interview data, I found a gatekeeper position that executive search consultants constructed for themselves in their speech. In this position, they portray themselves as having power over people's careers and being the ones who make decisions about them. Additionally, they present themselves as serving only the candidates they deem suitable for executive roles. Executive search consultants position themselves to serve suitable candidates by ensuring that the open position aligns with their career goals. It should be noted that they

constructed themselves acting as agents only for those candidates that they see could be hired for the open executive position, meaning that they do not construct themselves to serve all candidates in this position. In this position, consultants appeared as evaluators, making judgments about suitability, skills, and the "toolbox" needed for executive positions. They perceived themselves as objective evaluators with the power to assess and decide on candidates' readiness for leadership roles.

Executive search consultants positioned themselves in this gatekeeper position when they talked about finding and interviewing suitable candidates for the open position. Compared to the professional and servant positions, this position emphasized the executive search consultant's role in serving the candidates. In this position, the focus was on how the executive search consultant was advancing, and thus serving, the people they saw as suitable for leadership roles in their careers.

Extract 13:

I2: [...] And then in terms of the career, this role being proposed now would for the other, it would be more suitable, a career challenge, in the right direction.

In this extract, the interviewee is defining what they mean by suitability. This extract highlights the power that executive search consultants have. In this extract, the consultant positions themselves in the role of gatekeeper by showing how they define suitability and how they construct themselves to know best what would be the "right direction" and "career challenge" for the candidate. This also constructs them to serve the suitable candidates, as from this position the executive search consultant seems to be able to know what would best serve the suitable candidate in their career.

The next extract brings out how in this position, the executive search consultant describes themselves to know when it is a good time for people to advance in their careers:

Extract 14:

I2: Well, for example, right now they have a very long stretch of something specific behind them, and clearly now it's good to get the, expansion, in this career, and they just have those, tools in the toolbox that will help them cope very well

*with these, and that at the same time, they get to expand their own competence
[...]*

In this extract, the interviewee talks about the candidate's suitability for the job. Here the interviewee explains what they mean by suitability. In describing what suitability means to them, the interviewee constructs themselves as having the power to decide who is more suitable for the role. They seem to have the power to decide when it is a good time for the candidate to move forward in their career and when they have the necessary skills in their "toolbox". With this "toolbox" metaphor, the interviewee makes it seem as if the skills are something tangible that would help the candidate succeed in the leadership role. By making this comparison, the respondent also makes it seem as if they, in their job, would be able to easily assess whether someone has the right "tools" to succeed in the leadership role. This creates the image that executive search consultants' perceptions of suitability are based on objectivity rather than subjective perceptions, which in turn justifies their role as gatekeepers who have the power to make judgments about other people's suitability for executive roles.

The last part of the data extract also shows how the interviewee positions themselves to serve suitable candidates in this gatekeeper position. When the interviewee talks about the "tools in the toolbox" and how they will help the suitable candidate to cope in the new position and how the suitable candidate will be able to "expand their own competence", they make it seem as if the executive search consultant's job is to make sure that the suitable candidate has what it takes to succeed in the new role and that the new role will serve them in their career by expanding their competence.

Extract 15:

I4: [...] who has received positive feedback, that becomes evident when I interview them. Initially, I have a working hypothesis that probably this, this, or this person might fit. Then I meet these individuals, and we go through their work thoroughly. We stick quite strictly to what they've done, the kinds of companies they've worked for, and what they've accomplished. And how they drive change. I've asked a lot of people when I interview them, for examples. Like, tell me about a change management case, or what the situation was and what you did and

achieved. Then people provide examples. From there, I try to find the individuals who fit this particular company.

This data extract is from a section where the interviewee discusses the interviewing phase of the executive search process. This data extract shows how, in the gatekeeper position, the executive search consultant ensures that the candidate has relevant experience that will make them a good fit for the company. The executive search consultant describes having a "working hypothesis" of suitable candidates who might fit the open position, and then interviewing the candidates to learn about their experience. Experience is thus constructed as an important part of a candidate's suitability. The interviewer describes how they ask candidates questions about their experience and make judgments about their fit based on those answers. Thus, in the gatekeeper position, the executive search consultant has the power to make judgments about the candidates' fit with the organization.

Extract 16:

I4: [...] But not for myself, this type of title doesn't, in itself, qualify, to the extent that a CEO title qualifies.

In this excerpt, the interviewee talks about qualifications for the executive roles. In this excerpt, the interviewee talks specifically about the role of CEO and how the title of interim CEO does not necessarily qualify a person for the role of CEO. This excerpt shows how the consultant positions themselves as a gatekeeper who has the power to decide what title and what kind of experience qualifies a person for the CEO role. The interviewee does this by emphasizing that, in their view, the title of interim CEO does not qualify a person to the extent that the title of CEO does.

5.4 Executive Search Consultant as a Career Advocate Who Serves the Candidates

I found a career advocate position that executive search consultants constructed for themselves when they talked about the executive recruitment process and especially when they talked about gender equality in that context. The career advocate position constructed

executive search consultants as trustworthy people who would actively bring new career opportunities to candidates. Typical of this position was the construction of consultants as empathetic people who listen to candidates, especially female candidates, and help them understand that they can handle an executive role. This position portrayed executive search consultants as active advocates who stand by the candidates and also help them by communicating with the client in a way that would help the candidates succeed in the recruitment process. From this position, executive search consultants constructed themselves to serve the candidates.

The career advocate position is similar to the gatekeeper position in that it is also a position from which executive search consultants construct themselves to serve candidates. However, in the gatekeeper position, the consultants constructed themselves to serve only suitable candidates, whereas, in this career advocate position, the consultants seemed to serve candidates in general. In this position, the consultants also seemed to serve those candidates who, without their help, would not necessarily be selected for the open position. Compared to the gatekeeper position, this position also emphasizes the consultants' active role in promoting and supporting people's careers, rather than acting as a force that defines eligibility and has power over people's careers. Therefore, this position of career advocate portrays executive search consultants as positive influencers and reliable supporters in candidates' career journeys.

This extract shows how the interviewee positions themselves as a career advocate:

Extract 17:

I2: *[laughs] (-) but if you have to look for it on another level, it's a little more difficult, but there is potential there, because of course they want to be number one. It's our job really to always lift these people a little higher in their career.*

This extract is from the part where the interviewee describes how they find candidates for executive positions. In this extract, the interviewee explains that it is more difficult to find suitable candidates from the lower hierarchical levels in organizations because of the lack of specific experience. In this extract, the interviewee constructs people who are not in managerial roles as being motivated to move into these roles. The interviewee compares being an

executive to being "number one," which constructs an image that only the best can achieve it. Next, in the last part of the extract, the interviewee constructs the position of career advocate for themselves as they describe the work of executive search consultants as being about lifting people who aspire to be "number one" higher in their careers. The metaphor of "lifting" emphasizes the executive search consultant's supportive role in other people's careers.

The next excerpt shows how candidates also trust consultants to help them in their careers:

Extract 18:

I3: [...] *Then, of course, there is another thing that should always be remembered in this executive search, is that what makes this a good channel is that we are the only people in Finland, or anywhere, who know what this top management wants for the future. Because they don't tell anyone else, and we don't tell anyone else. They cannot tell that to their own board chairmen and members. They can't tell it to their subordinates in the company and they can't really ever tell it to other members of the business community because it's a big fear that it will spread. But they have that conversation with us because they know that if they tell us that they might be interested in some new things, they know that it can also lead to the fact that when something suitable comes up, we know how to get in touch, [...]*

In this excerpt, the interviewee talks about how top management wants to discuss their career aspirations and desires with the executive consultants. In this extract, the interviewee constructs the position of a career advocate by bringing up how top management wants to share what they want for their future with executive search consultants, knowing that the consultants can get in touch with them if something suitable comes up. First, the interviewee emphasizes that executive search consultants are the only ones who know what people in top management positions want to do next in their careers. In this way, the interviewee constructs the position of career advocate as one of trust. This is also how the interviewee justifies the importance and existence of the career advocate position. Next, the interviewee constructs the position for themselves by bringing up how top management knows that if they are interested in some new things in their career and if they disclose this to the executive search consultant, it could lead to some new opportunities as the consultant could call them

if something suitable comes up. In this way, the executive search consultant construct themselves to serve the candidates in this position.

Extract 19:

I6: [...] 15, 20 years ago, people didn't want that, today everyone wants us to keep that information and so, because it is part of the fact that they are branded, and they want to do everything so that new opportunities can come for them too.

In this extract, the interviewee talks about psychological tests that are often conducted for candidates in the executive search process. In this excerpt, the interviewee talks about how, in the past, candidates did not want the executive search consultants to keep the information from the tests for themselves after the hiring process, but now the candidates want them to keep it. The interviewee explains that this is because being part of a search process is part of being branded and it can also open up some new opportunities for them. In explaining this, the interviewee constructs the position of a career advocate who helps candidates with their personal brand and opens up new career opportunities for them. In this way, the executive search consultant positions themselves to serve candidates from this position.

Extract 20:

I4: No, that's why I'm just starting to ask what scares you, you don't tell me concretely what it is that you're afraid of? And then we'll go through where this fear can come from and, that you have managed before, what made you succeed there, so I have tried somehow to get people to think about these things. And that's what I've told women many times, when you get there for the final interview, don't ever say that you're afraid. I understand that you might be afraid, but don't bring it up in that interview, if you want the job, then you shouldn't be afraid, and shouldn't say it out loud. And so often when it's been talked about and so many times women say that, I don't know how my schedules are going with the kids and how I'm going to get through this. So that's when I often tell them that I rarely hear men talk like this, so tell me what your situation is. So how could you imagine to organize it, and the CEO's responsibility is 24/7, but it doesn't mean that you're working day and night. You still can be a mother. And then we talk how you can have time to do this and that. [...]

In this extract, the interviewee talks about how they discuss with women about possible fears they might have regarding leadership roles. In this data extract, the interviewee constructs an image of themselves as a career advocate, supporting female candidates who may have some doubts and fears about their ability to take on an executive role. The interviewee constructs the career advocate's position as one of listening, understanding, and actively supporting the candidate in the hiring process. In a way, the career advocate seems like a coach, asking questions that open the candidate's eyes to things like how they could be a mother and a CEO at the same time.

Extract 21:

I1: [...] I can say to that client that "Hey, listen, there are women involved now that these and these things are very important to them and you have to go through them carefully". And things of this type. [...]

This excerpt is from a part of the interview in which the interviewee discusses the opportunities for women to advance to executive positions. In this part of the interview, the interviewee talks about the role of executive search consultants in advancing women's careers. This excerpt shows the active role that executive search consultants construct for them in women's careers. In this extract, the interviewee positions themselves as a career advocate in which they can instruct the client to go through certain types of things and questions with female candidates who might consider some specific things important when choosing a place to work. This way this extract constructs the consultants to serve the candidates.

Extract 22:

I2: [...] And then also the fact that, in strong faith, we bring up the possibilities of this woman, find out why this woman was good for this job.

This extract comes from a section where the interviewee talks about whether executive search consultants can promote gender equality in the executive search process. In this extract, the interviewee constructs the position of a career advocate for themselves by bringing up that consultants can work as an advocate for female candidates in the recruitment process by highlighting the reasons why they are good for that specific job. Thus, the career advocate position portrays executive search consultants as active promoters who can influence other

people's careers, especially women's careers, by bringing up their thoughts and actively arguing for them.

5.5 Executive Search Consultant as a Moneymaker Who Serves Themselves

From the interview data, I found a moneymaker position that executive search consultants constructed for themselves in their speech. In this moneymaker position, search consultants emphasized the importance of finding the best candidate for the job to ensure their own financial gain. Therefore, in this position, consultants constructed themselves to serve themselves. In constructing this position, executive search consultants emphasized that the purpose and motivation of finding the best candidate for the job is to increase their own income. This position emphasized the executive search consultants' own self-interest in the recruitment process. This position also constructed money as more important than gender equality and collaboration. Therefore, this position seemed to describe recruiters as self-serving, competitive individuals.

The moneymaker position was evident in the interview data when the executive search consultants talked about the competition among consultants for clients and cases and their reluctance to share information with each other. For example, this position could be seen in the use of the "wolf pack" metaphor in talk. This metaphor was used to describe the competition between executive search consultants and how each one wanted to serve their own interests instead of working as a team.

The moneymaker position could also be seen when the consultants were discussing gender equality in the recruitment process. Executive search consultants positioned themselves in a moneymaker position especially when they talked about these issues. In their speech, they constructed their job as being about serving themselves and making money for themselves, rather than thinking about gender equality. Positioning themselves in this way when talking about gender equality allowed them to justify why it is not their responsibility to promote gender equality in leadership positions.

This position differed significantly from other positions because in this position the consultants are serving their own needs. For example, in contrast to the gatekeeper and career advocate positions, this moneymaker position did not prioritize serving candidates, but rather focused on maximizing the executive search consultant's own earnings. In addition, compared to the professional and servant positions, the ultimate goal in this position was not to serve the client as well as possible, but to satisfy one's own needs by making money.

The following extract shows how the interviewee describes the work of an executive search consultant:

Extract 23:

I3: I emphasize to you that as we do this recruitment for money, it is important for us to get the job done with the best possible selection. And when we have a constant shortage of good candidates, a terrible shortage always, otherwise if it were easy, we wouldn't be given these jobs. So, it doesn't matter to us which gender is selected for the company. That's just how it is.

Here, the executive search consultant describes an executive search consultant's perspective on finding good candidates. First, the interviewee begins by stressing the importance of finding good candidates and emphasizing that they do it for the money. In this way, the interviewee constructs the moneymaker position for themselves. Next, the consultant also emphasizes that they usually have a terrible shortage of good candidates and constructs their work hard. By first positioning themselves as the moneymaker and then emphasizing that their job is hard, the interviewee constructs a justification for why they want to get the job done with the best possible selection and why the gender of the person selected does not matter to them. In doing so, they also construct the purpose of doing recruitment and doing it well as being about making money. Therefore, this excerpt shows how executive search is constructed from this position to serve themselves.

Extract 24:

I3: [...] We are in such a poor market here in Finland when we are looking for these people, there are so few of them that we can't exclude a qualified person based on

gender, even if we wanted to, we don't want to, but even if we wanted to, we couldn't because it would be detrimental to our earnings [...]

In this excerpt, the executive search consultant responds to the interviewer's question about gender and whether it affects people's chances of getting into an executive position. In this extract, the consultant talks about how they can't exclude anyone in the hiring process based on gender because it would affect their own earnings, and by doing so, they construct the moneymaker position for themselves. In this extract, the interviewee uses a similar type of justification for not making gender equality a priority in executive recruitment as in extract 23. First, the interviewee construes their job as difficult because of the "poor market here in Finland" and then emphasizes that it would affect their earnings if they took gender into account when making decisions. Thus, in this moneymaker position, serving one's own interests becomes a priority.

Extract 25:

I4: [...] And then there were only men there as executive search consultants. And it was just a pack of wolves, to be honest. It was a pack of wolves that stabbed each other in the back. Everyone did their own thing, competing for clients and not telling each other if someone had a case going on or if they had a good candidate. They wanted to save it for themselves for some specific personal project.

In this extract, the interviewee describes their experience with an executive search firm. In this excerpt, the interviewee constructs the executive search consulting business as highly competitive, with executive search consultants focusing primarily on their own success rather than on teamwork and collaboration with other consultants. In this extract, the interviewee constructs the position of a moneymaker by describing the executive search consultant group as a "wolf pack" competing for clients. This metaphor, combined with the metaphor of "stabbing each other in the back," constructs executive search consultants as individuals who work together in the same firm, but who can't be trusted because everyone is looking out for their own interests and is willing to do whatever it takes to get the clients and the best candidates for the assignments. These metaphors construct an image that executive search consultants do not work together as a team, but rather try to compete with each other

in order to get more assignments and thus increase their own income. These metaphors also highlight how executive search consultants serve themselves from this position.

5.6 Executive Search Consultant as an Observer Who Serves Themselves

I found the position of an observer in the interview data. This position constructed executive search consultants as passive observers who get to hear all the insights of the executive job market, and based on all the insights they have, they have been able to develop a deep sense of the market. This sense allows them to feel and predict the changes and trends in the market, especially in the context of gender equality. Observing the industry and having access to inside information makes the job fascinating for consultants, and therefore they construct themselves from this position to serve themselves. In addition, the construction of this observer position makes it possible for consultants to distance themselves from active involvement in gender equality issues. By presenting themselves as passive observers of market trends, they avoid direct responsibility or accountability for addressing gender imbalances in leadership positions. This passive stance allows them to absolve themselves from proactive participation or intervention in influencing gender equality outcomes.

This position was evident from the language used in the interviews, particularly from the use of verbs such as "feel" and "hear". In constructing this position for themselves, the executive search consultants used these verbs to make themselves seem passive when it comes to gender equality. These verbs were used to highlight their role in acquiring knowledge, rather than actively engaging in making change in equality. This position was particularly used when discussing gender issues and when talking about the executive search consultant's profession in general.

In the observer position, executive search consultants constructed themselves to serve themselves as in the moneymaker position. However, the moneymaker position prioritizes financial gain and personal success, while the observer position creates a shield of detachment and neutrality that allows executive search consultants to avoid active engagement or responsibility in influencing industry dynamics such as gender equality.

Extract 26:

I4: And Finland is such a small market that here has been a limited number of these operators of course. So, it's not like there's a lot of these, in a way, it's a very interesting job. There aren't many executive search consultants anyway, executive search firms anyway. That really do work on this level. It's fascinating, you get to see a huge variety of Finnish companies, foreign companies, then you get really deep into it, and most often, they tell you everything openly. These are such critical decisions, that are related to these executives, so they tell you very openly what the actual situation is. [...]

Here the interviewee talks about the work of executive search consultants and describes how fascinating and interesting it is. In this excerpt, the interviewee constructs the observer position by pointing out that client companies usually disclose a lot of information to consultants because the decisions involved in hiring executives are important and it is important for the consultant to know the details of the job and the company. The interviewee's emphasis on the depth of information received and the criticality of the decisions in which they are involved demonstrates their positioning as an observer who benefits from the information disclosed by client firms. The interviewee's portrayal of the job as "fascinating" and "interesting" serves to construct this benefit by underscoring their personal satisfaction and engagement with the work. By highlighting and emphasizing how they get a lot of inside information and how this makes the work interesting and fascinating for them, the interviewee constructs themselves to serve themselves in this observer position.

Extract 27:

I4: But on the other hand, now that I've heard these messages from the field about what the current situation is. So, increasingly, the allure of managerial roles has diminished. People are not interested in it anymore, not in the same way as before. [...]

In this excerpt, the interviewee talks about gender equality and the future of it in executive positions. Here, the interviewee states that people are not as interested in managerial roles as they used to be, and therefore it will be easier for women to obtain these roles and get into executive positions in the future. This extract shows how the interviewee positions

themselves in the passive observer position, in which they only hear "messages from the field" about the declining attractiveness of managerial roles and thus act as observers of the market. In this context, the construction of this passive position serves as a way of hiding from the responsibility to be active in promoting gender equality in executive recruitment. Thus, the executive search consultant constructs this position to serve themselves.

Extract 28:

I5: But my feeling is that it will change quite soon. Especially when, somehow, even the media thinks, or it creates an image as if we were somehow headhunters involved in influencing that this is how it is. That's really not the case... It's a very strange thought. [...] Except for those board positions with the 40 percent rule, apart from those, I don't remember a situation when the gender issue was brought up when briefing that job. That's why it feels a bit strange that we would somehow be gatekeepers there, preventing or promoting.

This extract comes from the part where the interviewee discusses how they think there will be more women in top positions in the near future. In this excerpt, the interviewee first positions themselves as an observer by mentioning that they have a feeling that the situation with gender equality in top positions will change soon. The term "feeling" underlines this position, as it creates the image that the executive search consultant has absorbed a lot of information about this job market and has some kind of internal compass that allows them to feel the change coming. It also makes the consultant seem like a passive outsider who is just observing the market from the outside. Next, the interviewee mentions that the media has created a false image of headhunters and their ability to influence gender equality in the job market. The interviewee claims that they cannot remember a case in which the gender of the candidates was brought up by the client, except in the case of board positions, where there is a requirement that 40% of the board members should be female. This observation highlights the discrepancy between the assumed gatekeeping role and the reality of their involvement in gender discussions during job briefings, and the interviewee uses it as a reason why they should not be seen as gatekeepers preventing or promoting gender equality in the job market. Overall, this excerpt shows how the position of observer allows the interviewee to distance themselves from responsibility in the context of gender equality and how it makes it seem like it's something they can't influence.

6 Discussion

In this chapter, I first summarize my findings. Second, I discuss my findings and their contributions to previous literature and research. Third, I discuss the implications by discussing the dilemmatic relations between the different positions that I found from the executive search consultants' interview talk. Fourth, I reflect on the limitations of the study. Finally, I present suggestions for further research that emerged from this study.

6.1 Summary of Findings

In this thesis, I aimed to engage in the academic discussion set up by Baldo, Valle, and Olivas-Lujan (2019) about the triadic relationship between executive search consultants, their clients, and candidates. I wanted to gain deeper insight on this complex triadic relationship and shed light on how executive search consultants construct their roles and allegiances between the potentially conflicting interests in the triad. To solve that research problem, I built my own theoretical framework by combining the reformulated version of the Agency Theory with Positioning Theory. Combining these two theories together allowed me to identify the different positions that the executive search consultants constructed for themselves in the context of executive recruitment and analyze specific principal-agent relationships that the positions entailed. To do that, I formulated the following research questions:

- 1) how do executive search consultants position themselves in their talk? And,
- 2) whose agents do they construct themselves to be from each of these positions?

As an answer to my first research question, I found six different positions in which the executive search consultants positioned themselves in their talk. These six positions were: *professional*, *servant*, *gatekeeper*, *career advocate*, *moneymaker*, and *observer*. As an answer to my second research question, I found that the consultants constructed themselves to serve different principals from these positions. These principals were clients, potential candidates, candidates, and executive search consultants themselves. In some of the positions, the principal was the same, as in the positions of a professional and servant it was the client.

However, the positions differentiated from each other in how they constructed the consultants to be like and what meanings they gave to them.

6.2 Contributions to Previous Literature

This thesis examined the complex dynamics among executive search consultants, their clients, and candidates by integrating the reformulated Agency Theory with Positioning Theory. This study expands on the discussion initiated by Baldo et al. (2019) by enhancing our comprehension of the principal-agent paradigm in executive recruitment. The main findings of the study reveal that executive search consultants construct six distinct positions for themselves, serving different principals from these positions. These insights relating to the positions and the corresponding principals contribute to previous literature in various ways.

One of the positions that the executive search consultants constructed for themselves was the position of a professional. The position of a professional made executive search consultants seem like experts who have experience and special knowledge of the market. This experience and knowledge, in turn, made them able to serve the clients. This finding regarding how executive search consultants relate experience and expertise to the executive search consultancy aligns with the ideas presented by Finlay and Coverdill (2007) and Hamori (2004) on how headhunters typically possess more information about the labor market, enabling them to add value to the executive recruitment process.

Koivunen (2015a) and Tienari et al. (2013) suggest that during the profiling phase, it is important for the consultant and client to establish a shared understanding of the necessary skills and competencies for the position. In the position of a professional, executive search consultants seemed to take a proactive role in not only grasping but also shaping the client's needs and expectations. This was demonstrated by their active engagement in profile discussions and their ability to challenge clients' initial perceptions to better define the candidate criteria. This extends the findings of Koivunen (2015a) and Tienari et al. (2013) by illustrating how executive search consultants actively contribute to shaping the understanding of the job profile.

Another element that was related to the professional position was the consultants' active role in managing the recruitment process. This finding is similar to the coordinating element that Khurana (2002) identified in headhunters' role as intermediaries in recruitment. In this professional position, the coordinating aspect related to it suggests that the consultants have a significant role in the recruitment process. This focus on process management and aligning expectations not only continues but also enhances our understanding of the consultant's multifaceted role in executive recruitment, emphasizing their significant agency and impact on the outcome of the process.

Another position identified in this study was that of a servant. In this position, executive search consultants seemed to be tools that clients use to find suitable candidates for their open positions. In other words, this position portrayed consultants as facilitators who carry out tasks at the clients' request without assuming autonomy or decision-making authority. The consultants in this position appeared condescending towards their clients, simply following instructions without actively challenging them. This portrayal contrasts with Koivunen (2015a) and Tienari et al.'s (2013) findings that especially the profiling phase should be a collaborative effort between the client and consultant.

The interview data revealed a third position, that of a gatekeeper. In this position, executive search consultants were portrayed as authorities in assessing and determining individuals' suitability for executive roles. They effectively positioned themselves as evaluators and decision-makers in the career progression of people. This finding supports Coverdill and Finlay's (2017) and Finlay and Coverdill's (1999) argument that executive search consultants play a role in defining talent and determining access to executive positions. By emphasizing their gatekeeper position, consultants limit their services to only those candidates they deem suitable for executive roles, rather than considering all candidates.

Thus, while consultants seem to facilitate career progression for select candidates in this position, they seem to hinder opportunities for others as they are seen to define talent within the executive realm at the same time. This aligns with Finlay and Coverdill's (2007) perspective emphasizing that the consultant's primary role is to find candidates for clients rather than cater to the aspirations of all potential executive candidates. This finding also underlines Faulconbridge et al.'s (2009) point that executive search consultants act as gatekeepers for

high-status roles. This, in turn, can also be seen as problematic, especially from the gender equality perspective if they do not consider these issues in this position.

The finding of this gatekeeper position aligns with the results of Clerkin and Lee's (2010) study. The study revealed that search firms play a significant role in executive career advancement, with firm-initiated contacts often correlating with promotions and the perception of career success. Being recognized as a potential candidate for an executive role by a search firm can outweigh the benefits of executives' own networking efforts. The gatekeeper position emphasizes the consultants' authority to judge a candidate's suitability for leadership roles and only serve viable candidates, impacting people's professional advancement. This understanding adds depth to existing knowledge, highlighting the executive search consultants' influence as key agents in potential candidates' career development.

The fourth position found from the interview data was the position of a career advocate. In this position, executive search consultants seemed to serve candidates in general by being active supporters who build trust and advance people in their careers. According to Khurana (2002), mediating confidentially between people with fragile egos, contractual restrictions, and career concerns is one of the three main elements that characterize intermediation by headhunters. This aspect was also emphasized in the construction of the career advocate position. Thus, the career advocate position exemplifies Khurana's (2002) concept of balancing confidential discussions and managing the professional and personal interests of candidates.

The position of a career advocate also aligns with Finlay and Coverdill's (2007, 2000) concept of executive search consultants acting as sponsors for executive career success. However, unlike Finlay and Coverdill's (2007, 2000) who suggest that in the sponsor role, consultants would be proactive and aggressive in identifying and initiating contact with possible candidates, in this career advocate position, it appears that candidates actively engage with consultants and share their career aspirations in order to obtain new opportunities. This notion also differs from Clerkin and Lee's (2010) findings that being identified as an elite executive by an executive search firm may be more important than executives initiating interactions for executive career success.

Finlay and Coverdill (2007) also state that a search firm's job is to identify people for positions rather than find suitable jobs for individuals. However, the career advocate position depicts executive search consultants as promoters with whom candidates share their career aspirations to receive a call when a suitable open position becomes available. Thus, executive search consultants also engage in finding suitable jobs for people who have shared their aspirations with them. This challenges the conventional perception that executive search consultants primarily identify candidates for positions.

The fifth position identified is that of a moneymaker. This position portrayed executive search consultants as self-serving individuals who conduct executive recruitment for financial gain and compete with each other for the best cases. This perspective aligns with and extends Burt's (2000) and Finlay and Coverdill's (2000) understanding of consultants as labor market intermediaries, whose benefit stems from effectively managing the relationships between clients and candidates. This position enriches the existing literature by providing concrete examples of the financial incentives that drive consultant behavior and highlighting the competitive nature of the recruitment industry. It suggests a complex interplay of motives behind executive search activities, confirming the dual role of consultants as service providers and market competitors.

The finding of the moneymaker position highlights how executive search consultants can exploit imbalances within the client-consultant-candidate triad for personal gain, which is consistent with Baldo et al.'s (2019) observation that consultants exploit information asymmetries. The moneymaker position shows that consultants tend to concentrate on competitive dynamics with peers rather than discrepancies in client or candidate relationships. This finding contrasts with Baldo et al.'s (2019) observation of consultants using information asymmetries mainly in the client relationship. They portray competitiveness and the control of information not just as incidental, but as central to the professional landscape of executive search consulting. This nuanced understanding continues the discourse initiated by Baldo et al. (2019), extending it by emphasizing the internal competition among consultants and enriching our conception of the industry's complexities.

The final position found in the data was the position of an observer. This position portrayed executive search consultants as passive observers who watch the labor market from the

sidelines and get a lot of information from the labor market. Having a lot of information about the labor market is also something that Finlay and Coverdill (2007) described executive search consultants to have. However, in this position, the consultants seemed to distance themselves from responsibility by only presenting observations from the market without taking an active stance in influencing anything contrary to Finlay and Coverdill's (2007) idea that consultants actively use this information in their work.

In general, this observant position allowed executive search consultants to detach themselves from accountability which is why from this position they could be seen to serve themselves. This observation can be mirrored in the theory presented by Erving Goffman (1959). According to Goffman (1959), individuals strive to present themselves in a socially acceptable manner during interactions. Thus, by positioning themselves as observers, executive search consultants can appear in a more socially acceptable manner. This passive stance allows them to witness problematic issues, such as gender inequalities, without actively contributing to them.

It is important to acknowledge that the theoretical and methodological framework of this study differs from that of other research on the same topic, which affects the comparability of the results. Given the theoretical framework of the study and the potential for conflicting or differing perspectives among positions, a comprehensive comparison of the research results to previous studies is neither meaningful nor feasible. Instead, comparisons have been made on a position-by-position basis. As illustrated above, the positions and their corresponding agent-principal relationships may align with those found in previous research, or they may diverge, even when comparing the positions to the same study.

In conclusion, this thesis contributes to academic discussions by presenting empirical evidence and theoretical developments that could influence future inquiries and methodologies in the executive search consultancy field. The research presents an analysis of how consultants construct their professional identities and exert their agency. It outlines their positions as professional, servant, gatekeeper, career advocate, moneymaker, and observer, and how these positions align with different principals. The study reveals that executive search consultants perceive their roles as serving not only clients but also candidates and their own interests. This expands the conventional understanding documented in current literature. The

findings also show that executive search consultants embody roles with seemingly contradictory characteristics, such as being active and passive, which in turn serve different principals. This leads to a paradox in their self-representation, indicating the dilemmatic and sometimes conflicting nature of their professional commitments.

6.3 Implications

In line with the social constructionist perspective on research and reality, the purpose of this study was not to draw conclusions about reality beyond the process of construction, but to examine the different representations of reality and the meanings attached to them that emerge in the different processes of interaction. Therefore, the discussion of implications is related to the different representations of executive search consultants and the different meanings attached to these representations. The findings of this study suggest that executive search consultants create various diverging images of themselves when they position themselves in their talk. Some of these positions appear to be in tension with each other, potentially implicating principal-agent problems and dilemmas in executive recruitment. These tensions arise from the different meanings consultants attach to their positions and how they construct themselves to serve different principals from these positions. Since the purpose of this research was to better understand the role that executive search consultants play in the recruitment field, discussing these dilemmas contributes to a richer interpretation of the dynamics within the triadic relationship and provides a deeper understanding of the multifaceted roles and responsibilities of the consultant, which previous research has also called for (Coverdill and Finlay, 2018, Baldo et al., 2019).

First, comparing how the professional and servant positions portray executive search consultants, it can be seen that the different meanings attached to these positions create somewhat contradictory portrayals of them. Since both positions construct the consultant to serve the client, the tension between these positions lies in the conflicting meanings attached to the nature and means of providing their services. The position of the professional emphasizes the consultant's expertise and active contribution to shaping the client's perspective, while the servant position portrays a more subservient role, carrying out tasks without questioning or challenging the client's directives. These portrayals imply a potential conflict between the

responsibility and actual power of the consultants, to a certain degree, to shape the recruitment process and influence the clients' expectations while at the same time acting on the clients' mandate and strictly following their instructions.

Comparing the positions of gatekeeper and career advocate, the dilemmatic nature of these positions becomes more apparent, as there are also differences between the principals that executive search consultants construct themselves to serve in these positions. In the gatekeeper position, the principal served is the potential candidate, whereas in the career advocate position, it is the candidate in general. When the gatekeeper position emphasizes serving the potential candidate, it portrays consultants as evaluators and decision-makers in assessing suitability for leadership roles. In contrast, the career advocate position extends support to candidates in general, fostering trust and promoting career development without the selective evaluation inherent in the gatekeeper role. The meanings attached to the gatekeeper position suggest that selective facilitation may impede opportunities for some candidates, whereas the career advocate position portrays executive search consultants as offering more inclusive support that promotes overall career development. This contradiction implies a dilemma in the role of consultants: one position potentially limits opportunities for aspiring candidates, while the other seeks to empower a broader range of individuals.

A dilemmatic relationship can also be seen when comparing the positions of professional and servant, in which executive search consultants construct themselves to serve the client, with the position of career advocate, in which consultants construct themselves to serve the candidate. In this case, the dilemma seems to be that the consultants construct themselves as career advocates, facilitating and supporting people's career development, while at the same time assuming positions as professionals and servants, primarily serving the needs of the client. The tension arises from helping and supporting the candidate while at the same time portraying themselves as serving the needs of the client. This implies a potential conflict in prioritizing candidate needs versus meeting client expectations. However, when it comes to the gatekeeper position, in which recruiters present themselves as serving potential candidates, this type of conflict may not arise because serving potential candidates can also be seen as serving the client's needs.

Furthermore, when comparing the roles of gatekeeper and career advocate that consultants construct to serve candidates with the positions of moneymaker and observer, there is a dilemma as to whose behalf they are working. In this case, the consultants adopt the positions of gatekeepers and career advocates, portraying themselves as facilitators for candidates' needs. However, they also take on the positions of moneymakers and observers, portraying themselves as primarily serving their own interests. The dilemma arises particularly in the context of gender equality. In the interview material, executive search consultants used both the moneymaker and observer positions to justify why they cannot address the gender equality issue in executive recruitment. In the moneymaker position, the goal was to make money rather than promote gender equality. In the observer position, they presented themselves as detached observers who simply receive information from the labor market without actively engaging or influencing it.

Finally, when comparing the positions of a professional and a servant which construct the consultants to serve the client, to the positions of a moneymaker and an observer which construct the consultants to serve themselves, the image portrayed implicates potential dilemmas. When it comes to the meanings attached to the observer position, it seems dilemmatic that this position portrays the executive search consultants being sole observers of this market without taking an active part in it, whereas in the professional and servant positions, they are portrayed as actively engaging in the recruitment process and serving the client. In the case of a moneymaker, in turn, it is unclear whether the consultants are prioritizing their own financial gains or serving their clients. It is possible that these goals could be aligned, as fulfilling client needs could be in line with the goal of making money and serving oneself.

Overall, these findings seem to imply tensions, particularly regarding responsibility. This could be seen especially from how the executive search consultants positioned themselves in the positions of servant, observer and moneymaker when talking about gender equality in executive recruitment. Positioning themselves in these positions in this context allowed them to justify why they cannot and are not expected to have an impact on the issue. This was contradictory to other positions, such as those of professionals, gatekeepers, and career advocates, which portrayed consultants as active decision-makers or influencers in the decision-making process.

In conclusion, these findings contribute to the academic discussion initiated by Baldo et al. (2019) regarding the executive recruitment triad, which consists of the client, executive search consultant, and candidate, by examining the role that executive search consultants play in this triad and the agentic relationship between these actors. The finding of these positions and the principals that the executive search consultants constructed themselves to serve from these positions and the dilemmas that these findings implicate, brought up the multifaceted nature of consultants' roles, revealing potential conflicts in their responsibilities and priorities within the triadic relationship of recruitment. Although this thesis discussed the various positions and principles of executive search consultants, it managed to open up the question and debate on whose agents executive search consultants truly are and where their priorities lie.

6.4 Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study are related to the theoretical and methodological framework, as well as the dataset used. First of all, the use of a social constructionist perspective in this study has some limitations. This is because social constructionism and critical discursive psychology view things as being constructed and shaped in social interaction (Edley, 2001a). Thus, the findings of this study cannot be generalized beyond this research material. Therefore, I do not claim that the positions I found in this study are positions that all the executive search consultants construct for themselves every time they speak. However, it should be noted that according to Niska et al. (2018), the ways of speaking identified in the study may also occur in other contexts. Nevertheless, this research does not allow for predictions of such occurrences.

According to the epistemic constructionist approach, the results of this study cannot be used to make claims about reality outside of language (Juhila, 2016). The purpose of this study was solely to analyze and present the meanings and versions of executive search consultants as constructed in their interview talk. Thus, this thesis does not claim that the version it constructs of executive search consultants is an accurate representation of who they are in real life. Therefore, the goal of this research was not to create a generalizable model of what an executive search consultant is like.

Regarding social constructionist research, Potter and Wetherell (1987) note that the researcher's interpretations are socially constructed, which means that they should also be understood as a version of reality. Therefore, my observations and interpretations of the executive search consultants and their discourse in this thesis should be understood as one version of reality. It is also worth noting that by doing these observations and interpretations, I am also participating in constructing a certain version of our social reality. This means that other researchers may make different observations and interpretations, resulting in a different version of social reality. However, these versions would be equally meaningful as the one presented in this thesis.

Regarding the data set used in this study, it is important to note some limitations. Firstly, the data was collected in 2014-2015. As Gergen (1985) notes, knowledge in social constructionism is historically and culturally shaped, and therefore tied to a specific time and place. When evaluating the results of my thesis, it is important to consider that they are specific to the time and situation in which the interviews were conducted. Therefore, the results of this study provide insight into how executive search consultants positioned themselves during that particular moment. However, Niska et al. (2018) notes that specific ways to talk about certain things can also occur in other contexts at different times, meaning that the ways that executive search consultants constructed themselves in these specific interviews in 2014 and 2015 might still be in use today. However, it is not possible to predict or confirm this with certainty.

Another thing related to the data set used in this study is that equality was a clear theme in the interviews. Therefore, it is understandable that topics related to equality came up in the executive search consultants talk a lot. This was also reflected in this study's results. Therefore, it should be noted that in a different setting the positions, that the executive search consultants construct for themselves, might be slightly different. However, as equality is an important theme in our society, these results are also societally relevant as they highlight the role of executive search consultants in this context.

It is also important to note that I did not collect the interview material myself for this study. As the material was completely anonymized, there was no information about the companies

that search consultants work for or who they are. However, this information is not crucial to this research, as the purpose was to study the self-positioning of executive search consultants. As a researcher, it was sufficient for me to know that the interviewees worked as executive search consultants and in executive recruitment in Finland.

For data security reasons, the audio tapes of the interviews were destroyed immediately after the transcription (Koivunen, 2015a). Therefore, I did not have access to them. Listening to the interviews could have provided a better understanding of the interview material, as the audio tapes would have captured different tones of speech that could have aided in interpretation. However, I do not believe that having access to the audio tapes would have significantly impacted my interpretations as my analysis focused on word choices and metaphors, which are characteristic of critical discursive psychology.

6.5 Suggestions for Further Research

This study suggests several avenues for further research. One potential area of exploration is the analysis of the contradictions and dilemmas found in this thesis at the speech level. Examining the discourse of executive search consultants could provide valuable insights into how they navigate and negotiate these conflicting positions and inherent dilemmas in their daily interactions. Through an examination of the language, rhetoric, and communicative strategies utilized by consultants, researchers could gain deeper insights into the strategies used to reconcile the tensions between serving the different interests of different agents and addressing ethical considerations. This type of analysis could shed light on the intricacies of their work and the multifaceted nature of the challenges they face, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the executive search industry and its complexities.

The research material also revealed a significant dilemma regarding equality issues in the context of executive search consulting. Further investigation could delve into how executive search consultants address or avoid responsibility for these issues in their speech. Analyzing the language and discourse strategies used by consultants when discussing equality-related topics could provide researchers with valuable insights into the attitudes, beliefs, and practices that shape their approach to diversity and inclusion. This examination could provide a

nuanced understanding of how consultants navigate promoting equality while serving client interests. It could also shed light on potential areas for improvement and the effectiveness of current diversity initiatives within the executive search industry.

Furthermore, as the scope of a Master's thesis is limited, this thesis solely analyzed the positions that executive search consultants construct for themselves, and did not examine how they position their clients and candidates in their speech. Therefore, further research is needed to investigate how executive search consultants position their clients and candidates within their speech in this triad. This exploration could provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics of power, agency, and the roles within the executive search process, ultimately enhancing our understanding of the consultant-client-candidate relationship and its implications for recruitment outcomes.

Finally, because the material used in this thesis consisted solely of interviews with executive search consultants, an intriguing avenue for further research lies in exploring how clients and candidates perceive and position executive search consultants in discussions about executive recruitment. By including perspectives from clients and candidates in research, valuable insights into the dynamics of the consultant-client-candidate relationship and how each party shapes perceptions and expectations could be uncovered. Additionally, it would be valuable to investigate whether the positions constructed by clients and candidates for consultants differ from those identified by executive search consultants in this study. Comparative analysis could deepen our understanding of the nuanced interplay of perspectives within the executive search process and shed light on potential discrepancies or alignments in the perceptions of different stakeholders. This exploration could provide valuable insights into the dynamics of executive search consulting from multiple perspectives and inform strategies for enhancing collaboration, trust, and effectiveness in executive recruitment efforts.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview framework for executive search consultants (Koivunen, 2015b)

- How does the application process for a person for the company's top management – both the board and executive management – start?
 - o How does the recruitment process for board members and the chairman take place?
 - o What about recruiting the CEO (often the chairman of the management team) and members?

- Who from the client company participates in the selection of the executive management and board of directors?
 - o From the client's side, who is in a central position in the recruitment process?
 - o What role do, for example, the owners/investors, the HR manager, and other parties play in the process?

- What are the client's application criteria: how is the profile of the applicant created?
 - o What kind of competence and experience is required from the competent management and board? With what backgrounds are people selected for the management and the board of directors?
 - o Is there a difference in the qualifications and competencies of women and men? If so, is this reflected in the selection process?

- What channels are used in the executive search process?
 - o In which areas (industry, companies) are candidates being sought?
 - o Who is being contacted in this recruitment process (e.g. do you use your own networks)?

- Is the gender perspective taken into account in the selection criteria and recruitment process for the executive management and the board, and if so, how?
 - o Have there been situations where the client company expresses wishes regarding the gender of the person to be recruited? What kind of? Where/from whom do the wishes come?
 - o Are there obstacles for women and men to advance to the executive management and/or board of directors of companies?

- Is the gender perspective included in the guidelines and processes for senior management recruitment in the executive search and recruitment company?
 - o Can executive search consultants, if they wish, promote gender equality in the top management recruitment of client companies? For example, presenting female or male candidates for long and short candidate lists? What other ways are there?

- Are there advantages or disadvantages in recruiting that take gender equality into account, what kind?
- From the point of view of executive search consultants, what are good top management recruitment practices? What about bad practices?
 - o Are there any that take into account the perspective of gender equality?

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Appendix 2. Meanings of the symbols used in the data (Koivunen, 2015b)

,	A short pause in speech
..	Speech is interrupted, continuing the speech
(-)	Missed word or part of the word
(--)	Missed speech episode
(word)	An obscure word or period
underlining	A word or period with special emphasis
[square brackets]	Transcriber's comment
[hp]	Quiet talk
[ep]	Slurred speech
[...]	Deleted speech
Q	Interviewer
I	Interviewee

Appendix 3. Data Extracts in Finnish (Koivunen, 2015b)

Professional:

Extract 1:

I3: Mutta hallituksenhausta meil on yks aivan, selkee..tekijä mitä tulee headhunterille hallituksen jäsenhakuja, kyl se on niin että silloin kun se hallituksen jäsenhaku on helppo, niin kyl sen tekee nää valiokunnat itse, erittäin usein. Mutta silloin kun tarvitaan erityistietämystä, yleensä meillä on aina kun me saadaan hallituksen jäsenhaku niin kysymys on kapeen sektorin osaamisalueesta. [...]

Extract 2:

I6: Et esimerkiks suoraan konsulttia lisääntyvässä määrin käytetään pörssi-yhtiöiden haussa joka on hyvä, koska hyvä suorahakuyhtiö ei pyöritä niitä samoja ihmisiä, vaan ne pyrkii todella löytämään resurssia joka vois tuoda uutta

Extract 3:

I3: Mut me kyllä avustetaan tietysti paljon niissä ideoissa, kyllähän me niissä siinä keskustelussa kun ollaan mukana, kyllähän me tuodaan aina siihen keskusteluun sitä laajuutta lisää, avataan sitä. Ja se johtuu taas siitä että meillä on se kokemuspohja, että kun moni hallitus hakee, hallituksen jäsen hakee hallitusuransa aikana siihen tiettyyn yhtiöön yhden toimitusjohtajan. Me kuitenkin haetaan, vuodessa jo monta toimitusjohtajaa niin meillä tietysti on sitä näkökulmaa näistä markkinoista ja niistä ihmisistä, ihan toisella lailla kun semmosella henkilöllä joka ei tee sitä työkseen. Se on se, tiedämme siitä markkinasta todella paljon.

Extract 4:

I4: [...] Ja sit se et, et siinä profiloituvaiheessa, haastamalla sitä, joka tavallaan antaa tän toimeksiannon. Kun esimerkiksi, tosi usein kuulee silleen, et ”me tarvitaan tähän joku hyvä tyyppi”. Niin mitä hyvä tyyppi sulle tarkoittaa ja minkälaisia elementtejä siinä on. Et täytyy jotenkin saada se profiilien tekovaihe, se on mun mielestä tosi tärkeä. Tai no se on se kaikin tärkein, että siinä määritellään se, että onnistutaanko me, vai eikö me onnistuta. Ja sit se, että jos vaan kiltisti sillei kuunnellaan toimeksiantajaa, mitä se sieltä luettelee, niin kyl

se täytyy pyrkii ymmärtää et mitä se tarkoittaa sulle, että henkilö on hyvä ihmisten johtaja, minkälaisia elementtejä siin silloin on. Ja mitä se teijän yrityksessä tarkoittaa, että on hyvä muutosjohtaja, et mitä sen pitää osata. Minkälaisia ne on ne ihmiset jotka vastustaa muutosta, minkälaisia haasteita siellä on. Et purkaa sit mahdollisimman paljon silleen palasiksi ensin, et sä oikeesti ymmärrät sen yrityksen tilanteen ja sen että minkä tyyppistä elementtiä siinä johtamisessa tarvitaan. [...]

Extract 5:

I4: [...] Mut että kyl headhunteri voi hyvin, vähän herätellä tavallaan, niitä ajatuksia herätellä asiakkaassa. Et mitä muuta se voi olla, se mitä sä haluat. Mut et siin on tosi tärkeetä et sä ymmärrät nimenomaan sen bisneksen ja sä ymmärrät sen asiakkaan ja sul on joku ymmärrys siit organisaatiosta. Et ymmärrät sit oikeesti sen, että jos lähetään silleen vähän erilaisempaa tuomaan esille, et se oikeesti sopii sinne.

Extract 6:

I1: Se täytyy tietysti tuoda, ja auttaa asiakasta ymmärtämään et mikä oikeesti on mahdollista. Koska kaikillehan tulee paha mieli, kaikille tulee huono, fiilis, jos lopullista ratkasuu ei saada aikaseks, tai jostain syystä se lopullinen ratkasu epäonnistuu. Ja sen takia tietysti meil täytyy olla aktiivinen ote, jotta me tuetaan sitä, et lopullinen ratkasu saadaan a) ensinnäki saadaan aikaseks ja b) se onnistuu viel se.

Extract 7:

H1: [...] Sä et voi jumittaa, siitä et kyl mun mielestä, meidän tilanne on se että, mielellämme käytämme kaiken sen ajan mikä meille suodaan, sen parhaan mahdollisen, mutta sen jälkeen sun täytyy kunnioittaa sitä, aikaikkunaa. Eihän se, näähän pitää pitää. Nää prosessit kuitenkin, ryhdikkäinä. Ja siitä meille kuuluu keskeinen vastuu. Se haittaa koko organisaation toimintaa jos nää, rupee nää aikataulut, lipsumaan. Mikään organisaatio, mä sanon näin että, varsinki jos on toimitusjohtajasta kysymys, niin mikään, jokaiselle organisaatiolle jokainen päivä kun siel ollaan ilman oikeeta toimitusjohtajaa, on hirveen huonoja. Ja tää on siinä mielessä, tän prosessin täytyy palvella sitä. [...]

Servant:

Extract 8:

I1: Ei me asiakkaan kans voida neuvotella, me voidaan kertoo meidän mielipiteitä ja näkemyksiä ja ottaa huomioon jos ottavat. Kylhän tää on, tyypillinen työ että me ollaan työruk-kasia, me ollaan työvälineitä, me ollaan työkalu. Jonka tehtävänä on sit loppujen lopuks tuottaa, perusteltuja vaihtoehtoja ja asiakas tekee, koska he kantaa vastuun, ja aina sitte lo-pullisen valinnan. Ei me olla selkee renki talossa kuitenkin eikä isäntä. Kylhän se täytyy muistaa. Tässä suhtees me vaan, ikään kun tuodaan niitä näkemyksiä pöytään, eikä pyritäkään mestaroimaan koska meidän, me ei eletä sen lopullisen ratkasun, kans kuitenkaan. Eikä kanneta sitä lopullista vastuuta. Täs suhtees roolit, on kuitenkin ihan selvää. [...]

Extract 9:

I3: [...] useimmiten headhunter tekee sitä mitä sitä käsketään ja jos se ei tee sitä sen profiilin mukasta hommaa niin sitte se asiakas kysyy että mikäs nyt on vikana, miks te tämmösiä esitätte.

Extract 10:

I3: Elikä toisin sanoen me tehdään sitä mitä on käsketty, joskus sitä toivoo esimeks hallituk-sen jäsenhaussa että annettais semmonen hallitusjäsenhaku että sanottais että hakekaa mei-dän firmaan sopiva hyvä hallituksen jäsen, jollon vois ite ruveta miettiin että minkäslainen se nyt on ja sitte aika laajalla spektrillä miettiä sitä mutta ei sitä tapahdu, vaan se kuvataan aika tarkkaan mitä sen pitää osata ja that's it. Ja sen mukaan tehdään töitä. Näin se vaan tahtoo mennä.

Extract 11:

I3: Mut niin ku sanottu, kyllä se on järkevää porukkaa ne meidän toimeksiantajat et kyl ne tietää mitä ne halua ja kyl ne on aika oikeessa siinä mitä ne halua [naurahtaa]. Ei siinä paljon oo meillä nokan koputtamista.

Extract 12:

I1: Me ollaan kuitenkin käytännön toimijoita vaan. Ja suutari pysyköön lestissään.

Gatekeeper:

Extract 13:

I2: [...] Ja sitte uralla, tää tehtävä mihin nyt esittää niin se ois sille toiselle, sopivampi, urahaaste, oikeaan suuntaan.

Extract 14:

I2: No että esimerkiks sil on just nyt takana semmonen aika pitkä pätkä jotain tiettyä ja ihan selvästi nyt on hyvä saada se, laajentuminen, tässä uralla, ja hänel on just niitä, palikoita siellä työkalupakissa jotka auttaa häntä just selviämään hirveen hyvin näistä, ja sit hän saa samalla laajennettuu viel sitä omaa, osaamistaan [...]

Extract 15:

I4: [...] joka on saanut positiivista palautetta, siitä se selviää kun mä haastattelen heitä. Ensin työhypoteesi, että todennäköisesti tää, tää tai tää vois olla sellaisia. Sit mä tapaan näitä ihmisiä ja sit me käydään sitä tekemistä läpi. Et aika tiukasti pysytään siitä et mitä on tehnyt ja minkälaisissa yrityksissä ja mitä on saanut aikaseks. Ja miten vie muutoksia läpi. Paljon oon kysynyt ihmisiltä silloin kun mä haastattelen heitä, ihan silleen esimerkkejä. Et esimerkiksi just se että kerro joku muutosjohtamiscase, tai minkälainen tilanne oli ja mitä sä teit ja mitä sä sait aikaiseks. Sit ihmiset kertoo esimerkkejä. Sit sieltä mä yritän löytää ne ihmiset jotka sopii just tähän kyseiseen yritykseen.

Extract 16:

I4: [...] Mut ei sinänsä nyt ittelle, täntyyppinen titteli, ei se sinänsä päteviä, siinä määrin kuin toimitusjohtajan titteli päteväitä.

Career advocate:

Extract 17:

I2: [naurahtaa] (-) mut jos sit pitää etsii sitä toista tasoo ni se on vähä hankalampaa, mut sielhän löytyy potentiaalia koska ne haluis ykköseksi tiettenki. Sehän meiän tehtävä oikees-taa on et aina nostetaan näit ihmisiä vähä ylöspäin uralla.

Extract 18:

I3: [...] Sitten on tietysti toinen asia vielä mikä aina kannattaa muistaa tässä suorahaussa, on se että minkä takia tää on hyvä kanava niin mehän ollaan ainoita ihmisiä Suomessa, tai missä vaan jotka tietää mitä tää ylin johto itse haluaa tulevaisuudeltaan. Koska ne ei kenellekään muulle sitä kerro kun meille, ei kenellekään muulle. Ne ei voi kertoo sitä omille hallituksen puheenjohtajilleen, jäsenilleen. Ei ne voi kertoo sitä alaisilleen siellä yhtiössä eikä ne oikein juuri voi sitä kertoo koskaan, muille business communityn jäsenille koska se on suuri pelko että leviää sitten se asia. Mutta meidän kanssa ne käy sen keskustelun koska ne tietää että jos ne sanoo meille että vois kiinnostaa jotkut uudet asiat niin ne tietää että se voi johtaa myös siihen että kun tulee sopiva juttu niin me osataan ottaa yhteyttä, palvelee pitämällä salaisuuden ja edistämällä uraa kun tulee mahdollisuus, [...]

Extract 19:

I6: [...] 15, 20 vuotta sitte ihmiset ei halunnu sitä, tänään kaikki haluaa että me säilytetään ne tiedot ja näin, koska se on osa sitä että heidät brändätään, ja ne haluaa kaikkea tehdä, että niillekin voi tulla uusia mahdollisuuksia.

Extract 20:

I4: En, sithän mä vasta rupeen kyselee, että mikä sua siinä pelottaa, et kerro ihan konkreettisesti et mikä juttu tässä on se, mitä sä pelkää? Ja sitten käydään läpi, että mistä se voi tulla tämä pelko ja, et sähän oon pärjännyt aikasemminkin, et mikä on saanut sut onnistumaan siellä, et on yrittänyt silleen, jotenkin saada ihmiset miettimään niitä. Ja sit mä oon monta kertaa sanonut naisille, et sit kun sä meet sinne finaalihaastatteluun, niin älä vaan ikinä sano sitä et sä pelkää. Mä ymmärrän, et sä saatat pelätä, mutta älä tuo siinä haastattelussa sitä, jos sä tehtävän haluat, niin silloin sinun ei pidä pelätä, sanoa sitä ääneen. Ja sit usein kun siitä on puhuttu ja sit monta kertaa naiset sanoo sitä, että mitäs, et mä en tiedä miten mun aikataulut menee lasten kanssa ja miten mä tästä selviin. Niin sit mä usein sanon niille, että niin, että mä harvoin kuulen miesten puhuvan näin, että kerro mikä se sun tilanne on. Et miten sä voisit ajatella sen järjestäväks, ja toimitusjohtajan vastuu on 24/7,

mutta se tarkoita sitä et sä oot yötä päivää töissä. Et kyl sä edelleenkin silleen äitinä voit olla. Sit puhutaan sitä et miten mä kerkiin sitä ja tätä ja tota. [...]

Extract 21:

I1: [...] Mähän voin sille toimeksiantajalle sanoakin että ”Hei kuule, tässä on nyt naisia mukana että niille on nää ja nää asiat hirveen olennaisia et sun täytyy käydä ne huolellisesti läpi”. Ja tän tyyppisiä asioita. [...]

Extract 22:

I2: [...] Ja sitte myöski se että, me tuodaan vahvassa uskossa esille juuri tän, naisen, mahdollisuudet, selvitä ja miks tää nainen olis hyvä tähän hommaan. Mut me ei voida syrjiä miehiä taas naisten kustannuksella.

Moneymaker:

Extract 23:

I3: Mä korostan sulle sitä että kun me tehdään tätä rahasta, tätä rekrytointia niin meille on tärkeetä että se juttu saadaan hoidettua parhaalla mahdollisella valinnalla. Ja kun meil on jatkuva pula hyvistä ehdokkaista, siis kamala pula aina, muutenhan näitä toimeksiantoja jos se olis helppoo niin niitähän ei annettais meille näitä hommia. Niin meille on ihan sen siunaamaan sama et kumpi sukupuoli tulee valittua sinne firmaan. Näin se vaan on.

Extract 24:

I3: [...] Me ollaan niin köyhällä markkinalla tässä Suomessa kun me haetaan näitä ihmisiä, niit on niin vähän että ei me voida sulkee pois esimerkiks sukupuolen takia jotain pätevää ihmistä vaikka me haluttas, ei me halutakaan mutta siis vaikka me haluttas niin me ei voitas tehdä sitä koska se ois meidän tienestistä pois. [...]

Extract 25:

I4: [...] Ja sit siellä oli pelkästään miehiä, suorahakukonsultteina. Ja se oli vaan susilauma, jos ihan rehellisesti sanotaan. Niin se oli susilauma, joka puukotti toisiaan selkään. Jokainen sooloili vähän omiaan, et kilpaili asiakkaista ja ei kertonut jos kaverilla oli joku case

meneillään, niin ei välttämättä kertonut jos niil oli joku hyvä kandidaatti. Et ne halus säästää sen itelleen johonkin tiettyyn omaan juttuun.

Observer:

Extract 26:

I4: Ja Suomi on niin pieni markkina, et tääl on tietty rajattu määrä näitä toimijoita ollut. Et tästä hirveesti sellaista, et tavallaan hirveen mielenkiintoinen duuni. Et eihän paljon oo suora hakukonsultteja muutenkaan, suora hakutoimistoja. Niin kuin jotka oikeesti tekee tällä tasolla työtä. Tää on tosi mielenkiintoista, et sä näät hurjan määrän erilaisia suomalaisia yrityksiä, ulkomaalaisia yrityksiä, sitten pääset tosi syvälle ja sulle kerrotana ihan silleen avoimin kortein useimmiten nää. Nää on niin kriittisiä päätöksiä, mihin nää johtajat liittyy, niin kerrotaan tosi avoimesti se et mikä oikeesti se tilanne on. [...]

Extract 27:

I4: Mut toisaalta nyt kun mä oon kuullut näitä viestejä tuolt kentältä, et mikä sen tän hetken tilanne on. Niin yhä enemmän esimiesrooli on menettänyt hohtoaan. Et ihmisiä ei enää kiinnosta se, samalla tavalla kun aikasemmin. Et mä oon jutellut tuttujen henkilöstöjohtajien kanssa, niin se mitä heilt kuuluu on se, että noi esimiesroolit ei vaan kiinnosta. [...]

Extract 28:

I5: Mut mun fiilis on se että se tulee muuttumaan aika pian. Varsinki ku sitten, jotenkin mediakin ajattelee että, tai siitä syntyy sellanen kuva et ikään kuin, me oisimme jotenkin headhuntereina siinä pelissä mukana vaikuttamassa että tää on näin. Se ei todellakaan.. Se on tosi vieras ajatus. [...] Mä en ees muista että ois ollu joku sellanen tilanne et ois sanottu että tähän.. Lukuun ottamatta niitä, hallituspaikkoja jossa on se 40 prosentin sääntö, niin lukuun ottamatta niitä niin mä en muista että ois ollu tilannetta että, millon ois ollu edellinen sukupuoleen, sukupuolikysymys esillä kun on briiffattu sitä hommaa. Siks tuntuu vähän vieraalta se että, me jotenkin oltas siinä portinvartijana ja estämässä tai edistämässä.