Abstract

Self-leadership has traditionally been positioned as an individual-level phenomenon, putting strong emphasis on individuals' responsibility to influence themselves in order to achieve positive outcomes. However, this perspective may oversee that individuals are embedded in a social system, and that self-leadership may be best achieved as a collective endeavor that involves the individual and their interaction with the social environment. The present research thus aims to understand how individuals and their social environment at work (i.e., managers, co-workers) play together in order to enable self-leadership. The question was addressed using an inductive coding approach to qualitative data that stem from 73 semi-structured interviews with job newcomers from one organization in Germany. The findings showed that newcomers' self-led behavior could be enabled by two key aspects of their social environment (i.e., individualized support for learning; team members acting as partners), which shaped and were shaped by newcomers' internal process of becoming aware of their task and relations-oriented contributions at work. Overall, our findings point to the role that the social environment plays for self-leadership. We discuss implications for self-leadership theory.

Keywords: self-leadership, self-initiative, social work environment, qualitative interviews

It's not all about the self: Exploring the interplay between self-leadership and the social work environment

In the early literature, self-leadership was described as substitute for leadership. Leadership is commonly defined as an interactive process between a leader and their followers in which a leader influences a group of people who share a purpose or goal they aim to achieve (Yukl & Gardner, 2020). Similarly, self-leadership can be described as a process towards goal achievement, yet the target of influence are not other individuals but oneself. In short, both leadership and self-leadership are influence processes towards goal achievement. Different from each other, leadership is about influencing *others* towards achieving shared goals, while self-leadership focuses influencing *oneself* to achieve goals relevant to the individual. Additional elements to this definition will be described below.

Thus far, most of the self-leadership literature emphasizes the positive outcomes of individual self-leadership in organizations (e.g., performance, Lucke & Furtner, 2015; innovative behavior, Carmeli et al., 2006; for meta-analyses see Harari et al., 2021; Knotts et al., 2022). While these are important insights for researchers and practitioners in order to increase performance levels in organizations, less attention is being paid on social context factors that need to be in place in order for self-leadership to flourish. While several scholars pointed to the vital role that the broader social environment plays for self-leadership (e.g., Manz & Sims, 1991; see also Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Ellemers, 2012), empirical work on this question remains scarce. The limited research that exists shows that self-leadership can be affected by national culture (cf. Ho & Nesbit, 2009), family and school (Wen et al., 2020), as well as leadership (e.g., empowering leadership; Amundsen & Martinsen, 2015). Building on this, we argue that by putting strong emphasis on the individual, both researchers and practitioners may oversee that self-leadership is not just a matter of the individual, but in fact one that may be best achieved collectively in organizations. That is, while the main emphasis in self-leadership relies on individual employees' responsibility, it may be overlooked

that certain practices and context factors need to be in place in order for self-leadership to be possible.

Therefore, the present research aims to better understand how the interplay between an individual and its social environment at work facilitates self-leadership. More precisely, we will apply inductive coding procedures to qualitative interviews with the following research question: *How can the interplay between individuals and their social environment at work (i.e., managers, co-workers) enable self-leadership?*

Towards a definition of self-leadership

Conceptually, self-leadership can be located on multiple, overlapping theoretical grounds (Stewart et al., 2019). Among these, the agency versus structure debate (e.g., Settersten & Gannon, 2005), social cognitive theory (e.g., Bandura, 1989), and control theory (Carver & Scheier, 1982). We will briefly outline each of these theories and their relation to self-leadership, in order to form a working definition of self-leadership for our research. Figure 1 illustrates key elements of these theories.

In the agency versus structure debate two theoretical worlds collide. On the one hand, and more common in the field of sociology, scholars argue that individuals are largely if not fully determined by the characteristics and processes of the social settings in which they operate (Settersten & Gannon, 2005). On the other hand, and more prominent in the field of psychology, scholars argue that individuals are self-determined beings as they take decisions and choose the actions that impact their lives. The concept of self-leadership originates from the tradition of psychology and can be located more towards the agentic side of the discussion. Self-leadership puts strong emphasis on how individuals can exert influence on themselves to reach their self-set goals. The role of the social environment has been argued to be important for self-leadership to unfold (Manz & Sims, 1991), but is not an explicit part of the concept itself in the form that it determines self-leadership.

From a social cognitive theory lens, individuals are “neither autonomous agents nor simply mechanical conveyers of animating environmental influences” (Bandura, 1989, p. 1175). Rather, a system of *triadic* reciprocal causation is described, implying that personal factors (like cognition or behavior) and environmental events reciprocally impact each other. Individuals partly self-determine their behavior, and this can create changes in themselves as well as in their environment. Thus far, self-leadership scholars did not place much attention to this aspect of reciprocity in social cognitive theory; rather they focused on how individuals influence themselves, other than how the environment may impact the individual reciprocally.

In control theory (Carver & Scheier, 1982) it is argued that individuals self-regulate their behavior by comparing the momentary external situation to their reference standards. When individuals perceive a discrepancy between what is aspired (standard) and what is there (situation), they will choose to engage in behaviors to reduce the discrepancy. The impact of the behavior on the situation is assessed, and incorporated as feedback into how the situation is perceived. Manz (1986) applied a control theory perspective to contextualize self-leadership alongside the following four-step circular process: (1) Individuals perceive a certain situation, (2) compare it to internal or external standards, (3) take action to reduce discrepancy from standards, and (4) thereby have an impact on the situation, which they again perceive (repeating step 1). Here, Manz (1986) argued, when individuals’ internal standards are self-determined, rather than externally determined, they lead themselves. We can say that the more individuals choose internal, rather than external standards for comparison, and the more they take action based on what they, rather than some impactful other person or social entity, considers the right thing to do, the more individuals self-lead.

Building on this, Figure 2 illustrates self-leadership on a continuum. A low level of self-leadership thereby indicates that external sources largely determine an individual’s behavioral choices. A medium level of self-leadership would imply that individuals have some level of personal control but their choices are still based on external standards. Finally, high levels of self-leadership

are reflected in that individuals assess the appropriateness of standards, they self-determine the *how*, *why*, and *what* of their behavior (Manz, 1992). This means that individuals decide not only how they approach certain tasks or challenges, but they select relevant standards (i.e., what should be done) based on their reasoning (i.e., why it should be done). Following Manz (1986), individuals with high levels of self-leadership apply certain self-leadership strategies. These self-leadership strategies can be understood as means through which individuals can successfully lead themselves. The strategies are divided into three focus areas: constructive thought pattern strategies (e.g., self-talk), behavior-focused strategies (e.g., self-goal setting or self-reward) and natural reward strategies (e.g., finding one's own favorite ways of getting things done; Houghton & Neck, 2002). In short, and following this line of research, self-leadership implies (a) determining a goal, aim or purpose, (b) choosing a way or means to achieve it, (c) purposefully determining the why of one's actions, and (d) engaging in a self-influence process in order to reach the goal, aim or purpose successfully.

There is no black and white in this definition in that individuals would either lead themselves or they do not. Rather, self-leadership occurs on a continuum; the more individuals self-determine their how, why and what and engage in self-influence, the more they lead themselves. Also important to note is that self-leadership occurs when individuals engage in self-influence *towards* successful goal achievement, whether or not they do reach the goal successfully or not is not essential to this definition.

Thus far, strong emphasis was put on the self-influence process part of self-leadership, and only little attention has been given to the first three elements of the definition. This is partly due to the fact that most research in this area has been conducted quantitatively, using the set of self-leadership strategies operationalized into specific question-items that can be used to survey individuals. These strategies are heavily grounded in clinical theory, and are normative in that they prescribe how something should be done (Neck & Houghton, 2006). A large number of studies testing the effectiveness of the strategies and showing that the use of these strategies is typically associated with positive beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Harari et al., 2021) gives justification to

the strategies being prescriptive. At the same time, it is important to note that the strategies are only part of the self-leadership concept and that although proven to be helpful for individuals as a means of self-influence towards goal achievement, they will not be all-encompassing, allowing for other means to influence oneself as well.

There is some overlap of self-leadership with other concepts. These similarities and differences have been discussed in earlier work (e.g., Neck & Houghton, 2006), so that we only briefly outline similarities between self-leadership and what we consider the two most relevant related constructs: self-regulation and self-management. Self-regulation is a concept that seeks to explain human behavior as a result of (successful or unsuccessful) efforts to reduce the discrepancy between reality and a certain standard or goal (e.g., Latham & Locke, 1991; Vohs & Baumeister, 2004). Self-leadership operates within this theoretical framework, but differs with respect to the degree to which it is assumed that individuals follow externally set standards (self-regulation) versus self-determine their standards (self-leadership). At the same time, self-leadership complements self-regulation as it "does not represent an alternate theoretical view of self-influence, but rather a complimentary set of strategies designed to improve the self-regulation process" (Neck & Houghton, 2006, p. 279).

Self-management is theoretically rooted in self-control concepts (Manz, 1986). Self-control is described as a process through which individuals choose a less likely but perhaps on the long-term more desirable alternative. Self-management consists of a set of behavior-focused strategies, which were originally used in clinical settings to manage health related behaviors so that individuals could reduce the discrepancy between externally set standards and their health behaviors. Put differently, the self-management strategies provide information on *how* to achieve something, they do not address the standards themselves though (Neck & Houghton, 2006). Self-leadership builds on self-management, but comprises a larger set of strategies which also allow individuals to address the appropriateness of certain standards, and use their own internal reasons and motivation in the process (Manz, 1986)—determine their behavioral choices as well as reasons for them.

Self-leadership and the social environment

The limited existing empirical and theoretical work that considered context-factors for an individual's self-leadership can be categorized as national culture (e.g., Ho & Nesbit, 2009), trainings to increase self-leadership (e.g., goal setting training; Konradt et al., 2019), and, more recently, the social environment in form of family and school (Wen et al., 2020). These findings share the conclusion that the context in which individuals operate (e.g., culture, social setting) are relevant for self-leadership as it may help them to initiate self-leading behaviors, as well as shape how self-leadership is practiced.

In the work context, the relevant and immediate social environment for individuals are their managers and co-workers, which will be the focus of the present research. Prior research on an individual's social environment and their self-leadership at work are limited, and focus mainly on the leadership behavior of managers. For example, managers' empowering leadership behaviors are shown to positively relate to individual self-leadership (e.g., Amundsen & Martinsen, 2015). Also, Houghton and Yoho (2005) proposed contingency factors, suggesting when managers should encourage self-leadership, and when it is less useful. According to them, managers should encourage self-leadership when (a) their employees possess the required skills, and (b) the tasks are neither urgent, nor highly structured. The model does not, however, take the team or co-workers into consideration. Rather, self-leadership appears to be dependent on individual employees, their managers, and situational aspects. In addition, Bracht et al. (2018) outlined how self-leadership can be understood as a form of an organizational culture and explored the effects that a self-leadership-culture in organizations may have on individual-level outcomes, such as innovative behavior (Bracht, 2019). It does not, however, provide details on its relation to individual level self-leadership, or the interplay between both. Based on this, we pursue with our research question concerning how the interplay between an individual and their social environment at work (i.e., managers, co-workers) can enable self-leadership.

Method

Research context and sample

The research was conducted at a German organization, we call *The Shop*. We considered it to be a relevant case for studying the interrelationship between the social environment with individuals' self-leadership, because it emphasizes principles that clearly tap into self-leadership. So, for instance, the top management explicitly encourage individuals to take decisions themselves, and do what they consider the right thing to do, rather than waiting for someone in a higher position to fix emerging problems (e.g., repairing a broken counter). This is independent of an employee's hierarchy or position within the organization. *The Shop* was founded in the 1970s in Europe, and by the time of our research employed well over 50,000 employees, distributed across several thousand branches. *The Shop* sells a range of things from household products to cosmetics and healthy food.

At *The Shop,* we focused on a sample where emerging levels of self-leadership would be best observable, that is young adults who were newcomers to the organization in that they had just started their apprenticeship in one of *The Shop's* branches. We chose this sample for two reasons. First, most of them had just left school without significant prior work experience, so that their self-leadership development in a professional context started with entering the *The Shop*. This made them particularly suitable for studying how self-leadership may unfold. Second, as organizational newcomers, they should be particularly sensitive to interactions with their social environment at work.

Apprenticeship programs in Germany are a formal vocational training aimed at preparing young adults for their profession. Within a period of two to three years, apprentices work in their organization with intermitted periods (typically one day a week) at a vocational school. At school, they acquire the theoretical foundations (e.g., calculus, law, economics) required for their profession. During practice periods, they are expected to transfer their knowledge and develop their professional skills. In our case, all new apprentices were trained for as retail salespersons and underwent their training at the same region within Germany, albeit in different branches.

We included all young adults who started their apprenticeship at *The Shop* in fall 2019 in separate branches located in and around a large city in Germany. Not all branches in this area hired new apprentices, and there was never more than one new apprentice per branch. This resulted in a total number of *N* = 44 apprentices available for our study. While most of them had finished secondary school and did not have any prior work experience, ten held a high school degree or relevant prior working experience (e.g., completed parts of a similar type of apprenticeship). Another 14 had previously worked in temporary or student summer jobs. Our sample was 90 percent female which is typical for the job. Although we did not ask about age, most were in their late teens or early twenties. All newcomers gave their informed consent to participate in the study.

Defining the core construct self-leadership as self-led behavior

In our research, we focus on newcomers self-led *behavior* (instead of their attitudes or mindsets) as manifestations of self-leadership. Our main reason for focusing on young adults' self-report of their behavior is that we were interested in young adults' experienced interactions with their social environment, and the behavioral indicators for self-leadership that they describe for themselves as a result of that.

We refer to self-led behavior when a behavior is described as a (1) *self-initiated* and (2) *self-directed action*. Self-initiated action can be understood as an expression of having chosen what, why and how to do something. This can for instance be expressed in doing something new (e.g., suggesting and / or implementing a new product), or in doing something differently than the usual procedure suggests (e.g., changing how products are organized in store; using a digital rather than a manual tool to accelerate a process). The critical factor is that the initiative comes from the individual itself. Self-directed action refers to the independent management of new tasks. Being challenged by previously unknown tasks or situations requires newcomers to choose what to do, how to solve it, and to evaluate why this is the best way to approach it.

Self-directed action implies performing unknown tasks independently (i.e. without external guidance). For example, it might be the first time for a newcomer preparing a promotion shelf with

Christmas products. In this case, self-directed action would imply that the individual independently decides what and how to arrange the products, layout and their decoration. The key aspect is individuals' independent approach and problem-solving of new tasks and situations. Overall, we consider self-led behavior to be on a continuum—there can be small degrees of self-led behavior (e.g., approaching a customer to see if they need help), as well as larger degrees (e.g., starting one's own business), and many shades in between.

Data collection

We conducted semi-structured interviews with each apprentice at two points in time during their first year at *The Shop*. The first and second author conducted the interviews approximately one month (round 1) and five months (round 2) after apprentices started to work at *The Shop.* The first round of interviews (n = 42) took place in person at the respective branches. The second round of interviews (n = 31[1]) was conducted either in person (58%) or via telephone. Overall, the interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes (ranging from 21 to 65 minutes). All interviews were tape-recorded, resulting in a total of approximately 44 hours of audio-recorded data, and transcribed verbatim.

The interviews followed a semi-structured protocol. Although we slightly modified the interview protocol during the data collection to allow for emerging themes (e.g., Pratt et al., 2006), interviews in both rounds covered the same set of core questions. After a warm-up question on work tasks and activities, we prompted participants to think about situations in which they took initiative in tasks or in relation to people (in order to understand the extent to which they were leading themselves by determining *what* should be done, *how* to do it, and *why* it made sense for them to do it), and further asked them to describe their experiences with their managers (i.e., their line manager / branch manager) and co-workers. Sample interview questions were: (1) When you think of your apprenticeship to date, which events and/or experiences do you remember particularly

[1] Nine apprentices had left the organization by the time of the second interview, due to not passing the probation period or on their personal wish. Another four apprentices were not available for the second interview. Two apprentices were available for the second interview only.

well? (2) What are the things you are already good at, and where do you think you need to improve at work? (3) Can you share situations in which you took initiative, such as when you were working on tasks or with people?

Data analysis

We analyzed the total of 73 interviews in an iterative inductive fashion, by comparing pieces of data to identify central themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Miles & Hubermann, 1994). We first analyzed the first wave of interviews, and subsequently applied the coding to the second wave of interviews. We did so, as throughout our analysis, it became apparent that there was no systematic pattern of change between the themes prevalent in the interviews in wave one and those in wave two. We reason that this is because a few apprentices started their apprenticeship with comparably high levels of self-led behavior, such as one person who had already obtained a university degree and was in her late twenties. That is, although our first wave of interviews took place during the first weeks of the apprenticeship for all participants, there was a degree of variability in self-led behavior already at this stage. This allowed us to identify a range of degrees of self-led behavior already in the first wave. Further, some apprentices felt not supported in their self-led behavior, and thus did not show much variety with regards to their self-led behavior between both waves. We thus describe our findings at a general level, without explicating individual developmental trajectories.

For our analysis, we followed a three-stage process, as described below. Although the three stages are described linearly for clarity, they were overlapping such that our analysis was more of an iterative process (e.g., discovering higher-level concepts informed changes in lower-level concepts). We used the qualitative analysis program MAXQDA. Changes as part of the shared discussion were documented with memos as manifestations of the researcher's dialogue, written while examining, comparing, questioning, and relating pieces of data against each other (Charmaz, 2014).

Stage 1: Initial lower-level concepts

As a first step, the first and second author analyzed the 42 interviews of the first wave. The authors independently and openly coded the interviews to identify relevant statements regarding

newcomers' social environment and their self-led behaviors. After each set of four interviews, the authors met for discussions. In these discussions, they drew on commonly identified statements to create initial lower-level concepts, and discussed multiple or overlapping codes to agree on a single one for each coded passage. During their discussions, the authors iteratively dropped, merged, or split their initial codes (Grodal et al., 2021) in order to develop codes that could be differentiated.

Stage 2: Discovering higher-order themes

After analyzing approximately one third of the first wave's interviews, the authors started to merge lower-level concepts into higher-order themes. In an iterative process, the authors individually created groupings of lower-level concepts, and subsequently discussed these groupings with each other. For example, the authors noticed evidence for behavioral team norms, which were coded as "acting as partners" that included statements about the team as working in flat hierarchies with "all team members managing the same tasks", being a family "in which everyone can rely on each other", and members of the team "simply accepting each other". As part of this process, the researchers merged similar or overlapping codes, and renamed them accordingly (Grodal et al., 2021). For example, the authors merged concepts such as the individualized support that newcomers experienced in interaction with their co-workers with the individualized support they received from their managers into the same categories, as both described the same social process of customized support. Through this integration, categories became more conceptual and theoretical. After approximately two thirds of the first wave's interviews, the authors reached theoretical saturation where all lower-level concepts and higher order categories were fully developed and no new concepts emerged (Saunders et al., 2018). This resulted in 15 lower-level concepts and seven higher-order themes. The first author subsequently used the coding framework to code the second wave of data, where no additional changes emerged.

Stage 3: Aggregating theoretical dimensions

After creation of higher-order themes, the authors explored how the identified themes fit into aggregated theoretical dimensions to form a conceptual framework. The authors looked for

underlying dimensions in their categories in order to understand "how different categories fitted together into a coherent picture" (Pratt et al., 2006, p. 240). For example, some categories described enacted behaviors within the newcomers' team (e.g., "team members acting as partners"), while others referred to newcomers' internal processes (e.g., "awareness of one's contribution"). The authors looked at the narrative causality in newcomers' descriptions to understand how the emerging dimensions would fit into a conceptual model. Although newcomers' statements about their social environment were sometimes decoupled from their own behavior described within a given quote, the experiences they described in relation to their managers and co-workers permeated their reflections on their self-initiated and self-directed actions.

Figure 3 shows our lower-level concepts, higher-order categories, and aggregated theoretical dimensions. Table 1 provides sample statements for each identified concept.

Findings

Exploring how the newcomers' social work environment (i.e., managers and co-workers) can relate to their self-led behavior at work, we distinguish three broader areas to categorize the emerging themes and codes as a result of our analysis: (1) newcomer interaction with social environment, (2) newcomer internal processes, and (3) newcomer enacted behaviors. We first describe each code as grouped into themes and then elaborate on how they interplay. We suggest that in tendency, the newcomer's social environment was related with their self-led behavior via internal processes such as awareness of theirs task capabilities.

Newcomer interaction with their social environment

Newcomers described a variety of social work environments. In some of them, newcomers did not enjoy working, for instance:

> "Well, good things, this sounds really sad, but there are hardly any. The best thing is when I (….) have a break from it, and don't need to hear `do this and do that, you still need to get this thing done, or you can't go home before that is done´".

There were also more supportive social work environments, where newcomers felt accepted and welcomed–and a lot in between those extremes. In the present research, we focus on positive examples of social environments, and how they inspired self-led behavior. We do so, because when these positive formulations were not present in the newcomers' social environment, there were very limited indicators for self-led behaviors. As relevant positive social work environments we identified *individual support for learning* and *team members acting as partners*.

Individual support for learning

Newcomers described that they received customized help and feedback from their managers and co-workers, and were allowed to make mistakes, which, altogether we considered an environment that supported their learning. Importantly, this support occurred at an individual level, meaning that newcomers described one-on-one interactions, such as receiving support from individual co-workers and managers (e.g., through others providing feedback).

Receiving help. Newcomers experienced individual support from managers and co-workers through friendly responses to their questions and requests for help, and through their social environment showing them how to do certain tasks: "If there is something that needs to be done, and I don't know how to do it yet, they take me by the hand and show me". It appeared crucial for newcomers that the help they received was continuous, such that they could repeatedly approach their co-workers and leaders, without being confronted with impatience. For example, one newcomer described that even after repeatedly asking, their co-worker was not tired of explaining a specific procedure: "Each time I had a question, I called my colleague who showed it to me. Even if I still didn't know the next time, I asked her and she showed me again and again".

Receiving feedback. Newcomers described how they received feedback from their managers and co-workers on both what they were doing well, as well as where they should improve. For the most part, critical feedback was given immediately, and task-related, for instance: "S/he said, 'this did not work out well, why don't we try it this way.'", or: "They [the co-workers] also tell me, 'you

did this and that very well', and they give you real feedback, so that you can understand, what you can do better. This is very helpful." Less frequently, feedback was given in form of structured feedback-sessions.

Being allowed mistakes. As a crucial aspect of learning, newcomers described how they, as individuals, were allowed to make mistakes. Being allowed to make mistakes appeared critical for newcomers to dare trying new tasks on their own. Being allowed mistakes did not only imply permission to fail, but also included positive responses to mistakes, accepting mistakes as naturally occurring, as humane, and as an important learning opportunity: "Because s/he always told me: 'You can make mistakes, it is good if you make mistakes, because you can learn from mistakes'". Also, "I thought, I don't want to do anything wrong. That's what I thought first. But after some time, after one, or two days, I knew, I can make mistakes. Well, nothing happens (…) Because you learn from mistakes (…), so I was told."

Team members acting as partners

In addition to the individualized support, newcomers experienced enacted team values that emphasized team members as partners. These were described as being enacted within the team as a whole, denoting more general behavioral norms rather than individualized actions towards the newcomer. The kind of social environment, that we describe as *team members acting as partners* implies that newcomers experienced their teams to appreciate other team members in their uniqueness, and interacted with them at equal levels, independent of hierarchy (manager, experienced team-member, newcomer). More specifically, teams shared leadership, supported each other, and appreciated diversity within the team.

Team members sharing leadership. Newcomers described that their teams considered each team member as equally important, irrespective of formal roles: "Actually, everyone is equal, whether employee or leader". This also implied that everyone, including the newcomers, had a say in important decisions, and could assign to and receive tasks from other team members: "Well,

maybe you could say it is a bit like a soccer team, everyone gets the ball eventually. Everyone has sometimes less and sometimes more responsibility. But everyone will have a go."

Team members supporting each other. Team members were described as standing in for each other, and supporting each other: "If someone falls sick, there is immediately someone to stand in (...) really, you can count on everyone." Also, "everyone helps everyone (...) [we're] standing up for each other."

Team members appreciating diversity. Newcomers described how their managers and co-workers commonly appreciated individuality among team members. Thereby, individuality covered various aspects, such as more surface-level differences like outward appearance, as well more deep-level differences in values, character, or approaches to work tasks: "We are all very different and do things in our own kind of way". In the words of another newcomer:

> "I would almost describe it [the team] like a field of flowers, because we are all very different, so really like a field of wild flowers, which you can see near the highways or so (...) because we are all really different, having different shapes, different sizes, different colors, but are all on the same field, which is now our branch in this sense, or the work (...) So they are, if you see them as an outsider, all of them are extremely beautiful, none is better or worse."

Newcomer internal processes

Descriptions of the newcomers' social environment were closely related to descriptions of their internal world. Newcomers primarily described these internal aspects as something that was not there from day one, but arose over time—which is why we relate to them as processes. We identified three key internal processes: *awareness of one's task capabilities*, *awareness of one's contribution to the team,* and *feeling personally accepted.*

Awareness of one's task capabilities

Closely tied to newcomers' support for learning were their descriptions of increasingly becoming aware of their capability to do their work well. Newcomers' awareness of their task capabilities was reflected in statements concerning newcomers' rising confidence in work-related tasks, as well as knowing exactly what and how to do their work tasks, that is, creating routines.

Building confidence includes statements in which newcomers described that they gained confidence concerning work tasks and processes: "And then you feel more confident, and think, yeah, you can master anything". One of the key tasks in newcomers' day-to-day work was their contact with customers. Here, a newcomer described their increase in confidence in social interactions at work: "I gained confidence, also in advising customers, where I felt rather insecure at the beginning, to not say anything wrong. But this is, well, this got better eventually".

Routinizing work tasks reflects newcomers' descriptions of knowing what to do at work, and having clarity about work processes and procedures: "I know the processes in the branch quite well, and how things work, and what I need to be doing". It also includes being able to complete task routines without much cognitive effort: "I place products (...), I disinfect, (...), make sure that the shelves look tidy, and in general (...) of course cashing up, and all the normal things that are obvious".

Awareness of one's contribution to the team

Closely tied to experiencing a team where everyone was treating each other as equal partners (social environment) was the newcomers' awareness of how important their contribution was for their team (internal processes). Newcomers described feeling valued as a team member, feeling trusted and empowered, and feeling their share of responsibility for their team.

Feeling valued as a team member is reflected in statements about feeling increasingly as part of the team, and a full team member despite being new and with less experience: "You are seen as a full-fledged member of the team, even if I might not be this yet, because I don't know

everything yet. But at least you get the feeling that you are". Also: "And then, for the first time, I felt really (…) like a team member (…) who really completes the team".

Newcomers described *feeling trusted and empowered* by their managers and co-workers as they were, for instance, being fully trusted and given tasks with high responsibility. Being trusted was for instance described in these words: "There are people who say, I don't trust anyone, until he deserved my trust. And there is the concept here, that you trust a person, until the trust is broken".

Feeling responsible for the team is reflected in statements about realizing own responsibilities for others, such as through co-workers who approach them for advice. Statements such as "and by now I say (...) I can manage it alone today, and then the temporary workers come, and even if I am partly younger than them, I am in control of things", reflect that newcomers feel responsible not only for their own work tasks, but also for being there for the team, and taking their share.

Feeling personally accepted

Feeling personally accepted is reflected in statements about feeling encouraged to be oneself at work, and feeling personally appreciated by managers and co-workers. Newcomers felt personally accepted based on the interactions they had with their social environment, that is, the behaviors of their managers and co-worker towards them and the enacted values in the team overall. For example, one newcomer described that she felt she could be herself, associating this with everyone else in the team being themselves as well: "I feel like with my co-workers, I can be myself very well (…) I would say they [the co-workers] all behave like they would at home or so, well no one deludes anyone". In particular, newcomers felt personally accepted based on the individualized support for learning that they received from both their managers and co-workers. Individualized support in the form of help, feedback, and supportive responses to mistakes allowed newcomers to focus on learning their job, helping them to see that their social environment appreciates their stage of career. For newcomers who were the sole apprentices in their teams and

often considerably younger, the individualized support they received contributed largely to their feeling of being personally accepted. For example, newcomers described how they felt accepted in terms of being encouraged based on how others responded to their mistakes: “if one fails it is not too bad, it is in fact allowed to make mistakes so that one can learn from these mistakes (….) it’s not that one does get a roasting but that it is absolutely relaxed and one gets reassured that it wasn’t something major. This gives the feeling that even if one fails, one is supported”. Further, newcomers felt personally accepted when they could sense that the members in the team acted as mutual partners, with them being a normal part of the team despite their apprentice role. The team was thereby described as a human chain, with individuals relying on each other and equally sharing their tasks and responsibilities, such that “everyone is carrying the same burden (…) and no one carries more than the other (…) and no one would say, hey, I put my burden on top of yours”. Further, newcomers described how the appreciation of diversity shown by their manager fosters the feeling of being personally accepted: “My manager does not mind, if I wear what I want (...) also with my piercings and the color of my hair, probably many people won’t approve this. But this is my personality, this is what I like and my leader, s/he does not only consider this ok, but s/he appreciates it”.

Feeling personally accepted helped newcomers to become aware of their task capabilities and relational contributions, two internal processes that were key for their self-led behavior. Feeling personally accepted made newcomers feel safe to focus on their tasks, thereby exploring their ways of doing the what and how of their job without the fear of being personally rejected: “It’s that you can continue to learn. If it is that it works better for me in a particular way, than that’s the way how it works best for me. Then it is that one wouldn’t be criticized for that, for what one does differently than another colleague”. As such, feeling personally accepted helped newcomers to feel safe to focus on exploring and routinizing their tasks without the fear of potentially negative consequences for them as a person. Being able to focus on their personal approach in solving work informed newcomers’ awareness of their task-related capabilities.

At a more relational level, feeling personally accepted also helped newcomers to overcome the fear of interpersonal uncertainty and to see themselves as a normal and fully-developed part of the team: “[when I came here] I was first a bit scared cause everything was new. But then it was actually fine, because everybody treated me like I was a normal member. That is, they didn’t treat me like an immature girl, but just like completely normal”. Or as another newcomer described it: “You realize how they [the group of branch managers] treat you, how they talk to you is completely normal. It’s not that they try to explain something like a teacher (…) a teacher stands in front and explains things that the students must know. But it was simply like really humans (…) and it was simply the feeling that […] one could just talk”. Feeling personally accepted signaled newcomers that they are an accepted member of the team, helping them to become aware of the value they can add to the team. For example, one newcomer described how the experience of being accepted despite personal flaws informed their feelings towards the team: “[I get accepted with] all my flaws, so to say (...) And I consider this very important. Because then you enjoy working with the people, because you can be yourself”.

Overall, feeling personally accepted can be seen as a bridge between newcomers’ interaction with their social environment (i.e., the relational support they received; the enacted team values), and their internal processes of increased awareness of their task capabilities and team contributions.

Newcomer enacted behavior

Self-led behavior

As the manifestation of self-leadership, self-led behavior describes how newcomers showed self-initiated and self-directed actions.

Self-initiated actions describe the actions for that newcomers have chosen themselves the what, the why, and the how of their activities. In particular, they described how they adapted

existing work routines, and how they identified and initiated actions to support others (co-workers, customers, broader community).

Newcomers described how they adapted existing work routines to improve the customer experience. They either approached their managers or co-workers to verbally suggest a different approach, or they directly implemented their new approach. Most of the time, newcomers referred to situations in which they questioned the existing system of how products are organized in shelves. For example, one newcomer described how she changed the layout in one of the racks close to the checkout:

> "I have changed the layout a bit. For the layout, there were for example things sorted at the top [of a rack], with the SIM-cards (…) at the bottom. But I thought that the SIM-cards aren't visible at the bottom and a customer would need to look down and search for it, otherwise they wouldn't be found. (…) I discussed with my manager that I could re-sort the things a little bit. At the bottom I sorted the normal gift cards or so, because the SIM-cards are sold more often than the gift-cards. And that's how we did and I thought it's better like this."

Another newcomer described how she spontaneously implemented a new approach on how to deal with pre-ordered products that were not anymore available in-store. Again, her initiated action was informed by the need of a customer in order to improve the customer experience.

Although most newcomers described ideas on how their store could better organize the products, not all raised these suggestions or tried to implement them. For example, one newcomer described in detail how a shelf with different types of pasta, pesto, and spreads could be organized in a more coherent manner based on products (e.g., organize pasta made from spelt, wheat, and lentils next to each other) rather than on brands (e.g., organize pasta, pesto, and spreads of the same brand next to each other), but ended emphasizing that "with this idea, I have never approached someone. I have never done that… I just think of this idea for myself…I would do it

differently, but that is how it is, that's it". This may indicate that albeit having ideas for change, there is a difference in the extent to which these ideas are translated into a self-initiated action.

In addition to adapting work routines, various newcomers described how they identified and proactively pursued actions that helped their individual co-workers or the team as a whole. These actions usually happened when newcomers had a spare moment of time, or have just completed one of their work tasks prior to focusing on the next. Once they spotted an area that could be improved (e.g., costumers lining up in the area of a co-worker; a shelf that needs to be filled in), they did what needed to be done to keep the store in order. One newcomer thereby emphasized that keeping the eyes open and doing whatever small job you spot is what keeps the store in order: „For example, if I spot that there is litter on the ground, I pick it up and bin it. And if I see that some goods are in the wrong section, I immediately put them away." Similarly, another newcomer says "if there is something dirty, I directly clean it myself rather than telling someone else 'this is dirty, what shall I do?'".

Self-initiated action in the form of support extended beyond the current team towards customers, future newcomers, and local charities. For example, one newcomer described how she provided support to customers with special needs: "if there are older people with a walking chair who can't move well, I approach them for help or simply carry their bag to the checkout. I have two grannies myself and I know how hard it is". Another newcomer described how she decided to create a mini-manual for future newcomers and team members that describes how to deal with a specific machine in the store, that is occasionally used. She explained that the manual should support anyone who is unfamiliar with it as "many don't know how difficult it is to understand something, if one hasn't done it before".

Self-directed action described situations in which newcomers approached previously unknown tasks, and independently performed actions without external guidance. As one newcomer framed it: "I don't immediately approach a colleague and ask, but I try to do it on my own first".

Regarding self-direction actions, one newcomer describes how she decided to independently work on a task for that she had not yet build a routine: “Of course, I have already tried to independently allocate tasks for myself. For example, last week it happened that the red tubs came, and I said ‘Okay, I will do all that I can see at this point’. And then I worked on them without asking someone and it worked out”. Another newcomer explained how she could figure out herself how to deal with a new product in the assortment of goods that does not yet have a defined place in the shelves: “I figured out that I could explain it to myself. I always take a look if there is no space left and ask myself: okay, is there anything that should be replaced or does it all stay in? Or, how much of a product is still left? Or, where could I place it alternatively?”.

Structural support

Accessing structural support for autonomy refers to newcomers’ descriptions of having access to more institutionalized forms of support that enable them to enact self-led behavior. Structural support implied having the necessary tools and systems (e.g., books or phones) to look up things independently: “I like it that we get a work-phone here. Among other things, I can look up products (...) and then I am not so dependent on others, and can work independently”. Although structural support was mentioned to a lesser degree than individual support for learning (i.e., receiving help, receiving feedback, being allowed mistakes) it had a key role for apprentices’ ability to self-direct and self-initiate their actions. Even if all aspects of the social environment and internal processes previously described were supportive of self-led behavior, newcomers still needed to have organizational structures in place that supported them in leading themselves.

Relating elements of the social environment, internal processes, and self-led behavior

Figure 4 summarizes how the identified themes relate to each other in response to the question of how the social environment at work can be understood to encourage newcomers to show self-led behavior at work. Overall, the identified themes in the social environment at work (i.e., individual support for learning, team members acting as partners) were closely related with how the

newcomers thought and felt about themselves (i.e., feeling personally accepted, awareness of one's task capabilities, awareness of one's contribution to the team). As such, both individualized (i.e., individual support for learning) and team-level (i.e., team members acting as partners) processes evolved as relevant for self-led behavior at work. This emphasizes that rather than being an individualized phenomenon at work, self-leadership involved multiple personalized relationships with significant others (both managers and co-workers) as well as the collective contribution of the team.

Albeit the interviews suggested in parts a directional tendency such that the individual support for learning that newcomers received from their managers and co-workers helped them to build task-relevant self-confidence, other themes should best be seen as co-constituting each other. In particular, newcomers becoming aware of their own contribution to the team could not only result from team members acting as partners, but further help newcomers to actively contribute to the support that team members provide to each other. The following example illustrates how a newcomer felt trusted and empowered ("you are somehow at the same level") as a result of team members sharing leadership:

> "This is like, no one is superior than, don't know an apprentice or something, but you are somehow at the same level (…) you could notice this in the way they treat you, they talk to you (…) they don't try to teach you something, like a teacher, or so."

Similarly, the identified internal processes and newcomers' enacted self-led behavior are likely to co-constitute each other. Because of internal processes (feeling personally accepted, awareness of one's task capabilities, awareness of one's contribution to the team), newcomers were likely to engage in self-led behavior. That is, newcomers who experienced feeling personally accepted could feel save to explore self-led behavior at work, as the personal acceptance ensured them that in the case their self-initiated and self-directed actions would not succeed, it would not affect them being accepted in the team. In that sense, feeling personally accepted provided a safety

net which allowed newcomers to focus on their tasks and role within the team without fearing negative consequences for themselves. In particular, feeling personally accepted seemed to unlock relevant internal processes in newcomers such that through feeling personally accepted they could see that they gained relevant task capabilities and contributed to the team. Increasingly becoming aware of one's task capabilities informed self-led behavior as it built task-related confidence in knowing what and how to do ones' job. This helped newcomers to draw a line between what they already knew and what they could further do, allowing them to engage in self-led behavior without the danger of excessive demands.

Further, becoming aware of how ones' contribution for the team (i.e., feeling valued as a team member, feeling trusted and empowered, taking responsibility for the team) created a need and purpose for newcomers to act for the team, such that initiating improvements (self-initiated actions) and approaching new tasks independently (self-directed action) reflected self-directed behavior that served not only the individual themselves but the overall team (e.g., saves time and energy resources; implements new procedures). Likewise self-led behavior may have reinforced that newcomers felt accepted, became aware of their own task capabilities and their contribution to the team. As such, the identified themes should be best understood as processes that co-constitute each other when it comes to self-leadership at work.

Discussion

The present work sought to understand how the interplay between job newcomers and their social environment at work (i.e., managers, co-workers) enabled individual newcomer self-leadership. Concerning the social environment, our findings revealed two key aspects that could enable job newcomers to show self-led behavior: The individualized support for learning that they received (e.g., feedback), and a team in which members acted as partners (e.g., supporting each other). These aspects shaped and were shaped by relevant internal processes, namely that newcomers became aware of their own task capabilities (e.g., routinizing work tasks), realized their

personal contribution to the team (e.g., feeling empowered), as well as felt personally accepted at work. The findings emphasize the important role that the social environment at work plays for individuals' self-leadership. In particular, the findings underline that an individual's self-led behavior at work may be seen as a manifestation of what is co-constituted by both the social environment and an individual's key internal experiences within this environment.

Theoretical implications

Our study contributes to the literature on self-leadership in various ways. First, we advance the theoretical understanding of self-leadership by shifting the emphasis on self-leadership as something that is not just individually but rather collectively achieved. While prior research emphasized individual responsibility in self-leadership (e.g., training, Konradt et al., 2019), we contribute to a more balanced perspective that considers the individual within their social environment at work. We identified individual support for learning and team members acting as partners as relevant aspects that directly involve the social environment at work. These aspects formed relationships with newcomers' internal processes that described their awareness of more task- and relations-oriented capabilities, as well as their feeling of acceptance within their work context. This complements previous findings that demonstrated that an individual's social context outside of work, in the form of parenting style, school education, or national culture can affect the level but also the orientation (e.g., focus on relationships) of their self-leadership (Ho & Nesbit, 2009; Wen et al., 2020). We believe that our findings contribute to the literature in so far as they point out how self-leadership should not be restricted to either context factors alone (e.g., a manager's empowering leadership behaviors; Amundsen & Martinsen, 2015), or the focal individual alone. Our findings maintain that individuals think, feel, and act within a social context, and that their interaction with their social environment at work together with relevant internal processes shape self-leadership. Whereas previous research focused on the direct link between external stimulations, such as trainings of self-leadership, we maintain that the external context needs to be considered together with relevant internal processes for truly understanding self-leadership.

Furthermore, the internal processes we identified advance our understanding of team-orientation as part of self-leadership. This is important because, although self-leadership strategies are generally seen as useful for individuals, research indicated that they could be detrimental for a team's performance (Langfred, 2000). So, for instance, when individuals focus too much on their own goals, they may be less supportive at the team level, and thereby reducing the cohesiveness and effectiveness of the team. Our research indicates that the awareness of one's contribution to the team (taking responsibility for the team) is a key internal process that enables newcomers to show self-led behavior. In that sense, our research shows that self-led behavior may not contradict but rather co-depend on supportive and partnering team processes. This fits to theoretical perspectives emphasizing that individual self-leadership may in fact play a central role for inclusive leadership processes, such as when multiple team members share leadership across tasks and time (Pearce & Manz, 2005; Stewart et al., 2011). Finally, our findings provide new insights into individual self-leadership development. That is, we identify which interactions with the immediate social environment facilitate internal processes in newcomers that translate into self-led behavior. By doing so, we underscore the importance of one's social environment for self-leadership development, and show that there are other approaches than specialized trainings that may enable an individual to engage in self-leadership at work. Specifically, our research highlights the content of the interactions that newcomers had with their environment that were likely to contribute to their self-leadership. Whereas relevant interpersonal interactions mainly focused on support for learning (e.g., receiving feedback, being allowed mistakes), underlining the relevance of social learning, the relevant group-based interactions point to specific values that were brought to live through the behaviors within the team: Sharing leadership, supporting each other, appreciating diversity. What these values have in common is the emphasis on acting with each other on eye level.

Limitations and future research

Choosing *The Shop* as relevant case for our theory building was a strength on the one side, yet may also limit the scope of our findings on the other side. First, as *The Shop* was committed to

self-leadership, and organizational members were working on developing a culture around aspects of self-leadership over a span of decades, it might be easier for newcomers to show self-led behaviors at *The Shop*, compared to other organizations. We say this, because in the case of *The Shop*, most individuals and organizational units were supportive of self-leadership, including helpful structures, rules and norms. In other organizations, where commitment to self-leadership is less clear and present, the factors related to the social environment that we identified might not be sufficient to enable new comers' self-leadership.

Furthermore, the generalizability of our findings may be limited due to qualitative interviews with young adults as apprentices. The young adults in our sample might have been especially open (or malleable) to environmental influences such that their social environment may have had greater impact on their internal processes and behaviors, compared to more experienced or older newcomers. Another characteristic of the sample was that the newcomers were predominantly female. Research has found gender-differences in the use of self-leadership (Bendell et al., 2019), and also that female employees (compared to their male colleagues), may lack strong expectations of career-related efficacy as a result of their socialization experiences (Hackett & Betz, 1981). Therefore, we cannot rule out the possibility, that the described results would have been of a different nature for male newcomers in this organization. Future research should explore whether similar social environments encourage self-leadership development for other samples, like more experienced and male employees, as well. Such research may also consider other variables relevant for developmental experiences in organizations (e.g., match between developmental job experiences and personal needs; Cao & Hamori, 2020). Additionally, as a qualitative study, our research lacks statistical generalizability. Yet, it can inform "'naturalistic generalization', whereby one recognizes similarities based on experiences with similar 'cases' without any statistical inference" (Pratt, 2006, p. 259). Similar cases could be young adults starting as newcomers in other occupations and organizations that parallel *The Shop* in the level of autonomy that is granted to employees.

Another important next step for future research is to dive deeper into exploring different social work environments, and their relationship to self-leadership, or self-led behavior. This research could then add to other research exploring (a) positive effects of an individual's social environment (e.g., coworker support, Baethge et al., 2020; affirmation of the social worth of team members, Lee Cunningham et al., 2021), (b) context conditions (e.g., age diversity, Burmeister et al., 2020; Fasbender et al., 2020), and (c) potentially negative consequences (e.g., leader humility and deviance, Qin et al., 2020;). Despite these limitations, we believe that we contributed to the literature by providing a unique and in-depth perspective on how a modern, trusting environment can help young newcomers become valuable and autonomous members of the organization. We can only encourage other organizations to follow suit and learn from this example. Underlining the beauty that can be inherent in self-leadership development, we conclude with the following words from a conversation we had with a manager during initial conversations in preparation for our study:

> *And suddenly you realize, how the bud starts to burst, and you cannot stop her anymore, because now she dares, now she kicks off, now she does not ask any more "May I?", "Shall I?" or "Can I?". She just acts.*

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Table 1

Higher-order categories, lower-level codes, and examples from semi-structured interviews

Higher-order category	Lower-level code	Examples from semi-structured interviews
Newcomer interaction with their social environment		
Individual support for learning	Receiving help	• "Each time I had a question, I asked a colleague, and s/he showed me, even if I didn't know [the same thing] next time, I asked her/him again, and s/he showed me again" • "If there is something that needs to be done, and I don't know how to do it yet, they take me by the hand and show me." • "I get support from my co-workers (...) when I don't know about something, they always help me."
	Receiving feedback	• "They [the co-workers] also tell me, 'you did this and that very well', and they give you real feedback, so that you can understand, what you can do better. This is very helpful." • "And I did this and then I was praised for this, that it looked very nice." • "S/he said, ´this did not work out well, why don't we just try it this way"
	Being allowed mistakes	• "Because s/he always told me: 'You can make mistakes, it is good if you make mistakes, because you can learn from mistakes.'" • "You get the feeling that even if you fail, it is nothing bad, so it is indeed allowed to make mistakes, and that you can, um, learn from these mistakes." • "Yes, and then my manager said, 'No, are you crazy? This can happen to anyone'" • "Everyone overlooked it, so it was not too dramatic. But it was something where I said, I will learn from this now."
Team members acting as partners	Team members sharing leadership	• "S/he [the leader] works together with us and if there is something, we can ask her/him, and in general, s/he also asks us at times, if we have better ideas, and lets us co-decide, so, actually we are all leading together, so to say" • "Actually, everyone is equal, whether employee or leader." • "And it is not a problem, if you approach someone saying, hey, this and that needs to get done, would you like to do it? Um, there is no one, who says, yeah, this is not my task so to say, but everyone does everything, and everyone accepts this."

Higher-order category	Lower-level code	Examples from semi-structured interviews
		• "Well, maybe you could say it is a bit like a soccer team, everyone gets the ball eventually. Everyone one has sometimes less and sometimes more responsibility. But everyone will have a go."
	Team members supporting each other	• "Everyone helps you, (...) when you have problems opening something up or lifting something [heavy], or advising a customer (...), and more general (...) when you have private problems (...), or when you need help at school to understand something." • "If someone falls sick, there is immediately someone to stand in, and no one says, yeah I can't do it, or, yeah, really, you can count on everyone." • "Everyone helps everyone. We have this Smartphone, and we can do the labelling for new products with it. It is quite useful (laughs), and if someone forgot it, you give your smartphone to the other person, yeah, [we're] standing up for each other."
	Team members appreciating diversity	• "I would almost describe it [the team] like a field of flowers, because we are all very different, so really like a field of wild flowers, which you can see near the highways or so (...) because we are all really different, having different shapes, different sizes, different colors, but are all on the same field, which is now our branch in this sense, or the work (...) So they are, if you see them as an outsider, all of them are extremely beautiful, none is better or worse." • "Well if someone is different, s/he will be accepted just like everyone else. This is of course, in a team, there are many people different from each other, not everyone is like me, but many are different. (...) and everyone gets accepted how they are." • ""No matter which aspect we take, if you look at it from the outside, you can look at nationality, size, appearance, age, well, but the most important is the inside, everyone is entirely different, so really, there are for sure some people who are more similar to each other, but at our shop, I would really say, everyone is entirely different. Really. Sure, you have quieter one's, but they are quiet in different ways, and you have more turned up individuals, but they are turned up differently." • "We are all very different and do things in our own kind of way"
Newcomer internal processes		
Awareness of one's task capabilities	Building confidence	• "I was feeling very insecure and there were many challenges, which I felt were difficult." • "And then you feel more confident, and think, yeah, you can master anything." • "I gained confidence, also advising customers, where I felt rather insecure at the beginning, to not say anything wrong. But this is, well, this got better eventually."

Higher-order category	Lower-level code	Examples from semi-structured interviews
		• "I don't shy away approaching other people anymore, which actually was never my thing earlier." • "I gained confidence."
	Routinizing work tasks	• "I know the processes in the branch quite well, and how things work, and what I need to be doing" • "I place products (...), I disinfect, (...), make sure that the shelves look tidy, and in general (...) of course cashing up, and all the normal things that are obvious"
Awareness of one's contribution to the team	Feeling valued as a team member	• "I complete the team (...) I am fit, physically fit. I can carry a lot, hauling a lot and so on, that is sometimes quite good, especially, when there is a lot of goods." • "You are seen as a full-fledged member of the team, even if I might not be this yet, because I don't know everything yet. But at least you get the feeling that you are, at my other work – I was nine months in the hotel business, and partly for months, I felt so apart, as if I wasn't a part of it, but always only, well do this and that." • "And then, for the first time, I felt really (…) like a team member completing the team, who really completes the team"
	Feeling trusted and empowered	• "I was allowed to do this [responsible task] so early on, this means they have quite a large amount of trust in me." • "Despite me being only half a year into my apprenticeship, they completely trust me." • "And s/he [the leader] says, 'don't think so much, just do it, because I know that you can do it'" • "In my third week or so (...) the colleague said, 'yeah, I know I don't have to explain much to you' (...) And this pushes you a little, because you know that you are allowed to take on this much responsibility." • "There are people who say, I don't trust anyone, until he deserved my trust. And there is the concept here, that you trust a person, until the trust is broken."
	Feeling responsible for the team	• "And by now I say (… .) I can manage it alone today, and then the temporary workers come, and even if I am partly younger than them, I am in control of things." • "If someone has a bad day, then you talk, or sometimes, you don't talk too much, you just do your work, but make sure that [I] crack a few jokes or so, I don't know." • "For example, today, we are quite underrepresented, because many people fell sick. And um, [this] means, we have quite a lot to do and now I am today during the morning the manager so to say, um, well I have the full responsibility." • "We have a colleague who is 40 or 50 years old, and s/he is here as a temporary helper. And s/he asks me, what should I do?"

Higher-order category	Lower-level code	Examples from semi-structured interviews
Feeling personally accepted	Feeling personally accepted	• "My manager does not mind, if I wear what I want and (...) um, maybe also with my piercings and the color of my hair, probably many people won't approve this. But this is my personality, this is what I like and my leader, s/he does not only consider this ok, but s/he appreciates it." • "[I get accepted with] all my flaws, so to say (...) And I consider this very important. Because then you enjoy working with the people, because you can be yourself." • "By now, I am even more myself (….). Nobody says anything against what I do, or when my manager cracks a joke, and I jump in (...) and nobody says anything against it, and everyone accepts it and laughs. (...) and the others approach me and talk to me, it shows me that I am being accepted here."
Newcomer enacted behavior		
Self-led behavior	Self-initiated action	• "Because in [name of the city], there is, um, such a charity from the church (...). And I said, don't we want them, the things which are discontinued and we are not allowed to sell anymore, couldn't we give these things to them (...). Yes, and then I was gone for a week, and then [after my return] there was a box, which could go there." • "You need to keep your eyes open besides doing your work, and make sure customers feel good." • "And then I say, `oh look, we could do this as well, ´and so on, and I sometimes suggest these things." • "And then I was like, ´why don't we try arranging the layout to match the time of year and collection´"
	Self-directed action	• "Then I can, as I said, just go to the office, and see if there is something to do. And if yes, then I just do it independently." • "I don't immediately approach a colleague and ask, but I try to do it on my own first." • "For example, I had to decorate for Valentine's day. That was a lot of fun for me, because, I was happy that I could do it all by myself, and to allow my creativity full bent."
Structural support		
	Accessing structural support for autonomy	• "I can go to the office and get a book to inform myself about a certain topic. For example, recently, I read one about nails, (...) or perfume, and how you can advise customers properly, when they search for a perfume."

Higher-order category	Lower-level code	Examples from semi-structured interviews
		• "I like it that we get a work-phone here. Among other things, I can look up products (...) and then I am not so dependent on others, and can work independently." • "S/he [the leader] expects that I become as independent as possible, so that I (...) can do things on my own."

Figures

Figure 1

Overview of key theories that relate to self-leadership

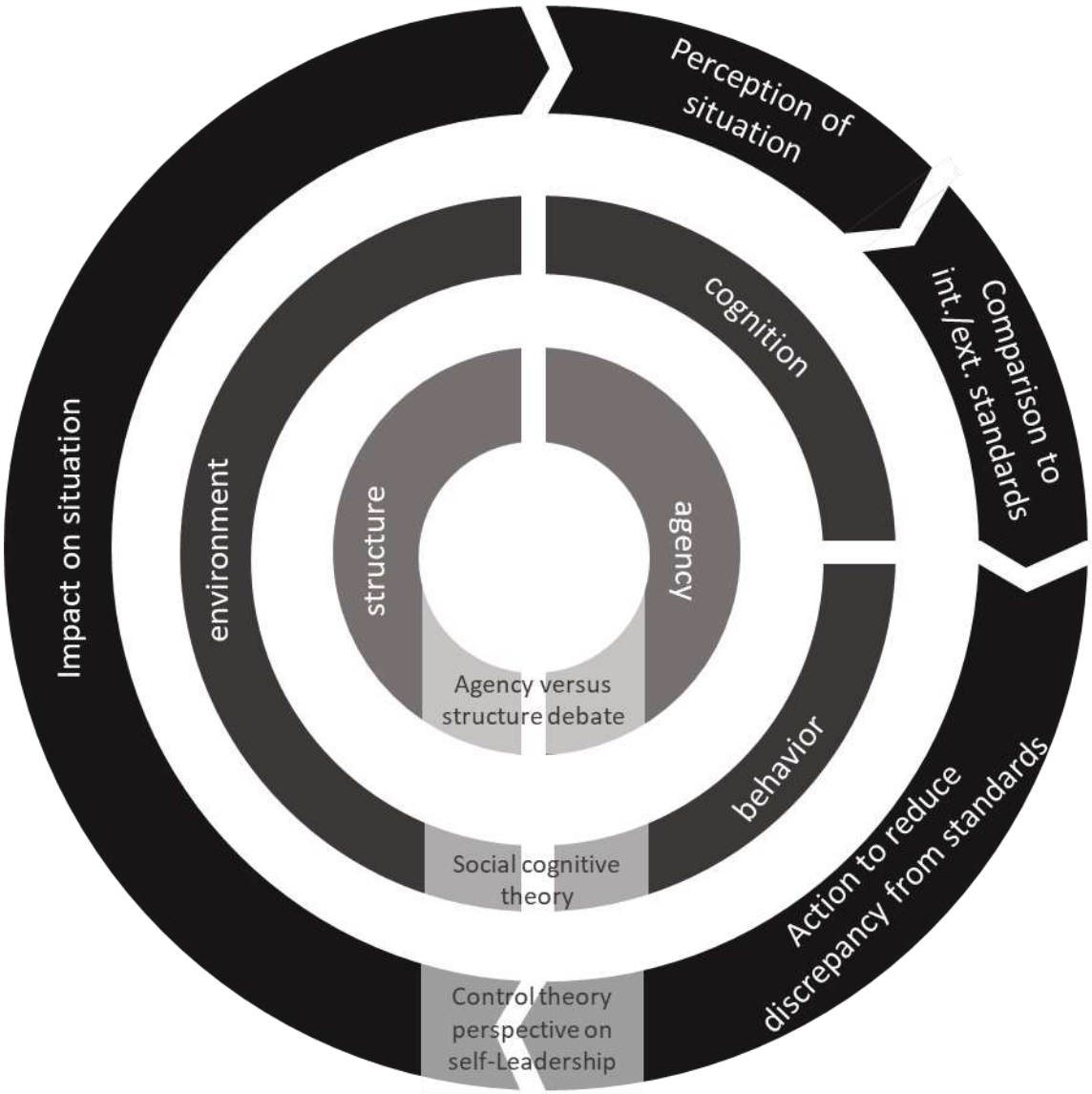


Figure 2

Self-leadership on a continuum

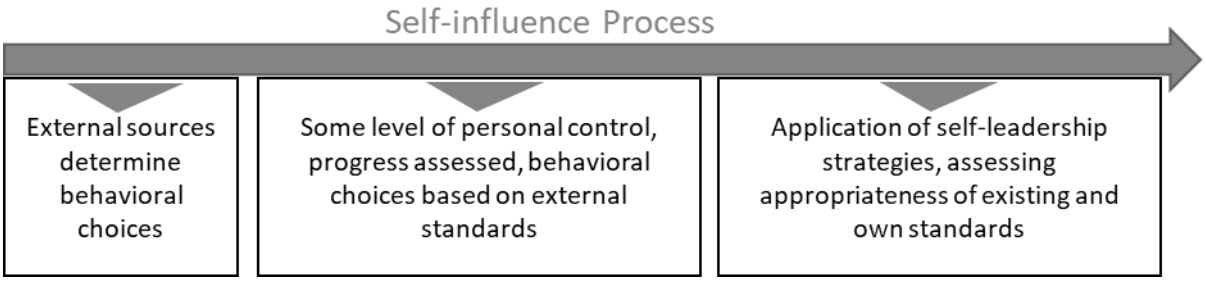
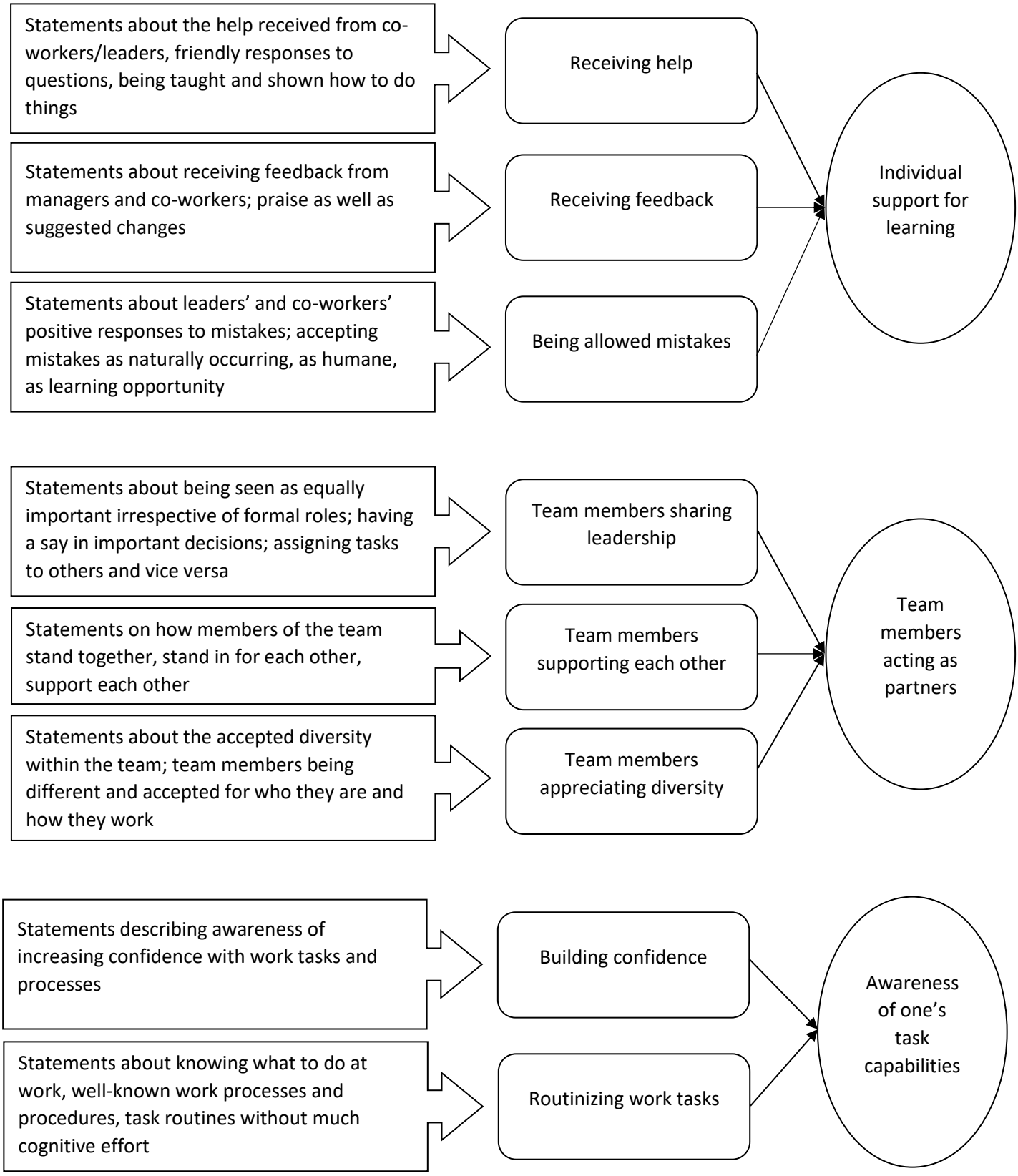


Figure 3

Coding Structure: Lower-level concepts, higher-order categories, and aggregated theoretical dimensions



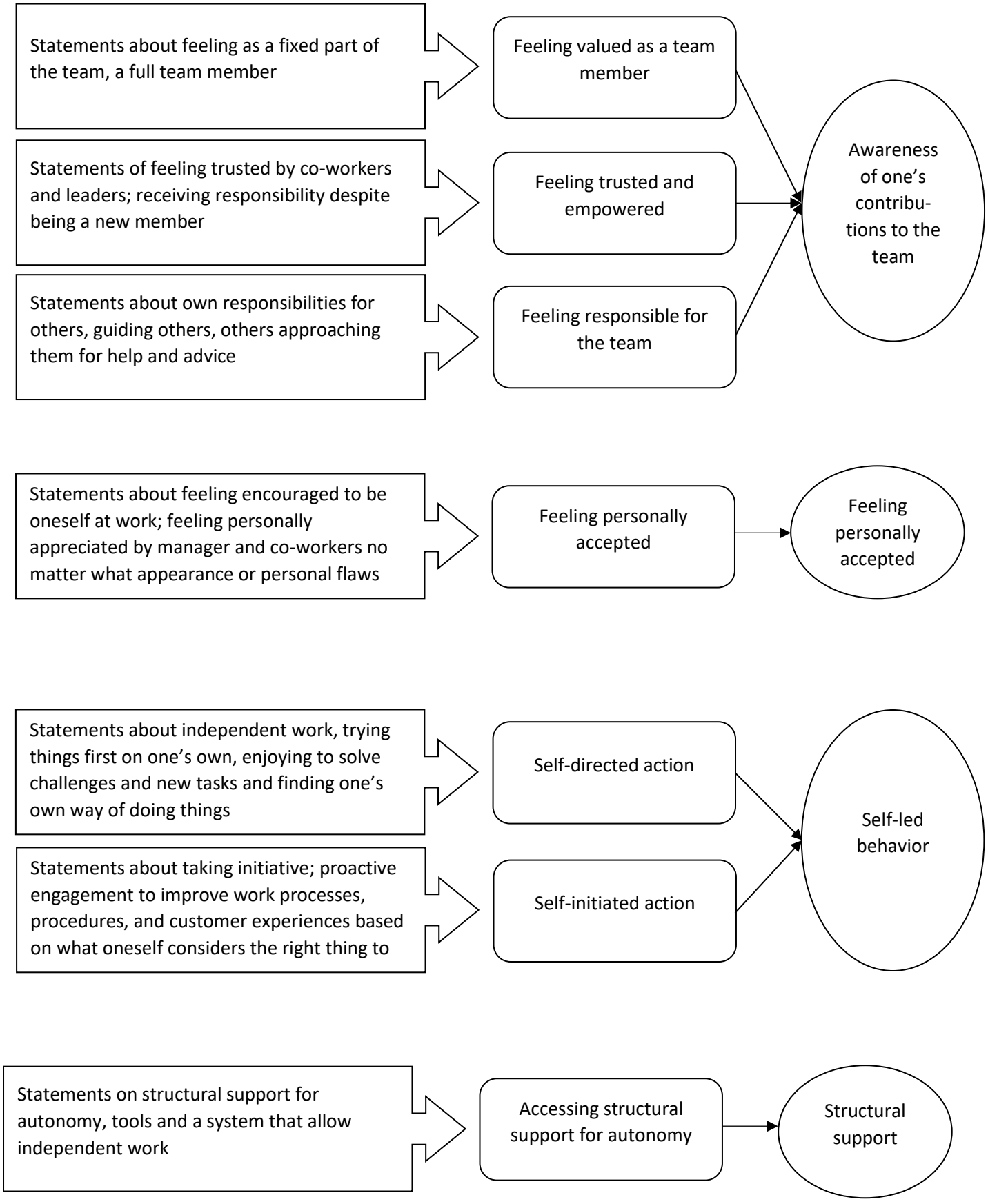

Statements about feeling as a fixed part of the team, a full team member
Feeling valued as a team member
Statements of feeling trusted by co-workers and leaders; receiving responsibility despite being a new member
Feeling trusted and empowered
Statements about own responsibilities for others, guiding others, others approaching them for help and advice
Feeling responsible for the team
Awareness of one's contribu-tions to the team
Statements about feeling encouraged to be oneself at work; feeling personally appreciated by manager and co-workers no matter what appearance or personal flaws
Feeling personally accepted
Feeling personally accepted
Statements about independent work, trying things first on one's own, enjoying to solve challenges and new tasks and finding one's own way of doing things
Self-directed action
Statements about taking initiative; proactive engagement to improve work processes, procedures, and customer experiences based on what oneself considers the right thing to
Self-initiated action
Self-led behavior
Statements on structural support for autonomy, tools and a system that allow independent work
Accessing structural support for autonomy
Structural support

Figure 4

Summary on the identified themes and their relation to each other.