RESEARCHING BREAKDOWNS INVOLVING SHAME:

REFLEXIVE INQUIRY AND THE PRACTICE OF ETHICAL

ORGANISATION DEVELOPMENT IN A UK GOVERNMENT AGENCY

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April 2019

Submitted to the University of Hertfordshire in partial fulfilment

of the requirement of the degree of Doctor of Management

Abstract

<u>Key words</u>: anxiety, breakdowns, complex responsive processes, embodiment, expertise, morality, organisation development, practice theory, reflexivity, self-respect, shame, uncertainty.

<u>Key authors</u>: M. Alvesson, P. Bourdieu, S. Brinkmann, N. Elias, M. Foucault, H.G. Gadamer, A. Giddens, P. Marris, G.H. Mead, C. Mowles, J.C. Scott, R.D. Stacey.

This thesis explores my work as an internal organisation development (OD) consultant in a national body that oversees health and care services in the UK. It makes contributions to practice theory and current debates on the nature of expertise, and provides a new way of thinking about the role of shame and respect as part of ethical OD practice.

Over the last two years, I have been inquiring into narrative accounts of what I do as a researcher-practitioner, as a means to understanding more of what OD actually involves in my workplace. This has included my work leading a culture and leadership project, and facilitating large groups. As I have progressed in my work and in my research, I have become increasingly aware of the uncertainty involved in human interaction and how routinised relational performances – or practices – might be involved in managing the anxiety associated with uncertainty, as well as the production and reproduction of identities and social order.

This perspective that combines ideas from pragmatic philosophy, practice theory, group analysis, and the complexity sciences, provides very different approaches to understanding many concepts in organisational life. In particular, I explore how expertise can be regarded as a relational practice involving experts, their lay audience and (where appropriate) relevant professional bodies, and how this practice is part of the ordering of contemporary societies. This argument adds to the literature on the nature of expertise, challenging the perspective that it is a property of individuals. This is through a concrete example of how social order emerges paradoxically from self-organising local interaction, which is a key principle in understanding human interaction as complex responsive processes.

I have also found myself increasingly intrigued by the bodily experiences of not knowing what to do when my expectations about the world fail to predict what actually happens. How these mismatches – or breakdowns – bring the contingency of social orders and identities into view, and their involvement in learning processes, has been widely explored in the academic literature. Some of this literature also considers related bodily experiences; however, my research focuses particularly on

reflexively inquiring into shame and (self-)respect because I have found these to be very useful in exploring the conflict of competing 'goods' in social life as embodied processes.

My research suggests that shame arises when the fragility of social norms is highlighted in ways that puts at risk our ongoing membership of real and imagined communities that are important to us. I argue that taking shame – and therefore the moral agency of others – seriously, paradoxically means taking our own moral agency seriously because selves are social. This accords with G.H. Mead's position on morality, which sees ethical judgement as a fallible process of purposeful action with as many perspectives as possible in view.

This position confirms the relatively common view that OD practitioners can never be 'outside' the social figurations they are tasked with trying to change, but challenges the ideal of practitioners as neutral guides who can avoid asserting their own agendas as they try to facilitate change. It also contributes to our understanding of human interaction as complex responsive processes by adding further dimensions to the specific concept of *social selves* in G.H Mead's theory of human interaction.

Acknowledgements

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1.   Introduction

This thesis accounts for a reflexive encounter with myself spanning more than two years. I came to the Doctor of Management (DMan) programme in October 2016 with what I thought was a firm grounding in philosophy and critical theory, and a vague sense that the more prevalent ways of thinking about what we are all doing at work didn't quite work for me. Somewhat separately, I also saw myself as quite self-aware, appreciative of diversity and good at my job, though perhaps a little intolerant of those who didn't seem interested in making intellectually rigorous arguments for their positions. I was eager to start researching what I was doing, to see what I could find out about what was actually involved in working on culture and leadership, facilitating groups and learning about organisation development (OD) in an arm's-length government agency in the UK. I was excited about where my research might take me.

I was not prepared for the extent to which inquiring into my practice through the four projects I have completed would be emotionally and ethically disturbing. As I engaged with new theoretical perspectives – especially from social anthropology and psychoanalysis – as part of analysing autobiographical accounts of my work, I found myself at times stuck, exhilarated, bored, elated and even embarrassed by what was emerging in my research. What might these conclusions say about how I go about my work, about my identity, and how I was perhaps habitually perpetuating some of the organisational patterns I was coming to see as problematic?

Encountering more and more ways of thinking about what I was doing, I also started to appreciate the vastness of the field of organisational research and became preoccupied with the question of how we could ever work out what to do – in work or in research – when there were seemingly infinite plausible interpretations of events to consider (e.g. Gergen and Gergen 1991; Andrews 2008) and an essential uncertainty about experience in general (Mead 1934; Gadamer 1975). Accepting those premises seemed to make the notion of being able to know what to do little more than a comforting fantasy. Further, as someone interested in moral conduct, this raised the specific problem of how I could do right by others if definitive meanings of what I was doing were no longer available.

Paraphrasing the social anthropologist, Clifford Geertz (1973), the loose threads of the intricate web of interpretive tendencies I had been spinning and suspending myself within over my professional life, which I had rarely noticed, were becoming increasingly visible. As my research progressed, accelerated through dialogue with the DMan research community, I started to become a stranger to myself, just as I saw others in the research community becoming strangers to themselves. For many

of us, initially at least, encountering ourselves anew, and bringing aspects of our practice into view that we might have preferred not to engage with, created a sense of unease that in ordinary life we might have consciously or unconsciously tried to avoid. This was both individually, as processes of maintaining a sense of self – which has been called the maintenance of *ontological security* (Laing 1969; Marris 1996) – or through group processes, involving inclusion/exclusion, of maintaining social figurations (Elias 1978; Elias and Scotson 1965; Stacey 2003). Over the course of my doctorate, I have come to see these as aspects of the same process if individuals are understood as social through and through (Mead 1934).

As a researcher, however, I increasingly tried to stay with these disturbing experiences as a way of confronting the limitations of my interpretive web. Though this was often challenging, I hoped to find new ways of thinking about how I work that might change what I felt able to do, and be of interest to others. It is these experiences that I seemed to be writing about more and more explicitly as my research progressed. In my earlier projects, I found that recourse to metatheory alleviated some of the anxiety I was experiencing as a result of my research; and over time, the question about what we are doing when we are engaging with or avoiding these anxiety-provoking occasions, when our expectations of the world fail to match what actually happens, became a second preoccupying theme.

I now see these two main themes as a single emergent question that has animated my research:
In the context of an essential uncertainty about social life, how might researching disturbing breakdowns in everyday practice be a process of moral development?

My thesis seeks to respond to this research question using ideas from pragmatic philosophy, process sociology, the complexity sciences, psychoanalysis and group analysis, which taken together help us to understand human interaction as complex responsive processes (Stacey 2003, 2009, 2012; Stacey and Mowles 2016). This is the perspective taken up by the DMan research community and informs its research method. In my project work, I found experiences where breakdowns involved shame to be particularly rich and so this became a further focus for my research.

Thesis structure

After this introduction, this thesis has the following structure:

- **Chapter 2: My research projects.** This section contains the four research projects I have undertaken over the course of the doctorate programme.

- **Chapter 3: Synopsis of my research.** In this section, I reflect on my project work, drawing out the emergence of my research question and the key arguments I am making.

- **Chapter 4: The DMan method.** My method section sets out the approach to research undertaken by students on the DMan programme, and I also consider research ethics here.

- **Chapter 5: The contributions of this thesis.** In the final section, I articulate my contribution to theory and practice, explain how I am planning to share my work, and suggest areas for further research.

- **References.** I have listed all sources cited in my thesis, and a small number of other sources that I have found helpful in my research. **NB.** Where I cross-refer to my projects throughout my thesis, these are denoted as 'P[project number]: [page in this document]', e.g. P3: 60.

For orientation, however, I will now provide a very short overview of the DMan research method, and explain my occupational context as I now understand it, to situate my project work.

Outline of the DMan research method

The DMan research degree is a professional doctorate, equivalent to a traditional PhD. All students undertaking the DMan use the same research method, which is a type of qualitative inquiry in which researchers explore puzzling aspects of their own work through a series of four projects and a synopsis that, together, comprise a doctoral thesis. Students are also obliged to participate in the DMan research community, which involves attending four weekend residentials per academic year, and being part of a learning set of up to four researchers and a supervisor who read and comment on each other's work.

Through their projects and subsequent analyses, DMan students seek to identify new contributions to theory and professional practice. With Alvesson and Kärreman, I see this as aiming to draw attention to 'a new angle, a new connection which breaks with established knowledge and ideas and … challenges established assumptions' (2011: 49) that may be relevant to their professional communities and, by the end of the programme, of interest to the organisational research community more widely. I will explore the DMan method in detail in Chapter 4, and in particular explain how I see its design as taking up some of the key ideas involved in understanding human interaction as complex responsive processes (Stacey and Griffin 2005; Mowles 2017a, 2017b).

Occupational context

Over the two years during which I have undertaken my project work, I have been working for an arm's-length government agency in the UK that oversees the health and care sector. National bodies have been part of the architecture of the health and care sector since health and care services were nationalised in the 1940s, but the extent to which they intervene in the organisations providing and commissioning care has varied over time. Currently, performance against key care standards in the sector is declining, which is generally attributed to rising demand from an ageing population with multiple co-morbidities; workforce shortages; and the ongoing effects of economic austerity following the financial crisis of 2008 (e.g. NHS England 2015, 2019). As a result, national bodies are in a particularly interventional phase, regularly sending their teams out to help struggling front-line organisations; while this pooling and deployment of experts may seem an appropriate response to dealing with some of the sector's more intransigent problems, and promoting self-reliance among those front-line organisations, paradoxically, it could also be seen as a mechanism by which the need for overseers and external experts is perpetuated, and perhaps strengthened.

My organisation is ostensibly a traditional bureaucracy, formally working according to calculable rules that define how the organisation's duties are discharged through the functional division of labour (Weber et al 1958; Townley 2008; Bauman 1989). As I explore in my projects, the ideologies of new public management (e.g. Hood 1991), experts as authority figures, and mechanical conceptions of cause and effect appear to be produced and reproduced through many of our organisational practices – from our internal schemes of delegation, committee structures and decision-making processes to the annual strategic planning rounds and operational approaches used for sector oversight.

Despite the continuing decline in service performance, these ways of thinking seem to prevail. Indeed, the response to noticing deterioration seems to be to do more of the same rather than review the validity of long-held assumptions. For example, despite workforce planning having gone on for decades, a recent parliamentary review's proposed solution to current shortages in key staff groups was simply more and better planning (Parliament, House of Lords 2017). Clearly, planning is important; but, as I explore in Project 2, perhaps there is a different way of thinking about what people are doing when they are planning, that may lead to different approaches. I wonder if these kinds of responses, which reflect the ideals of strategic choice theory (Child 1972), arise because reconsidering some of the key assumptions about how health and care workforce planning is conducted, as an instance of wider assumptions about how to provide effective services, might mean reconstructing identities and power relations across all aspects of the health and care system.

Given that many of the senior leaders within the sector have spent most of their careers in this mode of working, one can imagine that a different kind of approach may be too anxiety provoking to contemplate, leading to the reproduction of existing practices.

At the same time, the organisations we oversee are becoming more fluid, with public-sector mergers and joint ventures appearing increasingly frequently as responses to a new focus on integrating care services (e.g. NHS England 2015, 2019) and system leadership (e.g. Timmins 2015). The landscape of national oversight bodies is also evolving in response; and for me and many of my colleagues, the next reorganisation is always either on the horizon or anticipated soon. We are therefore constantly pre-emptively building and rebuilding relationships and explaining why we are doing the things we are doing. On the one hand, this is no bad thing because we are forced to make sure that our taxpayer-funded activities are responding to the changing needs of the sector. Perhaps as a result, we tend to talk about our primary motivations as being related to doing work we think is important; as I describe in Project 3, this is also a deeply socialised public-sector norm (e.g. Committee on Standards in Public Life 1995; Perry 1996; Feldheim 2007) that is consciously and unconsciously perpetuated.

On the other hand, riding the waves of change in organisational priorities and key stakeholders, membership of the leadership team and our own teams has consequences. Perhaps in response to feeling cast as dispensable or interchangeable bureaucratic functionaries (Bauman 1989), there is a noticeable degree of psychological withdrawal among my colleagues. I see this manifest as, for example, an air of cynicism about reassurances given by our most senior leaders about the value of the latest reorganisation, how it will lead to better service outcomes, and so on. While there is undoubtedly a rational basis for the changes that are made, it is perhaps not surprising that people find ways to cope with being obliged to bear the anxiety that comes with the uncertainty of working in this sort of environment (Marris 1996). This may be through keeping our heads down; or making new alliances in the organisation according to who is assumed to be in the frame for senior roles; or by seeking new jobs.

Perhaps as an example of a wider pattern in my experience of avoiding some of the emotional volatility that comes with engaging with more existential concerns, my response in the last two years has been largely to focus intensely on my work; this has two main components. One involves developing national policies around leadership and governance for the organisations we oversee, and working on projects and programmes that build capability in these areas. In the other, I am an internal OD consultant. This generally involves working with teams on development, running action learning sets, designing and facilitating away days or workshops, and helping managers think

through the design and execution of their projects. I sometimes work with the central OD team on the development plan for the whole of the organisation; in my first year on the DMan, I led a year-long project on culture and leadership development.

Though I have been doing this kind of work for nearly three years, I still feel relatively new to OD, and some of what I write about in my thesis reflects the conflicts I have encountered in gaining confidence as an OD practitioner. This has involved learning about the theory of OD by reading the contemporary literature (e.g. Jones and Brazzel 2006; Cheung-Judge and Holbeche 2015; Bushe and Marshak 2015) and through practical experimentation with facilitation techniques and ideas. It is the internal OD aspects of my role that I have used as the basis for my research projects, but I do not see my conclusions as limited to OD practice specifically: as I will describe, I think my arguments are generalisable to any aspect of practice, in organisations and beyond.

Beyond these aspects of my role, I am often called on to help with work outside either of my formal remits, which is partly because I bring a set of skills from my background as a project and strategy consultant that are not shared by many others in the organisation. I think it is also because of the alternative perspectives I have started to provide on how we are working, based on my DMan research – perhaps what people see and call upon is my tendency to notice different things about what might be going on, and to speak up in ways that they do not seem able to themselves, much as we do at the DMan residential weekends (described in Chapter 4). In some ways, I liken my role to that of corporate jester (Welsford 1935; Riveness 2006; Otto 2007; Firth and Leigh 2012), occasional *parrhesiastes* or speaker of truth to power (Foucault and Pearson 2001), or *bricoleur* (Simon 2015). I mention this because a role like this being possible in my organisation alludes to some of the informal ways in which we work, which perhaps conflict with the aspirational formal bureaucratic (and I think rather impersonal) structures I described above. Indeed, I see many of my colleagues working in similar ways, and this is arguably part of a more general pattern of organisational life (Scott 1990; Jackall 2009).

This is the context in which my project work has been undertaken. As a summary, it reflects how I have come to see how my organisation through my project work, which the next chapter now presents. These four projects are included as they were written as I progressed through the DMan programme, and so may seem a little raw or unsophisticated, particularly in the early stages as I was trying to understand some of the ideas involved in the complex responsive processes perspective.

As stipulated in my Ethics Committee submission, all names and some contextual features of specific events have been pseudonymised to protect the identities of the people I describe.

2. My research projects

PROJECT 1:

Engaging and distancing as processes of managing my sense of self

Introduction

In this project, I try to give an account of my professional development, focussing in particular on the ways of thinking that have come to inform how I work. In developing my argument through research and conversation with my learning set, two main themes have emerged; I will cover these briefly in this introduction, and then explore them in more detail. I end the project with some reflections on how doing this work has itself been developmental, and then indicate the areas of inquiry that I would like to pursue in Project 2.

The first dominant theme arises from noticing that I appear to try to manage my emotional states through repeating patterns of engagement and distancing from my environment, both within and between the situations in which I find myself. At times, these dynamics have been volatile and accompanied by emotional instability, but they are becoming less extreme as I now find myself distancing *in order to* engage. Further, I appear to oscillate between two main types of activity: socially motivated work, and academia. For me, the former relates to ideals of doing something worthwhile – I am drawn to connecting with others around social purpose, working in teams to get things done and making a difference to people's lives. Charles Taylor might describe this as a romantic expressivist application to higher meaning and purpose (Taylor 1990: 495ff). This is a process of engaging that leads to a sense of interdependence with others, but also the entanglement in everyday politics and conflicts of power that go alongside being in groups. Whenever I have found myself unwilling to engage with these politics or power dynamics, or when they cause me unhappiness or distress, I have sought to distance myself from them. I have always felt more comfortable in the academic world, with its emphasis on abstract hypotheses; perhaps speaking to Taylor's idea of a naturalism of disengaged reason (ibid), I feel more autonomous, more in control of my context and perhaps therefore of my emotions.

The second theme is about how I establish and manage my own credibility in any of these contexts. I think I am dealing with the legacy of an apparently deep-rooted assumption that knowledge is somehow causally linked to success, however that is measured in the context. So, to be recognised as someone to be taken seriously, by myself and by others, I have felt the need to be able to demonstrate factual knowledge of the relevant information to earn my right to contribute. While

this assumption has been challenged a number of times over the years, it has only been through writing this project that I have been able to bring it into critical focus.

There has been a lot to write about in relation to these themes, and initially the process of choosing what to include was difficult – not least because I was acutely aware that our understanding of the past is constantly being reconstrued based on our understanding of the present with a view to our hopes for the future (e.g. Stacey and Mowles 2016: 331). What I included would therefore reflect my ideology and assumptions too, and so I needed a way to explain how I would make these choices, or risk being trapped in an unreflective loop.

In *Truth and Method* (1975: 364), Gadamer describes 'insight' as arising when our expectations are confronted by something that thwarts them; this leads to learning, which (following Aeschylus) often involves suffering (ibid: 365). When writing the earlier drafts of this project, I found that my most interesting experiences seemed to be where the factors described above – involvement and distance, establishing and maintaining credibility – come into conflict, resulting in some degree of emotional distress. Following Gadamer, I imagined that new insights may emerge from exploring and reflecting upon these experiences; and, through repeated iterations of my narrative, this did happen. Accounts of these experiences therefore form the greater part of the project; however, I start with an attempt to explain why academia has played such a prominent role in my development.

Establishing the importance of learning

When I was a child, I remember being scolded by my mother for stepping on books: this showed great disrespect to Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of knowledge and wisdom. Like many Indian families, we held learning in high regard – primarily as a means to getting a good and (importantly) well-paid job. The stories in our immigrant community were all about achieving more than your parents by doing well at school, working hard in your job, and earning lots of money so that you could acquire material goods as a tangible display of status. Knowledge and wealth went hand in hand, and extended family members of my generation were all encouraged to go to university: not just to realise a dream that would have been beyond the reach of our parents, but also to enhance our earning potential.

Conversations at family gatherings would centre on expensive cars, bigger houses and the latest gadgets, all of which I found terribly boring. However, unlike my family, I appeared to see learning and education as intrinsically important, not just as a means to an end – perhaps because studying helped me to cope with being severely asthmatic and therefore unable to participate in things that

others my age might have been doing instead of schoolwork. Being academically bright and easy to get along with, I was identified early on as 'the clever one' in my extended family – the one who would 'go far' and so on.

This confidence in me was borne out by the good grades I achieved throughout my school years with minimal effort; I read voraciously, and was always slightly bemused by those around me who weren't interested in learning or found school difficult. The head of my school year group insisted that I try for a place at Oxford to read mathematics – an option that I had never considered before perhaps because going to 'Oxbridge' had never been something that I thought was for people like me: however clever I might be, these universities were never mentioned in my family, except as a mysterious place where people we didn't know went. My head of year's suggestion therefore opened my eyes to new possibilities – a first widening of my horizons – but as soon as I met the other applicants during the interview process, I realised that my grasp of higher mathematics was less advanced than theirs and that my schooling had been very different. Perhaps reflecting a belief in absolute, objective and logical criteria for the way the world worked that was coherent with the science I was studying at school, not to mention the assumed causal link I made between knowledge and success, I had no high hopes of gaining a place. So I was astonished to find myself offered one, and spent that summer in excited anticipation of going up to Oxford.

Over the summer, I started reading more widely and was amazed at how little of the world I had come across. Laclos' *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* marked a particular turning point: surprised to find such fresh and relevant insights into human nature in a book written over two centuries ago, I began to seek out different kinds of fiction to see what else I could learn. I also started reading simple books about philosophy, and quickly regretted my choice of degree: I felt trapped by the impending world of cold, abstract mathematics and was curious about how philosophy and literature could impart new ways of thinking. In my first week of arriving at Oxford, the senior tutor at my college agreed to let me change school to jointly study mathematics and philosophy, which was lucky as in the end as I turned out to be rather good at philosophy and rather bad at mathematics.

My first few weeks at Oxford presented some intellectually formative moments. I was in awe of all the history around me and acutely aware of feeling out of place; perhaps this was to be expected, given my background – no one I knew had ever been to Oxford or Cambridge; what was I doing there? Had there been some mistake? Not knowing the rules of how to be a student at Oxford, but open to new experiences, I thought I would stick to what I was good at – the work.

However, my first philosophy tutorial essay, on the topic of Cartesian dualism, presented a problem: I had not written an essay for some years. Feeling a little out of my depth, I sought the advice of an

older student who suggested that consulting the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Blackburn 1994) was a good place to start. Following his advice, I was delighted to find a solid textbook to rely on – as I had so many times at school, where non-fiction (mainly science) books would describe a stable, regular, predictable reality that could be understood objectively. The problem arose when I went to the recommended reading list for the essay – a further five books to digest: I expected these to simply expand upon the *Dictionary* definitions in greater detail, so that I could then summarise it all in my own words. Yet, to my surprise, each book offered a completely different interpretation of Descartes and the mind/body problem. I wondered how on earth I would be able to make coherent sense of them: if these revered thinkers couldn't agree on a solution, what chance did I have?

My application of a correspondence theory of truth – which, broadly, assesses the validity of propositions by checking them against objective facts – to things that were far more abstract wasn't working; I was being confronted with the possibility that my assumptions about the fixed nature of the world were wrong. I felt unprepared and fraudulent about being at Oxford, but decided to at least try to write the kind of essay I thought was being asked of me. In my first few tutorials, I withheld my own opinions in favour of reiterating the views I had read. I was a little uncomfortable with the approach my tutors took, which felt exploratory rather than didactic. Over those first few weeks, it gradually dawned on me that this was the true nature of philosophy (not just studying it): rather than finding 'the correct answer', I was required to arrive at my own view through critical appraisal of multiple viewpoints. But this concept was so new to me that I didn't know how to do it.

One day, discussing some aspect of metaphysics in a tutorial with my philosophy tutor, an elderly don, I offered a tentative suggestion that was initially met with silence; but after a few moments of reflection, he nodded, 'Ah, I hadn't really thought of that before – yes, I suppose you could look at in that way'. I was stunned to be taken so seriously by someone who had been teaching philosophy for far longer than I'd been alive. And here was perhaps a Gadamerian insight: my assumptions about the correlations between knowledge and success were unravelling, and with them the constraints that these assumptions had placed on my perception of my capabilities. The possibilities that this presented were hugely exciting. This interaction changed me: I suddenly felt bolder and more self-assured about voicing my own ideas, instead of assuming them to be inadequate. The experience had challenged my expectations, but in a way that quietened some of my self-doubt and reinforced the self-image I had held before university. I was coming to understand the importance of something a tutor in one of our early meetings had said: we were at Oxford to learn how to be independent learners, not to recite facts – and this meant being curious about the questions you *couldn't* answer, rather than simply reiterating what you already knew. Learning was therefore essentially wrapped up in overcoming the unknown.

Building on the work of George Kelly, Mildred McCoy (1977) analyses the quality of emotions as linked to the nature and extent of the challenge to one's personal construct system. Experiences that affirm or validate some part of one's structure result in positive emotions (e.g. love, happiness or self-confidence), whereas those that challenge or invalidate one's structure result in negative emotions (e.g. sadness, anxiety or anger). Taking 'structure' in these terms to mean the entrenched patterns of one's behaviour, the enhanced self-confidence I felt as a result of this experience could be explained as an 'awareness of the goodness of fit of the self in one's core role structure' (ibid: 121). And the effect has persisted: in many jobs since, I have found venturing into new areas of work with a tentative confidence in myself far more satisfying and professionally developmental, despite the associated uncertainty and anxiety, than doing the things I already know how to do. As a result, I have sought these opportunities, often telling my managers 'I have no idea how to do this, but if you think I'm capable of it I'll give it a go'.

Alongside the kinds of experiences I have just described, some of the ideas I studied at university have also stayed with me. Nietzsche's perspectivism, calling for intellectual honesty and denying objective moral truth, was particularly compelling and personally liberating. I found in the story of Zarathustra and the death of god (Nietzsche 1883) that I could start to explain some of the ways in which I felt my outlook was changing – I was starting to become much more circumspect, and (perhaps also partly because I was training to be a peer counsellor at the time) I felt I could relate to the perspectives of others in ways that I found my peers either not obviously able to or not interested in considering. Nietzsche's notion of the 'philosophers of tomorrow' (ibid) inspired me to find my own way rather than seeking to fit in, and reassured me that non-conformity was potentially generative.

I also came across Plato's allegory of the cave[1] (*Republic* 514a-515a), which also resonated: I took comfort in feeling that, through my more open outlook, I was gradually turning away from the shadows that others saw as reality, towards the intensifying light of the Sun, which in Plato's analogy is the only means by which reality (the Forms) can be known. For me, however, what was being illuminated was that reality, rather than being the kinds of abstractions Plato described, was perhaps only a series of interconnected, context-dependent perspectives, strung together for this or that

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[1] Plato allegorises the process of philosophical education as a physical journey of prisoners out of a cave. First, the prisoners are shackled to look only at a wall deep within the cave, convinced that the shadows of objects carried in front a fire behind them are real: only false statements can be made about these shadows because they are the objects of ignorance. The prisoners can imagine nothing other than what they can see until they are set free of their bonds, and turn to see the objects that are casting the shadows being carried in front of the fire – these objects are of the visible or material world and are the objects of belief and opinion. Those objects are then taken to be real until the prisoners are dragged from the cave and see the forms – these are of the intelligible world and are the objects of knowledge. The forms are illuminated by the sun, which is the highest form (or form of the good) that all other forms rely on for their perfection.

reason through narratives based on ideology (White 1975). I can see this as a move towards a coherence theory of truth, which relocates the problem of being able to know things from being in the world to being manifest in social interaction – or, as Nietzsche put it, 'One is always wrong, but with two, truth begins – one cannot prove his case, but two are irrefutable' (1882: §260).

Finding meaning in work

I left university with a good degree and a lack of clear direction about what to do next. Unlike many of the graduates in my year, who went immediately into to well-paid jobs in banking or law, most of my friends were considering further study towards careers in academia. I explored taking a Master's degree in art history, mainly because I'd studied aesthetics and thought it might be an interesting PhD topic; but, having been a student since the age of 5, I was reluctant to continue in academia without a break and, in any case, had insufficient funds for further study at that point. By chance, knowing that I was looking for something flexible and relatively light that would enable me to do other things during my year out of academia, a friend mentioned that medical administration was the best-paid temping available in London at the time. So, I ended up taking on temporary contracts in the National Health Service (NHS) to earn some money to fund whatever I might end up doing, and looked forward to a relatively relaxed year.

Initially, the work largely involved typing clinic letters from doctors' audio dictations and arranging appointments for patients. In many ways, the work was extremely tedious, but there was something fascinating about glimpsing the intricacies of these people's lives through fragments described by this orthopaedic surgeon or that neurologist in a letter, or as I spoke with them on the telephone. I found, perhaps for the first time, being able to make small, tangible differences to people's lives was hugely satisfying and I enjoyed the everyday challenges of trying to make people's experiences of getting what they needed as simple as possible for them, often when they had been struggling for some time.

Theory was still important to me and I found myself in social situations defending a quite pure relativist position – at least in relation to morality, values and beliefs. I would argue heatedly with friends about why none of us could be objectively right about these kinds of things and how little justification we had for criticising the practices of other cultures as we were approaching the world from a Western rationalist, mono-naturalist position that didn't allow for any other interpretations. I tried to be clear that I wasn't advocating *not* making moral judgements about this or that particular cultural practice, but that all such judgements should to be acknowledged as socially conditioned. Perhaps arrogantly, I thought I was trying to turn my friends away from the shadows in Plato's cave,

so that they too could start seeing the non-material world for what I felt it to be – essentially plural, relative and socially constructed. In many ways, however, these were intellectual problems – not so much about the tangible world, but more about my ability to argue a point; they made little difference to what I found myself doing each day – which was mainly being rather bored.

To deal with this, as I moved from department to department and from one hospital to another, I would set myself little challenges – how fast could I type up a set of clinic letters? How quickly could I acquire the lexicon of a particular medical speciality? The people I worked with most days were long-serving medical secretaries who found me relatively easy to work with, but in general probably wondered why I was there. I occasionally came across people like myself who were earning money to finance other things (opera singers, trainee therapists, medical students) and we would see each other in different hospitals in London as we all moved around following the work that came up. Over time, I found friends, many of whom I still have now; what I think brought us together was a mutual recognition of being similarly educated, on the fringes of the organisations in which we found ourselves, and seeing the work as a means to achieving other things rather than doing what we really wanted to do. Especially when we ended up working in the same hospitals for longer periods, we deliberately set ourselves apart from the permanent administrative staff, whom we talked about as unambitious for staying in roles that we would only entertain on a temporary basis, and inefficient or lazy for not being able to cope with the workload that had occasioned our temporary positions.

Occasionally, this could play out quite overtly. During one contract, I was working in an administrative role in a hospital and shared an office with three older women who had been in their jobs for a long time. I noticed that they complained bitterly about having so much typing to do, and so many phone calls to deal with; but from what I could see, they spent most of their time chatting and going out to smoke cigarettes. Over time, I became increasingly indignant about their wasting time (and therefore the public money spent on their salaries) and found indirect ways to call this out. For example, on one occasion, another temporary member of the team and I conspired to completely clear one of our permanent colleagues' work while she was on holiday for a few days. We were amused to observe the excuses the other two secretaries made to explain why their returning colleague was so busy, not to mention the returning secretary's resentment at finding her work already done. Thinking about the group's dynamics, our actions were undermining the existing paradigm and so not surprisingly were taken as an attack – I wonder to what extent the permanent staff would have acted to restore the power balance if my friend and I hadn't been leaving to do other things.

In general, however, this opposition played out much less overtly; for example, we would socialise with each other rather than the permanent members of staff. We talked about how good it was to be working in the NHS and making a difference to people's lives (a motive no doubt shared by our permanent colleagues), suppressing the acknowledgement that we needed these jobs to maintain the lifestyles we wanted, and that such opportunities could only have arisen through the inefficiency we disparaged in others (which was only sometimes warranted). In this way, our work identities were created and sustained through this opposition. Conformity and resistance to conformity have been analysed as being 'fundamentally linked to the image of oneself that one wishes to present to others (and undoubtedly also to oneself)' (Codol 1984: 317); a positive image (and self-image) for all of us relied on resisting and differentiation. This may be an early example of me trying to have some control over my sense of who I was by managing my context.

As the year progressed, I secured a place at University College London on a combined Master's programme in art history and critical theory. The programme took a year, during which – in addition to learning about Dutch and Italian painting and sculpture – I came across the work of people like Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and Gilles Deleuze. Their thinking fell outside the analytical school in which I had been trained, and I found their emphasis on the social action that results from philosophical thought, as well as clear lines of sight back to Nietzsche, very compelling. These authors weren't merely thinking about abstract problems, but instead were engaging with how societies worked and what people should do as a result of understanding more about what they found to be going on. I can now see a link back to my lack of enthusiasm for mathematics as the subject of my degree – perhaps I was inclined towards more socially motivated or practical endeavours, and these authors were helping me to start to articulate this.

I found no problem entering this world, which seemed familiar: I had the credentials to give me confidence in my abilities, and I was happy to contribute my thoughts. I learnt a great deal – in particular, I enjoyed working on the question of the incommensurability of competing critical theories. In exploring this topic, I came across Paul Feyerabend, and his argument that a utilitarian pluralistic attitude could resolve the tension arising from the (in his opinion misguided) quest of a metatheory with which to unify other theories, and the apparent social or scientific value of praxis (e.g. Feyerabend 1987). These ideas resonated strongly with me, and I would now characterise this as the start of a shift in my thinking towards a more pragmatic perspectivism.

I was deeply engaged in my work, and feeling intellectually 'at home' led to an urge to be playful. Building on the encouragement towards social action I was receiving from dead philosophers, and sensing that there was perhaps more to life than academia for its own sake, I took the opportunity

to see how far I could push the boundaries of what I was being asked to do in my papers. Many of the continental authors I was reading made clear (though often polemically) that scholarly writing itself was a tool of the academic hegemony that perpetuated power relations (e.g. Cixous et al 1976). So, I thought I too should try to subvert the establishment, and started making potentially controversial stylistic choices for some of my papers. For example, I experimented with structuring my papers to make my points polemically or sub-textually rather than directly. While I wasn't marked down for these subversions, I was eventually warned by one of my tutors to be careful: though he was supportive of what I was doing, he was having trouble defending it to his colleagues. It is perhaps understandable that the faculty would be naturally inclined to perpetuate more traditional academic approaches, as their power to some extent derived from being the arbiters of what was recognised as scholarly writing. If I acknowledged this as I went on to complete my degree, it did not dissuade me from continuing to tread a fine line at the boundary of the establishment in which I had been trained. On one side of this boundary was a reluctant submission to the dominant discourse, and on the other, a subversive, reflexive and exciting flirtation with the unknown. I can now connect this to the advice I received from the tutor at Oxford about doing the questions you couldn't answer, which I now interpret as needing to feel outside one's comfort zone in order to learn.

Having to choose a career

Re-entering the world of work after my Master's was meant to be temporary. I found myself working at a children's hospital, again on a short-term contract, while I applied for PhD programmes in continental philosophy schools. I wanted to write about Nietzsche, perspectivism and aesthetics and was offered a place to study part time at the University of Warwick the following year. I therefore set about preparing to try to survive in London as a remote, part-time student.

My job at the hospital was to coordinate the work of a small, super-specialist surgical unit. Although my place in the hierarchy was fairly junior, my previous experience gave me confidence in my abilities; besides, based on what I'd seen others doing in similar roles, I assumed it couldn't be particularly difficult. My role was to make sure that the unit ran efficiently, and that patients received their appointments and operations to meet NHS waiting-time targets. In practice, this usually meant working with people across the hospital to make sure that the correct multidisciplinary clinical teams, accommodation, and any requisite equipment were arranged for operations. I also managed a small team of administrative staff, most of whom were also on temporary contracts.

I was good at my job, contributed enthusiastically, and soon found ways to make our lives easier. I quickly became a valued member of the team, while also building an extensive network across the hospital. This made it easy to get things done, often in the face of considerable bureaucracy – my humble position in the hospital meant that I had little authority, so I worked largely through negotiating with those whose help we needed. I often relied on favours and goodwill to get things done, and as a team this meant that we were able to deal with most things that came our way even when these were, in retrospect, rather extraordinary.

For example, late one Friday afternoon, after most of my colleagues had left, I received a phone call from the care team of a baby who was due to have simultaneous major operations involving multiple surgical teams on the Monday morning. Another urgent case was scheduled for the following Monday, for a boy whose dissolving jawbone needed to be removed to save his life. The team were calling to say that the baby's lung had collapsed and that he wouldn't be able to have surgery on Monday after all. At first, my heart sank as months of work fell apart; then I was overwhelmed by a sense of panic about what to do. I telephoned the lead surgeon, and we decided to try to swap the operations of the baby and the boy. After a blur of phone calls with the families, the different sets of surgeons, and various external equipment suppliers, the theatre teams confirmed at about 7pm that everything was ready. Somehow, in just under two hours, we had done it! I remember being completely exhausted, bewildered by what had just happened, but elated that we'd been able to do this for the children whose lives were at stake. The following week, as accounts emerged of the Friday evening heroics, I was thanked by my managers and the team, which was also very satisfying – particularly when it came from the surgeons. Such experiences forged strong relationships in our team, and I was happy to be identified with them. Revisiting this now, it could be explained as me again creating a self-image that aligned with my expectations of myself.

Most of the time during this period, I felt quite settled. Sometimes I felt a little bored, but this was compensated by the immensely satisfying experiences of helping anxious families feel that someone was looking out for their interests, or seeing operations that were months in planning going smoothly. I enjoyed receiving praise for doing my job well, and at this point I became conscious that recognition from the surgeons meant much more than it did from my management colleagues – perhaps because I was proving something to myself about being able to pass muster with those I saw engaged in real, meaningful work.

Some months after I joined the hospital, one of my directors, based on what she knew of my work, suggested that I might want to apply for the NHS Graduate Management Training Scheme. I didn't know about the Scheme and hadn't considered alternatives to further study until this point, but also

had a growing sense that doing things that were somehow important or useful in the world meant something to me. Thinking back to the authors cited above, the idea of social action being the end point of philosophical thought was becoming increasingly preoccupying. I had a growing doubt that what the academic world required of me wouldn't be satisfying in the way that I was finding the world of work, which often involved making moral choices and therefore opportunities to act according to my personal ethics. I kept an open mind and applied for the Scheme.

At this point, I spent a great deal of time considering, alone and with others, what I would do should the opportunity arise to move away from academia. I could now characterise this as a struggle over what I thought was a binary choice: an academic life, where I could be like my friends from Oxford and continue the path I had embarked upon; or a step into an unknown that I had only glimpsed briefly during my work in the NHS, but found emotionally fulfilling. Did I want to be seen, or indeed see myself, as someone writing about being in the world, or someone living his philosophy through his actions?

I chose to join the Scheme and pursue a career in the NHS, and found much by way of affirmation of my choice in terms of the satisfaction I gained from my work. While undertaking a Master's degree in healthcare management and leadership, much of which was interesting but not particularly difficult, I managed an emergency department, worked for a national commissioning organisation, and had a policy role in an ambulance service. These were all rewarding experiences in one way or another, but by far the most influential aspect of the Scheme for me was being part of a learning set: we would meet for a whole day, every two months or so, focussing on reflective practice and personal development. In the mornings, we would explore particular topics, or discuss the results of various personality profiling tools; in the afternoons, we participated in action learning. I gained many insights at the time, although perhaps not the ones that I would now take.

I found the various personality profiles interesting, but saw them rather like horoscopes – sometimes helpful, sometimes not, but all ways of describing ourselves using a particular set of linguistic shortcuts that made it easier to be confident that what we were saying was being interpreted as we intended it to be. I remember being particularly taken with the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator (Myers et al 1998), which highlighted some of my less helpful patterns of behaviour that I was then better able to spot and manage in the workplace.

The action learning sessions were usually comfortable experiences for me – I was happy to participate in the problem-sharing activities, although don't remember finding them particularly revelatory. I put this down to having had previous experience of working in the environments that were being described, and therefore being a credible contributor compared to my colleagues, most

of whom had come to the Scheme directly from undergraduate study. The insights about our group's dynamics were much more interesting. In particular, the huge lack of congruence between how we each interpreted what each other said and behaved became clear over time as we got to know each other better. For example, I recall one colleague in particular talking about how she had only felt able to share anything remotely personal after three or four learning set meetings – I and a few others in our group had interpreted this lack of confidence as a lack of interest and found her new contribution a powerful demonstration of how easy it was to misunderstand each other at work.

Reflecting on both of these activities now, I am struck by how, despite my theoretical standpoint around social constructionism and perspectivism, I hadn't meaningfully connected the theory I had studied to my daily practice, or questioned the underlying assumptions with which we were working. For example, in the learning set I describe, I happily assumed a sender–receiver model of communication (Shannon et al 1949) where it is possible to transmit information that may or may not be interpreted correctly, rather than seeing meaning as arising in the interaction itself (e.g. Barthes and Heath 1977; Mead 1934). Further, in engaging with the personality profiles, I assumed that there was a stable reality that could be assessed and reported upon and paid no attention to the way in which discussing the results of these various profiles changed us individually and as a group through each interaction (e.g. Barthes and Heath 1977; Elias 1978).

Towards the end of my time on the Scheme, one of the directors at work became my mentor. At that time, she was in her first year of the Doctor of Management (DMan) programme at the University of Hertfordshire, and we often talked about her studies. As a result of our discussions, I started to explore the literature on complex responsive processes in relation to work I was doing on the final project for my Master's – a reflective narrative on my development over my time on the Scheme.

I attended the Complexity and Management Centre's conference in 2008 and was intrigued to find myself with people who saw the world completely differently than most of my colleagues to date. I remember the tacit banning of the word 'system' and the large group meetings each day. So much of what was discussed resonated with me, and I thought at that stage that I might want to pursue the DMan myself at some point. The conference came shortly before I was due to submit my reflective narrative, and I ended up writing a section on my interpretation of what taking a complex responsive processes perspective meant. This included taking our actual experiences seriously rather than relying on abstractions and reifications to make sense of our working lives; seeing meaning as continuously emerging through interaction, rather than something that can simply be conveyed from one person to another; and seeing leadership in terms of influence that is built through the

ability to interpret, shape and re-shape the collective reality in a way that engages and inspires others rather than simply being about positions in an organisational chart.

As I re-read my narrative from 2008, I am struck by how enduring the principles I articulated at that point have been for me. I have had at least four more jobs – as a commissioner of urgent care services in the NHS, as a consultant to the NHS in a boutique healthcare consultancy (which comprised multiple assignments over a period of just over four years), as a senior manager in a commissioning group, and now as an adviser in one of the national health and care oversight bodies. In most of these I have found expressions of the central themes of uncertainty in organisational life in some form, though they have been more or less prominent at different times. Much of this work has been unremarkable from a Gadamerian insight perspective, but there are two episodes that are worth recounting as they illustrate quite clearly how the dynamics of engaging and distancing are linked to my emotional states, this being one of the dominant patterns that undertaking this project has illuminated.

Changing contexts (1): engagement, crisis, escape

In one of my healthcare consulting assignments, I was supporting a hospital director to set up a new function within his organisation. Our stated purpose was exciting – to provide flexible support to a number of the hospital's departments in order to increase the speed and scale of transformational projects, many of which were already underway. Initially, I had two other colleagues, who were also consultants, and we quickly became the director's trusted aides. I think none of us were completely clear about what we were supposed to be doing, and so the way we worked in the early days of the assignment, although always purposeful, sometimes felt reactive and haphazard. We also found that our attempts to be helpful were often met with resistance from the department teams we were meant to be supporting; they seemed to see us as interfering with their autonomy, and as a symbol of didactic central control.

The power dynamics I was directly involved in, at one level, were relatively simple: my consultant colleagues and I were contracted capacity that the director could control, and we took on programmes of work as he directed. At another level, our relationships were very complicated: the director could be quite unpredictable, treating us sometimes as his employees and sometimes as part of an 'inner circle'. He was always very busy and so often delegated work to us, and we took his authority with us to meetings with senior stakeholders as a matter of course. This all gave us status and influence in the organisation that would have been difficult to get otherwise.

As the team expanded over time, in addition to the programmes we were running ourselves, the more important part of our role became informally inducting people to the rules we found ourselves working to, ostensibly to make their lives a bit easier. And we seemed to be able to do this in a way that simultaneously perpetuated the exclusivity of the inner circle quite adeptly, though we wouldn't have described it in that way at the time. For example, when a new colleague joined our senior team, we tried to create a sense of unity with him to help us all withstand the demands of our work. We did this through sharing stories of good and bad experiences, what appeared to work, and so on. In one of our first meetings with the director, however, when our new colleague challenged how some of our work programmes were being run drawing on his own considerable experience, as the original team, we found ourselves obliged to side with our director. The atmosphere became very tense and after the meeting ended, rather than call out the tensions we had just experienced, we tried to explain them away, acting as though this was just part of how the team worked. Our new colleague appeared baffled by this attempt to discipline him, however gently, and after a few episodes like this, ended up leaving the team earlier than planned.

This pattern recurred. About a month into the assignment, we contracted another consultancy firm to undertake a significant and high-profile piece of work. Our team's and the director's personal credibility was therefore tied up in this contract and I was given responsibility for managing the work. For various reasons, things weren't going to plan and I found myself having both to show solidarity with my director in performance managing the project team, and at the same time sympathising with the consultants because I knew that much of what was happening was outside of their control. Speaking to these different attitudes, sometimes I found myself in meetings saying things that were deliberately open to multiple interpretations – something James Scott might describe as one of the ways in which the *hidden transcripts* (the narratives of the oppressed) can emerge in public (the domain of the oppressors) from the inherent tensions that arise from power differentials between the groups (Scott 1990). In the situation I am describing, the client–consultant relationship contained an analogous power differential: the *public transcript* was about the completion of a conceptually simple project that would demonstrate the value of the new department; the *hidden transcript* was more concerned with the messy politics of trying to work with the departments we were meant to be supporting, who in some cases seemed to be actively sabotaging the work. The consulting team was having to manage all of this in a way that maintained their own credibility, while also trying to complete the assignment with integrity.

Scott's analysis of the junctures where the hidden and public transcripts meet is a helpful lens through which I can understand what happened next. Scott suggests that these touch points can result in genuine transformation or annihilation of the transgressor and in the case I am describing,

attempts to challenge the public transcript were generally dismissed. For example, initial attempts by the consulting team to raise concerns were closed down with responses like 'but that's what we're paying you to manage', thereby disempowering them and perpetuating the view of our department as unhelpful. This effectively strengthened the hidden transcript and made things worse for us.

Internalising these kinds of conflict, I felt increasingly mentally torn as I was pulled in different directions. For example, on one particularly bad day I found myself reassuring my director that a report he was due to present a few hours later would be sent over by the consulting team in the next few minutes, and at the same time having no idea whether this was true or not. As the report continued to fail to materialise and everyone became increasingly anxious, the only thing I could think to do was telephone the consulting team every few minutes demanding the report and telling them how bad it was making them (and me) look, knowing full well that this was pointless and that they were doing their best. In the end, the report wasn't presented and I was sure that I was going to be dismissed from the secondment; however, surprisingly, the converse happened and the director seemed to want me to do even more. As these kinds of experiences went on for more than a month, I eventually found myself in a quite fragile emotional state from which I could see no way out. Having explained this as best as I could at the time to my manager, noting that I also needed to focus on some exams I was taking, it was eventually agreed that my involvement in the assignment would end.

This is probably the clearest example I can give of how my sense of self is highly context dependent and linked to my emotional state in a very immediate way. Finding myself in a position I could no longer endure, I forced a change in the environment that I felt was causing my emotional distress by (in this case almost literally) escaping to academia.

As I returned to work and new assignments, things settled down and I returned to a much more stable pattern of work. Despite everything going about as well as I could have hoped and being on course for a successful career as a consultant, over time I found myself becoming restless, feeling that I wasn't able to see things through and that I wasn't responsible for much that meant anything. I felt I was able to 'do' the kind of consulting work our firm tended to undertake, which was largely change management based on a combination of strategic choice theory (Child 1972) and Peter Senge's formulation of learning organisation theory (e.g. Senge 1990). While there was always more to learn about the content of what people wanted, and about people, the consulting cycle itself as we ran it had become mundane and I didn't feel that I was learning enough. Ultimately, this restlessness became unhelpful, manifesting as an increasing impatience with people and a growing sense of distance from the firm.

I tried to find ways to make the work more meaningful, but taking these kinds of feelings as an indication that it was time to move on, I found a new job working for an ex-colleague in a senior role in an NHS commissioning organisation. I left the consulting firm on a positive note, buoyed by my good reputation and a narrative about how, having spent a few years advising rather than delivering, I was going to find out what kind of leader and manager I could be.

Changing contexts (2): engagement, conflict, distancing

I joined the commissioning group as it entered a period of increasing pressure to progress a large-scale service reconfiguration strategy, which had been developed some two years earlier. The intention of this programme was to make the local NHS sustainable, based on a business case which, when printed and bound, sat two feet tall and, in many respects, had taken on the characteristics of a religious text: it was understood to contain all the answers, and could not be questioned. I was personally very motivated by the responsibility I was taking on for the team of 20 people I would be managing, but also for the local population for whom our commissioning group had responsibility. As I had previously worked with this organisation as a consultant, I expected that I would be able to just get on with the job; that I would pick up the good relationships I had previously enjoyed; and that I would be able to bring my wider knowledge and insight to move things on.

My first few months in the organisation went by quickly – there was lots to do based on my assessment of where the team was in terms of planning, working together, role clarity, capability, and so on. I quickly got my team onto my much stronger analytical footing, refreshed our programme management approach, facilitated some difficult meetings, and made some good connections across the organisation. I felt connected to the work in a way that I hadn't as a consultant and was fully on board with the changes that needed to happen with the service transformation strategy. I was making sense of the scale of what needed to be done so that we as a team could deliver it and I started to highlight my findings in meetings, which were largely well received.

I felt credible with the executive team, partly because I had worked closely with some of them previously, and I was keen to demonstrate this credibility despite suggestions from my peers that the tacit rules of working at our level in the organisation were to 'keep your head down and quietly get on with the work'. So, perhaps feeling that my previous track record gave me some kind of privileged position, I readily spoke up in meetings with what I thought were useful and insightful contributions. To my surprise, though in hindsight entirely consistent with the advice I had been given, my input was met with an adverse reaction from the executive team: one executive director

told my manager that I was speaking out of turn; in a meeting with another executive director, I was admonished for presenting an analysis of why our delivery targets didn't seem to make sense. At the time, I couldn't understand why I was being stifled: I saw myself as trying to do a good job with just intentions and logic on my side, drawing attention to things that I and others knew to be wrong.

These turns of events felt unpredictable at the time – however, much of what happened can be seen as consistent with Bion's analysis of what happens in groups (Bion 1961). I can see how my actions could have been taken as a direct challenge to how the organisation's leaders saw themselves – by saving my team from what I thought were incorrect targets, I was also attacking the validity of the transformation programme the leaders had created, which was supposed to save the NHS locally. Further, my colleagues and I as a group were potentially a particular instance of a wider anxiety within the organisation about whether or not the transformation strategy could ever be delivered, despite the confidence with which it was regularly presented. If the executive team couldn't rely on their own staff to believe the story, what risk did this pose to the programme, and perhaps even themselves? In Bion's terms, this would be consistent with how groups with a dependent basic assumption operate as uncertainty increases: we were threatening the 'bible' that the organisation had created as its 'leader', which sustained the activities of the organisation by providing jobs, work and so on. My team and I could be characterised as an emergent pairing basic assumption group presenting a hopeful vision of a more realistic future that threatened the wider dependent basic assumption group, and this resulted in feelings of hostility. The executive team were now aggressors, and so my team became a fight/flight basic assumption group at first fighting back.

Further, over time, my team and I grew increasingly indifferent to the organisation's leaders; and even as we succeeded in progressing against our targets, we celebrated these achievements without thought of the executive team and only slightly acknowledged any praise that they offered. This is also consistent with Bion's analysis that when the fight/flight group's aggressors do not afford the opportunity to fight or fly, they are ignored (Bion 1961: 152). All of this would suggest a degree of predictability in what felt at the time to be wholly unpredictable; it is therefore a good example of how reflection on my experience widens my horizons and creates a more flexible disposition – understanding my experience in this way means I have new ways to think about experiences I may have in the future as they occur.

At the time, however, none of this was clear. Though I had been in some difficult situations at work before, this was different: I was invested in the organisation's work and saw myself as being able to make a meaningful contribution – it was why I had joined. And yet, the validity of these motivations was being called into question. As I failed to make sense of what was happening and therefore what

to do, for the first time in my life I entered a significant period of depression, which lasted some six months. In retrospect, what was happening was so different from anything I had experienced before that it must have challenged deeply held beliefs about myself. Returning to McCoy's analysis of the way in which emotions are linked to challenges to one's personal construct system (McCoy 1977), for me the challenge felt fundamental and so the emotions I experienced were similarly significant. I was aware that my behaviour affected others too as they experienced my lack of engagement; some sought to help, but I was withdrawn and found I couldn't connect with those reaching out to me.

This pattern of interaction persisted and intensified over time and eventually I settled into a narrative, which I came to share with others, of injustice and our team not being valued. This lasted throughout the time I was with the organisation. Given that the source of any praise seems to be important to me, it is perhaps not surprising that my depressive episode ended with a conversation with one of the senior directors who had previously admonished me. I reflected to him that I'd made a mess of joining the organisation and had been arrogant and dismissive of what was sound advice. We had quite an honest discussion and he was surprisingly supportive, recounting times when he had made similar mistakes and suggesting that I be less headstrong.

In *Moral Mazes* (2009), Jackall's analysis of what managers are doing in bureaucracies is another productive lens through which to view what happened, again suggesting that my experience was perhaps more predictable than I realised at the time. Jackall describes how being, and being seen to be, a 'team player' is a key survival mechanism in for middle managers. For Jackall, team play is based on a conformist psychic asceticism, which in the absence of any other objective purpose leads to a pervasive mediocrity and an attention to the 'main chance' of self-advancement achieved through political manoeuvring in circles of affiliation. I can see how, through my behaviour, I was differentiating myself from my peer group, challenging the dominant ideology, undermining my seniors and deviating from my assigned role. All of this inevitably led to not fitting in; using these terms to describe the conversation with the senior director, I was submitting to team play in order to survive. While I'm still not sure that I was wrong about what I had tried to do – a remnant of the hope for a better future that my team had created? – I can see that the way I went about it was incongruent with the organisation's implicit rules.

Over the subsequent months, I found ways to do work that I thought was important in ways that were more acceptable. Though I still felt somewhat sceptical about the transformation strategy, I was more circumspect about expressing this and was more guarded in my interactions with the executive team. We achieved some great things for the population we served, but I felt unable to really believe in most of what I spent my time doing. The most satisfying parts of my job involved bringing people together to make sense of some of the more intractable problems facing our

communities, and using the energy generated by having more honest and open conversations to do what we considered important. While I was doing my best to 'play the game' when I was at work, I also started distancing myself from it by beginning to discuss quite openly that I wasn't sure what my next job would be, having career conversations with 'safe' members of the executive team, and getting more involved in pieces of work outside my immediate remit. I could now characterise this as reconstructing my circles of affiliation, thereby diversifying the contexts with which I identified so that I could be more resilient; this also avoided me having to submit to the changes that I would have needed to make in order to fully belong.

Over a period of three or four months, I thought hard about what it was that I had enjoyed most about my jobs to date. People and change management emerged as common themes. Hearing an eminent OD practitioner talk about her work, I felt encouraged by her focus on the practitioner as an instrument that could be honed, and the apparent detachment with which OD consulting could be undertaken. Perhaps as a reaction to my most recent experiences, I started to look for jobs in development in the NHS, and found my current role in a national health and care oversight body working on projects and programmes to do with leadership and governance. I left the commissioning job on a very positive note, with a great leaving party, and a narrative about how I was going on to focus on developing myself as an OD practitioner. I think the underlying story of leaving behind the organisation that had for a time such a detrimental effect on my psychological well-being was also obvious to others, but it was never discussed openly.

Where I find myself now: distancing to engage

My personal narrative is now one of desiring greater independence from organisations to enable me to do the meaningful work of which I think I may be capable. Returning to Jackall's analysis, I could characterise this as a rejection of having to submit to the NHS's dominant managerial discourse, and a turning away from the path of dissatisfaction that I think may come with it. Implicit to this thinking, however, is an assumption that that by compromising on how I do my work, I am also impeded from realising my potential (whatever that might be). From a more social perspective, then, this distancing is perhaps also a way of increasing my emotional stability through weakening the entanglement with everyday politics that seems inherent to senior roles in organisations, and which appears to have been associated with emotional instability in the past. This process of distancing is therefore also a process of engaging.

Some conclusions

A few things have struck me from this exploration of my professional development. Drawing from my own observations and from the literature I have explored, my more significant insights have mainly come from being able to see what had felt at the time to be unpredictable turns of events instead as particular instances of more generalised patterns of behaviour. Some of these observations have already started to change how I work. For example, noticing the pattern of engaging and distancing: a year into my current role, I began to see myself distancing myself from my work, largely because of some of the power dynamics in the organisation but also because of doubts I had about the usefulness of the work national bodies do. Instead of this feeling of distancing progressing towards wanting to leave, as it has before, I have been able to think about what I am feeling in the context of what might be going on in the organisation and sector more widely. This has led to a refocussing of my attention on finding ways to make my work more meaningful by managing my context; in other words, paradoxically, the distancing process has created new ways for me to engage.

I could give further examples of changes in my practice, but perhaps a more significant insight comes from noticing that I am surprised at how illuminating I have found the process of writing this DMan project. In its first iterations, I was writing about different perspectives on my experiences as something of an academic exercise. As I have mentioned, I have done this before through various training and development programmes, and so I am comfortable writing about my experience, drawing connections, and relating these to relevant literature. Further, my pragmatic perspectivist standpoint and background in philosophy and critical theory make it easy to take the position of others and to recast this or that event from different viewpoints.

I was therefore intrigued to find myself stuck when trying to create something that made overall sense to me, when I was having to recast each element of my narrative at a pace that kept up with my latest thinking based on what I had just read, or the feedback from my learning set. With this constant and rapid turning of the parts and the whole, and never knowing what I might come across next, I found myself wondering how I could ever complete the project. At times, this felt paralysing; yet I was compelled to persevere. I reflected on how this problem mirrors everyday life: if our ability to act is based on the sense we make of our experience in the context of the histories we construct for ourselves (what Gadamer might call a 'fore-conception of completeness' [Gadamer 1975: 305]), but this is constantly changing with each interaction, then how can we decide what we should do with any certainty about what the result will be? And yet we have to act all the time; so is anyone in

organisations really doing anything more than making a series of best guesses and seeing what happens?

In thinking through what I was feeling, I found Gadamer's definition of 'experience' in *Truth and Method* helpful: 'experience stands in an ineluctable opposition to knowledge and to the kind of instruction that follows from general theoretical or technical knowledge. The truth of experience always implies an orientation toward new experience' (ibid: 364). I take this to mean that knowledge of things is less important than a flexible disposition that sees uncertainty as generative. This captures well what I have found happening as I have written this project, and while this isn't necessarily a new thought (after all, it is practically identical to what my tutors at Oxford told me about the importance of learning to learn, rather than just acquiring facts), something has changed in these last few months that feels important.

Despite a firm grasp of the theoretical positions I have talked about for years, I have a new sense that I haven't yet really integrated these theories with the reality of my practice. This is challenging my expectations about myself and my history. The self-image I have been building of myself over the years has implicitly assumed that my experiences are cumulative and stable, with bad work experiences arising from some form of hubris, or in some sense my having ignored my 'better judgement'. For me, taking the perspective of complex responsive processes seriously perhaps means coming to understand more fully how my behaviour and choices are context dependent. This is a powerful observation for me, and I am excited about where it may lead.

Emerging areas for further research

I am now about to start an internal culture change project in my organisation, which will mean working closely with the executive team and people from across the organisation using a toolkit that the team I work within has produced. Taking up some of the themes that have emerged from this project, I am intrigued to explore the experience of undertaking this work as it occurs, focussing on the social processes involved in the ethics of managing competing goods. One aspect of this relates to the work itself: the approach I will be using has been chosen because of the political currency of its architects; while this is hugely valuable during initiation, the approach itself has a positivist theoretical basis that I find problematic. I anticipate being tempted to adapt the approach quite significantly, which could create some interesting dynamics with my team and the wider organisation. I am therefore interested to see how I will go about managing the public and private narratives that may arise, and the ethical implications of using a tool that I have doubts about.

Another related aspect is much more personal: the work to improve employee engagement and well-being in my organisation is important to me. In the past, this kind of investment has left me at risk of emotional instability, so I am interested to see how I reconcile the necessary entanglement in the kinds of everyday politics that I have found difficult in the past, with maintaining a distance that protects me from emotional distress.

The key themes I am starting my second project with the intention of exploring are therefore politics, ethics, and emotions in organisational life.

PROJECT 2:

Reflective practice and the ethics of uncertainty

Introduction

In this project, I explore what is involved in the practice of OD in a large public-sector bureaucracy. Starting from my own experience as a manager leading an internal culture and leadership programme, I examine different ways of thinking about what we might be doing when we are working with others on these aspects of organisational change, and how these are influenced by organisational ideals and the environments in which we find ourselves. I notice that the search to explain our actions never yields a definitive simple answer; instead, closer examination complicates our understanding by endlessly increasing the number of interpretations available. This also makes trying to 'do the right thing' more complicated.

This suggests a link between processes of reflecting on practice and ethics; but if we understand meaning as a continuous social process of interpretation and reinterpretation, then normative moral philosophies – i.e. those that suggest ethical dilemmas can be resolved by application to immutable moral standards – appear increasingly redundant. So, if there are no definitive answers, and the meaning of what we do changes over time, how can OD practitioners go about deciding what to do? And can reflective practice, as a way of gaining more perspectives on what we are doing, itself be a way of being more ethical? These are the central questions that I explore in this project.

Organisational context

My current job is in a government body that oversees organisations in the health and care system in the UK. This is at a time when this system is felt by many commentators to be in decline. The growing demand arising from an ageing population with complex medical and social care needs, the ongoing impact of financial constraint, and workforce shortages all make the business of caring for people increasingly difficult. Due to the highly political nature of the health and care system, there is also relentless pressure from politicians to continue to provide high-quality services while at the same time increasing productivity so that those services can function within their allocated budgets.

My organisation is ostensibly an archetypal bureaucracy – highly organised and highly rational in the sense that we appear to favour the discharge of business through clear divisions of labour, and according to calculable rules (Weber et al 1958: 214). Perhaps due to the context that I have just described us operating within, there is a sense of anxiety among us – manifesting most recently in

our staff survey results as lack of clarity of purpose, and overly bureaucratic ways of working that inhibit people's sense of freedom to act. Partly in response to these findings, and also to address the noticeably high staff turnover rate, the executive team agreed to embark upon a culture and leadership programme, for which I am the nominated lead.

This work isn't my day job. It came about rather by chance because I became involved in various pieces of staff engagement work over a period of about six months, during which time an alliance formed between me and the Director of OD, Jerome. An overlap in our respective remits meant that we often met informally, and during one of these catch-ups Jerome asked if I would be interested in leading on this piece of work. I was initially both grateful to Jerome for the offer, and also reluctant to accept it: while I am interested in gaining experience in this area, I had doubts about the methodology that was being proposed and also perhaps my own ability to do the job well, given my lack of formal experience in the field.

What is the work I am doing?

In its first phase, the work involves the administration of a set of evidence-based diagnostic tools, carried out by people from within the organisation. It aims to illuminate how well the organisation is doing against a set of idealised leadership behaviours, which are themselves underpinned by the principles of distributed leadership. This is meant to inform, later, the development of a leadership strategy that will help to secure the organisation's future success by guiding succession planning and leadership development activities. Or so the marketing goes. These tools have been developed by people with whom I work, primarily for the organisations within our oversight purview, and part of the reason for using the approach internally is to role-model the good practice we are recommending to others – for if we aren't willing to use it, why should others be?

The approach is based on a number of assumptions. One of these is a largely positivist epistemology that is evident, for example, in the assumption that a diagnostic which takes many months to complete can tell you enough about a stable reality to allow it to be changed in a planned way through a strategy. Such interventions inevitably change what people are talking about in the organisation and thereby influence the organisation as they are carried out, so there is also a social constructionist assumption involved. While acknowledged, this aspect is generally played down in favour of appealing to the business case which, in keeping with many approaches to OD, assumes a mechanistic and linear causal relationship between the use of these tools and improved organisational performance – indeed, this is the stated purpose of the whole initiative. The implicit principles of distributed leadership are humanistic ideals – emphasising the need for compassion

and empowerment, on the basis that people work more effectively if they are allowed to flourish. Such notions are evidence-based insofar as they refer to social sciences research that shows statistically significant links between employee engagement and outcomes in healthcare.

The thinking about how to undertake this work has therefore largely already been done. The role Jerome had offered me was to coordinate the process, coach the internal change team running the diagnostics, and ensure that our senior leadership team were kept informed and involved in the work as it progressed. I spent a few days considering whether to agree to do the work, finding it difficult to reconcile some conflicting thoughts about what might happen if I took it on. On the one hand, I knew I was interested in exploring a career in OD, so this offered a chance to gain potentially valuable experience and credibility. Further, regardless of my actual position in the hierarchy I have often found myself enjoying working with the most senior leaders in my workplaces, and I welcomed the opportunity to get to know my organisation's senior team. Last but not least, the broader motivation of working to improve staff engagement was closely aligned with my own values of doing something socially useful in the workplace.

On the other hand, I had problems with the basis of the work as I have described it above: I find the purported causal link between compassion and empowerment leading to more effective organisations difficult to accept, as well as the use of diagnostic tools themselves. This is because of the implied positivist theory of change, which, as I describe in my Project 1, is a theoretical position I have long doubted. As I would be having to promote the use of such tools to my colleagues, I wondered if I would be compromising myself ethically by agreeing to take an approach I wasn't sure about. I was also worried about the timing of the work: our organisation has recently undergone a merger and so the senior leadership team are still getting to know each other, and many of the negative aspects of the staff survey feedback were assumed to be related to the merger process. I wondered if another six months might offer a better starting-point, but was also aware of a need being expressed by some of the team who had developed the tools to start the work internally; this was so that we could strengthen the narrative about role-modelling as part of marketing the tools to their primary users – the organisations we oversee. I was therefore also unsure about the relative importance of the potential impact of this work in our organisation, versus it being a means to promoting the resources externally.

Eventually, I decided to accept Jerome's offer on the basis that I would somehow find my own way of doing it. At the time, I wasn't sure what that would mean in practice; but I felt reasonably confident that establishing the support of key members of the senior leadership team, and a few others on whom I could rely for advice and help if and when I needed it, would mitigate my lack of experience. Jerome agreed to this, and buoyed by his confidence in me, I set about trying to mobilise the work.

I spent time meeting with senior leaders individually across the organisation to confirm their commitment to the work, and to check that they were happy for their staff to be involved. I considered this important because although the project's aims were uncontroversial, I anticipated difficulties securing the necessary time and commitment from people when we already acknowledged ourselves as under-resourced. Fortunately, using this approach to tackle the problems highlighted by our staff survey was regarded by many as an obvious next step; these meetings generally went well. They all followed a similar pattern: each time, I would talk a little about the background to the project, in particular drawing attention to how we would be role-modelling the good practice we were recommending to others; then I talked through a short document I had prepared, which included a rough but professional-looking project plan that covered the main activities we would be undertaking, identified key milestones, and highlighted the most important risks, which I had set out in a traditional risk register format. In particular, I made sure to flag 'leadership buy-in' as one of these risks, as I wanted to address head-on the likely problem of people realising later that they didn't have enough time to participate. In this vein, I also highlighted that the chief executive and the people I had met so far had been supportive of the proposals. At the time, I thought that all of this would pre-empt questions that could arise given the bureaucratic and hierarchical nature of our organisation.

Next, I usually put the document to one side, perhaps signalling that we were about to have a more honest conversation, and invited the director to tell me what they thought was going on for their teams, and in the organisation more widely. This tended to elicit many of the same comments that had been fed back in the staff survey; I noticed that – consistent with how we usually dealt with problems – people would talk about what *the process that I was proposing* needed to do, or what *other people* needed to do. Hardly anyone talked directly about their own roles in addressing some of the issues that had arisen in the staff survey and, as my agenda in these meetings was largely to secure each director's support when it came to formally signing off the programme initiation, I didn't feel the need to pursue these issues either – not least because the meetings tended to be very short. I was also interested in getting to know the senior team individually so that if, for example, problems arose, then we would have enough of a relationship to allow me to contact them directly about resolving them, without having to worry about the communication channels that are usually prescribed by the hierarchy.

And things went largely to plan: almost everyone said that the work was important as they leafed through the document, that they were happy for their staff to be involved, and that they would like to contribute themselves too, if time allowed. The only meeting that did not go according to plan was with one of the directors of finance, Angela. I began the meeting with my rehearsed 'pitch' for

the project but instead of the usual acknowledgement of the problems we were trying to tackle, she quite aggressively questioned the proposals I was making. The tension between us rose and I increasingly found myself not knowing what to do. We ended up sitting together in a silent impasse for a few moments, until she finally asked me how much money the work would cost; when I replied that it was nothing more than the time of some internal staff members, the atmosphere completely changed and the meeting reverted to the course the others had taken.

Ultimately, the paper I took to the senior leadership committee to formally initiate the work was accepted with little discussion, which was unusual as the team is known for extensive deliberation.

Emerging ethical conundrums

Initially, I attributed these ostensible successes and the readiness of the senior leaders to accept the proposals to my good planning and careful lobbying; but now, some months into the work, I find the initial questions I had resurfacing unexpectedly and in different ways. I notice that I am increasingly concerned by the ease with which people agreed to initiate the work. Even in the difficult meeting I described with the director of finance, the source of conflict appears to have been nothing more serious than a concern about money. Rather than feeling buoyed by this support as one might expect, I am finding it increasingly problematic; much of this unease has been catalysed by my research, particularly through discussions with my supervisor and learning set, and the DMan community more widely.

I find myself wondering whether the culture change programme as I presented it has provided an easy answer to the difficult problems flagged up by the staff survey and in some sense encouraged an abrogation of personal responsibility for contributing to the patterns of interaction that have been occurring within directorates and across the organisation as a whole – this is the very opposite of what I had intended. I wonder further what investment the organisation's senior leaders have in improving employee engagement – I suspect that in many parts, this may not be a high priority, and I base this upon the observation that responding to local staff survey issues seems in most directorates to be delegated to other members of staff to deal with, as the senior leaders themselves focus on more important external-facing matters. I feel that if the senior leaders were really interested, they would take more responsibility themselves; but I am also aware that I am perhaps underestimating the amount of pressure they themselves are under in their jobs. As a result, when I am interacting with the senior team, I find myself wanting to find out more about this. I sometimes try to provoke them into thinking about how they are participating in the organisation –

and this is easier with some than others, largely depending on the strength of my relationship with the particular individual.

Further, as Jerome and I talk about the development activities that are being undertaken more broadly among the organisation's leadership community, I find I am able to influence the design and content of events so that they more overtly address the issues about personal responsibility that are concerning me. I also find myself being increasingly vocal about my ethical concerns, especially in relation to the narrative about engagement being primarily intended to improve performance. I often find myself talking about how, while there is a sense in which of course employees are paid to do a job and by working on engagement we can hope for increased discretionary effort, there is also a case for treating people well as an end in itself, rather than just a mechanism for enhancing performance. While recognised by some, my insistence on this aspect of moral responsibility does not resonate with everyone: I am trying to be more aware that I can come sometimes across as sanctimonious.

I now find myself at a point where I am not sure I have complete faith in the work I am leading on, but instead see it as an opportunity to interact with people across the organisation, and to influence other development activities that are going on. The way I am seeing my organisation is changing rapidly as I work on this project and the sense of things being unpredictable is itself becoming a theme that is structuring my experience of work.

Looking back over the account I have just given, I have alluded to what I think I have been doing, but am curious to test the interpretations I have made by exploring other perspectives on my actions that have arisen through my research. The first aspect I will consider is my discomfort with the approach to working on culture that I have agreed to use. One could argue that creating and executing plans is a common way we think we can realise the changes we want make; in practice, however, there is widespread scepticism about this, even if it is only hinted at. So, what might we actually be doing when we are making strategic plans, including those to do with culture?

Organisational development as the emperor's new clothes

Culture and OD are gaining increasing prominence in the UK health and care sector. Despite a long history of reliance on the structures of power and control that have tended to dominate managerial discourse, in the last five years, new national agencies have become involved in promoting ideas that have been prevalent in industry since the 1950s and 1960s (Cheung-Judge and Holbeche 2015). These are ways of understanding the people-aspects of what may be going on in public-sector organisations as a means to tackling some of the long-standing issues public services face. This may

simply be the public sector 'catching up' with industry, but I find it interesting that the emerging prominence of OD in the health and care sectors has coincided with increasing financial constraints within which these sectors have had to operate under the UK government's successive austerity budgets since 2010. By many accounts, the impact of this restraint is having a negative effect on services (e.g. *Guardian* 2017); however, it seems unlikely that things will change in the near future.

Given the widespread managerialism that has pervaded at least the health sector since the Griffiths Report which recommended general management to the NHS in 1983 (Department of Health and Social Security 1983), the approaches that I have experienced organisations taking to tackling the problems they face suggest a widespread regard for a mechanical or linear conception of how organisations work in all respects. This means that to change something, we need to decide what the future should look like, diagnose the current position in relation to that future state, and devise a set of actions to take us from one to the other. The tools and approach that my colleagues have developed to work on culture appear to be based upon the same assumptions.

The prevalence of this kind of thinking can be seen in the way that central government agencies overseeing health and care endlessly mandate the production of various five-year strategies, plans on a page, annual or two-year operating plans, annual contracting rounds, and so on, all of which aim to set out very clearly the activities an organisation is going to engage in that will lead to better quality and more sustainable services. When things do not go to plan (which appears increasingly often to be the case), this is attributed to, for example, these sectors being subject to the whims of national and local politicians changing policy from month to month; or underskilled managers who may lose their jobs as a result; or the current model of health and care being out of date and therefore destined to fail; or, very recently, an absence of adequate long-term planning (e.g. Parliament, House of Lords 2017). Rather than exploring the value of the planning exercises themselves, additional swathes of exception reporting and recovery planning are initiated, as though somehow these plans will fare better than those produced perhaps only months before.

The futility of these exercises does not go unnoticed: among those employed to undertake these planning activities, it is not uncommon to hear discontent and frustration voiced at the apparent lack of improvement, or the feeling expressed that their salaries could be better spent be employing care professionals. And yet these activities persist; and the same approaches are now being used to work on culture. To me, these views all point to the inadequacy of strategic choice theory to explain how change of any kind happens. Management science has for decades suggested that a small group of people at the top of a hierarchy can decide the right thing to do and then 'cascade' this to the rest of the organisation, whose members will then execute the plans as intended (Child 1972). Potential sources of failure may be documented in risk registers against which further mitigating plans can

made, though in my experience these are rarely kept up to date. If the approach fails, then blame of one sort or another is attributed to incompetent planners, or to a lack of information, a changing environment, or ineffective implementers; the utility of planning itself, however, is rarely called into question.

What I see happening in my organisation now is that the traditional ways of trying to improve services or productivity – such as through savings plans and operational grip – are being supplemented with interventions addressing the people-aspects of change. While I agree that this is probably worth attending to, what is striking about the way that this is being approached is that it is based on the same theory of change that underpins the very ways of working that are being criticised as having been ineffective in the past. In other words, the problem is seen to be the *content* of what is being planned for rather than the *process* of planning itself. This theory of change is all-pervasive: in the account I have given of my work, the tools are to be run as a project; these lead to the development of a leadership strategy to be implemented; I meet with the senior leaders so that they can jointly decide to do the work; in the meetings themselves, I use the tools and language of projects. We do all of this almost by rote – as though there is no need to question the ritualistic behaviour we engage in, because that's just how things are done.

It is difficult to know what might happen if we rejected these approaches, and in many ways, as a government body expected to be accountable and to hold others to account in a fair manner, it is perhaps unsurprising that we find ourselves working in bureaucratic ways that are ostensibly rational, at least in the sense of being procedurally reliant on calculative judgement (Townley 2008). One explanation for this is that we are simply stuck in habits; however, it is not clear why we seem so reluctant to openly question them, especially if we have observed that such approaches often do not have the impact we expected. Perhaps, then, these habits are serving functions beyond their overt purpose; it is interesting to consider what these functions might be.

Rituals as examples of power relating

The anthropologist Stephen Lukes defines *ritual* as 'rule-governed activity of a symbolic character which draws the attention of its participants to objects of thought and feelings which they hold to be of special significance' (Lukes 1977: 54). He suggests that the purpose of rituals in political life is essentially to emphasise and reinforce the importance of some things over others; in his view, the Durkheimian position – that rituals are primarily about promoting social solidarity – does not account for how rituals can also promote social fragmentation or enable a proliferation of competing values. Taken in this broader sense, rituals are therefore instruments of social control, and so ultimately about power relating. Lukes therefore suggests that we can understand more about how

societies in which rituals take place function by considering, for example, which social groups have prescribed the performance of the ritual; which social groups define the referents of these performances; who holds those referents to be significant, and in what ways; and in whose interests acceptance of these ways of seeing operate (ibid: 68–69).

The idea that these activities are *symbolic* in this context – by which Lukes means that they appear to be disproportionate to their intended ends – suggests a potential link with the planning activities I am describing, including my work on culture. It is unclear what the referents of strategic planning activities are, beyond the promotion of managerialism itself. The people whose interests are best served by the performance of these rituals are arguably the very people who mandate them, and perhaps those who then do the work that is mandated. Compliance with this or that deadline or adherence to technical or political guidance serves no overt purpose in the delivery of care, and yet is somehow taken as the thing which is important, regardless of what difference this may or may not make to the people who use services.

It could therefore be argued further that the reason these activities persist is that they keep people in work; and in organisations which are not subject to any form of market competition (my organisation is constituted by statute), these jobs are both comparatively secure and well paid. So, despite the scepticism that is sometimes informally expressed, to reject these activities would be to advocate for one's own obsolescence – or, proverbially, for 'turkeys to vote for Christmas'. This would make the perpetuation of these activities a matter of individual and collective corporate survival, and probably a largely rational activity insofar as people are able to choose whether to continue with their work or not. On that basis, the initial round of meetings I had with my organisation's senior leaders could be seen a way for us all to collude in acts of self-preservation, and the lack of resistance to the proposals I made could be evidence of this.

This is not an uncommon view of bureaucracies in general. For example, as part of a wider critique of modernity, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman identifies two organising activities that occur particularly in bureaucratic organisations: first, the meticulous and functional divisions of labour, and second, substitution of technical for moral responsibility (Bauman 1989: 98–99). These processes combine to create the conditions where, through functional separation, the activities undertaken by individuals become decoupled from the final outputs or outcomes of the organisational endeavour and morality 'boils down to the commandment to be a good, efficient and diligent expert and worker' (ibid: 102). Bauman argues that this leads to a gradual dehumanisation of the real objects of bureaucratic operations, which over time are replaced with quantifiable measures. And as only humans can be the objects of moral considerations (Bauman suggests our ethical concerns about the treatment of

animals is anthropomorphism), by dehumanising people, one can treat them with ethical indifference, which in this case is to say their personal values or interests can be legitimately ignored on the basis of rules. Bauman illustrates the potential seriousness of this indifference by highlighting, for example, how easily the producers of war materiel can regard themselves as free from moral responsibility for the destruction of people that they indirectly enable.

To my mind, Bauman's analysis of what happens to the 'objects of bureaucratic operations', as I have just described, could be naturally extended to the treatment of people within the bureaucracy itself – they too are treated as units of labour rather than actual people, and the same lack of attention to personal circumstances can be justified. Thinking about Lukes' concept of rituals privileging particular social phenomena over others, it is perhaps ironic that the perpetuation of ways of working that idealise efficiency based on the 'elimination from official business of love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational and emotional elements which escape calculation' (Weber et al 1958: 216) might end up promoting those same interests in a different way: in my organisation, one can imagine how, regardless of employees' abilities to technically fulfil their roles, it was perhaps the *feelings* of lack of fulfilment, or the threat of new teams coming and taking over, that may have been factors in the decision to leave that many people took following the merger.

A criticism of Bauman's perspective is that it presents the logical extreme of one aspect of how bureaucracies work, and focusses only on the negative consequences. There are other perspectives that are perhaps more in line with the complex reality of our experience of working in these organisations. For example, the line of argument so far could lead us to the conclusion that people's motivations are rather binary: either people are mercenary and primarily motivated by self-preservation and therefore prepared to accept the bureaucratic ways of working; or they are socially motivated or altruistic, in which case they leave to find a more tolerable environment. However, this does not match my experience of most of the people I have worked with for many years: while there are always some people whose primary focus does seem to be their own advancement, the vast majority of people I come across in my work do appear be socially motivated, and intent on making some kind of worthwhile difference despite the constraints of their organisational environments.

Particularly in my current organisation, I have noticed these concerns and the resultant ethical questions being very much alive, and it has been argued that these kinds of conflicts are inherent to the roles of public office. For example, the fastidious adherence to rules that sometimes appear to disadvantage individuals because of their particular circumstances, also limits the potential for corruption (Du Gay 2000; Townley 2008); the exercise of discretion because of the absence of a rule to account for every particular circumstance means that part of governing is about making local

judgements (Stivers 2008). These kinds of arguments suggest that a more nuanced and contextual view of ethics is needed than offered by traditional normative approaches, the archetype of which is the Kantian thesis that what is ethical to do can be determined by the analysis of a particular action against the categorical imperative ('Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law' [Kant and Paton 1948]).

My sense is that our actions are rarely so clear that they can be easily treated in this way and in thinking about my own work, there are numerous examples of this ambiguity. For example, on the one hand, the culture work could be regarded as an attempt to help my colleagues to feel happier and more fulfilled at work; on the other, it may be seen as simply another way to perpetuate existing power dynamics serving the promoters of managerialism. From another perspective, on the one hand, I was utilising methods that are appropriate for engaging with busy executives, which would make it easier for them to take a view on the proposals I was making: I arranged short meetings, used managerial tools and techniques, demonstrated that I had the support of my chief executive, and talked about the need to role-model – all of which are reasonable things to do; on the other, I was colluding in the practices which are themselves part of the bureaucracy that has been identified as problematic in our organisation, and perhaps even coercing the people I was meeting, for example, by invoking the authority of the chief executive and citing the support of others, in order to get what I wanted.

This plurality of interpretations about what I was doing makes recourse to anything like the categorical imperative impossible in practice except in the simplest of cases; and yet, through this exploration, I am struck by a sense of regret about having taken this approach but am not sure how to account for it. I am also left wondering why, as mentioned earlier, I met with so little resistance to the proposals, when the people I was meeting are all very senior and experienced leaders who will have encountered numerous projects of this kind before. Even the one meeting that did not go to plan in the end turned out to have been complicated only by a rather straightforward misunderstanding about money. Perhaps they saw it as insignificant in the scheme of their other work, or were sceptical about whether it would come to anything – no doubt they have seen many projects start in earnest, only to quietly disappear. Or perhaps my tactics of persuasion really were more coercive than I thought at the time. But I do not find these explanations wholly satisfying; in particular, while there may have been elements of collusion and perhaps even coercion, these senior leaders are very experienced people who I would have expected to be much readier to push back if they felt they were being told what to do, or if they didn't agree with what was being proposed.

A new line of inquiry opens up by considering a different aspect of what we might have been doing together. For example, my approach could be seen as the way I found to cope with my own lack of confidence or experience in doing this kind of work – I focussed my energy on the things I felt I did know about, which were to explain the rationale for and sequencing of the work and the evidence behind it using familiar approaches. Further, many of the conversations I had with the senior team were about things that weren't to do with them as individuals, but instead about other people or systems and processes – perhaps these displacements of responsibility were ways we found to cope together with not knowing how to fix the problem we found ourselves working on. These observations could suggest that we were finding ways to cope with anxiety, which leads us to explore the unconscious motivation that might have been in play. Staying with the idea of ritualised activities, psychoanalytical theory offers a way to explore this further.

Rituals as defences against anxiety

There are a number of psychoanalytical schools of thought, but they have in common the premise that the individual is primary and that individuals act on mental representations that make up an internal world (Stacey and Mowles 2016). A *defence* in Freud's psychoanalytical theory is 'a general designation for all the techniques which the ego makes use of in conflicts which may lead to neurosis' (Freud 1926: 153) and arises from anxiety. Isabel Menzies Lyth, a psychoanalyst in the Freudian/Kleinian tradition, extended this concept to include how unconscious processes can lead groups to collude consciously in creating mechanisms that help individuals to 'avoid the experience of anxiety, guilt, doubt and uncertainty … [through] eliminating situations, events, tasks, activities and relationships that cause anxiety'. She argues that such mechanisms help people to avoid the 'personal disruption and social chaos' that may result from acknowledging and dealing with their anxiety (Menzies Lyth 1988: 63).

Menzies Lyth's seminal study of the work of student nurses (Menzies 1960) illustrates these points clearly. There, she argued that the structures and cultures resulting from the unconscious processes of managing anxiety enabled these nurses to cope with the stress that arose from the strong and conflicting feelings involved in the care of sick patients. This essentially involved splitting up contact with patients into a series of depersonalised and ritualised tasks which meant that no single nurse had to confront the stressful totality of a particular patient's care, and consequently an 'elimination of individual distinctiveness in both nurse and patient' (ibid: 444). This sometimes meant that patients were treated in an uncaring way and this was observed, for example, in the waking of all patients for ritualised medication rounds when it would be in a particular patient's greater interests

to sleep – this uncaring practice being a defence against the anxiety that a more holistic approach to caring might evoke. Importantly, the performance of the ritual itself replaced the actual care of patients as the primary purpose of nursing, and it is this for which responsibility was taken rather than any individual patient's recovery.

One can see how in my organisational context, when managers are faced with the anxiety that arises from feelings of powerlessness, futility and unreasonable expectations of being able to 'fix the problem' of a system in decline, we might fragment the worthwhile activity of providing holistic care to people (which involves a degree of local planning) into isolated tasks, recombine these functionally as impersonal rituals, and then see the successful completion of these rituals as valuable, regardless of their ultimate outcome. It could be argued further that many of the activities undertaken by the people I work with are forms of social defence, and that these are ways of sharing out (or avoiding having to take) responsibility for the particular outcomes of poor performance in the sector, the consequences of which are ultimately experienced by people who require care.

This perspective offers a compelling way of understanding what might have been happening in the meetings I was having with my organisation's senior leaders. The managerial artefacts I employed could have been more than just a strategy to help me cope with my own anxiety. In following our organisation's rituals, it is at least plausible that together we were constructing the culture work as a social defence unconsciously motivated by avoiding the shared anxiety generated by the actual experience of trying to lead teams in the environment we find ourselves in. Especially when feedback from the staff survey clearly identified hierarchy as a source of frustration – something which is perhaps in the immediate control of the people I was meeting – it was simply easier to assign the task of tackling these (often quite personal) criticisms to the process I was proposing. We could therefore recast these events as acts of mutual collusion in which the senior team and I helped each other to avoid having a stake in the outcomes of the work – if things didn't improve, then all of us could avoid responsibility by blaming the process rather than our own choices and actions.

Once again, I am struck by a sense of regret and perhaps even embarrassment arising from reinterpreting the way in which I approached the work. Again, however, these insights have only arisen through the process of inquiry I am undertaking in this project. I find I am slowly expanding the field of things that I know about and am bringing these new ideas into my practice. This is leading me to think differently about what I have said and done, and to act differently as a result.

In search of the static and stable; meaning on the move

I am also struck by the sense that this process of finding new insights could well continue *ad infinitum* as I explore further alternative perspectives on what I have been doing. One characterisation of this process of inquiry is that it is the linear search for a conclusive explanation of what has happened, motivated by the desire to arrive at a definitive answer that finally settles the matter. This kind of thinking betrays an assumption about the availability of such fixed or stable realities, which can also be seen in both the anthropological and psychoanalytical perspectives I have presented so far, and no doubt many others.

A very different way of thinking becomes available if we consider sociologist Norbert Elias's observation that, in our speech and thought, there is a tendency to reduce dynamic processes to static conditions. In *What is Sociology?*, Elias uses the phrase 'the wind is blowing' to demonstrate this *process-reduction*:

> We say 'the wind is blowing', as if the wind were actually a thing at rest which, at a given point in time, begins to move and blow. We speak as if the wind were separate from its blowing, as if a wind could exist which did not blow. (Elias 1978: 112)

Elias suggests that this tendency perpetuates the seeing of the changeless aspects of things as 'most real and significant' and that 'anything which changes must be ephemeral, less important, less significant and in short less valuable' (ibid: 112–114). So, for example, we tend to favour solutions to problems that provide universal or timeless rules over those which suggest more changeable or processual understandings of the matter at hand. And in the analyses provided above, there are a number of examples of this tendency: when we speak of 'objects of thought and feelings' in Lukes' definition of ritual, the implication appears to be that these are static and can be referred to by symbolic activities. But if these objects of thought (as generalisations) evolve dynamically over time, being formed by and in turn forming the particular instances in which they are thought about, to what extent could rituals refer to them in any consistent or meaningful way?

We can also think about what we mean when we talk about the 'real work' of caring for sick patients in Menzies Lyth's example, or the 'real problems' in the health and care sector that I am suggesting people in my organisation might attend to instead of some of the more apparently futile exercises in which we engage. These examples, and the work of seeking a definitive answer in general, could be taken as attempts to find the static and stable in what is ultimately dynamic and unpredictable: no two patients are exactly the same and nor is the composition of groups of patients, which change all of the time in a hospital setting; the same could be said of the organisational and political players in the health and care sector, and we could go on to apply the same thinking to the terms 'ritual' and 'social defences' themselves.

Now, it could be suggested that this line of thinking leads us quickly to the conclusion that if everything is continually changing, then it is impossible to identify the meaning in any of our work – and this may lead us to seeing our work as absurd. However, this kind of thinking is also based on process-reduction, which attempts to fix *meaning* itself as static and stable rather than seeing it as an ongoing temporal process. Sociologist, psychologist and philosopher George Herbert Mead argues for the latter in *Mind, Self and Society* (1934) in the context of thinking about human communication as an ongoing, social process involving gestures and responses.

For Mead, communication involves constant and instinctive adjustment to the attitudes of the others involved in communicative acts, with meaning dynamically arising from this interplay. This is the same process of mutual adjustment as that, for example, in which we might imagine animals engage (Mead gives the example of a dog fight). The fundamental difference for humans, however, is that we are able to call out in ourselves the response that we call out in others because we can hear and understand ourselves, and further that we come to expect responses to our gestures based on our past experiences (Mead 1934). *Meaning* is then a triadic relationship between the stimulus or gesture, the response that we call out in ourselves as we gesture to others (i.e. the expected completion of the communicative act or *idea*), and the response that is *actually* called out in the other with whom one is interacting (ibid: 79). This is a dialectical process in that both the gesture/idea and the response (as another gesture/idea) are continuously transformed by each other, informing evolving interpretations of what has just happened and new expectations of what might happen next (ibid: 179); in other words, we are finding out what we are going to say and do *as we are saying and doing it.*

This is very different from the more traditional cybernetic sender–receiver model of communication (e.g. Shannon et al 1949), which Stacey and Mowles (2016) characterise as iterative attempts to reduce the gap between what one intends to convey and how it is received. In this model, people transmit and receive fixed and stable thoughts to and from one another, encoding and decoding these using language, which would make meaning-making a largely individual activity. For Mead, as described above, meaning arises through interaction and therefore cannot be a purely individual activity, nor can it be known in advance or indeed fixed forever in the past.

Meaning can, however, be anticipated, and this is what Mead describes as *thinking*: the ability to imagine possible sequences of responses that may occur through private role-play (Mead 1934: 141). Mead argues further that humans are able to choose between alternative courses of action because we are able to delay our responses and through the process of *reasoning*, select the chain of responses that suggest the most adequate and harmonious end to the communicative act (ibid:

98–99, 118). In respect of the past, Mead describes one of the features of history (itself a meaning-making process) as being that it describes how social reconstruction has occurred in ways that were not obvious to the people involved at the time – a process made possible only by temporal distance (ibid: 297). We could add to this that the ways in which these reconstructions occur are likely to be ideological: as many philosophers have suggested, the construction of narratives is subjective and based on power relating (e.g. White 1975; Jameson 1981; Foucault 1972).

On that basis, strategic planning in general, including the way I started out on the culture work, can now be thought of very differently from the acts of designing realisable futures that they are often regarded as being, based on a strategic choice theory of change. While these activities may be rituals that perpetuate power dynamics, or ways to quieten anxieties, we can also see them as ongoing processes of recasting and anticipating meaning together – therefore of thinking and reasoning, in Mead's terms. To be clear, the corollary of this observation is not some kind of total end to planning; rather, I am suggesting that it is worth considering how we become more sensitive to the dynamic plurality of purposes that these activities can serve because this may lead us to reconsider, for example, what we are doing when we hold people to account for delivering (or not delivering) upon agreed plans, or when we decide who should be involved in creating these plans in the first place. Mead's perspective on dialectical ongoing processes of meaning-making leads us to a position where strategic plans are anticipatory interpretive processes, which perhaps should at best be held lightly with the expectation that things are unlikely to play out as anticipated.

Emerging implications for the practice of OD

This approach to looking again for the processual qualities of concepts that tend to be reified provides another way of critiquing the conception of organisational culture in its various positivist formulations ('the way we do things around here', for example, being the one used in the toolkit I am using in my work). In Elias's terms, these could be considered to be process-reductions, which mask the inherently fluid nature of the interactions they try to describe. A more processual conception of culture would undermine the availability of something to be discovered – and this is the reasoning that, for example, social anthropologist Clifford Geertz uses to argue that cultural analysis is 'not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning' (Geertz 1993: 5). What this means for practitioners working on OD is that the task at hand may be far less about uncovering underlying truths about an organisation that can then be changed through a series of interventions; instead, perhaps what we need to pay attention to and work with is the way that people interpret and make sense of what is happening – something that is inherently dynamic.

This line of thought to some extent underlies *Dialogic OD*, which has recently risen to prominence among the international OD community (e.g. Bushe and Marshak 2013, 2015; Cheung-Judge and Holbeche 2015). Dialogic OD takes a primarily discursive social constructionist approach to thinking about what happens in organisations, and its theorists suggest that transformational change occurs with a change in the conversations that people have about the challenges they care about. The skill of the OD practitioner is then to construct questions for the right mix of people in an organisation to consider together through dialogue, which enables them to engage with their work in a different way and the organisation to move to a more evolved state in a planned way (Cheung-Judge and Holbeche 2016: 43–44). While this does depart from previous approaches to OD that assume a more positivist standpoint, there remains an underlying assumption that engaging in this way will lead to a helpful change and therefore an implicit sense that cause and effect are linearly related. Taking the emergent quality of meaning that we have just discussed seriously means that we can make no such claim (Stacey 2015) – we can only find out what kind of change is taking place when people interact about a particular problem in its context as it happens; and this may be helpful or unhelpful, or indeed both, to different people or at different times.

I do not intend to explore dialogic OD further here – the comments above are included to acknowledge that thinking about interaction as a basis for change in organisations is not new; however, what may be interesting in this is the argument that as practitioners engaged in developing organisations, we have to pay much more attention to what is happening in the moment and the contingency of the outcomes we anticipate. For me, it is not enough simply to 'be present' – this would feel too much like a denial of how we have come to find ourselves where we are and the prejudices we come with, as well as an abrogation of responsibility for the impact we inevitably do have. I suggest instead that we need to be more aware of *how* we are making sense in the moment, with our prejudgments or assumptions in plain sight, as this gives us the greatest scope for negotiating with each other. In the account I give of my work, I describe how this increasingly appears to be the way that I find myself thinking and talking about my work and, further, how I have noticed several times in the narrative so far that the way I am making sense of what is happening at work is changing as I iterate this project.

This brings a thread running through my project into sharper focus: I find that, through this project, the exploration of each new perspective on what I have been doing in my organisation illuminates something about my work that I hadn't noticed before; this in turn changes what I find myself saying and doing at work. Importantly, these new interpretations of my previous experience have a moral component: I have twice experienced feelings of regret at thinking that I have colluded in an activity I find ethically problematic, but noted both times that these insights have become available only

through the exploration I am undertaking as part of my research – I could not have known them at the time. I have a sense this could continue indefinitely as I find further interpretations of my experience, and I can imagine that this characterises the experience of many practitioners who engage in research about their practice or professional development.

I noted earlier that one of the shortcomings of normative ethical perspectives is that our actions are too complex to compare against moral standards, except perhaps in the simplest cases. A further, more fundamental complication arises from the notion of meaning itself not being fixed: the very principles (as kinds of meaning) we would wish to test against are not static. How can I then account for the feelings of regret that have come about because of my reflections on my practice? I will now explore this in more detail.

Reflective practice as a social process

The exploration of what we are doing when we are reflecting has been undertaken by numerous theorists; Pollard (2008) emphasises how the philosopher and educationalist John Dewey is regarded as a foundational thinker in this field. Dewey (e.g. 1933) describes *reflection* as a process by which humans deal with being confronted with a difficulty in experience that gives rise to perplexity. We tend to formulate a 'way out' based on past experience or prior knowledge, which Dewey describes as uncritical thinking if we automatically accept the most 'obvious' solution. This is by no means to disparage this kind of habitual thinking; indeed, it would be difficult to cope with everyday life if we were to consider every action from all imaginable perspectives (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015).

Reflection, then, is what happens when we *engage* with the perplexity, considering matters further, seeking new evidence and evaluating the validity of the suggested course of action. In business and management theory, *reflective practice* tends to focus on the exploration of past events and one proposed definition is that it is 'the practice of periodically stepping back to ponder the meaning to self and others in one's immediate environment about what has recently transpired' (Raelin 2001: 11). In my experience, this is usually in order to think about what could have been done differently, to learn lessons, and to improve how one might approach a similar situation in the future.

Organisational learning theorists Chris Argyris and Donald Schön are probably the most influential thinkers in this field, establishing the terms *single-loop* and *double-loop learning* to describe two main modes by which this kind of activity can lead to changes in practice (Argyris and Schön 1974). Tosey et al (2012) critically analyse variations of these concepts provided by range of theorists, concluding that there is broad consensus around Argyris's formulation of the dichotomy as follows:

> [S]ingle-loop learning occurs 'whenever an error is detected and corrected without questioning or altering the underlying values of the system', and double-loop learning occurs 'when mismatches are corrected by first examining and altering the governing variables and then the actions'. (ibid: 292)

In other words, single-loop learning involves modifying an individual's usual response patterns to suit new circumstances: as a way of honing expertise, it does not examine the suitability of relying on established ways of working as circumstances change. Double-loop learning therefore seeks to address this potential for 'skilled incompetence' by stepping outside the single-loop process, to challenge and adjust the assumptions that underpin habitual ways of working. It explores whether other approaches are available that better suit the circumstances, or at least keep these assumptions in sight (Stacey and Mowles 2016: 109–111). Both of these learning loops could be seen as being primarily intended to improve either personal or organisational effectiveness in the future, through the modification of mental models; they are therefore primarily individualistic, cognitivist, and firmly based in systems thinking.

Tosey et al (2012) make this clear in describing how Argyris and Schön's work can be traced back to anthropologist and cybernetician Gregory Bateson's thinking on how higher levels of learning involve *correcting* lower levels of learning. Relying on Russell and Whitehead's theory of logical types (Russell and Whitehead 1910–13), Bateson (1972) argues that levels of learning are logical classes:

- *Zero learning* is immediate action, it is particular to the context and not amenable to correction;
- *Learning I* (single loop) is then a corrective change in *zero learning* and can be the processes of, for example, habituation, Pavlovian conditioning, or rote learning;
- *Learning II* (double loop) is a change in the process of *Learning I*, in which the set of alternatives from which choice is made is corrected;
- *Learning III* is a change in the process of *Learning II*, whereby the set of alternatives is itself corrected.

To support his theory, Bateson explicitly relies on and argues for the availability of repeatable contexts, and presupposes that we have the ability to stand apart from the experiences that are to be corrected. To me, this seems to imply that corrections can be somehow abstracted from the situations they are trying to address – and therefore from the temporal flow of experience (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011). These kinds of approaches allow, for example, apparent contradictions to be resolved through *both–and* thinking, where plausible yet opposing answers can exist in different logical classes, or in relation to different contexts. These approaches perhaps

necessarily fail to acknowledge that we can encounter unresolvable paradoxes in experience, where plausible yet opposing answers can co-exist simultaneously because they are understood as temporal phenomena. Perhaps the appeal of *both–and* thinking is that it shelters us from engaging with the ambivalence inherent in our experience.

Further, this emphasis on closed-off, individual entities takes insufficient account of interdependence of people, and the ethics, politics and power relating that goes with it. We see that Bateson himself struggles with moving beyond *Learning II* in practice when he admits that *Learning III* is 'likely to be difficult and rare even in human beings', occurring 'from time to time in psychotherapy, religious conversation, and in other sequences in which there is profound reorganisation of character' (ibid: 301), and *Learning IV* (change in *Learning III*), though theoretically possible, 'probably does not occur in any adult living organism on this earth' (ibid: 293). A further problem is that the notion of *correction* implies Bateson's assumption of a 'right' way to do something, at least within a cybernetic system – which is clearly questionable, given our inability to predict the outcomes of our actions with any degree of certainty.

Unless we accept these logical categories, Bateson insists, all learning would have to be regarded as *zero learning*: if each situation is unique, and we cannot move beyond our habitual ways of responding, then all that is left is genetically determined discrimination – that is, the playing out of innate predispositions. Bateson's position is consistent with a systems perspective, which presupposes isolated individuals who learn separately – a view that overlooks the importance of intersubjectivity, context and personal history in how we make judgements, and our ability to intentionally develop our capacity to judge over time.

A very different way of thinking about learning that can account for this tension between being both detached and involved at the same time scan be found by reconsidering Mead's concepts of thinking and reasoning: from this perspective, reflective practice can be seen as an extension of the ongoing learning that is central to human development. This doesn't require us to accept the notion of 'stepping outside' on which Bateson and Argyris and Schön rely. Mead suggests that in early development, or the *play* stage, children are able at best to take on this or that specific role and so they play at being doctors and nurses, or mothers and fathers (Mead 1934: 150). Over time, as children progress to the *game* stage of development, they begin to understand the increasing complexity of their social interactions and so must imagine themselves in the positions of (or *take the attitude of*) the multiple others with whom they are interacting. They must respond as one aspect of this complex whole according to a sense of social rules (ibid: 152). As development continues, individuals become able to take the attitudes of not just those in their immediate vicinity,

but all those who feature in their experience – which is to say their relevant social groups, or society at large; and these attitudes are organised into a sort of unit that is imported into individual thinking as the sense of a *generalised other* (ibid: 154–155).

Reflective practice, rather than requiring an appeal to metatheory, could therefore be seen as a further, more deliberate aspect of the same process of development that brings about the incorporation of additional perspectives into our thinking – increasing the possibilities we consider when anticipating the responses our gestures may invite from others. In other words, reflective practice is an intentional social process of enriching the field of our attention, and comes about through new experiences or exposures. Recalling our observations about meaning, on this basis, we cannot make any claims about whether reflective practice is of itself a good or a bad thing, because, as with meaning in general, we cannot know the impact of having these wider perspectives until they are called into use. We might like to suggest that having more perspectives in view is a good thing because it gives us more options, but this would be an ideological position – something I will come back to.

To illustrate this unpredictability, on the one hand, in my most recent conversations with Jerome, I have found myself talking about rituals or social defences, and in so doing I appear to be influencing how Jerome is thinking about the wider programme of OD work in the organisation. So far, responses have been positive to the workshops and development sessions we have run together. However, other occasions when I have brought these new perspectives into play have gone less well – as I mentioned in the narrative earlier, sometimes people have found me sanctimonious or disruptive and I have had to rethink what I am doing. Further, in facilitating team development sessions, some have ended positively with participants feeling they have made progress in areas that were stopping them working together, and sometimes I feel I may have made things worse. More and more often I find myself feeling that I don't know what I am doing, especially where there is conflict involved, though I am obviously still doing something in these situations.

Ethics and uncertainty

To cast the kinds of experiences I am describing simply as some kind of accelerated, value-neutral process of learning occasioned by new thinking I have encountered through my research for this project would be to trivialise something that feels important for a different reason: these experiences are generating a sense in me of having done things that I judge as morally good or bad. I also talk about the responsibility we have for what we are doing, however contingent the outcomes

may be. However, if meaning is not fixed, then how can practitioners ever decide what is ethical or unethical to do?

Unpredictability is a fundamental problem for any normative ethical theory: if meaning is constantly shifting, emerging through interaction and potentially changing in hindsight, then any attempt to identify a testable principle underpinning the kinds of everyday action we are routinely engaged in at work is so contingent that it is next to meaningless in all but the simplest of cases. And this accords with my experience: in my work, although the experience I have accumulated over my career undoubtedly informs my actions to some extent, I no longer consider it such a solid and reliable basis for action as I once did. While the increasing plurality of perspectives I have available helps me to see new aspects of what is going on in my work, those same perspectives – and the process of writing this project – are making me increasingly less certain about the validity of any conclusions I might draw. In other words, I feel I am becoming more certain only of the unpredictability of what might be coming up – and aware of the contingency of the interpretations I make in the moment, given that a new perspective later may recast the meaning I attribute at the time.

All of this could leave little space for ethics if we see morality as being about *what* we end up doing. Mead offers a very different way of thinking about morality that takes as its main focus the temporal and ongoing process of *how* we go about deciding what to do, suggesting that this process involves impartially taking account of all the interests involved in a particular problem (as far as this is possible, which makes the process inherently fallible), and then making a plan of action that rationally deals with them all:

> Our society is built up out of our social interests. Our social relations go to constitute the self. But when the immediate interests come into conflict with others we had not recognised, we tend to ignore the others and take into account only those which are immediate. The difficulty is to make ourselves recognise the other and wider interests, and then to bring them into some sort of rational relationship with the more immediate ones. (Mead 1934: 388)

Implicit in Mead's work is an ideological position that strongly encourages the integration of individual selves with their communities (ibid: 319ff). For example, Mead suggests that basic socio-physiological impulses lead to cooperation or antagonism, and that ethical ideals arise from our consciousness of mutual interdependence within a community and the need to cooperate. Ethical behaviour is therefore that conduct which increases integration, as far as this is socially beneficial and conducive to the well-being of society. The antagonistic impulse plays out when individuals find themselves unable to adjust to the interests and conduct of other individuals in society, and Mead

suggests that this is how ethical problems arise. Unethical behaviour, then, is that which is socially harmful or disruptive to society. I read Mead as therefore suggesting that ultimately the aim of society is to find a way to integrate as a universal community, through which 'conflicts can be solved or eliminated' (ibid: 308–309). It could be argued that this sounds rather like the kind of systems thinking critiqued earlier; it need not be, however, as the process of dealing with conflict is not by application to a metatheory or position outside of the system in which the conflict occurs in order to resolve or explain it (e.g. Gödel 1986), but rather through *social reconstruction* achieved through the ongoing process of interpretation.

I find this position compelling: as I described in Project 1, I have found myself inclined towards socially motivated work, and what I end up doing in these roles is creating communities in which individuals feel that they are being taken seriously as people, rather than just positions on organisational charts or as a means to an end. I also note that thinking in this way is problematic as it could be argued that I am simply substituting one ideology (strategic choice theory) with another (plurality and keeping options open); this is perhaps at odds with the arguments against normative ethics that I have made above. My sense is that this reflects a real conflict arising from a wider tension between logic and personal history: rationally, an argument can lead to a particular conclusion while personally, our inclinations and biases can lead to another. By holding both together rather than trying to resolve them, however, we are forced to notice the contingency of our beliefs and those of others, and also to acknowledge that these must be evolving over time. Mead's conception of morality appears to contain a similar line of thinking when he suggests that a way towards greater integration is to enlarge the community through the introduction of new ideas:

> A man has to keep his self-respect, and it may be that he has to fly in the face of the whole community in preserving this self-respect. But he does it from the point of view of what he considers a higher and better society than that which exists. (Mead 1934: 389)

So, the further complexity in Mead's conception of morality is that ethical conduct is not some kind of blind submission to the perspectives of others, but rather an ongoing process of negotiation of social and personal interests, which, in the absence of firm rules, must rely on individual judgements made in specific circumstances by particular people.

If we accept this position, then the implications are potentially important: reflective practice, far from being about finding out what we could have done differently so that we can apply some kind of better practice when the situation re-presents, is much more about increasing the things to which we are sensitive so that we may notice different qualities of our experience in the future. This may

lead us to speak and act differently than if we had not reflected; but we cannot know whether what we say and do is any better or worse as a result, either at the time or in hindsight.

On that basis, time spent agonising over the possible rights and wrongs of different courses of action according to their anticipated outcomes (as I perhaps did when I was choosing whether or not to take on the work in the first place) might be better spent seeking out and making sense of the plurality of perspectives on the matter at hand, and then acting in ways that continue to leave as many further options open as possible. This may give us the greatest scope for continuing to participate ethically with others because ethics becomes an ongoing process of meaning-making, rather anything to do with adherence to static or stable rules. As Griffin (2002) suggests, this makes all of our conduct in some sense moral:

> Ethics becomes a matter of our accountability to each other in our daily relating to each other. What is ethical emerges as themes that organise our experience of being together. (ibid: 207)

Importantly, this gives us a very different way to take responsibility for what we are doing – one that illuminates how practitioners might go about trying to make sense of, and cope with, the practical and ethical conflicts that arise in their experience of trying to develop organisations. This is potentially liberating because we are freed from having to predict and account for the ethics of a particular future; yet this creates a new burden – the ongoing need to consider the morality of the many possible futures to which our actions may lead, as well as tolerating the uncertainty that comes to characterise our outlook.

Concluding remarks and areas for further research

I began this project thinking that I would write about the way bureaucratic ideals and individual interests appeared to come into conflict in the context of the work I am doing on culture in my organisation. I considered two main perspectives that gave me new ways to make sense of what was happening in my work, and suggested that there were likely to be many others that would offer further insights. I examined our preference to look for the fixed and stable in our experience and the emergent quality of meaning, from which I concluded that strategic planning activities in general (including about culture change) are at best ways of temporarily making sense, rather than the prophetic interventions that we might like them to be. I acknowledged that, given the difficulty of predicting the impact of our actions with any certainty, the search for a definitive explanation of what I was doing at work was probably futile.

During this exploration, I also noticed the speed at which my attitude towards my work was changing as a result of my research, and in particular the ethical issues that became apparent in hindsight. This led me to consider how ethics and reflective practice might be related, and arguing against more traditional systems thinking–based conceptions of how we learn, I set out how these activities could be reconciled in Mead's social behaviourist theory. I argued that morality, from this viewpoint, can helpfully be thought of as a process of taking in perspectives to inform tentative actions that keep options open. This is a very different way of thinking about how we take responsibility, and for what; I suggested that OD practitioners might see this conception of ethics as a way of engaging differently with uncertainty in their practice.

At the end of this project, I notice how the progress of my research has been accompanied by a diminishing confidence in being able to predict the outcomes of my actions at work – in other words, to *know* what to do – and a growing sense of readiness to rely on my instincts rather than simply expecting things to rationally go to plan, as I may have done before. This has surprised me: as I described in my Project 1, being knowledgeable is part of my sense of self and a prominent aspect of how I find myself in relation with others. Further, in exploring psychoanalytical perspectives as part of this project, I notice that intellectualising is one of the ways in which I tend to deal with anxiety. To find myself at relative ease with not knowing, on the one hand, is therefore very destabilising; on the other, I am intrigued that I feel exhilarated by the way that I am now finding myself tolerating uncertainty. Despite this, I find it very difficult to describe what am I actually doing and feeling when I am acting *in the moment*; and so I am wondering if exploring knowing and not-knowing as social phenomena may help to deepen my inquiry about what OD practitioners are doing in their work, especially if they choose to do it in the way that I am suggesting.

I am therefore starting my third project intending to inquire into the experience of what we are actually doing when we find ourselves knowing or not knowing what to do.

PROJECT 3:

Exploring being stuck as a negotiation of social orders: preliminary thoughts on honesty as a way of coping with uncertainty

Introduction

My second project began with an exploration of my work as the lead for an internal culture and leadership project in my organisation. As I inquired into how I was going about this work, what I found most intriguing was the way my search for a satisfactory conclusion seemed to be repeatedly frustrated by the new ways of thinking I was encountering through my research and the feedback I was receiving from the DMan research community. These new perspectives seemed to be completely changing not only what I considered to be worth writing about, but also what I felt I was able to say and do at work.

This led me to explore the processes of reflection and reflective practice, and while still inconclusive, I found this much more satisfying. This was in part because I felt released from the constraining pressure of normative ethical thinking, but also because I became able to articulate a small number of beliefs that I can see informing my own practice as I try to 'do the right thing'. These are beliefs about the importance of social integration, attitudinal plurality, and acting tentatively to increase the possibilities for action. These feel irreducible because, though I seem to be habitually self-questioning (and perhaps increasingly so), I am comfortable in accepting these as qualities of my experience that I feel less need to question. In the terms that Dewey uses about reflection (e.g. 1933), they are part of my uncritical thinking which my experience rarely calls into question; in Gadamer's terms (1975), they are prejudices that remain intact in the hermeneutic processes I am engaged in with others.

I have found a similar process of evolution taking place over the course of this project. As I will describe, my initial iterations focussed on a clear and relatively contained experience I had at work, which I could then analyse from a number of theoretical perspectives. However, what I found most interesting was the movement in my own thought as the process of inquiry opened up further areas for exploration. Some of these felt quite uncomfortable, but engaging with this discomfort illuminated aspects of my experience at work that I appeared to be avoiding; this provided new possibilities for action.

This project is therefore an account of the dialectic of my research and my work. It draws attention to the ways in which ideological tensions play out in unexpected ways, both in my work and in my

research, and highlights how the avoidance of uncertainty and discomfort based on power relating might get in the way of acquiring new perspectives. I consider how being stuck can arise from the competition of social orders, and how experiences of becoming unstuck can be thought of as particularly poignant instances of more general processes of social reconstruction.

Organisational context

I am working in the same organisation as I have been for the last two years, a national body responsible for oversight of the health and care system in the UK. My portfolio of work has remained largely consistent throughout this period; its main focus is on projects that contribute to the development of capacity and capability around culture, leadership, and governance in the organisations we oversee. These are unusual activities for the organisation: most of our work seems to be focussed on increasing productivity and managing the performance of services that are increasingly described by commentators as being in decline and in urgent need of a different operating model (e.g. Darzi 2017). Some say that, as an organisation, we are at best slowing down the rate of failure, but many remain optimistic that we are making small differences that perhaps will add up to some kind of meaningful transformation.

Hanging over all of us is the spectre of reorganisation. Changes in primary legislation in 2012 (Health and Social Care Act 2012) dismantled key elements of the national and local oversight architecture, and more recent changes saw a further reorganisation of some of the remaining national infrastructure, aspects of which created the organisation I now work for. Two years in, staff have fed back through various routes, including the annual staff survey, that the operating model isn't working; so our senior leadership team is actively exploring what improvements to this might look like. This includes closer working with other national bodies, and significant changes are expected with the recent arrival of a new chair and chief executive.

Ostensibly, my colleagues and I are focussing on getting on with our work, talking in public forums about the importance of what we're trying to achieve and challenging perhaps more mechanistic conceptions that something as complex as millions of people interacting in increasingly ambiguous conceptual groupings can be 'fixed' if only we could find the right tool. However, our staff survey results reflect a contrasting undercurrent, which is comparatively covert – while a very high percentage of those who responded said they cared about the purpose of the organisation and its future, less than half said they expected to be working for the organisation in two years' time. The conversations hinted at here about moving into new roles happen far from the public stage, occurring instead around the photocopier or over drinks after work, or as anonymised feedback in

the staff survey asking for more transparency about plans for future mergers. Further, I increasingly hear people talking about union membership to make sure that, as a group of employees, we get a fair deal in any future changes. In response to the staff survey in particular, the senior leadership team have offered ameliorative responses in the form of reassurance that there will be no redundancies and that any changes will make us more effective; these are met with what seems to be resolute scepticism and mistrust among many of the staff I encounter.

Contemporary British sociologist Peter Marris's analysis of the politics of uncertainty based upon Bowlby's attachment theory (Marris 1996) has much to offer in making sense of this dynamic. Marris argues that those with greater ability to make choices manage their need for security, which is innate according to attachment theory (e.g. Bowlby 1979), by placing the burden of uncertainty upon those who, because of unequal power differentials, are less able to make their own choices. This can be seen, for example, in the way that large corporations will stabilise their core functions by contracting with smaller companies who, because their existence is more precarious, have little choice but to hold the anxiety that uncertainty creates if they are to continue to operate (ibid: 103). By extension, this might also be seen in the way that, in the emergence of global value chains, Western capitalist economies exploit asymmetries of market, social, and political dominance (e.g. Phillips 2017) by outsourcing their riskier production functions to developing countries, often putting some of the world's most vulnerable people in significant danger.

Marris argues that those who find themselves bearing the uncertainty because of their positions of relative weakness have little option but to create a different kind of security for themselves: adaptability is sustained through psychological withdrawal and a disinvestment of personal meaning (Marris 1996: 103). In my organisation, despite the senior leaders' reassurances, one could see the private speculations of employees about not being told the whole story, or about what the 'real' motivations behind increased joint working with other organisations might be, as manifestations of just such a psychological withdrawal, which is arguably an adaption in response to the experience of so many reorganisations over recent years. Each of these has claimed to be solving the problems created by the last, so one might well expect employees to be suspicious because their experience suggests that this kind of shuffling of deckchairs, which is endemic to organisational life in this part of the public sector, rarely achieves the results that are promised.

While this starts to offer an explanation for why staff may be feeling disengaged, Marris does not say much about how these muted realities might be expressed in other ways, e.g. in the photocopier conversations or responses to the staff survey. Following Nietzschean and Foucauldian lines of thinking, contemporary American political theorist and anthropologist James C. Scott describes a

model of public and hidden transcripts in his *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990), which offers a way into exploring these patterns of interaction based on power relating.

Public and hidden transcripts

Scott considers the ways in which narratives of the dominant and the dominated support the perpetuation of power relations: *public transcripts* are a social group's officially sanctioned stories, which reflect the hegemonic aspirations of the dominant group. They draw attention to the things that provide the biased evidence for maintaining their dominance, and away from those that threaten it. Political rituals (royal coronations, state openings of parliament, mandatory submissions of operating plans and strategies) are among the ways this can be perpetuated (Lukes 1977). *Hidden transcripts*, by contrast, are the narratives of the oppressed that emerge either in non-official spaces, or in code, for fear of retaliation by the oppressors against members of the oppressed group. They too can serve to maintain the existing power relations: acts of defiance that arise from oppressed groups' feelings of resistance and resentment of their oppressors can be seen as tests of whether the system of domination holds up. These tests are acceptable as long as they do not 'tear the fabric of the hegemony' (ibid: 204), and in those cases the fates of would-be transgressors become part of the mythology that serves to strengthen the hidden transcript and maintain the existing power relations. Should the challenge succeed, however, the ground is laid for significant social reconstruction.

In my organisation, it would be a conceptual leap to suggest that there is an overt oppressor/oppressed dynamic at play between distinct groups of people. However, the absence of public dialogue about potential reorganisations and mergers could suggest dissimulation of much of what people seem to be anxious about. Based on Scott's argument, one could see this absence as a way of avoiding entering into conversations that might threaten the established social order to the extent that we become unable to continue to discharge our organisational functions. This could take the form of exodus, or perhaps hopelessness, either of which might even strengthen the case for significant reorganisation as senior leaders have to find new ways to deal with their dependence on the workforce. Paradoxically, therefore, it may be in everyone's interests not to push too hard for answers about the future (despite a desire for more certainty), as this may ultimately compromise our ability to do the work we think is important. As these may be concerns for all employees rather than one group or another, importantly, this situates the tension between public and hidden transcripts *intra*-politically (from within) rather than, as Scott suggests, *infra*-politically (from below); in other words, we can at the same time be both oppressors and oppressed.

I will come back to this later; but for now, these are important early observations for two reasons. First, they help me to consider the ways in which transparency is perhaps being idealised as a comforting response to the anxiety that waiting 'in limbo' creates. As the other aspect of my job is being an internal OD consultant, this is especially pertinent for thinking about the team development activities that I facilitate and the sense I make of how people respond to me. Second, they are the foundation of how I am now making sense of my experience of undertaking this project. In its earlier iterations, I had significant experiences of being stuck: writing about a team away day I had run for the Support Directorate in my organisation, I kept feeling that something about it was wrong or missing. My exploration suggested that the same things being excluded from the public transcript in my organisation might also be unconsciously being excluded in my research. What follows, therefore, is an account of the process of becoming unstuck and the role of my research as a *critical dialogue partner* (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011) to my practice.

My relationship with the Support Directorate

I have been running team away days for the Support Directorate every four to six months for nearly two years. This came about because Sandra, the Director of Support, and Jeff, her business manager, decided they wanted someone to facilitate their team's first away day following the last restructure. They had heard that this was something I could help with.

The previous year's staff survey feedback had indicated morale was low, so all the organisation's executives were putting renewed emphasis on increasing engagement – as a general measure of staff satisfaction across a range of measures – in their teams. Most had planned programmes of team time outs and away days, and these were just starting to ripple through the organisation. At the time, I remember thinking that a rather simple and mechanistic relationship was being assumed between bringing people together every few months for some kind of large group activity and improvements in morale, almost irrespective of what actually went on in those events. I was sceptical about these assumptions, on the one hand, because of how I was coming to think about social life in general from my work on the DMan programme (which I was just starting): on what basis did we think that better engagement, or happier staff, should lead to more effective work? And why should bringing people together have any impact on this?

On the other hand, and more practically, my colleagues and I talked about how these away days for our own directorate seemed to be slightly interesting distractions from our day jobs, and sometimes a bit of a waste of time. This was especially the case when the activities undertaken did not appear to relate to the work that we were routinely doing together and so, while perhaps enjoyable at the

time, were seen by some at least as rather trivial. This no doubt influenced our evolving expectations of events like these, which in turn affected how we engaged with future events unless something dramatically different were to take place.

I have found the same mechanistic assumption to be prevalent in many of the organisations I have worked in. I wonder if this is because the belief that developing new of ways of thinking or working is better done as a group exercise rather than by an individual, reflects the ideologies prevalent in those organisations and society more widely. This seems to be especially the case in the public sector where organisational purposes tend to address one or another kind of social problem – be it the provision of health, education, environment, or prison services, or their development or oversight. It has been proposed that the career motivations of those who work in these organisations relate to specific social ideals rather than financial rewards (Perry 1996; Feldheim 2007), and there seems to be an implicit assumption that those ideals can be best realised if people work together effectively.

This isn't necessarily controversial: when the business of providing care relies on being able to cooperate with colleagues to execute what can be very complex activities for the benefit of people in various states of vulnerability, coming together physically to work on building relationships or managing collective anxieties that might otherwise get in the way (Menzies 1960; Hirschhorn 1988) makes sense. And this seems to be a very common thought style in the health and care system, where staff morale and engagement are instrumentalised for the idealised purposes of delivering better outcomes for patients and service users; for examples, see West et al (2002), or Bodenheimer and Sinsky (2014). It is perhaps no wonder then that the belief noted above, about the connection between working together and being together, arises. However, a problem with these kinds of generalisations is that they do not take into account the particularities of the situations in which they are functionalised. I will come back to this later.

Contracting for the first event

My first contact with the Support Directorate was an email I received from Jeff two weeks before the first event was due to take place, asking if I could help. We met briefly, and he explained what he and Sandra wanted. I had been excited at the opportunity to work with the team, at the time attributing this to the route by which it had come – I had been recommended by another director whose team I had worked with to design and run an event using large group facilitation techniques that were quite novel, at least for our organisation. I was practising these techniques as part of building my own confidence as much as anything, so being recognised in this way was flattering.

Jeff showed me the agenda, which was tightly packed with speakers and structured activities that seemed to allow little time for any actual conversation, and it quickly became clear that keeping the sessions to time was all that Jeff really wanted me to contribute to their day. I felt a little affronted: timekeeping seemed to be a poor use of my skills and perhaps even a little demeaning. I asked him if there was any flexibility to change the schedule to allow more time for interaction, and Jeff replied that the agenda was now set. He seemed to consider his request perfectly reasonable; even when I asked him, with a raised eyebrow, 'So, literally all you want me to do is to make sure things stop and start on time?', he confirmed this with a firm but affable enthusiasm. From his encouraging tone and smile, I supposed he thought this was something that took particular skill and for which he was very grateful. Perhaps, since he didn't know me, he was reluctant to deviate much from the original plan; and having got to know Jeff better since, I find him to be rather risk-averse, so this approach may have been his way of managing his anxiety about the unknown. That said, the power differential was not only in Jeff's favour: given the proximity of the event, I suspected that he was under pressure from Sandra to find someone to run the session – so he also needed something from me too: my agreement to do it.

Perhaps because of these competing priorities (though they weren't obvious to me at the time), the experience was uncomfortable. I ascribed some of this unease to the conflict between what I was being asked to do and my desire to identify with a community of OD practitioners who share a particular thought style. This relates to what constitutes meaningful engagement in organisations; Bunker and Alban (2006) provide a helpful overview of the emergence of these *large group methods* over the last three decades. Attributing their inception to a greater appreciation of systems thinking in order to increase the speed and scale of change (ibid: 4), these authors suggest these methods share four principles: inclusion of stakeholders; engagement of multiple perspectives through interactive activities; opportunities to influence; and the search for common ground.

Emery and Purser (1996) provide a further helpful articulation of the assumptions that underpin these principles in relation to the *Search Conference* technique, but I think generally apply. These are: that people are purposeful and have the capacity and desire to select desirable outcomes; that people accept responsibility for tasks that are meaningful for them; and that people can function in the ideal-seeking mode under appropriate conditions (ibid: 13). Proponents of dialogic OD (Bushe and Marshak 2013, 2015) would also situate these within a discursive social constructionist epistemology and argue for the importance of an expert practitioner who can add dimensions to people's experience of being together that they cannot elicit themselves.

I do not intend to examine these assumptions in any detail, but mention them here to highlight the evolution of ways of thinking about development, and to consider why the OD community might now be embracing them.

The (re-)birth of tragedy

In the assumptions above, I see biases towards a formative notion of causality (that people have answers or potential enfolded in them that will mechanistically unfold in particular circumstances) and a humanistic psychology (emphasising choice and personal freedom). I believe that these biases can be thought of as idealising the counterclaims to the perceived wider societal trends of individualism, fragmentation of communities, disengagement, and cynicism of the late modern period (e.g. Bauman 2015; Knights and Willmott 2002), the prevalence of a pervasive managerialism characterised by vacuous rhetoric (e.g. Spicer 2017) and a foremost purpose of self-advancement among employees (e.g. Jackall 2009). On that basis, one might characterise the shift in OD practice as a new problematisation of lack of intended impact as *low employee engagement* (as opposed to, for example, *poor organisational design*). This would accord with organisational contexts being increasingly described as 'VUCA' (volatile, unpredictable, complex, ambiguous).

It is argued that when the number of participants in any figuration of interdependent people increases, the control that any one participant can exert over the process and outcome of the interaction decreases (Elias 1978); with the interconnectedness that emerges with global supply chains, facilitated by instant telecommunications, the internet and social media, the number of players now interacting is vastly greater than it was even just 20 years ago. It is perhaps no wonder, then, that organisational leaders and managers feel decreasingly in control of their workforces (setting aside the issue of whether they ever really were); based on Marris's argument that those with more control create security for themselves by forcing uncertainty on those with fewer choices, one might expect to see new ways of exerting control emerging to maintain existing power relations.

In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872)*,* Nietzsche described Greek tragedy as arising from a confrontation between the ancient, civilised, Apollonian society and the threat of social disruption they saw in the Dionysiac cults. The theatrical art form combined the two – a process of assimilation that could be seen as the reframing of a threat, enabling the maintenance of status and control. A contemporary example of a similar process might be seen in the current debate about 'real news' versus 'fake news': those who are in formal positions of authority are trying to maintain their right to occupy those positions, and therefore control, on the basis that they know more than others (Lyotard 1979;

Foucault 1980) in the context of the threat posed by a wholesale democratisation of knowledge (Davis 2009; Denzin 2014; Lapadat 2017).

Using the same argument, one could see OD practitioners' change of emphasis away from the design of organisational structures and bureaucratic control and towards more humanistic ideals of individual empowerment, freedom, trust, and flourishing (for examples, see Seligman 2002; Laloux 2014; Kegan and Laskow Lahey 2016) as a form of professional protectionism. Consciously or unconsciously, OD practitioners may be responding to threats to their existence as a profession – arising from the redundancy of their previous approaches – by assimilating those threats as their key concerns. This would be ironic, given the emancipatory nature of the espoused ideals of OD: while perhaps based on a different set of assumptions in one sense (we are now trying to engage with people as people rather than simply as bureaucratic functionaries, emphasising their freedom), the managerialist thought style arguably remains very much intact. This is manifest, for example, in the continued reliance on mechanistic assumptions about causality, i.e. that if engagement approaches following these principles are used, then benefit for the organisation will follow.

This is perhaps not wholly unexpected, as it might become very difficult to sell OD work to decision-makers on the basis that there can be no certainty about outcomes, even if this is tacitly understood. And I recognise this in my own experience. For example, in Project 2 I argued for the perspectival and temporal instability of meaning based on American pragmatic philosopher and sociologist George Herbert Mead's theory of human interaction (Mead 1934). Mead suggests a very different way of thinking about how social organisation comes about based on an inherently unpredictable, transformative causality; on this view, any approach to OD that assumes that outcomes can be predicted beyond the general expectations we might have based on our previous experiences and patterns of behaviour is problematic.

And yet, while I agree with this critique, I find that I still use the kind of principles described by Emery and Purser (1996), and Bushe and Marshak (2013, 2015), to explain to my sponsors how I think events should be organised. This is perhaps partly because I assume that sponsors want assurance that the time they allocate to team development will yield reliable results, so being able to cite evidence and theory adds weight to my suggestions. However, I also find myself acknowledging some of my own doubts when I try to manage my sponsors' expectations by emphasising their and their teams' responsibilities for participating rather than passively receiving information during the events I run. Again, this could be sees as a negotiation about who holds what aspects of uncertainty, which reveals the politics and power relating that are inherent to these interactions.

In all of this, the role of facilitator is central, which gives people who are able to facilitate groups a special expert status. Part of my discomfort in the conversation with Jeff might therefore be explained by a sense that something I consider important was being negated: my desired self-image in this context was bound up in being someone who runs particular kinds of events and is knowledgeable and up to date with the latest trends in OD. To be asked to do something as mundane as keeping time challenged how I want to be seen, both by others and by myself.

The evolution of this project

While this may be a plausible explanation for some of what I was experiencing, it perhaps doesn't adequately explain how I actually dealt with my feelings of discomfort and the competing priorities I have just described – which was largely to ignore them. A simple solution would have been to turn down the request; and indeed, in quite similar circumstances I have turned down requests for support where I have felt I wouldn't be able to do things in the way I would prefer. On this occasion, however, I did not: responding to Jeff's enthusiasm, I brightened my own tone and demeanour and said 'Sure – no problem'. We went through the agenda again and I pointed out a few places where I thought improvements could be made. I reiterated my concern that it may not provide enough time for people to actually interact with each other; but we'd just have to see how it went.

In the earlier iterations of this project, I paid little attention to the negotiation with Jeff I have just described; it was simply part of the scene-setting that contextualised the third away day I ran for the Support Directorate. I noted briefly that my motives for accepting the request were about wanting to gain more experience and improve my proficiency in working with large groups; I also mentioned seeing it as an opportunity to get to know Sandra and her team better, but this was a passing thought at best. The proceedings of the third away day became the focus of the project, and I will now briefly summarise the analyses that formed the whole of this project in its first few drafts.

I described how, by running two successful events not of my design, and being able to reasonably accurately predict the feedback that they would receive, in Sandra and Jeff's eyes I had become a trusted 'expert'. This meant that I was able to influence the design and content of the event; and I noticed how I brought in ideas from the DMan programme about allowing time for conversations to develop, and emphasising reflexivity. This was in the context of discussions about the organisation's new corporate values and trying to improve inter-team working within the directorate.

I went on to try to describe in some detail what the event was like, what the space was like, who was there, the activities I designed, and how they played out. This included a few instances where I wondered what we thought we were all doing and made some mildly provocative comments to this

effect. I noticed the paradox of safety and experimentation in OD practice: the role of the facilitator (like the coach or therapist) is to create a safe environment for the participants; but to develop proficiency, one must also experiment with groups, which might undermine the very safety the facilitator attempts to create. Linked to this, I explored the dynamics of the group and the facilitator, arguing against the idea that appears in the mainstream OD literature of facilitators as selfless, neutral guides working only in the interests of their clients (e.g. Cheung-Judge and Holbeche 2015; Marshak et al 2015; Justice and Jamieson 1998; Corrigan 2015). Further, I argued that, despite surfacing these competing priorities, the group and facilitator's mutual collusion in the imagining of leader/follower roles was likely to be based largely on norms established by our past experiences of this kind of event, rather than the illuminating but perhaps more mystical explanations for crowd behaviour described by psychoanalysts in the Freudian tradition (Freud 1921; and e.g. Bion 1961; Parkin-Gounelas 2012; Reicher 2012).

I found these to be interesting observations, and they had some resonance with the colleagues I began to discuss them with. In my research and my practice, I found myself emphasising that we needed to take more seriously the interests of OD practitioners themselves in their relationships with clients, and in particular the roles they might have in reinforcing or changing the existing patterns of interaction according to their own biases rather than simply 'helping'.

I felt these to be logical and relatively compelling conclusions; however, the feedback I received from my DMan learning set as I developed my work, while encouraging and supportive, kept returning to a few important problems. First, despite my efforts to describe the Support Directorate's away day, my learning set found it hard to get a sense of *how* I was interacting with the group of ~80 senior managers and what they were all doing as I was facilitating. Second, my account lacked the 'thickness' (Geertz 1973) that describing context and intention provide for the interpretation of events; and, third, I seemed very focussed on my own speculations, anxieties, and dilemmas, which undermined the generalisability of my account. Moreover, it wasn't clear to any of us why what I was writing about was anything more than an interesting theoretical foray – my arguments may have been sound, but it wasn't clear why they were of interest to me, if indeed they were at all.

The autoethnographic research method (see e.g. Czarniawska 2004; Rhodes and Brown 2005; Ellis 2007; Denzin 2014) employed in the DMan programme starts with narratives of experiences of work that we feel are somehow significant, and from which generalisable contributions to knowledge and practice can be extrapolated (Stacey and Griffin 2005; Mowles 2017a, 2017b). The emerging sense that my inquiry was superficial made me doubt that what I had written about had enough of interest

in it to warrant the exploration I had conducted, and I was tempted to start again with a different narrative. At the same time, I found myself thinking quite separately about the purposes served by problematisations of particular topics over others: as Foucault argues, problematisations both draw attention to certain things and distract from others (Foucault 1980; Foucault and Pearson 2001). Reflecting upon this, in drawing attention to the facilitation aspect of the away day, then, perhaps I was also diverting attention from something of significance. At the time, however, I couldn't easily see that possibility, and things only started to become clearer at the most recent residential of the DMan programme.

An opportunity to become unstuck

Attending residential weekends are an integral aspect of undertaking the doctorate and involve working in large and small groups to explore how our experiences of being together as a community illuminate corresponding aspects of organisational life in relation to our research (Mowles 2017a, 2017b). The programme uses techniques that resemble aspects of the therapeutic group analytical model conceived by S.H. Foulkes (e.g. 1975), and there is an assumption about the value of this kind of experience for deepening students' research inquiries, just as the process of free-floating conversation in the Foulkesian therapy group increases patients' capacity to deal with their conditions (Stacey and Griffin 2005; Stacey 2006).

As I have said, despite the helpful efforts of my learning set, I think we all felt that I was stuck or that something significant was missing from my work. Questions would come up that I would try to answer hoping for some kind of epiphany, but this optimism would quickly fade with a sense of disappointment as I remained feeling stuck. I found myself feeling increasingly despondent about my ability to complete the project, and sometimes the doctorate programme altogether. However, something changed at the learning set meeting on the penultimate evening of the residential.

It was dark outside, and we were sitting in a small circle of four. It was my turn to talk about my research and, feeling quite resigned about where I found myself with my project, I started by rather grumpily expressing my frustration with not being able to 'fix' it. I went on to describe my project as boring and unimportant, which was a marked change from the more exploratory and optimistic attitude I usually try to maintain. Despite being rather uncomfortable, I felt a greater sense of coherence, which seemed somehow truer or more honest than before. It is difficult to describe this sensation beyond saying it felt like a bodily untightening, perhaps something like the relief experienced when breathing out after having held one's breath for a few seconds too long. This shift, finally, was accompanied by a new sense of possibility. Of course, nothing had changed in our

small conversational circle beyond my new disclosure, so I am very interested to explore what such changes in sensation might mean.

Traditional Western philosophy tends to characterise truth in terms of some kind of correspondence between internal experience and an external reality (e.g. Dreyfus and Taylor 2015), and yet here, my sense of something feeling true seemed to be signalled by a change in my body state, rather than being purely cognitive – a kind of coherence for which I would struggle to find an external correlate or indeed a particularly good description. Dreyfus and Taylor (2015) suggest that these kinds of experiences can be better explained by thinking in terms of *contact theories*, which are ontologically based on the assumption that *being* arises because we are in constant (conceptual and preconceptual) contact with the world as engaged agents (ibid; Shotter 2016). *Human* being, then, arises particularly from being aware of our positions as such engaged agents (Brinkmann 2017), which is similar to the argument that Mead makes about human consciousness and self-consciousness in his theory of human interaction (Mead 1934).

This is in stark contrast with *mediational theories*, which rely on the matching up of outside referents with internal representations, based essentially on some form of Cartesian dualism. Dreyfus and Taylor argue that in contact theories, instead, truth is *self-authenticating*. Giving examples of how one can be sure which year it is, or what activity one is currently undertaking (for example, I am currently typing at my computer), they argue that when asked to explain why one is sure, little more can be said that 'when you're there, you know you're there': these are firm aspects of the background on which other things are examined (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015: 19).

Importantly, this is an embodied, temporal process rather than an abstract comparison: the sensation of truth is inseparable from how it is arrived at. Further, it is a realist position that, in contrast to positivist epistemologies, can more easily cope with the plurality of human experience. The argument is that nature has its own ontic structure that is radically independent of human agents, and to grasp it we are called to continuously revise and adjust our thinking. However, this reality can be multiple and incommensurably described, which accounts for the possibility of differences in perception and paradox in experience that are another source of challenge to our thinking (Carman 2018).

What I find interesting about this concept of self-authentication is that it seems to be a way of describing a bodily experience of coherence that is not purely relativist or constructed socially in language, but rather relates to the embodied apprehension of some kind of pre-established meaning; while perhaps seeming a little ambiguous, this captures something about my experience that I haven't found another way to describe. If we can judge something as true based on a bodily

sensation, then perhaps we can sense honesty – the sense of having revealed to others and to oneself all that might pertain to a particular matter – in a similar way. Based on Dreyfus and Taylor's view, however, this is not necessarily a social phenomenon; but I will critique that position later on.

To explore this fully would probably require an entire project; but for now, these preliminary observations are helpful as they lead to a novel way of understanding my dissatisfaction with previous iterations of this project. If something had started to happen that felt more honest, what might have been untrue about what had gone before? I was as certain as I could be that my descriptions of what had happened hadn't been deliberately misleading; they were the best account I could give of my experience. Yet the sense of something missing had been a theme, and so honesty seemed to be something to do with completeness; and, in line with the argument above, my inability to identify whatever was missing suggested that it was unformulated, unacknowledged, or perhaps even concealed from me as well as from others.

A perspective on concealment from psychoanalysis

One way we might explore how and why we hide things from ourselves is using the psychoanalytical concept of *repression*. In Freudian theory, repression is one of the possible defensive responses of the *ego* to intolerable instinctual tension: through a turning away of the impulse or idea causing the tension from the conscious mind, and thus kept at a safe distance (Freud 1915). Something is not repressed once and for all, however; rather, it is an ongoing and dynamic process of intrapsychic conflict that can result in problematic symptoms or neuroses. Therefore, if something in my experience were being repressed, it could manifest in some dysfunctional way, such as in expressions of boredom or frustration. Boredom, in particular, has been characterised as a state of someone 'searching for an object [to discharge a drive], not in order to act on it with his drive-impulses, but rather to be helped by it to find a drive-aim which he is missing' (Fenichel 1954: 351). If, as Fenichel suggests, a sense of boredom can arise from the sense of an absence of meaning or purpose, then could my feelings of frustration have arisen from the sense of something being missing?

Another formulation of how we can unconsciously conceal things from ourselves is found in the work of twentieth-century British psychoanalyst John Bowlby. In his theory of *attachment*, Bowlby suggests that early life experiences involving deprivation of and reunion with significant security-providing figures (usually the mother) inform future patterns of relating (e.g. Bowlby 1961, 1979). Where children are unexpectedly deprived of this figure, the common reactions of anger and yearning – and finally, the construction of the defence of detachment – over time evolve into

healthy approaches to dealing with these kinds of events, but fundamentally promote the conscious and unconscious pursuit of security over the anxiety that uncertainty provokes (Marris 1996). In this theory, *exclusion* rather than repression enables the maintenance of security; indeed, the exclusion of an important aspect of my own experience might be related to the desire not to address certain elements of anxiety-provoking threat to my own feelings of security. As noted earlier, this theory informs the arguments that Peter Marris makes about the consequences of the pursuit of security in society more widely.

Given that psychoanalytical therapy might be considered successful when those instincts or ideas that have been repressed are brought into consciousness so that they can be better managed (Freud 1915), or when those emotional responses that have been excluded are experienced therapeutically (Bowlby 1961), my learning set could be seen as playing the analyst's role for me by drawing attention to the possibility that what was missing might be related to feelings of security.

There is no doubt that psychoanalysis has a great deal to offer researchers of organisational life (e.g. Jaques 1955; Menzies 1960; Marris 1996; Hirschhorn 1988; Gabriel 1999), and a common corollary for the study of organisations is to consider how individual processes occur in these kinds of groupings through the transfer of mental contents from one person to another. However, the explanations it provides can be seen as problematic for a reason arising from the theoretical basis of psychoanalysis: it relies on the primacy of the individual mind as an internal world with inborn drives or instincts, and assumes a systems-based way of thinking where individuals are closed entities interacting with each other. As with all systems-based theories, this position cannot easily cope with some of the inevitable outcomes of experience conceived as social, which begins with the proposal that individual minds are social through and through (Mead 1934).

As I have described in Projects 1 and 2, Mead's analysis of human interaction proposes a continuity between *society* – the conversation of gestures that occurs between the bodies of different individuals – and *mind* – the conversation of gestures that occurs as a kind of private role-play made possible by human beings' ability to respond to the imagined gestures and responses of others. These imaginings are informed by our past experiences and idealisations that arise through our continual interactions with others, which together constitute the sense of an increasingly complex *generalised other*. This continuity is important because it explains how individuals or groups of individuals interacting with each other involve the same social process as does an individual interacting with themselves; and, paradoxically, that what is thought of as individual consciousness and self-consciousness *can only arise* socially. On this basis, the notion of innate drives that play out interpersonally becomes problematic.

Further, from a more practice-based perspective, if psychoanalysis concerns individual minds, then it concerns social or group processes (Dalal 1998); and because group processes involve interdependence, mutual constraints, and therefore politics and power relating (Elias 1978), the concept of an analytical therapeutic process that relies on a notion of internal worlds where politics can be 'kept out of the room' (Dalal 1998: 113) seems questionable. That these key features of psychoanalytical practice are problematic suggests we might usefully look for other explanations.

A perspective on concealment from critical theory

Staying with the general idea of omission being somehow related to security, one way we might proceed in trying to understand honesty is by referring back to Scott's theory of public and hidden transcripts (1990). As I outlined at the start of this project, Scott (1990) suggests that the public and hidden transcripts of interdependent groups function to preserve a dominant but fragile social order that is at constant risk of transgression by the oppressed. I suggested that some of the hidden transcripts in my organisation were about our personal existential concerns relating to the threat of restructure, versus the more acceptable public discourses about continuing to be able to do meaningful work.

By analogy, this provides a way into thinking about what might be missing from my inquiry; but for this analogy to be valid, I need to demonstrate how – in contrast to the dynamics of the actual master/servant relationships that Scott bases his work upon – the sense of competing social discourses can be located in the private social processes of individuals. This is possible with reference to the continuity of society and mind I outlined above (Mead 1934). On this basis, rather than minds being internal worlds interacting with an outside world and therefore requiring fixed positions within social hierarchies to provide a basis for power relating, they can be described as social processes patterned with a multiplicity of emergent and contextual qualities. In turn, this means that the intersection of multiple discourses and their associated power relations can be located in an 'individual', but only insofar as this is seen as a temporally dynamic process wholly embedded in an enabling and constraining network of social interaction. This way of thinking about identity formation is captured well by Ybema et al (2009: 301), who characterise it as:

> a complex, multifaceted process which produces a socially negotiated temporary
> outcome of the dynamic interplay between internal strivings and external
> prescriptions, between self-presentation and labeling by others, between achievement
> and ascription and between regulation and resistance.

If we consider the public transcript in my case to have been manifest in how I found myself exploring and making sense of my experience, then – based on what I have described – we could characterise the dominant order being perpetuated as ostensibly involving the rational (Townley 2008) and depersonalised (Baumann 1989) ideals traditionally associated with bureaucracy, along with the altruistic ideologies of the public sector. I can locate the origination of these norms in at least three social discourses in which I have been involved: my university studies, my work, and the public-sector culture. In Mead's terms, these inform my sense of the generalised other and so situate my habitual tendencies to respond.

First, as an undergraduate in analytical philosophy I was trained to test the validity of arguments as logical problems rather than much to do with the real world – illustrating the kind of rational bias which, it has been argued, arises from the predominance of the scientific paradigm and its supposition that some kind of objective position is possible (Mead 1923; Elias 1978). So, I might describe a predisposition towards this kind of thinking as a long-established patterning of my experience, which is probably also evident in the way that I have just tried to provide a 'proof' of the validity of the analogy.

Second, impersonal rationalisation is generally expected in my work: the health and care sector is dominated by strategic planning and my organisation is, ostensibly at least, very bureaucratic. I suggested in Project 2 that, apart from being a way to impose a rational structure on the complexity of organisational life so that work can continue, these plans might also serve as instruments of social control functionalised for the perpetuation of managerialism, and/or ways we organise ourselves unconsciously to manage our anxiety about our work in the context of a system in decline. Having worked in these kinds of organisations for over a decade, I am socialised into such ways of thinking and no doubt perpetuate these norms, or rules of conduct, because not to do so would be to break with the very things that afford me membership of those groups (Elias and Scotson 1965). Following Foucauldian lines of thinking (e.g. Foucault 1975), without being articulated, these norms are likely to have a disciplining effect that I do not generally notice; this is a different way of thinking about how unconscious processes play out.

Third, I find there is a strong sense in the service-oriented aspects of the public sector of a kind of asceticism that denies personal interests (at least formally). For example, those hired into leadership roles are usually asked to contractually commit to abiding by the *Nolan Principles of Public Life* (selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty, and leadership), by which they can then be held to account (Committee on Standards in Public Life 1995). It is not surprising, then, as Perry (1996) and Feldheim (2007) find in their studies, that public-sector employees tend to cite

these kinds of altruistic concepts as their career motivations. However, it is less clear whether these truly are personal ideals voluntarily held, or norms into which individuals have been consciously or unconsciously socialised as part of working in public service.

In either case, as social artefacts that moderate behaviour (Foucault 1975), they are considerable constraints on human freedom and, ironically, are perhaps rather inhuman: arguably, degrees of selfishness, subjectivity, and privacy are part of what make us who we are. Yet acceptance of these norms is part of group membership, which is reinforced in ways that are far subtler than the performance of signing a contract. For example, at a recent conference, I participated in a small discussion group of about 10 people from a variety of healthcare organisations, in which we found ourselves talking about workers' motivations in the context of managing change processes.

One member of the group – Ian, the head of patient experience for a hospital – seemed to be suggesting that we could always rely on the notion of *patient care* as a way of overcoming resistance to change. Aware of being slightly provocative, I suggested that while this might be important, it wasn't the only thing that motivated people: based on my own experiences of trying to manage change, mortgages, family life, or other interests often outweighed patient care in the balance of deciding whether to support a change – but these other motivators were less easy to talk about. This was a reflection of the argument that concepts like patient care are *cult values*, which are generalised ideals that can emerge in groups, imagined as free of the constraints that their functionalisation in particular circumstances necessarily involves (Mead 1923, 1934; Griffin 2002; Stacey 2012). They can be problematic if they are seen as totalising in a way that ignores the conflict that arises between people as they negotiate with each other to functionalise competing ideals in their judgements about what to do.

I thought I was making a reasonable point about the practicalities of our actual experience of trying to manage change and the shortcomings of simply relying on abstract ideals, and so I was somewhat surprised by Ian's highly charged emotional reaction: he became quite agitated, perhaps even angry, reiterating his point strongly towards me that patient care was *always* ultimately at the heart of why people worked in healthcare. This rather aggressive attempt to silence me could be seen as an effort to preserve identity: it is conceivable that for Ian, against the background of what is seen by many to be a fundamental principle of this part of the public sector, it might have been disturbing to have a core aspect of his role, as well as his way of thinking about how to resolve conflict, called into question in public. Ian's response itself did not deter me – I still wanted to pursue the argument, rather than give in to a totalising error that I suspected limited our ability to really make a difference to patient care: taking Ian's line, I felt, ran the risk of covering over important aspects of why we

couldn't be better at it. It was more that when I scanned the faces of other members of the group in search of support, everyone avoided eye contact; I guessed that I was at the boundary of what was acceptable according to our group norms, so I relented. This is a further example of the ways we maintain group membership through self-censorship by avoiding the shame and stigma that challenging deeply held beliefs might occasion (Elias and Scotson 1965). It also provides insights into how social norms are perpetuated through everyday interactions.

Acknowledging these socialisations as the basis of 'my' public transcript, following the analogy would suggest that there may be hidden transcripts that play out in different spaces, for different audiences, and can be more emotionally charged. Bringing in the themes of security, uncertainty, and power relating, we might also suggest that 'my' hidden transcript concerned values or behaviours that I might prefer not to engage with. This started to become more apparent as the learning set meeting I was describing continued.

The prospect of a grand dénouement

As my learning set colleagues and I persevered with trying to find a way through my feeling of being stuck, my supervisor asked me who else in my organisation might be feeling bored or stuck. This question presented me with another new sensation: it was as if a very faint light had become suddenly brighter. With some surprise, I noticed a growing sense of enthusiasm (albeit tinged with embarrassment that I had not thought of this before) as I started to describe the context of the threat of organisational restructure or merger and the conflicting feelings that these created for me, none of which had occurred to me to mention before. I went on to describe how, based on the photocopier conversations and staff survey results, it was likely that many of my colleagues were thinking about their work in the context of potentially not having jobs in the near future.

Suddenly, new avenues became available for making sense of why I could do little more than describe passing details about Sandra's team at the away day: perhaps in the context of the uncertainty about our ongoing employment, the topics of corporate values and inter-team working could only ever seem rather trivial. No wonder I was unable to describe the details of my interactions with Sandra's team, and that writing about the away day for this project might also seem trivial. Or perhaps I was more actively avoiding engaging with the group, albeit unconsciously, to protect myself (and perhaps us all) from the kind of emotionally charged conversations that talking about our real preoccupations with future employment might provoke. Further, apart from these kinds of conversations being generally out of keeping with the norms of bureaucratic organisations (Fineman 2000, 2001), perhaps I thought Sandra and Jeff might find them at odds with

the optimistic tone they needed to maintain to keep the team motivated, and so I shied away from provoking such discussions so as to maintain my standing with my sponsors.

What was coming to light in the conversation was a sense that, while I had been talking and writing about competing interests and how OD practitioners are perhaps more self-serving than we might usually acknowledge in the particular context of running large group meetings, I had been excluding the exploration of those same themes in my wider experience. By focussing on the facilitation of the away day in isolation from the anxiety-provoking aspects of the organisational context, I was avoiding examining how I was going about, through this same event and otherwise, responding to the anxiety of organisational uncertainty by attending to my own interests.

In Scott's terms, the conversation with my learning set had enabled a transgression of the orderly, principled and selfless public transcript of management in the health and care sector with something that is usually excluded – both organisationally and personally. This transgression created a sense of an opportunity for social transformation; again, I draw attention here to how the dynamic relationship between hidden and public transcripts is evoked in the private processes of individuals.

Engaging with the 'main chance' of self-advancement

The moral philosopher G.E. Moore suggested that altruism denotes the theory that 'we ought always to aim at other people's happiness, on the grounds that *this is the best means of securing our own* as well as theirs' (Moore 1903: §58, italics added). In other words, selflessness always implies a degree of selfishness, however noble or otherwise one's intentions may be.

It occurs to me that, for the reasons discussed above relating to the norms by which we ostensibly operate in the public sector, a kind of inhuman fairness is implied that denies the possibility of extra-meritocratic considerations playing into most aspects of work. For example, while we might like to believe that our decision-making conforms to calculable rules (Townley 2008), it is argued that most of what happens in organisations is actually political, but this is often omitted from official narratives (Gunn and Chen 2003; Vigoda 2003). Alternatively, in recruitment and promotion, public-sector appointments (at least, those that are not part of national or local political cycles) usually claim to be based on fair and transparent recruitment or talent management processes; this is at odds, however, with research that clearly describes the role patronage plays in how people actually advance in their careers (e.g. Powell et al 2012).

In the corporate world, these practices and the associated response of employees to focus on the 'main chance' of self-advancement (Jackall 2009) through various forms of impression management

(Kowalski and Leary 1990; Drory and Zaidman 2003) are perhaps more expected, if not necessarily more acceptable. In the public sector as I have experienced it, these same practices tend to be couched in terms, for example, of wanting to make a greater social difference rather than being acknowledged as the simultaneously self-serving acts they may be. In the photocopier conversations I have had about the impending restructure, and indeed in my own team's development sessions, while we have been thinking about how we collectively position ourselves to maximise our chances of survival, we haven't talked about what we might be doing individually to secure our futures.

And this is what I now notice I had been doing in the earlier iterations of this project: in my initial drafts, my apparent inability or reluctance to engage with the aspects of my experience that concern how I am going about trying to secure my own organisational survival could have been a way to avoid dealing with the somewhat less noble topics of what we might all be doing to survive, and the deep-rooted shame we might experience when these threaten to surface. Further, this is likely to involve being in competition with each other; this seems at odds with working for the common good and teamwork – which, like patient care, are idealised as cult values.

Recall the conversation with Jeff: despite feeling undervalued and resistant to the request, I agreed to take on the work and explained this to myself in terms of helping Jeff and becoming a better practitioner. Given the specific context of uncertainty about the organisation's future, it is plausible that my accepting the request was based to a significant extent on the desire to be recognised by Jeff – and by proxy, Sandra – as helpful. And there are good reasons for this: Sandra is an important person in my organisation – she has worked in national oversight roles for more than a decade, and is well-respected. Her team does the difficult job of supporting some of the sector's most challenged organisations admirably and, further, she is likely to have a significant say in the arrangements resulting from a reorganisation or merger. Being recognised as helpful and good at one's job by Sandra is therefore a desirable place to find oneself in terms of future survival and it is perhaps no wonder that I agreed to help, despite the challenges this presented to my self-image.

Embodiment, self-authentication, and social reconstruction

This begins to expose some of what I had been reluctant to engage with until I was led into these aspects of my experience by my learning set's provocations to find alternative explanations for what was going on. Despite the noble, selfless ideals into which I have been socialised, there is a hidden transcript of less palatable, selfish concerns that I would prefer not to entertain because engaging with my response to this existential uncertainty could be distressing.

Indeed, when my relationship with Sandra came up in the conversation with my learning set, I felt flooded with conflicting feelings: from a research perspective, I was excited about starting to grasp

something that felt more important than what I had been writing about previously; at the same time, from a professional perspective, I felt dismayed as I considered what exposing my own, largely unconscious, political manoeuvrings might mean for me in terms of my desired self-image. I also felt embarrassed for not having noticed all this in earlier iterations of my project. However, far from being debilitating, these messy, conflictual feelings paradoxically created a new sense of coherence or honesty; and I was exhilarated by the accompanying sense of optimism that emerged. Interestingly, this is in contrast to popular theories from positive psychology and neuroscience suggesting that people are at their most creative when they feel comfortable or happy (see, for example, Brann 2015).

As mentioned earlier, Dreyfus and Taylor (2015) suggest that truth can be thought of as a self-authenticating experience of 'knowing you're there' that is inseparable from the route by which one comes to it; I saw my strong and conflictual feelings as a signal that something important might be happening. Drawing a connection here back to the description of identity formation provided by Ybema et al (2009), in the same way that identities might be described as conflictual, responsive, and negotiated in the moment, we could also regard emotions as bodily responses to stimuli – just as thoughts and speech acts are responses, based in habit, to the actual or imagined gestures of others (e.g. Burkitt 1999, 2014). Therefore, when we notice that our emotions are strong and ambivalent, this could indicate that a significant process of reorganisation of our experience or identity is underway, which may result in meaningful changes in our patterns of behaviour or thought.

That these emotional experiences suggestive of social reconstruction are almost *prohibited* by the kind of impersonal ideals expressed in the Nolan principles, and maintained by the kind of interaction I had with Ian (rejecting my challenges to his apparently deeply held beliefs), perhaps offers important insights into why change seems to be so slow and difficult in the public sector. What might the world be like if strong reactions were seen as opportunities for change that we should rush towards, rather than being suppressed, or intellectualised, or turned into puzzles that we can pay consultancies to solve for us? If we could accept that sometimes these uncomfortable experiences will be intolerable, could staying with them for even a little longer afford us more hope and optimism about doing the meaningful work we claim to want to do?

It is these kinds of experiences that are leading me towards a sense that what I am now exploring in this project is important to me; and this seems bound up in just this question of the extent to which my research, and working as an OD practitioner, offers opportunities to think differently about what I and others have been doing with more of my experience in view.

Social reconstruction and personality reconstruction

It would be easy to think of the process of social reconstruction (or becoming unstuck or changing one's mind) as an individual process, and, as mentioned earlier, self-authentication – as Dreyfus and Taylor describe it – has a similar connotation. However, I argued earlier for the Meadian position of individuals being social through and through; and from that basis, these processes can only be considered as being social.

Taking social reconstruction first, Mead is very clear that, most broadly, social reconstruction and personality reconstruction are two sides of the same coin:

> Social reconstruction by the individual members of any organised human society entails self or personality reconstruction in some degree or other by each of these individuals, and vice versa, for, since their selves or personalities are constituted by the organised social relations to one another, they cannot reconstruct those selves or personalities without also reconstructing, to some extent, the given social order, which is, of course, likewise constituted by their organised social relations to one another. (Mead 1934: 309)

I think what Mead is drawing attention to here is the idea of individual members of societies being the intersections of a myriad of continually evolving, population-wide patterns of interaction (Stacey 2003, 2009, 2012; Stacey and Mowles 2016). Far from being independent, closed entities interacting with each other in systems, individuals and society paradoxically form and are formed by each other; this is how cultures arise and habitus[2] evolves. Therefore, personality reconstruction constitutes changes in patterns for social relating, and vice versa: social reconstruction constitutes changes in individual identities as social phenomena.

Arguably, we are having these kinds of experiences all the time as we encounter and overcome tiny mismatches between our expectations and our experience; but the kind of experience of social reconstruction that is of particular interest to me is that which leads to a bodily sensation of being somehow more honest. How might we construe this particular kind of self-authentication as a social process?

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[2] Bourdieu defines *habitus* as a 'system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or by an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them' (1990: 53). I interpret this as the evolving background social conditionings that unreflectively structure experience, and through which identities and social orders are produced and reproduced.

Self-authentication and embodiment

To explore this adequately, we need to grasp a further aspect of Mead's theoretical programme: in addition to *mind* and *society*, Mead describes the notion of *self* (and therefore self-consciousness) as the subject taking itself as an object. Mead explains this using the concepts of 'me' (self-as-object) and 'I' (self-as-subject). 'Me' signifies particular, temporal and context-specific organisations of the generalised other that call out responsive actions. It is a constraining aspect of self, representing the rules into which we are socialised. 'I', then, signifies that aspect of self which is spontaneously and unpredictably responding to 'me'. It is important to note that for Mead, 'I' and 'me' are therefore functionally discriminable but inseparable *phases* of self; because they mutually define each other, it is important that they are thought of as ongoing dialectical processes, and not reifications as their nomenclature might suggest.

Because 'me' is socially formed and therefore must reflect our histories, the constraints of interdependence, and the power relations inherent to them, I suggest that the experience of social constraint – feeling allowed to do some but not other things – and the occasional lack of it, is one way of understanding self-authentication based on Mead's further description of the potential for *fusion of 'I' and 'me'*:

> It is where the 'I' and the 'me' can in some sense fuse that there arises the peculiar sense of exaltation which belongs to the religious and patriotic attitudes in which the reaction which one calls out in others is the response which one is making himself. (Mead 1934: 273)

Further,

> From the emotional standpoint such situations are peculiarly precious. They involve, of course, the successful completion of the social process. (ibid: 275)

I think Mead is saying here that there are some instances where we temporarily experience a sense of harmony with others in our social field that feels somehow free of the constraints of interdependence. At its logical extreme, this is the 'completion of the social process' because Mead regards the aim of society to be the full integration of individuals with their communities (ibid: 319ff). That Mead's examples of 'I'/'me' fusion are religious and patriotic moments, or the experiences of effective teamwork, perhaps suggests an underlying communitarian ideology; one could equally see the 'I'/'me' fusion as a feature of less desirable groups who nevertheless share strong beliefs. What is important here is the experience of social harmony and the sense that those experiences are especially valued.

By the continuity of minds and society, we can argue that this sense of harmony can also be a solitary experience (i.e. in private conversations with oneself rather than in conversation with others); this may explain the particularly poignant instances of Dreyfus and Taylor's notion of self-authentication I am interested in as social processes. Further, because their theory is contact-based (or preconceptual) rather than mediational (or cognitive), this is an embodied experience rather than an intellectual one. To be clear, however, this is not to say that poignant moments of self-authentication are always necessarily pleasurable; rather, the contexts in which they occur and the nature of what they reveal are likely to determine the valence of the accompanying feelings – we can easily imagine, for example, quite depressing moments of realising something displeasing. However, in the context under discussion, my own poignant moment of self-authentication arose with feeling able to move on with my research, which happened to be pleasing.

That I characterise this experience as involving honesty perhaps reveals a further aspect of my own values – in addition to the set of beliefs I noted at the start of this project, there is something about striving for the broadest spectrum of perspectives that seems to be important to me. Reverting to the conclusions from Project 2 (P2: 52), this may well be bound up in Mead's notion of morality and leads me to want to investigate the ways in which we find ourselves trying to cope ethically with the inevitable uncertainty of social life.

Concluding remarks and areas for further research

In this project, I have inquired into the ways that avoiding anxiety-provoking aspects of our experience can lead to an unsatisfying focus on trivialities, boredom, and frustration. I have described how the idea of something being missing led me to look into how – consciously or unconsciously – we hide things not just from others, but from ourselves. From a psychoanalytical perspective, I found the focus in Bowlby's attachment theory on pursuing security, and the social and political consequences of the associated avoidance of uncertainty that Marris describes, helpful in making sense of my experience.

However, critiquing the theoretical basis of psychoanalysis as insufficiently able to cope with the notion of minds as social through and through led me to seek alternative explanations for concealment. Considering this from the perspective of critical theory, I proposed that Scott's concept of public and hidden transcripts, construed as a dynamic interplay of social orders that can be evoked in the private processes of the individual, offered a compelling alternative way of thinking about how and why we might hide things from ourselves. In my case, the relevant competing discourses appeared to concern, on the one hand, the self-sacrificing ideals of public-sector work

and, on the other, the existential concerns of employees that are negated through shame and guilt as they try to live up to their purported ideals and maintain membership of their social groups.

I found that engaging with aspects of my experience that I had perhaps been socialised to avoid meant confronting the steps I was taking to secure my own future in response to the latent threat of organisational restructure. I described how the process of becoming unstuck had been facilitated by conversations with my learning set, and how the discomfort I felt led to an embodied experience of greater honesty, which I saw as bringing the totality of my experience more clearly into view; this allowed me to move on in my research, as well as giving me new ways to think about my practice.

I described this as a process of *social reconstruction* and that my moments of becoming unstuck could be seen as particularly poignant instances of what Dreyfus and Taylor (2015) call *self-authentication* in their contact-based epistemological programme. Noting the potentially individualistic conception of these terms, I showed how both could be seen in social terms, and especially how self-authentication could be reframed as a particular state (the fusion of the 'I' and the 'me') in Mead's theory of human interaction. Based on my arguments in Project 2, deepening my inquiry in this way is a moral process because it increases my capacity to act by offering a richer understanding of the complexity of my experience.

I am now struck by how this project has brought to light a personal preoccupation I had not noticed before: seeking the comfort offered by illusions of wholeness. I am becoming aware of this as a pattern in my experience – whether making sense of my experience in terms of honesty, or (as in previous projects) resorting to metatheory to resolve the conflicts in my immediate experience by invoking different kinds of unity. From an attachment theory perspective, one might see this as another example of the pursuit of security – if only we could know *everything*, we could be certain of the practical and ethical consequences of our actions.

I am therefore starting my fourth project intending to explore how idealised totalities – driven by a desire for security, and perhaps inevitably accompanied by feelings of hope, doubt, and disappointment – play out in organisational life, and how considering alternative ways of dealing with uncertainty might increase our capacity to act.

PROJECT 4:

Expertise as a relational practice: exploring the paradox of shame and self-respect

Introduction

I have been working for my organisation for two and a half years and continue to have a dual role developing leadership and governance policy for health and care service providers in the UK, and providing OD consultancy support to various internal teams.

Planning for the organisational restructure that I explored in Project 3 is now very much formally underway: the completion of a review of our joint working arrangements with other national bodies involved in sector oversight is imminent and the resultant changes are likely to be far-reaching. The official intention of the restructure is to create an oversight architecture that resolves some of the current problems of fragmentation and duplication across the sector, which gives rise to ambiguity and mixed messages from the perspective of the organisations we collectively oversee.

As the most senior organisational leaders are being more explicit about the kinds of changes that are likely to happen, conversations about what people are thinking about the organisation's future are also becoming more open. This is particularly in cases where decisions about key pieces of work or recruitment are concerned: people seem keen to wait to see who their new leaders will be before making significant commitments. I find it interesting that conversations about where people may end up individually in the new structures remain comparatively infrequent, at least in public. Based on my explorations in Project 2, this is perhaps a bureaucratic ideology playing out: if people at all levels are thought of as interchangeable units of labour, and work is carried out through functional division according to calculable rules, then what place do individuals' histories, interests, or intentions have in the discourse of organisational life? Further, what responsibility can senior leaders take for their teams when team members, and the leaders themselves, are constantly changing? Alternatively, from my explorations in Project 3, we could also interpret the lack of discussion about individuals' futures as an avoidance of the anxiety stirred by engaging with the uncertainty of the restructure; it may also be due to the implicit norms of our sector, which eschew public discussion of self-interested concerns in favour of declaring more altruistic intentions.

It may be that all of this matters less to others than it does to me, though I find that somewhat difficult to believe: in various ways, we are all likely to be at risk of redeployment or redundancy in this process, which is different from the previous restructure. I am aware, however, that one of the

reasons the restructure is personally preoccupying – beyond paying attention to these processes in my research – is because my dual role means that where I might find myself in the new organisational structure is less clear than it might be for others who have more defined remits.

In this context, I am still working with the Support Directorate, led by Sandra and her business manager Jeff, whom I wrote about in Project 3. I have been their OD 'coach' for two years now, which involves providing input to their OD working group, and helping to design and facilitate their whole-directorate development days. As I have been designing and running these kinds of events over the last few years, I have been increasingly thinking about how to improve their relevance to participants, in the hope that they will no longer see such events as frivolous distractions from the actual work they're employed to do. In Project 3, I found that bringing in aspects of my experience that I might unconsciously prefer to leave out could illuminate more of what might be going on as I tried to work with others, and evoked a greater sense of honesty.

I believe this provided new capacities for action, which also points to a wider pattern that is emerging in my approach to work and my research: exploring scholarship in the fields of social anthropology, critical theory, psychoanalysis, and group analysis has illuminated new aspects of my experience, recognition of which gives me a greater sense of choice when I am presented with challenging situations. I now find myself considering alternative perspectives on my experience more or less as a matter of course, and while one might see this leading towards a kind of nihilistic, radical perspectivism, I do not consider myself a relativist; rather, I think it is by considering these perspectives that we are better able to take responsibility for what we do end up doing. From the Meadian position on morality that I have previously argued for, the process of seeking out the widest range of perspectives on the matter at hand, and then making a judgement on the balance of interests, including one's own (Mead 1934), is a way to be ethical when we take seriously the inherent fallibility of our sense-making processes.

As part of this movement of my thought, I now notice myself consciously trying to make sure that people are given the opportunity to talk about the things that interest or worry them in the development sessions I design, so that they too have the opportunity to discover more options for what they do with others. I therefore tend to prefer less structured activities that allow plenty of time for interaction and self-organisation, and so find myself quite often suggesting approaches like World Café (Brown and Isaacs 2005) and Open Space Technology (OST; Owen 1992), or modified versions of these based on similar principles given the particular situational constraints. I realise that not everyone may find these activities comfortable or desirable, especially if they break with the more established routines associated with these kinds of events; however, I feel it is the right thing to do.

Recently, I worked with Sandra and Jeff on their fourth away day, my account of which forms the start of this project.

Preparing for the away day

Over the course of the previous events I had facilitated for them, my ability to influence the structure of the Support Directorate's away days and the kinds of activities we might engage in has increased considerably. Compared to the first event, where all I had really been asked to do was keep time, I am now able to suggest using techniques like OST and be relatively sure that they will be accepted. I have heard Jeff describe such approaches as 'wacky', but I take this simply as an acknowledgement that they diverge from the usual expectations in our context. This negotiation tends to be via the OD working group, whose members are experienced senior managers from across the directorate whose day job is to support care providers to improve their performance, but who have also expressed an interest in trying to improve ways of working within the directorate. The group is chaired by Jeff; he and most of the group's members – despite the group's name – have no particular OD experience beyond the development activities they have participated in themselves, and their own experience of trying to support others.

In preparing for the fourth away day, I attended the OD working group meeting to agree what we would be doing. After a general discussion about the feedback from the previous meeting, imagining that lots of people would have the organisational changes on their minds and might find exploring that with each other helpful, I suggested that it might be a good idea to give people an opportunity to talk about what was worrying them; otherwise, the day might feel a bit trivial given what was currently happening in the organisation. Further, as the 80 or so senior managers who would be attending the away day had, by now, been getting to know each other for a couple of years, I thought that we could give them quite a lot of autonomy in deciding how they wanted to use their time together. On this basis, I put forward a simple plan for the day following the rough formula we had established over the previous three events: an introduction from Sandra (she likes to do this, but then prefers to engage as a participant in subsequent activities); an address from the chief executive (in particular about the organisational changes); a World Café-inspired session, to share and develop workplans for the year; a 'self-organising' session using a modified version of OST to give people, in my view, the freedom to talk about what was important to them; and, finally, the directorate recognition awards.

As I suggested this plan to the OD working group, while they seemed comfortable with the overall proposal, they asked me so many questions about the proposed modified OST session that I realised

it was clearly making some of them nervous. I tried to address this in a number of ways. With an odd sense of 'performing' (given how many times I have explained this before), first, I explained the origins of the technique in Harrison Owen's idea that much of what people find useful about structured events occurs in the coffee breaks. Then I described the process of allowing group members to suggest topics 'in the moment' in response to an animating framing question, and the idea that people could follow their interests and move between groups as the discussions progressed. I re-emphasised how this gives responsibility to the participants for how they use their time together.

I have previously critiqued as rather idealistic some of the assumptions made in what are now being called dialogic OD interventions (Bushe and Marshak 2013, 2015), of which OST is one: as I will explain later, while the idea that skilfully changing conversations in organisations leads to positive change may be attractive, we have no guarantees that these interventions will have the kind of impact anticipated by those leading change. I still find myself using the techniques, but on a different theoretical basis from the way they tend to be traditionally explained. To some extent, this is so that I can retain a sense of integrity or honesty about my practice, which seems to be important for me: if I do not agree with the theoretical foundations of the interventions I am advocating, why should anyone else?

Taking OST as an example, the principles underpinning this technique are usually explained in terms of humanistic psychology and the formative causality associated with systems thinking. The assumption is that, given the right conditions, the unrealised potential somehow naturally enfolded in people working together will be released to achieve the desired ends (e.g. Emery and Purser 1996). Instead, based on my DMan research, I prefer to conceptualise it as an activity that takes up key ideas involved in understanding human interaction as complex responsive processes (Stacey 2003, 2009, 2012; Stacey and Mowles 2016). I will explain this briefly.

Open Space Technology from the perspective of human interaction as complex responsive processes

In Harrison Owen's original formulation of OST (Owen 1992), the event sponsors and facilitator are meant to come up with an emotive and engaging framing question, the resolution of which is widely recognised as urgent and complex. The question is intended to attract participants who then propose topics they would like to discuss in relation to it, using a marketplace/bulletin board. Conversations about these topics then occur over a day or more, resulting in documented evidence

of the discussions that is given back to the participating community to take forward. Importantly, OST aims to flatten hierarchy, encourage a sense of freedom and responsibility, and create a temporary feeling of community in which different conversations can occur. From a dialogic OD perspective, these changes in conversational patterns also influence the social reality in some helpful way that advances the organisation (Bushe and Marshak 2013, 2015).

In terms of understanding these steps as complex responsive processes, the framing question in OST can be seen as a gesture from the sponsors to others to engage with a topic that is important, and to which participants are expected to have different and unpredictable responses based on their own histories and interpretative tendencies (Mead 1934; Gadamer 1975). As an initial response, they will attend or not based on whether the question does indeed resonate; and if they do choose to attend, participants can make further gestures in the form of proposed discussion topics. Again, these topics may resonate with others, or not; and participants can then choose to attend discussions on the basis of their interpretations as further responses. They may find themselves more or less interested in the discussion they attend, depending on whether it meets their expectations or needs. OST legitimises moving between discussions (the 'law of two feet'); this offers further opportunities to break out of established social orders and their inherent power relations, which might not be possible in more traditional meeting settings.

One could argue, therefore, that OST is an approach to engagement that takes seriously and responds to the unpredictability of human interaction in the face of more managerialist ways of thinking in organisational life. Where OST is perhaps idealistic, however, is in the suggestion that extant social figurations (Elias 1978) can be so disrupted that they do not continue to play out in significant ways, regardless of the rhetoric about full participation in these kinds of events (Shaw 2002). Particularly when they are conducted within more established groups – or, as I ran it in the specific session I will shortly describe, at an away day where the directorate members were already present – participants' ability to disrupt established patterns of power relating may be limited, because they are surrounded by their colleagues. This may constrain how participants engage with the process: the topics they feel able to propose, their choice of which discussions to attend and what they feel able to contribute in those discussions, could all be influenced by how they imagine others will respond. A sophisticated use of this approach might therefore include considering how these kinds of processes playing out – as magnifications of ongoing patterns of relating – are also a rich source of data to which OD practitioners might also respond when they try to support the development of organisations.

However, continuing the argument above, rather than being the neutral, disinterested guides they are sometimes held up to be (e.g. Justice and Jamieson 1998), practitioners are also likely to be caught up in these figurations and patterns of relating. Our individual social histories are inescapable and are brought to bear, consciously or unconsciously, in all of our judgements; so any interpretations or responses proposed by practitioners as part of their work must always be understood, using the terms from anthropology, as *emic* (from within the group) rather than *etic* (from outside the group) (Denzin 2014; Denzin and Lincoln 2017).

Gadamer uses the term *prejudice* – meaning the pre-judgements that are brought to bear consciously and unconsciously in our practical judgements (Gadamer 1975: 283) – to describe this necessary historical situatedness. I introduce these ideas here as a reminder that, in a similar vein, this project itself is idiographic rather than nomothetic: I cannot escape my own unique history and relationship with the Support Directorate, and so my observations about my experience in what follows must be understood accordingly.

To share or not to share; is that the question?

Now, of course I did not explain to the OD working group all of my thinking about OST in terms of the complex responsive processes perspective – there was no obvious need to engage in a detailed theoretical discussion about the nature of experience; but it was important for me to be able to think through this argument, perhaps to reassure myself that my membership of the community of OD practitioners who can explain what they are doing, and of the DMan research community, was legitimate. This is a way of taking responsibility that I consider important, and I suppose reveals a desire to demonstrate (if only to myself) the credentials that I believe afford me membership of particular communities, to assuage the anxiety associated with the possibility of exclusion; I will come back to this.

In any case, the group flooded me with questions – perhaps out of curiosity, or scepticism, or a mix. How exactly would the session work? What did I think people would want to talk about? Had I run these sessions before? What if there were no topics? What if there were too many topics? How would people choose which topic they wanted to go to? Would the 'law of two feet' apply? I ascribed some of the questions to unfamiliarity with the technique, so I was happy to rehearse the procedure. I have used and participated in this version of OST many times, and there have always been topics, even if they come a little slowly at first; I tried to reassure the group by recounting some of these experiences.

However, while I was telling them not to worry, privately, I noticed a tension between what I was saying and a heightened sense of uncertainty about how things would actually go. In many ways, I shared some of the anxiety that was being articulated as questions: every time I use this version of OST, when the moment for suggesting topics actually arrives, I have my heart in my mouth, so to speak, wondering what will happen. This has been compounded by my research, which emphasises the unpredictability of social life: when human experience is understood as complex responsive processes of interaction (Stacey 2003, 2009, 2012; Stacey and Mowles 2016), the agents who make up organisations need to be understood as having an infinite capacity for unpredictable and responsive novelty (Mead 1934). If we also consider the 'butterfly effect', whereby small variations in the initial starting conditions of non-linear systems can lead to dramatic differences in the impact of small perturbations, then perhaps we can never really predict what the effect of an intervention will be in an organisation, beyond some general expectations that will eventually be validated or not.

This profound sense of uncertainty has been increasingly on my mind whenever I use OST, yet each time I have always been surprised by the number of topics that are volunteered. Arguably, my prejudices in this respect now include a pattern involving doubt and relief, which I take as given.

Following my explanations, some of the OD group members did seem reassured and even suggested topics they might propose on the day. I speculated privately, however, that others were reserving judgement or at least not vocalising their concerns; but it is difficult to say why, beyond a general sense of lack of resolution. This leads me to think that there was potentially a great deal that was being communicated non-verbally, and perhaps unconsciously, to which we were all responding as we made sense of the affectual qualities permeating the group. Feeling tentatively reassured, and probably compelled by my belief in these kinds of activities as useful, I pushed us towards a decision: we agreed to proceed with the proposed approach and agenda.

Perhaps noticing that the conclusion of this discussion felt more like acquiescence than the enthusiastic agreement I might have preferred and have previously experienced, I added that I could understand why people might be anxious about this kind of unstructured activity. I stated that based on what I have been exploring in my research, not giving people at least some time to talk about some of what was worrying them in the context of the organisational changes, though it might be unpredictable and perhaps difficult, might at best make an away day at this point in time seem rather trivial; at worst, to deny people this opportunity might even be ethically problematic.

On reflection, I find it interesting to consider that I was reluctant to share more of my own concerns about using techniques like OST with the group to whom I was proposing it, when they were

expressing their doubts. While I have a clear sense of why these processes are more appealing to me than more structured activities, I feel that there is more to explore about why I chose not to vocalise more of my thinking with the group. This is particularly striking given that I have argued previously for the Meadian notion of morality. In those terms, by not expressing all of my concerns, was I negating the moral agency of the group's members by asserting my own? This revaluation sits uncomfortably with me, and I am keen to explore further how this kind of situation comes about.

A need to deal with strangers

I have found exploring the relationship between trust and expertise in organisations to be a productive way of making sense of my experience. One way we might go about this is to consider what seems to be a deeply habitual attraction to fantasies of wholeness, apparent in so many aspects of the history of Western thought, for example:

- *Philosophy* – in Plato's notion of the form of the good, or Hegel's notion of the absolute spirit, or Mead's notion of a universal community;
- *Psychoanalysis* – in ideas about the desire for security that goes with the certainty of reunion in attachment theory, or Freud's theory of primary narcissism, or the Lacanian idea of a yearning for wholeness arising from the lack of enjoyment that comes from being split;
- *Management theory* – in its reliance on reified, decontextualised models and techniques that distort reality towards particular ends, or the idea of bureaucracy where work and labour can be functionally divided to add back up to a whole; or in systems thinking, which imagines that some whole beyond the local interaction of human agents can have agency.

We might argue, therefore, that trust in expertise relates to the imagined possibility of omniscience as an aspect of the wider pattern of attraction to wholeness in Western thought: if someone knows everything and has altruistic motives, then, surely, they are trustworthy because they will be best able to take a decision on the balance of relevant goods? We might go on to try to explain the attraction to these wholes in terms of, for example, the Lacanian or attachment theory perspectives from psychoanalysis mentioned above, as the security and comfort offered by such fantasies.

This way of thinking seems to appeal to the same assumption that there is an abstract unifying explanation to be found; and a problem with this kind of thinking is that any imagined coherent totality abstracted from context is likely to ignore important conflicts that arise when it is brought to bear in a particular situation because of the constraints of social interdependence (Elias 1978) and

the essential paradox of self-consciousness (Mead 1934). From a systems-thinking perspective, the only way out of the paradoxes that arise in our experience is through appeal to other levels of understanding in which the paradoxes disappear (for example through double-loop learning [Argyris and Schön 1974; Bateson 1972; Argyris 1982]), and the central premise of Gödel's incompleteness theorem[3] (Gödel 1986) is that there are always paradoxes in any logical system. However, the temporal and perspectival instability of meaning draws our attention to the way that these decontextualised abstract ideas deny the historical situatedness and temporality of our experience.

If instead we see social change as the evolution of population-wide patterns that emerge in the interactive processes of local agents endlessly responding to conscious and unconscious experiences of everything that has gone before, then there can be no fixed rules playing out because there is nothing more or less to social life than the experiences of those interacting agents. Another way of thinking about trust in expertise, then, is to take a Foucauldian approach and see it as the new problematisation of some ongoing social phenomenon that serves to maintain a particular kind of social order. This is how we might describe the approach that contemporary British sociologist, Anthony Giddens, takes in *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990). There, he argues social relations in modern society are *dis-embedded*, and that this is in contrast to pre-modern societies, in which trust tended to be based on intimate knowledge of the members of one's community, their family histories and so on. By this, he means that relations that would have been specifically temporally and spatially located in particular communities become abstracted from those contexts, and this creates new requirements for relating to allow societies to continue to function.

Gadamer describes how our prejudices, when brought to bear in a particular situation, prompt interpretations based on a *fore-conception of completeness* – by this he means that our initial encounter with a gesture prompts an understanding, or possible understandings, of that gesture as part of a coherent idea of the future (Gadamer 1975: 279). For example, reading the first page of a novel prompts us to imagine how the whole story might play out. Importantly, these fore-conceptions are based on the experience or knowledge we already have. In large, fast-changing, modern societies, it is impossible to know everyone in the way that one might in a small, stable community; yet the complex arrangement of goods and services requires us to have some kind of social contract that enables us to interact with people. As individuals have less and less direct access

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[3] Gödel's incompleteness theorem states that for a theory, T, that proves only true statements, then the statement, G, of T, which says of itself that it is not provable in T, is neither provable nor disprovable in T (because both G and −G are not provable in T). Therefore, in every theory T, there is at least one statement that cannot be proved in T and hence the consistency of T can only be proved within a larger theory T', where T⊂T'.

to the society in which they have to operate, they find themselves relying more and more on imagined communities (Anderson 1983). Following the twentieth-century sociologist Karl Mannheim's thinking on ideology, which he describes as 'magical systems of explanation' (Mannheim 1936: 89) that arise unconsciously and function to stabilise society, new ideologies (as a particular kind of fore-conception of completeness) are perhaps likely to arise in modern societies in a way that may not have been the case in smaller communities.

Giddens argues that these interactions involve a need to trust strangers. For example, in our most general interactions, we cannot know that every person we pass in the street is not trying to harm us, but we have to trust that they are not. We may come to see some neighbourhoods as safe if our experiences are generally trouble-free. At the other end of the spectrum, in what we might call 'specialised' interactions, while we may not personally know the doctor who is treating us for our health condition, we need to trust them enough to follow their advice, as we cannot all be medically trained. If we have positive experiences of these interactions over time, our trust, or confidence, in the individual with whom we are interacting may increase, though we may know little more personal information about our doctor than their name. One might see my role as OD coach for the Support Directorate in these terms: although I meet the group members twice a year formally in the away days, and every few months in the OD working group meeting, I feel very much an outsider rather than a member of the group. However, there is enough consistency in my relationship with Sandra and Jeff to provide a sense of accumulated confidence in me, so perhaps this establishes a certain level of trust among the group.

It is important to notice that both of these examples involve interacting with strangers, and therefore varying degrees of indeterminacy: as the sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman argues in *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991), in the dualism of friends (like me) and enemies (not like me), strangers are those not yet known to be friends or enemies; they are therefore potential threats who call the friend/enemy duality into question, and, by extension stand for the fallibility of social order more generally. The feminist philosopher, literary critic and psychoanalyst, Julia Kristeva, defined *abjection* as the casting away of whatever blurs the boundary of subjectivity and objectivity, occasioned by bodily experiences of horror or disgust (Kristeva 1982). For Kristeva, when we encounter our own bodily waste, or wounds, or corpses, though we may wish to cast them away, we cannot fully 'other' them because they are somehow part of our being; instead, we *abject* them – which I interpret as a paradoxical experience of acceptance and rejection. In both perspectives, our disturbing encounters with liminality (Horvath et al 2017; Szakolczai 2017) force us to consider the contingency of our identities and the social order. Our conscious or unconscious choices can be

understood as claims to what kind of people we want to be and in what kinds of societies, and are therefore processes of identity formation and the production of social order.

Therefore, although entering into these temporary trusting relationships is necessitated by the lack of alternatives for dealing with our legitimate ignorance of areas of specialist knowledge, this trust is often accompanied to varying degrees by scepticism and caution (Giddens 1990: 86–89; Hughes 1959). Such relationships are therefore characterised by a natural ambivalence. This resonates strongly with the experience I have recounted of my interaction with the OD group: on the one hand, I felt like a trusted adviser; on the other, I felt that some things were left unsaid and sensed a lack of resolution. In a way, my choice of action – a statement invoking my research and experience that was intended to reassure, but on reflection was somewhat paternalistic and, as a normative moralistic compulsion, perhaps even exhortative (Lifton 1967) – was an attempt to reinforce our power figuration.

This may, then, relate to a further feature of Giddens's theory: if we accept that the complexity of modern societies often precludes many of us from having much more than a passing acquaintance with most areas of specialist knowledge, Giddens suggests we are in general asked to place our trust in *expert systems* of 'technical accomplishment or professional expertise' (Giddens 1990: 27). This is one of the forms of the dis-embedding of social relations; and its ubiquity in our everyday experience of being in the world is manifest in our usually unchallenged assumptions that our houses will not fall down, or that aeroplanes don't normally fall out of the sky. Our encounters with expert systems tend to be with individuals who act as *access points* to those bodies of knowledge – the doctor to medicine, the judge to law. Arguably, in the case I am describing, I was perhaps just such an access point to the body of knowledge about OD as far as this relates to the design and execution of development events.

Traditionally, it has been common to think of expertise as a property of individuals who are seen as having acquired more of the complete knowledge lay people might imagine becomes available through scholarly or professional activity in one's field (e.g. Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986; Collins 2016). More recent scholarship, however, has begun to explore the ways in which expertise might be seen as a relational activity. For example, some scholars advocate a *relational* turn for expertise. This means that, in addition to my own professional knowledge, there are further skills for me to acquire regarding how that knowledge is brought to bear with other professionals to work on interdisciplinary problems (e.g. Edwards 2010, 2017). Following a similar line, it has also been suggested that that expertise is a *claim to knowledgeability* that experts make to their lay audiences (Kuhn and Rennstam 2016; Treem and Leonardi 2016). These views start to acknowledge the

involvement of others in the notion of expertise; however, to my mind, they fall short of taking up the sociality of selves, in that they retain a sense of the individual expert as the primary or more important agent.

This is striking because, in my interaction with the OD working group, I experienced what felt to be in equal measures a sense of having something that the group needed, but also being completely dependent upon the group. A more radical view would therefore be to consider expertise, like power, as a property of social relations that are imbalanced (Elias 1978) – in this case, in terms of access to specialised knowledge or resources. Building on the position just described, I would like to argue that expertise is a *co-created* relational practice in the sense that it requires performative work by all parties involved – the experts, their lay audiences, and society more widely – to conform to expected roles and in so doing, perpetuate a social order in which these kinds of interactions can take place at all.

Exploring expertise as relational practice

In many professions, there are reasonably obvious social mechanisms that make it easier for lay people to trust experts. Giddens (1990: 86) gives the examples of systems of professional regulation (acquiring qualifications, being admitted to recognised professional bodies) and meeting expectations of professional demeanour (conforming to the performances commonly associated with a particular profession) as the shortcuts that enable lay people to quickly assess the competence of the expert with whom they are interacting. This immediately suggests a kind of functional collusion (Curtis 2018) involving ongoing work on the part of those representing the expert system, those interacting with them, and those who are regarded as able to judge the competence of others (Deleon 1998; Mulgan 2000) to achieve common goals; one can imagine they are all consciously or unconsciously playing up or down aspects of what they are doing.

Giddens cites the twentieth-century Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman's work on *frontstage* and *backstage performances* (e.g. Goffman 1961) as a way of speaking about aspects of the practices through which social order emerges and is reproduced (Giddens 1990: 86). This central tenet of Gidden's structuration theory proposes that social norms and the conditions that allow their reproduction (which Charles Taylor [2002, 2003] calls the *social imaginary*) are perpetuated in the mundane, routinised practices of everyday life (Giddens 1984). A similar idea can be found in Bourdieu's practice theory (e.g. Bourdieu 1990) and is inherent to Foucault's assertions about the reproduction of power relations through all actions everywhere due to the ubiquity of non-

egalitarian and mobile relations (e.g. Foucault 1976). Put another way, the evolving social order, and the power relating inherent to it, is forming and at the same time being formed by each instance of its particularisation in the social actions or practices of interacting agents.

Giddens emphasises the recursivity of these processes and relates this to the cybernetic maintenance of *ontological security* (Giddens 1984: 284), a term coined by psychiatrist R.D. Laing to describe one's 'sense of presence in the world as a real, alive, whole and in a temporal sense, continuous person' (Laing 1969: 40); note that Laing uses *ontological* here in the simple sense of a suitable adverb or adjective derivative of *being*, rather than its more philosophical uses. The same point is made from a psychoanalytical perspective about the need for security giving rise to a *conservative impulse*: maintaining a sense of continuity of the past with the present allows us to predict the future, and this enables us to act into the unknown (Marris 1974). Understanding human interaction as complex responsive processes draws attention to the dialectical and transformative nature of human experience, so we might argue that the tendency towards stability and continuity we notice is significantly complemented by unpredictable moments of social change. Following Foucault, if there is stability, it is likely to be in the service of something; so revaluation of these taken-for-granted phenomena can help to expose such purposes, and this potentially creates new possibilities for action.

In that case, the frontstage performance of experts – what they tend to show their lay audiences – might involve demonstrating their knowledge, or conforming to a professional demeanour; this enables temporary trusting relationships to form, but also maintains the relevant power figurations that cast experts as authority figures based on their knowledge. One could also describe this in terms of wider societal trends relating to the Enlightenment's formal subjugation of authority to reason (Gadamer 1975: 290) and the culmination of an assault on irrational subjectivity (Linge 1976), which has been increasingly marginalised since the Greeks (Elias 1978).

By contrast, the backstage performances of experts – what they tend to conceal from their lay audiences – might involve dealing with exactly those ambiguities or conflicts that arguably arise from being human: disagreements and power dynamics within and between professional groups, or overcoming concerns about personal credibility or competence as experts encounter situations that fall outside of their experience. This *learning–credibility tension* is a concept explored in the literature, particularly in the field of general management consultancy (e.g. Bourgoin and Harvey 2018) as a paradigm case: because of their role in trying to work on the kinds of problems those in organisations have decided they cannot manage themselves, management consultants continuously need to manage their clients' anxiety as well as their own conflicting feelings of competence and

imposture. One could also see this as a feature of any professional field that has to engage with novel situations – or for novice practitioners more generally, as I have been particularly describing in my previous projects.

These are all fairly well-rehearsed arguments that resonate with the internal conversation I have described as going on in my interaction with the OD working group. I had a role to play for the group, and acted according to the expectations I had of myself and imagined others had of me. Less attention is paid in the literature to the other performances that are also required for experts to perform their roles. For example, lay audiences – as the OD working group members might be considered in relation to me – have considerable work to do. Frontstage performances here might involve accepting that the professional credentials are indeed sufficiently reassuring to create temporary trusting relationships, and that appropriate displays of deference are expected in most interactions with experts. Backstage performances, however, may involve the informal research lay audiences may conduct about the experts they are interacting with; or managing the anxiety associated with acknowledging that access to the required resources is necessarily mediated through fallible individuals; or the self-doubt, and even fear of exclusion, that we might experience when we call into question the views of experts who are regarded by others as the leading authorities on a particular matter.

As I have mentioned, one might argue that for experts in professionalised fields, qualifications and the membership of particular professional bodies can provide a level of assurance of competence; this therefore also creates a demand upon those tasked with admitting others to professional status to maintain a reassuring frontstage sense of authoritative continuity while at the same time engaging in the backstage work of keeping up with and responding to, for example, social and technological innovation. In many ways, this is a key activity for organisations like mine who are tasked with oversight and regulation of organisations in the health and care system.

In the case of the non-professionalised field of OD (and other non-technical consultancy services are probably also in this category), there are multiple theoretical paradigms, models, and interventional approaches (e.g. Cheung-Judge and Holbeche 2015), each of which may lead practitioners down very different paths. There is no standard training route, nor an easily recognisable professional body from whom lay people can seek assurance of the competence of proclaimed practitioners, nor a particular expected professional demeanour. What is left, then, as a source of legitimacy for ongoing working relationships between lay people and experts in OD and similar fields, is the accumulation of trust and experience over time.

As I described in Project 3, I have a history with the Support Directorate that started with me being recommended to Sandra by another director in my organisation. Subsequently, Sandra, Jeff, and the wider directorate members' experiences of engaging with the activities I have suggested and facilitated for them have been generally positive (based on feedback from the events). Moreover, I have demonstrated an ability to predict what this feedback is likely to be, which I suppose encourages confidence in me. The more traditional signifiers of competence remain absent, though, so to me this relationship seems somewhat fragile.

This may help to explain the ambivalence I sensed in the group, including myself. Though we reached a tentative agreement to the agenda, my sense of there being much left unsaid leads me to consider what the OD group members' backstage performances might have been. My noticing a lack of resolution suggests that these backstage performances can leak (even if only affectually) into frontstage. I suppose some of this may involve an awareness of the power relations inherent to our social figuration: I work with the group at Sandra and Jeff's behest, which may lend me some perceived vicarious authority; I am a member of my organisation's central OD team, so I have some perceived legitimacy; I am well versed in OD theory and techniques, which other group members lack and perhaps suppose they need. Together, these factors might have made it difficult for group members to express their dissent or concerns – ironic, given that the topic at hand had been giving them and their colleagues an opportunity to discuss their concerns! This demonstrates some of the conflicts in our collective experience that may have been in play.

Going back to the practice theory argument, lay people's acceptance of the assurances of experts is part of the social order that maintains modern society, and indeed is a key feature of how my organisation relates to the organisations we oversee. So, seeing negotiations over that social order playing out locally in this way should perhaps be expected. In my meeting with the OD group, we might therefore interpret the invocation of my credentials and my subtle moral disciplining of the group at the end of our conversation as a way of calling attention generally to our respective roles as knowledgeable expert and deferent lay audience. They may do something similar in their own everyday work of supporting care providers to improve their operations, as another expression of a social order in which experts (like me, like them) can exist at all.

This exploration of trust and expertise as relational practice that reflects wider societal patterns helps to explore the question I posed earlier about sharing or not sharing my concerns: it would be too easy to think that the moral position I am advocating is answered simply by fully disclosing all of one's inner dialogue so that others may make up their own minds, and that to do otherwise is somehow patronising or arrogant. While the latter observation does resonate – and is somewhat

disturbing, as this isn't how I would like to think of myself – arguably, this is just the kind of decontextualised, normative ethical thinking that I have critiqued previously as untenable due to the temporal and perspectival instability of meaning (Mead 1934), which includes ethical meaning (e.g. Griffin 2002). Instead, the discussion above suggests that the contextual features informing what happened included competing ideals about OD practice, deference to experts, justifying one's position, the membership of communities, power relating, role-playing, and the maintenance of social order. It should suffice to say that none of these were in my immediate consciousness in the interaction itself; but, as I will now describe, some of this competition played out on the day itself in an unexpected way.

A solid start that met our expectations

The morning of the away day went largely to plan. We were in the hall of an old hospital building, which had been built to resemble the old livery halls found in the City of London. On arrival that morning, I had noticed the high ceilings, wood panelling, and austere portraits of people of importance. Somehow, despite its grandeur (or perhaps because of it), the atmosphere felt rather oppressive and dull. I hoped things would liven up as people arrived, but didn't feel particularly concerned about it; I was feeling unusually relaxed about the whole day, and for some reason lacked my usual eagerness.

Once everyone had arrived, Sandra opened the event, as she usually does, by appreciating her team's most recent achievements and emphasising the importance of making the most of the day. She was followed by the chief executive who, as briefed, talked about some of the organisational changes that were being scoped. He gave little in the way of detail beyond what had already been provided in staff briefings in recent weeks: that there would be some joint functions across the organisations involved – some that would be hosted in one organisation on behalf of all, and others that would remain separate; it was rumoured that the Support Directorate would be a joint function, but this had not been formally confirmed in any way. The chief executive explained that no decisions had been made about the restructure, and that high-level proposals would be presented to the board in a few weeks' time. He ended by offering his thanks for everyone's hard work. The audience applauded politely – presumably, a habitual response rather than a real expression of appreciation given that what he was saying was probably quite disturbing and offered no reassurance.

He then took some questions. These struck me as odd, because they didn't appear to be about what he had just talked about. I was surprised that people weren't being a bit bolder or asking for more

details of the organisational changes, given the opportunity to do so. Instead, they were asking some quite challenging questions about his views on some very specific issues in relation to some of the organisations we oversee, or what he thought of how we work with another national body not involved in the restructure. Though I didn't think about it particularly at the time, one could imagine that this avoidance of engagement with what for many was likely to be the source of anxiety (future employment) reflects the relational habitus of corporate ascetism that can be seen in the public sector more generally. As I explored in Project 3, this is exemplified by the rather coldly impersonal *Nolan Principles of Public Life* (Committee on Standards in Public Life 1995), and maintained practically through group processes involving praise and shame (Elias and Scotson 1965). I also argued there that more individualistic concerns are still likely to be on our minds, even if only unconsciously; in that case, rather than active avoidance of a topic, perhaps the questions that were asked were gestures demonstrating good corporate citizenship towards someone imagined to have influence over the outcomes of the restructuring process. Alternatively, we might argue that repeated exposure to the kind of anxiety involved in restructures (recalling that the last one had only been two years ago) has led to a degree of psychological withdrawal as a defence against the anxiety occasioned by ongoing uncertainty (Marris 1996).

These are, of course, retrospective speculations – I didn't consciously consider them at the time – but, given that these are issues I have been thinking and writing about through my research for some time, they are likely to have unconsciously informed my responses because they are aspects of my prejudices. What seems likely in any case is that if uncertainty about the future already featured in the experience of the away day participants, it was heightened by the interaction with the chief executive and so had the potential to play out during the rest of the day in some way.

We proceeded with a short break, after which I explained how the World Café session would work. We have done this activity before in away days and on this day, it went completely according to plan: group members attended the table discussions that interested them and in the round of feedback I conducted at the end of this activity, those who reported back said that they had found it helpful to hear about each other's work and get new ideas. Following this, I introduced the modified version of OST that we would be using after lunch, my intention being that this would take the pressure off having to come up with topics when asked later in the day. In the same vein, we had tried to warm participants up to this session in the pre-event invitation email to the directorate, suggesting that they may like to think about topics in advance in relation to the following question:

Given recent announcements about organisational changes, what does the Support Directorate need to do to adapt to the changing landscape?

Linking back to the earlier description of OST, we had selected this question because it was broad enough to be taken up differently by people according to their interests, but also demanded a specific active response to the organisational changes. Though I did not notice it at the time, I suppose this reflects a preference for demonstrably dealing with change and the anxiety it may create, even if the resultant activities turn out to be the kind of social defences (Menzies 1960; Hirschhorn 1988) that help groups avoid engaging with the anxiety that confronting more of their experience might occasion. Arguably, this would make sense in the context of a public sector that is felt by many to be failing (e.g. Darzi 2017), whose decline national bodies like the one I work for can perhaps do little more than slow down. Appearing to be doing something, however little good it ends up doing by whatever measure we find ourselves using, is better than appearing to be doing nothing – even though doing nothing beyond spending time reflecting upon what is already happening is itself doing something that might be useful, albeit out of keeping with the practices of the relational habitus. Also noticeable now is just how abstract the question is, and while perhaps laudable in its intent to be broad and engaging, it is conceivable that introducing this question may have heightened the anxiety that people were already feeling about the restructure, and which had been amplified by the chief executive's session.

Somewhat aware that the topic generation session coming up next might need a bit of encouragement, and perhaps unconsciously out of a desire to reduce my own anxiety about this, especially given the strange reaction to the chief executive's session, I tried to speak with a few people over the lunch break. I was listening out for topics that I thought others might find interesting in the next session and whenever these came up, I would invite them to host a discussion around it; everyone tentatively agreed. By the end of the break, imagining that my efforts would have increased people's confidence to speak up, I was reasonably assured that eight or nine topics would be put forward in the next session.

So, once everyone had settled in their places again, I reiterated the process we would be using and asked – with a light-hearted air, and what I hoped was some inspiring buoyancy – if there were any topics that people wanted to propose.

A crisis in practice?

My optimism quickly faded as I was greeted with complete silence for what seemed like an age.

As time seemed to slow down, I could feel my heartbeat quickening; the oppressive atmosphere I had noticed that morning seemed to intensify. I tried to catch the eyes of the people I had spoken to during the break, but for a while couldn't find any of them.

Finally, someone suggested a topic about how a focus on quality could be maintained as we went through organisational changes. Another followed quickly, proposing to discuss how the product they have been developing could be given more visibility; though this seemed nothing to do with the framing question, I felt bound to support it partly because any topic is a good topic according to the rules of OST, but also to encourage others to volunteer. Instead, things became quiet again.

Trying to maintain an encouraging air, I said 'So, any more topics?' and 'I know some of you have ideas…'. I picked on a manager I'd had a good conversation with over lunch, to suggest the topic they had mentioned – about how to support individuals and groups under pressure; so they came up and proposed their topic. Then the room returned to silence once more.

I started to lose heart. I've used this technique numerous times, and my expectation of a doubt/relief cycle was being thwarted. Inwardly flustered as I was trying to work out what to do next while also trying to maintain my composure outwardly (afterwards, a member of the OD group came up to me and complimented me on my ability to keep so calm), I found myself also feeling irritated at the lack of any kind of response that might help me to help them. I also felt out of my depth, wondering if my habitual self-doubt was actually being justified: here was clear evidence that I didn't really know what I was doing. Surely, a better practitioner would know what to do.

Looking for an escape route, I earnestly offered: 'How are we feeling about this? Do you want to do something else instead?'. Still, nothing but 80 faces all staring at me, in complete silence. In the blur, I thought I saw some of the people I'd expected to suggest topics looking pleadingly at me, and I imagined others looking around sceptically; but I couldn't understand what they wanted me to do or how to cope with my ambivalent experience of feeling threatened, irritated, and embarrassed.

As I described in Project 3, the behaviour of groups has been well explored in psychoanalytical literature, and Wilfred Bion's theory of basic assumption group behaviour (Bion 1961; Hirschhorn 1988) is a helpful way into trying to make sense of what was happening here. This is the argument that when groups come together with a primary task that connects them clearly to some purpose beyond their own existence, they have the potential to form a sophisticated work group where

members are free to cooperate, associate, join, resign, or whatever is needed to complete the task. However, when anxiety levels in the group rise for some reason, the existence of the group itself can become a preoccupation that distracts from the primary task and the group behaves more overtly according to one or a series of basic assumptions. In Bion's original formulation, these basic assumptions are *dependency*, *pairing*, and *fight/flight*; a further basic assumption of *oneness* (Turquet 1974) or *aggregation/massification* (Hopper 2009) is sometimes also added.

Bion, following Freud's thinking on mass psychology (e.g. Freud 1921), suggested that basic assumption behaviour relates to the Oedipus complex (Bion 1961: 161), but one could equally characterise this using the Meadian theory of mind that is foundational to the complex responsive processes perspective. Here, counter to the assumptions of psychoanalysis that give primacy to individual minds and internal worlds (e.g. Frosh 1999), individual minds are regarded as social through and through and selfhood is an ongoing social process (Mead 1934; Stacey 2003; Stacey and Mowles 2016). In that case, the sophisticated work group bears similarities to Mead's notion of teamwork, which he describes as the situation where 'all are working toward a common end and everyone has a sense of the common end interpenetrating the particular function which he is carrying on' (Mead 1934: 276). Put another way, using Mead's conceptual programme, there is a fusion of 'I' and 'me' (described in detail in Project 3 [P3: 77] in terms of experiencing freedom from social constraint – as also associated with, for example, religious experience), where our personal intentions (expressed in the responding phase of self that is denoted 'I') align with the intentions of the group (expressed in the gesturing phase of self that is denoted 'me') towards a particular common goal.

We can therefore reframe basic assumption behaviour as the playing out of conscious or unconscious socialisations that arise when a group's common goal becomes ambiguous for some reason. The recognisable patterns of responding in these situations, denoted as the three or four basic assumptions, can then be described as deeply entrenched population-wide patterns that have emerged over time and which serve to maintain group membership (Stacey 2003: 38). Following Giddens (1984, 1990) and Bourdieu (1977, 1990), these responses perpetuate the social order and its power figurations; indeed, Bion describes the basic assumptions as being paradigmatically represented by the institutions of Western society (the church, the army, and the aristocracy for dependency, fight/flight, and pairing, respectively [Bion 1961: 136–137]).

Thus characterised, basic assumption behaviour may well have been in play in the situation I am describing. It is plausible that the chief executive's reiteration that significant changes were coming, but then not providing any further information, had already raised some kind of existential anxiety

within the group about its future. Given my history with the group, and my membership of the same organisation, I am by no means immune to this anxiety: my own employment is also at risk, as well as my ongoing relationship with the directorate. I probably increased anxieties further in breaking with typical away-day routine by asking the group to pay attention for a while to their existential concerns (which they had just avoided talking about), rather than the external focus that might usually and preferentially allow effective team working. By suggesting they engage with parts of their experience that the relational habitus tends to exclude, and so perhaps also threatening the social defences usually employed to avoid unwanted anxiety, one can imagine a sense of social danger emerging in which basic assumption behaviour came to dominate the group, at least for a time.

Pursuing this line, one might then interpret the group's response to my invitation for topics as fight/flight-type behaviour, which tends to be characterised by defensiveness, aggression, or hostility. Facilitators, like therapists, are often regarded as experts in creating safe environments for development (e.g. Corrigan 2015) and to be skilled in managing tricky situations in large groups (e.g. Schuman 2010). In this respect, one can think of many reasons I might have felt threatened: as someone working on Sandra's behalf, or being seen as a representative of the expert system of management in general, or the OD community, or of the leadership team who were initiating the organisational changes, perhaps I became somewhere for us all to focus our anxiety that did not otherwise have an obvious target. I was provoking the group to engage in thinking about parts of their experience they might consciously or unconsciously want to avoid – and in doing so, challenging the social order and threatening our ability to go on with each other. Perhaps the group's silence was an act of hostility – figuring me as a scapegoat who is attacked to regain a sense of social cohesion or order within the rest of the group (Girard 1972, 1986).

Nevertheless, I was very much *part of* this emergent phenomenon, not *apart from* it. Kristeva's notion of *abjection* (1982) – in particular, its characterisation as a process by which one's identity is defined in the *rejection* of some problematic aspect of *subjectivity* – is helpful in making sense of how we might figure the group members' behaviour towards me as a response to conflicts in their own experience.

I have explained previously how Mead's theory of mind as a social phenomenon allows us to locate processes of inclusion and exclusion usually associated with groups (e.g. Elias and Scotson 1965) *intra*-personally rather than inter-personally (P3: 69). This is relevant here, too, because it provides a way of thinking about how abjection and similar phenomena, which are typically characterised as individual processes, can also be group processes. Following this argument, although group

members were not prepared to engage with me about their existential anxiety and take responsibility in the way that I had wanted, in another way, perhaps we were all tacitly and collectively engaging with and responding to the sense of social danger that had been heightened that morning in a way that even an unstructured process – like the modified version of OST we were using – could not provide a forum for. In doing so, we were reinforcing the social rules and work identities that tend to keep self-interested concerns out of the public realm, and perhaps also expressing our personal desire to survive the organisational restructure.

As I mentioned earlier, these observations and analyses might be fascinating data for OD practitioners working with groups – for example, it would be interesting to understand if fight/flight behaviour plays out in other aspects of the Support Directorate's work – but I am struck by how the exploration I am undertaking in this project could well have provided different capacities to act had I been able to consider them *in the moment*. This capacity perhaps relies on a degree of detachment that might not be possible if one is consumed by involvement in a situation. As recounted by Elias (1987), Edgar Allen Poe's short story *A Descent into the Maelström* provides a helpful illustration of this kind of detached involvement.

In Poe's story, three fisherman brothers find their boat caught in a notorious whirlpool that has killed many before them. Only one of the brothers survives the whirlpool – and this is because amid the terror of being engulfed in the vortex, he finds himself, unlike his brothers, also observing the beauty of the whirlpool and patterns in what he sees sinking and floating. Noticing that larger objects tend to sink faster and cylindrical objects more slowly, rather than lash himself to the boat as his brother does, he ties himself to a water cask and then cuts the cask free of the boat. The cask descends more slowly than the boat, and floats to the top once the whirlpool subsides; and so, the fisherman survives because his ability to stand apart from the phenomenon in which he is involved provided new capacities to act.

While this kind of detached involvement may offer additional options in moments like the one I am describing, the allegory is also instructive for the role of research in the development of practice: the exploration in this project provides new encounters with difference, which enrich the field of my experience. My prejudices evolve accordingly, which may help me to notice more about what is going on and respond differently in the future should I find myself in similar circumstances. Further, and as I wrote in Project 2 about reflective practice (P2: 49), this is an ethical practice based on Mead's notion of morality being an inherently fallible process of seeking out the widest available range of perspectives and then acting on the rational balance of interests.

Ruptures and ripples of resolution

I am aware that the account I have so far given of the event gives no indication of how things actually turned out – and this is very much in keeping with the quality of my experience that I am trying to convey: in the silence, as I continued to stand somehow paralysed at the front of the room, time seemed to have stopped as I experienced having no idea what I was going to do. Recall Gadamer's notion of the *fore-conception of completeness* (1975), in which meanings are projected for the whole social act based on the prejudicial interpretation of an initial gesture, which then evolves as further gestures are made in a continuous dialectical process; taking into account the arguments from Giddens (1984, 1990) and Marris (1974, 1996), we could say that this projecting is one of the ways we gain the ontological security we seem to need if we are to act at all.

As discussed in Project 2, in Mead's terms, this is part of the process of *thinking* which, in his programme, is the ability to imagine possible sequences of responses that may occur through private role-play in the form of generalised ideas (Mead 1934: 141; P2: 43). I prefer the Gadamerian formulation above, as I think it points to the way in which we deal with partial information by filling in the gaps in our understanding with some configuration of the aspects of our past experience, current understanding, and intentions, that happen to be called out – consciously and unconsciously – by the matter at hand. This creates a kind of continuously evolving sense of coherence into which we can act, even if this has multiple options within it and is not fully articulated.

In the account I have given, my response to the silence could be seen as a failure of this process and a breakdown in the coherence that generally allows me to take a next step. Perhaps the situation called out too many conflicting responses, or perhaps none at all; either way, a rupture of some kind occurred that stopped me in my cognitive tracks. What I actually found myself doing was suggesting that the groups have discussions at their tables, to see if they could come up with some more topics. Normally, I would have asked them to do this at the start of the topic generation session; but we had pre-informed participants of this session extensively and I was confident of having recruited plenty of help over lunch, so I had felt it unnecessary. In retrospect, of course, it is easy to see that this might have been helpful; but it was not obvious at the time.

One might argue that there is perhaps an inevitability to this kind of occurrence: given that I have described the nature of social life as inherently unpredictable, I might well expect a facilitation technique I have used time and time again at some point to not go to plan. As I explored in Project 1, Gadamer describes how this kind of experience in which one is 'pulled up short' by an encounter with difference brings our prejudices into view, which is the start of a process of learning (Gadamer 1975: 280).

As the table discussions started, I sought out Sandra. Saying that the process didn't seem to be working, I asked for her help in deciding what we might do if no more topics were volunteered. To my surprise, her first response was to call the whole OST session into question, wondering a little sceptically (or so it seemed to me) who had come up with the idea. Expressing my doubts, it seemed, had enabled her to express hers. However, when she realised the session had been my initiative, she seemed to take back her scepticism, I thought almost apologetically, and suggested we should wait and see how things went. I felt this placed the responsibility firmly with me for deciding what to do next. I consider this a further example of how expertise can be thought of as a relational practice: my asking for Sandra's help, when our relationship in this context is based our mutual performances as OD expert and lay person, respectively, could be interpreted as a challenge to the pattern of relating that Sandra and I are accustomed to – through which she maintains her trust in me, and I maintain my credibility with her.

Using Goffman's frontstage/backstage concepts, when I brought 'frontstage' some of the sense-making and recalculation that usually goes on in my 'backstage' private conversation, I was breaking out of character in a way that called our habitual way of relating into question. In that case, one might well expect a response that reinforced this habit; and, given what had just happened with the group's rejection of my invitation for suggestions, perhaps it is unsurprising that I interpreted this gesture as a rejection of my application to Sandra for help in addressing what was happening. A different interpretation is that Sandra's response was consciously or unconsciously intended to provide a way to help us both maintain our respective roles so that we could continue to work together. A further interpretation, from a structuration or practice theory perspective, is that my interaction with Sandra was entirely predictable because these moments are forming and being formed by a social order in which expertise is possible at all; this is an order in which I, Sandra, her team, and our organisation more generally as an oversight body, are all implicated and on which we rely for our continued existence.

As Sandra and I talked, I noticed with some relief that people were starting to come up to volunteer more topics from their table discussions. These weren't all related to the question that had been asked; indeed, one of them was a humorous suggestion about bringing pets to work. At the time, I wondered a little if these suggestions might be responses to what had just happened – in Girardian terms, had the subtle violence that had just occurred heightened a sense of social cohesion offering temporary relief for the feelings of social conflict that are usually present (Girard 1972)? Mostly, however, I was just happy that things were moving again. Indeed, the rest of the session returned to plan: people chose their topics, had conversations (interestingly, the 'bringing pets to work' topic

attracted the biggest group and, judging by their convivial laughter, they seemed to have an enjoyable conversation – which would fit the Girardian interpretation), and filled out their discussion sheets.

I ended the session by asking people to volunteer their summary conclusions in plenary. With what had happened at the start of the session very much on my mind, I was preparing for limited or no feedback and mainly wanted the session – and with it, my part in the day – to be over. So, I was surprised that almost every group wanted to offer a reflection – and quite enthusiastically, too – about ways they could support each other through the coming changes. Wrapping up the feedback session, I thanked the group for their cooperation and said that it had been nice to work with them again. With ambivalent feelings about what had just happened and the day overall, I watched quietly as the directorate awards were presented, and then left as quickly as I could.

Shame and its cognates

I have been working on this project for a few months now. Though the away day was therefore some time ago, I am still left with very mixed feelings about it and my ongoing relationship with the Support Directorate in general. Arguably, it was a rather successful event: the feedback (sought through an online survey) suggested that almost 90% people who replied had found the day to be 'good' or 'very good' (compared to 'average' or 'poor'). One might therefore conclude that the experience of what I have called a crisis in this project was only mine, and that my analysis of fight/flight basic assumption behaviour, and the collusion between me and Sandra, over-inflates what were actually quite insignificant events. Yet there were also indications that my perception of the OST session was shared by others. For example, in the survey feedback, someone anonymously described the topic generation episode as having been 'excruciating', while another described the OST session overall as 'hard work'.

More immediately after the event, a number of the interactions I had with members of the Support Directorate also seemed to suggest that something uncomfortable had happened. For example, at the end of the day, Jeff told me that he thought the whole day had been good and seemed to make a point of saying that despite some reservations about the OST session, it had gone rather well. Another manager approached me as I was packing away my things to say she thought that people had been reluctant to speak up in the OST session due to their perceptions of hierarchy, and that I was right to leave them with the responsibility even though it may be intimidating to name issues on behalf of the group in this kind of setting. Further, the next day, I received an unprompted email

from a member of the OD working group saying 'I think the session worked well in the end, appreciate you had to keep the faith!'; another manager came by my desk, apparently with the sole purpose of saying that things had probably been a bit bumpy because people were worrying about the restructure and that it had turned out OK in the end.

As these interactions accumulated, I found myself thinking that people were somehow trying to make me feel better or make sure I was all right, or somehow apologise for something they had done to me. I found this very confusing as, reflecting a habitual pattern in my own sense-making process, I had been seeing the breakdown in the process during the OST session as something I should have been able to prevent or fix rather than something in the group. It seemed that others had different views. My overriding feelings were of gratitude that people had taken the time to speak with me, but also confusion about why people would be making these reparative gestures.

We might interpret these last events, and indeed many of those I have described in this project, using the notions of *shame* and *guilt*. Much has been written about these, particularly in the psychoanalytical literature, and H.B. Lewis (1971) is often cited as providing a primary distinction between the two (Dearing and Tangney 2011), with shame focussing on the self and guilt on a triggering behaviour. Therefore, while I feel guilty about something I have done, I feel shame about who I am, but both involve the idea of inadequacy in relation to some behavioural standard that is felt to be morally important.

Using this distinction, in my account, one might see my own response to the silence as being related to shame. I describe feeling irritated, threatened, and embarrassed as I failed to meet my own idea about what I should be able to do – which extends to a sense of fraudulence about who I am or want to be. It is suggested that anger, contempt, envy, depression, grandiosity, or withdrawal are all potential responses to narcissistic injury as we fail to measure up to the idea we have of ourselves (Morrison 2011), which might suggest that shame was part of what was going on for me. From the perspective of the members of the directorate who contacted me afterwards, one could then see their reparative gestures as potentially arising from guilt. In some sense, I was a guest at their away day; and one could imagine retrospective perceptions among some members of having treated me inhospitably, or perhaps even aggressively, as something that may have triggered remorse. In that case, given that we are likely to meet again, making amends was a way to secure our future relationship. Another interpretation is that the directorate's members imagine I have some influence over what happens in the reorganisations arising from their own assumptions about my relationship with Sandra, Jeff, and the organisation's senior leaders. In that case, the gestures would not just be towards me but also towards what I might represent as an access point to the wider abstract system

of management. Conversely, my response to these gestures might have been reflecting my own anxiety about the implications for my own future having done 'a bad job'.

While these interpretations are plausible and useful for making further sense of my experience, I find the distinction being made between shame and guilt unsatisfactory as, to my mind, they are based on a rather individualistic conception of human interaction (consistent with much of psychoanalysis) and further, they suggest a separation of who we are from what we, in the widest sense of the term, *do*. Where I talk about feeling shame for not being a good enough facilitator, this is inseparable from the actions that have stimulated those feelings; when I talk about the directorate members potentially feeling guilty for what they had done to me, this is inseparable from what we might think of as the kinds of people who act in this way. As I have argued previously, if we think of identity as the emergent, dynamic, and multifaceted patterns in the responding phase of self as ongoing social process (Ybema et al 2009; Mead 1934), then who we are and what we do are mutually constitutive. On that basis, though they may remain somewhat distinguishable in terms of their triggers, shame and guilt are conceptually inseparable on the basis Lewis suggests (Lewis 1971); further, it has been argued that emotions like embarrassment and humiliation are all part of the same phenomenon (Scheff 2000, 2003, 2014).

This is important because it leads to an exploration of how *shame* might have been motivating the reparative gestures I received and therefore how these responses might have been about group members' sense of self and identity. As suggested earlier, if the Support Directorate's members did indeed see me as a representative of the abstract system of management (of which they are also part), or of Sandra or the wider senior leadership team (with whom they also work); or an expert (and therefore part of a social order in which they are also implicated, because they are experts in their own fields); or indeed as one of their own, given that I have an ongoing relationship with them that is likely to continue into the future – then what happened at the away day is probably not just something that group members did to me, but also something they did to each other and to themselves. Returning to the thrust of Kristeva's argument, to cast off an aspect of subjectivity is a *claim to identity* and so we come to the idea that shame might also be part of a social process of identity formation.

In that case, the identity of group members implied by scapegoating me, if indeed that was what happened, was out of keeping with the expectations we have of ourselves and each other in our relational habitus and was therefore likely to be disturbing. This rupture arguably brought into view the fragility of the social order and so making amends, as a response that makes a further claim to identity, then offered an opportunity for us to find a way to continue working with each other

according to the norms we are used to. It may also have mitigated the risk of adverse consequences in relation to the influence we imagined we might have over each other's futures.

Events like those I am describing here seem fairly prevalent to greater or lesser extents in my experience. I therefore propose that, especially for people who are interested in how they affect others (as most OD practitioners I have met are), it is important to pay attention to shame in our experience of being with others.

The paradox of shame and (self-)respect as moral process

Though shame is acknowledged as having an important role in the development of self-awareness and self-regulation in childhood (e.g. Sedgwick and Frank 1995), it appears to be a common view that shame-proneness is unhelpful and undesirable beyond the years during which the ability to imagine the attitudes of others is developing. For example, in education, shame arising from insecure attachment is seen to stand in the way of learning (Cozolino 2013); in therapy, unconscious shame and its manifestations are something to be overcome (Morrison 2011). Popular psychology and management literature, where it talks about shame at all, seems to follow a similar line (e.g. Brown 2007, 2010). The negative associations of shame go back to the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis, and, as Elias argues in *The Civilising Process* (1939), the evolution of shame and its gradual passing into the shadows of discourse can be seen as a key aspect of the move from pre-modern to modern Western societies. So, one can well imagine that the undesirability of shame is deeply socialised, though not talked about, and therefore why its avoidance or overcoming might seem self-evident.

I believe this position becomes very ambiguous, however, if we consider shame as part of the moral processes involved in interdependence; and I find the complementary accounts provided by the contemporary American philosopher Krista Thomason, and the contemporary Australian gender and cultural theorist Elspeth Probyn, particularly helpful in making this case.

From a philosophical perspective, and to my mind very much in keeping with ideas from psychoanalysis about shame being bound up with narcissistic injury, Thomason characterises shame as a complex emotion that relates to 'the experience of tension between one's identity and one's self-conception' (Thomason 2018: 18). Drawing on the work of Deonna and Teroni (2012), rather than seeing shame as inherently undesirable, Thomason ascribes moral value to it by asserting that a liability towards shame demonstrates a willingness to give material weight to the perspectives of others: to feel shame is to show that we are open to moral criticism and recognise the standing of

others as moral agents. This figures the feeling of shame as a necessary counterpart to having respect for others. It is important to note that this does not entail that experiencing shame is a pleasurable experience; on the contrary, an important characteristic of shame and its near emotional neighbours is that it is morally disturbing.

Now, if minds are social through and through, then to recognise the moral standing of others is also to recognise one's own; and so, arguably, this further qualification of Thomason's argument might account for the quality in our experience where shame and *self*-respect seem mutually constitutive. For example, in the revaluation of my decision about whether or not to share all of my concerns about using OST with the OD working group at the planning meeting, my sense that not sharing – and instead, playing to the role of expert by invoking my credentials – was the appropriate thing to do is in direct conflict with the sense I have now of potentially having been patronising; this evokes feelings of shame for me. Further, in my description of standing in front of a room full of people at once believing that, as a reasonably experienced facilitator, what I was doing was right and at the same time recognising that it wasn't working, the sense of unresolvable conflict – which I describe as a breakdown in my habitual processes of fore-conceiving completeness – emerged as a sense of shame, irritation, and fear.

We might therefore say that, in Mead's terms, if 'me' and 'I' are experientially discriminable phases of the ongoing dialectical process of self (as related to experiences of social constraint and of creative agency, respectively), then shame relates to 'me' and (self-)respect relates to 'I'. In that case, the paradox of 'I'/'me' is closely related to (self-)respect/shame, which we might also then see as paradoxical. In that case, particular instances of shame are the opposite of the poignant experiences of being in community/freedom from social constraint captured as the fusion of 'I'/'me'; rather, they are the poignant experience of conflicts of 'I'/'me' in relation to matters of moral importance.

Here, from a different perspective, Probyn's illumination of shame as an affectual and psychological phenomenon that relates to *belonging* adds a further helpful dimension to my argument. Probyn (2005) describes shame as an ambiguous state that arises when a position of interest and its concomitant possibility of connection with others who are important to us, is confronted with the possibility of humiliation and exclusion. Probyn specifically acknowledges her debt to the twentieth-century psychologist and pioneer of affect theory, Silvan Tomkins, who characterised shame as signalling 'the incomplete reduction of interest and joy' (Tomkins in Sedgwick and Frank 1995: 5). Tomkins's formulation emphasises that shame occurs not at the moment of exclusion, but before this – when the possibility of connection still exists. The reduction of interest and joy that comes

from communion is therefore incomplete, because it may yet increase again. It is therefore a way of thinking about shame as particularly relating to *threats to the social bond*, which is how other authors have described it (e.g. Lewis 1971; Scheff 2000, 2003, 2014).

On this account, shame is a bodily experience of something we personally value greatly – which accounts for the different people feeling shame about different things – being somehow put at risk (Probyn 2005: x). In my account, my ongoing ability to work with this group, my relationships with Sandra and Jeff, and more generally my membership of the OD community are all interests that are called into question in small ways during the moment of crisis. Further, from a structuration theory perspective, we could say that my experience with the group is forming and being formed by the wider social order; this means the rupture brings into view the fragility of the whole ideology of support, oversight, expertise, and authority through which my organisation is constituted. Perhaps it is no wonder, then, that our collective deviation from expected performances might seem so significant in the moment and warrant reparation afterwards. We might also say that our encounters with liminality or strangers, or difference in general, is part of the same phenomenon: it draws our attention to the possibility of exclusion, and therefore the possibility of shame.

Taking these perspectives together is powerful: we can now say that the experience of shame is an emergent affectual response to conscious or unconscious experiences of tension between how we would like to see ourselves and how we might actually be being seen by others (and ourselves), in relation to aspects of our conduct that afford us membership of real and ideological communities – therefore including institutions, thought collectives (Fleck and Trenn 1992), or others who share our values – that are important to us. From Mead, we also have the idea that morality is a process of seeking the widest range of perspectives on a matter and then acting in a way that gives weight to those perspectives, including one's own; we might therefore say further that morality as a process depends on respect and self-respect, and therefore necessarily involves shame.

Concluding remarks: OD expertise, ruptured practices, and paying attention to shame

In this project I have proposed four main arguments, which I will now try to bring together. From these, a moral philosophy of OD begins to emerge, which I believe naturally extends to any aspect of social life where we are interested in our impact on others.

The first argument is that expertise is a relational practice. By this I mean that, far from being a property of individuals, expertise is an ongoing negotiated social process that takes the form of a particular set of practices. These practices involve habitus-appropriate performances by those who

are seen as experts and their lay audiences, and society more widely, as they are forming and being formed by the social order in which those kinds of interactions can occur at all. Examining the context in which the experiences of expertise-as-practice I have recounted occur (my conversation with the OD working group, and with Sandra in the OST session), I can see the presence of norms concerning, for example, the relationship between overseers and the overseen, deference to authority, and reverence of those who are seen to have special access to knowledge resources.

My second argument is that expertise is just one example of the many relational practices that are involved in the maintenance of social order, which is essentially fragile. These practices involve application to abstract ideals (and therefore the possibility of idealised wholes), the invocations of which are invitations to be in community with others. For example, we might imagine that talking about expertise, most generally, is an invitation to be in community with others who idealise the possibility of omniscience, or at least significantly value specialist knowledge. However, because our different prejudices, histories, and intentions are likely to lead us to different interpretations of these abstract ideals, these invitations are also the openings of processes of negotiation over meaning and the evolution of the very ideals concerned. They therefore involve the possibility of exclusion from the real or imagined communities concerned; and I have suggested that experiences of shame pervade this tightrope walk between inclusion and exclusion – between our idealised selves in conflict-free communion with others like us, and the conflictual selves we encounter in the practical failures of our imagined moral universes to deal with our actual experience. And because of our deeply socialised aversion to shame, we are drawn towards the avoidance of these experiences – perhaps towards the avoidance of conflict in general – and towards inclusion and the ontological security that continuity provides.

This is therefore an argument for conservative or recursive tendencies in our interactions as ways of maintaining social order and identity – particularly if we are interested in being able to go on with each other, as we need to with our colleagues at work, or in our families or other communities. I have described just such recursive tendencies in my project. For example, in my conversation with the OD working group, we could see my mildly exhortative statement as a response to the fragility of the social order being brought into view: as the contingency of our expert/lay audience roles became apparent, I invoked my credentials to reinforce our social figuration and the power dynamics inherent to it. Likewise, with Sandra's response to my call for help; however, there, it was Sandra's gesture that reinforced our figuration. Further, in the OST session, my response to my audience's silence was to find a way to stay on a track that conformed to the relational habitus in which these kinds of away days occur. The breakdown arguably brought into view the contingency of

our collusive functionalisation of an idealised facilitator–group figuration; while, in the end, order was restored (albeit with some significant discomfort), some of the people involved felt compelled later to make reparative gestures.

My third argument is that, while this recursive tendency is clearly a common feature in our experience, it is not totalising: there is always the possibility of novelty arising, along with the potential for social transformation. Indeed, I am struck in all of the examples I have just mentioned by the sense that things could have been otherwise: what would have happened, for example, if I had shared my concerns about OST more freely with the OD working group? What would have happened if, during the silence in the OST session, I had somehow taken up my sense of feeling threatened, embarrassed, and afraid with the group, instead of turning away from these feelings? What if I had not acquiesced to Sandra's handing responsibility for what happened next back to me? These ruptures in practice seem to present new opportunities for action; but if we are consciously or unconsciously seeking to avoid disturbing but perhaps important aspects of our experience (as the examples I give here might illustrate), then perhaps we are missing opportunities for our moral development. I am arguing that experiences of shame – in a paradoxical relationship with (self-) respect that mirrors Mead's 'I'/'me' dialectic – are a just such an important aspect of being self-conscious moral agents. In a way, this project demonstrates how engaging with breakdowns can offer opportunities for new ways of sense-making: had I not inquired into these events, I might not have come to think about structuration theory, ruptures in practice, or shame as I do now. I believe all of these are starting to change my practice as I am better able to explore with others and respond with greater choice to disturbing experiences, which might otherwise remain unarticulated.

My fourth argument is therefore that engaging in our experiences of shame may provide new opportunities for action. Following my exploration in this project, it would be tempting to think that I have new moral justifications for some of the times I have found myself in conflict with others. For example, I recall being irritated by an interaction with an OD expert who seemed uninterested in the possibility that there might be other perspectives on the matter of organisational culture than hers; I could characterise this as a lack of interest in being part of a community who explore these topics together, and therefore a lack of respect, which justifies my irritation as a response to their lack of shame. Similarly, I can recall experiences of feeling perplexed by a colleague's apparent blind deference towards an expert; I could characterise this (to my mind) abrogation of responsibility as an avoidance of the possibility of shame and a lack of self-respect. However, I am not suggesting a self-edifying advocation for calling out these instances, partly because I notice the presence of my own values in what I have just written. Previously, I have described attitudinal plurality (belonging to

the community of others who are radically open to the idea that they may be wrong); taking responsibility (belonging to the community of others who do not delegate their thinking to others); and being knowledgeable (belonging to various communities who have particular kinds of specialist resources), as all being important to me – so, one could interpret my irritations as simply about others not sharing my values.

In that case, perhaps all I am really arguing for is that inquiring into ruptures in practice as I have done – either in the moment, or through research – can bring into view the fragility of the social order in which we find ourselves participating. Where these ruptures involve significant experiences of shame, it may be that the aspects of the social order at stake concern things that matter to us; therefore, through further inquiry, we may find out more about what the things that matter to us are. Sometimes, these inquiries will present intolerable threats to ontological security and identity more generally, so we might expect them to be disturbing. This disturbance may well cause significant anxiety as we encounter our taken-for-granted selves and others as strangers; our abjective responses are likely to be further claims to identity. At times, pursuing such explorations might be harmful to those concerned; at other times, these explorations may be hugely generative – much of the work in OD practice involves disrupting unhelpful patterns of interactions, to allow new possibilities to emerge. The same could probably be said of any therapeutic or transformative process of personality and social reconstruction.

However, despite the unpredictability of social life, we are nevertheless performing with others all the time, in and out of keeping with collective expectations. And for as long as we are interested in the impact we have on others (as OD practitioners working to facilitate organisational change, but also more generally as social agents interdependent with other social agents), at the heart of these considerations is the question of how to be ethical. Another way of describing the Meadian perspective on morality is to say that we need to respect the perspectives of others as we take responsibility (with self-respect) for how we step into the unknown. We are probably better able to do that if our prejudices are, as far as possible, in plain sight; and I have argued that paying attention to disturbing aspects of our experiences that we might prefer to avoid – of which shame is one – is a way to find out more about ourselves. This is therefore an important aspect of how we take responsibility for ourselves and our moral development.

3.   Synopsis of my research

In this section, I reflect on my research projects, first summarising each of them and then analysing them thematically – citing new literature in some places – to draw out what I see as having been the key movements in my thought. This includes setting out a summary of the theoretical foundation for my research. Deliberately adopting a more detached attitude than when writing Projects 1–4, I then articulate my argument as a series of five claims and associated implications for OD practice. In the case of the last argument, I also note some implications for research as a practice. Finally, I critically engage with the contemporary literature on expertise, providing a new conceptualisation of it as a social object.

This review is therefore a further iteration of the research cycle: if Project 1 explored the evolution of my interpretive tendencies, and each of Projects 2–4 were exercises in breakdown-oriented research (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011; Brinkmann 2012; see Chapter 4), then this summary too is a further opportunity for critical and reflexive analysis, through which I may understand more about identity and the social order in which I am involved.

Project summaries

Project 1: Engaging and distancing as processes of managing my sense of self

In my first project, I tried to describe the evolution of some of the thought styles (Fleck and Trenn 1992) that now inform my approach to work. I traced a personal history that started with an early enthusiasm for learning in childhood, combined with a sense of not quite fitting in. This was followed by significant movements in my thought during my undergraduate and graduate studies, and through my experiences of work as a healthcare manager in the public sector and as a consultant to healthcare organisations.

From an epistemological perspective, I described an evolution from a clearly positivist perspective (i.e., that through scientific inquiry we can discover the true nature of the world 'out there', as reliably documented in school textbooks) to a more relativist social-constructionist perspective, which came about largely through my undergraduate encounters with Nietzsche's writings. I then described a move to a more pragmatic perspectivism that focussed on the value of theory as a means to social action, which I associated with my graduate studies in critical theory. Though I stepped away from academia at that point, these ideals followed through as a tendency towards doing socially motivated work and a belief in the importance of intellectual honesty and rigour.

In describing these movements in my thought, I drew attention to how I have appeared to try to manage my emotional states – which I would now describe in terms of anxiety – through repeating

patterns of engaging in and distancing from my work. I noticed how this seem to be particularly related to my ability or willingness to tolerate the emotional volatility that accompanied my more challenging experiences of being with others. I also noticed how these kinds of experiences became more prominent as I took on more senior roles: while committed to doing socially motivated work, when I was unwilling to play into particular kinds of politics or power relating that I found difficult, or when they led me to unhappiness or distress, I sought to distance myself from them, and this often involved 'escaping' to academia. These were helpful observations about my history that I had not previously considered, which enriched the field of my attention and immediately started to offer new ways of dealing with events at work to which I had strong reactions.

As I was writing Project 1, I also noticed that the process of its development itself offered useful insights into how I think, beyond the content of what I was writing about. In that phenomenological move (from the object of inquiry to the process of inquiring [Brinkmann 2012]), I noticed that I was getting very stuck when contemplating the vast extent of literature waiting to be explored and the ideas I might encounter: there was so much that I could have read and written about, and each new idea I encountered seemed to profoundly change my understanding of the experiences I was reflecting upon. What had seemed important initially suddenly felt trivial; what had seemed unpredictable at the time became easily explained through some new critical or psychoanalytical perspective. This open-endedness was both paralysing and exhilarating: I couldn't see how I would complete my project because I didn't know what I might come across next, yet I sensed that new possibilities might be becoming available to me, although I couldn't articulate these at the time. Further, I felt that to be a good researcher, I *should* know more – which perhaps draws attention to a more general sense in which knowledge and certainty have been idealised in Western society since the Enlightenment (Gadamer 1975; Elias 1978; P2: 42; P4: 87).

What I found most helpful in dealing with this conflict between a cognitive appreciation of not being able to know everything, and a much more pre-cognitive, *bodily*, attraction to wanting to know more, was to try to reframe the problem of being stuck by exploring the process of interpretation. I took up Gadamer's theory of hermeneutics (Gadamer 1975) and within it his ideas of *insight* (P1: 8) and *experience* (P1: 27)*.* Together, these led me to revise my project to concentrate on writing about the events that had been particularly anxiety provoking (as these offered the greatest opportunities for learning) and to reassess my desire for completeness and certainty. This revealed a disconnect between my espoused pragmatic perspectivism and my actual interpretive tendencies, which seemed much more positivist than I would have cared to admit. This was a profound moment for me and catalysed a new sense of (at least cognitive) ease with a lack of certainty about the future and a greater appreciation of my interdependence with others. I ended my project intending to inquire more deeply into politics, ethics, and emotions.

In my second project, I wrote about how I went about initiating a culture and leadership project in my organisation. The work had been requested by the director of OD, and, as a part-time member of their team, I was directed to use a particular set of diagnostic tools. As this work progressed in tandem with my research, I found myself becoming increasingly sceptical about the approach I was using. This was especially because revaluating what I had been doing brought about ethical concerns: I felt regret and embarrassment about how I was coming to reinterpret my previous actions.

I started by considering what sense I could make of the increasing focus on culture using diagnostic and strategic planning tools, identifying these as some of the traditional techniques of scientific managerialism based upon the principles of strategic choice theory (Child 1972). Using ideas from anthropology on rituals (Lukes 1977), I argued that one of the reasons that these simplifying tools might be taken up in bureaucratic organisations (in preference to engaging in the complexity of our experience) was to preserve managerialism, its associated patterns of power relating, and the status of people (like me) who are kept in work by the managerialist paradigm. I argued that we could see a wider conflict in these approaches between bureaucratic ideals – viz. the discharge of business according to calculable rules through the functional division of labour (Weber et al 1958; Townley 2008) – and the interests of individuals, which can be seen as tending to be negated in these kinds of organisations (Bauman 1989).

I critiqued the either/or assumption implied by separating bureaucratic ideals from the interests of individuals as an oversimplification of a more complex set of competing and irreconcilable ideals (du Gay 2000). Consequently, I suggested that it was worth exploring other explanations for my experience and took up ideas from psychoanalysis on rituals as a way to think about what happens in organisations (e.g. Jaques 1955; Hirschhorn 1988; Gabriel 2013). Specifically, I considered how the kinds of planning activities I was examining might be seen as social defences against anxiety (Menzies 1960; Armstrong and Rustin 2015). This is the idea that groups can be unconsciously motivated to collude in creating ritualised social processes that help group members to avoid dealing with the disturbing reality of their fuller experience. I suggested that it was at least plausible that the work on culture I was leading could be thought of as a social defence against the anxiety provoked by the actual experience of trying to lead teams in the challenging environment we find ourselves in. Extrapolating from this, I concluded that strategic planning activities in general could be seen as important but temporary ways of making sense and managing anxiety, rather than as the prophetic forecasts we might sometimes imagine them to be.

I suggested that accepting this proposition might imply a very different way of dealing with, for example, the non-delivery of plans than current ways of holding individuals to account sometimes involve. As a result, I found myself being more explicit with my colleagues about what I thought project management tools were for, which seemed to resonate with them and provided us flexibility and space to negotiate agreements that might otherwise have been seen as unamendable. I also found myself talking about taking responsibility for what we were doing in different ways, emphasising the need to engage with people as people rather than spaces on organisation charts.

However, noticing that both the anthropological and psychoanalytical perspectives on rituals had offered insights that felt significant to me, I wondered how many other perspectives might do the same. As I had done in Project 1, I noticed a sense of paralysis emerging from the observation that I had no idea what else I might find if I read more. Relatedly, in light of the new interpretations I was making, I noticed how I myself might inadvertently have been negating the interests of my colleagues, which led to further ethical discomfort. I therefore became curious about how OD practitioners could ever work out what the right thing to do was in light of this kind of uncertainty about the future and about the past.

I went on to suggest that my paralysis might reflect a deeply held preference to look for the fixed and stable in our experience (Elias 1978) being called into question – in other words, a defence against anxiety. I explored a more processual alternative position in the argument from pragmatic philosophy that meaning emerges in interaction (Mead 1934), concluding that the assertion that we can predict the impact of our actions with much confidence beyond some general expectations was unwarranted; and for the same reasons, argued that the search for a definitive explanation of what I was doing at work was probably futile. I notice now how this could be seen as a further example of a habitual tendency to dichotomise as I pitched certainty against uncertainty, at this point privileging the latter. I now also wonder if my turn away from exploring further interpretations may have been a form of intellectualising defence against anxiety, manifest as a reluctance to admit how socialised I was into the bureaucratic ideology I was criticising, and the prospect of finding further disturbing explanations for what I had been doing.

The movement in my interpretive tendencies that seemed to being brought about by my research, and particularly the ethical concerns that were arising as a result alongside new capacities to act, were becoming increasingly prominent in my thinking. This led me to write about how reflective practice could be seen as an ethical process of engaging with uncertainty. I argued against more traditional systems thinking–based conceptions of how we learn (e.g. Bateson 1972; Argyris and Schön 1974; Argyris 1982) on the basis that single- and double-loop learning implied a repeatability

of social experience and an ability to step outside our experience, both of which I suggested were problematic in the absence of an Archimedean 'view from nowhere' (Nagel 1986). Instead, I set out how reflective practice could be regarded as an intentional social process of enriching the field of our attention based on the Meadian theory of human interaction (Mead 1934). Further, on Mead's view, that morality could helpfully be thought of as a necessarily fallible process of seeking the widest possible range perspectives and acting on the balance of competing goods. This suggested a way that OD practitioners could engage differently with uncertainty, by thinking differently about what it is possible to take responsibility for.

By the end of Project 2, I felt much more comfortable relying on my instincts rather than trying to predict what would happen as a result of my interventions, as I would have done before. I would now characterise this as a state of awareness that was more sensitive to signals that things were not going to plan. In practice, I'm not sure if it is possible to say what I did or did not notice as a result, but I mention this to draw attention to the way that a new way of thinking was also feeling or bodily state. I also now see my project as an initial exploration of the practice of researching the surprising quality that inquiring into my experience seemed to occasion. I ended my project intending to inquire into what we are actually doing when we find ourselves knowing or not knowing what to do.

Project 3: Exploring being stuck as a negotiation of social orders: preliminary thoughts on honesty as a way of coping with uncertainty

In my third project, I continued to inquire into my experience of working on employee engagement and culture in my organisation, this time starting with an account of a team away day I facilitated for a large directorate within my organisation. I explored the power dynamics of the facilitator–group relationship and while I came to some interesting conclusions about the paradox of safety and experimentation, and about the how current trends in OD practice (e.g. towards dialogic OD) could be seen as forms of professional protectionism in the OD community, none of this seemed to be particularly satisfying for me.

As I worked at trying to make my inquiry more compelling, no matter what I tried, I seemed unable to create the thick description (Geertz 1973) that enabled others to empathise with my narrative and subsequent analyses; and this was leading to me feeling stuck, bored and frustrated. This triggered an interest in the embodiment of social processes, which I took up by engaging with literature about boredom (Toohey 2012; Fenichel 1954); this largely suggested that there was something important *missing* from my work.

Noticing that the process of becoming unstuck had been facilitated by conversations with my learning set, which had led to a greater sense of honesty, I became curious about what might not have been honest about what I had been doing until I became unstuck. This led me to consider psychoanalytical perspectives on concealment – repression (Freud 1915) or exclusion (Bowlby 1979) – and how these might relate to the pursuit of ontological security (Laing 1969; Marris 1996). While I critiqued the basis of psychoanalysis as insufficiently explanatory of the social nature of mind and its development (Mead 1934) if human interactions are understood as complex responsive processes, I found the theme of the pursuit of security through concealment compelling. So, I turned instead to James C. Scott's theory of public and hidden transcripts (Scott 1990) as an alternative way of exploring ideas about concealment as social processes. I argued that from this perspective, feeling stuck could be seen as the embodiment of conflicting social orders: in my specific case, this related to the competition between, on the one hand, the self-sacrificing and arguably rather impersonal ideals that seem implicit to the discourse of public-sector work; and, on the other, the existential concerns of employees and their accompanying anxieties – manifest perhaps as boredom, envy, anger, or other emotions that are formally excluded from this discourse, but still very much present in other ways. I suggested that these patterns were maintained through group processes involving shame and guilt (Elias and Scotson 1965).

I went on to consider how the threat of reorganisation likely heightened anxieties, which are arguably most likely to be borne by the weakest members of the social figuration (Marris 1996); though in organisations, the 'weakest' also place constraints on what leaders can achieve. I argued that while this may lead to workplace disengagement or preoccupations with trivialities (and I noticed this happening in my work and in what I found myself able to write about in the earlier stages of the project's development), I was nevertheless consciously or unconsciously taking steps to secure my own future; when I became able to engage with this, I found that new capacities to act became available.

I used the notion of *self-authentication* from Dreyfus and Taylor's contact-based epistemological programme (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015) to explore the experience of feelings of coherence or honesty that accompanied becoming unstuck, and figured this further as a process of *social reconstruction*. Using Mead's arguments that individuals are social through and through, I showed that far from being processes that occur 'in individuals', both could be seen as *social processes*. In particular, I argued that moments of felt coherence were instances of what Mead terms the fusion of 'I' and 'me', representing a temporary sense of freedom from social constraint, and that social reconstruction and personality reconstruction were mutually constitutive (Mead 1934).

On that basis, I suggested that OD practitioners and leaders in general might well consider what could be enabled by bringing into view anxieties arising from uncertainty. Though I appreciated that seeing this as an alternative totalising ideology of transparency was also likely to be problematic, I nevertheless leant towards the idea that anxiety should be explored wherever possible because having more choice was somehow *necessarily* better. I noticed that this might speak to an idealisation of the possibility of omniscience, which could also be seen as being shared (at least implicitly) by organisational researchers who are currently inquiring into practice (e.g. Greig et al 2012; Hibbert et al 2017). I ended my project intending to explore how else we might deal with the conflict between the uncertainty that seems inevitable in organisational life and a pursuit of certainty (Bowlby 1979), which I saw as driving our apparent attraction towards idealised totalities (e.g. aiming for familiarity with 'all' of the organisational literature, or to know 'everything' about oneself).

Project 4: Expertise as a relational practice: exploring the paradox of shame and self-respect

In my final project, I was determined to stay focussed on my experience of work and resist the temptation to idealise or resort to metatheory that I had demonstrated in my previous projects. I started with the description of a further experience of planning for and facilitating a development event for a directorate in my organisation. This event occurred just as an organisational restructure was getting underway.

Whereas I had been drawn to describing quite stark or dramatic events in Projects 1–3 (the moments of being significantly 'pulled up short', as I had resolved to pay attention to in my first project), I was now much more interested in the more mundane ways I was going about my work, keeping in mind the learning from my research so far. In particular, I noticed how I was paying much more attention to competing social orders and community memberships, and this showed up in my research as writing about why, for example, I was choosing facilitation techniques based on the extent to which I could describe them using the theoretical perspectives I was using in my research: being able to describe Open Space Technology (Owen 1992) from the perspective of human interaction understood as complex responsive processes felt important because it justified my membership of, for example, the DMan community of researchers, or of the community of OD practitioners who can explain the theoretical basis of their practice.

As I inquired into experiences in which I responded to some sense of my credentials as an OD practitioner being called into question, I increasingly started to notice the performative quality of what was involved for different parties participating in expert–lay audience relationships, and in

particular the *backstage* and *frontstage* aspects of those performances (Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Giddens 1984, 1990; Goffman 1951, 1959, 1967). I also noticed how the ideology of the regime of overseers and the overseen seemed to play out in the moments of rupture I was describing, and I found practice theory (and particular Giddens's duality of structure and agency [1984]) to provide a compelling account of the production and reproduction of social orders, the power relations inherent to them, and the conditions that enable their reproduction.

What I find missing from practice theories is an adequate description of *how* practices produce and reproduce ideologies, but I think this is where the complex responsive processes perspective can help. Firstly, from the complexity sciences, complex adaptive systems involving heterogenous agents suggest by analogy how population-wide patterns can emerge and evolve paradoxically in local interaction; secondly, from pragmatic philosophy, Mead's conception of self-consciousness as a paradoxical experience of self as simultaneously both subject and object also provides a way of reconciling Giddens's duality of structure and agency (Stacey 2012; Stacey and Mowles 2016; Mowles 2015; Simpson 2009).

Alerted by my conclusions in Project 3, I also noticed how experiencing the fragility of the social order being brought into view was accompanied by bodily discomfort. I suggested the aspects of the social order involved included: the role of experts in modern societies as access points to specialist knowledge resources (Giddens 1990); the particular role my organisation occupies in the oversight regime for health and care services; and the role I play in relation to the directorate I am supporting. These observations emerged from critically analysing my account of a meeting with the directorate's small OD group in which we were planning the upcoming team development day, and a second narrative recounting an episode at the development day when the process I had planned for the eighty or so delegates seem to dramatically fail.

The experiences themselves were disturbing at the time, and so was their revaluation as I inquired into them. I took these disturbing moments, as in Project 3, as indicating that processes of personality and social reconstruction were going on. Relating this to practice theory, I described them as embodied *ruptures* in our socially constructed, habitual processes of fore-conceiving completeness (Gadamer 1975) that produce and reproduce patterns of interaction. These can be thought of as moments when the contingency of our assumptions is brought into view, which provides openings in which patterns may transform unexpectedly (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011). Importantly, responses to these ruptures can also be recursive, and indeed may often be so. Where I had previously been rather drawn to the idea of transforming stuck patterns towards some greater purpose – as is, to some extent, the job of OD practitioners as they try to improve organisational

performance (e.g. Bushe 2017) – I noticed the contingency of even that ideological position. In Project 3, I had already rejected the idea of OD practitioners as the 'neutral guides' they are often supposed to be (see e.g. Cheung-Judge and Holbeche 2015; Marshak et al 2015; Justice and Jamieson 1998; Corrigan 2015) because of the essential interdependence of being a social actor (Elias 1978). And in that case, given that my motivations may not always be the same as other people's motivations, how could I go about deciding whose moral agency was more important?

I was surprised that my inquiry led to an exploration of shame (though I now notice that I described feeling embarrassed and regretful in previous projects, too), which seemed to offer an explanation not only for some of my own feelings about my experiences, but also for the actions of others. Exploring philosophical and psychological perspectives on shame (Probyn 2005; Sedgwick and Frank 1995; Scheff 2000, 2003, 2014; Thomason 2018), I concluded that experiences of shame could be thought of as affectual responses to the possibility of exclusion from real or imagined communities that were important to us, and that this sense of vulnerability demonstrated an openness to being morally criticised by others. I argued that these experiences were likely to arise when some kind of social norm was transgressed; and since abjective responses arise in relation to the desire to cast away some disturbing aspect of ourselves (Kristeva 1982), experiences of shame could be considered as abjective affirmations of identity – and simultaneously (because selves are social) of the social order. I argued that shame was therefore an important aspect of moral development.

I concluded my project with four arguments:

- Expertise can be thought of as one of the routinised relational practices – here involving the backstage and frontstage performances of experts, authorising bodies and their lay audiences – through which the social order of large, complex modern societies is produced and reproduced.

- Routinised relational practices in general are the means by which social figurations and the power relations inherent to them (Elias 1978; Foucault 1976), and the conditions that enable their reproduction, are produced, reproduced, evolve and transform (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984). In particular, our aversion to shame and other anxiety-associated responses that are called out during ruptures in practice account for a recursive tendency, often because we fear exclusion (Probyn 2005; Sedgwick and Frank 1995; Lewis 1971; Scheff 2000, 2003, 2014; Stacey 2003) or are seeking to reduce the anxiety that uncertainty creates (Marris 1996). I think this tendency is privileged in systems thinking and cybernetics.

- Alongside this recursive tendency, there is also a tendency towards significant social change, but it is difficult to predict how these competing tendencies will play out in particular

instances due to the perspectival and temporal instability of meaning (Mead 1934) and the analogy of the butterfly effect.

- Staying with and inquiring into the felt disturbance that goes along with breakdowns in practice – including those involving shame, experienced alone and with others – may provide new capacities to act. The extent to which this is possible, of course, will depend on the context; and making judgements about what is appropriate – at particular times, in particular places – is what taking responsibility might mean. Importantly, this tries to resist the tendency to preferentially elevate one side of dichotomised propositions (such as certainty/uncertainty or thinking/feeling) that I noticed in my practice in previous projects: in some cases, not challenging the status quo might be, on balance, judged the 'right' thing to do.

Looking back over the four projects summarised in this way, I notice how the themes that emerged in Project 1 about politics, ethics and emotions, and in Projects 2 and 3 about uncertainty and security as intended areas for exploration, did indeed turn out to be the foci of my research. I did not anticipate that expertise and shame would arise as topics for exploration, or that practice theory and morality would become so dominant in my thinking, in the way that they did in Project 4. I think this demonstrates something about the way the DMan enables researchers to follow what puzzles them rather than trying to anticipate this in advance. I will come back to this in Chapter 4.

Thematic analysis of my projects

A further review of the project synopses I have just provided begins to illuminate some of the key movements in my thought over the course of the DMan programme. I will now summarise those that I see as being most material to the arguments I want to make, and try where possible to account for the societal conditions that may explain why I am drawn to them.

<u>Uncertainty and the pursuit of wholeness</u>

How we respond to the prospect of experience being endlessly revisable has been a consistent theme in all of my projects. It emerged in Project 1 as reflections about how – despite my leanings towards perspectivism that arose in my undergraduate studies – I felt both exhilarated and paralysed by encountering academic literature that kept prompting reconstructions of my previous experience. I found some sort of resolution in Gadamer's notion of the hermeneutic circle (Gadamer 1975) as a metatheoretical way of explaining why enquiries into practice were necessarily open-ended. Later, I would find this echoed in the work of contemporary social constructionists (e.g. Gergen and Gergen 1991) and qualitative researchers using narrative inquiry (e.g. Andrews et al 2008).

In Project 2, I explored in detail how meaning arises in interaction in Mead's pragmatist philosophy, and therefore needs to be seen as time- and context-dependent (Mead 1934). I also noticed a tendency to look for the static and stable through what Elias (1978) calls 'process reduction', and found this a helpful way to draw attention to the processual nature of social life that tends to be underplayed in managerialist thinking.

In Project 3, despite my coming around to the idea that we can never really know how our gestures will be taken up by others and ourselves, I noticed a strong attraction towards idealised 'wholes': in Projects 1 and 2, I had looked to metatheory to resolve conflicts in my experience, and in Project 3, I found knowing more about myself to be somehow comforting. In Project 4, I located this tendency to idealise imagined wholes as a feature of Western thought that found its greatest expression in the Enlightenment (Elias 1978; Gadamer 1975; Linge 1976).

Summary: I would now characterise this movement as a growing acceptance of human finitude and the inherent unpredictability of social life, which renders all action probabilistic. I have moved from sensing an unarticulated tension between a cognitive understanding of the limitations of inquiry and a kind of pre-cognitive, bodily attraction to some ideal of omniscience, to being able to explain this tension more succinctly as an embodied competition of the ways of thinking in which I have been socialised.

<u>Rituals and anxiety management</u>

My interest in rituals or routinised interactions emerged most clearly in Project 2, where I explored perspectives from both social anthropology, which connects rituals to the perpetuation of power relations, and psychoanalysis, which connects rituals – as social defences – to group processes of managing anxiety. For clarity, by *anxiety*, here, I mean any disturbing response to unarticulated or underarticulated factors, either in the environment or in the self; anxiety in this way of thinking is an aspect of the absorbed coping of everyday life (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015), which may be captured socio-linguistically as this or that particular emotion (e.g. Burkitt 1999, 2014). From both of these perspectives, I noticed the way that we can habitually conform with ritualistic activity, without considering how those activities might be part of the very patterns of interaction that we, as OD practitioners, and particularly as internal consultants, may be trying to change.

In Project 3, while not considering rituals specifically, I explored arguments from attachment theory that the pursuit of security is linked to managing existential anxiety (Marris 1974; Bowlby 1979), and in particular Marris's arguments about the distribution of uncertainty being inherently political (Marris 1996). This connected the distribution of anxiety in social figurations to power relating, which was emphasised further in my exploration of Scott's 'public and hidden transcripts' (Scott 1990). As the narratives of the dominators and the dominated, respectively, these patterns of interacting could be seen as routinised relational activities – or practices – that provide some kind of certainty to those involved (even if the consequences of that certainty are undesirable to some), versus the social chaos that may arise from transgressions of social orders.

I explored the idea of routinised practices most fully in Project 4, where I used Giddens's structuration theory (Giddens 1984), with the addition of key arguments from the perspective of human interaction understood as complex responsive processes (Stacey 2003, 2009, 2012; Stacey and Mowles 2016), to make sense of how patterns of interaction are produced, reproduced, evolve and transform in local interactions. I argued that the recursive tendency we notice in group processes may arise from a collective avoidance of the anxiety associated with the uncertainty that would arise from challenging established ways of working and social ordering. This may be especially noticeable in modern societies due to the extent to which their size and complexity preclude really getting to know more than a tiny fraction of the people we might encounter in everyday life. In line with Marris (1996), I would see the uneven distribution of uncertainty – and therefore anxiety – as a political process that serves to perpetuate power relations.

Summary: I would therefore characterise my thinking here as a movement from noticing the rituals in some aspects of organisational life, to seeing routinised interaction as constituting identities and social order in ways that are bound up with power relating and the management of anxiety.

<u>Embodiment of social processes, including breakdowns</u>

My interest in how heightened bodily states can indicate that important reconstructive processes are going on has also been an ongoing theme in my projects. In particular, I have found myself interested in how experience is affectual rather than simply cognitive; and by *affect*, I mean any of the ways we find ourselves affecting or being affected by the world around us, including other people, objects, ideas, language and ourselves (Gherardi 2017, 2018; Carlile et al 2013). Anxiety, as I have expressed it above, is therefore an *affectual* response in these terms, which may be captured socio-linguistically in different ways, depending on the quality of the experience and its social context (Gherardi 2017).

This theme appeared in Project 1 in a number of ways: for example, I describe how each new perspective I encountered seemed to change my sense of my history and my identity in disturbing ways; further, I took up Gadamer's notion of insight, which emphasises that our most important learning experiences involve suffering (Gadamer 1975: 365); further still, the reason I turned to Gadamer was because of the paralysis I felt when confronted by the sheer scale of the available literature.

In Project 2, I was disturbed by ethical concerns associated with realizing that my habitual ways of working may have perpetuated some of the very patterns of interaction that I was criticising. This disturbance manifested as feelings of regret and embarrassment about who I was finding myself to have been, and it was these feelings that led me to inquire into reflective practice more generally as a way of minimising the chances of this kind of problematic revaluation (and the discomfort that went with it) in the future.

In some ways, Project 3 largely focussed on the embodied experience of unacknowledged conflicts of the group processes of social ordering in which I am involved, with identity being a way of speaking about the location of competing concerns in individuals (Ybema et al 2009). Importantly, I started to become more attentive to the pre-reflective, pre-linguistic or affectual quality of interaction (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015; Gherardi 2018; Shotter 2016). In inquiring into my experiences of feeling stuck, and becoming unstuck, I started to explain how 'individual' psychodynamic processes, involving concealment and pragmatic resolution, could be seen as embodied group processes. In particular, I found Mead's notion of personality reconstruction and social

reconstruction being mutually constitutive (Mead 1934: 309) to be helpful in articulating this as a paradoxical relationship.

In Project 4, I paid attention more formally to ruptures in practices, where the contingency of the social order comes into view, manifest as bodily experiences. I proposed that a rising sense of anxiety correlates with increases in uncertainty about our ability to stay in relation with each other – logically, then, a rising sense of anxiety might lead us to question what about the social order or our identities is at stake.

Summary: I would chart this movement in my thought as a growing dissatisfaction with the Cartesian mind/body dualism that has dominated Western thought since the Enlightenment. Arguably, this historical separation of rational objectivity from irrational subjectivity, and the elevation of the former over the latter (Linge 1976), negates much of what makes us human. If we are interested in social life and all of the ways that we affectively interact with each other, and accept Mead's position that human experience consists of bodies interacting with other bodies and themselves, then there is clearly more to attend to than just the cognitive and linguistic aspects of experience we tend to privilege.

Shame and self-respect

In Project 4, I engaged with the notion of shame, its emotional neighbours and their associated manifestations. I characterised these as arising with the threat of exclusion from real or imagined communities that are important to us, as a recognition of the moral agency of others (Lewis 1971; Sedgwick and Frank 1995; Probyn 1996, 2005; Scheff 2000; 2003, 2014; Stacey 2003; Thomason 2018).

Further, using Kristeva's notion of abjection (Kristeva 1982) – figured as a group process that can occur privately, using Mead's notion of minds being continuous with society (Mead 1934; P3: 69) – I explored how our visceral awareness of these threats of exclusion and the responses that follow could be seen as affirmations of both identity and the social order. Put another way, what we do when we feel shame may say a lot about what or who is important to us among competing identity or membership claims. I saw this as closely related to Mead's dialectic of 'I' and 'me', and came to see self-respect and shame as similarly dialectically related in the process of self-consciousness. Far from being something to be avoided, shame therefore becomes a fundamental aspect of what it is to be human.

Looking back over my projects, I can now see constant examples of this interplay of shame (where memberships were at risk) and self-respect (where what was important to me was expressed). Table 1 illustrates this with just two cases (there were many more) from each project as examples. In each, I describe the incident in which I experienced shame to some extent; I suggest which real and imagined communities may have been at stake; and I suggest what aspect of my identity or the social order my response affirmed. The range of experiences in the table indicates the diversity of stimuli that called out a shame-like response, and the conscious and unconscious identity affirmations that were involved. The patterns observable in the final column, I would argue, demonstrate how identity can be thought of as an ongoing negotiated process (Ybema et al 2009) that is always forming and being formed by the social order.

Table 1: Experiences where memberships are at stake

Experience	Page ref.	Memberships at risk (evoking shame)	Response and interpretation (involving self-respect)
Project 1			
During my Master's studies at UCL, being told off for taking risks by writing polemically rather than conforming to norms of academic writing.	15	**Real:** Academic community at UCL; Master's graduates **Imagined:** Continental philosophers who write polemically, prompting social action; people who are subversive	**Largely submitted to academic norms but tried to maintain my focus on polemic.** • Found a way to reconcile conflicting memberships to get my degree but not compromise on my ideals; • perpetuated a social order in which deviation from norms was allowed, but only to an extent.
In my commissioning role, depression as I found myself not fitting in.	24	**Real**: My own team; the organisation more widely **Imagined:** People who are intellectually rigorous; healthcare managers who are good at their jobs; credible interlocuters with leadership teams	**Submitted to team play but tried to find ways to do the work I thought was important.** • Found a way to reconcile conflicting memberships, but played down my own concerns; • submitted to organisational patterns of power relating, arguably reinforcing the social order.
Project 2			
With Jerome, ethical discomfort when considering whether or not to take on the culture work because I disagreed with its positivist basis.	31	**Real**: Jerome's team; in the future, the OD community **Imagined:** People who are intellectually rigorous; my research community	**Agreed to do the work on the basis that I would do it the way I felt made sense.** • Expressed the importance of my own priorities over others; • challenged the status quo, enabling the possibility of transformation of patterns of relating.

Experience	Page ref.	Memberships at risk (evoking shame)	Response and interpretation (involving self-respect)
Regret when revaluating how I had been going about the Culture work as perpetuating the habitual patterns of relating I was criticising.	39, 41	**Imagined:** People who promote the agency of their colleagues; people who are self-aware; people who take responsibility for their actions; people who are intellectually rigorous	**Changed my approach to be more consistent with my values, and tried to influence wider OD activities.** • Set myself in opposition to my habitual tendencies/organisational norms, affirming my preference for the imagined communities listed; • primarily an evolution of identity.
Project 3			
Alone and with my learning set, feeling stuck because I wasn't able to progress my project – boredom, frustration, resignation.	65	**Real:** My research community; DMan graduates **Imagined:** People able to work through difficulties; people who are academically able	**Stayed with feelings, even though unsure about outcome.** • Expressed desire to stay in research community and prove myself; • perpetuated social norms of the DMan being personally as well as academically challenging.
With the group at the healthcare conference, ambivalent feelings when wanting to pursue the argument about cult values when others didn't.	71	**Real:** The particular group of 10 people and others at the conference **Imagined:** Healthcare managers; my research community; people who are intellectually rigorous and willing to consider alternative or critical perspectives	**Submitted to group norms rather than argue with Ian.** • Group membership seemed more important, and I contributed to perpetuating the social order in which 'patient care' trumps other concerns; • that I've written about it suggests that the research community is more enduringly important to me.
Project 4			
Ethical discomfort when revaluating not having shared more of my thinking with the OD working group.	86	**Imagined:** People who respect the moral agency of others	**Considered explicitly the situatedness of the decision, which will likely change my approach in future.** • Affirming my commitment to attitudinal plurality and acknowledging fallibility; • primarily an evolution of identity.
Embarrassment, irritation and fear when the OST process didn't go to plan.	98	**Real:** The Support Directorate's members; the central OD team; the organisation more widely **Imagined:** OD community; good facilitators; people who can handle tricky situations with large groups; people who care for others	**Asked the group members to have table discussions, rather than following my original plan.** • Expressed deference to group norms by 'giving in' to what I thought they wanted, i.e. escape from discomfort; • perpetuated a social order in which it is difficult to talk about some topics in public.

Summary: I see the movement in my thought here as an increasing appreciation of the importance of shame in group processes of inclusion and exclusion, and in particular moving from being uncomfortable about feeling embarrassed or ashamed, to seeing these experiences as opportunities to inquire into what is at stake for me or for others. I also see a move from privileging the moral agency of others over my own, to a greater appreciation of the situatedness of ethical judgements and the responsibility involved in acting (self-)respectfully. Paying attention to these experiences in my research has led to significant revaluations of my experience and more choice in subsequent encounters with unexpected difference: now, when I notice heightened emotional states in myself and others, they tend to trigger conscious reflexive processes in the moment rather than unreflective action.

Morality and freedom

A preoccupation with the relationship between morality and uncertainty has been present throughout my projects. In Project 1, I posed the question of how we could ever work out what we *should* do when faced with the open-ended and revisable nature of meaning that I was starting to notice. In Project 2, I focussed specifically on my dissatisfaction with normative perspectives on morality in the Kantian tradition (e.g. Kant and Paton 1948), and how the Meadian pragmatist perspective on morality – as seeking the widest range of perspectives, then acting on the rational balance of 'goods' (Mead 1934) – seemed better able to deal with the actuality of negotiating with others (Griffin 2002). This led to my characterising reflective practice as an ethical process because it was a deliberate way of enriching our fields of attention, allowing more perspectives to be taken into account, and therefore expanding our capacities to act. On reflection, if choice relates to freedom, then this is an argument for maximising human freedom.

In Project 3, morality was less of an overt theme, but was nevertheless present in my considerations about bringing into view aspects of our experience that we might prefer to avoid through psychodynamic, but still social, processes of repression (Freud 1915) or exclusion (Bowlby 1979). Implicit in this was the tendency to dichotomise certainty and uncertainty, privileging engaging with uncertainty as a way of increasing choice. This again emphasises a bias towards human freedom, even if these processes were disturbing.

In Project 4, I re-engaged with the theme of morality more explicitly in my exploration of the ethical implications of staying with ruptures in practice as opposed to acting unreflectively to try to escape them. This was particularly in my considerations of shame, as recognising the moral agency of others

and demonstrating an openness to moral criticism; and self-respect, as asserting one's own moral agency in the balancing of 'goods' proposed by Mead's moral philosophy.

Summary: I now characterise the movement in my thinking about morality as an increasing appreciation of how rejecting normative perspectives on morality in favour of pragmatic ones creates new responsibilities for those who are making judgements about what to do. In the course of my research, I moved from not really understanding what I thought about morality, to then idealising uncertainty and exploration of the anxiety associated with it as a means to greater freedom, which I seemed to feel everyone should pursue. I have now come to a more explicitly egalitarian notion of human freedom and a more nuanced view of morality whereby each judgement has to be uniquely assessed for the potential benefits and harm it may cause to others, and ourselves, at the same time as seeing whatever we do as ongoing processes of identity formation and the evolution of social order more widely.

Theoretical grounding: pragmatism, performed.

The core theories involved in the complex responsive processes perspective come from the complexity sciences, pragmatist philosophy, process sociology and group analysis (Mowles 2017a, 2017b). The emergent approach prescribed by the DMan research method (see Chapter 4) inevitably means that researchers are exposed to a variety of theoretical paradigms that cannot be predicted in advance. Further, as the research method aims to deepen an inquiry that arises in each researcher's own work, these inquiries can focus on very different aspects of the core theories according to researchers' interests, learning set patterns, and what they find most useful based on their own histories and contexts.

Reviewing my projects now, I notice that the ideas that I found most useful are quite diverse, which is perhaps a further expression of my stated commitment to attitudinal plurality and a growing appreciation of the value of a radical openness to the perspectives of others. I also notice, however, that the key ideas I took up can be seen to reflect the tenets of classical pragmatism, and I will set out below my understanding of that position and describe how ideas from non-pragmatist disciplines can be reconciled with pragmatism to provide a coherent theoretical grounding for my research.

<u>Defining pragmatism</u>

It has been argued that pragmatism does not have a single definition, but, rather, is a family of approaches taken by different scholars who seem to share a set of principles that can broadly traced back to the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James and John Dewey (Bernstein 1991, 2010; Talisse and Aiken 2008; Simpson 2018). This lack of a clearly delineated theory of pragmatism arguably reflects one of its central principles: that the theories that prove useful for living and working together will be responsive to and evolve with the situations in which they are called into use. Importantly, these theories are endlessly open to critique, which makes any kind of epistemic foundationalism problematic; indeed, it has been suggested that this kind of non-foundationalism is core to critical philosophy in general (Bernstein 1991), and so to be completely consistent, the principles of pragmatism themselves must be open to radical critique.

One logical conclusion of this way of thinking is an 'anything goes' epistemic relativism – which, as noted in Project 1, was largely the position I took during my undergraduate studies. The assumptions involved in that line of thinking perhaps reflect what the contemporary American philosopher Richard Bernstein describes as the 'grand Either/Or' that started with Descartes and animated the Enlightenment: *either* there is a secure foundation for our knowledge that can ground our existence and moral choices, *or* we are cast into a radical relativism and intellectual and moral chaos (Bernstein 2010).

Bernstein suggests that pragmatists reject this dualism by recourse to the notion of *pluralism*. Unlike relativism, pluralism makes no claims about our ability to know the world 'as it really is' because the distinction between epistemology and ontology is largely irrelevant to the questions that actually arise when we engage with our experience of trying to go on with each other; this includes the experience of yearning for unifying explanations that seem ultimately unavailable, which was a theme that arose throughout my projects. Bernstein's critique here can be seen as an example of rejecting epistemic dualisms, which is suggested to be a further defining characteristic of pragmatist thought (Simpson 2018). Reviewing my projects, this was very much was the direction my research took as, for example, I started to consider affect (as defined on p.125) as an alternative account of experience that did away with the need to separate thinking and feeling; or in my use of the notion of routinised relational activities as embodied processes of managing anxiety as a way of bringing together the often separately treated issues of identity formation and social ordering.

A pluralist approach, instead, asks us to consider what kinds of unity feature in our experience, and what practical differences they make (Bernstein 2010: 59). For the purposes of academic research, this perhaps permits a more exploratory way of engaging with research paradigms compared to more positivist approaches that seek to resolve ambiguities and contradictions that arise in experience teleologically through, for example, metatheoretical resolution (see, for example, P2: 48); instead, those issues become opportunities for further inquiries that create new more helpful working theories. This does not, however, negate the need for critical rigour in research – indeed, it perhaps increases the need to demonstrate that alternative perspectives are being taken seriously so that our critiques, and the affirmations immanent to them, are robust enough to stand up to scrutiny in our communities of inquiry.

<u>'Classical' pragmatism in my research</u>

As the preceding subsections of this thematic analysis section indicate, my projects can be read as a deepening exploration of pragmatism, which emerged as I came increasingly to see my experience of being in the world as engaged, plural and fallible, rather than the detached, teleologically rational and ostensibly impartial attitude that many of my colleagues over the years have seemed to idealise. It is important to note that the emergence of this perspective was in no way inevitable – it would have been equally possible for another paradigm to have emerged as dominant had certain 'starting conditions' been subtly different (e.g., when I started my research, which learning set I was in, what was going on at work at the points when I started each project).

Particularly from Project 2 onwards, I found key ideas from George Herbert Mead compelling, and I drew heavily on his collection of noted lectures, *Mind, Self and Society* (1934), throughout my projects. In particular, the following elements emerged as enduringly important in my research:

- **Human selves as social through and through** in terms of: bodies interacting with themselves as they interact with other bodies giving rise to selves and self-consciousness; challenging the Cartesian mind/body split, which provoked me to consider *affect* rather than focussing on cognition or intelligibility; and the ways in which identities and social orders can be conceptualised as forming and being formed by each other.

- **Meaning emerging unpredictably in those interactions** and the possibility of novelty and creativity being ever-present as we find ways to live and work together; this is a provocative counterpoint to theoretical perspectives that focus largely on the conservatism or recursivity in our experience, and to the idea that communication is the cybernetic transfer of mental contents from one person to another.

- **The evolution of the sense of the generalised other**, which I understand to be a temporally dynamic range of sensitivities that arise over time from being able to take an increasingly sophisticated set of attitudes of others into account; these are differentially and intentionally functionalised according to the particular circumstances in which they are called out.

- **Morality** as a fallible process of judgement having taken into account as many as possible of the possible perspectives on the matter at hand. Pragmatist ethics is a way of thinking about how moral problems can be addressed, rather than the moral imperatives found in normative ethics. I find that, for Mead, this is situated within a wider ideology of democracy and the pursuit of a universal community.

I also draw slightly on the work of Mead's contemporary and fellow pragmatist philosopher, John Dewey. This is particularly when I write about reflective practice as a formulation of Dewey's notion of engaging with perplexity in the process of inquiry, however, in Project 2, I link this back to the Meadian conception of the evolution of the sense of the generalised other.

Using ideas from non-pragmatist disciplines

Bernstein describes how pragmatist principles can also be found in the work of many of the twentieth century's most prominent philosophers, even though they come from very different historical and theoretical roots to classical pragmatism. For example, in *The New Constellation* (1991), he critically examines how Heidegger, Gadamer, Foucault and Derrida (among others) all speak to concepts that the American pragmatists had raised, but fell out of fashion in the middle of

the twentieth century. The contemporary Canadian philosopher, Cheryl Misak, makes a similar point in her *New Pragmatism* (2007), where she suggests that key themes from the work of Peirce, James and Dewey have emerged in the work of other philosophers who may not normally be considered – or even consider themselves – part of the pragmatist tradition.

As I noted above, the main theories I take up in addition to Mead's are those that I found useful in making sense of experience leading to new, more helpful ways of working; following Bernstein and Misak's lines, I think the elements of those theories I have taken up are those that sit quite comfortably with classical pragmatism. In many cases, within my projects I have critically explored how theories that do not seem to fit with the pragmatist paradigm could be reformulated so that they are theoretically consistent. Some examples are outlined below.

Psychodynamic theory

I found exploring the ideas of individual and group psychodynamic defensive processes to be helpful for making more sense of how my colleagues and I seemed to respond to the situations we were engaged in. This was particularly in relation to my experiences of managing felt experiences of unease, or anxiety (as defined on p.124). However, while psychodynamic theories are themselves diverse – with classical Freudian schools tending to posit innate drives, the conflicts of which give rise to psychodynamic tension and unconscious motivations; and other formulations, such as object relations theory, focussing more on the imprinting of early relationships as templates for future interactions – they are all largely based upon individualistic, psychologically deterministic and broadly Cartesian assumptions (Frosh 1999; Stacey 2003).

I was drawn to the more relational theories because of the importance they give to social conditioning, but noted the same reliance on internal worlds – which is incompatible with the pragmatist perspective of social selves. Further, classical psychoanalysis tends to treat groups as somehow regressive (e.g. Freud 1921) and from which individuals need to be liberated in order to flourish; yet again, this is inconsistent with the notion of individuals being social through and through. In response, I suggested how even these notions could be considered to align with Mead's theories of development and interaction. An evolving sense of the generalised other will inevitably involve patterns of power relating, or habitual responses to anxiety, that over time come to pattern our sensitivities and responsive tendencies in particular ways that resemble what is described as psychodynamic repression (e.g. Freud 1915) or exclusion (e.g. Bowlby 1979).

In this way, I attempted to analyse, from what I would now describe as a pragmatist position, aspects of my experience that seemed amenable to psychodynamic interpretation. Indeed, my inclination to consider shame as the anticipation of exclusion (from both real and imagined

communities) could be seen as arising primarily from this attention to sociality, which also takes seriously human fallibility and an apparent need to belong; this therefore also locates identity formation – as processes of shifting identifications – securely within a pragmatist perspective.

Hermeneutical phenomenology

I found the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, especially his *Truth and Method* (1975), helpful in developing my understanding of the interplay of the past, present and future. In his formulation of *prejudice* (ibid: 283) as a set of responsive tendencies established in history that inform our interpretations of the present, and in particular in his notion of a *fore-conception of completeness* (ibid: 205), I found a way to articulate some of the tensions I was experiencing in my practice that my reading of Mead did not call out in the same way. Insofar as the fore-conception of completeness is a way of articulating the abductive logical steps we take – extrapolating immediate experience based on our histories to working hypotheses about the world – as we act into the future (Brinkmann 2012; Martela 2015; P4: 88), this can be readily associated with the responding phase of the self in Mead's theory of interaction (Simpson 2018), and therefore emergence and the possibility of novelty in experience in general (Garud et al 2015). So, despite hermeneutical phenomenology having a very different lineage from classical pragmatism,[4] on reflection, the ideas I have used are those that sit comfortably with the pragmatist perspective.

Practice theory

Particularly in Project 4, I drew on Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, which I encountered when I was exploring his work on experts as access points to specialist knowledge resources in complex societies. To my mind, this work spoke generally to the bringing together of the individual and the social, and specifically to Mead's notion of global patterns forming and being formed by local interaction (including identity as a patterning of interaction with the self). Giddens' formulation helped me specifically to understand how one might take up these ideas in relation to the organisation of complex modern societies (Giddens 1990). A key critique of Giddens' work is that it over-emphasises recursivity; and this is arguably also seen in Bourdieu's practice theory (Nicolini 2012), upon which I also draw. I highlight this tendency towards conservatism in Project 4, where I connect it to affectual engagement and the management of anxiety, contrasting it with the sense of unpredictable novelty that I also recounted in my projects – in the complex responsive processes

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[4] Hermeneutical phenomenology originated in the methodologically oriented theological hermeneutics of Friedrich Schleiermacher, which Wilhelm Dilthey – with whom Mead studied (Joas 1997) – revived, focusing on trying to understand human lives. Martin Heidegger's phenomenological project began with, but then critiqued, Dilthey's work – as did Gadamer, who studied with Heidegger (Brinkmann 2012).

perspective (reflecting the pragmatist philosophy that informs it), both recursivity and novelty are core and inseparable features of experience.

Further, the concepts of structuration (Giddens) and habitus (Bourdieu) have both been critiqued for insufficiently engaging with the embodied social actors who provide the vehicle for practices (Simpson 2009), and the possibility of novelty in experience associated with those social actors. In my research, I addressed this performatively by starting with my own experiences as an social actor, embodying competing social orders through the routinised relational activities I came to see as forming and being formed in local interaction; reflectively, I noticed the opportunities for making different choices, and how reflexive inquiry seemed to accentuate this sense of contingency. I think my analyses are therefore consistent with pragmatism, as long as practice is construed as the routinisation of relational activities that patterns interaction rather than, for example, in opposition to theory. Indeed, this conception of practice has much in common with Mead's notion of the *social object* (Mead 1925) – or the generalised tendency to act shared by groups of people. I will explain this in more detail in my further examination of expertise as a social object at the end of this chapter (p.150).

Power, inclusion and exclusion

The only perspectives I have used that are not quite so easy to reconcile with my understanding of pragmatism are those concerning power, inclusion and exclusion. While it has been suggested that notions of dominance and subordination are largely absent from Mead's work (e.g. Athens 2002), Mead and his pragmatist contemporaries were clearly concerned with politics, given their interests in democracy and ethics. Indeed, in the third section of *Mind, Self and Society*, Mead does explore cooperative and antagonistic socio-psychological impulses as aspects of social interdependence that give rise to conflict or integration (1934: 303–304). He also discusses the changing relative values or importance of 'I' and 'me' in interactions (ibid: 199), which I interpret as a way of talking about the differential prominence of the experiences of social constraint and freedom as we act into the unknown. Both of these might be seen as ways of talking about power relating, but I did not find these expositions particularly helpful for deepening my research inquiry.

The authors I did take up in relation to power and politics seemed to address more directly the issues that were coming up in my practice. These were the German process sociologist, Norbert Elias, and the French post-structuralist philosopher, Michel Foucault – both key authors in the complex responsive processes literature. They both suggest that power is not something that individuals can possess; rather, power should be regarded as a property of non-egalitarian and mobile relations, immanent to ever-changing social figurations in which social actors simultaneously enable and constrain each other. I also draw particularly on Elias's focus on inclusion and exclusion, and on Foucault's genealogical approach to understanding social phenomena that perpetuate

hegemonic biases. Interestingly, where, for example, Dewey does write about power – such as when he suggests that maintaining an epistemic dualism of habit and thought enables 'those who wish a monopoly of social power … to do the thinking and planning while others remain docile … instruments of execution' (Dewey 1922: 72) – it is similar to the way that Foucault would later write about discourse. This again shows that, despite arising from very different traditions, many of the ideas I take up are consistent with a more formal pragmatist perspective.

If we assume that Elias and Foucault's observations are relevant to understanding patterns of social relating (and the themes of inclusion and exclusion, and the perpetuation of dominant ways of thinking, did seem to feature in my projects in important ways), then it is reasonable to suggest that in the terms of Mead's theory of social selves, they inform the development of the sense of the generalised other and therefore the evolution of identities and society. A further addition from pragmatism is that these patterns are not somehow fixed, but open to radical transformation as we transact with each other (and self-consciously with ourselves) in the world.

Summary: while my research did not adhere to a particular theoretical paradigm in terms of the ideas I used to deepen my inquiry, I see it as engaging with the same themes that concerned the pragmatists. As I have tried to set out, the key non-pragmatist paradigms I engaged with, and use within subsequent sections of this thesis, can all be related to the pragmatist principles that have emerged as underpinning my research. I see this approach as very much in keeping with the evolution of the complex responsive processes perspective itself over the years since its inception in the 1990s. The diverse perspectives that the DMan research community has engaged with have been reframed and combined over time to provide a multidisciplinary theoretical position highlighting a range of features of experience that seem relevant to the study of organisational life (Mowles 2017a, 2017b; Stacey and Mowles 2016).

Synthesis of my key arguments

In Project 1, I investigated the following dilemma: If our ability to act is based on the sense we make of our experience in the context of the histories we construct for ourselves, but this is constantly changing with each interaction, how can we decide what we should do with any certainty about what the result will be?

I think the thematic analysis above shows how this question has echoed throughout my research projects, which I now articulate as the central research question I posed at the start of this thesis: *In the context of an essential uncertainty about social life, how might researching disturbing breakdowns in everyday practice be a process of moral development?*

In this section, I will try to concisely articulate the five key arguments, and some implications for OD practice, that together start to answer this question. With my fifth argument, I also suggest some implications for the practice of research.

<u>Limitations and aspirations</u>

I am keen to emphasise that my arguments are responses that have emerged for me based on my history, my interactions with my learning set, the wider DMan community and the people outside of my research community with whom I have discussed my work. In keeping with the argument I have been making for the time- and context-dependence of meaning, this is clearly not the only set of conclusions that could arise from my project work; rather, it reflects my history, a growing curiosity about group processes, and also the interests of my learning set colleagues and supervisors.

It also reflects the values I hold about the importance of intellectual rigour, attitudinal plurality, and trying to do right by others in an uncertain world. Of course, these values are themselves contingent and I can chart their origins in my own personal history; but throughout my reflexive inquiry, they have remained the points of stability to which I found myself anchored. I realise that these are choices, and fully expect encounters with new perspectives to change what I think about my arguments in the future; for now, however, they are good enough and give me new ways of going about my work. My hope is that they may also provoke new thinking for others, providing them with new ways of going about their work too.

Further, it should be clear that my research has concerned my experience of *doing research about* my work. This is unavoidable: as part of meeting the obligations of research ethics, I have let my organisation's 'gatekeepers' (its most senior leaders) and people I am working with regularly know how my research is conducted. This knowledge must change our interactions in conscious and unconscious ways. Further, my attitude to my work is as a researcher as well as a practitioner: that I

am trying to pay attention to my experience in a different way, and that others know I am doing so, has consequences that I cannot predict or account for. On that basis, I see my research as concerning my work as a *practitioner-researcher* (rather than just a practitioner), and it is in that context that my arguments are intended to be read.

i.   The inherently uncertain nature of social life renders OD interventions probabilistic.

I have come to understand *meaning* as a way of describing all the various ways we can understand each other and ourselves, arising in interaction (Mead 1934; P2: 43) based on our socialisations (Gadamer 1975). Our interpretations are therefore contingent, time- and context-dependent, and endlessly revisable (Gergen and Gergen 1991). This accords with the Gadamerian description of the hermeneutic process as an iterative (rather than purely self-referential) circle in which a constant turning of parts and whole continually reconstructs the past in the present based on expectations of the future (Gadamer 1975).

Therefore, while we may have ideas about the responses (as bodily states, understandings, or reflective or unreflective actions) our gestures will call out – which we can imagine and anticipate with increasing degrees of sophistication as we develop (Mead 1934) – we cannot know for certain how we will find ourselves acting in the moment, or how those actions will be understood. This is because experience is unrepeatable (and therefore unpredictable) insofar as every situation involves a unique configuration of individuals, objects, histories and intentions. Applying the analogies of non-linearity and the butterfly effect from the complexity sciences, appreciating that there are innumerable and often imperceptible differences in 'starting conditions' helps to explain how gestures may be interpreted and amplified in quite unexpected ways. Further analogies from the complexity sciences using the ideas of self-organisation and fractal symmetry suggest how population-wide patterns can emerge from local interaction (e.g. Gleick 1997; Stacey and Mowles 2016).

The important contribution from Mead's theory of selves (1934) is that that humans are social through and through. This is in three senses. First, human development can be seen as the evolution of our sense of the *generalised other*, which expresses the way in which our interpretive and responsive tendencies arise through interaction and are constantly evolving (P2: 48). This intensifies the argument that every interaction is unique. More importantly, Mead explains how the dialectical conversation of affectual gestures between different bodies in which meaning arises (society) is the same process as bodies interacting with themselves in private conversation (mind). Minds therefore have the same quality of being dynamic temporal processes in which meaning can arise with

unpredictable consequences (P2: 69). Finally, because we can 'hear' and understand ourselves, we can take ourselves as objects to ourselves, which adds a further transformative potential. Mead expresses this self-consciousness as the dialectical, mutually constitutive experiences of subjectivity and self-objectivity, which he terms 'I' and 'me' (P3: 77). This puts paradox at the heart of human experience.

Together, these modify the theory of complex adaptive systems as it is understood in the complexity sciences by emphasising that human interaction is predictably unpredictable: humans can be regarded as dynamic processes responding to each other and themselves, with paradox as an essential feature of experience.

Implications for OD practice:

Starting from this point gives us a very different way of thinking about how OD practitioners might go about understanding what they are doing when they are intervening in organisations. I have found mechanical assumptions about how change happens through strategic plans and calculative implementation according to strategic choice theory (Child 1972) to be very prevalent in the ostensibly rational bureaucracies (Weber et al 1958; Townley 2008; Bauman 1989) in which I have worked. Indeed, I would argue from a practice-theory perspective that it is through these very activities that bureaucracy is produced and reproduced.

However, taking the uncertainty of social life seriously means that actions can have unexpected results, and perhaps should be expected to go other than to plan at least some of the time. In that case, perhaps a more tentative way of acting is called for, that expects and looks for the unexpected and accepts that conflicting rational explanations can exist at the same time. This is not to say that such ways of acting cannot be purposeful, but more that the certainty with which the outcomes of OD interventions are sometimes positioned may reasonably be treated with some scepticism.

ii. **Seeing everyday practices as involving social processes of managing anxiety introduces new ethical dimensions to OD practitioners' judgements about what to do.**

Despite the unpredictability I have just described, there are many aspects of our experience that do seem to be relatively stable. Bourdieu describes social actors as *virtuosos* to convey the way in which, in general, we forget the way that the many instances of responding to similar situations in our past, over time, become our conscious and unconscious patterns of predicting the responses our gestures will invite (Bourdieu 1977: 78–79). This implies at least some consistency to experience.

A key theme in my research has been the different ways that we are socialised to manage anxiety in everyday life, both privately and with others (Elias 1978; Bowlby 1979; Stern 1985; Mead 1934). As a pre-reflective state, this absorbed coping (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015; Gherardi 2017; Shotter 2016) can involve individual processes of repression (Freud 1915) or exclusion (Bowlby 1979), which I see as embodied conflicts of social relations (P3: 76); or social defences (Menzies 1960; Hirschhorn 1988; Armstrong and Rustin 2015), seen as group processes of avoiding anxiety.

Taking group processes first, practices – defined as routinised relational activities – can be regarded as the sites of the production, reproduction, evolution and transformation of patterns of relating, and the conditions that enable their perpetuation (Giddens 1984; Bourdieu 1990; Foucault 1976; Nicolini 2012). As I illustrated with the example of expertise as a co-created relational practice (P4: 91ff) – and which I examine more fully at the end of this chapter – I would like to argue that in organisations, everything from the way we greet our colleagues each morning, or what people usually talk about in public and in private, to the way meetings are usually organised or where they take place, or how pieces of work are planned, all constitute the practices of everyday life. This is because I think they share a basic property of being processes through which anxiety associated with uncertainty (Marris 1974, 1996) is maintained at a tolerable level through joint performances that conform to expectations within the relational habitus. Put simply, if routines create certainty, and certainty reduces anxiety, then practices reduce anxiety.

Further, continuing the argument that individuals are social through and through, we can make a similar argument about individual identity. As described above, Mead accounts for the uniqueness of human experience by arguing that humans are not just conscious, but also self-conscious because we can hear and respond to ourselves in the same way that we can hear and respond to others. This leads to a paradoxical experience of selfhood involving both social constraint and agential freedom at the same time as an ongoing dialectical process. I argue that *identity* amounts to the patterning of this dialectical process as interpretive and responsive tendencies that maintain ontological security (Laing 1969), or a sense of continuity about who we are (Marris 1974, 1996).

The distinction between individual defences and social defences is therefore that the former involves the interaction of bodies with themselves, and the latter involves the interaction of bodies with other bodies. In that sense, identity formation can be thought of as an ongoing, social practice of the body interacting with itself to manage anxiety, just as social ordering is an ongoing, social practice of bodies interacting with each other to manage anxiety.

Regarding relational practices and identity as both the sites of reproduction of social order and processes of managing anxiety in organisations complexifies the judgements of OD practitioners: disrupting any routine can no longer be simply a matter of improving performance, but also of potentially creating additional anxiety for those the changes involve. It is already argued that inquiring into organisations as collections of practices may offer new insights into how ideologies are perpetuated through everyday activities, and therefore what might be done to destabilise the logics of those practices (Nicolini 2012; Gherardi 2012; Gorli et al 2015). Seeing those practices as the ways that people are maintaining tolerable levels of anxiety, however, adds an ethical dimension to considerations of what might be the right thing to do in a particular situation at a particular time.

This may lead to the consideration of questions such as: How able are people to tolerate anxiety in the interests of improving performance, and how might those anxieties be engaged with? How might anxiety be unevenly distributed, and in particular, are the weakest members of social figurations being obliged to bear more anxiety by those who have more autonomy? And how do the answers to these questions change if the organisation's continued existence is at risk?

Answers to any of these questions are necessarily judgements, which I think place different kinds of responsibilities on those initiating and facilitating change processes. I will say more about what this means in Argument (v).

iii. Breakdowns in practice bring the fragility of the social order into view; engaging with them to develop better organisations is an ideological choice.

Moments where we experience mismatches between what we expect to happen and what actually happens can bring the contingency of our habitual ways of thinking and relating starkly into view. These breakdowns have long been discussed in philosophy: to give just a few examples from different traditions, Dewey – from the perspective of pragmatic philosophy – describes how encountering difficulties in our experiences can lead to processes of updating systems of warranted assertions to better cope with the world (Dewey 1933, 1938; Martela 2015). Heidegger, from a hermeneutic and phenomenologist perspective, has a similar concept in his oft-quoted analogy of the hammer: it is only when a hammer breaks that it comes into view as an object in its own right – or *present-at-hand*, to use his terminology – rather than simply being an aspect of the carpenter's work that isn't reflected upon (Heidegger 1962). Following Heidegger, Gadamer (1975) describes this experience in relation to reading texts as being 'pulled up short' (280), and more generally

emphasises how these moments are affirmations of human finitude and one's own historicity (365–356). Foucault, from a poststructuralist perspective, describes these moments as *eventalisations,* where the self-evidence of our habitual ways of thinking is called into question and we wonder how else things could be (Foucault 2000: 226).

In all of these, breakdowns can be thought of as potentially *reflexive* moments, by which I mean that they destabilise taken-for-granted assumptions in relation to social conditions in general, or more existentially to the researcher's own social history (Cunliffe and Jun 2005). Contemporary organisational researchers of practice and reflexivity, who are largely working in the Heideggerian tradition, have taken up the idea of breakdowns as the foregrounding of the 'background' logic of practice (Greig et al 2012) through critical and self-reflexivity (Cunliffe and Jun 2005). Where these lead to arresting moments (Cunliffe 2003; Greig et al 2012), new ways of relating may arise (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011; Gorli et al 2015; Hibbert et al 2017). Engaging with these experiences may therefore increase our options for going on with each other, but to do so is acknowledged as being difficult (Greig et al 2012); breakdowns inevitably increase uncertainty and therefore anxiety (Marris 1996), so engagement with them might be consciously or unconsciously avoided. Moreover, if one begins engaging seriously with breakdowns through reflexive inquiry or deliberate attempts to remain detached and involved at the same time (Elias 1987; P4: 101), breakdowns may well become scarcer – or at least, the events that occasion breakdowns will be very different from those that might have done so before, as our relational habitus evolves in unexpected ways.

While noting that change may or may not come about from exploring breakdowns (Gorli et al 2015; Hibbert et al 2017), implicit in these analyses seems to be an idea that bringing about opportunities for change is likely to be a good thing. This fits with the humanistic assumptions of OD practice, the purpose of which is sometimes described as supporting the creation of better organisations, evoking a therapeutic metaphor whereby organisations become more able to help themselves by bringing ostensibly unhelpful stuck patterns of relating into view on an ongoing basis (e.g. Bushe 2017). In that case, one might naturally think that encouraging people to engage reflexively with breakdowns is a helpful thing for OD practitioners to do, as a means of identifying opportunities where changes in patterns may become possible (Hibbert et al 2017).

While I might agree with this position in principle, it is important to recognize it as an ideological stance that is likely informed by wider sociological trends: there is nothing in the notion that understanding more – and therefore having more choice about what we might do – is of itself morally better; rather, this kind of thinking perhaps reflects Platonic or Enlightenment ideals about perfect knowledge, an egalitarian notion of human freedom, and belief in external moral standards.

Seeing reflexive inquiries into destabilising moments, in which the taken-for-granted assumptions involved in organisational life become apparent, as a means to creating better organisations is an ideological position. While it may be attractive to think that engaging with breakdowns is generally productive, understanding ourselves as forming and being formed by ideology more widely brings the contingency of that ideology into view too: engaging with breakdowns that bring patterns of relating into view may well increase uncertainty, and therefore anxiety, for people (including OD practitioners); further, by my argument that social life is essentially uncertain, any such intervention may make things better or may make things worse for those involved.

In that case, if considerations about harming and not harming others are moral questions, then deciding to deliberately challenge individual and social defences by disrupting the logics of practice is an ethical judgement. Such judgements place further responsibilities on those initiating and facilitating change processes, which, again, I will come back to in Argument (v).

iv.   **Shame helps us understand what is at stake for us and for others, which may provide OD practitioners with new capacities to act.**

Many of the scholars currently writing about breakdowns from a practice perspective point to the way that they involve heightened emotional states which may signal 'pivot points of change' (Hibbert et al 2017: 3). Some of them also point to the way that feelings such as shame, guilt and embarrassment can be involved in these moments (Hibbert et al 2010; Greig et al 2012); however, these researchers do not seem to explicitly explore the qualities of those experiences, either for practitioners or for the people with whom they are working, beyond noting that such feelings are strong. These ideas are, however, taken up in other fields of research – especially in philosophy, psychology and psychoanalysis – and I have found bringing together ideas from practice theory and the psychodynamics of group processes to be both fruitful and underexplored.

I have already argued that practices can be thought of as group processes of managing the anxiety associated with uncertainty in organisations, which can manifest as individual and social defences that perpetuate ontological security or social order, respectively. These normative patterns of relating emerge as social figurations (Elias 1978), and compliance with social norms is therefore part of group membership. Further, it is argued that one of the ways community cohesion is maintained is through group processes that symbolically (Lukes 1977; Scott 1990) and psychologically (Elias and Scotson 1965; Girard 1972, 1986; Stacey 2003) reinforce those norms.

In that case, for the member of a community to challenge its norms through creating or exploring breakdowns is to put themselves at risk of exclusion; as the psychologist Silvan Tomkins suggests, this 'incomplete reduction of interest and joy' where someone finds themselves about to be humiliated or cast out from a community that is important to them, is experienced as shame (Sedgwick and Frank 1995; Probyn 1996, 2005; P4: 108). Indeed, shame has been more generally related to issues of group membership and the judgements of each other such memberships involve (Elias and Scotson 1965; Stacey 2003; Lewis 1971; Scheff 2000, 2003, 2014).

I agree with this position, and notice particularly the way in which both the avoidance of shame is deeply socialised (Elias 1939) and communion with others seems to be rather precious. I explored the latter in Project 3 as Mead's notion of the fusion of 'I' and 'me' (Mead 1934; P3: 77) in which the temporary alignment of the goals of a group's members is experienced poignantly as a sense of belonging, or freedom from social constraint. I noted there that the preciousness of these moments – such as one can imagine occurring in, for example, religious or patriotic moments – related less to the nature of group members' goals (which may be benign or malign) but rather to the sense of them being shared. Together, I think these provide a compelling explanation for why processes of inclusion and exclusion seem to so easily trump rational arguments in change initiatives.

I suggest further that if everyday practices are the means by which identity and social order are perpetuated, then shame may arise in every interaction in some degree, as tiny breakdowns happen all the time. For example, at its simplest, any gesture that tries to communicate an idea can be thought of as an invitation to others to be in a community who understand that idea in a particular way. However, if meaning arises in interaction, then this is also an invitation to negotiate the meaning of that idea. If the importance of being understood in a particular situation is low – in casual encounters, or about a trifling topic – this negotiation and its lack of resolution may be largely inconsequential; where the importance of being understood is higher – in political statements, or in our expert performances at work, or when accounting to our loved ones, or even in one's doctoral viva – this negotiation may concern the things that are most important to us, both individually and as groups. As such, they may have significant consequences at the time, or later, that are impossible to predict. Arguably, the extent to which the membership of real communities (expressed in the social norms of our organisations, teams, friendships or families) or imagined communities (expressed in our values) matter to us, will inform the intensity of the experience of shame (e.g. Kelly 1955; McCoy 1977).

On that basis, I would like to argue that noticing experiences of shame in breakdowns, when we poignantly feel at risk of exclusion, can help us to become more aware of which communities are

important to us. From an individual perspective, these breakdowns might be experienced as a sense of rising anxiety or emotion, or feelings of ambivalence, or something being unsaid or misunderstood, which may or may not be articulable. Similarly, from a group perspective, heightened tensions, spoken or unspoken disagreements, passivity, despondence or outbursts of laughter, perhaps as forms of basic assumption behaviour (Bion 1961), may suggest that something existential for the group is at stake. Reflecting upon these experiences can help us to explore which aspects of the social order might be being negotiated and therefore what is important to us.

As suggested by contemporary organisational consulting literature in the psychodynamic tradition (e.g. Obholzer and Roberts 2019), this could be seen as taking seriously our experiences of *countertransference* – the state of mind in which the consultant (or therapist) identifies with the unconscious projections of their clients (or patients) according to their own responsive tendencies. This literature suggests that consultants' awareness and interpretation of experiences of countertransference can be very helpful in understanding what might be going on for their clients that they find difficult to articulate consciously or may be defending against. I think this position, while compelling and helpful, perhaps underplays the role of consultants as moral agents in their own right rather than agenda-less helpers.

Implications for OD practice

Based on the argument above, if the business of OD is indeed trying to create 'better' organisations through changing ways of working, then OD perhaps necessarily involves experiences of shame. This happens in two ways. Firstly, initiating and facilitating change will inevitably involve challenging existing patterns of interacting. If those patterns are the means by which social order and individual identities are sustained as processes of maintaining anxiety at tolerable levels, then OD interventions, and in particular those that focus on reflexivity, have to be seen as threats to social stability and therefore as potentially increasing anxiety. OD practitioners are therefore perhaps always putting themselves at risk of being excluded, and therefore of experiencing shame; and this could be especially the case for internal consultants who, due to their shared histories and involvement in patterns of power relating with the other people in their organisations, may be consciously and unconsciously involved in the production and reproduction of the very problematic patterns of relating that they are trying to influence.

Secondly, if social life is essentially uncertain in the ways that I have already described, then interventions will inevitably not 'go to plan' from time to time. Not living up to one's self-image, or reputation, or what we imagine others expect of us as – all as ways of speaking about the communities we imagine we belong to – may also therefore be a source of shame.

However, I contend that if OD practitioners are willing to accept an ideological position that advocates an egalitarian notion of human freedom, and have in their minds some ideal about promoting social goods, then paying attention to breakdowns involving shame is a way to find out more about what is important to them and to others. As this has the potential to bring more of our experience into view, it may provide more options for how we might proceed together. Appreciating that these experiences may be disturbing, practitioners also have responsibility for making judgements about the foreseeable impacts of what they do, understanding that those judgements will inevitably privilege some groups over others.

v.   Resolving breakdowns involving shame and self-respect can be thought of as a process of moral development.

Morality in general relates to questions of right and wrong, or good and bad. Normative moral perspectives, for example in the tradition of Kant's categorical imperative, suggest that possible actions can be judged against some external moral standard, which should then inform what we do (P3: 39). However, if meaning is unstable (Mead 1934), then ethical judgements (like all judgements) rely on interpretations of social life that are time- and context-dependent (Griffin 2002). Further, in the absence of an external moral adjudicator (e.g. Nietzsche and Kauffman 1883), any moral standard we may wish to measure an action against is itself an imaginary construct whose meaning is evolving over time in the instances in which it is brought to bear in particular situations.

Mead provides a very different way of thinking about morality, which accounts for the problem of historical situatedness I have just described. For him, moral processes involve impartially taking account of as many of the interests involved in a particular problem as possible, *including our own*, and then making a plan of action that deals with them all on the balance of 'goods' (Mead 1934; P2: 50). Importantly, competing goods here are assessed not by reference to any *external* moral standard, but instead by reference to the adjudicator's *own* standards – which we might call their values. Reflexivity (as defined on p. 143) can draw attention to how those values are socialisations that evolve over time, and so are not innate or pre-given; if this brings into view the contingency of what we stand for, then all that is really left is our in-the-moment judgements – in Mead's terms, the spontaneous responding phase of self (or 'I'). Then, like 'I' and 'me' (Mead 1934; P3: 77), these judgements are mutually and paradoxically constitutive of our values, our identities and social order.

Ethical judgements on this basis are therefore always acts involving self-respect insofar as we are prepared to take our own moral agency seriously, and stand up for what we believe in, including when this goes against what others might prefer. To be clear, this is not to advocate an 'anything

goes' moral relativism or nihilism; rather, I am arguing for a moral philosophy where through ongoing reflexivity, we come to understand more of our taken-for-granted assumptions, which increases the sophistication of our moral reasoning in Meadian terms. This is an ideological position that speaks to my own values about maximising inclusion towards a universal community, which is likely (in this case, paradoxically) to exclude those who do not share this value. Then, if we are also interested in an egalitarian notion of moral freedom, which is a further ideological position and speaks to another of my values about attitudinal plurality which also may not be shared by others, these judgements will also involve shame as we demonstrate our respect for the moral agency of others by welcoming criticism from others as part of our own moral development (Thomason 2018). Further still, as a process that can occur privately as a conversation with oneself, self-respect and shame can be regarded as paradoxically related in the same way that Mead's 'I' and 'me' are paradoxically related (P4: 108).

Adding to this the argument that shame is about the risk of exclusion from real or imagined communities that are important to us, then ethical judgement – in Mead's terms – can be seen as a process of balancing the relative importance of the competing memberships of those different communities. The choices we make in response to breakdowns involving shame – seen as moments of personality and social reconstruction that are felt in the body as increases or reductions in anxiety (P3: 77) – say something about who we think we are or want to be (Kristeva 1982). As an ongoing dialectical process, these self-respecting responses transform our future experiences of shame, just as our responses to ourselves and others transform our future expectations of responding to ourselves and others in the 'I'/'me' dialectic.

Implications for OD practice

Thinking about morality in this way starts to explain what I have so far described as the 'further responsibilities' that are placed on those initiating and facilitating change processes. If OD practitioners are interested in an egalitarian concept of human freedom, and accept that what they are working with – social life – is inherently uncertain, then decisions about what to do to facilitate change in organisations can perhaps only be made tentatively, paying close attention to the responses that those actions call out. Ongoing judgements need to keep considering whether the anxiety or harm to others (and indeed to the practitioner themselves) that may be caused by actions taken is warranted, based on the practitioner's own values and the ongoing demands of organisational survival.

Reflexively inquiring into breakdowns involving practitioner shame can help us to understand more about what is valued in organisations (as evidence of our respect for the moral agency of others) and

about what we value (as evidence of our respect for ourselves), providing more perspectives on what might be going on when practitioners are trying to facilitate change. Keeping these perspectives in view, and being open to criticism, may provide new capacities to act. From a Meadian perspective, as a skill in organisational life, this is one way that we can strive to do right by others in the context of an essential uncertainty about social experience.

<u>Implications for researching practice</u>

This is therefore also an argument for seeing organisational research as a moral process. Researching practice can be seen as a systematisation of finding out more about what we are saying and doing in organisations in a way that gives us more options for how we go on with each other. It is therefore also a way of enriching the field of our attention, increasing the range of perspectives we can bring to bear in particular situations as we balance competing goods.

However, in the same way that I have suggested OD practitioners' ongoing judgements need to account for the potential for benefit and harm, I believe so too must social inquiry. It is perhaps too easy to think of organisational research as occurring in some rarefied arena, where all observations are permitted as long as appropriate ethics approvals have been secured, because it will be up to others to take them up. To me, this suggests the same kind of thinking that Bauman criticises in his analysis of bureaucracy: if we decouple the process of doing research from its outcomes, then we are perhaps not taking sufficient responsibility for the impact we may have on others. I suggest, then, that if we are interested in the impact we have on others as researchers, then we too must be tentative – directing our ongoing attention to how our work is taken up, so that we can respond (self-)respectfully to whatever happens.

Expertise as social object: a key conclusion

While the arguments I have presented so far are perhaps necessarily broad, and relate primarily to practice, my research also offers a novel way of conceptualising expertise. In Project 4, I wrote about expertise as a co-created relational practice, drawing attention to the joint performances involving experts (those with access to specialised knowledge resources), legitimising authorities (e.g. regulatory bodies such as the one in which I work), and lay people (those who need those resources but cannot access them directly). Earlier in this chapter, I also suggested that expertise could be considered as a routinised relational activity among many others that mutually constitute identities and the social ordering of complex modern societies.

This section more fully explains my contribution to theory by critically engaging with contemporary scholarship on expertise, and challenging what seems to be a commonly accepted epistemic dualism between experts and lay people. I see this dualism as unduly limiting the scope of inquiry into contemporary debates about expertise and, instead, propose what I think is a more fruitful, anti-dualistic, pragmatist conceptualisation. As I will explain, this new approach constructs expertise as temporally dynamic and takes seriously the multiplicity of roles involved in the perpetuation and evolution of societies where access to specialist knowledge resources is mediated.

<u>Contemporary perspectives on expertise</u>

In many ways, the question of expertise is highly pertinent to contemporary public discourse, where anyone with a view on the matter at hand who is able to gather sufficient support, appears to be able influence broad opinion without recourse to traditional sources of legitimacy. According to popular commentators, we are living in the era of 'fake news', 'alternative facts' and 'post-truth politics', where the ways in which the representatives of specialist fields of knowledge are legitimised – be they journalists, economists, historians or academics – seem to be becoming increasingly democratised. Arguably, this is a crisis of trust that arises not from a lack of information, for there is perhaps now more information available about world affairs than there has ever been before. Rather, the issue seems to concern the ways in which traditional safeguards against deception by commentators or politicians have been weakened (O'Neill 2002), and the apparently simultaneous decrease in interest in assessing the quality of that information, or the ability to do so (Davis 2009).

Determining the nature of expertise is by no means a new problem, however; take, for example, the classical Greek reflection (attributed to Socrates):

> Now I observe that when we are met together in the Assembly, and the matter in hand relates to building, the builders are summoned as advisers; when the question is one of shipbuilding, then the shipwrights; and the like of other arts which they think capable of being taught and learned. And if some person offers to give them advice who is not supposed by them to be an expert craftsman, even though he be good-looking and rich and noble, they will not listen to him, but laugh and hoot at him until either he is clamoured down and retires of himself, or, if he persists, he is dragged away or put out by the constables at the command of the prytanes. (From the dialogue in Plato's *Protagoras*, 391c)

This is cited by Ericsson et al (2018) as the starting-point for their attempt to summarise the ways in which expertise has been construed through history. Tracing a line that starts with a special status given to people with certain skill sets by the ancients (illustrating this with the quotation above), they recount the emergence of guilds in the Middle Ages as mechanisms for protecting against competition, much as one might view the Scholasticism of the same period. Then, they recount the creation of the first encyclopaedia as articulating the spirit of the Enlightenment, where reason was elevated over authority and people were invited to inform themselves rather than relying on dogma. Finally, they give an overview of the main contemporary conceptualisations of expertise, covering themes including hereditary or innate prowess, skills acquisition models, the content and organisation of knowledge, elite achievement, and reliably superior performance.

What is striking about this account is the way it presents a gradual narrowing of the field of inquiry: from broadly commercial issues about the perpetuation of communities with access to specialist technical and knowledge resources, to a highly cognitivist focus abstracted from social relations that casts expertise as the defining characteristic of experts, ignoring the others who are involved in interactions concerning specialist knowledge resources (which I will call *expertise-interactions*). This trend seems to be echoed in other recent studies that try to summarise the history of expertise: for example, the contemporary cognitive learning scientist, Chi (2011), accounts for 30 years of literature on expertise largely by describing individualistic models concerning both what knowledge is involved, and how the structure of that knowledge changes for solving problems as one moves from novice to expert. She ends with suggestions for how to accelerate the acquisition of expertise. In another recent example, Cherrstrom and Bixby (2018) review expertise in 12 years of human resources development literature assuming throughout that it is something that HR professionals have, can develop or use.

Naturally, there are variants within these conceptions; 'fluency' theories that describe the decreasing reliance of individuals on deliberation in the execution of their skills (Winch 2010) – such

as Dreyfus's novice-to-expert stage model (2004), or Schön's notion that proficiency is about the ability to *reflect in action* and *reflect on action* (Schön 1983) – do seem to broaden the notion of expertise beyond considering specific mental contents and innate capabilities, towards a conception that emphasises that expertise is something that develops over time. However, they retain the notion of a set of skills or competencies with which *individuals* can become fluent; and this can also be seen in approaches that try to broaden the conceptualisation of expertise further by trying to emphasise relationality. For example, Edwards (2010, 2017) introduces the concept of *relational agency* to describe the way in which bringing one's experience to bear with others in relation to the resolution of particular problems is itself a skill that can be developed.

This is what contemporary practice theorists Nicolini et al (2018), who also try to summarise the history of expertise, describe as a 'turn' in its contemporary history: from conceiving of expertise as something that experts *have* to something that experts *do* – often with others, and sometimes in particular environments with specialist types of equipment. They go on to suggest that further 'turns' involve considering how any notion of expertise also seems to need to take into account the ways in which professional communities, loaded with economic, commercial and intellectual interests, legitimise and negotiate with each other what counts as expertise, as an ongoing process. Expertise is therefore less an attribute than an *attribution* made and enabled by relevant others within a social milieu, which therefore problematises the notion of fluency because expertise is decentred from individual experts. Taking these personal, social, relational and material concerns into consideration, Nicolini et al (2018) suggest that 'experts are not so much owners of expertise but rather the carriers or conduits of broader circuits of knowledge' (ibid: 318); on this basis, they go on to suggest radically that expertise 'is an effect produced by and emerging from the entire … rhizomatic heterogeneous entity composed by practitioners, sites and their connections' (ibid: 319).

In keeping with the critique that practice theory can lose sight of the embodied social actor (Simpson 2009), the perspective just described does seem to underplay the agential, creative and responsive nature of selves (so central to a pragmatist perspective) that must surely feature in a conceptualisation of expertise that describes our experience of living and working together. Moreover, what remains absent from these accounts, is a sense of the additional others – beyond professional communities and those who are economically or intellectually invested in them – who are involved in expertise-interactions; specifically, I am referring to 'lay people' or those who need, but do not have, direct access to specialist knowledge resources. However, this seems to be less a case of these others not featuring in researchers' experience, than it not having been a focus of their studies. This may well be due to the locus of the data collection that forms the basis of analyses

concerning expertise: arguably, if studies are designed to look at organisational practices, it is unsurprising that those formally outside of the professional sphere are left aside.

However, we should not overlook the importance of audiences prepared to accept that experts are indeed credible in respect of the tasks for which they have been summoned (as noted in texts as ancient as Plato's *Protagoras*) and the group processes of shaming that may serve to perpetuate the social order (Elias and Scotson 1964). Yet, Ericsson et al (2018) pay little attention to this aspect of the quotation from *Protagoras* in their summary of the history of expertise. Similarly, Nicolini et al's (2018) account makes almost no mention of the lay people involved. This is despite their study using the example of a medical procedure (trans-aortic valve insertion) where the roles of everyone involved in the procedure – surgeons, nurses, equipment suppliers – are brought to bear in the analysis they provide. Everyone, that is, except the patient undergoing the surgery – who is presented as part of the material environment that the procedure relies upon, rather than a social actor who presumably has a history that is also relevant to the situation.

Returning to my own examples from Project 4, the experiences I recounted clearly demonstrate the importance of lay people in expertise-interactions. Any sense in which I considered myself as having access to resources that others did not was bound up entirely in the sense of having to maintain credibility with my sponsor, the OD working group and the groups with whom I was working. This was in addition to my familiarity with some of the theory of OD (e.g. the use of Open Space Technology), the situatedness of that knowledge in particular times and places (in the large group meeting I described), and a sense of the professional communities in which I was implicated (contributing to my experiences of shame),

Now, of course, it could be argued that my own history and circumstances for some reason led me to a preoccupation with lay people that others find less relevant. However, from a pragmatist perspective, taking the Meadian notion of sociality seriously means understanding that there is no experiential boundary to our engagement with the attitudes of others in respect of this or that specific group; rather the whole of society insofar as it is relevant to the problem at hand is present in individual conduct as a sense of the generalised other that develops through encounters with others (Mead 1934). Therefore, if the notion of expertise is to deal more fully with the kinds of interactions I have recounted – with the OD working group, with the Support Directorate's members, and with Sandra – its conception should go far beyond notions of local and trans-local professional communities and the materiality immanent to those communities that have been so far discussed as the constituting the mainstream perspective on expertise.

The minority of scholars who do acknowledge the roles of lay people in conceptualising expertise tend to maintain an epistemic dualism that limits the scope of inquiry. For example, the contemporary British management theorist, James Fleck (1998), suggests a tripartite formulation of expertise, comprising *knowledge* – involving individual ability to produce particular outputs; *power* – involving who legitimises those outputs; and *tradability* – involving the demand for those outputs by the relevant markets. Tradability must surely include lay people, but this is not really explored. More recently, contemporary sociologists Collins and Evans (2007) suggest a 'periodic table of expertises' that includes:

- *Ubiquitous expertises* – those that all members of particular communities possess
- *Dispositions* – personal qualities that make us better or worse at certain activities
- *Specialist expertises* – concerning the acquisition of specialist tacit knowledge or fluency
- *Meta-expertises* – concerning how expertise is judged by other experts.

They add that there are also *meta-criteria* by which expertise can be measured by what the authors call 'outsiders'. These include the assessment of experts' credentials, track record and experience and recalls Giddens' (1990) perspective on trust as the basis of expertise-interactions, which I write about in Project 4 (p.89).

The contemporary organisational and communications theorists, Treem and Leonardi (2016: 2), go further, noting that 'to be recognised as an expert, an audience needs to see signs of that person's expertise', and proposing that this involves two key assumptions: that an observer can know what expertise looks like (echoing the perspective on outsiders from Collins and Evans [2007]), which they find problematic because of the fluidity of that assessment; and that there are communicable cues experts can use to indicate different levels of skill, which is the authors' focus of their communication theory-centred argument. The latter point is the basis for the description of expertise provided by Kuhn and Rennstam (2016) as a *claim to knowledgeability*, which does presuppose others to whom experts make their claims and recognises that such claims have validity only in relation to the contexts in which they are made.

These further perspectives acknowledge the role of lay people, yet retain the dualistic notion of experts as the locus of expertise, which is assessed, legitimised and traded, versus lay people who require access to those resources. A very different way of approaching the problem would be through an anti-dualistic, pragmatist critique (Bernstein 2010; Simpson 2018) that construes expertise as being bound up in the interactions of people taking up expert and lay roles in different ways at different times in relation to society more generally, as an ongoing temporal process. Based

on my own experience of the shared taking up of norm-based roles, I would like to argue that a more radical position – one that collapses this primary expert/lay people dualism and re-situates expertise in dynamic social relations – provides a more helpful understanding of how we live and work together.

<u>Conceptualising expertise as a social object</u>

My argument is that experts do not 'have' expertise, but rather that (so to speak) expertise 'has' experts, lay people, authorising bodies, and ultimately the whole of society, insofar as these roles are involved to varying degrees at different times in the evolution of identities and social orders in communities where access to specialist knowledge resources is mediated. This relies primarily on what I have been calling routinised relational activities as processes of managing anxiety; from a more formal pragmatist perspective, this is equally captured in Mead's notion of the *social object.*

Mead defines a social object as the object of a social act 'that answers to all parts of the complex act, though these parts are found in the conduct of different individuals' (Mead 1925: 264). I understand this to mean that a social object can be thought of as a common expectation among at least two social actors as to the completion of a social act, so that the expected differential conduct of each actor is contained within the conduct of the other actors at the same time. Over time, these social objects can be become common expectations for large numbers of people, and are, in a sense, institutionalised – which is a way of saying that a common set of responses to particular stimuli become habitual for community members, and that such responses are related to recognisable complex social acts (Mead 1934: 261). In that sense, social objects are generalised tendencies to act found in the conduct of social actors within communities; and importantly, like all generalisations from a pragmatist perspective, they are in a constant state of forming and being formed in their particular moments of being functionalised – sometimes conservatively, and sometimes giving rise to novelty.

If we then examine expertise as a social object, then we are immediately presented with the multiplicity of roles noted above that are all likely to feature in the conduct of social actors involved in interactions about accessing specialist knowledge resources. On that basis, expertise becomes a set of shared expectations that shapes identities at the same time as producing and reproducing the social order in each of those interactions. Further, if those interactions are necessarily about accessing knowledge resources that are unequally distributed, they are also about power; however, as I describe in my projects, these power relations are plural rather than simply balanced in favour of those taking up the role of expert.

To illustrate this, I try to describe the roles that emerged in my projects as relevant to expertise-interactions in the table below, and identify the competing identifications that may co-exist in the experience of individuals, at least in the kinds of organisations I have worked in. I suspect that this analysis extends naturally to similar organisations in Western capitalist societies, although more research would be required to confirm this.

Table 2: Roles and relations concerning expertise-interactions

Role	Performative demands of social actors	Power relating
Experts, educators and professional communities: those with direct access to specialist knowledge resources	Demonstrate skills to maintain standing, and satisfy and give confidence to those who are accessing those resources, at the same time as managing concerns they may have about what they either do not know or consider unknowable	Notionally have ability to withhold resources, but are constituted through demand for resources
Lay people: Those who need access to specialist knowledge resources but cannot gain them directly	Appear deferential or compliant to get what they need, at the same time as managing doubts and concerns about the particular individuals involved (e.g., through research or seeking opinions)	Notionally have to seek access to resources, but without this demand those resources may have no value
Legitimising authorities: Where relevant, those tasked with setting the standards by which facility with specialist knowledge resources is notionally judged, accepting that this is problematic	Maintain regulatory authority with professionals and the public, at the same time as assimilating innovation and dealing with the failure of the professionals they have authorised	Notionally have ability to define who can give access to resources, but are constituted both through regulatory mandates and through the confidence of professional communities and the public

Surely, it is only through considering the expectations of all these aspects of conduct that we can achieve a notion of expertise that reflects the breadth of issues involved in what individuals are doing when taking up roles in relation to expertise-interactions. Moreover, thinking about expertise in this way highlights how the notion of expertise necessarily evolves over time with changing patterns of social relations. For example, it makes sense that the guild-based professional protectionism of the Middle Ages might resemble the Scholasticism of the same period, concerned as they arguably both were with the exclusion of lay people to maintain standing and authority. Similarly, it makes sense that the legacy of the Enlightenment's focus on individuality and rationality may lead to constructions of expertise as the property of individuals, perhaps with omniscience as an ideal animating the emergence of professional communities.

Further, it also makes sense that, in the United Kingdom today, we are struggling with the concept of expertise because of what I have been calling the democratisation of traditional sources of legitimacy – a process perhaps accelerated by social media, which offers a platform for self-appointed 'experts'. If we take current debates about the reasons for and against the UK leaving the

European Union as an example, analyses conducted by traditionally legitimate experts – such as the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the Bank of England, or indeed HM Treasury – are all being largely ignored by pro-Leave campaigners. A more traditional approach to conceptualising expertise may lead one to suggest that experts and professional communities are being marginalised in favour of a pernicious populism; indeed, it is suggested that democracy cannot dominate every realm because this would destroy the value of expertise (Collins and Evans 2007: 8). What this analysis misses, and I think treating expertise as a social object offers, is that no realm of human conduct is free from democracy in these terms: pragmatism gives us the notion that all meaning is negotiated in interaction, so to suggest otherwise is to abstract this or that concept from its constitutive social relations. In turn, this may prevent us from noticing aspects of experience that may be pertinent or even crucial to living and working together.

Conclusion

I am proposing a novel conception of expertise that builds on but also departs from existing scholarship:

Expertise, as a social object, can be thought of as the continually evolving, population-wide expectations of the differential conduct of social actors in relation to accessing specialist knowledge resources in communities where this access is mediated – shared expectations that are present in the conduct of all social actors involved in such interactions.

In this sense, as stressed earlier, experts therefore cannot 'have' expertise; rather, expertise 'has' experts and all others who are involved in expertise-interactions.

The movement of expertise with broader social trends arises responsively in the construction and reconstruction of identities, as the members of communities are brought into different relations to each other. Only at some times will these relations involve the kind of cooperation that privileges those taking up expert roles, which draws attention to the contingency associated with the taking up of those roles, the ever-present possibility of new patterns of relating emerging. It also highlights the ways in which the emphasis placed on particular knowledge resources is a matter for societies at particular times in relation to particular problems.

My analysis here arises from the experiences I recount of being, or being asked to be, an expert in OD within the wider patterns of relating in the health and care sector where, rather traditionally, power relations tend to be balanced in favour of those who have access to specialist knowledge resources. It would be interesting to explore the experiences of those involved in some of the more contentious expertise-interactions – such as those providing evidence and analysis regarding Brexit – to understand what is involved in attempting, and increasingly failing, to bring people into more traditional relations concerning expertise. These are areas for further research.

4.   The DMan method

I have found it helpful to see the DMan research method as a form of what Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) introduce as the investigation of breakdowns in everyday practice, where our expectations of what will happen in a given situation fail to match what actually happens in some surprising way (Brinkmann 2012). As I will explain in this chapter, I see this method as consistent with some of the key principles involved in understanding human interaction as complex responsive processes, which is the theoretical position on social experience taken up by the DMan research community.

Note: I have already made arguments in Chapter 3 that are relevant to justifying the use of this research method for researching organisations, and I will indicate where I am drawing on those arguments rather than repeating them.

Contributing to theory and practice through qualitative case-based research

As an approach to social research, organisational ethnography and narrative inquiry are becoming increasingly widespread (Czarniawska 2004; Rhodes and Brown 2005; Andrews et al 2008; Denzin and Lincoln 2017). Indeed, some even say it has become fashionable (Gherardi 2018). In these necessarily case-based – or *idiographic* – approaches, generalisability has to mean something quite different from the kinds of predictive rule-generating – or *nomothetic* – conclusions that tend to be the goal of the natural sciences. The same could be said about, for example, action research, which arguably shares similar positivist assumptions insofar as it recommends actions to improve practice, implying some degree of repeatability of experience in which those actions would have lasting validity (Stacey and Griffin 2005).

I see the key consideration as being that, if social life is seen as essentially uncertain (Argument (i) in Chapter 3), then conclusions from social research cannot be predictive beyond some general probabilistic expectations based on hitherto repeating population-wide behavioural patterns. For example, the very statement of a conclusion that purports to predict some aspect of experience changes the reality it is describing in unpredictable ways: who says it, when, and with what histories and intentions, and who responds to it, when, and with what histories and intentions are all aspects of unique social acts taking place in particular places at particular times. I refer back to the analogies from the complexity sciences I described earlier, and particularly the way in which imaginary constructs – such as ideology, social norms, or organisational culture – are paradoxically forming and being formed in the practices of everyday life. I think this leads to a natural attention to both local interactions and the social objects that emerge in them as legitimate foci of organisational research.

Adding to this further perspectives from pragmatic philosophy, process sociology and group analysis – the notion of individuals being social through and through (Mead 1934; Foulkes 1975), and that interdependence and therefore power relating are unavoidable aspects of conscious and unconscious human experience (Elias 1978) – I think leads to a further focus on group processes. As I describe in Project 3 (P3: 65), the DMan research method is strongly influenced by the Foulkesian group analytical model in how it conceptualises these processes (Mowles 2017a, 2017b), which is perhaps not least because its earliest incarnation was as a joint programme with the Institute of Group Analysis. Exploring what may be going on consciously and unconsciously in local interactions is also therefore very much part of what researchers on the DMan do in their project work.

Taken together, these propositions constitute what I understand as the core principles of the perspective of human interaction understood as *complex responsive processes*. It should be clear that this perspective is based on radically different assumptions about the nature of human experience compared with the more mechanistic theories of scientific management, and this perhaps naturally informs a way of undertaking research that is very different from practices in social sciences that might try to emulate natural scientific research. This includes a different way of thinking about the notion of how contributions to theory and practice are identified.

The contemporary Danish professor of psychology and qualitative research, Svend Brinkmann, provides a helpful way to approach this. He suggests criteria by which conclusions from qualitative research can be judged for contributions to theory and practice (Brinkmann 2012). These are truth, beauty and goodness, all of which are addressed through the DMan method. *Truth* is assessed in terms of plausibility: Do the proposed contributions from our research make sense, are they compelling, and do they emerge coherently from our analyses and what we come to know of each other in our learning sets? Further, as researchers progress through the programme, is their self-awareness, or reflexivity, increasing the plausibility of their analyses and therefore the conclusions they draw as they inquire more deeply into their practice? *Beauty* is assessed through the extent to which contributions resonate with others – again, as above: Are they recognisable in the experiences of others, and, if so, are they of interest to widening communities of inquiry: our colleagues, other researchers who take the perspectives we do, and some who perhaps do not? Finally, *goodness* is assessed by considering how useful contributions are found to be – in line with pragmatist philosophy, which sees ideas as the tools that people use to cope with the world (Brinkmann 2012). The correlate for research is that new social theories can be thought of as tools that lead people to articulate their experiences differently, which transforms their reality; a key test in the DMan is whether others find our conclusions helpful for making new sense of their own practice, which may increase their capacity to act.

In this way, conclusions from social research can be seen as provocations or gestures that others may find helpful in their own practice in different ways. Though perhaps humbler than the nomothetic aspirations of some social scientists, I think this approach is more aligned to our actual experience of taking up other people's ideas. For example, experiences in everyday life where I find myself taking up a new idea about management or leadership occur less when I am asked to simply accept a theoretical hypothesis, however well-reasoned, and much more when ideas are presented in a way that makes sense to me because I can relate them to my own experience and sense that they might be worth a try.

In summary, then, contra the *necessary* conclusions sought by research assuming a positivist epistemology, no absolutes are sought through the research method used in the DMan. The goal instead is to make interpretations that are epistemically, aesthetically and morally sufficient to the researcher, taking the attitudes of wider research and professional communities increasingly into account. This undertaking is successful if contributions provide others with new responsive capacities, just as the research process has done for the researcher. Initially this can be tested with members of the DMan research community, but researchers are encouraged to increasingly test their ideas with members of their professional communities or other academics.

Programme components

As outlined in the Introduction to this thesis, the main part of the DMan programme involves undertaking four projects and participating in the DMan research community.

<u>Project work</u>

Each student's first project is an intellectual autobiography that seeks to bring to light some of their assumptions and how these have come about. As well as identifying the themes that seem to be animating the researcher's experiences of work, it is a first exercise in reflexivity and helps to establish the plausibility of the accounts that form the bases of subsequent research projects. As noted in Argument (iii) in Chapter 3, reflexivity can be thought of as bringing into view the contingency of the assumptions that inform why some things are taken up over others (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000), and some authors differentiate reflexivity further as concerning either general social conditions or one's own social history (Cunliffe and Jun 2005). However, if individuals are seen as social through and through (Mead 1934), then these are arguably aspects of the same phenomenon, and, in addition, are particularly hard to differentiate when using autobiographical accounts. For simplicity, I will describe the exploration of the historical situatedness of

interpretations of social phenomena in general as *critical analysis*, and accounting for the researcher's interpretive tendencies as *reflexive analysis*.

Projects 2–4 are all inquiries into autobiographical narratives of the researcher's more specific experiences of their working lives. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000: 255) provide a framework for undertaking reflexive analysis through the construction of data, interpretation, critical interpretation and self-critical reflection; as I will explain, I think this framework is broadly followed in each project. As these projects are developed iteratively, over time they serve to deepen the researcher's inquiry and further increase the plausibility of the eventual contributions to theory and practice. Taken together, these four projects form the main 'data' and analytical content of the thesis.

Engaging with the DMan research community

Alongside this, researchers are obliged to participate in the DMan research community. This involves attending four residential weekends per academic year, working as part of a learning set of up to four students and a supervisor, and participating in the DMan research community more generally.

Learning set members read and comment upon iterations of each other's written work, which are then discussed in learning set meetings at each residential, and four more times during the year. These activities help to accelerate each researcher's work, as well as evaluating the novelty, plausibility, resonance and usefulness of emerging conclusions. Further, learning sets are also small group processes, the exploration of which can help to illuminate aspects of what happens in organisations relating to researchers' inquiries, and can also support the researcher's ongoing reflexive analyses. For example, the patterns of relating in different learning sets varies greatly and there can sometimes be competition between learning sets, the exploration of which can help researchers to think about how teams may compete with each other in the workplace. Alternatively, in Project 3, it was my experience of a learning set meeting that illuminated some of the group processes playing out in my organisation, which were being also expressed in my research project.

Residential weekends also involve three 'community meetings' where the whole research group (of up to 20 students and five faculty) meets for 90 minutes, using the model of the Institute of Group Analysis's large experiential group. The group sits together in a large circle with no agenda, exploring whatever comes up. Similar to the learning set, what happens in the community meeting can help to illuminate aspects of what happens in organisations, or help researchers understand more about their interpretive tendencies or make new connections to other students' project work. This therefore provides another forum in which research ideas can be tested or developed; and over a weekend, themes can sometimes be taken up in quite unexpected ways. For example, examining my own experiences of responding to the participation of a visiting researcher in community meetings

during one residential helped me to explore how others might perceive me when I 'dropped in' to groups as a facilitator in Project 4.

These aspects of the programme that focus on exploring group processes can be seen as drawing attention to aspects of experience that may lead to new capacities to respond, just as the process of free-floating conversation in the Foulkesian therapy group increases patients' capacity to understand and alter their everyday behaviour (Foulkes 1975; Stacey 2003). Through writing their projects and participating in the ways described, researchers demonstrate a deepening understanding of the theoretical perspective taken up in the research community and, by Project 4, an ability to work at doctoral level.

Data collection: using autobiographical narratives

The first step in Projects 2–4 is to gather the 'empirical data' relating to the breakdown to be explored. I have already argued for the utility of breakdowns (Argument (iii) in Chapter 3) as a way into reflexively exploring both the social order in which we work, and our social histories as researchers. A further feature of the DMan method to explain is the use of autobiographical accounts of these experiences, which form the start of each project. There are three main reasons for this choice of method, and some important limitations to note that the programme design mitigates, at least in part.

<u>Why use cases?</u>

The first reason for using autobiographical narratives concerns the use of cases. Perhaps reflecting biases towards rationality and stability that I have already explored (P2: 42, P4: 87), case-based research is sometimes seen as inferior to methods that aim to formulate general theories (Flyvbjerg 2011). However, those general theories are necessarily abstracted from time, and largely do not account for the way in which, as above, their very articulation changes important aspects of the social reality they are trying to describe. As Bourdieu puts it:

> The detemporalizing effect (visible in the synoptic apprehension that diagrams make possible) that science produces when it forgets the transformation it imposes on practices inscribed in the current of time [...] is never more pernicious than when exerted on practices defined by the fact that their temporal structure, direction, and rhythm are *constitutive* of their meaning. (Bourdieu 1977: 9, italics in original)

As a response to this, it is suggested that dealing with cases is more appropriate for conveying the 'data' of social inquiries because this acknowledges that the world of human affairs is particular,

concrete and processual, rather than general, theoretical and static (Flyvbjerg 2011). As described above, any attempt to determine how things 'really are' abstracted from particular contexts could be seen to ignore the way in which temporal and contextual interpretation and reinterpretation, along with 'practical necessities, uncertainties and urgencies' (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011: 342), are an unavoidable part of social life.

<u>Why narratives?</u>

The second reason concerns the use of narratives. Narratives can be criticised from a positivist perspective for being unreliable or unverifiable data because they are subjective. A first general response to this claim is to argue that all inquiries (even those in natural sciences that claim to be objective) are subjective in important but underacknowledged ways, because there can be 'no view from nowhere' (Nagel 1986; Mead 1923). As Denzin and Lincoln (2017: 17) note, in light of the postmodernist and poststructuralist turns, it is generally accepted that:

> Any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race and ethnicity. There are no objective observations, only observations situated in the worlds of – and between – the observer and the observed.

A second general response is that if individuals are socially formed in Meadian terms, and interdependent in Elias's terms, then all subjective accounts represent a range of conscious and unconscious socialising processes and so necessarily involve others. This means that my accounts are never just mine, but rather reflect collective experience from my perspective, aspects of which others are likely to share but may interpret differently (Gadamer 1975).

More positively, we can also argue that narratives are able to convey more about the experiences being examined than can (ostensibly) objective descriptions of events, because narrativisation is itself a defining feature of human experience (e.g. Jameson 1981; Bruner 1986; Ricœur 1991; Niles 1999). In writing down an account that connects events and attributes meaning in a particular way, informants or researchers are not simply documenting events; they are also taking abductive logical steps to come up with explanations that sufficiently deal with the breakdowns they have experienced (Brinkmann 2012). These are creative moments (ibid) and inevitably reflect the accounting party's prejudices (Gadamer 1975).

It is important to note that I am therefore not arguing for a pure relativist position, as I am not denying the existence of a reality that is being experienced. Rather, I am arguing that assumptions, intentions and interpretations are as much the stuff of human experience as the ontic reality that is being multiply interpreted. In that case, as narrative inquiry embraces the subjectivity of accounts as

a defining feature of experience, it offers organisational researchers a different way of accessing important aspects of our working lives from which knowledge can be generated (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000; Flyvbjerg 2011; Denzin and Lincoln 2017).

<u>Why autobiographical accounts?</u>

The third reason concerns the use of autobiographical accounts in preference to the reported or observed experiences of others. There is a long history in social anthropology of theorising based on observing and analysing the interactions of others, and there is clearly much to learn from embedded research. However, there are two important limitations of, for example, interviewing or observing others, which are at least partially addressed by the use of autobiographical accounts.

The first is that if human experience is primarily affectual (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015; Shotter 2016; Gherardi 2017), then the use of reported accounts is necessarily partial; analyses are restricted to what is reported, which may not adequately or reliably reflect the informant's experience, particularly if aspects are misremembered or, for example, consciously or unconsciously repressed (Freud 1915) or excluded (Bowlby 1979) as a way of managing anxiety. Further, the reports that informants provide may be influenced by their own intentions, how they understand the object of the inquiry, or what they imagine the researcher's prejudices may be. Observation can help to enrich and triangulate accounts; but observing the affectual responses of others, or imagining what people might be thinking or feeling, as above, will always involve the observer's own interpretive tendencies and fields of attention. A further constraint relates to the time that is actually spent with those who are being observed: in researching organisations, experiences that occur deliberately or accidentally out of sight, or by text message in the evening, or by phone because the matter is too sensitive to be recorded, will all fall outside of what is available for analysis. These factors may limit the plausibility of analyses produced; however, statements of researcher bias, longer periods of observation and diverse research teams may help to mitigate these risks.

Inquiring into autobiographical accounts responds to some of these risks, but is not without its own. The affectual experiences, assumptions, intentions, and interpretations to which researchers have the fullest access are arguably their own: researchers are 'with themselves', so to speak, all the time, so DMan researchers are able to explore experience in ways that other methods cannot. An important consideration in this approach, however, is that because the researcher provides accounts of their own work, for those not involved in the researcher's organisation, accounts are not objectively verifiable as having taken place. Another is that researchers exploring their own experience may also exclude aspects of their experience as a defence against anxiety (which I write about in Project 3), or edit their experiences due to their own concerns about what they can write

about because, for example, the work will eventually be published under their own name (Lapadat 2017).

The DMan programme design helps to mitigates against these risks in a number of ways, and this is primarily through the obligation to participate in the DMan research community while undertaking research. Researchers are encouraged to use *thick descriptions* (Geertz 1973) to convey the events they are describing, to help learning set members (initially, but also anyone who may read the project later) understand the work. A description can be considered 'thick' when context and intention are conveyed sufficiently to allow others to make sense of the sequence of events (Greenblatt 1997); moreover, a thick description allows the reader to judge for themselves not only whether or not the narrative is plausible (Brinkmann's epistemic criterion, noted earlier; *truth*), but also whether or not events conveyed are sufficiently resonant with their own experience (the aesthetic criterion; *beauty*) to mean that the subsequent analysis of the experience will be of interest and potential use (the moral criterion; *goodness*).

The thickness of narratives is tested in the DMan community in different ways. In reading and commenting on each other's work in the learning set, each researcher's project work is continually being examined for consistency with what researchers come to know of each other's interpretive tendencies and occupational contexts. As mentioned earlier, this starts with the very first DMan project, which situates analyses in subsequent projects, and against which the plausibility of accounts can be judged as the learning set members become more familiar with each other's histories and organisational contexts. Objectivity for this kind of research is therefore primarily a matter of relational plausibility, which engages with the multiple subjectivities involved in making sense of experience.

A further mitigation comes from the perspective of aspiring to being a credible researcher, which I think means that we are trying to inquire into our practice as faithfully as we can to come to new insights. In that case, it is not clear whose ends would be served by trying to deliberately mislead, given that researchers on the DMan are there of their own volition. I will come back to research ethics at the end of this chapter.

There are also further benefits to working as a community of inquiry. The ongoing review of iterations of projects is an opportunity to identify relevant scholarship that addresses the themes emerging from the narrative – resources that may so far be unknown to the researcher. This therefore can also help to determine whether the questions that are emerging for the researcher have already been addressed elsewhere – a further indication of whether the topic is original and could be of interest to a wider research community. Further, that the members of learning sets tend

to be diverse (in my group, we come from different countries, have different academic backgrounds, and do reasonably different jobs) is also important: as mentioned about observation as a research tool, a diversity of perspectives helps to ensure that the ongoing process of sharing work with others widens the researchers' perspectives. The residential weekends also offer opportunities to have work challenged, helping to mitigate the risks of groupthink in learning sets.

I often experienced this level of scrutiny as quite challenging; however, this is a very important aspect of the research process. This is firstly because failure on Brinkmann's measures drastically undermines the credibility of the 'data' presented and leaves any subsequent analysis wide open to the criticisms noted above; second, these challenges are new encounters with difference that, as an evolution of the researcher's field of attention, increase the researcher's responsive capacities not just in their research, but also in their work as they progress.

The DMan also involves a different way of engaging with scholarship than tends to be used in more orthodox PhDs. Rather than starting with a systematic literature review that identifies a gap in the literature to be researched, DMan researchers use scholarship that relates to their emerging themes to deepen their inquiries. If reading suggests to the researcher that their emerging question is already well explored, then a new, less explored area may emerge in response. Pursuing these emergent topics enables researchers to be largely unconstrained in terms of their topics as they move through the programme, ideally leading to a topic that doesn't appear to have been explored yet – what Alvesson and Kärreman term a *mystery* (2011) – which therefore presents an opportunity to make a new contribution to theory or practice. Towards the end of the programme, researchers tend to explore more formally the breadth of scholarship regarding their proposed contribution, to ensure that their research is indeed novel.

Critical and reflexive analysis

<u>Critical analysis, alone and with others</u>

If reported faithfully using thick descriptions, narratives are likely to reflect the researcher's interpretive tendencies; so the first account of an experience, initial analyses and discussions in the learning set are the beginning of a process of deepening the researcher's inquiry. The twentieth-century French philosopher, Paul Ricœur, offers us two ways of thinking about the task of interpretation – distinguishing the *hermeneutics of faith* and the *hermeneutics of suspicion* – and these have been related to the process of qualitative research (e.g. Josselson 2004; Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000). Josselson (2004) casts the former as a process of *restoring meaning* in the account provided, based on the intention of being faithful to the experience of the informant – in other words, the researcher aims to understand the participant's experience as the participant understands it. The latter, by contrast, is a process of *demystifying* the account provided, which assumes that experience is deceptive in one way or another. Ricœur refers especially to Freud, Marx and Nietzsche highlighting how hidden libidinal drives, economic interests or power relations, respectively, may be uncovered through analysis; but we could similarly add any critical position to this set (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000). The intention of this kind of hermeneutics is to unmask and decode what is experienced to reveal meanings beyond the account, given that these are unlikely to be wholly apparent to the provider of the account because of their cultural situatedness.

Both methods are relevant to the DMan research process, and probably in a much more iterative way than the binary distinction described above might suggest; indeed, Ricœur himself described these modes as 'contours of the hermeneutic field' rather than being truly distinct (Ricœur 1970: 9).

Of course, one could conduct this exploration privately, and various methods are available for diversifying research inquiries (see, for example, Abbot 2004). Brinkmann (2012) suggests that phenomenological, critical and deconstructive *stances* are particularly relevant to the exploration of narratives: phenomenological stances draw attention from the object of inquiry to the process of inquiring; critical stances draw attention to potentially hidden meanings; deconstructive stances draw attention to ambiguity in the use of language, and to the contingency of our habitual interpretive tendencies.

While these are undoubtedly useful activities (and part of progressing as a researcher is being increasingly able to reflect upon one's experience using these kinds of approaches as a matter of course), the depth and breadth of analysis is enhanced even further by regularly sharing work with one's learning set and the wider research group. As I inquire privately into my experience, engaging with the 'broad scholarship' (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011) in relation to my topic, arguably I am

looking to find new meanings in my writing that feel faithful to what happened. This can be animated by faith or suspicion, in Ricœur's terms; but inevitably, the extent to which I am able to demystify my own experiences will be limited by my prejudices, which may involve defensive processes that unconsciously limit what I am able to notice. In sharing my work with my learning set, then, further connections may be found, and further meanings that I might be consciously or unconsciously avoiding can also become available. These processes are perhaps less likely to occur in solitary research. These alternative perspectives, while potentially uncomfortable or disturbing, can also lead to a sense of the account becoming more faithful to what happened; this iteration then becomes available again for further inquiry. For me, this demonstrates how both hermeneutical modes can dialectically widen and deepen the process of inquiry and, further, how this method emphasises reflexivity. I have already argued that this can be thought of as a moral process (Argument (v) in Chapter 3).

<u>Ongoing reflexivity as establishing plausibility</u>

As mentioned earlier, reflexivity in social research can have a number of definitions. I have been differentiating critical and self-reflexivity (Cunliffe and Jun 2005) as the destabilising of assumptions through exploring the contingency of general social conditions, and researchers' own social histories, respectively. In social research, reflexivity arguably acts as a safeguard against social theory drifting into uncritical totalism that fails to account for the researcher's own social history, the biases and power relations of the field of social research, and the tendency to privilege nomothetical idealisation over a more idiographic grounding (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Put more simply, to better understand experience, researchers need to account for why particular data and interpretations are chosen over others, because this helps to highlight that there may be other conclusions to be drawn from the same 'source material'.

It has recently been noted that, even though ethnography is becoming more fashionable as a method for organisational research, attention to the researcher's biases and intentions is being somewhat neglected. Gherardi (2018) suggests that these inquiries are:

> often accompanied by a sort of innocence that overlooks the crisis of representation that grew out of a literary turn in the 1980s concerning textuality, disciplinary history, critical modes of reflexivity, and the critique of realist practices of representation. (ibid: 1)

I have already argued that there is no definitive interpretation to be found for experience: as noted in my account of the instability of meaning (Argument (i) in Chapter 3), the process of inquiry is open-ended and may continue indefinitely (Gergen and Gergen 1991; Andrews 2008; Brinkmann 2012). I think this creates even greater demands on organisational researchers to account for their

own prejudices and intentions on an ongoing basis as they undertake their research, and this is built into the structure of the DMan.

As mentioned, Project 1 is a first attempt in reflexive analysis, and each subsequent project illuminates new aspects of the researcher's experience. As an ongoing inquiry in which the researcher becomes increasingly aware of and able to account for the contingency of their own assumptions and interpretations, the whole DMan process could therefore be seen as an exercise in ongoing reflexivity: focussing on breakdowns that reveal more about the researcher's interpretive tendencies and their working contexts helps to establish the plausibility of the conclusions that are ultimately drawn. Importantly, these can only be pragmatic resolutions that are open for further revision as researchers encounter further breakdowns in their experience.

Project work therefore begins to function as a *critical dialogue partner* (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011), with contributions to theory and practice arising from the (specifically) dialectical interplay of the researcher's work and research. Arguably, the skill of the researcher is then based in being able to deal with these together. Geertz (1974) suggested that what we are striving for is:

> a continuous dialectical tacking between the most local of local detail and the most global of global structure in such a way as to bring both into view simultaneously. (ibid: 43)

I think Geertz is drawing attention to the paradoxical relationship between generalities and their particular instances – again, highlighting the relevance of the methodology to some of the core concepts in the perspective of human interaction understood as complex responsive processes.

Research ethics

The topic of research ethics in methods that uses autobiographical accounts is fraught with complexity (Ellis 2007; Lapadat 2017). On the one hand, by writing about our own experience rather than the experiences of others (as conveyed, for example, in interviews where informed consent can be actively sought), some of the common ethical issues that arise about anonymisation of research subjects might be regarded as avoidable. On the other hand, a core argument of the theoretical perspective taken up by the DMan research community is that individuals are social through and through, so even private experience is social in an important sense; further, and perhaps more practically, writing about what we are doing at work, and focussing on group processes, inevitably features other people.

<u>Writing about other people</u>

Due to the emergent nature of the inquiry involved in this method, researchers on the DMan are making ethical judgements all the time as we consider the implications of what we are writing about for those whom our accounts concern. This is partly because, unlike traditional social research, it is difficult to know in advance who will feature in the autobiographical accounts that form the basis of a researcher's projects, especially if writing about breakdowns. It is also because it would hardly be practical to inform everyone I encounter that they may or may not feature in an account of the interaction that is about to happen (though I have taken the opportunity to do so if, for example, people ask about my research).

I have attempted to deal with this for Projects 2–4, by informing the leaders of my organisation and my most immediate colleagues about how my research is conducted. Further, when I am initiating new pieces of work, I let the people I am working with know that I am writing about my practice and that they may feature in it in some way. Each individual who appears in my accounts is then pseudonymised so that they cannot be recognised by others; and where they might recognise themselves, were they to ever read my thesis, I have created opportunities to relate what I am writing about to the people involved, either at the time or later.

For example, in writing about strategic planning as defences against anxiety and my ethical concerns in Project 2, I talked through what I was writing about with Jerome as I went along, and after I completed the project. This influenced how we went about subsequent phases of the work. Similarly, I have relayed relevant aspects of my conclusions from exploring the directorate away day I describe in Project 4 with the people involved, which is starting to change how we are working together. It is more difficult to feed back to those who feature in Project 1, because I am no longer in contact with them, and haven't been for many years. As a result, I have paid particular attention to

pseudonymisation, trying to make sure that this doesn't alter the content of what I am trying to draw attention to, but does protect identities; I have tested the success of this with my learning set.

As I have already mentioned, telling the people I work with that I am doing research must have some effect on our relationships. This means that my research can perhaps only really be described as dealing with my experience *as an internal consultant whom others know to be researching his own work*. While this could be seen to limit the generalisability of my research, in a way, I think it is better to be transparent about this rather than imagining that I can somehow write myself out of the arguments I am trying to present; indeed, one might argue that to do so would undermine the value of being a researcher (Steier 1991) and perpetuate the very privileging of traditional notions of objectivity over subjectivity that I am arguing against.

Writing about myself

A further set of ethical concerns arises from the particular perspective of the autobiographer: while anonymisation in ethnography more generally can protect the identity of research subjects, here, by the fact of the thesis' eventual publication under the researcher's own name, the researcher cannot be similarly protected. This means that they become vulnerable in particular ways that other ethnographers may not. This may be through reliving the traumas they recount in their narratives, though the analytical process may also be therapeutic; equally troubling is the notion that the researcher may be stigmatised or may suffer consequences in terms of future employability due to the disclosures they make, however well-anonymised the accounts (Lapadat 2017).

For these reasons, ethics remain a live issue throughout the process – assessments are made constantly about the competition between the potential impacts of using a narrative upon those described and on the researcher themselves, versus its importance for the deepening research inquiry. What should and should not be included in a project, taking into account the perspectives of others, is therefore being negotiated on an ongoing basis – informed by conscious and unconscious responses involving our interests and the power dynamics of our working environments – just as ethical judgements are made in everyday life as we interact and negotiate with others (Griffin 2002).

This can be considered a further skill that is developed as part of the DMan process, as well as a further manifestation of how we can see selves as social through and through. As I have progressed in my research, talking regularly about ethical concerns with my fellow researchers and my colleagues, I have found it easier to produce accounts that I think I would be happy for those whom the narratives concern to read, which suggests a maturing approach to conducting this kind of research. This therefore also represents an evolution in the researcher's field of attention, that incorporates these complex ethical considerations of writing about others as new sensitivities that are brought to bear as we consciously and unconsciously conduct our inquiries.

5. The contributions of this thesis

Drawing on my arguments in Chapter 3, in this section, I conclude my thesis by stating the key contributions I believe my research offers to researchers and practitioners.

Contribution to theory

As described in detail in the final section of Chapter 3, I have presented a new conceptualisation of expertise based on a pragmatist critique of the contemporary scholarship on this topic. I believe this will be of interest to scholars interested in expertise, but also to policymakers or think tanks who are considering how their products are taken up in society.

Drawing on the Meadian concept of the *social object*, I argue that expertise can helpfully be conceptualised as the continually evolving, population-wide expectations of the differential conduct of social actors in relation to accessing specialist knowledge resources in communities where this access is mediated – shared expectations that are present in the conduct of all social actors involved in such interactions.

 This conceptualisation draws attention to how, rather than experts 'having' expertise, expertise can be regarded as 'having' experts, professional communities, educators and authorising bodies and lay people, as roles that dynamically and responsively emerge as aspects of wider patterns of society, shaping identities and producing, reproducing and transforming social orders.

This conceptualisation extends existing thinking about expertise beyond its decentring from individuals to professional communities and those economically and intellectually invested in them. Most importantly, it construes expertise as an ongoing, responsive, social process, and as such begins to offer insights into the current ambiguity concerning the roles of those who may traditionally have been regarded as experts.

Additional insights that arise from my thesis and might constitute further contributions to theory, but warrant further investigation, are also listed at the end of this chapter.

Contributions to practice

This thesis also makes two main contributions to OD practice that should be of interest to members of the OD community insofar as they are concerned with ethical practice. I think it will be especially relevant for those who are in the early stages of their careers who find themselves 'getting it wrong', or are worried about doing so.

The first of these challenges the common conception that OD practitioners can be neutral guides. While it is increasingly acknowledged that practitioners cannot be 'outside' the groups they work with, the literature, for example, on *Use of Self* and *Self as Instrument* (e.g. Rainey Tolbert and Hanafin 2006; Cheung-Judge 2012; Cheung-Judge and Holbeche 2015), tends to suggest that practitioners' own interests, rather like the therapists' own feelings in psychoanalysis, can be managed out of their work with organisations through ongoing reflexivity. Put another way, becoming more aware of habitual interpretive tendencies makes it less likely for those tendencies to play out unreflectively in practice.

While I agree that reflexivity is important as a means to becoming more self-aware, I do not agree that the purpose of such reflexivity is to prevent one's interests from interfering with OD work. This is because my research suggests that OD practitioners are always asserting their own agency even when they are trying to prioritise the agency of others. I contend instead that any action taken – for example, about how to interpret data, or which views to prioritise over others, or what interventions may help, or even inaction – all reflect the practitioner's history, values, and conscious and unconscious intentions and assumptions about the groups they are working with, and the wider figurations in which they are involved. Further, these actions always promote the interests of some over others, including practitioners' own interests, as affirmations of aspects of identity formation and the perpetuation of social orders, and this may be particularly pertinent for internal consultants who are more directly implicated in the changes they may be working on with teams. In that case, the reason I regard reflexivity as important is because it enables a richer awareness of experience and therefore more choice and thus freedom, which in turn better enables OD practitioners to take responsibility for themselves and the impact they inevitably have on others.

In my own practice, this plays out as a greater awareness of my own interests when I am working with groups, which I try to increasingly to bring into conversation, rather that assuming that the interests of others are *de facto* more important. My intention remains to be helpful, but as I have become more used to expecting the unexpected, I find myself drawing attention to the potential implications – good and bad – that OD interventions may have, and my own preferences for how to proceed. I think that this is so that those with whom I am working and I, together, have the greatest possible opportunity to take responsibility for what we think we are doing, which for me arises from a desire to do right by others and being persuaded by Mead's notion of morality. I appreciate that others may not share the same interests as I do, and this plays out in my interventions sometimes being met with resistance; I am becoming more skilled in judging whether to pursue riskier lines of inquiry, as ongoing processes of balancing the extent to which I feel at risk of exclusion, against the importance of being included and some kind of social betterment.

This brings me to my second contribution, about the importance of paying attention to shame in OD practice. It builds on the position just outlined, but strengthens further the focus on processes of inclusion and exclusion, and how these are moral processes. I have argued that for anyone interested in the impact they have on others, shame (thought of as a response to moral criticism whenever we challenge social norms and feel at risk of exclusion from communities that are important to us) should be an expected aspect of social life. For OD practitioners charged with catalysing helpful changes in patterns of interaction in organisations, challenging social norms or encouraging others to do so is part of everyday work. In that case, OD practitioners perhaps more than others can expect to experience ethical disturbances in their work. However, OD practitioners are involved in the production and reproduction of the same population-wide patterns as are others, which includes a strong tendency to avoid shame or try to overcome it. Indeed, this is the direction taken by much of the popular management commentary regarding shame.

I would like to argue that bodily experiences of ethical discomfort – shame, or any of its emotional neighbours or associated manifestations (e.g. guilt, embarrassment, anger, contempt, envy, depression, grandiosity, or withdrawal) – that arise when things significantly do not go to plan, are signals that something of importance is at stake for the practitioner and/or the people they are working with. Reflexively inquiring into these breakdowns as they arise, in terms of the membership of real or imagined communities that are at stake, can help us to understand more about what is at risk; further, inquiring into how we and others have responded to these experiences may also help us to understand how identities or social orders are perpetuated.

These activities may provide new options for action; however, the inherent uncertainty of social life, and the way that its associated anxiety is managed through routinised relational practices, means that there can be no prescriptions for what to do with these options: an intervention to change a pattern that seems to help one group may make things worse in another. When intervening in social processes, rather than relying solely on external standards or evidence, practitioners perhaps can really only rely on their own values and judgements; and these too must be acknowledged as changing over time, just as identities and social orders do. I believe that thinking about OD practice in this way places new responsibilities on practitioners who are interested in the impact they have on others, to act tentatively with as many perspectives, including their own, in view. While this may be difficult to bear, and sometimes it may not be possible for people to go on with each other, I argue that trying to do right by others, and ourselves, means taking this responsibility seriously.

Concluding remarks and areas for further research

My research on the DMan has led me to new ways of being in my organisation. I now pay much closer attention to what I and others are saying and doing when we try to work together, and more naturally consider the possible social anthropological and psychodynamic aspects of what is going on; I am also much more aware of my affectual responses in interactions with others. In particular, I find myself responding to experiences of bodily disturbance, including shame, by tending to pause and reflect on what might be at stake, which I find gives me new ideas about what to do. As I learn more about myself, new disturbances seem to be both less frequent and more intense; and I have made reflecting on those experiences part of the ongoing development of my own OD practice.

I have now started to discuss my ideas with the wider academic and practice community: I have contributed a book chapter on creating cultures of quality improvement to a new textbook for clinicians, which is due for publication in 2019; I have also been invited to conduct a seminar on the topic of shame as part of ethical OD practice at the Organisation Development Network – Europe Conference in May 2019 (Amsterdam).

Further, I am in the initial stages of preparing two papers for submission to academic journals: one of these concerns the conception of expertise as a jointly performed relational practice involving experts, lay audiences, and professional bodies; the other concerns my arguments about the relationship between practice, anxiety, breakdowns and the avoidance of shame.

In terms of areas for future research, some of the lines that open up from my thesis for further investigation are:

- **Further examination of shame and self-respect as an aspect of Mead's paradox of self-consciousness.** This thesis offers a way of connecting Mead's conception of self-consciousness – as a dialectical ongoing process of self-as-subject and self-as-object, or 'I'/'me' – with the notions of self-respect and shame. I believe this adds to the literature on shame in pragmatic philosophy (e.g. Scheff 2000, 2003, 2014) and also in moral philosophy (e.g. Thomason 2018). If we regard shame as signalling the possibility of exclusion from real communities that are important to us, then it can be seen as arising from a concern or respect for the moral agency of others. In this sense, it arises in our interactions with others and is an aspect of maintaining social orders. However, if selves are social through and through and we interact with ourselves in the same way as we do with others (Mead 1934), then shame can also be seen as signalling risk to our ongoing identifications with imagined communities that are important to us; it can therefore be understood as arising from a concern or respect for *ourselves* as historical beings in the present.

This creates a paradoxical relationship between shame and self-respect as mutually constitutive aspects of an ongoing dialectical process of identity formation, just as Mead's 'I' and 'me' are paradoxically related; and I am keen to test the theoretical basis of this claim through further research.

- **Further exploration of identity formation and social ordering as social practices of managing anxiety.** This thesis offers a way of thinking about routinised relational activities as involving social processes of managing anxiety. I believe this offers a new dimension to practice theory by articulating more fully some of the psychodynamic processes, based on attachment theory, involved in the habitual reproduction of social orders. I am keen to investigate this further to elucidate some of the wider practical implications.

- **Further research into the impact of social media on experiences of shame.** The proliferation of social media and global communications enables the formation of many more communities, both real (physical and virtual) and imaginary. By rendering social norms ambiguous and complexifying individuals' fields of attention exponentially, this also affects the shame response which may be interesting to explore in relation to the dynamics of social mobilisation and political engagement.

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