
**Subjugation and Subterfuge: Struggling with Metrics
as a Middle Manager in a UK Business School**

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Abstract

Subjugation and Subterfuge: Struggling with Metrics as a Middle Manager in a UK Business School.

This thesis explores the behaviours and emotions which emerge when middle managers in Higher Education (HE) use metrics as a tool to measure organisational performance. It uses auto-ethnography as a methodological approach, employing research narratives and reflexive inquiry. These narratives explore micro-interactions at work to enquire into the social, political and emotional relationships which emerge when managing using metrics. Whilst recognising that metrics may be useful at an abstract level as a means of opening an exploration of what gets done and what is valued, this research also identifies that metrics can be taken up in ways that may also be used to blame and shame others. Managing using metrics in this way can lead middle managers to feel as if they are stuck 'in the middle', lacking agency. This raises ethical concerns with regard to the uncritical application of metrics. These feelings of 'stuckness' are often not discussed in formal meetings, instead they tend to be expressed in jokes, lewd gestures and gossip.

Managing using metrics may present middle managers with a double bind (being stuck between two unpalatable choices) which can lead to feelings of futility and a lack of agency. Acknowledging feelings of hopelessness, subjugation and stuck patterns could enable managers to become more aware of their habitual responses. They may then come to recognise that there are moral decisions to be made about what they can question and what they may do which could enable them to act in political ways that may be more nuanced.

This thesis also highlights that strong emotions may emerge when metrics are used. This may make it harder to talk about how we are working together, including our vulnerabilities. Acknowledging that metrics may evoke emotional responses may help middle managers increase their capacity for coping with the anxieties of feeling 'caught in the middle'. As we come to expect strong emotions, we may be able to engage, more imaginatively, in how we might act.

Processes of subjugation and subterfuge emerge in paradoxical patterns of conforming and resisting, and inclusion and exclusion, and emerge as gossip, joking and ribald acts, which have the potential to shift existing power relations. Subterfuge is a ubiquitous emergent pattern which middle managers might expect to see in working with metrics, and which can be paradoxically constructive and destructive (and sometimes both at the same time). Subversive acts are not simply pejorative

activities. They are both a chance to try to keep work human in a metricised environment and also to play a valuable part in the negotiation of who we are and how teams work together.

Key words: Conflict, Complex Responsive Processes of Relating, Double Bind, Emergence, Emotions, Gossip, Higher Education, Identity, Metrics, Middle Managers, Power, Ribaldry, Resistance, Subjugation, Subterfuge.

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1. Introduction

Motivations for this Research

I have made metrics central to my work because I come from an accounting background where metrics play a key role. I now work in a UK business school, where the pressure of metrification has been increasing since I moved into a management position in 2011. In my current organisation, metrics are seen to have great benefits. A senior member of my business school stated at a recent strategy meeting:

“We use metrics to think about the right things, it gives us more information. Measuring performance is a natural outcome of wanting to excel. You would be disappointed if we managed just on gut instinct.”

Prior to starting this research, I had not questioned whether managing using metrics was appropriate or effective, it was just the ‘way it is’. I had thought that if using metrics didn’t work in the way I expected, it was either because I was not a good enough manager, or because others were ‘mis-aligned to the goals of the organisation’, or because the metrics had been interpreted incorrectly, or sometimes all three. What initially motivated my research was noticing that despite what was promised in much accounting and management literature about how metrics could be used as a tool to make managing easier, this was not my experience. My work highlights emotional outbursts (including pride, glee, shame, anxiety, anger, and envy) along with strategies for competing, compliance, activities designed to ‘game’ the metrics and acts of subterfuge (including lewd jokes, ribald behaviour and gossip) adopted by staff, my colleagues in the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and myself, as metrics are introduced and discussed.

In this thesis I am not arguing against the use of metrics in managing. I can see how the use of metrics could be used as a means of opening an exploration of what it is we do and what it is we value. What my work has highlighted, however, is that we can also apply metrics in ways that devalue practical judgement and blame and shame others. I came to realise, over the course of my research, that applying metrics in such ways may lead middle managers to feel as if they are ‘stuck in the middle’, lacking agency. I came to notice that speaking about such feelings were seldom discussed in public forums or meetings, instead we tended to express these in ‘hidden’ or unofficial ways, such as ribaldry and gossiping. I recognised that these were not simply depreciative activities

that were not worth thinking about, but in addition play a rather valuable part in our negotiation of who we are and how we work together. This led to a reforming of my research questions to:

Subjugation and Subterfuge: Struggling with Metrics as a Middle Manager in a UK Business School.

Organisational Context

As I have undertaken my research, I have been working in UK higher education (HE) as a middle manager of a post-'92 university¹. This is a role I have now held for 9 years. Prior to this I worked in private education, having completed my early career as an accountant in a big four accountancy firm². My current job is as a Head of Subject Group in a large and diverse business school. Over the time of my doctoral research, the scope of my role has expanded due to reorganisation and non-replacement of middle managers as they have left the business.

During the time I have worked in HE there have been many changes in the sector. The traditional characterisation of a public sector university sees the primary business of universities as the making of citizens and university leadership and governance, founded on principles of collegiality which often includes the appointment of senior university administrators following election by their faculty colleagues (Watson, 2009). Universities were seen to be communities of scholars, working in collegial ways, and those leading universities were academic leaders rather than managers (Deem, 1998). In 1990, there were 46 universities in the UK educating 335,000 students. Today, there are more than 140 universities, teaching over two million students (Department of Education, 2017).

Since 2009, there has been a fundamental restructuring of the funding regime, and an increasing level of fees has been charged to students. In addition, as HE has expanded in the UK, universities have increasingly been required to justify the expenditure of public funds. To attempt to do this metrics have been implemented by successive governments, to try to assist students in making value for money decisions. Students have been recast as consumers of higher education (Williams, 2013) and the sector has been increasingly perceived as a commodity which can assure a higher income. Indeed, the current Education Secretary has stated that:

¹ Post '92 universities are those that were created by the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 which granted former polytechnics university status. The idea was to increase the quality and scope of research in subjects seen as applied or vocational such as art, education and information technology.

² The Big Four refers to the four largest professional services networks in the world: KPMG, EY, Deloitte and PWC. Collectively they are estimated to have around a 2/3 share of the global accountancy market. In the UK the Economic Affairs Committee reported that the Big Four audit all but one of the FTSE100 companies and 240 of the FTSE250, an index of the leading listing companies (Economic Affairs Committee, 2011).

“We must never forget that the purpose of education is to give people the skills they need to get a good and meaningful job.” (Williamson, 2020a).

Research Approach

I have been part of the Doctor of Management Programme (DMan) since March 2017. The DMan programme is a part-time, practice-based programme where managers and consultants, from across the globe, explore questions of interest in their practice. They do this across four research projects with a synopsis, to make better sense of their experience, in a way that is relevant to themselves and others in their discipline. In addition to writing these projects and subsequent analysis (which I will explain further in the next section) I have also participated in a DMan research community, which involves attending a minimum of twelve weekends at residential centres over three years, and being part of a learning set of up to four researchers and two supervisors who read and comment on each other's work.

This professional doctoral thesis is an exploration of everyday situations encountered in my workplace, including interactions with colleagues. My research has been conducted in an emergent and iterative way, involving exploration of work situations and processes that puzzled me, and focusing on local interactions between individuals. The narratives present moments and events, working with the SLT of my business school, which disturbed me and stimulated me to start exploring them, and consequently to reflect on them in order to make sense of my experiences. I often found alternative explanations and interpretations of what had happened compared to my initial assumptions, and this allowed me to challenge those assumptions and the underpinning understanding I had taken for granted. My research projects were successively re-iterated at the time of writing, through reading and comments from my learning set and from my principal and second supervisors. My thesis has thus developed out of an individual and social process, drawing on multiple perspectives on my work. I have not re-written anything retrospectively: to do so would not allow the reader of this thesis to see the evolution of my thinking. In the detail of these projects, what slowly emerges is how my experiences and understanding change as I begin to pay more attention to behaviours that I would formerly have considered inconsequential.

Given the focus of my work on my own experience, I did not do an extensive literature review at the outset of my research, as is common in much doctoral research. Instead, I have concentrated on the issues that arise from my experience. My research takes practice as the starting point by using a narrative approach. From these narratives, relevant literature is identified in the ongoing reflections

on the narratives and what puzzled me about them. The choice of literature has therefore been an evolving process as my understanding has developed or changed and new puzzles emerged.

I have presented the research method, including approach to ethics, first in this thesis because the context in which the research was carried out is important to understand the nature of the research that then follows. Further details can be found in section 2 of this thesis.

Thesis Structure & Approach

After I have presented my research method, my thesis then consists of *four reflexive projects* (each including narrative accounts and analysis of my everyday experience in my organisation) that have been written over a three-year period as I have progressed through the Doctor of Management (DMan) programme. These are presented in section 3.

Part of the methodological approach on the DMan programme is to be reflexive about the impact that my history has on how I interact with others at work. My first project, therefore, is an autoethnographic account of what have been the main influences and themes on my thinking, mainly related to my work and studies, with some references back to my early years. This involved reflections on how these influences and occurrences shaped my thinking at the time of writing. This autoethnographic account includes narratives, as does my later exploration of other work situations. My research theme around the use of metrics evolved partly out of the process of writing this first project, reflecting on it and discussing it with my fellow researchers.

Projects 2 to 4 are explorations of diverse aspects of my research theme of metrics and middle managers and are drawn from recent work situations that have puzzled me. These projects explore the everyday conversations that happened in meetings, corridors and in electronic messages, as metrics are used in managing. I have used reflexive narratives to explore the apparently self-evident and habitual ways of working and managing to which I had become accustomed. I drew on relevant literature in each of these to explore further what it was that puzzled me and why, attempting to draw some initial conclusions. Becoming aware of these habitual ways of working has helped me to better understand the outcomes when metrics are used to manage people

The synopsis, in section 4, examines the main themes that have emerged in my work and develops the lines of argument evoked. As part of the synopsis, I explain how the various threads of my practice and theory relate to one another. This allows me to make a further reflexive turn on my projects and serves as an additional opportunity to provide a critical appraisal and to present the

final thoughts for my thesis. The themes that I have explored are those that originally animated my research around the use of metrics and the role that middle managers played in the organisation. However, as I reflected on my four projects I realised that there were two emerging sub-themes, relating to the use of metrics. Firstly, the link between metrics and emotions, secondly, the feelings of subjugation that emerge when metrics are used and the development of subversive acts (such as joking, lewd acts and gossiping) in response to those feelings of subjugation. This further iterative turn on my projects allowed me to see the relevance of these emerging sub-themes and served to develop the line of my argument. Presentation of these themes is included from page 142.

My three *detailed arguments* are then presented on pages 159 to 163. They are as follows:

- Managing using metrics presents middle managers with a double bind, leading to feelings of a loss of agency.
- Intense feelings and emotions may emerge when metrics are used. Acknowledging this may increase the capacity of middle managers to respond to such feelings when they arise.
- Processes of subjugation and subterfuge emerge in paradoxical patterns of conforming and resisting, and of inclusion and exclusion. Subversive acts are a ubiquitous emergent pattern experienced by middle managers working with metrics.

My *contributions* to knowledge and practice, as well as concluding remarks with suggestions for further research, constitute the last parts of my thesis in section 5.

Note: All names, some contextual features of specific events, organisations and in some instances job titles, have been replaced with fictitious names throughout this thesis.

2. Method

Methodology

The dominant discourse of management that I discuss in my projects, assumes an organisational world 'out there', and whilst sometimes acknowledging complexity, seeks to manage and control it through abstract knowledge that is believed to be appropriate irrespective of time and context. Knowledge, then, is understood as abstract, general, and timeless (Tsoukas & Hatch, 2001: 990-991). Research in this tradition is often based on 'if-then' propositional statements, which presume a linear causality, i.e., a direct correlation between 'cause' and 'effect'. Most organisational research in my professional tradition, accounting, is based upon this positivist approach.

However, I understand experience as both individual and social: human relating is always contextual between interdependent people in ongoing power relations, and those people make evaluative choices about how they respond to each other. An aspect of this way of thinking is a lack of linearity between cause and effect. Causality is paradoxically predictably unpredictable. In non-linear systems any variable, no matter how small, can have a disproportionate effect on the system as a whole. As a result, it is not possible to determine which variables cause which effects, thus problematising any research methodology that assumes linear causality. Elias argues that: "...to unravel social processes, the researcher must be able to spot the consequences of people's interweaving actions which they did not perceive" (Mennell, 1977:106). My research approach tries to take account of this by paying attention to what otherwise might be considered micro-incidents, but which make up human experience.

My projects have emerged from paying attention to my experience of working with others at times when I have found myself disturbed, puzzled or challenged by what is going on around me. I believe this way of understanding leads to a more generative kind of questioning that enables me to challenge my assumptions, prejudices, and practice. I am drawing on a pragmatic, philosophical position that we can make: "...productive use of doubt by converting it into operations of definite inquiry" (Dewey, 1984:182). This method is one in which individuals take their own experience of these social processes seriously and try to understand the nature of that experience. My research emerges from the pragmatic position, which holds that there is a world out there that we can only come to know through our engagement with it. Dewey (1929/1984) argues that what is 'known' is

always in relation to the 'knower' and held that experience grows out of experiences, and experience, which then leads to more experience. Rather than knowledge being certain or 'out there', knowledge is understood as fallible, i.e., we can only claim that something is a 'warranted assertion' (Dewey, 1941 cited in Clandinin and Connelly, 2000:2). I take this to mean that we need to establish a good enough position to take the next step.

I have adopted a reflexive method, drawing on the narrative descriptions of my everyday experience of working in organisations. Using these narratives, I explore the interaction between myself and others. It is an ontological process of self-reflection and self-reflexivity. Mowles (2015b:60) describes reflection as a process which allows us to distance ourselves from our participation or involvement, considering things and finding solutions. In comparison, Mowles (2015b:60-1) believes reflexivity involves us reflecting on what we are doing and how we are doing it, what we are thinking about, what is going on and the sense we make of it. When I reflect, I think about events, but when I am reflexive, I turn back on myself and consider how I am thinking about my thinking of these events. Since we are interdependent individuals, reflexivity involves thinking about how we, and others involved with us, are interacting. This in turn will involve noticing and thinking about our history together and thinking about how we are thinking. Mowles describes the use of reflexivity as a research method to enable us to go beyond:

"...what we take for granted and our habitual ways of thinking about the world, our prejudices if you like, which are invisible to us until we are brought hard up against them through the experience of difference." (ibid:61).

The synopsis, which explores my most recent reflection on my reflections, is a good example of being able to think about and explore my previous assumptions, which become exposed when I encounter diverse and different ways of understanding.

Given the theoretical orientation of my research, it would be inconsistent to choose a positivist approach. However, I could have adopted other methods which are also compatible with a pragmatic approach. Several of them share similarities with the reflexive narrative approaches I have used. Case study (Thomas, 2010), ethnography (Watson, 2011), and at-home ethnography (Alvesson, 2009) all have features in common with my method. For example, the case study method describes a situation and reflects upon this. However, the researcher may not have been involved in the event as an active participant. My research has some of the characteristics one would expect in autoethnography, in that I am attempting to make some generalisations about people and organisations. Autoethnographers approach research through writing narratives drawn from their experience of participating in a culture. However, the social processes in the narrative method I have

taken up moves me away somewhat from autoethnography, in that autoethnographers will often work alone (or at least give that impression in their writing), whereas in writing my research I make it explicit how others are responding to it (such as those in my learning set and the wider DMan community) as an important part of the method. At-home ethnography does involve research where the researcher is a participant, but the focus is not on their experience. Because I take the ideas from the pragmatic tradition seriously, I am keen to study my experience of my feelings and those of other people, together.

The Research Community

In the DMan programme students come together at quarterly residential weekends. I have now been a participant on twelve such weekends in person, and three on-line. During residential weekends, students at different stages of the DMan, come together to discuss their research, which is based on what is happening for them at work, and there is input from faculty members on themes, identified by students, that would be useful to their work such as ethics, emotions in the workplace and complex responsive processes of relating. We are asked to read articles and book chapters in advance, attend presentations by faculty staff on specific themes and be involved in student discussion of these presentations and readings. During these weekends, students also give presentations to the community about their projects to gain feedback and to enable them to progress. I presented my work in April 2018 and in January 2020. Presenting was useful to gain input from the whole research community on the direction of my work.

During these residential weekends the community also comes together at the *community meeting* which lasts 1½ hours on each morning. During this meeting students and faculty can discuss anything they find relevant and important to themselves and their research; there is no pre-planned agenda. The DMan concentrates on group processes, so this community meeting is an important element of our research. The community meeting is drawn from ideas of Group Analysis (Foulkes, 1984). The idea is to make links between the patterns of conversation in this learning community and what is happening for us in our workplace to enable us to discuss our research. Mowles points out:

“...participants are encouraged to recognise patterns of anxiety as well as recognition and misrecognition (Honneth, 1996, 2012) inclusion and exclusion (Elias & Scotson, 1994) and the negotiation of power which permeate organisations.” (Mowles, 2017:8).

Community meetings provide an opportunity to explore what is happening for us. Discussions have ranged from what it means to succeed in the DMan programme, how we assimilate people into our community, the rituals of our community, how we deal with the loss of members from our community and occasionally the negotiation of people leaving the programme without a doctoral qualification. This raises anxiety and strong emotions about our research being 'good enough', being included or excluded and recognised. As my research calls for me to pay attention reflexively to how I am forming and being formed by my experience in social settings, developing an understanding of group analysis through these community meetings has clear relevance.

For example, on my second residential I told the community that I was struggling with how we would know if our projects were 'good enough' for now. In the discussion that followed there was recognition from the group about their own struggles with understanding what 'good enough' is. This led to a discussion from students and faculty on how we may negotiate this together and a discussion of areas of assessment such as 'are our narratives compelling and plausible' and 'the coherence and quality of our arguments'. We discussed how we may begin to judge this and discussed the commenting we make in our learning sets, both those that others make on our projects as well as those we make on theirs. I noticed how the comments made by members of my learning set on my projects were provoking and challenging me to consider other ways of seeing what was happening for me. I remember this being extremely frustrating, and on occasions I was angry with my learning set for relentlessly asking questions about my work. I recollect, in my first project, my frustration with questions such as 'what assumptions are you making?', 'why do you think this?' and 'what type of thinking underpins this way of writing?'. I wanted to shout at them that I just didn't know. However, their prompting and prodding made me consider things I would not have challenged by myself. They helped me to question my own biases and ways of seeing things that I may otherwise just have taken for granted. For example, they made me consider my assumptions about how knowledge is formed, how humans can be controlled, how I considered metrics to have an agency of their own and how emotions should not be part of organisational life. Their questioning and challenging has assisted me in continuing to interrogate my assumptions and recognise those things that I have not previously questioned. The community meeting is thus a way of thinking about organisational life and encourages us to consider how the themes discussed there are seldom confronted in our professional lives.

The community meeting also allows us to reflect on our reactions and what is happening for others. For example, after one meeting, when I expressed my irritation with another member of the community and how they spoke in the community meeting, I was encouraged by my supervisor and

learning set to consider how I could break these habitual patterns in both myself and the person with whom I was irritated. On another occasion, when I was very upset about what had happened in the community meeting, I was invited to consider why this might be, and this made me think about other situations where I was also upset and work out what might have provoked these feelings. I came to realise that conflictual situations were emotional experiences for me. This enabled me to notice how these same themes may be arising in my research projects. For example in P2 I cried when challenged by my line manager on my use of a performance improvement plan, in P3 I became frozen sitting between two colleagues having an intense argument, and in P4 I challenged the use of the personality tests at an away-day and then cried and ran to the toilets. This made me want to explore these areas even more, to study if there were other ways I could consider what was happening in my narratives.

My research centres around the theory of complex responsive processes of relating, a theory of action which is informed by Mead (1915, 1929, 1934/2015) and Elias (1978, 1987, 1991, 1994), amongst others cited earlier. Mead argues that individual minds and selves arise through interaction with others. Elias (1978, 1987, 1991) contends that we are constrained and enabled by interdependence and power relating. The community meeting is one method for exploring these processes together. Its purpose is to try to prompt greater reflexive self-awareness in relation to others, which supports the production of my thesis by paying attention to these patterns and linking these to my work.

Learning Sets

At these weekends we also work in smaller groups, *learning sets*, of three to four student researchers and our principal supervisor. We focus on our projects by discussing and critiquing each other's work, as well as reflecting on matters arising during the weekend. Each member of the learning set is at different stages of their research, and students join and leave the learning sets over the three years of study. This sometimes leads to joking about how other learning sets 'do it', who is the 'most senior member' of the learning set and 'the way we do things around here' which replicate similar situations at work, and may reflect deeper anxieties about inclusion/exclusion.

Between the residential weekends, we share our draft projects with our learning set and we discuss and critique each other's work. Working in small groups, both during the residential weekends and between our Skype calls, helps us to link our research with our practice. In our learning sets we have

sometimes had painful negotiations around what 'good enough' looks like, how we comment on each other's projects and discussions, and about what it feels like when a member of the group falls behind their targeted submission dates. To give an example, I joined the learning set at the same time as another student. We progressed from our first to second project at a similar time, but whereas I progressed to my third project after four iterations, it took the other student over seven iterations to achieve the cherished status of 'good enough for now'. The feelings that this evoked in both of us and in other members of the learning set and indeed our supervisor, were discussed, and we recognised the constraining and enabling nature of being in a group together. This provided awareness that these patterns also occur in my work, particularly in my third project where I discuss the paradox of cooperation/competition and inclusion/exclusion. I also note how these are socially formed and enacted.

Each project in this thesis started with a powerful narrative drawn from my experience at work that I then shared with the learning set. In turn they each give a response to my narrative that started the reflexive process of me trying to understand what was going on and how I was thinking. Through a process of further iterations and drawing on relevant literature, I continued exploring the narrative until I had a sufficient explanation of what had occurred to enable me to move on in my research. Learning set members provide comments on our projects and indicate what areas of our narrative are persuasive and interesting and resonate with their experience. They also comment upon the literature we have chosen to use and how we use it. Projects typically progress through four or five iterations and develop in this way. Sometimes, the comments I receive have surprised me and they have led to a deeper reflection and exploration of the narratives I share. In this way, the process of writing the projects is a social, iterative and reflexive process.

The writing and critiquing in my projects emerged through the interactions with my learning set. It is the giving and receiving of feedback on our projects and the comments of our learning set members and supervisors, which contribute to the changing of my thinking, as much as the reading and critical reflection on what is happening. In consecutive projects I have developed my understanding on how I am thinking. This enables me to see other perspectives on the narratives I include, and supports me in considering other meanings that may be emerging. In later projects, I have been able to anticipate some of these questions and in this have been able to take a more critical stance on what I am exploring, before being prompted, as I am starting to think about what other people may think and what other perspectives there may be to what I write. This has helped me to move from a position of not seeing my own biases until questioned by others, to starting to engage more with other perspectives.

Validity & Generalisability

In the process I have described, above, I am trying to describe experiences which are specific to my context, but these may be encountered in other similar schools and institutions seeking to introduce metrics. My experience is therefore both specific and general. For *truth* I am seeking plausibility and persuasiveness – do my accounts make sense? Are they compelling and are they coherent? I also seek resonance (Foulkes, 1984). Are the themes arising in my accounts recognisable in the experience of others and, if so, are they of interest in other areas of inquiry? I have tested this plausibility and resonance first with my learning set members. As they come from different countries and contexts (for example in my learning set there is an organisational consultant from the Netherlands, an IT project manager from England and an HR learning development professional from Israel), this helps me understand whether the ‘data’ I present, in the form my narratives, is plausible and can be sufficiently generalised to other contexts.

My writing involves what Geertz (1973) called a ‘*thick description*’, which allows the reader to judge whether the events described in my narratives are plausible and resonate with their own experience. This can then determine whether an analysis of the experience will be of interest to others. Several authors (Jameson, 1981; Macintyre, 1981; Geertz, 1995; Czarniawska, 1998/2004 etc.) argue that narrativisation is a defining feature of being human. Narrative offers a way of examining important parts of our experience from which knowledge can be generated (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009; Flyvbjerg, 2001) and where I take my everyday experiences seriously (Brinkman, 2014). Bruner suggests that humans make meaning and think in terms of ‘storied text’ which captures the human condition, human intentionality, and the vividness of human experience fully (Bruner, 1986:14–19). Taking this narrative approach has required me to pay attention to my experiences, which are inevitably subjective. My narratives become the data from which I have analysed through interpretation; thus, subjectivity becomes the premise for my understanding. We are living and telling, relieving and retelling the stories of experience that make up our lives. I have sought to reflect the complexity of what it means to participate with others. I therefore use narrative as my research ‘data’ to explore the complex interplays, interactions, and interdependencies as it is sensitive to the particularities and temporality of events and interactions (Tsoukas & Hatch, 2001). Beer (2016:182) suggests that metrics leave narratives behind and so it is important, in understanding reactions to quantification, to look to the stories and narratives that are attached to metrics. It is in looking at narratives that we might understand power and resistance. In

the narratives I have used, I have explored those meetings or incidents which have troubled or puzzled me.

It is not the writing of the narratives alone that enabled sense making, but the reflection undertaken with my learning set, as well as with others on the programme, that has deepened my enquiry. In this there has been an element of re-narration and exploration of my experiences in new ways. In the discussions I have been able to gain fresh insights and perspectives. By exploring my experiences with my learning set, I have become aware that meaning is not something to be uncovered as if it exists independently, but that it is only created in our gesturing/responding with each other and ourselves (through our silent conversation of the mind) (Mead, 1934:43). This has helped me to re-consider my narratives, and it is an essential element of my research because it helps me test whether there may be areas of resonance that may provoke a reader to new ways of perceiving. I claim, drawing on Dewey (1960:178), that there are universal aspects of human experience, when people are trying to achieve things together, which I can comment upon from my own experience and which will add to the sum of understanding.

Literature

In my projects I have considered issues which arise from different perspectives explored in organisational literature. For example, I have taken a particular interest in the processual sociology literature of Norbert Elias (1970, 1991, 2000), the work of James C. Scott (1985, 1990, 1998), a political scientist who looked at the strategies of resistance to domination, and the works of Ian Burkitt (2008, 2014) who researches social selves and emotions, along with writers on metrics, especially Jerry Muller (2018) and David Beer (2016). Unlike a traditional PhD, I did not do an extensive literature review at the outset of my research. I have, rather, focussed on the issues that arise from my experience and therefore the readings that I have undertaken have inevitably been influenced by these experiences. There are authors that all DMan scholars are likely to consider, who discuss subjects which range from modern philosophy, psychology, and anthropology to organisational theory, and who take both traditional and critical approaches. Complex responsive processes of relating sits within the broader tradition of critical management studies (CMS), which tries to question what might be taken for granted in more traditional approaches. The authors most likely to be studied would be those who inform complex responsive processes of relating: Stacey, 2010, 2012; Stacey and Mowles, 2016; Dewey, 1891, 1984, 2005, 2015; Mead, 1934/2015; Elias, 1970, 1991, 1994. In the DMan programme it is interest in our practice that drives our inquiry, and

which leads us to the relevant literature. In this, I have looked to scholars who can help me make sense of my practice. The insights that they have given me have contributed to some of the shifts in my thinking and in my practice.

Ethics

Writing narratives about my experience raises questions of ethics, as other people are characters in the narratives I write. I am aware of the need to gain their consent or to ensure their total anonymity, but this has been a challenge. People at work know I am registered on the DMan programme and that I am writing about my experiences at work. I have been asked by staff what their anonymous name is in my narratives. I have been careful about the answers I have provided and have ensured anonymity by changing details such as names, gender, job titles etc. I have also not referred to the academic institution in which I work in my narratives, although I am conscious that having my name on my research output, has the potential to reveal the identity of my organisation and, thus, those familiar with the details, may be able to make informed suppositions about the identities of key players if determined to do so (Floyd & Arthur, 2012:177). This means I have taken particular care about minimising the potential harmful impacts of my research on others.

In my research, I explore what I do at work, in relation to others, and therefore my reflections also include accounts of what others are doing and what I think other people may be thinking and feeling. I am not trying to capture the 'truth' about other people, and they cannot be subjects of my research in a traditional way because I am focussing on what is happening in my practice and thinking. Clifford (1983) argues that writing narratives is about writing cultural fictions that never lie, but also never tell the whole truth because our actions are constrained. As Cunliffe & Alcadipani (2016:554) point out, we make personal choices about what to omit and include in our accounts of organisational life. For example, in my narratives I have included items of gossip and ribaldry that others may be ashamed of being a part of had they thought these would be exposed. Discussing these could potentially be damaging to those individuals, or indeed to the organisation in which I work. I have had robust conversations with my learning set, my supervisors, and other members of DMan faculty about the extent to which I can describe and explain these in my projects. Because others have a place in my narratives, like a character in the play of my life, I am aware that I have a responsibility towards them. While reflecting and writing my projects, I have been careful not to be offensive about anyone, while acknowledging that these narratives are necessarily written from my personal perspective. I am also aware that the relationships with those I write about will need to

continue for many years into the future. These issues are frequently discussed and shared among members of the DMan research community and are an ongoing negotiation. It has not been my intention to expose individuals or legitimate anyone's behaviours, which has meant walking a fine line in terms of maintaining professional integrity, personal safety, research goals and relationships with others in my organisation. Because of the nature of the DMan community, these issues have been discussed extensively and negotiation of mutual trust has been required. Drake & Heath (2008) discuss the possibility of being 'safe' to avoid any vulnerabilities, but I have not taken this route. Sharing my narratives with those at work has continued to be extremely difficult as I am trying to be open and revealing within them.

I suggest that from the perspective of a processual understanding, where things are constantly in a state of becoming, ethical behaviour cannot just be measured through rigid standards. After Ellis (2007:4), I argue for an ethical approach that copes with unpredictable situations when engaging in research which requires that moral judgements are frequently made and negotiated which she refers to as "situational ethics". For example, I have shared the fact that I am undertaking doctoral work with my colleagues at work and they know that part of my research involves writing and reflecting on narratives concerning our work together. Indeed, there have been several occasions, after a conflictual meeting, where colleagues have commented that at least there was something 'juicy' for my doctoral work to focus on.

According to Ellis (2007:4) ethical research does not simply mean simply complying with a standard but rather, feeling responsible for one's own behaviour and the consequences that it may have on others. Due to the evolutionary nature of the research process of the DMan programme I have not planned in advance who my research 'contributors' would be. Nevertheless, as the meetings in project three and project four have been subject to ongoing debate with my peers, I have shared aspects of these narratives with them. This has led to further conversations with some, disregard from others and an ongoing dialogue with one colleague whose own sense of shame in response to my narrative surprised me and to whom I felt responsibility and have continued to re-negotiate our relationship. I have also discussed the themes of my research with my line manager and my Dean of school. This has included discussions around the use of metrics, the function of gossip in organisations and feelings of 'stuckness' in organisational life. I have been quite clear with them that my thesis depicts meetings taking place in the school, and which ones they were, without sharing the details of the narratives, although I have offered them this opportunity. I will continue to have an ongoing dialogue with my Dean and others about the implications of my research if I were to publish from this thesis and acknowledge that this is subject to ongoing negotiation.

Having said this, I have reviewed the ethical guidelines for my profession as an accountant (e.g., the IFAC code of ethics and the ICAEW code of conduct), as well as standards for researchers conducting similar types of research (e.g., social anthropologists), and I believe I am behaving in an ethically compliant, as well as professionally responsible way, and in line with the ethical approval granted by the university in April 2018.

3. Research Projects

I present below the four research projects that have made up my research. They focus on issues that puzzled me and draw on relevant literature to deepen my understanding of my practice, in particular about the role of metrics in managing. Project 1 is a reflective account of my history, studies, work, and other influences that have shaped my thinking about organisational life. Projects 2 to 4 present narratives from situations that have arisen in my professional life.

3.1 Research Project 1 - An Intellectual Autobiography

Introduction

This is the first project in the Doctor of Management Programme (DMan) at the University of Hertfordshire. In the next sections of the project I will chart some critical moments of change during a business and academic career. I take a reflective approach to my past experiences and try to take meaning from those reflections as I see them today and attempt to elaborate on the thinking that has influenced me. I will discuss the questions that are beginning to shape my inquiry and how these have emerged in my life, work, education and reading. I will also show how I am beginning to think about these, considering my early experience of the DMan program.

A reflective approach should emphasise the: "...significance these events have for the narrator in relation to a particular theme" (Polkinghorne, 1988:160). This idea, drawn from psychology, was something I explored in an assessment I did for an internal leadership development programme at my university. That programme worked on the premise that leadership is a social, relational phenomenon where one of the critical capabilities required of a leader is the capacity to add skilfully to conversations.

I started this project by writing a chronological account of my life and trying to pull out the themes at the end. However, I found myself frustrated. The need to constantly re-visit areas, and the struggle I had to pull together the influences on my current practice led me to re-group these. The first section therefore reflects on the theories that have influenced my practice. Thereafter, there are sections which follow a thematic (rather than chronological) structure. These sections include experiences that show the formation of my thinking and link this to underpinning theory. I consider how I am starting to reflect on these in light of my participation on the DMan programme, drawing together the themes that have emerged in this project. Finally, I identify themes for further exploration in my next project.

My first drafts included numerous valuable stories exploring areas such as ethics, reality, endings, and emotion in organisational life. However, I have decided to write primarily about power and

leadership as these emerged as the primary themes for my research. The other themes may re-emerge in later narratives.

Reflective account of theories that have influenced my practice

University Education

I started university in 1989, at the age of 18, and had decided to study a mathematics degree. Recognising the potentially career limiting options this posed I decided to couple this with business. I hoped studying business would keep my career options open whilst continuing to study a subject I loved (mathematics). My recollections of this period are that I was not a very good student. I struggled with the difficulty of the applied maths syllabus. I did not apply myself effectively to this study. Conversely, I found most of the business school courses I took to be easy. It was here that I was introduced to mainstream management theories. These included planning tools such as Porter's five forces framework (Porter, 1985), which lists aspects of the industry: threat of entry, threat of substitutes, power of buyers, power of suppliers and competitive rivalry and SWOT analysis, which lists strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. I also studied decision-making tools. For instance, payback analysis, which shows how long it will take to recoup an investment, and discounted cash flow analysis, which forecasts future cash flows and uses interest rates to determine whether to undertake an investment.

In addition, I was introduced to motivation theories such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1954), Herzberg's hygiene factors and motivators (Herzberg, 1968), and an 'explanation' of leadership styles through tools such as McGregor's Theory X, and Theory Y (McGregor, 1960). These latter theories looked at the ways that people were motivated and therefore should be led. Maslow (1954) posed a hierarchical picture of needs that motivate human behaviour. He proposed that there were five levels of needs, beginning with the most basic: survival. Next, physiological needs such as food and shelter, followed by needs relating to safety. There are then needs of love and belonging. Next, humans have needs of esteem, such as the need to be respected. Finally, in Maslow's hierarchy, is the need for self-actualisation (fulfilling one's potential). McGregor (1960) built on this theory of motivation to look at how a manager should organise resources based on different motivators – theory X, based mainly on money and security and theory Y, based on needs of esteem and self-actualisation. My exposure to these theories led me to understand that the purpose of leadership was to apply the principles of scientific management. I believed that this

would solve any problems that a business faced. I thought that people needed to be motivated and controlled for them to act in the manner in which management desired. It was a leader's job to choose appropriate goals and motivators.

Accounting Education

In 1993, straight from graduating, I joined a large accounting practice as a trainee auditor. This has had huge influence on my thinking for the last 25 years. Whilst accounting can be traced back more than 7,000 years to Mesopotamia, the modern practice of accounting in the UK was developed as joint-stock companies (especially from about 1600) built wider audiences for accounting information. Investors without first-hand knowledge of the company's operations relied on accounts to provide information (Carruthers and Espeland, 1991). The development of accounting practice as part of the Enlightenment movement³ is well documented (Mathews & Perera, 1996; Gaffikin, 1988).

Positive Accounting Theory was popularised by accounting academics, Watts & Zimmerman (1986). It is a research approach underpinned by the works of the economist Milton Friedman (1953). It is based on many assumptions, including the assumption that all people are trying to maximise their own personal wealth. Wealth accumulation is assumed to be at the centre of all decisions. Positive Accounting Theory does not incorporate considerations of fiduciary duty, loyalty or social responsibility. It focuses on the relationships between those providing resources to an organisation, and how accounting is used to assist in the functioning of those relationships. This is underpinned by agency theory. Agency relationships occur where principals hire agents to perform a service on the principals' behalf. In accounting, the shareholders (principal) and company executives (agents) are assumed to have different goals or desires. Agency theory is built on the economics-based assumption that all individuals' action is driven by self-interest. (Deegan & Unerman, 2006).

The primary information that is sent from the managers to the shareholders are the financial statements of the organisation. An audit is the examination of the financial statements of an organisation - as presented in the annual report - by someone independent of that organisation. The auditor perceives and recognises the propositions before them, obtains evidence, evaluates the

³ The Enlightenment is an intellectual movement originating in the mid-decades of the 18th century. It incorporated the notion of scientific thought and reason as the only valid foundation of human knowledge. It is illustrated by the work of Newton, Descartes, Bacon and Locke (Bristow, 2017).

evidence, and forms an opinion, based on his judgement, which is communicated through their audit report (Power, 1999).

Audit practice was my real-world introduction to the use of management tools. They were used to help classify organisations and 'make sense' of what was being reviewed. They focussed on understanding the processes and procedures within a business, looking at them mainly from a systemic view of organisations. The audit considers the information flows to produce the financial reports. Every human or computer intervention in this system would be evaluated as to whether there was a risk of introducing error into the reports. Since humans are prone to making mistakes, the audit process highlights their interventions in the system as a point in the audit process where the risk of mistakes is increased.

Another example of where this systemic thinking has persisted for me is from my time in professional education, which I entered in 2002. Here I trained accountants towards their professional examinations. Students respected their tutors for their ability to get them through their exams and to impart the knowledge and techniques they needed to do this. However, if students were unhappy with the teaching they would complain. Reputation in the professional education market was important to the continued revenue stream. Management would take very swift action to remove tutors from classrooms when students were unhappy. Tutors were a 'cog' in the system. Where they were found to be faulty they would be moved to a different position and a more suitable 'cog' brought in.

Systemic thinking considers the organisation as an entity above and beyond the individuals which form it (Senge, 1990). It advocates that interventions can be planned and implemented by leaders in the organisation by breaking down the organisation into its component parts. Leaders are assumed to stand above this organisation to effect change in a planned way through a series of interventions in the interest of controlling them. The underlying assumption is that managers have the power and capability to effect these changes. Managers can predict the outcomes in a 'if...then' type of causal relationship. This cybernetic system is an application of the engineer's idea of control to human activity. In this type of system actual outcomes are compared with an idealised outcome and the difference between the two is fed back. This then guides the next action in such a way that the difference is reduced or eliminated. The system should then reach the desired goal. Norbert Weiner, a scientist considering the accuracy of anti-aircraft defences during the Second World War, held that these negative feedback loops were important in most human interaction (Weiner, 1948). For organisations, this negative feedback loop prompts a manager to take corrective action to bring the system back to the idealised course. Such systems depend upon this clear link between cause and

effect. The manager utilises negative feedback to achieve goals. Managers either sense the disturbance before it hits the organisation, or detect the disturbance after it has occurred. I can relate this to the experiences above. For example, the auditor can sense potential disturbances in advance by analysis of risks within the financial processing system. They attempt to prevent the disruption happening by ensuring there are measures in place to prevent errors (Stacey & Mowles, 2016:71). In the case of students complaining about a tutor, the manager attempts to correct the deviation through activities such as removing the tutor from the classroom. There is an assumption both that the organisation is a self-regulating system, and that a manager can intervene to bring about specific and necessary change. The manager merely needs to take the appropriate corrective action to bring the system back to the idealised state.

I bring attention to this here because much of my formative thinking has been based on such systemic thinking. My formative education led me to believe that people needed to be controlled to achieve organisational goals, and that wealth accumulation was at the centre of those motivations. An organisation was a thing above and beyond the people that made it up, and people were problematic parts of the system. However, it is my experience that the outcome is rarely that planned by a rational observer, and rarely achieves the outcomes exactly as the manager planned.

As I embark on the DMan programme I have been reading much more on systemic approaches to management and control. Stacey and Mowles (2016) point to the limitations of systemic thinking when it is applied to human organisation. Ralph Stacey is Professor of Management at Hertfordshire Business School and along with his close colleagues, Douglas Griffin and Patricia Shaw, developed an understanding of leadership and management in organisations as the ordinary politics of everyday life. In presenting organisations as 'complex responsive processes of relating' they point to a way of thinking of organisations not as systems, but as human beings engaged in many, many local conversational interactions and power relations. Chris Mowles is a Professor of Complexity and Management at Hertfordshire Business School and the director of the DMan programme. Stacey and Mowles (2016) argue that systemic thinking assumes that on the one hand a person can observe the system and make rational choices about the best course of action, and on the other hand people are subject to formative causality (i.e., we can predict what the output will be because it is already enfolded within the system). As such we cannot choose, but are subject to, the formative process of the system. Thinking of organisations as systems: "...immediately reifies and objectifies human action" (Stacey et al, 2000:58). He stresses that: "...systems thinking cannot adequately explain how novelty arises in organizations or what the role of managers and leaders is in the emergence of such novelty." (ibid:59).

Understanding the role of managers and leaders in this systemic way, now leads me to consider my previous assumptions about power and leadership. My first job in an audit environment confirmed, and then questioned, how I thought about power, hierarchy, and knowledge.

Power, Hierarchy and Knowledge

My first job was as a trainee auditor in a regional office of a large audit practice, Allstar LLP. Graduates were recruited as trainees and would be promoted, through an exam based, time served system, to 'audit seniors'. Promotion to the role of senior manager was attained through performing against competency-based objectives. These competency objectives were common to all trainees at the same level. We could be graded by our manager as 'approaching competency', 'competent' or 'exceeding competency targets'. We had no participation in setting these metrics. On all audit engagements of a certain size performance was evaluated. At the yearly appraisal interviews, one must bring along at least 5-6 such 'audit appraisals'. Achievement of a good appraisal was important for promotion prospects and for setting rates of pay for the next year.

The pinnacle of Allstar LLP, as I saw it, was attaining the role of Partner. Admission to the partnership was a difficult, lengthy, and expensive process that was largely a mystery to those of us lower down. Partners had to buy into the partnership. They were the owners of the business, not just the senior management. In addition, every time they signed an audit report they did so in their own names; subjecting themselves to the potential of being sued – the downside financial risk of the behaviour of their employees.

There was a very clear accountability to the partnership for the work we performed. If work was not performed to the expected standards, pay awards would be lower and promotion could be denied. Ultimately verbal and written warnings would be issued. It was common that trainees would be asked to leave the firm before the end of their training contracts. I knew very quickly that I could expect to lose my job if I did not keep up with my studies, or if my work was below the standard expected. There were stories of those that had 'gone before' and I knew peers who lost their jobs. I certainly had no intention of being shamed in this way.

On a day-to-day basis, trainees were directly managed by audit seniors at audit client's premises. Managers visited the audit team once or twice a week. The partner's visit to the audit team was a much-anticipated event. It was the summit of all the work and all the investigations. It was important to the whole team that things had been done properly and it was the partner who would

determine this. The partner would also question the judgments that had been made by the audit team. The judgments used in audit are a central activity and the audit partner was always deferred to. They were considered to have the superior judgment, which had been acquired through their length of service, and re-enforced by their hierarchal position at the top of the organisation.

This respect for hierarchy mirrored ideas from my own upbringing. My parents were teachers in the UK comprehensive education system in a medium sized industrial town in the East Midlands. My recollection of their conversations was that they were always very respectful to their head teachers, and loyal to the schools in which they worked. This didn't mean they didn't engage in rebellious activities. In the 1980's, during a period of a highly anti-union government in the UK, my parents were actively involved in industrial action and strikes on pay and conditions. However, despite this, their conversations about their local schools remained respectful. I recollect now, in my late teens my sister laughing at me when I got a Saturday job at Boots the Chemist, not at the blue crimplene A-line dress and American tan tights (which deserved to be laughed at), but at my loyalty to the firm and to the people with whom I was working. At the time I could not understand why this was something to laugh at.

The many levels of organisational hierarchy at Allstar LLP, where all work was controlled and where partners appeared to be highly respected without exception, re-enforced the norm of showing respect for the organisation which I learned from my parents. My conviction at that time was that control of staff was appropriate, and that those in a senior position in the hierarchy should be given respect. I also believed that power was something that individuals held.

Two years after qualifying as a chartered accountant I realised that I wanted a new challenge. I took a secondment to the national audit training team, based within the London offices of Allstar LLP. The national audit training team comprised of seven staff, four of whom were seconded from the audit practice, including myself. This team created all the course materials and delivered all the audit training courses to the 900+ trainees nationwide. They did this supported by a range of trainers from Allstar LLP and in turn trained those trainers.

In the UK, the training that accountants receive through their three years post-graduation and pre-qualification is twofold. Allstar LLP provided training relating to their own contexts, i.e., on their own way of performing audits. Trainees also completed examinations, set by their qualifying bodies, for which they went to professional training organisations. Underpinning the whole of the auditing profession is a huge knowledge base of accounting standards and auditing standards. The way that training was delivered both in Allstar LLP and by the professional training organisations was very much a hierarchical learning environment. The ability to impart agreed core knowledge was

important. The training we all received assumed that the learner was an empty vessel that needed to be filled with facts and skills. The student would absorb this information and would be successful in their exams. This assumed that knowledge gained was transferred in a sender/receiver model as developed by mathematicians Shannon and Weaver (1949) whereby a message is 'sent' by one and 'receive' by another, with the assumption that there is objective meaning embodied in the message, which the receiver understands in the way the sender intended. This meaning is believed to exist outside of peoples' interactions. The accounting profession considers knowledge to be very important in its members. The accounting syllabus starts with the application of the rules at the foundation level and moves through to more holistic case study type scenarios at the professional level, mirroring the Dreyfus model of skills acquisition. This was developed by engineer Stewart Dreyfus and his brother, philosopher Hubert. (Dreyfus, S. & Dreyfus, H. 1986). Bonner and Walker (1994), accounting scholars, say that accounting education places emphasis on declarative knowledge (knowledge of facts and definitions) and procedural knowledge (knowledge of rules or steps). In auditing, basic declarative knowledge is commonly acquired through formal education, and procedural knowledge is acquired later during one's professional career.

The work within the training department felt exceedingly important to the direction of the firm. We sat with the team who wrote the audit methodology (the processes or procedures used to assess a company's financial and business risk) and those who wrote the audit software. We shared offices with the managing partner of the UK firm. These teams were hugely influential in the way that the core work was being carried out. This was the first time I started to question my own belief, that power was only held by those in hierarchical positions but could also be held by those with knowledge and expertise. I enjoyed the feeling of having power.

My early view of power was that it was instilled in people through their position or gained through knowledge. This has been significantly challenged by my experiences of managing change, yet I could not explain what was happening. It can be seen from the way I make sense of my practice that I considered power to be a 'thing' that can be possessed by an individual – either from hierarchy or from knowledge. German process sociologist, Norbert Elias felt that there was a strong tendency to reify power and to treat it as an object that was possessed. He argued that all human relationships are relationships of power. Elias wrote:

"...power is not an amulet possessed by one person and not by another; it is a structural characteristic of human relationships - of all human relationships." (Elias, 1970:74).

I had not considered that power could be so complex, and only lately am I starting to see the interplays in all sorts of working relationships. He suggests we consider power issues as universally

present ones of mutual dependency, even in situations of apparently very one-sided power imbalance:

“From the day of his birth, a baby has power over its parents, not just the parents over the baby. ... But whether the power differentials are large or small, balances of power are always present wherever there is functional interdependence between people.” (ibid:74).

Whilst I could see the complexity of power relationships, I placed power with individuals. I am now reflecting that power, respect and being respected are strong themes for me, and the link between these is something I need to explore further.

Leadership

After entering audit practice, in 1995, I was invited to a week-long residential training event on new audit methodology. The team comprised a few staff, including the partner. We were going to a Georgian mansion and I was extremely proud and nervous to be attending as such a junior member of the team. I rang my mum to boast about this opportunity. I clearly remember the advice that I was given. She instructed me on which way to pass the port, and that I should not cut the nose off the cheese! I was embarrassed that she thought this mattered. Fortunately, there was no port at the conference and therefore I could avoid any social faux pas. This was probably the first time I had overtly considered norms⁴ and how they make a difference in our interactions with others. I had not previously considered how they impact what others may think of us and the respect they may have for us. I can see that I have taken this desire to be respected into future careers and how I have tried to adopt norms to make myself accepted.

In 2009, I made a move into higher education and in 2011 I became the Head of the Accounting Subject Group. I was the youngest member of the group and had only been in academia 18 months. I had applied for the job in competition with longer serving staff and had not expected to be given the role. Whilst my own background may have led me to believe that my appointment to Head of Subject Group should naturally afford me the power and respect to lead the team, I was extremely apprehensive about how they would view my leadership based on my age and knowledge of higher

⁴ The norms can be defined as a standard or pattern of social behaviour that is accepted in or expected of a group (Oxford English Dictionary, 2017a).

education, especially those I had been in competition with. I can see that even though I now had formal power, the power afforded by title and position, I also wanted the team to recognise and respect me as their leader. As Doug Griffin, a contributor to the body of theories around complex responsive processes of relating argues, "...the leader is as much formed by the recognition of the group as he or she forms the group in his or her recognition of the others" (Griffin, 2005:10).

I have used knowledge acquisition to bolster my own feeling of being recognised as the leader. So, for example, since I joined the university I have gained my senior fellowship of the higher education academy (one of only a handful of staff to have achieved this within the business school) and I have become an associate coach mentor. To an extent, even my enrolment on this DMan programme could be viewed as trying to obtain recognition as an academic. I have believed that if you get the qualification or 'badge' then the recognition automatically follows. I can see that this is still wrapped up in my belief that power increases with knowledge acquisition and elevation of hierarchal position; both of which are 'held', or not, by individuals.

Furthermore, I recognise how I have tried to use the organisational rituals to affirm my own position within the group as leader. Rituals can be defined as: "...repeated actions of patterns of behaviour having significance within a particular social group" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2017b). In academic life there are many rituals e.g., graduation ceremonies, exam boards, welcome meetings, and end of term meetings. One ritualistic event at university is the exam board. The exam board is a formal process of agreeing students' marks. I chair these boards and typically read out the formal minutes and remind the members of important aspects of the board process. It is the chair's job to ensure that marks being issued to students are sound and to highlight any areas of concern in the teaching or assessment of the students. Module leaders are typically compliant with the requests from the chair and play their parts very well: like a well-rehearsed play that is highly scripted in parts and improvised in others. I find it difficult to balance the needs of the board whilst understanding that this may be the only point in the academic year where the module leader gets to boast about their modules to their peers. It is also a time where people may be shamed by publicly pointing out those modules that are not doing well, according to a set of metrics laid out by the quality assurance staff. Navigating this process is difficult, since whilst it is important to discuss issues in an open forum, there is also a risk of inducing feelings of shame. The exam board ritual is important in academic life as it is the process whereby people are publicly recognised or shamed, and this can lead to feelings of inclusion or exclusion from the group.

I raise this here to point out that I enjoy maintaining my position of chair and leading such ritualistic events; this is an important part of my feeling recognised by the team as their leader. I note that

others do not seem keen to take on these roles. This has puzzled me. I wonder now whether this links with my formative work in accounting practice. In that environment, everyone had to take on roles where they were exposed to potential failure. Failing meant shame and exclusion. I do not consider taking on these roles as optional. I would consider not doing them well to be a failure. I wonder whether leading on these ritualistic events and gaining these 'badges' is part of the need I have to be recognised by the group to which I belong (or want to belong) as the leader.

However, I am now coming to understand there are other ways of thinking about leadership than as something held by individuals. From a complex responsive process perspective this means that for the manager: "...the focus is on how one is constrained and enabled in forming intentions by the current patterning of organisational life experienced in local interaction, as well as how one's intentions may constrain and enable others" (Stacey & Mowles, 2016:500). This can be seen in the many rituals in university life but also in other leadership experiences I describe below.

Within my work there are many rituals. From my reading for the DMAN I am starting to see these rituals more as a social process, whereby the 'rules' have been co-created with others and that these continue to evolve. As Emma Crewe, DMan supervisor and anthropologist explains, conformity to the rituals is not a matter of assessing interests but something that: "...emerges out of relationships and making sense of the world and one's place in it" (Crewe, 2010:318). I note that in both my own desire to gain recognition, and in the exam board process I describe above, there is a significant link to the metrics that are used to determine my success. With the qualifications it is typically someone else, an examiner or teacher, who determines the criteria for success. It is important to me to reach the standard. In the exam board, the metrics for success of modules are also laid out quite clearly. Using such metrics as part of the praising/disciplining process is something that feels natural to me. I am coming to realise this is 'norm' within my professional life.

Leading through Metrics

When I entered professional education for accountancy training in 2002, it was highly competitive. There were a few national, reputable providers and numerous small providers. Despite the wider market context, within the centre I worked in there was no significant competition. If we laid on courses, the students would come. There were metrics around pass rates imposed by the examination bodies, which were the focus of any judgment about our performance. The staff were

competent at what they did but there was little focus on striving to be better, to innovate or on real customer satisfaction.

Four years after joining this environment, in 2006, I became the managing director of two regional centres. This was my first management position I felt that the position of Managing Director (MD) gave me the ability to change things as I saw fit. I believed I now had true power with my position and could affect the changes that were being demanded of me from the parent company.

The lecturers had all entered professional education, having previously had careers as accountants. The role promised long vacations, autonomy of time and the chance to be an expert. In the two-year period prior to me becoming MD, a new national competitor had entered the marketplace. It opened a centre offering the full suite of training courses, right on our doorstep. The race was on to capture, and keep happy, the corporate clients who could provide a steady income stream. In this oligopolistic marketplace, there was high interdependence between our businesses. Pricing, and the attractiveness of the courses on offer, were critical. The days of offering what we liked and sweeping up all business were gone.

Consequently, it became apparent to me that the way business was being operated could not continue. The competitor aggressively attacking our marketplace had better facilities, better choice of courses and more accountability to their corporate clients. Without rapid action, we would lose market share and potentially our jobs. In addition, the parent company was looking to gain degree awarding powers and then to sell the business. Tough metrics were imposed upon me relating to the performance of the centre which impacted on my personal salary and bonus prospects. These metrics were in the form of a 'balanced scorecard' which measured service delivery, income generation and key external metrics. The balanced scorecard is commonly ascribed to Kaplan & Norton, based on their book *The Balanced Scorecard* (Kaplan & Norton, 1996). It is a performance management tool used to keep track of activities whereby performance is measured, the measure compared to a reference value and corrections made based on the variance between the two. (Balanced Scorecard Institute, 2017). It is based on systemic control and assumes that an observer can monitor performance and intervene to make change. It is easy to see the comparison with cybernetic control systems, described above.

The external metrics were based on the examining bodies stringent 'platinum' partner status requirements. They imposed these metrics on all training providers who wished to carry this badge. These included external measures such as exceeding exam pass rate targets. They also included internal measures such as receiving positive student feedback, excellent premises, and ongoing financial viability.

I started to implement formal monitoring of classroom quality through student feedback sheets. Students answered on a Likert scale of 1–5: 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. They answered questions such as ‘I like the teaching on my course’ and ‘I feel prepared for my exams’. Such measures are ubiquitous in management training environments. Evaluating training in this way was first described by Donald Kirkpatrick of the university of Wisconsin (Kirkpatrick, 1959). The evaluation I was implementing here was limited to immediate feedback (often referred to as ‘happy sheets’). They allowed me to monitor classroom quality against an idealised standard without having to be in the classroom. They enabled me to notice any problems in the ‘system’ and take corrective actions to rectify these with the individuals concerned.

As the leader, I felt I should be able to rise above the organisational politics to create the necessary change. The marketplace was changing. I thought that the staff could be convinced by my rational arguments for the need to change. After all there was evidence to show this change was necessary. Student numbers were dipping as they switched to the competitor. I was sure that the staff would become convinced, as I was, that change was needed in themselves and would understand the metrics that were in place to improve performance.

I implemented balanced scorecards for staff based on both internal and external metrics. I introduced formal appraisal systems and processes to ensure and demonstrate equivalency of work loading etc. The most unpopular move was to re-negotiate staff contracts as we now needed to deliver Sunday teaching to match our competitor. I felt that people needed to be incentivised to achieve goals. I did this with pay awards linked to scorecard measures and allocation of bonus pools. I also believed that introducing metrics would motivate them and allow me, as their manager, to measure their performance and control what they were doing. This shows parallels to my accounting education and the cybernetic approach, although I did not make this connection at the time.

Application of Metrics Failing to Deliver as Planned

My relationship with my staff deteriorated rapidly. This was brought home to me at a Christmas lunch, for which I was paying, when I sat down at one table and every member of staff scrambled to sit at the other table. I began receiving emails from staff showing me how they could earn more by working in Tesco, stacking shelves. Nobody ever told me that it was the new processes and proposals that were causing them problems, but there was a shift in my relationship with the staff. I could see that what I was implementing was unpopular and that there was a large level of resistance to the changes.

Furthermore, I realised how much of myself I had put into those changes and how emotionally charged the environment had become. In the end, our emotional reactions to one another overshadowed and undermined the ability to discuss any of the underlying issues affecting the business. The staff had stopped respecting me and I had decided that they must be driven by ulterior motives to protect their own interests. I believed they were misaligned with what I thought to be in the company's, and ultimately in my own, interests. This reflected my belief that my leadership should be a means for generating shared direction and commitment to organisational goals of profit maximisation.

I became angry with my line manager, who I felt was placing unreasonable demands on me. He started making comments about how I needed to 'raise my profile' in the local area. He demanded I went to meetings with him at short notice. All the metrics he had put in my balanced scorecard showed I was doing a 'good job' but the demands he was making made me feel the opposite. I became angry with the staff who I felt I could no longer trust to do a good job. I started to resent them, and interpreted every question from them as demonstration that they didn't want to do any work. I now see that the way I was behaving and controlling people led to resentment in staff, which in turn led to my own resentment. The dynamics that we created meant that working together became impossible. I left the organisation as soon as an exit was possible.

What I am starting to see here is how I used metrics as a form of control and how I thought this was right based on my formative education and training. I believed I could make my organisation better by getting staff to do what I thought was right. I thought I could control them by applying metrics. At that time, I had thought I could control what was going to happen. I believed I could leave my emotions out of the job of leading. Where behaviour deviated, a fix could be applied to bring things back in line. My beliefs were based on an idea of an 'if...then' causality, namely if I did something, then a certain outcome could be predicted (Griffin, 2002:50). Thus, if we plan correctly then we can achieve our goals. Again, systems thinking underpins much of this approach. This 'if-then' mindset is very much a part of how I have operated over the last 20 years. Any deviation must be because I had not done it 'right'. Or alternatively, I blamed others for not recognising the rational outcomes needed.

As a result, this experience led me to seriously question my understanding of power as being located in the leader. I could not see a way to rationalise this, other than to locate the blame in the other people. I saw my role as trying to increase the effectiveness of what we do through a series of interventions. I tried to lead change through imposing metrics and tight control to try to achieve the

outcomes I thought were correct. The change I wanted 'worked' through many of those measures, but the process was painful, both for myself and for the staff involved.

I have started to acknowledge that I am inevitably linked to the politics of the people. Mowles (2015) suggests, drawing on Elias, that:

"...we are not detached from organizational life contemplating it objectively but are caught up in the game, forming it and being formed by it both at the same time.... We might notice that we are caught up in a game and pay attention to the way we are influencing who we are working with, but also how they are influencing us". (ibid:2015)

Mowles (2015) argues that: "...this means paying attention to everyday activity and noticing how general trends are played out in particular people at a particular time." This resonates with me both from the situation above but also in the university in which I now work, as paying more attention to the game that is being played may give me more options about how to play the game.

A more social approach to leadership

Since 2009 I have worked in higher education in the UK, as an academic member of staff in a post-'92⁵ university. I am the Head of a Subject Group within a very large and diverse business school. This role means I have staff line management responsibility for over 25 academic staff and quality responsibility for the delivery of a large undergraduate programme, along with various other academic responsibilities. During this time, there have been many changes in the higher education sector in the UK, in the university where I work and in the business school. These have included the introduction of significant increases in tuition fees (from £3,000 in 2006 to £9,000 in 2012), the partial commercialisation of the sector⁶; a new Vice Chancellor of the university who has introduced a new strategic direction; a significant re-organisation within the university; and a new Dean of

⁵ Post '92 universities are those that were created by the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 which granted former polytechnics university status. The idea was to increase the quality and scope of research in subjects seen as applied or vocational such as art, education, and information technology. There is an extensive body of literature, much of it conflicting, about university, its purpose and its functioning (Craig & Amernic, 2002).

⁶ Previously UK universities were government funded through a grant system and were allowed a quota of students. With the introduction of student loans, whereby the government lend the money to the student to fund their education, the cap on student numbers was lifted. Measures have been put in place by the UK government to enable students to make informed choices about their study options. More recently, the government have introduced measures that are proxies for research excellence, teaching excellence and employability prospects.

School with a change of focus for the school, to name a few. There has been an increasing impact of managerialism⁷ in universities (Collini, 2012) and I am part of this academic management. With the increased tuition fees, there has been an increase in the demands of the student body. Students are seen to be customers who must be kept happy and customer satisfaction surveys such as the National Student Survey (NSS) reinforce this notion.

The largest piece of work which I have been involved in over the last few years is a significant review of, and amendment to, the undergraduate accounting programme and the subsequent delivery. The programme is mostly delivered by the group of staff I manage, but also pulls in experts from other subject areas. It is frequently said that managing academics is like 'herding cats' and that academics value autonomy very highly: "Academics ask for good arguments not instructions on how they might perform better" (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016:29). This confirmed my own expectations, and I perceived that leading change would be difficult, especially given my tough experiences of doing this in the past. I booked myself on the university's management development programme, anticipating a programme that would equip me with the technical skills I presumed I lacked, to be able to lead change better than I had previously. I was thinking of myself as: "...a rational self who can choose, control, analyse and intervene both with others and with themselves to bring about pre-reflected and intended outcomes." (Mowles, 2011:118). Mowles, in stating this, is criticising this theory of the leader as an objective observer who has undistorted access to facts. Such an approach has led to management development programmes which focus on individual qualities and competencies which managers can possess and use. This had been my previous experience of management development programmes and what I was expecting when enrolling on this one.

The leadership development programme, run by a DMan alumni, was not like anything I had encountered before. This programme encouraged the participants to talk about their everyday practice, to consider it in the context of some management theories, and to use conversation to make sense of what was happening for them. This programme introduced me to alternative management literature. For example, I was introduced to the idea that leaders do not need to be in control of everything. Ancona et al. (2007), professors of management at MIT, look at distributed leadership. They state that: "...the leader's job is no longer to command and control but to cultivate and co-ordinate the actions of others" (ibid:92–93). I also started to consider the importance of conversation. Browne & Isaacs (1997), co-founders of the idea of the world café, consider that leadership happens when leaders see their organisations as dynamic webs of conversation and

⁷ Managerialism within the university context is typically seen to refer to the implementation of systems, process and initiatives more commonly associated with commercial organisations.

consider conversation as a process for effecting positive change. It was also where I started to consider that taking experience seriously was important. Before commencing the programme, I had never really considered that reflective practice could be a valuable process. In this programme I started to reflect on my own practice and started to question the way I did things. This was not always a comfortable experience.

This experience, of reading and reflection prompted me to try to lead more collaboratively. I brought together the whole subject group to determine the direction of the programme review. As part of this, the team identified the need to maintain professional exemptions⁸. Due to the need to maximise these exemptions, the curriculum and assessment were tightly confined. When I added together the assessments from each module, I saw that students had been subjected to over 40 assessments in each year of study. The staff agreed this was ridiculous. We agreed that we needed to look at assessment practices across the entire programme, rather than just for each module. They agreed the need to devise programme wide assessment strategies, whereby we considered what the programme needed rather than what modules were needed. They came up with a strategy, collectively, about the amounts of work and types of work that a student should be exposed to in each year of their degree programme and agreed that these principles were appropriate. They also agreed that a focus on the skills we were developing in our students needed to be more formally implemented in the curriculum. Staff identified that skills such as critical thinking, problem solving and ability to research were important to develop.

I then asked those same staff to write documents that showed which assessment strategies they would implement in their modules and the skills that they would be developing in those modules. What they wrote showed that although they had agreed to a change in approach, when they came to consider their own practice there were few changes being implemented. I had many discussions and negotiations during the following few months to bring these documents into line with the overall strategy that had been previously agreed. In some instances, I had to change these documents unilaterally to meet development timetables and overall objectives of the programme. I

⁸ In the UK, to qualify as a chartered accountant, a student would need to pass exams that are set and administered by a recognised qualifying body (RQB). These exams typically take three years to complete. If a degree programme gives students exemptions from having to take these exams after graduation this cuts down on the time taken by a student to qualify as an accountant. Within accounting degrees, in the UK, recruitment of students to undergraduate programmes is heavily reliant on the number of exemptions the professional accounting bodies give to the degree. These exemptions however constrain syllabus content and the nature of the assessments.

was determined that the principles that the whole team had agreed should be adhered to, whilst knowing that this approach would upset some staff.

The team are now delivering the degree to the students and discomfort by some staff shows up. Questions like: 'Can we award marks for turning up/small submissions/weekly reading/class participation?' are repeatedly asked. Some staff use this when justifying a range of factors from poor student feedback, to poor attainment rates. In contrast, I have had some staff expressing a view that I have saved them from themselves by forcing them to re-think their assessment practice. In addition, although staff agreed that there should be a focus on the skills being developed in our students, most academic staff have been resistant to these being embedded into their own modules. Where they agreed conceptually to this, they have failed to then implement these areas. Their argument is that they have too much technical content in their module to have been able to focus on this area. Over the past academic year there are instances of failure to properly prepare these sessions so that they fail to run. There are also many comments from staff that they are too busy to really implement this area. I suspect that they are more comfortable with delivering technical content than with skills delivery and feel ill-equipped to do this, although no one has said this directly to me.

With regard to the above, I can see that staff have been happy to theoretically accept the principles of the change needed and the rationale for these changes. However, where these changes begin to impact upon their own working practices and disrupt the norms, a resistance to implementing some of these changes has arisen. I can see strong similarities in this behaviour of staff to the earlier situation whereby I led through a command and control style. Despite my attempts for a more collaborative approach to change and the much lower explicit focus on metrics and the less significant impact on individuals working practice, there are still problems with implementation that I would not have expected. I had considered that by getting the staff much more heavily involved in designing their own solutions that problems should not have arisen in the same way. This way of managing change shows many similarities to a soft system methodology (SSM) view. This is an understanding developed by such thinkers as Peter Checkland (2006), a British management scientist. Checkland was critical of the engineering view of organisations as systems and came up with SSM. He considered that systems engineering did not take sufficient account of messy human realities, including unsurfaced and clashing views. SSM tries to incorporate multiple viewpoints and cultural influences, as well as to include more stakeholders as participants in identifying and designing systems that are supposed to govern their own action. Designing a system is now the task of a team in conversation with one another. This second order systems thinking is a move away from

first order systems thinking such as cybernetics. In first order systems the emphasis is one of command, control, and efficiency. In second order systems there is a focus on participation and inclusion. Despite this ideological shift, second order systems continue to rely on the concept of a system as a way of thinking. Managers are still expected to step out of the ongoing events to make sense of those events and apply systemic thinking to them. The notion of autonomous individuals is retained. This viewpoint would still imply managers (and now wider participants) simply had to make choices, and that the system would then do what it is designed to do (formative causality).

Themes

Until starting to write this first project on the DMan, I had rarely challenged the underlying beliefs and ideologies that inform my practice. Several themes have arisen for me in the writing of the first project. Above all I have been struck by the central themes of power and leadership. These appear to be linked with the use of metrics.

I reflect that my understanding of power has been formed over many years, and I have considered it to be a 'thing' that is possessed by those at the top of the hierarchy or through acquisition of knowledge. I am becoming aware of a way of understanding power not as a binary construct, where people (typically leaders) are either powerful or not, but rather seeing that power is present in all interdependent relationships. Through reading and discussions, I am starting to consider new ways of looking at my work, for example exploring how I might understand organisations as: "...the ongoing patterning of power and ideology as they emerge in local conversation" (Mowles, 2011:8).

The second theme which has been prevalent in my current project is my evolving approach to leading change over the last 20 years. I have been heavily influenced by my formative education where I believed that people were problematic parts of systems that needed to be commanded, motivated, and controlled. The use of metrics has been important. Metrics were a key part of my formative education in how you could manage, control, and motivate people. This view was then compounded by my experience in accounting practice where formal appraisal was used as both a shaming and a motivating tool. My own leadership has had a huge focus on the use of metrics. Even when moving to a more social view of leading change, I have still had an 'if-then' type of approach. I believed that a planned change could be implemented in a predictable way. I had started to believe that one could create managed change if there was a period of consultation and moving in small, iterative steps to the outcome you desired. Despite this approach, tensions arose and what emerged

was not what I may have envisaged when I set out. I have continued to be puzzled as to why this has not occurred. What I have started to call into question is the idea that there is an idealised outcome that can be achieved through the predetermined actions of a leader. Through reading and discussions, I am starting to consider new ways of looking at leading change relevant to my current experience:

“Instead of being determined by a prior plan, organizational change will be emerging in the local interactions of many, many people...The change can only happen in many, many local interactions, not through some central plan or programme” (Stacey, 2012:15)

The final theme, which has been particularly prevalent in my current context, is how I have attempted to acquire qualifications and badges to try to affirm my position as leader, and to be recognised by the team. I have also used the rituals of the organisation. I have wanted to do this with competence. I have been happy with the measurements imposed by others, whether that be through exams or from adopting the rituals in a way that is accepted by the group. I have reflected a lot on this, as it is only recently that I have realised that others do not. I wonder whether my desire to be included and not shamed has been a powerful motivator that has outweighed the risk of taking on these activities. I am becoming more aware that many of the ways we go about our business are social in their nature, and that the activity of organising is about interaction and power relating. We are constantly and iteratively co-creating the rituals we find ourselves caught up in. Many of these rituals may be what Stacey (2012) refers to as: “...techniques of disciplinary power”, drawing on the ideas of French philosopher Michel Foucault. This is something I wish to continue to explore in future projects.

These themes of metrics, power and leadership are areas that continue to be a struggle for me. How do I make sense of what I am doing in the commercialised world of academic life in the UK? The measures of teaching quality expressed in surveys such as the National Student Survey and Teaching Excellence Framework, impact upon how we are perceived by prospective students and within the university itself. The changing face of the higher education sector has a view of the world that is systems based and which sees change and improvement as resulting from a tightly engineered regime of performance management that in turn leads to even greater control. As the leader of a group of staff who are tasked with delivering a large change programme, I am getting messages about our under-performing metrics that I need to ‘sort it out’.

I am starting to consider some of the principles of complex responsive processes of relating, where the individual and group are both forming and being formed by each other at the same time, and organisations are social patterns of relating (Stacey et al, 2000); they seem to make sense. What

makes sense to me is that although I can make decisions and take actions, I cannot control the responses that others will make in response to those decisions. I am starting to see that others can only respond according to their own capacities as I can only respond to their responses in accordance with my own capacities. I can see some problems arriving in my working life by starting to explore this way of thinking. I will have to be (or at least be seen to be) in control of the destiny of my subject group and programmes whilst knowing, at the same time, that I am not (at least not in the systemic way of thinking).

Stacey et al. call for:

“...a move away from understanding ‘the organization’ as a system subject to one kind of causality... and ‘the manager’ or ‘the leader’ as the maker of human choices operating according to another causality. We are interested in understanding the process of organizing as the ongoing joint action of communication. We are arguing that organizing is human experience as the living present, that is, continual interaction between humans who are forming intentions, choosing and acting in relation to each other as they go about their daily work together.” (Stacey et al., 2000:187).

Acknowledging that change will be played out in the many conversations that will take place over the next few weeks, months and years makes me anxious. It has been much easier to imagine that I can effect change and where this does not happen as planned, to rationalise this away (it's the people, it's the support networks etc.). Griffin (2005) argues that the complex responsive processes perspective highlights the emergent role of the leader, where leaders form and are being formed by the social processes of recognition inherent in their day-to-day interactions (conversations) with others. Griffin characterises effective leadership as:

“...participating skilfully in interaction with others in reflective and imaginative ways, aware of the potentially destructive processes one may be caught up in. [In order to] assist the group to continue acting ethically, creatively and courageously into the unknown” (Griffin, 2005:13).

As part of my research I would want to explore, challenge and test this perspective by reflecting on my own leadership practice and that of the teams I work with daily, and consider how thinking on complex response processes of relating might illuminate my practice. A research question starting to form for me is related to leading in a metric driven environment. I wish to explore the emerging patterns of behaviour of middle managers in a UK business school when performance metrics are used. This matters for me as it challenges many of the assumptions underlying my entire career,

assumptions to which I have remained largely oblivious until recently, namely, that I may have less control over my working environment than previous theories of management which I studied had led me to believe. As part of my research, it is likely I will explore the literature around performance management and control (Armstrong & Baron, 2005). I will be examining how measuring may be based on trying to make sense of the uncertainty of organisational life (Power, 1999b; Scott, 1998), and how abstractions such as metrics get particularised by middle managers (Scott, 1998; Griffin, 2002). I will look at what metrics may lead to, such as gaming (Muller, 2018) and what they fail to measure. In addition, I will look at how these metrics seem to play out in stories of resistance and compliance (Scott, 1990).

3.2 Research Project 2 - A Rational approach to Performance Management

Introduction

In Project 1, I described personal and professional incidents that impacted my development and started to outline some themes which had emerged. I began to question my understanding of power. I touched upon my need to use the badges and values of my organisation to affirm my own position and how being recognised was important to me. I also recounted two different methods of leading change, one through a metric focussed approach, and another more social approach by involving staff in decision making. These showed my thinking as an 'if-then' mindset. In the heavily metric focussed workplace in which I now work, I want to investigate further what these themes mean for me and the people with whom I work.

In this project I will start a more detailed and critical examination of these themes. I present a two-part narrative from recent conversations at work and link it to some major ideas that have influenced my work, firstly by drawing on classic management literature on change management and performance management, and secondly by drawing on complex responsive processes of relating as another way of trying to make sense of the narratives I have presented.

Background

I work in a UK university as a Head of Subject Group in a large business school. I have line management responsibility for around 20 academic staff and responsibility for the delivery of 4 very large undergraduate programmes and a smaller post graduate programme. These programmes are made up of 52 modules for which I also have responsibility. My job description states that: "The Subject Group Leader is responsible to the Dean of School for providing academic leadership of the subject group and for the efficient operation and quality control of subject modules and programmes provided by members of the group and the operational co-ordination of teaching staff within the subject group to ensure the efficient and high-quality delivery of modules within the group's portfolio."

Marketisation of Higher Education

Universities in the UK have undergone significant change in the last 25 years. The government used to restrict the numbers of students that universities could register, through applying funding caps. Universities can now take the number of students they can accommodate. More students than ever are accessing university study. Over 40% of 18 – 30 year olds in the UK now engage in some form of Higher Education (Department of Education, 2017). Concurrently, in England, undergraduate university fees have increased from £3,000 annually in 1999 to £9,250 in 2017. Most university funding comes from students in the form of loans obtained from the government. Universities can set their undergraduate fees up to the £9,250 cap. Nearly all universities declared that they charged the full fee level in 2017 (The Complete University Guide, 2018a). As student populations have increased and fee levels risen, it seems that marketisation of Higher Education has become inevitable. Stacey (2006:25) points to how: “...public sector governance has become increasingly based on quasi-market mechanisms⁹.” Indeed, the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2016a) white paper report states:

“Competition between providers in any market incentivises them to raise their game, offering consumers a greater choice of more innovative and better-quality products and services at lower cost. Higher education is no exception.” (ibid:8).

This implies that universities will be competing for customers (and perhaps more importantly their tuition fees) in a market-driven higher education sector. The idea of higher education as a marketable commodity appears to have given rise to managerialist approaches to leading in the sector. Stacey (2006:26) argues that: “...marketisation and demands for increased performance in Higher Education have led to a move to managerialism”.

Managerialism in Higher Education

In ‘*The Managerial State*’, Clarke & Newman (1997) describe how the UK governments’ attempts to resolve the predicament in the welfare state in the late 70’s led to ‘Neo-Taylorist’ management methods (ibid: 20). This involved the setting of targets, performance indicators and strengthening

⁹ When Stacey refers to a quasi-market this is an acknowledgement that the UK HE market is not a genuine free market but is heavily regulated and supported by the state. For example, UK universities are not free to charge whatever fees the market will support and are accountable to government for many areas of their operations. Similarly, the fact that there appears to be an appeal to students to make the market ‘work’ (Leach, 2006), suggests that the market is not automatically arising just because fees are being charged.

and rewarding those who got results. There was a move away from values of public administration to value for money and efficiency. The goal was to reduce public spending. Clarke & Newman (1997:10) also point out that the reputation of public organisations became dependent on being seen to be well managed. This managerial approach has become dominant in the public sector in the UK. Universities, in common with other areas of the public sector, have adopted this 'managerialist' approach.

Universities used to be run by academics who reached senior positions following selection by their contemporaries. Decisions were reached by consent. Over the last 25 years, UK universities have reformed many aspects of their management in response to new requirements for accountability and revenue generation. Coupled with this was a suspicion of the professional elite, such as university professors, and the idea that university was 'subversive' to the 'enterprise culture' (Rustin, 2016:152). Gordon Graham, a moral philosopher at Princetown, in his book *'Universities: The Recovery of an idea'*, describes how increasing accountability to UK government, and greater competition for students, has meant that universities have now become big business and that the old collegial style of management has become out-of-date. This new managerialism means that universities are starting to mimic private sector firms in introducing budgets, quantitative targets, and techniques for punishment and reward (ibid, 2002:26). Lawn (2011), a senior research fellow at the University of Oxford who writes extensively on educational reform, suggests that educational governance is now: "...governing through data" whereby change is driven by: "...comparison against the past and competitors" (ibid:287). Clarke & Newman (1997:40) summarise that managerialism has not just been an instrument of change, but that the managerial discourse has helped push the change process along by making it seem inevitable, that there was no other way. There is pressure from the UK government for the higher education sector to modernise and re-structure. Marketisation and managerialism are the dominant ideologies under which Higher Education now operates.

Teaching Quality Metrics

Since the introduction of student fees, universities have come under increasing criticism and scrutiny by both the government and the press. Questions have been raised about the value of a degree, there is criticism of the tuition fees system, and recently, condemnation of senior academic staff being overpaid. According to Jo Johnson, then Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research, and Innovation:

“...we must accept that the transition from an elite to a mass system of higher education brings with it an expectation of a strong economic return.” (Johnson, 2017).

He pointed out that the Higher Education Policy Institute Student Survey had shown that more students in England believed they have received poor value rather than good value from their degrees:

“Holding universities to account for performance and value for money has been the key objective of HE reforms.” (ibid, 2017).

Since the 1980's, universities have been measured on the quality of their research through the five yearly Research Assessment Framework (RAE) and now the Research Excellence Framework (REF). There have, until recently, been no measures to judge the quality of teaching in universities. Universities have sought to gain both economically and in reputation, from a good outcome in REF. They are now being encouraged to do the same with the introduction of the Teaching Excellence and Outcomes Framework (TEF) which the government introduced in 2016.

The government's stated intentions are that TEF will be used 1) to: “...provide clear information to students about where the best provision can be found” 2) to: “...encourage providers to improve teaching quality to reduce variability” and 3) to: “...help drive UK productivity by ensuring a better match of graduate skills with the needs of employers and the economy” (The Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016b:5).

“For competition in the HE sector to deliver the best possible outcomes, students must be able to make informed choices.” (The Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016a: 11).

Universities were informed that to access fees higher than £9,250 they should participate in TEF. To enter TEF, in Year 1 (2016), universities had to apply for approved provider status. To do this, they must have achieved successful Quality Assurance (QA) from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), an independent body who develops and safeguards quality codes for Higher Education. Failure to 'meet expectations' in QA could mean that the universities students may not be able to access student loans. In year 2 (2017) TEF assessors, who are a panel of students, academics, widening participation experts and employers, were given information on universities to assess them for a bronze, silver, or gold award. These awards were intended to reflect excellence across the universities teaching, learning environment and student outcomes. In principle this is a good thing to assess and improve. The information given was based on six core metrics. Three of these metrics come from student responses to questions on the National Student Survey (NSS). Of

these three, two are about teaching quality. The third metric is about academic support (which is related to the learning environment). In addition to the three areas drawn from the NSS, other metrics are 'non-continuation data' (i.e., failure rates) from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), and information on student outcomes and learning gains from the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey which gives data on the proportion of former students in employment and further study. To supplement these metrics, the assessors are given contextual data (e.g., about operating context), additional metrics on grade inflation and Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data, which links higher education and past students tax return data. Universities were also able to make a short statement about their institution around the themes of teaching quality, learning environment and student outcomes. (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2017).

The National Student Survey (NSS), which has 27 statements about a student's university experience, is an important constituent of TEF. It is conducted by an independent market research organisation. It gathers final year undergraduate students' opinions about the quality of their course. The NSS is also used by many media outlets, who state that they are shining a light on student satisfaction levels. The NSS informs different published league tables such as the Guardian League Tables (Guardian, 2018), The Times Good University Guide (O'Leary, 2018) and The Complete University Guide (Complete University Guide, 2018b) etc. In addition, the NSS results are displayed when a student is researching their programme and institution on the UNISTATS website (UNISTATS, 2018). It is not uncommon to see some of these metrics on university web sites, backs of buses, social media, and on the email footers of academic staff. A rise or fall in the NSS could have significant consequences for a UK HE institution. An increased NSS leads to an increased reputation in the domestic and international market. This in turn could lead to increased student numbers and could make it easier to attract top students and therefore income, which in turn can lead to improved facilities, teaching and research. Conversely, a fall could lead to decreased student numbers and ultimately, presumably, closure of the institution. (Wilkins & Huisman, 2012).

My Study

There is much research around the introduction of TEF, the nature of the metrics which it uses and the marketisation of higher education. These are as varied as contribution to the debate on what universities are for (Holligan & Shah, 2007; Kedourie, 1998; Williams, 2013; Zemsky, 1993), reviews of the factors for success in the NSS (e.g., Lenton, 2015) and the validity of measuring teaching in this way (Shevlin et al. 2000; Sheridan & Simpson, 2013). These writers range from academics, the

University and College Union (UCU), the National Union of Students (NUS) and policy analysts. Whilst I am aware that there is a lively debate around the pros and cons of the introduction of TEF and NSS, in this project I wish to explore the effects in my own business school of a focus on metrics and the managerialist approach highlighted above.

I have explained earlier the current Higher Education context to be able to explore what is happening where I work. Understanding the history of our communities is a critical part of making sense of what is happening. In this project I share narratives relating to events experienced as a middle manager in a UK business school during this period of change. In reflecting on my experiences, I hope to review them and in doing so hope to gain a greater understanding of those experiences. Stacey argues, however, that reflexivity goes beyond reflecting. He defines reflection as giving careful consideration to things and finding solutions, whereas reflexivity involves thinking about how we and others involved with us are interacting. In this we should notice and think about our history together and the wider communities of which we are a part.

In exploring what is happening where I work, I draw on authors who take a critical view of managerialism. I will draw on the work of Ralph Stacey, who along with colleagues Patricia Shaw and Douglas Griffin developed the theory of complex responsive processes of relating. Along with these authors I will look to writers that informed them in the development of these theories, such as George Herbert Mead, an American pragmatist, who I also look to due to his interest in the paradox of the particular and the general, and his review of cult values. In addition, political scientist James C. Scott also drew parallels around abstraction and particularisation in his book *'Seeing Like a State'*. I draw on Scott further to discuss how overt attempts to dominate often provoke covert resistance, what he referred to as the 'hidden transcript'. Scott studies the 'hidden transcripts' that subordinates expose through different forms of resistance, whereas the 'public transcript' describes the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate. The hidden transcript does not just include speech, but a whole range of practices that are kept 'offstage'. In earlier iterations of this project I had discussed in more depth some of these hidden transcripts such as gossip and the creation of strange alliances. This is heavily linked to establishing groups of those who are included and those who are excluded (Elias & Scotson, 1994). I found that I could not do justice to this topic within the constraints of the length of this project and will therefore focus on this area in project three.

In my research I have also referred to the Critical Management Scholars (CMS), who also engage in a critical reflection of institutions and the managerialist discourse. This is helpful to me as many of

these scholars are also working in universities and write on their experiences in these institutions from a critical perspective.

I have given the context of the environment in which I operate with a focus on marketisation, managerialism and controlling through audits and monitoring of metrics. What I will go on to explore, is how this is influencing what is happening where I work with people with whom I am working. I am using my own subjective narratives about what is happening for myself and colleagues, so that I can explore how I and others are interacting.

A Metric Focussed Conversation

It's my first day back at work after a three-week summer break with my family. It's a beautiful day and I have a meeting planned with the Dean of the Business School. The meeting is to review the modules¹⁰ that my staff delivered during the previous academic year. As Head of Group I am expected to discuss the action plans for each of those modules that fell below the threshold for approval. During each academic year students are asked to complete module feedback questionnaires (MFQs) to evaluate various areas relating to their modules. The MFQ has nine statements on it. These are largely themed around teaching quality (e.g., 'The module has been intellectually stimulating'), assessment practices (e.g., 'The criteria used in marking have been clear'), organisation (e.g., 'The module has been well organised'), and finally student voice (e.g., 'staff value students' opinions about the module'). These themes mirror, but are not identical to, those presented to students in the NSS. Students answer on a Likert scale of 1–5: 1 being definitely disagree and 5 being definitely agree. I am expected to have an action plan on any module where there is less than an 80% approval rating (i.e., less than 80% of students scoring at a 4 or 5). The metrics as they are presented to me are colour coded with red (R), amber (A) and green (G) modules (RAG ratings).

A commonly held assumption is that if a student has a lot of modules they 'dislike', then they are more likely to give us a poor result in the National Student Survey (NSS). It has been my experience that there may be a strong correlation between these two measures, but also that there may be other strong influences on the NSS results, such as cohort size and the programme leader's dedication to their students. Nevertheless, the people with whom I work are focussing on the results

¹⁰ A programme of study that a student takes is made up of a collection of modules. Each of these modules has a module leader and teaching team.

of the MFQs as a key area. This focus has taken some time to solidify as the 'right thing to do', but seems to be largely accepted and uncontested. As Head of Group I am expected to take responsibility for the quality of the modules my team deliver.

From ongoing discussions with my staff and with the student body, I am aware of issues on modules. I have discussed good practice with my staff and problems arising in modules well before this meeting. We are constantly discussing what is happening with the modules they deliver, and student feedback from MFQs is rarely a 'surprise'. We have these discussions not only in informal meetings, but also in more formal one-to-one meetings, in whole subject group meetings and more formally at exam boards (see Project 1). I have a good story for each of the 52 modules my staff deliver. There are only five modules on the 'hit-list', rated amber or red. Two of these I had already decided to remove from the portfolio in discussion with the subject group and programme team. In both these cases the modules did not achieve what we wanted, and there were more contemporary areas we could introduce or better ways to teach the content of these modules. Another module was new and had some teething problems that I discussed with the Dean. We discussed the feedback from students and the discussions I had had with the teaching team, the problems they had encountered and how they intended to change things moving forward. It was a productive conversation as I felt we could discuss openly the challenges being faced.

The final two modules were more problematic. They were led by the same member of staff, David, and the student's feedback had been damning about how they were 'useless', 'boring' and poorly planned. The modules were different to each other in their content and purpose, so it did not appear to be the nature of the modules that was an issue. We also had similar modules where student feedback was very high. When I have asked staff teaching on the module, they have expressed that they found the student feedback to be fair, and that they have not enjoyed teaching on these modules. This isn't the first year I had heard this message, but it was even more negative than before. David and I had had numerous conversations over the previous two to three years about the student feedback on these modules. These had initially been in passing in corridor conversations where a short conversation, sometimes initiated by myself and sometimes by David, appeared to have been positive, until the student complaints arrived.

Discussions had then become a response to student complaints, and therefore had been me tracking David down to his office, as I bumped into him less and less. More latterly, they had been in response to documented MFQ feedback and had been planned meetings in my office. There had always been some reason why, as far as David was concerned, that the problems with the module were everyone else's fault. He looked for someone to blame and it wasn't him. He claimed that the

module got poor feedback because of the timing of the teaching sessions, because of the teaching team that had been allocated, or simply that the students didn't understand the benefit of the module but that it would do them good, like a nasty medicine. When I suggested that he talk to the teaching team to get feedback, these meetings were never arranged. When I prompted him to talk to students to gain further feedback, this was only shared from two students (of the 240 cohort) both of whom gave positive feedback. When I asked him to provide action plans for the module these never came, despite chasing. David had made changes to the module, such as changing teaching orders around and amending the assessments. These had been done without discussion with the programme team, the teaching team or me, and in all cases the changes had led to student complaints. The programme team only heard about these changes when they were announced to students and when they in turn complained. He had sent communications to students that were at best complaining and at worst rude and threatening. For example, despite the programme team having flagged to him numerous times that the students did not appear to know what they are doing on his coursework, he told students:

"...my coursework guidance was published over two weeks ago and yet of the 200 students I have on this module, less than half have accessed it!!! I am now very concerned because of the poor time management and task management exhibited by many students that the marks for the essay will be below our expectations. Feedback is only on whether you have taken the right approach and I will not give guidance on how to improve to get to a 2.1 or a 1st. We don't give away degrees like sweetsies."

And on receiving the MFQ feedback from the module:

"I have now received the results of the MFQ you filled in for this module plus the comments. It is a shame so few of you filled in the MFQ. For those who could not find the time and so the silent majority can I please stress the importance of filling this in next time. Most comments did not relate to the questions posed and were more about failure on the coursework. This is the wrong reason for giving a low score."¹¹

All these had led to further student complaints which had in turn led to worsening of MFQ scores. I had become more and more irritated over the past few years with David's less and less realistic excuses. I had become exasperated by his lack of effort to engage with me or the programme team

¹¹ These are 'quotes' taken from communications to students. Although presented as verbatim quotes, these have been altered in order to protect anonymity. In doing so I have attempted to retain the integrity of the nature of the original information that was given.

about how things could be improved. I could not understand why he would not wish to discuss with the team how he could attempt to make improvements.

I felt my temperature rising and my body language change as I talked to the Dean about these modules. I crossed my arms defensively and slumped down in my chair. My voice became wobbly. My anger was rising, having to sit there and take what felt like an interrogation. The Dean asked me why I had not dealt with the issue, and I explained that I had discussed the issue with David many times. I had not had satisfactory responses from David about any actions he planned to make or any feedback he had sought. The Dean appeared puzzled by this statement. The conversation carried on. I cannot now recall the exact words that the Dean said but my recollection is that 'the facts speak for themselves' and 'sort it out'. I felt my head drop as I left the room. I felt ashamed and disappointed in myself. I found myself welling up.

First Reflections

Before resuming the narrative, I break to explore some of the issues that arise in using measures such as module feedback questionnaires to drive our actions. I also explore my relationship with the Dean and David, and how this relates to my previous reflections in Project 1 on recognition.

Measures to drive action

My narrative talks about the use of MFQs to get feedback from students. In training environments, it is common to ask participants to complete evaluation forms. This is familiar to me from my days in both audit training and in professional education. These forms are designed to capture the students' immediate impression of their modules. These are normally completed either in a hurry at the end of a teaching session, when students are keen to leave, or sometimes we ask students to complete on-line surveys. The level of engagement is typically dependent upon how much the individual tutor impresses on students the need to provide feedback, or sometimes upon how disgruntled the students are.

What we receive from students is largely a subjective measure on whether students liked their module. What we are doing is attributing a 'scientific' or rational validity to what are highly subjective assessments made by the students. I do not believe that many of us in the business school think about how we operate when trying to 'improve' the MFQ scores. I have taken it for granted that it is possible to measure teaching quality in this way, that this was a natural thing to do. I have

assumed that I should be able to get module leaders, including David, to also think in this way. To be able to question whether what is happening is helpful, I will start by investigating where this assumption comes from.

Systemic Thinking

Much management literature assumes that organisations are systems. Stacey & Mowles (2016:58) describe three types of systems thinking theories: general systems theory, cybernetic systems, and systems dynamics. Authors writing about organisations as systems consider the organisation as made up of composite parts, or sub-systems, with autonomous people who come together as individuals, and work in a rational way. In systemic thinking managers have a privileged role given to them as a function of their position. The manager's purpose is to observe and scrutinise what is happening, and then implement corrective action using tools and techniques of management. This assumes that the manager can determine an outcome and drive people towards its achievement. This approach assumes predictability and linearity, meaning that there is an implicit 'if-then' connection: if we, as managers, use the tools correctly, a certain outcome can be reached; if we plan correctly, goals and targets will be met. This type of approach attributes rational causality and free will to managers only. It is believed that others in the organisation will follow leaders in the processes and rules that they set.

In what I have described above the Dean and I are trying to measure and control performance of the system and the individuals within it. There is a cybernetic element whereby the goal is regulating performance. We are seeking to meet a pre-determined goal, like a central heating system where a thermostat regulates the temperature, checking it relative to the target and adjusting accordingly. In my narrative the MFQ data shows that something has gone wrong in the system with several modules, they fail to achieve the desired levels. A performance standard of 80% has been set and several modules are failing to achieve that level. The information that the students give us in MFQs is being used as a 'temperature check' in our system, an indicator as to whether we are meeting student's expectations on teaching quality. In cybernetic thinking it would be assumed then that I can 'step-outside' the system to view the information objectively and know what should be done. I can then apply tools and techniques to achieve control. If this is true, then David simply needed to be told what was wrong and how to fix it and he would re-order his thinking to do this. My narrative shows that I have had several conversations with David about his modules, and despite numerous discussions the problems have not been fixed. David's thinking has not been re-ordered and improvements are not forthcoming. In fact, things are getting worse, at least in terms of the MFQ

data. This questions several assumptions. It questions the idea that the data gives proof of what is wrong, and it questions whether a manager can easily apply a corrective action which will lead to an appropriate response. There seems to be a gap between what systemic theory says should happen, and what is happening.

Not all systems thinking is this simplified. For example, the system dynamics strand in systems thinking takes account of amplifying feedback in which small deviations can spiral out of control to produce unexpected and unintended outcomes. Furthermore, second-order systems thinking does emphasise the constructivist nature of modelling organisations as systems. These second-order approaches focus on organisational learning. Recognising numerous personal realities of individuals in organisations does aid a move from the cybernetic position of measure and control, to more participative approaches to managing organisations. If I were to apply this type of thinking to my narrative, then I could argue that of course it was not easy to find a remedy for the 'problem' as I was not paying enough attention to the personal realities of the situation. But in these second-order theories I could still find a solution by stepping outside of the system as a manager and observing what was happening and applying tools and techniques. I just needed more practice in particular tools or techniques. For example, Senge (1990) suggests that following his 'five disciplines' will lead to better learning and knowledge sharing and hence improve performance. Covey (2004) would suggest that following his 'seven steps' and re-ordering how we think would make us more effective managers. Although very different management theorists, both assume that change comes about from paying attention to what is going on with the people, with the organisational structures and within ourselves, and then applying tools and techniques to achieve improvements. The shift from reductionist management science, such as cybernetic systems thinking, to holistic systems perspectives on organisations, continues to present idealised, prescriptive, albeit less mechanical models (Stacey & Mowles, 2016:61). Both first- and second-order thinking present a risk of: "...getting stuck at the abstract level of systems" and disconnecting from organisational reality (Stacey, 2010:124). By using MFQ data as the measure of what is good, I am looking at modules at an abstract level. By using RAG ratings to present this data we are assuming that they show what is good and what is bad. This may not actually be the case.

Norms and Abstractions

I have briefly explained systemic theories and how this type of thinking has a risk of being stuck at an abstract level. I have also introduced how using metrics such as MFQ data has a risk of making assumptions about what is good and what is bad. I will go on to explore these aspects further.

As a manager of academic staff how could I argue against improving teaching quality and student satisfaction levels? Arguably, this is a 'good' thing to aspire to. There are 'good' intentions behind this desire. My narrative focussed on the use of MFQ data to define what is 'good'. Modules that achieve MFQ rating of above 80% are 'good'. Those that are below this rating are 'bad'. As these measure students' satisfaction with teaching, then it becomes reasonable that what is 'good' is improving teaching quality and student satisfaction levels. Whilst I feel that I can argue about the use of MFQ data to measure the 'good', or feel that I can argue about what constitutes a 'good' module (is it 80% approval or something else?), the value of improving teaching quality and student satisfaction is not something that I feel I can argue against. This appears to accord with what Stacey (2006), drawing on George Herbert Mead, refers to as cult values. Stacey points to how the form of corporate governance in the public sector is creating a: "...cult of performance" (ibid:18). Stacey argues that it has the hallmarks of a cult because it presents a hopelessly idealised future and incorporates demands for conformity.

Cult Values/Norms

To understand further how these cult values can be understood I will refer to Mead's 1915 essay *'The Psychological Bases of Internationalism'* In this essay Mead looked at how all nations involved in World War One were justifying their involvement as self-defence. Both sides considered themselves to be moral and yet they were at war. Mead saw ethical and psychological aspects in behaviours being driven by cult values. In the psychological aspect of cult values, Mead argued that when countries or institutions started to see themselves as wholes, they can start to ascribe idealised values to all the members of the group. The ethical aspect was related to the potential conflict between the cult value and other values the cult may subscribe to. Mowles (2011:156) argues that ethical issues arise when the values of the idealised group become norms to which individuals must subscribe. Mowles draws on Joas (2000) for the distinction between norms and value:

"...norms are obligatory and constraining and describe the right: values meanwhile are imaginative idealisations and describe the good. Norms restrict action and provide evaluative criteria for what ought to be done, while values are compelling in a voluntary sense: we choose to be constrained by our values." (Mowles, 2011:156).

For Mowles and Mead, assessments of good, when taken up as cult values, become norms according to which one risks being included or excluded from the group. As discussed above, the idea of improving teaching quality and student satisfaction is a powerful value that makes opposition difficult and taken for granted as being 'good'. In Joas's definition then this would be a 'norm'. The

assumption that improving teaching quality is 'good' could be viewed as a form of subjugation, an invitation to conform. In my school there has been no dissent to the norm to improve teaching quality or student satisfaction. As stated at the start of this section, how could this be argued against? What I will explore below is how this norm, which restricts actions and provides evaluative criteria, is leading to shame, blame and strategies of resistance as these are applied to me, and as I try to apply these to my staff.

Griffin (2002) argues that idealised values emerge in the evolution of any institution. These idealised values become functional values in the everyday actions between members of the institution. Griffin stated that:

"Cult values are an important part of the past and, as they are functionalised in the moment in the living present, social and personal identities are recreated and potentially transformed as people together construct their future." (ibid:117).

For me, this cult value of improving teaching quality emerges as I talk to the Dean, as I try to implement this with my staff, and also in the discussions I have with fellow heads of groups about how they are trying to improve teaching quality. What emerges will not be because of the determined action of the Dean or myself as a leader. Attempting to 'implement' better teaching will inevitably lead to an articulation of the cult value in functional values, which will in turn lead to a negotiation and conflict as it is implemented.

What I wish therefore to turn to is the idea of the cult value or norm as an abstraction, before going on to explore how I feel when being measured against this, and how I have then tried to functionalise this norm.

Abstractions

I am now understanding the MFQ feedback being presented in spreadsheets with RAG ratings as an example of the abstraction I referred to above. It is not representing the details of what is happening in everyday interaction, but is simplifying the information to be able to see it in clear metrics. James C. Scott (1998) discussed this type of activity of abstracting and simplifying in his book '*Seeing Like a State*'. He depicts how much early modern statecraft was devoted to rationalising and standardising complex activities into legible and administratively more convenient formats to enable activities such as taxation, conscription, and relief of the poor. Scott argues simplifications were necessary for social realities to be intelligible to state regulators who sit at a distance and explains that this simplification, abstraction, and mapping are essential tools of modern statecraft (ibid:4). I turn to

Scott because his book provides some ways for me to understand what is going on, as the Dean and I are doing when we use MFQ data and RAG ratings to understand what is happening in the classroom and to try to improve it.

Scott referred to how the pre-modern state, seeking to control its lands and citizens, created cadastral maps¹². Such maps were essential to simplify and abstract from the complex reality they represented. But, the cadastral maps were changing the world in many respects to accord with what could be measured, and in doing so they were shifting patterns of power relations in which administrators became more powerful and cultivators less so. They did not merely describe the system of land tenure. They also helped create such a system and refashioned society and the environment.

In a similar way, for the Dean and I, summarising data in MFQ scores and RAG ratings reduces the complexity of what is happening across 50+ modules (and for the Dean 290+ modules), and with 30+ staff (180+ staff), to a few statistics that can be compared to an idealised picture and to one another. These metrics then point to the problem areas where I can focus my time and energy to support and correct issues, rather than spreading myself too thinly over all modules and staff. Stacey (2010:112) notes that modern governance would be impossible without mapping and standardising and abstracting with simplified averages. Scott (1998:4) explains that this simplification and abstraction and mapping are essential tools of modern statecraft. The development of the modern state, Scott explains, has been based on necessarily simplified plans for natural and social organisation. Measures such as MFQ and RAG systems are abstractions. The logic of such targets may make sense at an abstract level of systemic improvement, and in helping managers to focus their efforts to specific areas. Stacey understands methods and tools as: "...second order abstractions", as generalisations and simplifications, which must be particularised in the situational experience (ibid:4–49) through processes of conversation between human agents in the "...ordinary politics of daily organisational life" (ibid:51). The MFQ 'rule' is a generalisation that emerges only as part of a social process, that is in the way that a group of people discuss and use it, the particularisation.

So what happens when this is taken up by individuals, in Griffins words 'functionalised'? Barbara Townley, a critical management scholar who studies how performance measures impact on institutional functioning, states that adopting quantitative methods helps to: "...calculate things,

¹² Summarised maps that attempted to show ownership of land for numerous regulatory purposes most importantly created to designate taxable property holders.

people, events and processes from a distance” (Townley, 1995:568). Scott (1998:345-6) argues that abstracting sees the implementers and recipients of improvement schemes as: “...standardised human subjects”. My concern is that in these abstractions we lose site of the human beings affected by this measuring. We treat the data as the reality of what is happening. We assume that this data is objective, rather than being a subjective measure of whether students ‘liked’ the teaching they have just received.

Jerry Muller, a historian and head of department at a private university in the US, in his book *‘The Tyranny of Metrics’* argues that there are numerous unintended but predictable negative consequences of metric fixation (Muller, 2018:169). He sketches numerous ways in which state simplifications, to improve performance, fail to achieve the improvements that they desired, because the focus is on the metrics rather than the purpose of the scheme. For example, he highlights the 2001 US government initiative ‘No Child Left Behind’, which was intended to improve educational outcomes in underperforming schools. Scores achieved by students, on standardised tests, were used to judge the success or failure of the programme. As the stakes were incredibly high for teachers, whose jobs depended on the metrics, it seems rather predictable that teachers not only diverted time and energy away from teaching students things that were not in the tests to things that were (meaning the education was actually poorer), and re-classified weak students as disabled (so they were excluded from the metrics), but in some cases also engaged in out-and-out cheating by changing the students test answers or ‘losing’ poor papers. Some states also lowered the pass rates on the test to demonstrate the success of their educational reforms. Muller sketches many other schemes like this in both the UK and US, across healthcare, police reform, overseas aid programmes and finance, with similar outcomes.

One impact, I would argue, is that seeing modules in RAG ratings dehumanises the whole process. Students forget there is a lecturer receiving the ratings and comments they provide. Middle managers, such as myself, forget that module leaders, such as David, may have their own anxieties about meeting the targets and are, generally, reasonable, dedicated educators. Senior management, such as the Dean, may also forget that middle managers, such as myself, may be anxious about being seen to be in control and meeting the standards set. In these simplifications we forget about the concerns of the humans involved, and then become puzzled by the responses we invoke.

Objective Metrics?

As Scott pointed to, the use of the cadastral maps was not purely an objective and scientific measure. They were changing what was happening in the world. I have seen this happen in other

parts of my career. Accounting is a practice that encourages a numerical view of reality. Financial statements are produced because users need relevant and reliable information to make: “...economic decisions” (IFRS Foundation, 2010:27). This implies that accounting information is objective and that it is simply reporting what is happening and therefore would have no impact on behaviours or in ‘constructing reality’¹³. Whilst I worked in accounting, The UK Accounting Standards Board issued a new standard on pension accounting. This new standard measured the assets and liabilities in a way which highlighted pension liabilities in the company’s own accounts, rather than being largely hidden. Suddenly, large multi-national organisations were showing extremely large pension liabilities or ‘pension holes’ as the press labelled them. Yet nothing had changed. The data was simply being reported differently. This had, and continues to have, a significant impact. Most companies in the UK no longer offer final salary schemes. I use this example here to show that reporting and measuring something is not an objective activity. I knew that accounting was not free from bias. I knew that reporting data would lead to changes in behaviours which could not necessarily be predicted.

In using MFQ data I accept that people may alter their behaviour to make the metrics look better. I have had conversations with colleagues who want to change the order of the teaching so that the topics the students don’t like come after the survey. I have had other colleagues comment that the easiest way to improve their MFQ scores would be to give all students higher grades, implying that they could get higher metrics through lowering standards. I have also been in conversations where I have talked about moving modules from the Autumn semester to the Spring semester, so it comes after the NSS survey, as we know students don’t like the module. These metrics are not just measuring what is happening, but are also changing what is happening. In my opinion, none of these activities improve the teaching, but they do attempt to make the metrics better. I believe these are strategies employed to ‘game’ the metrics¹⁴.

I also raise what my DMan supervisor referred to as the ‘McNamara Fallacy’¹⁵. Simply put, it means that when you measure something, and express it in numbers, you ‘know’ something about it. When you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is inadequate and unsatisfactory and therefore you are likely to ignore it. However, just because you can’t measure it doesn’t mean it’s not

¹³ After Ruth Hines (1988) who questioned whether the reporting of reality in financial accounting exists separately from the creation and maintenance of social reality.

¹⁴ Goodhart’s Law, after the British Economist who formulated it stated, “Any measure used for control is unreliable”. Anything that can be measured and rewarded will be gamed. (Muller, 2018:20).

¹⁵ After Robert McNamara, an accountant, & professor at Harvard Business School & US Secretary for Defence, during the Vietnam war.

important. In fact, you ignore it at your peril. This fallacy, in my narrative, is to assume that everything that a lecturer does in a classroom (and indeed in all the interactions they have with students, via Virtual Learning Environments (VLE), E-mails, Social Media messages, Office hours, 'formal' celebrations and meeting in informal settings) can be measured in a handful of simple measures, which can be compared to other simple measures. The blindness of such measures may lead to a lack of focus on unquantifiable attributes such as communication, competence, compassion and giving stretch and challenge to students.

When we start to believe that the data is scientific and objective instead of student's subjective opinions, then this may lead to behaviours that could be detrimental to teaching quality and student experience, rather than improving it. Setting 80% approval targets may lead to improvement in teaching. However, it may also lead to pressure on lecturers to carry out activities that may not be in the student's best interest. Much of what happens in a classroom is about the relationships between the tutor and the student. I now believe that the focus on metrics could make this relationship poorer by making tutors more anxious about being good enough against an idealised measure, and increasingly resentful of the power given to students. Staff have told me how they feel under constant attack from student comments, and worry when the programme team or I come to talk to them. Staff have also commented that they dread getting the MFQ feedback on their modules as they know it will be critical, no matter how hard they have tried. This undermines the relationship between the tutor and the student.

I also note that in my obsession with these metrics I had no idea how David must be feeling. The escalating nature of the formality of the meetings with him is something I have only just noted, prompted by my learning set.¹⁶ What I am beginning to wonder is whether this fixation on the MFQ data, rather than leading to more engagement by David in planning an appropriate response, has instead led to a progressive withdrawal, an increasingly defensive attitude and a consequently worse experience for the students. I consider now whether he felt the same in the meetings with me that I felt in the meeting with the Dean. In the same way I have been blaming David for the poor performance, he has been trying to shift the blame onto others. I suspect as much as I felt ashamed at not being good enough, David has felt this too. I suspect he is also disappointed at his own

¹⁶ Throughout this project I have explained how my learning set have brought things to my attention that I may not otherwise have noted. During the three to four years of study on the DMan programme, we work together with small groups of three or four other researchers. We share our projects with them and our projects progress through typically four or five iterations. Learning set members provide comments on our projects and *indicate what areas are* persuasive or interesting. Sometimes the comments they have made have surprised me, and in this have led to further exploration of the narratives I share.

inability to 'sort it out' and must be exasperated by the students' response to attempts to rectify problems. He is therefore laying the blame on other factors, including the student's inability to see the value of the module, as I have been doing in his inability to take any responsibility. However, I don't know how he feels or why he has re-acted as he has done. My learning set asked me to describe how David responded to me, what his body language was like in our meetings. I was too annoyed with him to have noticed.

Recognition as a 'Good Corporate Soldier'

In my narrative I mentioned that I felt ashamed at not having effected a change in the modules that David leads. I also mentioned earlier, that in using metrics we forget about the people involved in the process. In the meeting with the Dean, I felt strongly that I had not done my job well enough. My DMan learning set have pointed out to me that I could be seen to be doing a good job, of over 50 modules only two are still a problem. So why then did the shame feel so strong?

One could argue of course, that I would be in favour of the idea of improving teaching quality. I would be in favour of this not just as a norm. I am likely to personally benefit from my subject group improving teaching scores in MFQs and improving the NSS. I will probably be looked upon favourably if I can do this, and prospects for increased rewards and promotions are likely. Critical management scholar, Slawomir Magala (2009), whose research focuses on sense making in bureaucracies, points out that most academics comply with a system of bureaucracy in the pursuit of the promise of upward mobility. However, compliance with this regime is not straight forward for myself or anyone else. One moment I would boast about my MFQ scores, and the next moment I am sitting in the Dean' office feeling ashamed at not being able to effect a change in two problem modules. I find it is difficult to argue against measuring in this way when I am being shown in a good light, as being competent. It is almost impossible to argue when I am not being shown in a good light. In the way I was exasperated by David when he made 'excuses' about the poor performance, I felt emotional and unable to argue in front of the Dean when I felt not able to 'sort it out'.

In my Project 1, I discussed how I have been somebody who needs to be recognised as being good at their job. A good 'corporate soldier'. I mentioned in my first project that I have always sought recognition by those higher up in the organisation. My formative experiences of this recognition were punitive. If performance did not reach the required level, then punishment would be expected in the form of lack of pay increases and loss of job. Therefore, when the metrics are applied to me and I feel I have come up short, I feel ashamed. I am worried about not being 'good enough' against this norm of improving teaching. In seeing the MFQ data as objective data, I was failing to see the

people behind the numbers, but that approach seemed helpful towards managing the anxiety and complexity and in giving a sense of predictability and control. However, the way these metrics are being used and discussed has provoked a sense of anxiety in me and left me feeling as if I need to do 'more'.

Initial Summary

Abstraction to comparable measures has brought about unforeseen and unpredictable consequences as I have started to functionalise the generalisations. Stacey (2006: 37) argues that generalisations only have meaning in the local interactions. What is important therefore is how these generalisations and this norm of improving teaching quality, and the measuring of this through MFQs and RAG ratings, are taken up in local interactions. The norm of improving teaching must be functionalised in a specific situation, at a specific time. In my narrative above, it has been functionalised in the Dean's conversations with me, and then in the escalating nature of the conversations with David about the poor performance, and my location of the problem in David. In both these cases they appear to have led to shame and to trying to place blame in others, and have not led as one might suppose to fruitful discussions about how to improve students' experiences.

My systemic view of the organisation, where as a manager I can step outside of the organisation to bring about rational, planned change and to improve the situation, coupled with the unarguable norm of improving teaching and student satisfaction and then measuring this at an abstract level, has not led to improvements as I would have predicted. What I go on to explore below is how I have taken further action to functionalise this norm and made steps to 'sort it out'.

Carrying out a Plan

Having left the meeting with the Dean, I had been quite determined that I needed to do something. I felt the Dean's words of 'the facts speak for themselves' empowered me to take more forceful measures than the conversations David and I had been having hereto. I would ensure that he knew that I didn't care for the excuses any longer. I would now act. I decided that it was time to start implementing the university's policy on managing poor performance. I envisaged myself pulling on my lycra super-hero outfit and shiny boots and sorting out this situation.

Although I am responsible for the modules that David delivers, I am not his line manager in the formal structure of the business school. I therefore needed to involve David's line manager, Brian in

ongoing conversations. Brian is also my line manager. He has been my line manager for seven years, since I became Head of Group. I have an excellent relationship with Brian and I have trusted him implicitly. We have discussed many issues over the years and rarely disagreed on the way to handle anything. We have entered constructive debates and conversations in many areas where we have come to compromise or consensus. Two years ago, David applied for a position which meant Brian became David's line manager, rather than me. I continue to manage David's work allocation for the proportion of his job that is teaching related, and still have responsibility for the quality of the modules he delivers.

I approached Brian to discuss how to tackle David's performance on these modules. We agreed that I should call a meeting to which both David and Brian should be invited. We also agreed that we needed a forceful performance review meeting. I had done performance review meetings before and had my own expectations of how this ought to be done. I started to prepare a draft performance improvement plan, pull off the Human Resources (HR) guidance on managing poor performance, and generally prepare for an informal meeting on performance management. The HR guidance stipulated that I should ensure that David was made aware that there were concerns about his performance, and a performance improvement plan would be implemented which would include measurable SMART¹⁷ objectives. Appropriate support and counselling would be offered. The plan that I drew up included the following: David would have a teaching observation from myself or Brian, and participate in feedback and improvement plans; David would review the content of the poor modules in minuted meetings with his teaching teams, and prepare an action plan to be agreed by me; David would attend the 'refreshing your practice' teaching workshop or have a 1-2-1 session with the teaching and learning champion, and provide feedback to me on activities he would be undertaking to improve his teaching practice. All the above would lead to improved MFQ and less student complaints. Achievement of these objectives would be monitored. When I shared these documents with Brian, minutes before the planned meeting, I could sense his response. He appeared flustered. He pulled at his face uncomfortably and crossed his arms. He started to rock backwards and forwards on his heels. He said that this plan felt too harsh, there must be reasonable explanations effecting David's performance. It would be better if we had an informal conversation. I felt that he was horrified at the performance improvement plan I had written. I felt that he was judging me for thinking this was the right thing to do. I wanted to defend myself, but my only defence was that this action is what the HR process dictates. I caved in because I didn't feel I could

¹⁷ SMART refers to specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound. The SMART acronym first appeared in the November 1981 issue of Management Review, written by George Doran et al.

make a reasonable response without it ending in a confrontation with him, and I was not certain myself that this approach was the right one. I could not implement an improvement plan without Brian's backing. Our HR partner would not agree to any form of disciplinary route without Brian's agreement. Unlike the performance improvement plan that I had prepared, we should let David respond to why the issues were arising rather than presenting 'solutions'.

The meeting that Wednesday afternoon followed the patterns of previous conversations with regard to the poor feedback. I pointed out the issues that were raised by students. For example, I reminded David that the module had received feedback from students below that of the other modules they took. David responded that the students did not understand the value of the module. I asked what actions had been put in place to help students see how valuable this module was? David had simply told them that it was valuable. I asked whether there might be a more effective way of communicating this? David acknowledged that there may be, but that he had not tried any other way. I felt myself sinking in my chair. I asked why so few students had completed the questionnaire? I was told this was because they did not attend. Why did they not attend? Because the timetabling of the lecture was poor. I held back the sigh I wanted to make. We had discussed this before, and whilst I acknowledged that the timing of the lecture was not great, I had been unable to move it by the time he had raised the issue. Other lecturers had been using effective methods to deal with these situations, and I had suggested he talk to them about how he could mitigate these problems. This had not been done. When was the questionnaire done? In the lecture? Brian interjected: "...so, in fact those that filled it in were the ones who came, and they saw no value in the module?" David clammed up. I felt frustrated with David. What was the point in a meeting where he could not take any responsibility for what was happening. I was angry with him for failing to recognise that there were things he could have done to improve the module. I felt disappointed in Brian for not doing more, and in myself for not insisting on the performance management meeting as agreed.

Thursday morning and I walked into the building and couldn't even smile at anyone because I was so angry. I forced a false smile. I stamped my boots as I walked past open office doors, and attempted to slam my own office door (a rather futile attempt given they have soft closers on them). I sat at my desk and cried. Why was I so lividly angry about this meeting? Is it because I felt unsupported or because of the casual message I had from Brian that said, 'I thought that went well'. No, it didn't. How could he believe that? I decided that I needed to calm down and then I should meet with Brian. So, after fixing my makeup, I am sat in my office discussing the meeting with Brian. I told him that I was frustrated by the meeting and where we now found ourselves. I told him that I felt there would be no change in David's attitude because of the meeting, and therefore there would be no improvement to the modules. Whilst saying this, I could feel my voice beginning to break. Brian said

he believed that a clear message had been given that the teaching and the modules were not good enough. He also believed that a clear message was given that modules would no longer run if no improvement was seen in them. I acknowledged that this message may have been given, but could not acknowledge it had been received.

My experience of David's lack of actions in response to these conversations in the past did not make me think any change would be forthcoming. I asked Brian what teaching I would be expected to give to David in the future, if he were not to run these modules? I asked how this would help David or myself in the longer run? That this was just deflecting the issue. I would simply be putting pressure on other staff by giving them more work whilst taking work away from David. Brian acknowledged that this could be the case, but this would solve the problem of poorly performing modules. I felt stuck.

Further Reflections

The first area that I want to reflect on is the strong emotions I felt in my 'conflict' with Brian about how to manage David's performance. I will then review the performance management literature and look at what that tells us about managing performance of individuals and its critiques.

Being Pulled up Short

Why did I feel such strong emotions and why was I so upset? I have reflected on this and I am still unsure, but there are three things I can pinpoint. Firstly, an initial feeling of anger by Brian's reaction to my proposed actions, secondly, a feeling of anxiety as I could not see how this issue might be resolved and finally, I was frustrated as I felt the meeting had been a waste of time and energy.

I was angered by Brian's reaction to my attempting to do what I had believed to have been previously agreed, a forceful performance meeting. In advance of the meeting, I had expected that a performance review meeting would go ahead, and yet minutes before the meeting this had changed. My expectation of what would happen was disrupted by this action, and I was placed in a difficult position of either agreeing to the change in scope or cancelling the meeting. In some way, Brian's failing to carry through with what was planned upset my expectations of the correct way to behave. This was the first time I felt a real rift between us in our perceptions of how to behave. When I look back, whilst we had agreed to a performance management conversation, I realise that my expectations of what this may be were not articulated. I had not discussed it with Brian until

moments before the actual meeting. I did not communicate what my expectations of this meeting were as I had made assumptions that Brian and I would see this in the same way. It was, after all, the approved process in the HR handbooks! I felt by following the procedures in the HR handbooks we would be doing things in the proper way. By using the tools that it prescribed, I would be behaving appropriately. Following the procedure made me feel more secure. I could disassociate myself from any pain that may be inflicted in this process – it was just the process. I will return in the next section to explore these types of HR tools and techniques further.

Being pulled back at the last minute was a shock. At that point I felt compelled to carry on with the meeting, but being stopped and the horror that Brian appeared to express led to my reaction the next morning. That feeling was not only anger and frustration but also shame. I have become worried about how Brian may have viewed my desire to follow what he considered to be a harsh process. In some way, I have started to feel that this act of stopping threw me into the role of bully, and made me feel 'less of a person' in Brian's eyes. In retrospect, I worried that he was ashamed of the route I planned to go down and therefore ashamed of me. Axel Honneth, a professor of philosophy, who wrote about recognition and made significant contribution to work on understanding complexities of human relating, said:

"The emotional content of shame consists, to begin with, in a kind of lowering of one's own feeling of self-worth. Ashamed of oneself as a result of having one's action rejected, one experiences oneself as being of lower social value than one had previously assumed."
(Honneth, 1996:137–138).

I felt as if Brian's calling me up short was an affront to my identity as a good 'corporate soldier'. It also called into question my values about treating people with respect and in an ethical way. I had felt that in following HR procedures that this would be a given. When I read my narrative now, I also realise that the process I was trying to implement meant that judge and jury had already ruled. What David was doing was wrong and the sentence was now to be handed out. The only discussion was how the punishment would be implemented. The 'facts spoke for themselves'. Implementing this performance improvement plan was a way of functionalising the norm of improving teaching quality in a structured and sanctioned way. Brian's reaction challenged this.

With reflection I believe that his pulling me up at the last minute was a challenge to my habitual reactions, with a surprise so sharp that my emotions boiled over. One thing that I can point to was that it was the very act of sitting at my desk crying that prompted me to use this narrative for this project. It was the emotion of that moment that made me want to understand what was happening for myself and for others I work with. Without this emotional experience I may have not stopped to

consider my own actions and those of the people around me. On that Wednesday morning, I felt defiant and that Brian was in the wrong, but I have started to wonder whether he may say the same about me. When I now read what I planned to do in this performance improvement plan I feel ashamed. I read the actions that I planned to put in there and imagine what I may feel if someone were to give something like this to me. It clearly shows David to have been already judged as 'in the wrong', and the actions show that he now needed to account to me as a form of higher authority.

I don't plan to delve deeper into my emotional response here other than to point to it as a moment that pulled me up short and instigated reflection. I may come back to a review of emotions in later projects. What I do wish to point to, is that this emotion has led to deeper reflection and a desire to look at my actions and reactions. What I want to look at is what the literature on performance management suggests is an appropriate process for managing poor performance, and to review this considering my narrative.

Performance Management

The first formal monitoring systems evolved out of the work of Fredrick Taylor and were based on the idea of using systemic observation and measurement. Rating people on merit started in the US in the 1950's and 1960's, and this was followed by management by objectives in the 1960's and 1970's (Armstrong, 2009:10). These results-orientated performance management systems are predominantly still in use today, and most performance literature points to achieving better performance as the drive behind performance management. Michael Armstrong (2005), former chief examiner with the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) and prolific writer in Human Resource Management, defines performance management as:

"...a systematic process for improving organisational performance by developing the performance of individuals and teams. It means getting better results...by understanding and managing performance within an agreed framework of planned goals, standards and competence requirements" (ibid:1) "...performance management is about aligning individual objectives to organisation objectives and ensuring that individuals uphold the corporate core values." (ibid:1).

Similarly, Herman Aguinis (2007), a scholar in the US who writes extensively on performance management and organisational behaviour defines performance management as:

“...a continuous process of identifying, measuring, and developing the performance of individuals and teams and aligning performance with the strategic goals of the organization.” (ibid:2).

This emphasis assumes that business goals are defined by strategic managers and the context for people to perform better is then developed. Brown & Armstrong (1999) believe that the result of performance management is performance improvement.

As a middle manager I had been given the message from the Dean that it was my responsibility to ensure that the modules my group deliver gained good MFQ scores. According to the literature above it is legitimate for me as a manager to ensure that my employees ‘outputs’ are ‘congruent with the organisation’s goals’. It is notable how much of the literature above is talking about performance in an abstract way, and is based on the systemic way of looking at working as outlined in section 5.2 above. This literature seems to point to a cybernetic type control system that I pointed to earlier. A negative indicator has been highlighted (poor MFQ data) and this has been found to be due to a faulty part, David. This error can be corrected through performance improvement plans.

The use of performance management tools in the way mentioned, assumes that manager involvement can bring about better employee motivation, involvement and therefore output. This assumes a clear linearity between the performance measures and individual actions. Mowles (2011: 212) describes how much management literature considers performance management to be a simply technical and rational exercise relying on managers to be: “...blessed with the ability to communicate effectively, create the right culture and instil the right values in staff.” Indeed, Armstrong & Baron (2005) state that when there is poor performance then there is a simple process to identify and agree the problem, establish the reasons for the shortfall, decide and agree the action required (which includes changing behaviour and attitudes of the poorly performing individual), resource the action and then monitor and provide feedback (ibid:136–137). This is seen to be a largely unproblematic exercise. As can be seen from my narrative above this is clearly not the case for David, Brian, and myself. Any route of performance management that either Brian or I have taken is clearly a problematic exercise. Neither my attempts to control, nor Brian’s attempts to follow a less formal process have led, to date, to ‘improvements’ in the MFQ scores. I have therefore looked at some of the critiques of performance management.

Some critiques point to problems with a lack of training of managers (Pulakos & O’Leary, 2011) whilst others point to problems of bias in the system (Fletcher, 1993). Some point to the fact that employees find performance management to be an empty exercise (Legge, 1979). Some of them also point to the fact that the interest of employees and employers are not aligned, the agency

problem that underpins much of accounting as pointed to in my P1 (Purcell et al., 2003). Some also discuss the ability of employees to game the system (Fletcher, 2007). In most of them, failures in performance management are due to simply not following through the process. They are failures of either the individual or the system. I could look at my narrative above and argue that had I been David's line manager and/or been allowed to go ahead with the performance management conversation I had planned, then I would have achieved an effective outcome. But on reflection, this does not feel right for me. None of these adequately explain what happened to me, Brian, and David.

Tools and Techniques of Disciplinary Power

Having reviewed much literature on performance management and some of its critiques, I wanted to see if there was another way to look at this type of activity. Although what I had been doing was trying to apply some of these techniques, they did not seem to be working in the way prescribed. I wondered why that may be. I have therefore looked to the critical management scholars and to complex responsive processes of relating, to try to understand this further.

Barbara Townley (1990), when reviewing performance appraisal in UK universities, argued that it works as a form of Panopticon¹⁸. Stacey, drawing on Foucault, refers to performance improvement plans and performance management processes as tools and techniques of disciplinary power. Michel Foucault, a French philosopher whose theories primarily address the relationship between power and knowledge, looked at how these tools are used as a form of social control. Foucault (1977:170) argued that disciplinary power works through hierarchical observation, normalising judgments, and examination.

Hierarchical observation includes surveillance; checking what others do. There are perhaps less obvious instances of hierarchical observation in universities than in other workplaces. We do not swipe in or out of buildings, we do not monitor phone calls or have CCTV installed in offices as may happen in other workplaces. However, we do have to use our cards to swipe into offices, have CCTV in classrooms and corridors, and our virtual learning environment and messages to students are monitored. I can, and do, monitor the activity on the virtual learning environments on the modules for which I have quality responsibility. I would equate this to the idea of the panopticon. The form of

¹⁸ The Panopticon is a notion of a prison designed around a central observation tower from which the actions of all inmates could be seen by a single watchman, whilst at the same time the inmates do not know whether they are watched or not. This is based on an idea from Jeremy Bentham.

hierarchical observation that I have mentioned in my narrative is that of the MFQ data. We take MFQ data and student complaints seriously. MFQ data is shared not only with the member of staff concerned but also with the Vice Chancellor, Dean, and line managers of staff, as well as those given responsibility for academic quality. When problems are suspected, teaching observations are carried out and coaching and mentoring sessions are implemented. Most of the areas I would have tried to include in a performance improvement plan for David would have included aspects of hierarchical observations.

Another technique of disciplinary power is 'normalising judgement' – the application of measures to individualise and make comparisons possible (Foucault, 1977:177). In the case above the use of MFQ data, the deviation from 80% approval ratings and RAG ratings show clear links to this type of discipline. The MFQ data creates the averages from which the deviation is measured. The MFQ data therefore fixes the norms. The examination of MFQ data makes it possible to: "...describe, judge and compare individuals with each other" (Stacey, 2012:73). In my conversation with David, I stated very clearly this deviation from the expectation. His modules had feedback below that of other modules offered to the same students. This sort of statement is a penal mechanism in that it is designed to show how performance is unacceptable. In the same way that I was ashamed at being less than perfect by the Dean, I have used a tool such as performance improvement plans to attempt to 'pass on' this shame and would speculate that others may do the same.

Foucault is clear that techniques of disciplinary power are not inevitably bad but simply the way that power works. Complex modern organisations cannot function without the techniques of surveillance, hierarchical normalisation, and corrective training (Stacey, 2012:66). What I am pointing to above is that whilst I am being told to 'sort it out' I have gravitated to techniques that assume an 'if-then' causality and tried to implement tools in a way that highlight aspects of disciplinary power. Stacey & Mowles (2016:356) argue that defences to anxiety can include the use of such procedures. I had assumed that following HR processes would treat people fairly and that I could remain detached and objective as a manager. It would allow me to remain emotionless and get through the situation. But such processes and procedures aren't emotionless and rational. Instead trying to implement such plans has led to shame, anger, and upset and has led to my own strong emotional reaction as my ideas of what being ethical to others means, has been challenged.

Concluding Thoughts

My narrative starts by pointing to MFQ data as rational, objective judgments on what is 'good'. I have pointed to a systemic way of thinking based on rational causality in both the use of MFQ data as a metric, and my own attempts at managing the performance of David. But what emerges throughout this narrative are feelings of shame and anxiety.

I felt shame both in the meeting with the Dean and at not being able to achieve the expected level of 80% approval, and with Brian's reaction to my attempts to performance manage David. Similarly, I suspect that David has felt ashamed at not being able to 'sort it out'. Scott (1990) pointed out that when people feel obliged to comply with schemes that do not square with their own values, then they resist. This resistance may be overt or covert. Scott talks about a public transcript and a hidden transcript, those hidden narratives of resistance and subterfuge, such as gossip and strange allegiances, that form when application of norms is implemented in a way to dominate employees. In my narrative, I am trying to maintain the public transcript of focussing on improvement of teaching. I want to maintain my image as a good corporate soldier. I showed how I felt anxiety about how I may go about achieving the outcomes expected of me. The use of tools and techniques of disciplinary power, such as implementation of performance improvement plans, is one way I have attempted to constrain my anxiety. It is much easier, as a manager, to feel as if I have behaved ethically if I can show that I have followed appropriate HR processes. Much of the performance literature I referred to above agrees that those who do not conform to the cult values should be sacked. In my own institution the guidance on managing poor performance states that:

"The policy on poor performance is intended to help and encourage all employees to achieve and maintain standards of work and performance satisfactory to the University. It is designed to inform staff of the likely consequences of their failure or inability to fulfil or meet their work obligations."

and ends with:

"...the Vice Chancellor will conduct a disciplinary hearing and will then decide if they will ... dismiss."

Therefore, if David does not improve it is legitimate for me to remove him from employment with the business school. If I can point to him in some way as less than a 'good' member of the community, then this makes this process feel more ethical.

Stacey (2012) reproaches the contemporary management approaches for relying mainly on: "...tools of rational analysis" and: "...rational monitoring procedures", to design and monitor to keep things under control (ibid:40). He claims that intentionally applying rational mechanisms of control, in the

form of methods and tools, to achieve predicted outcomes, is based on a misleading rational and linear causality which he considers to be a simplistic way to understand human collaboration.

I argue that the MFQ 'rule' is an abstraction that only becomes concrete as people take it up in their social context. These generalisations require interpretation by each of us when we functionalise them. How we interpret and use these will be influenced by the groups to which we belong and other competing values. The way I have chosen to take this is influenced not only by my history of performance management and by my understanding of metrics as a form of control, but is also influenced by the way others around me discuss these types of activities and what they are doing about functionalising the norm. What happens is emergent in the social patterning of interaction between the Dean, David, Brian, myself, the group of middle managers with whom I discuss this and indeed the wider subject group and business school. Because of our own backgrounds, personal histories, beliefs and habits each of us may have different ways of interpretation: how we particularise the generalisation of 'good teaching'. However, we are also likely to be influenced by one another as people are included or excluded in the group of 'good' managers based upon the actions that they take. So, Brian being horrified at the performance improvement plans I proposed, will influence my future behaviours as much as my discussion of this with others will influence how they decide to act on MFQ data. Stacey et al. would suggest that behaviour is not directed by a leader standing outside an organisation (indeed they would advocate there is no inside or outside) as a detached observer who can reset the system to an idealised position. What transpires at work, they argue, is: "...the unplanned interweaving of everyone's intentions, which will follow no overall plan or blueprint" (Mowles, 2011:8). Scott (1998:4) points out that there is a conflict between the simplifications required at an abstract level and the contextual. For me, there is a conflict between what the metrics show me at an abstract level and what is happening in the classroom at a contextual level. Scott points out that how the abstractions are implemented, how people take them up with others, is what is important. This is not just between myself and David but also formed by the interactions I have with the groups to which I belong. Stacey et al. would argue that organisations are not abstract, idealised entities, but groups of people engaging in ordinary activities and communications, or 'local interactions'. Local interactions are made up of deliberate and impulsive actions, planned and emergent activities, power relations, values, and personal agendas. What is happening is perpetually re-shaped in the particularisation of the local interaction. So, the interactions I have with my fellow middle managers, with my staff and with students in both 'public transcripts' and in the 'hidden transcripts' will impact upon how we will functionalise the norm of 'improvement'.

In all the management literature I have referred to the application of norms, metrics and the re-ordering of what people do should lead to goal alignment and move people 'forward' to a 'better place' where people will be transformed, and improvement will be achieved. The call to improve teaching and student satisfaction and measuring this through MFQ data, has not, as anticipated, always led to alignment; instead it also leads to conflict and negotiation and strategies for resistance. Stacey (2005:484), drawing on Mead, states that as soon as cult values become functional values in everyday interactions, conflict arises. It is this conflict that must be negotiated by people in their interaction with others. Our interpretations may conflict. However, this may not be a conflict in the sense of taking opposing positions. We may be in a negotiation process of how we take up our particularisations and what the 'improvement' may be as we functionalise this norm.

Looking to Project 3

The essence of this project has looked at a rational approach for managing performance. One in which 'the facts speak for themselves' and as a manager I can 'sort it out'. Yet much of what I discuss is about shame, anxiety and anger. Much of the management literature to which I refer assumes that a manager can stand outside a system, point out to poor performers the error of their ways, and if the manager is skilful enough then improvements will be forthcoming. However, what this project shows is that although performance management is supposed to be all about the facts and unproblematic, what is happening is a provocation of strong emotions. In my next project, I wish to explore the strong emotions this way of managing is provoking in my school. There is competition between the middle managers, emotion 'escaping' through gossip, and rumour spreading through the school. Performance management may be intended to be all about the metrics and a very rational process; however, I am now seeing it is also provoking shame, envy, competition and rivalry.

3.3 Research Project 3 – Exploring Conflict

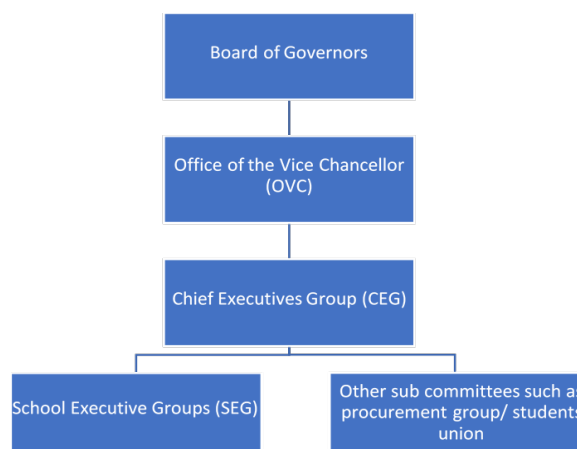
Introduction

In Project 2, I discussed the use of performance metrics, specifically module feedback questionnaires (MFQs) which attempted to measure teaching quality and student satisfaction. I considered how performance metrics were used in my daily interactions, and how their use appeared to be leading to shame and anxiety for academic staff and for myself, impacting on relationships between managers and lecturers. In this project, I will use a narrative from a management meeting to look at the patterning of behaviour as metrics are presented to the senior leadership team (SLT) of my school. To give some context to the formal governance structures and relationships between the SLT, I begin by explaining the structure of the university and the business school.

Management Structure

I describe my university and school structure to outline the relationship between my role as Head of Group (HOG), and the others who make up the SLT. The university is headed by the Board of Governors, to whom the Office of the Vice-Chancellor (OVC) reports. The OVC is supported by the Chief Executives Group (CEG) which includes the Deans of each school. Each Dean is advised by their School Executive Group (SEG), comprised of their SLT.

Fig. 1. Management of the University

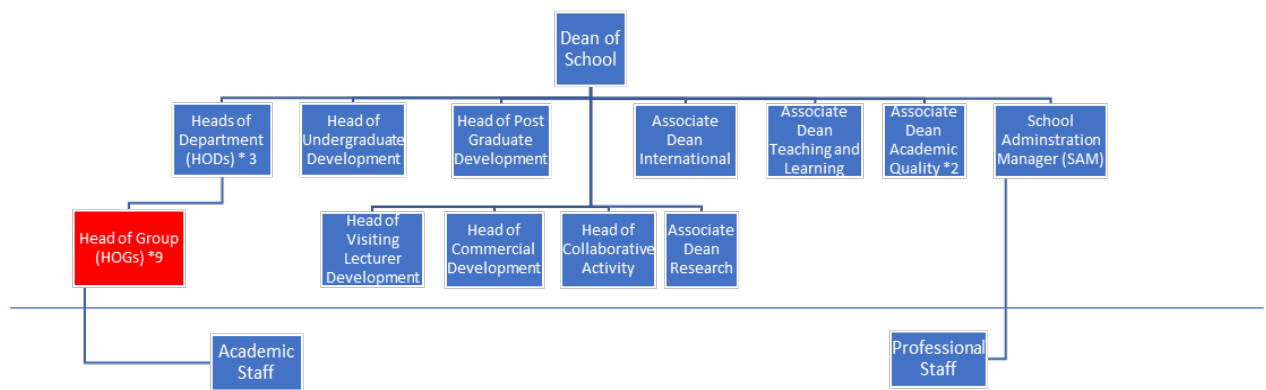


The senior leadership team of the school is comprised of:

- The Dean
- 10 senior managers, with a range of responsibilities
- 3 Heads of Department (HODs), responsible for the operations of the school
- 9 Heads of Group (HOGs), who line manage all academic staff
- The School Academic Manager (SAM) who manages all non-academic staff

My position in the school organisation chart is highlighted in the red box.

Fig. 2. Management of the Business School.



Focus of this Project

Having described the formal structure of the school I present a narrative which shows how Module Feedback Questionnaire (MFQ) data is being presented and discussed by the senior team. In Project 2, I recounted a discussion about MFQ data with the Dean and how I tried to ‘solve the problems’ this data presented, by attempting to ‘performance manage’ the module leader of the poorly performing modules. I explored the use of the MFQ metrics and the emotions that this provoked. I have chosen a further narrative around MFQs as it follows the theme from my previous project. This narrative explores the conflicts and emotions evoked in discussing and negotiating how these metrics will be used to measure the performance of the middle managers, including myself.

There are numerous conflicts in our SLT meetings, and I draw on the work of Rahim (2001) and Isenhart & Spangle (2000) to consider how conflict is viewed in ‘modern’ conflict theories. I then draw on Scott (2000), Stacey & Mowles (2016), Mowles (2012, 2015) and Mead (1934) to investigate conflict further. I will conclude these themes and identify what I may look at in my final project.

In earlier iterations of this project I had delved into the: "...hidden transcripts" (Scott, 1990:2) of organisational life to review how conflicts sometimes get hidden behind closed doors. I find myself without the space, in this project, to explore fully this aspect of organisational life, and it is likely that I will explore this aspect further in my final project. I also reviewed functioning of power and explored several writers on power. Amongst the authors I reviewed were Dahl (1957) and Weber (1947) who saw power as belonging to formal position or personality; Bachrach & Baratz (1963) who looked at how power is manipulated by ensuring discussion occurs within certain boundaries; Lukes (2005) who looked at attempts to make relations of power appear inevitable; Foucault (1977) who argued that power relations shape our sense of self; and Elias (1974) who saw power as a structural characteristic of all relations. I had been particularly drawn to Elias's ideas of interdependence and game models (Elias, 1970) as being especially relevant to my narrative. I still believe that power relations and their dynamic nature are important, but do not have space to do justice to the vast range of literature. I do draw on Elias's ideas on power figurations since they are most relevant to this stage of my exploration into the emerging patterns of behaviour of middle managers when performance metrics are used as a principle tool of management.

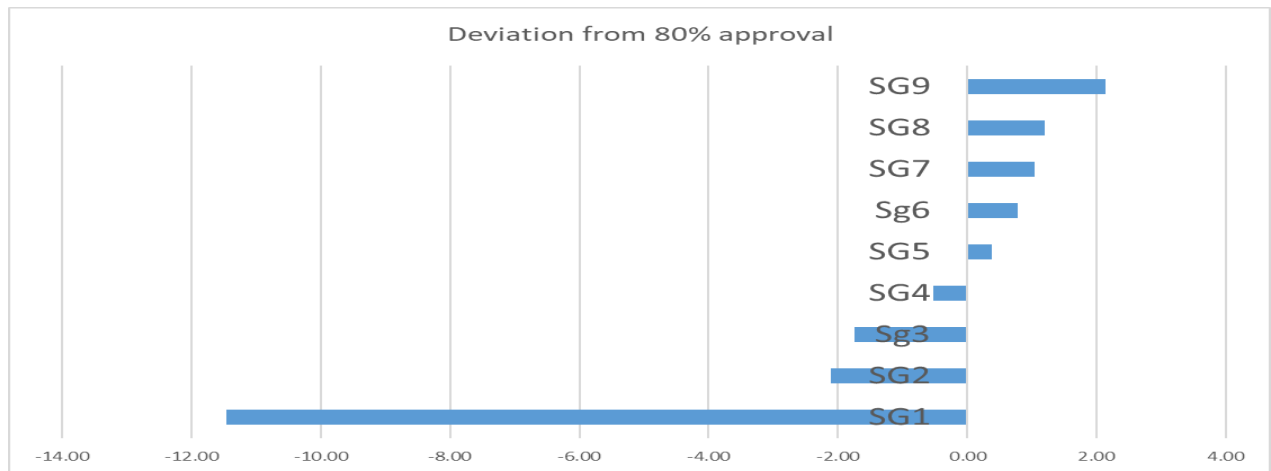
Revisiting Metrics – Module Feedback Questionnaires (MFQs)

The SLT squeezed themselves into a sunny meeting room. Different people were chatting with one another and the foyer and meeting room were full of babble, as was typical of these monthly senior executive group (SEG) meetings. This additional SEG was convened to discuss the Module Feedback Questionnaire (MFQ) data received from the Autumn semester. The Dean opened the meeting by reminding us that we were here to review the MFQ data by subject group.

Benchmarking

In advance of the meeting, information had been circulated to the Heads of Groups showing the MFQ data for each module, and a weighted average MFQ for the modules owned by each subject group. We had also been sent the graph below showing each group's deviation away from the targeted 80% approval¹⁹. The graph ranked the data from best performing group to worst performing group.

¹⁹ I have discussed the MFQ data and its basis more fully in my 2nd project.



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The data presented was drawn from the MFQ surveys completed by students at the end of their modules. The data from the individual modules was collated and weighted according to the number of students responding to the questionnaire. A large module would have a bigger impact than a small module. If a group's modules were above the 80% target, they would appear to the right of the target line and those below to the left. My subject group, SG9 was at the top, the best performing, based on this metric. There were four of the nine subject groups below the targeted level.

Before the meeting I had discussed this data with a handful of other HOGs. In our discussions most of us had been quite pleased to note that Lucy's results, the HOG leading subject group 2, were below the benchmarked level. I knew that many of the HOG's considered her to be incompetent. She had failed to sign documents resulting in staff not being paid. She allowed her staff to dictate which work they would and wouldn't do, and had designed a poorly recruiting and expensive programme. She also stated that she was not capable of completing all her work whilst taking part in foreign travel, that I considered to be 'optional', or attending coaching sessions that I considered 'nice to have'. I discussed gleefully with some fellow HOGs that these results showed that we were right to think of her as incompetent. However, I felt sympathetic to Pete, HOG of subject group 1, the worst performing group. I listened compassionately to his tale of woe and believed his sincere protestations of the numerous issues he was facing. I wonder now whether I felt justified in stigmatising Lucy because these metrics showed it to be true. Where they supported my view that Lucy was incompetent, it was easy to take them and use them to prove the point I wanted to make. In Pete's case, the metrics were inconsistent with how I saw things, therefore I concluded that

²⁰ The graph above had been adapted from the data circulated to protect anonymity.

students had answered the questions incorrectly or there were other reasons, outside of Pete's control, that led to these outcomes.

Emotions

The Dean circulated copies of the graph to us all (the SLT). The data had not been shared in advance of the meeting with anyone other than the HOGs. In previous semesters, MFQ data had only been presented to each of the HOGs privately and discussed with us confidentially. My second project explores one such meeting. Other members of the SLT would not have reviewed this data before, and individual HOGs would not have previously seen their subject groups summarised and compared in this way.

I was proud that my subject group was at the top of the list. However, I also felt anxious and restless. I barely dared look at my colleagues. I kept my eyes focussed on the table. I hoped nobody asked me how we had achieved this. I didn't want to have to acknowledge that I had no idea. I felt in control of the efforts we had made to improve student MFQs (although in retrospect I acknowledge I was not in control of this either) but not in control of the outcome nor how it was measured. For example, I had discussions with staff about how they were planning to 'improve' their modules to increase MFQ outcomes, and attempted to 'performance manage' those whose modules had poor outcomes. I had no way of knowing whether these activities had happened and, if they had, whether this is what had improved the metrics, or not. None of us spoke to each other as the graph was presented by the Dean. There was no congratulating or commiserating. I felt annoyed that those whose success (or lack of) was not measured in this way (the non-HOGs) appeared to sit in judgment on me. I felt as if I was being placed under a spotlight.

Despite my initial embarrassment I also felt slightly aggrieved that no one congratulated me. On the one hand I wanted to be acknowledged by the Dean for the huge achievements of my staff and myself, but on the other hand I felt at risk of being excluded by my peers as a 'goody two shoes'²¹. I felt as if I could not speak and that anything I said could be construed to be a criticism of my fellow HOGs. I notice how I find it difficult to critique the metrics when they show me in a good light.

²¹ A colloquial phrase that was used when I was growing up. Generally, it is used in a derogatory manner to describe someone who always does the right thing, who is annoyingly perfect and judgmental of others short comings.

Because I appeared to be doing well in these metrics I found myself in a double bind²². How could I criticise what made me 'look good'?

The Rupture²³

The Dean explained that an 85% target would be set for the following year. MFQ data continued to be a key metric. I looked nervously at others. I caught the eye of Pete, who had only achieved 68% approval. He was fidgeting in his chair. The Dean appeared to be talking to the table rather than to us. Justin, another fellow HOG, asked where the 85% target had come from. He had some information with him showing that no part of the university achieved these levels, which he waved around vaguely. There was some discussion of the target level, but it didn't seem to gain much ground. Anything raised seemed to be blocked by the Dean. It felt impossible to argue against.

I was filled with conflicting emotions, I felt anxious about how others may re-act to my speaking out, but also felt a compulsion to speak. I felt butterflies bubbling up in my stomach. At that time, I had been writing the second project of my DMan. That project had started to look at how the way we were using the MFQ data was leading to anxiety and upset, and how I had started to blame some of my staff, and they, in turn, the students, for poor results. I had explored the shame I had felt by my attempts to performance manage the module leader of some poorly performing modules, especially after Brian, one of the Heads of Department and my line manager, had rocked my sense of self by rejecting my actions. I now felt as if I must speak and didn't quash the compulsion, whilst feeling nervous, because I anticipated the likely responses. I was worried that the other HOGs may consider my speaking out as support of the measures because 'I did well' in the MFQ data, and they may also consider my speaking as a criticism of them. I imagined what I would have felt had I been shown to be doing less well, if a colleague who was doing better had spoken.

In addition, I was concerned that the Dean may consider my speaking out as a criticism, and that I risked exclusion or disciplining by expressing something critical. I believed that arguing about using MFQ data was futile, but I felt obligated to negotiate *how* we might use it. I hesitantly stated that although I found the target level challenging it was just like a budget. That, if it was just a starting point for a discussion, not something that we would be beaten up about, then it couldn't be a

²² Mowles (2015b:14) describes a double bind as two mutually exclusive negative consequences; neither choice being particularly palatable, either choice judged as 'bad'.

²³ Borrowed from political scientist Scott (1990:18–19) who wrote about strategies of domination and resistance. He describes a rupture as the point when the hidden transcript is made public.

problem. In utilising this analogy I was hoping to appeal to the Dean's focus on metrics and get a connection.

Sophie, the HOG of SG5, sitting on my right, was clearly riled by the conversation. She had only just exceeded the current target. She tapped her flawlessly manicured nails and entered a to-and-fro discussion with the Dean (to my immediate left) culminating in her spitting through her fixed lipsticked grin, words to the effect 'so, we should measure the effectiveness of our teaching by taking the perceptions of some over-privileged 18-year-old prima-donnas?' The Dean responded in a very controlled, but angry tone of voice: '...are you telling me that we should not care what students, paying over £9,000 per year, think?' jabbing his index finger into the table in front of my face in time with his words. I sat very still in between them, a lump rising in my throat, frozen and feeling sick, shocked at the way Sophie had expressed herself. She had always been an advocate for listening to students and stated that much of her past success was because of the great relationship she and her staff had with their students. I considered the Dean's response extremely aggressive, and felt myself trying to shrink into my chair between them. Sophie flushed and in a wobbly voice whispered that that was not what she was saying. I had never seen Sophie upset. She was referred to in whispered conversations between some of the HOGs as 'hard-nosed'. Indeed, it was only a few days before this when I had been upset about something, that she had said she would never get upset about work, 'It wasn't worth it!'

The relationship between Sophie and I had been up and down as we needed, and it was expected by the Dean, to collaborate and to be seen to be collegiate. I admired her dedication, hard work and her ability to always present a polished front. Conversely, I felt an intense jealousy of her confidence. We clashed over the way to manage staff. I did not agree with the close control she wanted to have. Disagreeing with Sophie always felt uncomfortable as I believed she couldn't take account of others' perspectives. Her way was always correct and the only opinion that mattered. For many years I had felt inferior as her subject group had been doing consistently well in league tables and National Student Survey (NSS) results. However, her group and programmes were very small in comparison to mine. I often refuted her boasts about metrics: it was easy to achieve some of the things she had with such a small cohort of students and staff. I had argued that it was much easier to maintain a relationship when you were only teaching a handful of students and not groups of over

200. Sometimes this descended to snide comments. For example, when we had manned clearing²⁴ phone lines, she had complained that all the calls she had taken were for my programmes and that I should pay her. I had counter argued this, saying that I already did.

Sophie got up and left the room and two other HOGs went with her. I didn't know what to do but didn't feel that I should follow them. Everyone sat in the room, looking at the table. I have absolutely no recollection of what we then discussed, but I felt a huge knot in my stomach. I cannot re-collect how long they were absent. Anything discussed in this time, and what I or others were doing, is erased from my memory. When Sophie returned, her makeup was not as polished as normal. She had clearly been crying. She sat back in her chair on my right and I did not look at her, keeping my eyes on the table in front of me. The rest of the meeting progressed. I have no idea what was said, but recollect a very submissive tone to the meeting. When the Dean re-iterated the belief that focussing on achieving a higher MFQ target was appropriate, there was a murmur of assent and a passive-aggressive 'whatever you say' from Sophie.

Walking Back to My Office

As I walked back to my office with Brian, I expressed my shock at what Sophie had said. Brian murmured agreement. We talked about Lucy's results and how this may show she was unable to cope with her role. Brian suggested that she needed support, which she was not getting from her line manager (Sheila, one of the other HODs). I replied she may simply not be 'up to the job'. He conceded that this may be the case. We discussed Sophie's behaviour briefly and I stated that the way she had challenged the Dean would not help the HOGs as being seen to be an important part of the SLT, but rather as a troublesome, unruly child that needed to be closely managed.²⁵ I somehow felt comforted by our conversation. Nevertheless, this meeting has continued to upset me. I believed I had betrayed my fellow HOGs. I also felt upset and angry with Sophie. I thought that the

²⁴ Clearing is a part of the UK university application process. It's a way for universities to fill any spaces they have left for the following academic year after the release of prospective students' exam results. It also gives applicants who do not hold an offer or have not managed to achieve their offer at another university a chance of finding a university place. During clearing staff man phone lines to make offers to students who ring in to see if they can gain a place.

²⁵ It was noted by my supervisor that this conversation appears rather sanitised in comparison to other phrases I have used in this project. I concede that this is the case but cannot recollect if I was more forceful at the time. However, I have found myself to be more careful in how I express my feelings with Brian and how I talk about colleagues with him. This has been particularly the case since his rejection of my plans for performance management which I discussed in my second project. I felt this as a rejection of me and that Brian was ashamed of me. Brian has also stated that he does not agree with 'being emotional' in our work! So even in narrating the events here, I have sanitised the conversation in my memory. This is something I suspect I will look at further in my final project.

clumsy way that she questioned the MFQ data and its value, had made it even harder for any of us to have a sensible discussion around its use.

First Reflections

As I explore the narrative, I start to challenge assumptions about metrics and their use in management that I have previously supposed. In reviewing my projects, I notice I have been starting to question the presumption that performance metrics would always lead to improved organisational performance. When I had first started writing about metrics, I had considered them to have their own agency and that they made us behave in particular ways, e.g., in Project 2, I assumed that the metrics had 'shown' me some poorly performing modules and that I had to sort them out. In the narrative above I assumed that the new metrics seemed to be starting to 'show' my subject group in a more favourable light, and Sophie's as slightly less glossy. I used the metrics as evidence to belittle Lucy and believed that they confirmed my opinions of her 'not being up to the job'. Drucker (1974), drawing on the work of scientific management by scholars such as Frederick Taylor (1911), argued that a manager needs to establish yardsticks and have measurements available to them as the foundation for firm decision-making.

Accounting literature would advocate that management accounting is a method of providing unambiguous data to provide managers with evidence to make savings and rationalise efficiencies. 'Evidence' in the form of metrics then, should put an end to disputes and would be the best way to manage. Instead, I notice how the meaning of the results are sometimes contested, and there are times where there is denial of what the results are saying when it reflects badly on individuals and conflicts with our views. For example, I am happy to take the metrics at 'face value' when they show Lucy to be doing a poor job, but feel sorry for Pete when his metrics appear to show poor performance. I had previously assumed that using metrics would show what was objectively 'correct'. I notice that my colleagues and I appear to amplify and dampen existing power relations, using the metrics as 'evidence'; either by inflating our own sense of worth and value in collaborating with our allies, or by diminishing that of others who we are in competition with. Smaller groups such as Sophie's fared much better under the 'old' metrics which determined what 'good' was. Power figurations appear to be shifting as we talk about the metrics and where the results appear to highlight areas that need improvement, and question the competence of some people, or groups of people. I note that the power relations within the group are changing, and are being renegotiated as we come together: "...a fluctuating tensile equilibrium" (Elias, 1970:131), which I take to mean that

there is an incessant and changing interweaving of intentions as people respond to, and are responded to in turn, by other people.

I experienced the discussion about metrics as an emotional process and I noticed others did too. Sophie clearly had been crying, and I interpreted the Dean's jabbing fingers as anger or frustration. Where my results are good, I worried about being excluded by my peers at speaking out and being a 'goody two shoes', whilst also desiring recognition by the Dean. I knew that I had previously felt jealousy at Sophie's good results and had argued that it was because she did not deal with cohort sizes like mine. I had gossiped with fellow HOGs about her. I could anticipate, to an extent, how she might respond to my results being better and my speaking out about them. I also imagined what may happen if I was seen to be too critical of the Dean, and worried about exclusion and/or disciplining. I want to explore the emotions that appear to be being evoked and which play into the discussion on metrics because I notice that although the graph above is 'de-personalised' in the way it is set out and presented, I and other colleagues identify with it in a highly personalised way, and feelings of pride, injustice and anger have lingered for a long time.

I have started to question the idea that metrics have an agency of their own and always make managing easier and incontestable. I feel that rather than providing evidence to make managing easier and ideas less contested, the way we are using and talking about these metrics appears to be fanning the flames of the inter-group rivalries and competition. I also see that the competition and conflict between myself and my peers is influencing the way we take up and use the metrics. For example, I have looked for patterns in the metrics that re-enforce my previously held assumptions about who is doing well, and who is doing less well. I can see that any one of us can attribute a variety of meanings to these metrics which appear to be inextricably interwoven with organisational politics and relations of power. In order to make sense of this further and to explore my narrative more fully, I wish to first consider the theory of complex responsive processes of relating which draws on the pragmatist tradition, insights from the complexity sciences, process sociology and group analysis.

Complex Responsive Processes of Relating

The theory of complex responsive processes of relating, developed by Stacey, Griffin & Shaw (2000), examines what happens when people work together and suggests that an organisation can be considered as:

“...the iterated patterning of communicative interaction between large numbers of interdependent individuals.” (Stacey, 2005:485).

Unlike many traditional approaches to management, Stacey et al. (2000:194) argue that the future evolves through interactions between people. We cannot anticipate outcomes in an ‘if-then’ manner as we cannot attribute one cause to one effect. Individuals form, and are being formed, by ongoing processes of interaction. As diverse interdependent people interact with one another, the future develops in a way that cannot be known in advance. Patterns emerge from local interactions that are predictably unpredictable (or unpredictably predictable). The emphasis of complex responsive processes of relating is on what is happening when people respond to one another, with no blueprint for their interactions. Stacey et al. (2000:194) argue that change, either positive or negative, only happens because of the very nature of exchange itself. It is only in the interaction between people in which the emergence of mostly orderly global patterns arise.

In putting forth this theory of action, Stacey draws on the social pragmatism of Mead (1934), where humans are understood as shaping their environment and being shaped by it, both at the same time. Mead offers a unique understanding of human communication which supports my line of argument. He finds that in human communication, meaning arises where one person makes a communicative gesture to another and the other responds to that gesture, resulting in a new response and so on and so forth. Meaning arises in the ongoing process of gesturing and responding. What is different about this theory is that Mead argues that since the gesture/response occur at the same time, rather than sequentially, we can only discover the meaning of what we say when we see how others respond to our gesture. The person making the gesture can anticipate to some degree the response they will stimulate in the other person; however, they can never fully determine that response. This is because the response is marked by the current emotional state, the life history and cultural background of the person responding. Whenever we make a gesture, we can experience what reactions and emotions our gesture evokes in ourselves in the form of internal role-play. But this is not enough to be able to fully determine the responder’s reaction, since our own life history and current emotional experience is significant for our internal role-play.

Mead believes that communication is a relational process, using: “...significant symbols” (Mead, 1934:45) which have similar meaning for the interacting people, allowing us to anticipate, at least in some way, how others might respond to our gestures. The capacity of humans to take others’ attitude develops, and we anticipate their generalised expectations of us rather than just taking the attitude of specific people (Mead, 1934:90). Mead describes how this: “...generalised other” is not only what we perceive that others think we should do, but becomes an integral part of our

perception of ourselves (ibid:195). This is often unconscious, and is a powerful form of social control. Communication is not simply sending a signal to be received by another, but rather a social responsive process of self-formation in which meaning and society wide patterns emerge.

Stacey et al. also draw on the work of Elias (1939) to understand how the processes of interacting amount to relations of power. Unlike my previous understanding of power, being given because of position or having knowledge, they consider it is not something that someone possesses but rather a characteristic of all human relating. In order to stay in relationship with someone you cannot simply do what you want. Rather, we are enabled and constrained by others. Power is an enabling-constraining relationship where power tips dependent upon who needs whom more. In communicative interacting and power relating we are always making choices between one action and another, which may be based on conscious or unconscious desires or intentions.

I will explore these ideas further as I delve into my narrative and try to make sense of what is happening for me.

Conflict

I can see now that the presentation of the metrics and the way we take up and discuss these metrics, is a power laden process. The purpose of the benchmarking of module metrics could be admirable; we want to understand what is working well and what needs to be improved. Benchmarking is something I would have encouraged as an accountant, and a tool I have used as a manager. Accounting literature such as the Handbook of Finance (Mann, 2009) extol the virtues of benchmarking to share good practice and improve business performance. Muller, in his book *The Tyranny of Metrics* argues that whilst metrics are a potentially valuable tool, when they become the criteria to reward and punish, then problems arise. He argues that reward based on metrics tends to promote not cooperation, but rather competition and conflict:

“If the individuals or units respond to the incentives created, rather than aiding, assisting, and advising one another, they strive to maximize their own metrics, ignoring, or even sabotaging, their fellows.” (Muller, 2018:172).

Although performance metrics are not explicitly being used to reward and punish in my school, in project two I showed how I felt humiliated, anxious and disciplined when I discussed poorly performing modules with the Dean. I felt my competence questioned because I hadn't yet 'sorted it out'. I also tried to use the performance metrics as a tool to performance manage academic staff

and eventually took their modules off them, essentially punishing them. When the data is presented in the graph above, showing subject groups in comparison to one another and ranking them, highlighting who is doing well and less well against the targeted level, I felt both proud and anxious, as though the HOGs are competing with one another for recognition. When speaking out about the use of MFQ data, I felt I was wading into a conflict and anticipated that I may be disciplined or excluded, for either being a 'goody two shoes' or for being considered to be overly critical. I wish to explore conflict in more depth by looking to writers on organisational conflict. The primary authors I have turned to are Rahim (2001), a behavioural scientist who researches conflict in organisations, and Isenhardt & Spangle (2000), consultants in dispute resolution and conflict management. Both these authors looked at the history of conflict and asserted that they took a 'modern' approach to conflict management.

History of Writings on Conflict

Rahim reviewed different disciplines that write about conflict. From philosophy he reviewed works of Plato through Hobbes, Locke, Hegel, Marx and concluding with Dewey. From this work he concluded that: "...an individual should examine a conflict situation to discover the various actions possible and choose the one that is most effective" (Rahim, 2001:4). He also looked to Darwin's writings on biological sciences and Coser & Simmel's writings from sociology. He argued that conflict was an important social concept and that it was important to study it in an organisational context. Rahim classified those who wrote about conflict in organisational research into classical approaches, neo-classical approaches and modern views of organisational conflict (ibid:7–14). In the classical view of conflict, work design, rules and procedures and hierarchy etc. are used so that organisational members would be unlikely to engage in conflict. This is based on assumptions that harmony, cooperation and absence of conflict are appropriate to achieve organisational effectiveness, and draws on authors such as Taylor (1911), Fayol (1930/1945) and Weber (1947/1978). In neo-classical approaches Rahim suggests that managers will treat workers as individuals, with individual needs, which in turn should make them more willing to cooperate and contribute to organisational goals. Rahim argues that there is still an attempt to eliminate conflict but through altering the social systems, rather than the altering of the structure of the organisation. This view comes from his review of human relations writers, such as Mayo (1933) and Lewin (1951).

Isenhardt & Spangle (2000) looked to writers on organisational conflict to try to understand the reasons conflicts arise, in order to consider approaches to lessen conflicts. They review some authors where the focus is on individuals' contributions to conflict. These theories range from

Attribution Theory (where people make sense of their world by assigning attributes to others, based on what is most relevant to them), Equity Theory (where people believe they are not receiving a fair distribution of something they value, e.g., Rolloff, 1981), Field Theory (whereby different forces motivate or inhibit behaviours, e.g., Lewin, 1951), and Psychodynamic Theory (whereby conflict arises because of internal conscious states, e.g., Freud, 1925). They also review theories of conflict where conflict escalates through the interaction of people (which they term interactional theory, influenced by the work of Mead and Dewey²⁶, whereby conflict is viewed as a process of ongoing negotiation of what is valued) or through phases of conflict (which they term phase theory, whereby conflict unfolds over time because of a sequence of behaviours of participants such as triggering of conflict, force and threats being used, resolution occurring until the process starts again). They finally describe transformational theories of conflict, which focus more on managing conflict than on its explanations and causes.

Modern Views of Conflict

Rahim argues, that in a modern view organisational conflict does not necessarily signify weakness, in fact he argues that conflict is necessary. He maintains:

“Conflict can be functional to the extent to which it results in the creative solution to problems or the effective attainment of subsystem or organizational objectives that otherwise would not have been possible. Little or no conflict in organizations may lead to stagnation, poor decisions, and ineffectiveness. On the other hand, organizational conflict left uncontrolled may have dysfunctional outcomes.” (Rahim, 2001:12).

Isenhardt & Spangle argue that conflict is an inevitable part of social life. Edelman (1993), another writer on organisational conflict, agrees that minor conflict at work is inevitable and that such conflicts can be productive if they generate creative solutions and are compatible with high levels of work satisfaction. Glasl (1999), who describes himself as a conflict consultant, also argues that conflict can be generative. Although Rahim, Isenhardt & Spangle, Edelman and Glasl disagree about how conflict should be managed, they all appear to be of the view that conflict can be positive, and

²⁶ Isenhardt & Spangle are very brief about each of the theories they review. They state: “In an organization, each staff negotiation over how work should be done creates additional understanding about roles and expectations” (Isenhardt & Spangle, 2000:6). I would argue that Isenhardt & Spangles’ explanation of interactional theory suggests that the course of change is reduced to the actions of individuals. Elias (2000:24) likens this understanding to seeing individuals as billiard balls that collide and separate. This is contrary to how Mead considers how humans shape their environment and are shaped by it, both at the same time.

that some conflict is necessary to generate change. All these writers believe that managers should keep conflict at the 'correct level' and have theorised how to manage conflicts.

Theories on how to Manage Conflict

Edelman (1993) suggests that where conflict is effectively managed then it can lead to productivity. He suggests that managers need to negotiate the 'relationship rules' and gives frameworks to attempt resolutions. Glasl (1999) argues that managers need to improve their 'conflict capability' using their inner strength and assertiveness, using various methods and techniques to make them more 'conflict resistant'. Isenhardt & Spangle (2000) argue that managers must create collaborative conditions and discuss processes such as mediation, negotiation and arbitration. They argue that systems can be designed and people trained to avoid conflict. Rahim (2001:21–23) suggests that a manager must categorise conflict into one of ten types (affective, substantive, conflict of interest, conflict of values, goal, realistic v non-realistic, institutionalised v non institutionalised, retributive, misattributed, and displaced). He then provides five different styles (ibid:22–27) of how people might deal with each of these categories of conflict. Rahim advocates that managers need to identify the type of conflict and then match a style of managing it with the category of conflict, to improve the organisational performance. He suggests his approach is different to those solutions where negotiation or mediation are suggested because these approaches only encourage solutions within the current bureaucracies. Rahim describes his approach as encouraging: "...double loop learning"²⁷ (ibid:64), whereby the diagnosis and interventions suggest changes to organisational policies and assumptions, rather than just accepting that change needs to happen within the existing system.

Managing conflict, then, is unproblematic if the manager can follow the appropriate steps. Rahim implies that a manager needs to decrease the harmful impacts of conflicts and to increase the constructive aspects of conflict, and in this has a similar view, although a different way of 'solving' the problem, as Isenhardt & Spangle, Edelman and Glasl. They all agree that conflict requires managing so that only those conflicts that are positive remain, suggesting that a manager can diagnose conflicts and manage them using techniques at their disposal. This is based on assumptions of human behaviour lifted from cybernetic thinking which I discussed in Project 2. These

²⁷ Argyris (1991:4) explains double loop learning by analogy: "A thermostat that automatically turns on the heat whenever the temperature in a room drops below 68 degrees is a good example of single-loop learning. A thermostat that could ask, "Why am I set at 68 degrees?" and then explore whether or not some other temperature might more economically achieve the goal of heating the room, would be engaging in double-loop learning." This views organisations as systems of humans that are autonomous subjects, acting based on their personal interests, sensations and own interpretations of their environment.

assumptions include: First, that leaders can direct the system in ways that those lower down react to, using tools and techniques of disciplinary power such as performance improvement plans. Second, that it is possible to set targets for the system, measure these, and act to restore the equilibrium if measurements fall outside acceptable levels. Third, that metrics objectively measure what is happening in the organisation and 'best practice' is transferrable to other 'systems' through identifying what it is, codifying this through education, guidance and training. (Adapted from Norman, 2012:193–194).

Applying Theories of Conflict

Using Rahim's way of classifying conflict, the conflict between Sophie and myself could be characterised as a conflict of interest (because we may both be in competition for promotion), or as a conflict of values (because we have different thoughts about how staff should be managed) or as non-realistic conflict (because I could simply be 'releasing tension'). The conflict between the Dean and Sophie could be a substantive conflict (because they have a disagreement about the strategic direction) or a conflict of values (Rahim, 2001:22–23). According to Rahim, there is a clear role for the leader to bring about change in the organisation, by encouraging staff to learn more about the five tools for managing conflict. I wonder how a manager can get the 'right' amount of conflict? Is the amount of conflict between myself and Sophie the right amount or the wrong amount of conflict to be generative, and how would we manage this? I also wonder how we might predict the 'right' amount of conflict? It could just as easily turn out to be the 'wrong' amount of conflict. And the 'wrong' amount of conflict now could end up being more productive in the long term.

Systemic views of conflict management

The way of managing conflict advocated by Rahim assumes that a manager can predict and control conflict to bring about an outcome they have decided in advance. Kolb & Bartunek (1992), writers on conflict and negotiation, present case studies in their study of hidden conflicts in organisations and argue that most conflict management theorists focus on public and rational conflicts. They emphasise the rationality within conflict management frameworks and argue that "...rationality captures the preconceived, logical and systemic side of conflict" (Kolb & Bartunek, 1992:20). Authors such as Rahim imply that a manager can diagnose the underlying reasons for conflicts, and then provide techniques to help the manager achieve the correct amount of conflict. They assume that managers can predict and control conflict in a linear and sequential way, i.e., once the problem is

identified the manager intervenes to bring about organisational learning and transformation, or to change the organisation's structure, in the way they could anticipate. Rahim, and the other writers on conflict that I have referred to, assume that we can detach from the ambiguity, contestation and stressful situations, to control what is happening.

This assumes a level of managerial influence that I have come to question. My narrative shows that conflicts, of a greater and lesser extent, are happening all the time in our interactions, e.g., we conflict when we are trying to work out how we set the level of the benchmarking for the MFQ data, Sophie and I conflict when determining how we will manage our staff etc. I am not arguing that managers do not have any influence in managing conflicts within organisations, but rather the extent of that influence. I question whether the same techniques can be applied to all situations, where conflicts arise from similar categories of conflict with no reference to those who are in conflict and their experiences and history. Furthermore, I challenge that there is a right amount of conflict in organisations that anyone could predict and manage. It appears to me that Rahim idealises the actions a manager ought to be taking. Having been involved in the meeting above where conflicts arose, I can understand the desire to want to control conflicts. They are stressful and anxiety provoking. What I am questioning is whether such a rational approach can really be applied to complex political and emotional situations. In the debate on MFQ data, I did not deliberately intend to provoke Sophie, nor, I am sure, did she intend to voice that she wasn't interested in what students said, certainly not in the way it was interpreted by the Dean. I am also sure that the Dean did not intend to respond so forcefully. Therefore, I could not have considered why this conflict was occurring or what model should have been adopted. If what Rahim says is correct, then I should have subsumed my interest and emotion to reason, as should Sophie and the Dean, and found a style for handling the conflict.

Emergence & Interdependence

The difficulty with Rahim and others' approaches, as described above, is that we can easily start to think that by application of a procedure or technique we can manipulate the interaction in a desired way with no reference to context. Similarly, those approaches appear to locate responsibility solely with managers to control conflicts. Rahim's way of thinking emphasises solving conflicts, and offers a technique that can be applied on any occasion where a conflict arises, as if the conflict was independent of the people who are taking part in it. Rahim's perspective is exactly the kind of thinking which prevents us from trying to stay open and to understand what is at stake for all those involved. His ideas on conflict management take a highly idealised understanding of how techniques

can help us 'master' the possibly conflictual processes of interacting with others to manipulate and control them. The assumption underpinning this is that emergence can be harnessed, and managers can assert control. This ignores the emergent nature of conflict, instead looking for systemic approaches to identifying and resolving conflicts. To me, an approach to managing conflicts proposed by Rahim shows a rather limited understanding of what people are experiencing when they are negotiating how to apply managers' strategies into action. I would argue that in the Dean asserting control something was closed down, and I felt subjugated, but we won't know just how important what was closed down was.

I am starting to see that conflicts emerge between the members of the SLT as we attempt to explore our similarities/differences of understanding and what matters for each of us. In the back and forth of conversation we are all exploring the responses we evoke in others. There is always room for misinterpretation, misunderstanding and ambiguity. It is from this very ambiguity and difference that emergence and movement is possible. When the Dean asks us to affirm that an 85% approval rate for MFQ data for the following semester is appropriate, he would have anticipated some of the possible responses this was likely to receive and I suspect must have known it could provoke feelings of anxiety and disagreements. Whilst the Dean may have anticipated some resistance to the call to affirm the 85% approval rating, the many responses and counter-gestures are patterned in ways that are predictable and unpredictable at the same time. It is not possible to fully appreciate what response the 'gesture' would invoke, because it depends upon our emotional states, our history of these types of metrics and our current connections. For me, I was questioning the use of the MFQ data through the discussions and readings from my Project 2, and starting to see its use as anxiety provoking. I therefore felt compelled to question its use. It is only in the back and forth of our conversation and my call to see the MFQ data like a budget, that the agreement/or otherwise of the 85% approval rating was being negotiated. The back and forth of that conversation appears then to have provoked a response by Sophie. This patterning of behaviour was both predictable (in that there would be resistance) but also not predictable (in that what eventually is questioned is the use of the 'student voice' – see my argument in section 7 below).

Taking the ideas of complex responsive processes allows a different understanding of what conflict is, and the extent to which it inevitably underlies many instances of human interaction. Stacey & Mowles (2016:370) draw on Groot to distinguish two forms of conflict: polarised and explorative. In polarised conflict, people are two opposing forces and overcoming the opponent is understood to be the goal. They also draw attention to the explorative aspect of conflict whereby in the process of finding a way forward in our interactions, people challenge each other's acts and act at the same

time. Stacey & Mowles point out that when conflict arises in organisational settings, this originates from the way people negotiate in local interaction the broader guidelines set by senior managers. In Stacey's view, conflict is not something which can ever be resolved, as is proposed by Rahim. Instead, conflict is a necessary element of human cooperation through which our thought moves, power differences fluctuate, and through which we recognise or misrecognise others when experiencing ourselves in relation to others. There is therefore the risk that conflict may not be generative but could be polarised, but not considering conflict's explorative aspect implies a diminished understanding of what people are doing when working in organisations.

Stacey & Griffin (2005) see organisations as ongoing, iterative processes of cooperation and competition between people that produce patterns of relating and themes which produce further patterns of relating. In *'Mind, Self & Society'* (1934), Mead discusses conflict and integration as two impulses common to all individuals who participate in society. He describes how these impulses lead people to form themselves into social communities and how they lead to both cooperation, which gives rise to friendly attitudes and relations, and to social antagonism which gives rise to hostile attitudes and relations (Mead, 1934:304). Mead sees conflict as a necessary and basic tendency that plays a significant role in organisational life:

"Human individuals realize or become aware of themselves as such, almost more easily and readily in terms of the social attitudes connected or associated with these two 'hostile' impulses (or in terms of these two impulses as expressed in these attitudes) than they do in terms of any other social attitudes or behaviour tendencies as expressed by those attitudes."
(ibid:305).

I interpret this as how both friendliness and hostility are vital and through this, we acquire a stronger sense of ourselves and others in a social situation. Mead (1908:189) suggests that we continuously develop and recreate our world through conflict, and that it is central to our day-to-day existence. It is by observing the reactions of others to our actions, that we can determine the meaning of our actions. What this means is that conflict cannot be managed away, and is inevitable when we come together to negotiate how we want to work. I suggest that in our meeting our differing perspectives may lead to conflict because what we are arguing for (or against) matters to us. Each of the SLT brings with them their own experiences, histories and predispositions that provide them with a sense of what is true and right.

Within this, there will be difference in opinions and viewpoints that needs to be discussed in order to be resolved. What I am taking from this is that staying involved in the conversation and engaging with the other's otherness, is how we explore what we are doing together. Conflicts are part of our

gesturing and responding, and inevitable as we negotiate with one another how we go forward together. In order to explore this further, I wish to draw on the part of the narrative above that I referred to as the rupture as this is the most 'obvious' aspect of conflict in the above narrative, and to look at this very public conflict and my feelings and reactions to it.

The Rupture

When Sophie questioned if: "...we should measure the effectiveness of our teaching by taking the perceptions of some over-privileged 18-year-old prima-donnas", I suggested that she 'ruptured' the public transcript. Scott defined a rupture as the point when the hidden transcript²⁸ is made public (Scott, 1990:8-9). Scott draws on George Elliot's *Adam Bede*, to illustrate his point using a character in the story, Mrs Poyser, a tenant of Squire Donnithorne. The Squire imposes onerous obligations on Mrs Poyser. However, she normally behaves politely towards him. On one occasion, when he came to propose an exchange of land that would be to Mrs Poyser's disadvantage, she 'let's fly' her accusations. She vehemently and spontaneously declares that she is the only one in the village who speaks her mind, although others think the same way, as he flees out of the door toward the safety of his pony and trap. The rest of the community repeat the story with 'unalloyed joy', showing that they believed she had also spoken for them. What she said was not remarkable, but saying it to the squire's face was, and the vicarious pleasure others gained was because of this.

The reason that I believe Sophie's statement about the students is a 'rupture' of the hidden transcript, is because I suspect her feelings accord with how I felt when receiving student feedback, and which I recognise in many colleagues' reactions to receiving student feedback. I relate back to how lividly angry and ashamed I was in my Project 2, where I was told to 'sort out' two poorly performing modules, and how I blamed a staff member and tried to discipline him. He in turn blamed his students. I contend that Sophie was voicing something I can recognise, having previously taken a similar attitude myself and blamed my staff and students for giving poor feedback on modules, and this does therefore represent a 'hidden transcript' being voiced. I make this suggestion because I have felt the same in similar circumstances, and others have told me (see Project 2) that they also felt angry and conflicted about student feedback, as if nothing they did was ever good enough. However, I find the way Sophie 'chose' to voice her objections as shocking, and contrast

²⁸ Scott (1990:2) referred to public and hidden transcripts. Public transcripts are those that may be openly communicated and hidden transcripts as those that were 'off stage'. He argued it is important to pay attention to hidden transcripts as a means of getting insight into power, domination and the arts of resistance.

them to my attempts to negotiate with the Dean. In order to do this, I want to briefly explore values and norms, identity and recognition.

Values and Norms

I contend that Sophie brings into the open something that the HOGs and our staff had been talking about and discussing, and which is causing anxiety for all of us when she questions using MFQ data as evidence of good (or bad) performance. However, she does more than that. In the national student survey (NSS)²⁹, 6 of the 28 questions consider the 'student voice'. These include: 'I have the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course', 'staff value students' views and opinions about the course' and 'it is clear how student's feedback has been acted upon'. Stacey & Mowles (2016:390–399) draw on the work of Mead (1923), Elias (1997) and Joas (2000) to discuss values and norms. In complex responsive process terms, values are themes organising the experience of being together in a voluntary compelling manner, whilst norms are themes of being together in obligatory, restrictive ways. When people interact with one another they constrain and enable one another at the same time and are continually evaluating their actions, whether consciously or unconsciously. The criteria by which they judge their actions will be both by the norms or obligatory limitations (what they ought or ought not to do) and values or voluntary compulsions (what they judge as good or not good to do). In my second project I discussed how 'improving teaching quality' and 'student satisfaction' were powerful norms, measured in the MFQs, and that they acted as a form of social control; an invitation to conform. I would argue that 'valuing the student voice' is also a powerful norm. This norm must be functionalised in ordinary, everyday situations as people interact. When Sophie talks of students as 'prima-donnas' in such a vitriolic way, she is breaking a norm that many of us struggle to argue against, despite the feelings being invoked as we try to deal with our responses to the 'student voice'. I would suggest that it is the breaking of this 'norm' which makes her rupture quite so shocking, to me and probably to others because some of them will be thinking the same thing. I suspect it is also shocking to Sophie (based on her reaction to the Dean's reaction by immediately denying that she had said what she had said, and subsequently leaving the room and crying). Stacey & Mowles (2016:397) argue that emotions such as shame, fear of punishment or exclusion provide the main constraining force and that gratitude, self-worth and outrage provide the

²⁹ I have discussed the NSS more fully in Project 2.

compelling force associated with values. Values and norms therefore form the basis of the evaluative themes that are then the basis of our actions.

I would suggest that when I spoke out and tried to link the MFQ data to budgets, it is because I was starting to question the way we were using these metrics. I had in some way anticipated the response that Sophie received from the Dean, in that questioning the MFQ data could be perceived to be overly critical not only of the metrics, but also of the norm of 'valuing the student voice'. When I felt compelled to speak, I was worried about being excluded by other HOGs as a 'goody two shoes', and about exclusion or chastising by the Dean. What I had not anticipated was the nature and the ferocity of the Dean's response. I felt that Sophie was immediately and forcefully dismissed (although thinking now, maybe I did anticipate this reaction and this was why I was so hesitant in my approach). What I now wonder is whether Sophie had more at stake than others. She has previously stated that her NSS results are good because of good relationships between staff and students, and yet this does not show up in this new form of metric. I suppose she would be quite anxious about future NSS outputs and her own reputation. If Sophie is correct in her reasoning about her NSS success as being due to the good relationships her staff have with the students, then these metrics were bound to show her favourably, yet they do not.

Recognition and Identity

I would argue that these results are painful for her. As her results dip and mine look better than hers, she must find this extremely provoking as I remember how I felt provoked when her results were better than mine, or when the Dean pointed out to me poorly performing modules, as I demonstrated in my Project 2, and told me to 'sort it out'. Sophie's outburst, like that of Mrs Poyser, is emotionally charged, and the words she uses are not a pre-planned attempt to question the metrics as I might previously have supposed, but rather an emotional outpouring of antagonism to her staff and students, with whom she maintains she has such a good relationship. I suggest that this emotional outburst is because she sensed a threat to her identity as the shining star that previous metrics would have positioned her to be. I also suspect she feels mis-recognised in what the metrics appear to be showing. I imagine Sophie is shocked about how the students have responded as she does not recognise herself and her staff in the feedback she has received. If she felt like I did when being asked by the Dean to 'sort it out', then she must be extremely angry with her staff and the students (even if only temporarily) who have responded in the way they have, after everything that she has done to support them. She now must account for these poor scores in quite a shaming way, in front of her peers. The rupture occurs because the hidden transcript, the gossip which has

occurred between colleagues who have been thinking similar things, bursts out into the open. The shock that I felt might be to do with the fact that she dared to say out loud what I had more or less been thinking myself.

Taking Mead's ideas in section 4, when interacting with others we inevitably open ourselves to engage in the process of establishing our self, in the other. When we engage with others, we are establishing our selves (not just ourselves), i.e., the interaction calls our self forth. We cannot know in advance exactly what that self will be, although we have a pretty good idea because we are our habits. But each situation is new, so we can surprise ourselves and others in how we respond in the moment, which may be completely un-reflected. Mead suggests we get to know ourselves through the actions of the other, and in this, our very self changes. Whilst we try to be recognised by the other and open ourselves up, we still try to maintain a basic sense of self. However, in this discussion we constantly negotiate aspects of ourselves and the groups of people we identify with, and how we feel accepted (or not) by those groups. Although we have a high wall of guilt and shame established through the socialising process which disciplines us mostly unconsciously in our interactions, sometimes an unmediated response to what we are caught up in may burst through, as it did with Sophie. So, we discover our selves in our action into the group, but also see ourselves reflected in how others respond to us. We realise our selves both in the action and in the reaction to the action. The group calls out a gesture in us, and members of the group respond to our gesture.

Complex responsive processes of relating stresses the explorative qualities of conflicts, and argues that it is in the conflictual processes through which we explore the other and ourselves at the same time, if they can, and are not immediately closed down, as they were here. I would suggest that Sophie's outburst is because her sense of identity is rocked when her results 'show' that students may not value her and her staff as highly as she may have believed, because I also felt the same when students' responses were below what I had hoped for and felt shamed. In this case the Dean responded quite violently. I argue that this was a way of gesturing to the rest of us what is and isn't acceptable in terms of group norms. In other words, you can challenge me, but not too much, and not in that way. Mead suggests that we cannot not be recognised by others, however it may not be the way we want to be recognised. Even misrecognition is a form of recognition. Others' recognition of us may horrify us, as it clearly did Sophie, but we cannot control how our gestures are responded to by others.

I would also contend that Sophie (and all the rest of us) are negotiating who we are in this group of the Senior Leadership team. Where some people are perceived to be doing less well/better from the metrics that are presented, there is negotiation of who we are as a part of this group. We are

constrained by norms and motivated by our values, which we are constantly renegotiating, and in this are negotiating our identity and the identities of the groups to which we belong. In organisational life we may have to become the kinds of selves which we do not recognise in order to be included. So, what is it that we are allowed to be in order to make our work work? And to what extent can we negotiate how we do this? In my narrative it appears not to be very much. I anticipate returning to the theme of recognition and identity in my final project.

Emotions and Conflict

In these conflicts there are a range of emotions evoked: pride, anxiety, anger, sympathy, fear and confusion amongst others. I felt proud and anxious about my MFQ results. I felt cross and sympathetic with Sophie. I felt scared and confused about the retribution I expected to receive from the Dean because of the rupture by Sophie. I painted Sophie as both the victim and the perpetrator of a crime. I see that I discussed the metrics to attempt to justify my success and to support my position about Lucy being 'not up to the job'. The judgments about who is good and who is bad, and the feelings of superiority, inferiority and shame continue, whilst in constant flux. I would argue that being involved in conflicts is an emotional process as how others view us is negotiated. My 'outburst' of discussing the MFQ data as being 'like a budget', was perhaps less shocking and vitriolic than Sophie's, but it was still driven by emotions and how I expected others to react to my entering into the discussion. I want to therefore explore the part that emotions play in the conflict and the negotiation of values, norms and identities.

In the theories of conflict that I referred to in section 5, there is little consideration of the relationship between emotions and conflict. Rahim argues that a moderate amount of task related conflict is helpful in maintaining an optimum level of organisational effectiveness that managers can use or harness, but affective conflict should always be minimised and is dysfunctional for an organisation (Rahim, 2001:65). As I discussed, the models I have explored seem to take a rational approach, focussing on managing conflict by providing a linear cognitive step-by-step approach. They make little allusion to how emotions may be entangled with conflict. An assumption is implied that an autonomous individual can make choices about whether to engage in conflict. I think this is where writers on organisational conflict often leave us believing that emotions are unhelpful or ignore the impact of emotions altogether. As demonstrated above, working in my organisation is an emotional experience as we are constrained by norms and motivated by our values, which we are

constantly renegotiating, and in this are negotiating our identity and the identities of the groups to which we belong.

I would previously have argued that I am 'rational' in conflict negotiation, that I could call upon 'evidence' to support my position and persuade others to my point of view. I now start to question this viewpoint. I was assuming that emotional reactions and venting of feelings, expressing displeasure or showing upset, were hindering logical thinking and arguing. In my narrative, I had denigrated Sophie's public display of emotion and considered her outburst to be inappropriate. But I also notice that when I observe conflicts, I feel sick and anxious, and when I engage in conflicts, I can feel my temperature rise, my heart getting fluttery and tears pricking at my eyes. When I questioned the use of the MFQ data it may have been less of an outburst than Sophie's, but it was still driven by an emotional response to the conversation, and was still a negotiation and potentially conflictual. Over the course of the DMan, I have come to be more aware of my emotional reaction to conflicts, both through exploring my narratives in these projects and in instances of conflict that have happened in the community meeting³⁰ on the DMan residential weekends. For example, following an altercation between a student, some faculty members and fellow students negotiating the student leaving the programme, without the doctoral qualification, I recollect myself leaving the community meeting very shaken and lying on the floor in my learning set room, crying and feeling sick. When Sophie and the Dean argued about the MFQ targets, I felt very emotional; I was not a detached, dispassionate observer. However, I also notice that I do not shy away from entering conflictual situations, despite the emotional turmoil I experience. I would suggest that it is not possible to separate task related conflict from emotions, and that whilst the authors I studied above on conflict may make helpful contributions to understanding conflict, there is limited focus on the way emotions are intertwined in 'task related' conflict. Kolb & Bartunek (1992:20) argue that management theorists often ignore emotional aspects of conflicts.

I am starting to see that acknowledging the importance that emotion may play in conflict is important. As I argued above, the experience of clarifying differences that call one's values into question provokes a negotiation of those values. This in turn questions our identity and strong emotions are evoked as part of that process. I don't see separating task related and affective

³⁰ During the DMan residential weekends the community come together at the community meeting which lasts 1½ hours on each morning. During this meeting, students and faculty can discuss anything they find relevant and important to themselves and their research, there is no pre-planned agenda. The DMan concentrates on group processes so this community meeting is a key element of our research. The community meeting is drawn from ideas of Group Analysis (Foulkes, 1984). The idea is to make links between the patterns of conversation in this learning community to what is happening for us in our workplace and to enable us to discuss our research.

conflict, as Rahim does, as helpful. Doing this makes it seem as if task related conflicts are appropriate and exist as a separate entity to emotional conflicts. Surely, disagreements about the tasks we will be doing are intertwined together with emotions rather than being a separate type of conflict? When we discussed the MFQ data with the Dean I felt nervous about speaking, Sophie was clearly upset by the conversation and was riled by what the results showed, the Dean re-acted in an angry manner and Sophie left the room and cried. All of these are part of the negotiation of how we use the MFQ data and the norms that we are constrained by and the values we hold. They are not separate from the negotiation. Non-rationalist theories of conflict, such as Kolb & Bartunek's, highlight the unconscious or spontaneous aspects of conflicts which are driven by feelings and not simply by reasoning. I suggest that we use feelings all the time in our interactions, not necessarily in a deliberate way but in involuntary and sometimes unconscious ways. My sense of anxiety, shame, glee and positive affirmation in the meeting, and Sophie's outburst, were not deliberate acts, but an embodied feeling of increasing tension. I was not simply reasoning logically but also had an emotional response, which is often ignored in linear conflict theories. Burkitt (2014), a professor of sociology and social psychology with a research interest in the social and psychological understanding of feelings and emotions, argues that thinking and feeling arise at the same time in our bodies, because we are embodied beings. He argues that knowing how to take the next step together is a feeling tendency, often called intuition. These feelings mediate our actions and interpretations. Our responses come from others' gestures and depend on the specific context, past experiences, personal interests and how we anticipate the chances of a likely outcome (Burkitt, 2014:55).

Stacey & Griffin (2008:13) argue, drawing on the work of Damasio (2000) on brain formation, that feelings and emotions are important in determining what course of action is taken. Damasio's research on brain damaged patients suggests emotions probably assist in reasoning when it comes to matters involving conflict (Damasio, 2000:41). I take this to mean that emotion supports the ability to make rational decisions, especially in conflictual situations. Fineman & Sturdy (1999:632) consider emotion as 'essential to control processes', and that emotions are part and parcel of our social lives. Purely rational decision making is thus impossible. As Stacey & Griffin argue:

"...decision making is then an emotional, ideological, social process of communicative interaction and power relating, rather than in terms of the thinking activity of a rational, autonomous individual." (Stacey & Griffin, 2008:13).

For me, being in the meeting I recount evoked a myriad of emotions, I felt proud when my results were good, anxious when I thought I may be asked how I had achieved these results, gleeful that

Sophie' results were not better than mine, and all of these were washing around my body when I spoke about the MFQ data as being like a budget. In summary, unlike the assumptions of Rahim, I realise that emotions aren't irrational, non-work related or inconvenient, but an inherent part of work and are valuable (albeit often uncomfortable). They bring human experience to the fore. I suggest that emotions are highly relevant, offering people the opportunity to expand their awareness of what is going on in social situations, to become aware of their emotional tendencies and to develop alternative responses to emotionally charged situations. Emotions are constituted within the social situation and reflect power relations as the enabling and constraining activities of others. They reflect what we care about in a situation.

Tolerating Anxiety

I have noticed that I struggle with conflictual situations and whether and how to accept and act into these situations. In some situations, I have tried to remove myself from conflicts or not to react to them to keep the level of conflict down. In other situations, I have acted/reacted. I have sometimes been angry at others, ashamed at myself and a whole range of other emotions have been invoked by both entering into conflicts or conversely avoiding conflicts. I notice that although I find conflict extremely emotional, I do not always withdraw from provoking them or entering them. Where I have reacted however, I quite often feel defiant (as I did in Project 2 when Brian questioned my way of managing a poorly performing staff member) or I have felt ashamed of myself (such as when I told Sophie I already paid her wages). I am now starting to think that if conflict is part of human nature, as Mead and Stacey & Mowles suggest, when people with different ideas and aims are trying to get things done together, then at times work relationships are likely to provoke intense emotions and to be both creative and destructive.

I am coming to realise how my own anxiety has been provoked through the conflicts I am engaged in and observe and how this may have prevented me from recognising the paradoxical nature of such conflicts. I would suggest that recognising both my own anxiety and how I have provoked others has made it, paradoxically, easier for me to live with that anxiety. Staying actively engaged in exploring other's otherness and what we have in common appears to have helped me to endure conflictual aspects of relationships. Moreover, being more critical of myself and being open to the fact that I may evoke different responses in others than those I have anticipated makes me at least attempt to stay actively engaged with others, despite the anxieties this has provoked in me. I illustrate this with an example of engaging in the large community at a DMan weekend. Since early in the DMan

process, I have rarely spoken into the larger community meeting. Latterly, I have tried to notice how others acted into the community meeting and my response and my perception of others' responses to these interventions. I was encouraged by my learning set, and other community members, to notice how I was reacting to others speaking and 'taking the risk' of stating out loud the emotions that were being evoked in myself. After sitting listening to the ebb and flow of conversation, I was moved to note how I was provoked by a conversation and took the courage to speak to express how I was provoked. I stated that I noticed how I was feeling annoyed that one person's need to speak to the community (Peter) appeared to have been cut down by another community member (Stephen). Peter responded in the positive to affirm my intervention, and Stephen expressed his annoyance at my intervention. I noted within myself a feeling of shock, shame and tears welling up. However, I tried to stay with the conversation, to respond to Stephen to acknowledge his feelings and to continue a discussion of why we had both felt as we had and what that evoked in the other. Rather than repeating patterns of ignoring what was happening for me, ignoring what may be happening for the other, running away from the conflict or sulking or getting angry, I engaged with the otherness of the other and in this felt a shift in my sense of self.

This is not the only way to respond in conflictual situations of course and I compare this to how the Dean responded to Sophie, rather than opening up the conversation about what was happening, he closed the conversation down, which I have done previously on many occasions when feeling anxious or threatened. I would argue that noticing what was happening and engaging in the otherness of the other is what Dewey (1922:76) referred to as observing the world in a consciously reflective way, which he argues occurs when habits have been disrupted, as they are when the response received may be different to the one anticipated. Dewey argued that: "...reflection, roughly speaking, is the painful effort of disturbed habits to readjust themselves" (ibid:76). I suspect I will return to reflection in my final project or synopsis.

Of course, I acknowledge that this now sounds as if 'I have got 'it'', whatever 'it' may be, and that I may just start charging around telling everyone that they 'piss me off' and that this would be a 'good thing', which I can acknowledge is not the case. What I am arguing for is an attitude that acknowledges conflict will arise when working with others. It is not about reaching for techniques that will eliminate or reduce conflicts. Rather, I would argue that we should stay open to the ambiguity and uncomfortable feelings that conflicts cause. This doesn't promise productive results, nor does it offer a way of manipulating others. I am coming to see how our minds and selves arise in interactions with others (Mead,1915) and that we are constrained and enabled by our interdependencies (Elias,1991). In this way, understanding that conflicts are an inevitable part of

discussion/negotiation and that there is no way to manage these in the conventional sense as implied by Rahim etc., has allowed me to focus more on what we are doing when we are coming together in meetings, in corridor conversations and coffee chats, and to start to explore these and respond to these in different ways. Mowles (2015b:71) suggests a movement away from being occupied as leaders in planning and strategising, to focus on what we are doing when we are participating together in our organisational life:

“What managers might do instead is to immerse themselves as fully as possible in the complex responsive processes of relating which takes place in all social life, noticing their own reactions to and perspectives on the situation as important data in deciding what to do about it. [...] A good manager is not someone who disdains politics, or is naïve about it, but who is politically savvy. It means being more honest with oneself about what stake one has in the game. This is part and parcel of developing a robust approach to dealing with uncertainty and assuming that it is the negating paradoxical pole of certainty and cannot be separated from it.” (Mowles, 2015:139).

I take this to mean that discussion and negotiation when our habits are disturbed, when the existing way of going on no longer seems to work, are the things that deserve our attention. The challenge with this view does not lie in trying to accomplish a goal, but in keeping the discussion going, holding onto my anxiety, and becoming conscious of when I or others try to close the conversation down. I am starting to see that we are all struggling with anxieties that working with others may evoke.

Conclusion

In my discussion, I have presented the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating to offer a different understanding of the conflictual situations I have encountered in management meetings. While writers on conflict management in the main discourse I have explored above (e.g., Rahim, Isenhardt & Spangle, Glasl etc.) advise strategies to help managers to ‘manage’ and ‘solve’ conflict, I have suggested that this is not helpful for the following reasons.

First, I argue, drawing on Mead (1934), Stacey et al. (2000), Stacey & Mowles (2016), Kolb & Bartunek (1992) etc., that conflict is inevitable when humans come together to negotiate how they want to work together. It is in conflictual processes through which we explore the other and ourselves, both at the same time. By exploring aspects of our self in the other, we may be surprised since in the interaction we will likely discover very different aspects of our self. I have argued that

conflict involves the negotiation of values and norms and in this there is likelihood of recognition/misrecognition in which our identities shift. People cooperate and compete with others for recognition, inclusion, rewards and getting ideas and actions legitimised, all the time. This is a constant process of mutual positioning. In retrospect, it appears inevitable to me that strong emotions would be evoked when metrics were presented in a manner which appears to highlight better and weaker performances. I can imagine that this is the case for many middle managers in many different types of businesses. What I make of this now is that conflict is much more important in our interactions than I have previously considered. From a complex responsive process of relating perspective, the potential for conflict is ever-present.

Secondly, unlike Rahim etc., who believe that managers can control conflicts in predictable and linear ways, I argue how limited our capacity is for predicting and ultimately managing communicative interactions, and that there are many opportunities for misunderstanding and conflict. An insight from complexity is that what emerges does so because of what all agents are doing or not doing, rather than from a blueprint or someone in control. So, whatever we do or don't do has the potential to influence what emerges. Negotiations only arise in gestures and responses between interdependent people. Conflicts do not occur because of any innate characteristic of any individual member of the SLT which can be 'managed away'. My response to the MFQ data presentation is not just dependent upon what is happening in the meeting, but also based on past experiences with Lucy and/or Sophie, or with the Dean or Brian and how the SLT collectively discuss other SLT members in our gossiping together, how we have shared information and how we may discuss this. It is also based on my own history and experiences of working with metrics and my experiences of being involved in conflicts. The response that Sophie and I made to the Dean's gesture was different because we have different histories, different things at stake in the meeting, different senses of our own identity and different interpretations of how others may respond. Mead (1934) argues that:

"Every individual self within a given society of social community reflects in its organised structure the whole relational pattern of organised social behaviour which that society of community exhibits or is carrying on, and its organised structure is constituted by this pattern; but since each of these individual selves reflects a uniquely different aspect or perspective of this pattern in its structure ... the structure of each is differently constituted by this pattern from the way in which the structure of any other is so constituted." (ibid:202).

What this quote means to me is that we learn through a process of socialisation to adapt to the expectations of others (or not), but our response to the social patterning is unique. Mowles

(2011:73) argues that because this response is unique to the generalised other: "...that both stability and change, general social themes and particular responses to them, are possible".

Finally, I argue that conflicts arise from, and evoke, strong emotions, which bring human experience to the fore, and that the evoking of strong emotions is human experience. I would argue against trying to overcome conflictual aspects of working in organisations but rather perceive them as inevitable when we work with others. I suggest that we need to take the conflictual elements of interaction seriously. The possibility of staying open to the ambiguity and uneasy feelings that conflicts may cause is important. I am not suggesting that doing this will lead to productive results. What it does do is open the door to critical involvement with others and with ourselves. It is not about seeking to avoid or resolve conflict, but about exploring and negotiating how we might go forwards together, since it is in the exploration and negotiation of our similarities and differences that the potential for understanding and novelty arises (Mowles, 2015a:128).

Looking to Project 4

In my business school, we have just been through a reorganisation of the management structure to 'align our structure more closely to the student experience by removing heads of departments and focussing on subject groups'.³¹ The proposed structure attempts to bring accountability and responsibility to heads of subject groups to act on metrics. In my first projects I have looked at the metrics that have been used in my business to seemingly measure the performance firstly of the teaching staff and then the middle managers. As we move into the new structure it appears that the heads of subject groups will be subject to more performance measures. My intention is to focus on narratives around encounters I have during this 're-alignment' process, and to consider how this additional measuring is impacting the identity of myself as a member of the senior leadership team, and the processes or recognition/misrecognition that are being evoked in order to deepen my enquiry into the emerging patterns of behaviour of middle managers when performance metrics are used as a principle tool of management. I have started to wonder what my job is and how to take the next step that is 'good enough for now'?

³¹ Taken from the consultation document which outlines the rational for reorganising the SLT of the business school.

3.4 Research Project 4 – Metrification of Personality

Introduction

In previous projects I have explored my experience of performance metrics in a UK business school when used as a principle tool of management. In Project 2 I looked at how using module feedback questionnaires (MFQ) was leading to feelings of anxiety and shame and impacting on relationships between managers and staff. In Project 3 I deepened my understanding of managing using metrics, exploring conflicts arising in the senior leadership team (SLT) when metrics were presented and discussed. I concluded that:

- the potential for conflict is ever-present as interdependent people interact with one another
- our capacity as managers for ‘managing’ conflicts is limited, as negotiation only arises in gestures and responses between interdependent people
- conflicts arise from and evoke strong emotions which bring human experience to the fore

In this project I will continue to explore the emerging patterns of behaviour of middle managers when performance metrics are used, and focus on a narrative following the restructure of my business school. Before doing this, I wish to return to the idea of metrics in Higher Education (HE). This is because my projects to date have focussed on conversations about metrics within my day-to-day practice which I have come to think of as inevitable. As I have become more uncomfortable about what managing using metrics brings out in people, I want to re-examine my assumptions about metrics in HE.

Metrics Ideology

I wish to re-explore metrics ideology in HE because I suggest, drawing on ideas from complex responsive processes of relating, that the context in which we find ourselves inevitably influences

what we think about how we practice. In Project 2, I pointed out that the proliferation of metrics in HE has arisen at the same time as the introduction of marketisation and managerialism in this sector. There has been a huge change in the UK HE sector as a consequence of a change from the government providing direct funding to HE providers, to students becoming fee paying. Universities have come under increasing criticism and scrutiny. At the same time, successive governments have promoted, not just the idea of marketisation of higher education but also an audit culture, whereby the 'performance' of universities can be improved by measuring them in various ways. There has been an increased focus on results and accountability (Perrin, 1998:368). Clarke & Newman (1997:40), suggest that the managerial discourse has helped push the change process along by making it seem that managerialism (and I would argue also metrification) is inevitable: that there is no other way. To explore this metrification, I draw on authors who have analysed this neoliberal turn in higher education (e.g., Collini, 2012, 2017; Williams, 2013) and those who have written about the rise in metrics more widely in society (e.g., Power, 2004; Beer, 2015; Muller, 2015, 2018) and I focus on the trends these authors all seem to be highlighting.

The first trend appears to be an increasing reliance on numerical indicators and rankings to evaluate phenomena that were previously assessed using qualitative criteria and professional judgements. Beer, a professor of sociology, who looks at how metrics and data reshape society, suggests that:

"...we are created and recreated by metrics; we live through them, with them, and within them. Metrics facilitate the making and remaking of judgements about us, the judgements we make of ourselves and the consequences of those judgements as they are felt and experienced in our lives." (Beer, 2016:3).

This statement emphasises the pervasiveness of metrics in contemporary life in the UK (and other developed nations). One could argue (*if one were to agree with the idea of the marketisation of university education*) that one *should* pay attention to National Student Surveys (NSS) and Teaching Excellence Frameworks (TEF). However, this alone doesn't explain to me the proliferation of other internal metrics (such as MFQs, RAG ratings, staff engagement scores etc.) that I have spoken about throughout my projects.

The second trend is the increasing dislocation between metrics and what they purport to measure. While metrics are clearly not new, Beer argues that there has been a clear shift in recent decades towards measurement: "...as a replacement or substitute for more qualitative judgement" (ibid:23). I would suggest that looking at a trip advisor score of the hotel I am thinking of staying at, which reflects the opinions of others who have stayed there, may provide some useful information about

location, cleanliness or the quality of the breakfast sausage, however, as Collini, a professor of intellectual history, argues:

“Asking users of higher education whether they are satisfied with the quality of the education they have received is likely to produce responses that are quantifiable but of little use, or responses that may be relevant to the activity but are not quantifiable.” (Collini, 2018:40).

Initially in UK HE, metrics around university research assessment exercises were treated as ‘proxies’ for quality or excellence, but it seems to me that more recently scores have often acquired a life and value of their own. For example, in my school, a fellow head has been able to dampen questions about poor MFQ scores by pointing to her degree’s subject high position in NSS. Conversely, I describe in P2 (p. 46) how I am called on by the Dean to discuss poor MFQ results and asked what I will do to ‘sort it out,’ but I rarely have a discussion with him about the quality of the education we are providing. It appears to me as if getting a gold TEF rating or high student approval in the NSS has become more important than providing a valuable education to students. I notice that I, and my staff, re-produce this in our conversations with each other. Staff come to their appraisals with copies of their MFQ data (or sometimes not) to show me how well (or not) they have been graded by students. What appears to be happening is that the proxy measure (high MFQ scores) for ‘good teaching’ becomes a target to be aimed at rather than ‘good teaching’ in itself. Muller (2015) suggests that the proxy becomes the measure, and the measure becomes the target.

Thirdly, as pointed out above, society appears to demand accountability. Power (1999) argues that there has been an explosion in auditing activity in the UK which has its roots in political demands for accountability and control. In HE, seeking accountability seems to have shifted from a legitimate demand that universities be accountable to society, to one where it appears that the only publicly acceptable way to measure ‘quality’ is through rankings of universities, using some of the ‘proxy’ measures of quality or attainment, such as NSS ranking tables. Collini points out that most people think they know that these rankings are flawed or limited, and yet seem to nevertheless appear to think they say something useful (Collini, 2018:53). For example, most people acknowledge that ranking tables are not neutral, as even the smallest change in the weighting of different measures would lead to significantly different rankings. The argument, by many, though, is that these rankings ‘must work’ at a general level because the ‘better’ universities are at the top. This seems to be similar to the argument I was making in project 3 that where metrics support what we already ‘know’ then we appear to think they add legitimacy, such as when module feedback ‘proved’ Lucy as not ‘being up to the job’. Similarly, NSS ranking tables ‘prove’ that Cambridge is a good university (or

one could argue that Cambridge coming out top validates the ranking tool itself). However, where the metrics do not support the pre-judgements we have we largely dismiss them, such as when I assumed Pete was misunderstood when his module feedback was poor, or the rumpus that erupted when the London School of Economics which is 'known' to be a good university, was awarded a TEF bronze award (The Independent, 2018).³²

In my business school, metrics seem to be taken up in ways which reflect what is happening more generally in the HE sector. At a recent strategy meeting a senior member of the SLT stated that:

*'We use metrics to think about the right things, it gives us more information. Measuring performance is a natural outcome of wanting to excel. You would be disappointed if we managed just on gut instinct.'*³³

There were no dissenting voices heard (publicly).

As an accountant of many years I understand that using metrics has an appeal. A number holds the promise of confidence, accuracy and neutrality. Power (2004) argues that metrification enables commensurability, thus potentially reducing cronyism, subjectivity or bias. In theory, metrics are convincing and leave little ground for any subjective response or reaction. It seems to me that the statement above appears to be suggesting that metrics are better than anything human intuition or judgment might offer, and that human agency is unreliable, inefficient and limited in its impartiality. If metrics bring these promises of neutrality and accuracy, I am starting to question why it is that the way we are taking them up in my school seems to make managing more difficult? Why is it that they appear to be provoking competition, conflict and strong emotions?

In order to explore this further, I look at a narrative from my practice where a different kind of metric, one which purported to measure the personality profiles of myself and my colleagues, was used. I describe how that moved beyond measuring the outputs of my work, by raising questions about whether my personality was 'good enough.' Before moving to my narrative, I firstly need to explain some changes that have happened since I wrote Project 3 to the structure of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) of my school. This helps explain some changes in terminology and puts into context the narrative that follows.

³² I find it interesting that LSE accused the TEF as reporting "...subjective estimates".

³³ Taken from my notes from a school meeting.

The Restructure

Since writing Project 3, a restructure of the SLT of the business school has occurred. The stated purpose of the restructure was to align ownership and responsibility of programmes to subject groups, and to place accountability and responsibility where performance was being managed. At the same time, the Dean stated, in a whole school meeting, that he was slimming down the SLT to provide more support 'on the front line'. This SLT restructure came hot on the heels of the restructure of the professoriate whereby eight professors/readers left the business school (not in circumstances of their own choosing), a process which had been simultaneously secretive and public and appeared to be acrimonious.

As part of the restructure of the SLT, the Heads of Department (HOD) role was removed and instead a Deputy Dean role was created. This means my line manager is now the Deputy Dean, as it is for the other Heads of Group (HOGs). Brian, my former line manager, was appointed as the Deputy Dean. The other HOD in post at the time of re-structure, Sheila, took an Associate Dean post, an effective demotion, and eventually left. One of the HOGs, Janet, resigned her post and was not replaced – her staff and work being split between Hugo (a fellow HOG) and myself. The structure prior and post reorganisation is presented below.

Fig. 3. Management of the Business School - prior to re-organisation.

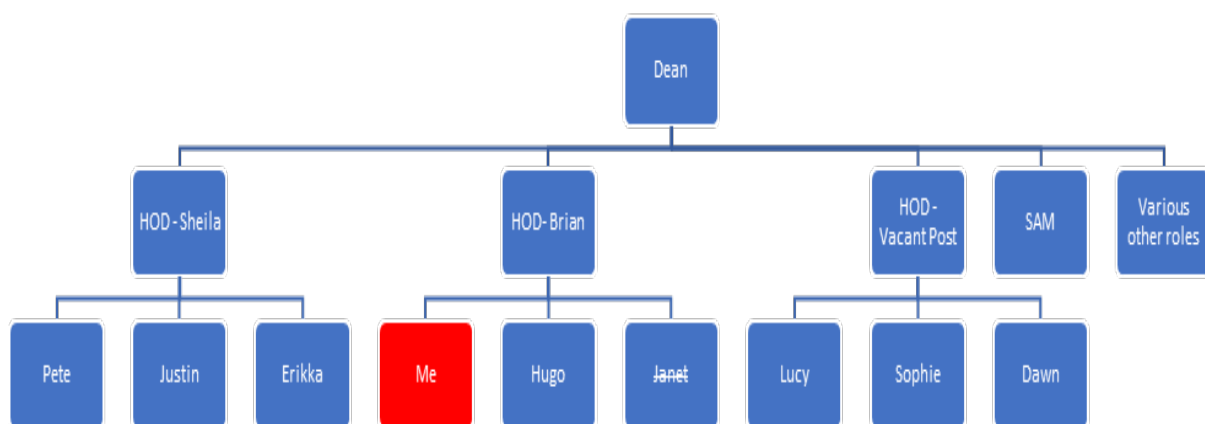
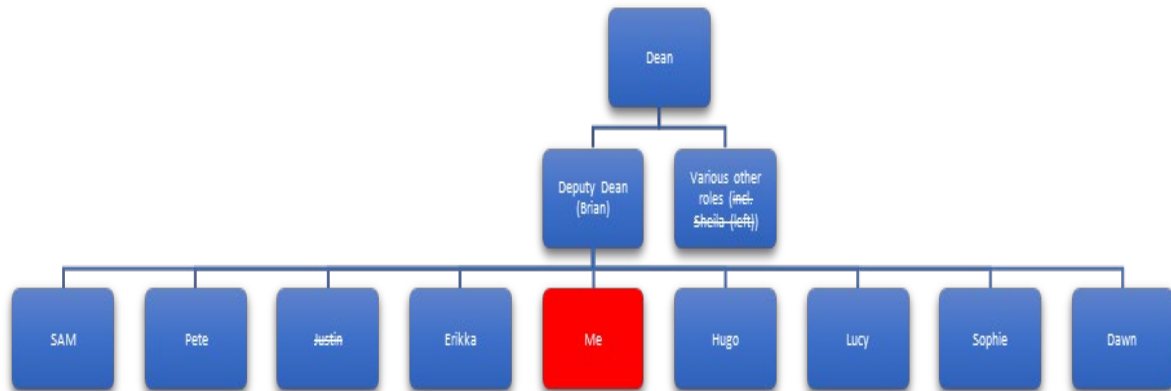


Fig. 4. Management of the Business School –6 month post re-organisation.



The HOGs are now referred to as ‘Heads’ and collectively meet with the Deputy Dean in a weekly operational meeting which, with some amusement, we named OMG³⁴ (Operational Management Group). Everything has changed: my job has expanded to incorporate Janet’s work, my cosy chats with Brian, Hugo and Janet have gone, I am now one of seven heads reporting to Brian, and there are no longer any Heads of Department to mediate for each of the heads. And yet nothing has changed: I have largely the same job, my staff (plus six/seven extras) still do the same work, and Brian is still my boss.

To explore the changing relationships and use of metrics further, I describe an SLT away-day I participated in, which shows how metrics are affecting the middle managers, where there were tears, shocks and challenges.

The Set Up to the Away-Day

The Dean prefaced the away-day by stating that he had recently undergone some training with a consultancy firm called ‘Team Results’³⁵, and found it hugely enjoyable and insightful. His e-mail read ‘the training promotes greater self-awareness. What are our individual go-to styles of working? How does that shape our interactions in teams? And, how does that help others to work with us? I

³⁴ OMG in text speak stands for ‘Oh my God’ and when spoken as O-M-G is often accompanied by an eye-roll indicating something ridiculous.

³⁵ Team Results is a fictional name for the consultancy company and tool used, to protect the anonymity and trademarked product.

am hoping that individually and as a team we can gain a huge amount of insight from the day.³⁶

Attached to the email was the Dean's personality profile from the previous training he had undertaken and an indication that an external facilitator would be in touch.

A few weeks later an email popped into my inbox at 8.46am on a Thursday morning with a link to an online questionnaire to complete in advance of the away-day. I clicked the link, looked at the overview of the questions, groaned and closed the web page. The questionnaire was a personality type survey, and was going to give a profile of me, based on the way I answered the questions. Though I am unable to determine why, I decided there was no way I was going to answer. I sent a message to my learning set³⁷ asking them what the risks might be of refusing to complete the questionnaire. I got swift responses with sympathetic comments, stories of having done these types of activities and nods to keep an eye out as it might be great fodder for a DMan project!

Eventually, on Friday night, having consumed a glass of wine, I decided to complete the survey. I felt cross, anxious and coerced into completing it. I found myself completing the questions as faithfully as I could, whilst muttering to myself about 'stupid' questions. The questions were asking about what ways of working I preferred (e.g., Do you enjoy gathering and reporting information or establishing new ways of working?), how I relate to others (e.g. Do you enjoy being the centre of attention or are you happy in your own company?) or how I make decisions (e.g. Do you make decisions based on facts or beliefs? ³⁸). I completed it as quickly as possible, giving little thought to what I was doing, closed my computer and returned to the more enjoyable activity of a Friday night with my family.

The following week I had several conversations with other Heads about the survey, questioning what they thought and whether they had completed it. Several, like me, seemed to show a reluctance to engage with it. A few of the Heads groaned together about another away day, wondering about the type of stupid exercises we would be expected to engage in, with someone speculating whether we would need to build newspaper giraffes or Lego bridges. We giggled about whose profile would come out with the most 'leadership qualities'. Given the focus in previous meetings together (see previous projects) I shared that I felt that this profile and away-day was clearly assuming that we needed to be individually and collectively 'improved'. Given that we were unable to consistently

³⁶ Taken from personal email communication.

³⁷ During the three to four years of study on the DMan programme we work together with small groups of three or four other researchers, a learning set. We share our projects with each other, and we provide comments on each other's projects indicating what areas are persuasive or interesting.

³⁸ Given the trademarked nature of the product used, and the fact this was completed some time ago, this is my recollection of the types of questions given the profile I later received.

produce 'excellent' results, maybe this was a way to find out how to fix us? Erikka, had read the Dean's profile and pointed out the high rating he had received for being analytical and structured. After giggling about whether that was why Dawn and I managed to get extra resources because we were adept with spreadsheets and graphs, we speculated as to whether we would want a profile that was similar to the Dean, or whether we might all be safer if we each came out with a range of different personality profiles. Pete ventured that it was highly likely that Sheila would come out as something weird on her profiling, suggesting that it could be the final nail in her coffin and mimed sealing the lid of an imaginary coffin with a pretend hammer and nails.

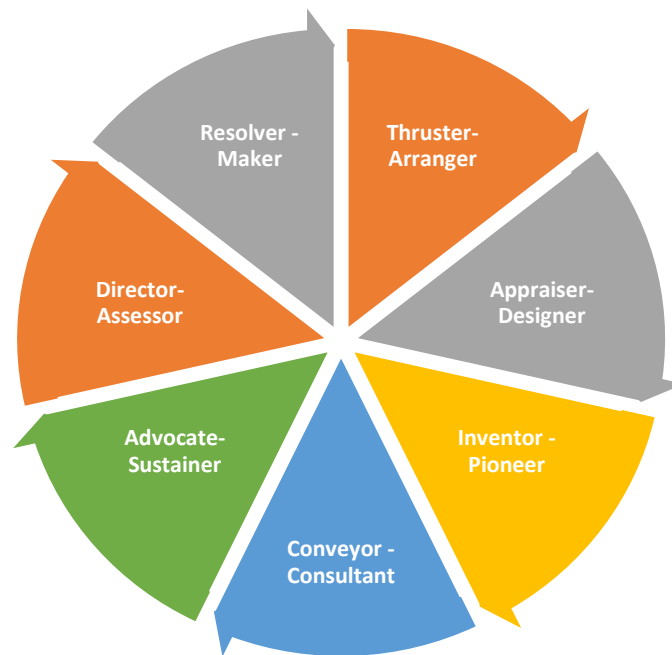
I realise now that I felt anxious about the purpose of the personality profiling. What if I also came out as something weird and my face no longer fit? What if it was considered that I could not be 'fixed'. After all, Team Results' website promised that 'by understanding individual energies and preferences, you can more easily fix broken teams, and accelerate the performance of those teams' and that 'enhanced team performance begins with the development of the individual'.

The Team Profile

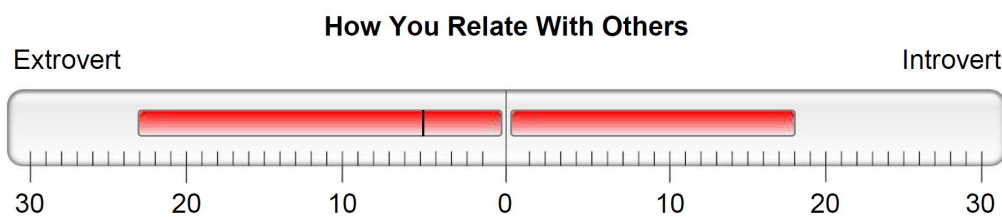
Three weeks later I received a text from Erikka. It read, 'I am really upset about my team profile. I got the same as Sophie³⁹! What did you get?' Torn between wanting to respond to Erikka and wanting to see what my profile said, I decided to do the latter first. I searched for the e-mail I had ignored earlier and opened the report. On the first page, in enormous letters, under my name, it stated, 'Your major role is Thruster-Arranger'. It was followed by a diagram showing the 'team circle' highlighting my major role.

³⁹ See Project 3 for an introduction to Sophie. In that project I explored the jealousy I felt of her competence, the shifting power relations between us and my glee as new metrics were introduced that favoured my modules more and hers less so.

Fig 5. Team Circle



Following this, were comments about what this profile meant for how I worked and a series of diagrams giving scores for ‘how you relate with others’ (extrovert-introvert), ‘how you gather and use information’ (practical – creative), ‘how you make decisions’ (analytical – beliefs), and finally ‘how you organise yourself and others’ (structured – flexible)⁴⁰. All were shown on a scale of +30 to -30. The net score was also shown by taking the lower score from the higher. To give an example, my relationship score was measured as 23 extrovert, 18 introvert, giving me a net extrovert score (shown by the thick black line) of 5.



I fleetingly noticed that I had a score on the analytical scale similar to the Dean, before sending a text back to Erikka. ‘I think I am expected to organise the orgies – Thruster-Arranger’. ‘The same as

⁴⁰ Margerison et al. (1986:7) call these four factors relationships (R), Information (I), Decisions (D) and Organisation (O), and therefore the questionnaire provides a RIDO score.

me and Sophie' she responded. 'No, no, no' I thought, feeling upset at being categorised the same as Sophie. I immediately sent a message to my learning set 'consider myself to be pigeonholed' it said, 'apparently I like working to deadlines and expect others to as well'. I knew I had pulled out lines from the profile that would make them laugh and was paying little or no attention to the content of the report, other than to search for things that would make them giggle. Marcus immediately responded, 'Incontrovertible proof of the assessments accuracy, you have deadline-it-is'. I felt relieved and giggled at his response.

When this away-day had first been raised, I told Brian that I felt sick about the day and he had responded that whilst he understood my objections there was no point in wasting my energy because the day was going ahead. I now started to think of ways I might avoid it. I joked with Erikka about having a puncture on the way to the meeting or whether I might say I had a sick child. The night before Sophie, Erikka and I had an email exchange speculating about how the day may go and who might get told off the most. We poked fun at the Thruster-Arranger label in ribald manner. I wonder now that as well as mocking the tests, we were also worried that if there were too many thruster-arrangers, then one or more of us may need to leave. Maybe it was important to be the 'best' thruster-arranger.

Personality Tests

When reflecting on my experience of taking this test I noticed how endemic they are in management development. Paul (2004:xiii) claims that the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator test⁴¹ has been given to 2.5 million people each year, is used by 89 of the companies in the Fortune 100 and that there are over two and a half thousand different personality tests. Over my career I have been asked to take tests like this many times and have never challenged their use.

First Reflections on Personality Tests

I was first asked to do a test like the one described above in my early career in accounting practice. I recollect poring over the results that I received, trying to identify myself in the information it contained. I remember having a high 'completer-finisher' score and felt both proud and confused of

⁴¹ MBTI is an instrument created by Isobel Briggs Myers, a Pennsylvania housewife, and her daughter Katherine Cook Briggs, assigning the test taker a personality type represented by four letters. It purports to help identify strengths and facilitate teamwork.

the result. I felt proud because an auditor was expected to have an eye for detail and completing tasks was important, so I felt that this showed I was good at the job. However, I also felt confused. I had never considered myself to be a 'completer-finisher', I was more a 'that-will-be good-enough'.

Later in my career, in professional education, when I appointed a deputy managing director, HR insisted applicants needed to complete a psychometric type test, despite the fact they had all been working for me for over five years. I remember receiving one profile and laughing when it highlighted that the staff member was an excellent team player. I recollect thinking to myself that they had clearly lied on their profile, as in my experience, it didn't matter how anyone worked with them because they were always difficult.

I now notice that despite the fact I largely dismissed what the findings reported on both occasions, I didn't question the legitimacy of such tests being used at work. I saw them in much the same way I would have seen the tests I had taken as a teenager when reading 'Just Seventeen'⁴² which were supposed to help me identify what 'type of teenager' I was or 'how to know if your crush likes you'. I found the tests seductive but also rather silly. I gave no thought to how they were supposed to work.

The Team Role Profile

As I researched the type of profiling I did in my early career, I recognised this as a Belbin style test. The Belbin test (1981) was developed by observing successful teams, using simulated management games, to try to determine which factors influenced team success or failure. Belbin used behavioural observations, recording personality and mental abilities of group members to produce a taxonomy of nine group role preferences. He argued that group members have the tendency to display particular behavioural patterns in their interpersonal interactions which influenced the group in achieving tasks. One of the major claims that Belbin made was that balanced teams (where all the 9 team roles he had identified were present) would perform better than unbalanced teams (where roles were duplicated). He argued that having a balanced group role configuration would ensure quality interpersonal interactions, which in turn would influence group performance and lead to success. This reminds me of the exploration & critique I made of cybernetic systems in project 2 (p. 50), which claims that we can keep a system in equilibrium by allowing a manager to step outside

⁴² Just Seventeen was a British magazine I read as a pre-teenager, which included many articles and quizzes such as those listed above.

and apply a fix. In project 2 I argued that there was a gap between this cybernetic theory and what was happening in the teams I was working with.

The test I took claims to be based on similar assumptions to Belbin (1981) and Myers-Briggs (1995)⁴³. Team Results' website states that each sector in the team circle describes both a work function enjoyed (e.g., Arranger), and the behavioural characteristic associated with someone preferring that sector (e.g. Thruster). I have found it difficult to discover how the measure on a 60-point scale of traits such as extroversion is arrived at and how this is 'translated' into the quadrant on the team circle.⁴⁴ However, I note that the questionnaire has 60 questions broken down into four main categories, namely four factors of relationships, information, decisions and organisation (RIDO). This implies that each RIDO score is calculated on how each question is answered (a higher score given when there was a stronger response). Davies et al. (1998) state that the scores achieved on the four RIDO factors are placed into a computer programme, which then places the respondent in the sectors in the team circle. I find it interesting that Sophie and I scored very differently on all four RIDO areas and yet we both ended up in the same quadrant of the team circle. Margerison et al. (1986:14) acknowledge that people in the same quadrant may perform each of the major roles in slightly different ways but argue they also have a high degree of similarity, e.g., arguing that Thruster-Arrangers all exhibit high levels of analysis and enjoy a well-organised structural approach to the job.

Assumptions in the Tests

What all such tests assume is that if we recruit people with the correct characteristics to make a perfectly balanced team (in advance) then they will perform well together and deliver a good output. This presumes that groups perform optimally, based on an aggregate set of simplistically defined discrete individuals. If we can 'fix' the individuals in the team, as the Team Results website promises, then we must be able to create high functioning teams.

The first assumption underpinning these tests is that a well-balanced team has representation from a variety of preference types. Studies which have tested theories that balanced teams produce better performance have been inconclusive, with some showing little or no relation between role

⁴³ Taken from the consultancy companies own website.

⁴⁴ It is interesting to note that the model that I used has never been reviewed in any refereed journals and as such it appears has never been exposed to a reviewer's critique. Much of it's methodology, data and research is only available to it's consultants. Paul (2004) states that despite the prevalence of personality tests they have received surprisingly little scrutiny.

balance and performance (e.g., Senior:1997, Van de Walter et. al: 2008, Batenburg et.al: 2013) and others validating the assumption (e.g., Higgss et al:2005, Meslec & Curşeu:2015). The assumption is that from the innate behaviour types of individuals, the tool can predict how individuals will work together to form a team. This implies that the dynamics of a group can only be understood through how each individual, with innate characteristics, interacts with others to create an outcome. Focus is first on the personal and psychological characteristics of individuals and only then the connection between them, assuming that society is a separate phenomenon created by the aggregation of individual interactions. This assumption was affirmed when the Dean stated that the away-day would explore ‘How our individual way of working shapes our interactions in teams?’ I also recall the Heads gossiped about whether it would be better to be ‘like the Dean’ or to be evenly spread around the team roles, thus further affirming the above assumption about individuals and teams.

The second assumption is one of linear causality, i.e., a direct correlation between cause and effect. Using the test should lead to a pre-defined (and positive) outcome. By engaging in this tool there would necessarily be enhanced personal and team effectiveness. This makes assumptions about how humans behave, which is rooted in a systemic understanding of organisations and individualistic understanding of experience⁴⁵.

The final assumption is that certain people prefer certain roles. This is based on the typological theories proposed by Carl Jung in his book *Psychological Types* (Sharp, 1987). Personality tests seek to uncover innate preferences inherent in individuals and assume that people’s behaviour is rooted in their innate typology. This takes for granted an individual model of psychology, within which individuals can learn about their own mental models and can make choices to change the way they behave to better align with what is expected of them. This belief is affirmed by the tool’s website which states that it can help a leader ‘know’ who he has in their team and was reiterated by the Dean when he stated that taking part in the test would help understand “What are our individual go-to styles of working?”

Whether personality tests in general, and Team Results in particular, tell us anything worth knowing about personality is contested. For example, Paul (2004:136) suggests that the authors of the Myers-Briggs test did not understand Jung. Jung didn’t believe that personality types were easily identifiable, nor that people could be permanently slotted into a category, instead suggesting that type changed over the course of peoples’ lives. Mischel (2009), a psychologist critiquing personality testing, argued that personality is complex and contingent upon the situations in which we find

⁴⁵ I explored this further in Project 1.

ourselves. Gladwell (2004:44) argues that how we answer such tests is affected by what circumstances are foremost in our minds when we take the test, such that the outcome could well be different if we were to take the same test a second time.

Before I go any further it may be useful to situate such approaches to personality and teams in terms of the theories of change which underpin them. Stacey (2006), writing in a therapeutic context, identifies three major theories about the nature of the individual, the relationship between the person and the social, and the nature of causality which are relevant; that is the autonomous, expressivist and social individual. Considering self as an autonomous individual sees each person as a separate, autonomous, and rational individual who can bring about change in themselves and their environment through their own conscious and rational effort. Stacey (2006:194) points out that this theory underpins systems thinking (which is a fundamental influence upon managerialism) as well as most clinical and psychoanalytic approaches to therapy. I would also argue this underpins personality testing. If we consider self as cut off from other selves who define themselves through processes of introspection and reason and change in a person comes about because of a rational re-ordering of individual thought processes, then these tests make sense. They assume that the whole (the team) is simply the aggregation of all the parts (individuals) and that although individuals will interact with each other this does not involve any change to those individuals as a result of the interaction and that personality remains static and fixed. The expressivist perspective assumes that each individual has an urge to self-actualise (ibid:197), causality is formative, and is focused on unfolding some sort of hidden individual potentiality. The social perspective sees the individual as a cultural being, necessarily dependent on others (ibid: 191) with change occurring through a complex social process of communicative interaction. This is the theory of change which has primarily influenced the development of my thinking through the projects which have made up my thesis thus far.

My research has started to question whether assumptions about autonomous individuals are helpful in understanding how metrics are taken up in human organisation. To test these ideas further, I have turned to academic traditions which take a more radically social view of understanding of individuals and teams, because having enrolled on the DMan programme I have been exposed to social theories of individuals and groups. What interests me is what is left out in these personality tests to explain predictably unpredictable group dynamics. Elias argues that:

“...the figuration of interdependent human beings cannot be explained if one studies human beings singly. In many cases the opposite procedure is advisable – one can understand many aspects of the behaviour or actions of individual people only if one sets out from the study of

the pattern of interdependence, the structure of their societies, in short from the figurations they form with each other.” (Elias, 1970:73)

This leads me to reconsider the idea of ‘self’ which these personality tests assume. In order to question this further I wish to look into authors who discuss identity because I suggest that being given RIDO scores and people being labelled as ‘types’ may change how we respond to each other. How does being measured and defined in these ways affect my sense of self? Who I am?

Identity

Stacey (2006:192) argues that sense of self, that is identity, differs from culture to culture and evolves over time. Burkitt (2008:5-9), a professor of sociology and social psychology with a research interest in the social and psychological understanding of feelings and emotions, suggests that during the Enlightenment, rationalists (such as Descartes) emphasised that the mind was paramount and saw people as rational beings. Romantics (such as Rousseau), emphasised people as irrational beings, ruled by bodily passions. Both considered the individual as cut off from other individuals seeing self as located inside, which Elias critically referred to as a “...windowless monad” (Elias, 1985:60), whereby a person lives in a world of their own, cut off and separate from society. Burkitt suggests that the Western tradition of thought is based around a view that the human being is a self-contained unit with:

“...their uniqueness deep inside themselves, like pearls hidden in their shells.” (Burkitt, 2008:1)

This way of thinking continues to form the foundation of many ideas of self, and Stacey (2006:194) argues it still underpins much of the dominant discourse in sociology, psychology and organisational theory. I propose that the idea of an unchanging self, cut off from other selves, underpins personality testing: understanding the individual mind as a cognitive, autonomous system inside a person, with change arising from individuals changing their mental models. The Dean affirmed his understanding of this when he presented to us the same personality profile he had completed with another group of individuals. He clearly believed that personality was fixed inside and unrelated to the groups with which we are working.

In order to reconsider this idea of self, I wish to re-evaluate part of my narrative that cannot be explained if I consider ‘self’ as solely something fixed and contained ‘inside’. When I first received my label of thruster-arranger and realised that I was in the same category as Sophie, I was upset and

was imagining whether that represented me and accorded with a sense of 'who I am'. Rather than just rejecting the label I banded together with Erikka and Sophie, the other thruster-arrangers, in advance of the away-day. I suggest that whilst we were mocking being labelled as 'Thruster-Arrangers', we were also looking to each other to affirm/deny that label. When I questioned the profile in the personality test I looked to others (Erikka and Sophie and also my learning set) to see if the image I had of myself was reflected in the words, attitudes and actions of the others, and I suspect Erikka and Sophie were doing something similar. Whilst I may have had a sense of 'who I am' and was having a silent conversation (with others in mind) I also looked to others to affirm or reject the sense of self I had. I did not look solely inwardly to myself to any certain sense but also to others. This highlights to me that self, rather than being solely contained inside me, fixed and unmoveable, appears to be constantly under construction in interaction with others. Self seems to contain some aspects of continuity but is also iterated in the interactions we have with others.

Burkitt (2008:13) draws on the philosopher Hegel to question the idea of 'self' as located inside. For Hegel, the individual is a cultural being, necessarily dependent on others, who only develops a mind and purpose of his own in interaction with others (Stacey, 2006:197). Burkitt takes up the idea of humans as social beings and of self being created in society, contingent on different influences that have informed us, "...literally making us who we are" (Burkitt, 2008:26). He argues that:

"The idea of having an 'inner' self, waiting to be revealed somewhere inside the body or mind feels correct, but only as a metaphor. The metaphorical sense of having an inner self arises through a silent dialogue we constantly hold with ourselves (not necessarily going on 'in the head'), which is only possible through social relations and dialogue with others." (ibid:26).

This means that we exist as embodied beings in social relations when we participate in any activity and, together, we take part in processes of identity formation. This way of thinking would help explain why I did not simply accept my label as a 'thruster-arranger' but looked to the response of others to affirm/deny that label. And they similarly looked to me.

Elias, who writes in the Hegelian tradition and whose process sociology is one strand underpinning the theory of complex responsive processes of relating⁴⁶, makes the case that "One cannot imagine an 'I' without a 'he' or a 'she', a 'we', 'you' (singular and plural) or 'they'" (Elias, 1978:123). In his 1991 book *The Society of Individuals* he points out that, in Western Europe, with the rise in the power of nation states, people gain social advantage by showing greater sensitivity towards others'

⁴⁶ See Project 3 for a fuller description of complex responsive processes of relating. This is my preferred way of making sense of organisational life.

feelings, meaning that people learn to regulate and monitor their feelings and expressions in the presence of others, as a person out of control of their feelings has less influence. This resonates with me because I am starting to see that 'my' identity is part of a mutual process, enabled and constrained by others, within the groups to which I belong. For Elias, the very structures of our personalities have arisen and continue to arise from the social processes which we form and are forming us at the same time.

Elias on Identity

Elias & Scotson (1994), in *The Established and the Outsiders*, study relations between an established group and newcomers in the community of 'Winston Parva', a British village with a new housing estate. They describe how newcomers and an established group of inhabitants became caught up in dynamics of inclusion and exclusion showing how gossip, stigmatisation and domination are used to generate a 'them' and 'us', the 'us' being the heroic established group and the 'them' the migrant estate-dwellers. Elias & Scotson argue that engaging in interaction with people involves dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. Their view is that, since, as humans, we derive our identity from the different groups to which we belong, what is at risk in the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion is our identity. Elias argues that there is a negotiating of who is 'in' and who is 'out,' who 'we' are and who 'they' are. Those who speak out in this negotiation risk being excluded by expressing an opinion that differs from the majority. This then risks our identity, as 'I/we' identities are so closely related. Since individual identity is partly shaped by group membership and it is weakened by exclusion from a group.

Elias argues that our identity is being formed relationally as we engage in social interaction with others in which norms enable and constrain the actions and desires of interdependent people (Elias, 1994:345). For example, when Marcus referred to me as having 'deadline-itis' I felt amused and recognised by him. Over the course of the DMan, I have never yet missed a deadline and seem to be respected and admired for this, especially by Marcus. The exchange between us was important, because it made me feel appreciated by someone who I wanted to be recognised by. However, being recognised like this has made it even harder for me to ask for project deadline extensions without calling into question this part of my identity. I feel constrained by this 'label'. In this way this characteristic has become part of who 'I' am in the learning set, reinforced by others, and constrains and enables the actions I take.

As I have reviewed my narrative, I have reflected on the anxiety I had about the test and away-day. In taking Elias's ideas about how our very sense of self is created and recreated within the groups to which we belong, I want to explore the strong sense of potential exclusion that I felt.

First, I have previously acknowledged in my Project 1, my desire to be a 'good corporate soldier'. I would suggest that the Dean telling us that engaging in the away-day would be a useful process and sharing his profiles with us constrained and enabled whether and how I engaged with the test. I could have refused to complete the survey but, as I joked with my learning set, there would be consequences. What these would be I cannot know for sure, but my expectation, based on my private conversation formed by, amongst other things, previous meetings with this group of people, would have been disapproval, anger, shaming and possible exclusion from the group of senior managers. Given the powerful norm I suggest was created by the Dean sharing his profile, I realise I could not conceive of having turned up at the away day without completing a profile. That wasn't 'who I was'. I felt constrained by being seen to be a 'good corporate soldier' and what I imagined that meant.

Second, when reviewing the organisation charts above (p. 106) it is noticeable that 5 of 23 SLT colleagues have left. In most instances there has been a lack of mourning for these lost colleagues and, in some instances, there have been expressions of joy and relief. My initial thoughts were that the Dean was playing on insecurities about our jobs and his rhetoric in the whole school meeting about how he was slimming down the SLT to provide more support 'on the front line' and this reorganisation following from another in which eight people left the school feeds this vulnerability.

However, I realise that we are also doing this to ourselves. For example, several of us joked about the 'nails' being put into Sheila's coffin and some of the SLT giggled about who might be next to leave, suggesting that heads of smaller groups had better 'watch their backs'. The night before the away-day Erikka, Sophie and I collectively came up with the defiant picture of us as 'Thruster-Arrangers', and I worried about not being the 'best' Thruster-Arranger and being superfluous to requirements. I, and others, gossiped whether it would be better to have a profile like the Dean's or to be evenly spread. It may be more comfortable to make a joke of the results of the questionnaire than to discuss our anxieties about the changes that are happening or any worries about what the results may 'really' be used for. I notice now that I have failed to pay attention to the nature of the joking and gossip in which all members of the SLT appear to be involved. This may be something I return to in my synopsis.

Third, the use of performance metrics to discipline people in my organisation has emerged as a 'norm' throughout my projects situated in the business school. In project 3 I looked at how I used

performance metrics as a measure of someone not being up to their job and in project 2 I explored an attempt to discipline someone who was perceived to be failing, based on module feedback questionnaires. I realise now that I had imagined that the output of this personality test could be taken up in similar ways, either as a weapon to diminish or discipline each other and/or conversely to avoid conflicts that I anticipated might arise as we discussed this new form of metric. I expected that the output of these questionnaires would be used as a form of disciplining (oh Emma behaves like that because she is analytical) or to cover over what might really matter (If I am 5 extrovert but Lucy is 15 introvert we can attribute some of our conflicts to these personality traits). In our gossiping together I can see that we discipline each other, conflict with others and form new alliances as we compare our profiles to others'. I note how the SLT are simultaneously enabling and constraining one another in our conversations as we giggle over who is 'extrovert', who is 'weird' and who is most like the Dean. This shows how our personality, who we are, rather than being static and held inside, like personality tests would suggest, is constantly being affirmed/re-constructed in our interactions. Maybe though, it is safer to point to a tendency to act like an 'extrovert', which is supposedly a trait we are born with, rather than take responsibility for our actions.

Going back to the sense of self I explore above (p. 116), through my research I am starting to see that my prior assumptions about self, have shifted from an individualist assumption to one where I am starting to consider that individuals are social through and through. I am starting to question my habitual ways of working (and the theoretical assumptions that might account for these) in ways that enable me to consider alternatives that I hope will prove more useful to myself and colleagues.

I now consider the double bind⁴⁷ of the situation I found myself in. It seemed as risky to complete the test as to not. I speculate that I may have been excluded if I refused to co-operate and complete the questionnaire and equally I felt I may be excluded if I don't have a profile that 'fits' or there are too many of us in one quadrant of the team circle. Drawing on Elias, if we derive part of our identity from the groups to which we belong, if we are excluded from a group with which we want to identify, we lose a part of our identity, which immediately makes us feel insecure and vulnerable. Maybe I will be the one on the receiving end of the gossip next time for a weird profile or the one who 'no longer fits'? Keeping myself included feels like an imperative. There seems to be an ongoing struggle to be included, whilst the possibility of exclusion appears to be ever present. I suggest that these strong feelings of potential exclusion make it scary to question the 'way things are done here'.

⁴⁷ See Project 3 for an explanation of double bind.

What I am starting to consider is how best to co-operate and compete in this metrics game? I am starting to understand the values and ethics of what is at stake in terms of who is ultimately included/excluded. This has implications for what we are becoming and provokes strong feelings. This is something I now consider is worth paying attention to.

I will now return to my narrative and to the away-day where these feelings of exclusion were brought to the fore, where I and others tried to question this metrification of our personality and the purpose of these tests, and where I felt my sense of self was further questioned.

The Away-Day

The Senior Leadership Team gathered over Danish pastries at the universities drab 1970's conference venue. I had accidentally on purpose⁴⁸ forgotten to print my profile out, which was supposed to be discussed during the day. When I mentioned this to Sophie, she said 'You are such a rebel these days Emma'. I felt both proud and panicked. The Dean opened the away-day by introducing the external facilitator, Ruth, and re-iterating how helpful he had found doing this activity on a Deans' development programme. The Dean handed over to Ruth, who had arranged all the chairs in a circle, facing the centre. Ruth asked us, as a means of introduction, to select a post-card from the array at the back of the room, to determine how we all felt about the day. I worried about what to select and eventually found a card of the three wise monkeys⁴⁹. I felt nervous as I sat back down with this postcard.

We sat back in the circle and Ruth invited us to go around, showing the postcard we had selected and what it signified to us. The first few people had selected trees (to represent the possibility of new life unfolding), a rainbow (because it was just so pretty), etc. I stifled a desire to laugh. Erika, who was before me in the circle, also offered something light and fluffy (I can't recollect what exactly) and I felt like I wanted to stick two fingers down my throat at what I considered to be a stupid platitude. I felt angry with her. How could she gossip with me about her concerns and yet not say anything?

⁴⁸ This was a phrase my mother used a lot when I was growing up. It indicates that you do something by accident, when in fact you meant to do it.

⁴⁹ To me these indicate the traditional western idea of "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" which typically refers to turning a blind eye to what is going on.

I showed my postcard, feeling a rising sense of panic, and blurted out that I had chosen this card because I did not want to be in this forum, I didn't believe these types of personality tests were helpful and that there was a real risk that these types of days covered over the conflicts and challenges that were right in front of us. Like the wise monkeys we wouldn't see, hear or speak about what was important. As I spoke, I heard my voice hitch up a notch and felt tears pricking at my eyes.

Ruth thanked me for my input with a smile and a simper and then invited the next person to share their postcard. I felt detached from what was going on, in a panic, feeling that I might cry. I was shaking and couldn't drag my eyes from my shoes. I don't remember what the next person said, but remember it being light and frothy.

Then Sophie spoke in a strident voice. She had a postcard with some fluffy sheep on it. She is going to say something cheerful, I thought. Instead, what she practically shouted was 'I have chosen these sheep because I feel I have been dropped in this pen, shorn, chopped up and will be placed on a BBQ to be cooked slowly and painfully'. Oh my god, I thought, there is going to be a riot. I felt my heart beating painfully inside my chest. Ruth, with her head patronisingly on one side, politely thanked Sophie for her comments and moved onto the next person in the circle. I looked at Sophie and noticed how she also seemed to be shuffling uncomfortably in her chair.

My tide of panic continued to rise. I felt flutters in my body and palpitations. How could everyone ignore what Sophie and I had said? I couldn't speak. I knew I would burst into tears if I tried. Ruth finished the session by cheerily thanking us all, stating that there were clearly some things to explore, and we would come back to these later in the day.

Crying

Ruth asked us to break into pairs to discuss something⁵⁰, as she explained listening was an important skill for people in groups. One of us had to listen without saying anything for three minutes and then we were to swap over. I turned to Erikka and she looked at me and thankfully said she would talk first. She talked and I pretended to listen, not hearing what she was saying. I felt tears building and I was hyper-ventilating. 'Swap over' said Ruth brightly. I opened my mouth to talk and heard a sob escape. With tears streaming down my face, I grabbed my phone, fled the room and ran straight to the ladies toilets where I locked myself in a cubicle, my whole body wracked with sobs. After what

⁵⁰ I don't recollect and my notes from the away-day do not mention what it was we were invited to discuss.

felt like a long time I sent a message to my learning set. 'I am sitting in the toilet crying' I said. I got back messages of hugs, love, and promises to come round to beat the rest of them up. I continued sobbing feeling less ashamed, but in more of a panic about how to get out of the situation I found myself in.

Returning to the Group

As I sat there, in the cubicle, I realised I had to go back in and 'face the music'. My tears had subsided, and I had been out a few times to wash my face. I decided I would return at the next break. The door opened and I recognised the voice of two colleagues. Right, I thought, this is time. Then I heard what they were saying. They were debating why I had reacted so badly. One of them said to the other that they did not realise I was so unhappy. The other responded that I was probably just pre-menstrual. I was shocked and felt myself frozen where I was.

I decided rather than going back to the session, I was going to go for a walk. Whilst doing this Brian caught up with me. He didn't say anything, but just walked beside me and eventually told me what had been happening whilst I was out of the room. He didn't ask me what was wrong, and I didn't volunteer any information. I didn't know what to say in any case. I agreed to go back in. When I entered the room, the rest of the SLT were at a coffee break, and Brian took me through the flipcharts that they had been doing. I didn't really take in what was on them as I was just pleased not to be crying. As other colleagues drifted back into the room, I got a range of responses. Some, like Hugo, came and stood next to me. He didn't say anything, but I felt a wave of warmth from him being there. Others came in and avoided looking at me. I noted that Ruth did not acknowledge my return and the Dean did not say anything either but looked rather withdrawn. I assumed he was angry.

Mead on Identity

What I have been arguing is that my sense of identity and that of others, rather than being static and held inside as personality tests would suggest, is continually being affirmed/re-constructed in our interactions. Looking at the personality tests I discussed in above (p. 111) I have argued these are based on assumptions about individuals who are separate from society and they assume that society only arises from the aggregate actions of individuals who make up that society. I highlighted (p.116) how these ideas of self grew during the Enlightenment period and introduced writers who started to

question these ideas of self. I noted (p. 118) how, drawing on Elias, I began to realise that I am enabled/constrained by the actions of others in processes of inclusion/exclusion and that my sense of self arises because there are others to whom I relate.

In order to explore social selves and identity further I want to review the ideas of Mead, who called himself a social behaviourist, because he considered how individuals in society adjust their conduct by interpreting the actions of others. This resonates with me, as I noted my feelings changing when I thought I may have allies in Erikka and when I felt that support was no longer there. What I see now is how my feelings of being enabled/constrained by others to question the personality profile shifted, both in the lead up to the away-day and throughout the postcard session and my feelings about what was happening and how I responded changed as others participated. When I first selected the postcards at the beginning of the away-day I had felt brave and defiant, but as others in the session showed their trees, flowers and rainbows I started to feel angry and afraid and started to regret selecting something that would appear critical. These feelings escalated when Erikka, who I believed to be my ally, showed her light and fluffy postcard.

Mead, in his lectures captured in *Mind, Self and Society*, does not deny unique individuality but explains that such uniqueness emerges in social processes of interaction. He looked at the development of humans and argued we are physiologically capable of taking ourselves, as objects to ourselves. We get a sense of self only as we become objects to other people.

“It is just because the individual finds himself taking the attitudes of the others who are involved in his conduct that he becomes an object for himself. It is only by taking the roles of others that we have been able to come back to ourselves.” (Mead, 1925:268).

He believed that self-consciousness emerges from conversations with ourselves, in which one becomes an object to oneself (Mead, 1934:173). Mead argues, in order to question what others think of us, we need to have the capacity to take the position of the other in acts of imagination, aided by our earlier and continuous experiences of the generalised other, which I explored in project 3 (p.80). Taking up this idea, every member of the SLT bring others into the room in acts of imagination, both from past socialisation called out in private conversation and in what they share more openly in the present. For example, I was bringing in experiences with this team in previous meetings (including the Dean reprimanding Sophie for saying something critical: explored in Project 3), expectations of how I should behave in opening sessions of away days (my experience is that in the opening session of any away-day people say shiny, happy things about how they hope the day may go, indeed I have run such ‘icebreakers’ as a trainer in the hope of getting people talking on a non-risky topic) and even the critiques by my learning set of these types of activities (some of which

I shared openly in the away-day, and some of which stayed hidden in my “...internalized conversation of gestures which constitutes thinking” (idid:173)).

Burkitt (2008:40), drawing on Mead, argues that self often enters the scene after the fact when we ask ourselves questions such as ‘why did I say that?’ and ‘what will others think of me?’ So we question both our subjective response to the situation and the objective impressions we have left on others. For example, I notice that how I responded to the spontaneity of what came up for others, such as when I choked back retorts in the postcard session at Erikka’s intervention, or the physical pressure I felt to speak out about the personality tests. Drawing on Mead and Burkitt, I argue that one continuously considers how our gesture may be taken up by others and what we consider prudent to say, is based on our expectation of how others might respond. This suggests that while we may act spontaneously, this will always take place within the enabling-constraints we are working in, and our perception of the particular people we are working with.

When I consider the pressure I felt to speak out I am reminded of the definition of values and norms I explored in P3 (p. 91). Values are themes organising the experience of being together in a voluntary compelling manner, whilst norms are themes of being together in obligatory, restrictive ways (Stacey & Mowles, 2016:394). As my values have started to shift so has what I feel I ‘ought’ to do (the norm). This comes back to Elias’ ideas about inclusion/exclusion and how our actions are regulated by our expectations of the response of others. When people interact with one another they constrain and enable one another at the same time and are continually evaluating their actions, whether consciously or unconsciously. It is in the conversation of gestures, where one person’s gesture calls out a response, which then calls out further gestures and responses, that social meaning is constructed, reinforced or disrupted.

Personality Tests – Initial Conclusions

When I started this project, I was starting to question the idea of the view of self as an individualist rational self that personality tests assumed. From this perspective, such tests make sense because they assume that if we recruit people with the correct characteristics to make a perfectly balanced team (in advance) then they will perform well together and deliver a good output and self can be reduced to tidy labels. My project has highlighted that such assumptions have proven to be limited when making sense of my experience at work. I have turned to a more radically social understanding, informed by Elias and Mead, and this has led me to question the idea that personality tests can reduce our complicated, contradictory, and changeable selves to tidy labels.

Rather I would argue that these labels are abstractions that appear to lend legitimacy to what I am coming to see as rather spurious numerical calculations based on what I (and other authors above (p. 113)) have suggested is equally dubious science.

I am coming to see this personality test as another variation of the metrics I have discussed throughout my projects. In project 2 I reviewed the use of Module Feedback Questionnaire (MFQ) data and the Red-Amber-Green (RAG) traffic light system that was applied to these and in project three I discussed a meeting where MFQ data was presented in a graph and each subject group was ranked against each other, around a targeted level. What I am starting to see now is that each of these forms of metrics became more and more personal and discussed in a way that was subject to greater public scrutiny and yet in other ways more and more abstract⁵¹. In project 2 the MFQ data was discussed on a module by module basis, and each poorly performing module was discussed solely with the Dean. The feeling I had in this conversation was of being measured as to whether I could manage a handful of problem modules/staff, and subsequently went about trying to 'prove' that I could. In project 3 the MFQ data was presented by ranking each of the subject groups' amalgamated results. This lumped 'good' modules and 'poor' modules together and made assumptions about what was happening in subject groups based on this abstract measure against an arbitrary target. This was presented in a graph to the whole SLT and heads were required to discuss this target in an open forum where all the rest of the SLT were present. I felt the way this was discussed was judging not just my ability to deal with isolated cases of perceived poor performance but placing the Heads in competition and judging whether they were any good at their job. Finally, I argue that the personality tests that we completed for the away-day weren't just a judgement of whether I was good at my job but my whole personality.

What this exploration has re-enforced for me is that these personality tests are one more stage removed than other metrics I have written about. The other metrics purported to measure the output of my work and that of my team. The 'Team Results' test seems to have broken the link altogether between the team and what our 'performance' is producing. I would suggest that these personality tests are another form of proxy measure. Like other metrics I have drawn on they seem to be a means of disciplining people, compelling us to demonstrate compliance with the cult values⁵² so that sanctions can be applied to those breaching the norms, either by bringing them back in line (or 'on target' in cybernetic thinking) or to risk exclusion. If the Dean takes up the idea that 'Team

⁵¹ In Project 2 I had argued that MFQ data was an abstraction and referred to Scott's (1998) work in 'Seeing Like a State' on cadastral maps. See project 2 for a fuller explanation.

⁵² In Project 2 I explored cult values more fully.

Results' proposes, that in order to have a high functioning team he must have a variety of different personality types, then he needs to determine which of the thruster-arrangers he needs to 'correct' or get rid of, presumably. It seems to me that they are questioning not just who I am and am I fit for purpose, but do I fit in? Do I need to accept the Dean's judgment and way of doing things or risk exclusion?

What I see for me and the SLT is that in our gesturing and responding around the personality test we are re-enforcing and resisting these labels we have received. For example, Hugo still jokes about whether we would want someone at our Christmas lunch who is so introverted. On the other hand, when someone mentioned that I would of course be in charge of something because I was very good at arranging, I reminded them not to forget my 'thrusting' nature and mimed towards Erikka a suggestive, thrusting movement, which she in turn repeated back to me. It seems we feel the need to demonstrate that we are like the labels, or alternatively (and sometimes simultaneously) that we are not. We appear to be both enabled and constrained by the labels we have received, and similar to how I have become enabled/constrained with my learning set by being labelled as having deadline-it-is, similar practices are emerging around the personality test labels. By affirming or resisting these labels we appear to be changing our responses to each other.

I contend that giving scores to measure our extroversion etc. and grouping people together, not only labels and measures people but may also change the way that others respond to us and how we respond to each other and ourselves, through silent conversation. As the philosopher, Hacking (1990) (and others) have argued, metrics are not neutral descriptions, but moral ones. In measuring, they define the world relative to the interests and priorities brought to the measurement process. I notice that I, and others, disregarded these personality tests and being labelled as a 'thruster-arranger' as silly nonsenses. Yet, I would now argue that the outcomes of these tests can have consequences for one's identity and the treatment we receive, helping to define who we are and how we are judged by others. They therefore have some significant ethical issues associated with them because they affect people's lives (as they get taken up in recruitment, talent management, promotion rounds and decisions on who leaves organisations). I am not saying that tests like these always have necessarily a negative impact. There is a warm and inclusive side (see p. 111 above about Marcus's recognition of my deadline-it-is). What is important, is that in the use of such tools we don't lose sight of their social and political implications.

Destabilisation

I wish to turn my attention further to the discomfort I felt on the away-day and my speaking out in the post card session, continuing to draw on the theories I have presented above. For most of my career, as laid out in project one, I have believed that metrics were important in order to manage. Therefore, although I would describe myself now as an academic, this explanation is too simplistic. I am starting to consider, drawing on Stacey & Mowles (2016), that ideology only exists in the articulation and acting of it in local interaction then the degree to which one is enabled or constrained by others, or indeed enable or constrain others, plays a vital role in establishing which ideologies come to dominate (at least in public). My identity has certainly been informed by my work as an accountant and developed during my time in academia, but by far the biggest influence, I would suggest, has been my participation in the DMan programme with its reflective/reflexive approach not only to my research, but also to what we are doing together in our practice.

What I have started to notice is that prior to the away-day I may have purposely ignored my doubts about the use of metrics in favour of adopting a narrative to maintain my role as a 'good corporate soldier'. I now notice that my perception of the response of the Dean, as being angry at me for disrupting the away-day, coupled with Sophie's comments on the morning of the away-day of me being a rebel, has led me to question my sense of self. Whilst a pessimistic view of the situation in my school may be that metrics are already too deeply entrenched for a dissenting voice to be effective, I felt compelled to speak out in some way at the away-day.

I wonder now if I am struggling with 'who I am' within the SLT in comparison to my experience of joining another community of practice on the DMan, in which I am exposed to different ideas about metrics. I have started to become more sceptical of the 'metrics game' and see the harm that managing using metrics can do. As my supervisor pointed out, for how long can I defend the assumptions from my work community in the face of another strong discourse of the DMan community? How might I navigate my way to take a place in both communities?

As I have become more sceptical of the 'metrics game', I have started to question some of my habitual ways of working. This started with my reflections in project 2, when I felt brought up short by following the universities procedures on performance management and started to question whether I was in fact acting ethically by following the HR procedures. In project 3, I started to question the idea that metrics have an agency of their own and always make managing easier and incontestable. I suggested that rather than providing evidence to make managing easier, the way the SLT are using and talking about these metrics appeared to be fanning the flames of the inter-group rivalries and competition.

While writing this project, I have noticed that the ubiquitous use of personality tests means that no one really questioned their application. Whilst my project shows there is limited evidence of their efficacy in delivering any of the improved team performance that they promise, and indeed on page 127 argue that their use raises some ethical issues, the fact that tests such as this are so commonly used seems to have led to a lack of critical reflection of their use by myself and other members of the SLT. I argue they may have become part of our habits/norms. To explore this further I will examine the philosopher and pragmatist Dewey's ideas about the formation of habits.

Dewey on Habits

Dewey does not understand habits as a simple repetition of acts, but instead as a series of interconnected dispositions⁵³ that may, under specific circumstances, lead us to act in certain ways. I interpret Dewey as saying that habituated patterns create a 'sensitiveness' to certain impulses, preferences and aversions (Dewey, 1922:28). Such habits are not inborn, but acquired, through a multitude of practical actions occurring over time, even though they may come to feel like second nature to us. Dewey states that "...the essence of habit is an acquired disposition to ways or modes of response" (ibid:32). He claims that habits have a function in that they are "...conditions of intellectual efficiency" (ibid:113). They serve to protect us from irrelevant information that is not routinely required. Dewey leaves us in no doubt that social interaction plays an important role in habit forming, as the patterns are not only formed by us in our social practice, but also simultaneously form us as they influence how we act.

These insights offer me a helpful way of making sense of my experience of the away-day. Dewey considers that people can become aware of their habits and critically reflect upon them and this happens when a situation provokes conflicting demands from individuals. When I spoke about my three wise monkeys in the postcard section of the away-day I felt disturbed. As I have started to question the ways of working I have seen as 'inevitable' for many years, I have started to try to work in a way I have not done before, and my habitual ways of acting no longer seem to work. Dewey claims that such disruptions are often dealt with by simply trying to recover the situation, falling back to patterns of reaction that do not promote learning and thus do not allow for new practice to emerge. In the postcard session I felt as if I didn't know how to act and argue that by crying, and

⁵³ Dispositions significantly influence how we observe, reason and judge what is going on around us, what Dewey referred to as a: "...tendency to act" (Dewey, 1922:115).

then removing myself, closed any chance for reflection together. After Dewey, I think that there is a tendency that we may get stuck, to attempt to maintain the social order and to be able to continue to be included in groups to which we wish to belong.

I suggest, drawing on Dewey (1922) and Elias (1994), that although we are all subject to longer term social processes which shape what we find ourselves talking about and how we respond, such as metrics ideology in HE, the specific way we participate together to make sense of these particular social patterns is not pre-determined. For example, Paradeise & Thoenig (2013) explore 27 case studies of academic departments in different countries and subject areas and uncover different responses to metrification from those giving high attention to the call for 'excellence' to those paying low or no attention to quantitative indicators. Unlike my initial assumptions that metrics are inevitable, I suggest there is nothing inevitable about our actions and reactions to the processes in which we find ourselves participating. However, whilst forming us, our habits are enabling and constraining our actions. It may be that members of the SLT are complicit in maintaining the patterns of relating to which we have become accustomed, perhaps to avoid challenges to our sense of identity and to maintain our inclusion in the group. Habituated patterns of interaction both help us to function efficiently and, at the same time, may blind us to the possibility of any alternatives or adapting to changing circumstances. Dewey argues that we should make productive use of doubt to overcome the automatic way in which one typically operates, practising deep inquiry, questioning assumptions, being less convinced of one's convictions and thus open to challenging one's habitual practice. Brinkmann, a professor of psychology, refers to these moments of doubt as 'breakdowns' (Brinkmann, 2012: 44).

Reading Dewey has helped me to see how we are formed by the social patterns reinforcing our practice while at the same time forming these patterns. For example, my feeling of tension about the away day was co-created by gossiping with others, by reminding myself of past experiences and using the metrics from the personality test in the same way I was afraid others might use them. I have felt writing this project extremely discomfoting as I have come to realise how I am contributing to such habituated patterns of relating and suggest, drawing on Dewey, that this is likely to happen when our habitual intentions and actions are disturbed. As Stacey & Mowles point out "...changes in how one experiences one's self are bound to be highly emotional and anxiety provoking" (Stacey & Mowles, 2016:347).

I am struck that my exploration in this project could well have enabled me to have acted differently in the away-day, had I been able to consider them in the moment, rather than withdrawing into my defiance, anger and shame. Drawing on Dewey, Mead & Brinkmann I argue that when we respond

to others, we do so by either reproducing the same habits or by shaping new ones through the process of breakdown, doubt and inquiry. Gonner (2018), a DMan graduate, who writes about emotions, reflexivity and breakdowns argues that detached reflection and habitual involvement are connected. He argues that it is only through the continuous correlation of action, breakdown and thought, as part of the same process of meaning-making, that practice is spontaneously reproduced into a new (but not necessarily better) practice. Gonner started to understand practice as a social process of detached-involvement. Drawing on this thinking, and before concluding I wish to consider further this idea of detached-involvement.

Detached-Involvement

I consider now, how the very strong emotions I felt, closed any possibility for me to consider the position of others. When I showed my postcard and cried, I felt vulnerable. I was deeply concerned that I would be excluded from this group. As I started to cry in an obvious and messy manner I realise I no longer had any idea of what was happening for others in the meeting. In previous iterations of this project I argued that others in my narrative were to blame for my behaviour. For example, in early iterations I was violently angry about Ruth's behaviour and took her actions as a personal affront, rather than considering what may have been provoked in her. My learning set have prompted and goaded me in paradoxically collaborative/conflictual conversations to see that maybe Ruth was not just a terrible facilitator but also the anxieties she may have felt, when instead of her anticipated rainbows and flowers in a nice little postcard warm up session for the day, she was ambushed by 'angry' women with their monkeys and severed sheep. Perhaps her passing on quickly from these comments was a sign of her own anxieties about how to deal with the situation she now faced and could be a factor in how she responded.

I notice, that whilst involved in my feelings of anger, defiance and shame I was unable to consider the position of others in the meeting. I certainly struggled to show any empathy for them. I focused on myself as the object of others' positive or negative intent. I could not know the background to other's actions yet attributed various intentions (largely negative) which I previously argued triggered my emotions of defiance, anger, frustration and eventually of shame. Elias (1987:46–48) suggests that situations where we perceive things to be uncontrollable, provoke emotions in us which further reduce the chances of controlling the situation. This vicious cycle makes it even more difficult to detach from situations of overwhelming emotions. The more I became aware of how inappropriate I felt my behaviour was, the more the feeling of being constricted and needing to cry

became. I suggest that the more we become involved the harder it is to stay detached and observe what our possibilities are. This raises the question about how to endure our discomfort, not becoming defensive or retreating into fantasies. How do we continue to experience what is going on in our interactions with others? How is it possible to be both an involved actor and a detached observer?

Elias (1987) recounted Edgar Allen Poe's short story 'A Descent into the Maelstrom' to illustrate this kind of detached-involvement. In this story, three brothers find their fishing boat caught in a whirlpool. Engulfed in the terror of the whirlpool only one of the brothers survives. This is because amid the terror he finds himself also observing the beauty of the whirlpool and patterns of what is sinking and floating. Noticing that large items sink faster and cylindrical objects more slowly, he ties himself to a water cask. The cask descends more slowly than the boat, and floats to the top once the whirlpool subsides; and so, he survives because his capacity to detach from the phenomenon in which he is involved provided new capacities to act. Elias reasons that our experience can be like the maelstrom. It can feel like something outside of our control, and sometimes we can fantasise that we can step outside of it, but in reality, we are inescapably immersed in it. While we can take "...a detour via detachment" (Elias,1956:229), we can never be completely detached, nor can we ever be completely involved without any hint of self-awareness (ibid:226). As such we are paradoxically always both detached and involved at the same time.

In completing the personality profile and receiving our outputs I suggest we were called upon to take a detached and highly reductive view of our 'self'. Reading our profiles encouraged us to think logically and dispassionately about what this means for how we work together. There was a strong implication that we need to 'transform' ourselves because as the 'Team Results' website stated the results of this test can help build balanced teams, fix broken teams, and accelerate and enhance the performance of those teams. I have made several arguments above that show my scepticism that this tool could provide any of the benefits it purports to be able to do in terms of delivering improved performance. Importantly the way the tool was taken up in the away-day felt to be anything but detached and dispassionate, but rather involved and passionate, at least for some of us.

Drawing on the themes I have been exploring in this project, what is coming to mind for me, is that being attentive to my own emotional reaction and how that influences my response is an important part of going on together with others. My interventions at the away-day were choices that were paradoxically forming and being formed by both the reflexive assessment of my embodied reactions to the gestures of colleagues and the amalgamation of ideologies that are my motives for action, at

the same time. I suggest that much of the time we are caught up in the game of organisational life largely unreflectively, and we are so because we are invested in it. We play the game because it matters for us. For example, I completed the personality questionnaire, because I was worried about the consequences of not doing so. Equally I would suggest that I questioned the use of the test in the post-card session because I was starting to question the ethics of managing in this way. I am beginning to think about involved-detachment as a practice which may be more helpful for me to understand performance in teams than the personality test that we completed in advance of the away-day. Whilst in the away-day my failure to be detached about my involvement did not allow me to recognise what was happening for others I am starting to see a change in my practice.

At a recent DMan weekend two learning sets were brought together to plan an activity which other DMan participants would engage in. When the learning sets came together, on the first night of the residential, a member of my learning set, Martha, became very animated, argumentative and dismissive of others. She had, to that point, not engaged in any discussion about the exercise. In the meeting I felt a sense of rising anxiety and anger and I recognised my desire to remove myself from the situation. I felt anger with Martha, embarrassment about her being part of my learning set and a growing feeling of defiance. However, rather than getting upset and crying, I attempted to engage in a conversation with Martha and the rest of the group about what was happening. I recollect more sharply what happened in that session and what was happening for other participants, not just Martha and myself. Similarly, in a recent work meeting, a fellow Head, Lucy, shouted at another head, accusing them of some heinous act. I recognised a rising sense of anxiety and panic starting to rack my body. I felt a strong desire to aggressively support my colleague over Lucy, but I tried to reflect, in the moment, why I may have that reaction, to attempt to recognise my prejudices and my own desire to rush in and resolve the conflict or to remove myself. I acted in a way that I may not have otherwise done had I dived in there straightaway, and tried to discuss with Lucy why she may have reacted in the way she did, and now have a clearer view of some of her vulnerabilities. The conflict between my colleagues is still bubbling, so I am not claiming that my actions in any way improved the situation. What I am starting to realise is how a shift in my theoretical understanding of the paradox of conflict and collaboration, which I explored in project 3 and above has begun to change my practice and my feelings around conflict.

I continue to believe that we cannot pre-determine how people will respond to the gesture of others (Mead,1934). What this is allowing me to question is my own assumptions and consider that things that I have engaged in or done unreflectively may be worthy of reflection.

Conclusions

In this project I started by re-evaluating my understanding of metrics ideology in Higher Education (HE). From this research, it seems to me, that metrics appear to be more prevalent in decision making processes in the last 20 years and that there has been a move to consider metrics as objective measures of fact, rather than the proxy measures that after Muller (2018), Beer (2016), Collini (2017) and Power (2004) I argue that they are. Drawing on Stacey & Mowles (2016:397) I argue it is important to understand our history because this is something that can contribute to a better understanding of the (habitual) choices we make in any given situation. They argue that, from the perspective of complex responsive processes, ideologies are evaluative themes at the basis of our choices, paradoxically forming and being formed in human interaction as norms and values are functionalised. Elias suggests that if we are able to understand the historical development of processes in which we find ourselves caught up and are able additionally to pay attention to the particular pressures we face in a context, then there is no inevitability that things will necessarily continue the way they are.

I have argued that the personality tests that we were asked to complete in advance of the away day were another form of metrification. I felt that this time they were a measure of not only was I good enough, but were questioning not just who I am but do I fit in? They privilege the leadership characteristics presumed to inspire high performance, assuming that this management is best done by metrics and have a strong emphasis on establishing and policing values. I am starting to think that the process of judgment, central to tests such as these, are not analytical, scientific, non-biased process but rather relational and social processes, in which we are enabled/constrained through processes of inclusion/exclusion and in which identity is affirmed and/or re-created and in which our interactions are also changed. My synopsis intends to offer a contribution to my field by considering this alternative.

I would suggest that whichever way we manage has the potential to create conflict (p. 99), provoke processes of inclusion and exclusion and rivalry and create the potential for strong feelings as the felt effect of incremental transformations of identity. What seems particular about metrics, including personality tests, is what they provoke/cover over. They promise to make the process of management more objectively based in that we can measure and describe scientifically the outcomes. But it seems to me that metrics seem to be amplifying all the natural tendencies of groups to be divisive as well as to co-operate, because the fantasy of measurement seems to make it even harder to talk about feelings, relationships and vulnerabilities.

I now think that maybe my intervention in the away-day was an attempt to bring together some of the ideologies from being part of the DMan community and the habitual ways of working I had found myself stuck in, in my SLT. Stacey (2003:125) points out, ideology is a form of communication that preserves the current order by making the current order seem natural but contends that "...it is in engaging with the contradictions between our various acts of thought that we begin to make more sense of what we are doing together" (ibid:1-2). Elias suggests that longer term social trends are hard to resist and work against, but if we gain a greater detachment about our involvement, this may offer more opportunities for different outcomes. I am starting to question my habitual ways of working (and the theoretical assumptions that might account for these) in ways that enable me to consider alternatives that I hope will prove more useful to myself and colleagues in trying to produce 'good' work.

I now notice that there is a theme running through this project and the others of resistance. I had previously failed to take any notice of these small acts of resistance. As I have started to recognise this I have also noticed some of the power gestures that are taking place in my business school. For example, since starting to write this project OMG no longer officially meets, ostensibly because one member was unavailable at the scheduled time, although the Heads speculated that it was because Brian was fed up with us complaining about what was happening in the school. I have written, and then taken out of my projects (due to word count limitation), explorations of acts of resistance, such as gossip and ribaldry, which political scientist Scott (1990) argues are a type of resistance to domination. Stacey & Mowles (2016:409) argue it is through our gossiping that "...ideologies and figurations of power are sustained and potentially transformed". What I am starting to see is that when direct resistance appears to fail, such as my telling Brian that I did not want to attend the away day, and him telling me there was no point in objecting, we turned to acts of subterfuge such as gossiping (e.g. when I joked with Erikka about having a puncture on the way to the away day) and ribaldry (Sophie, Erikka and I poking fun at the 'thruster-arranger' label). Using some of the theories I have drawn on throughout my four projects I now wish to further consider how managing using metrics is shaping the way of thinking in the SLT in my synopsis.

4. Synopsis

I will begin this synopsis by summarising each of my four projects, drawing out the key themes and providing a brief reflection on the insights that I have taken from each of them and reflecting further upon them and the implications for my practice. From this, I will identify recurring themes and draw upon the academic and professional literature I have researched to present the arguments of my thesis.

4.1 Synoptical Summaries of Research Projects

Review of Research Project 1

My first project explores how critical moments in my upbringing, education and career have influenced my thinking. These experiences include studying mathematics and business at a UK business school, accountancy training in a top four accounting firm and working as a Managing Director (MD) of a private professional accounting education company before finally leading a change project in the UK Higher Education (HE) institution, where I now work. My assumption was that individuals worked in systemic ways, controlled by powerful leaders, and that metrics were a key tool in supporting managers to control staff.

Metrics are neutral and objective and reduce the emotions involved in managing others

I can see now, from considering further my upbringing, education, and formative management experiences, that metrics and standards have been ubiquitous throughout my career. When I reflect now, I see that I believed that with the right metrics and the right leadership skills I would be able to both maintain control of my staff and achieve the targets that had been set for me to achieve. I believed that metrics were a neutral and objective way of seeing the world and using them would lead to harmony and dampen conflicts. When the metrics didn't achieve the outcomes I expected, my habitual way of thinking was to blame my inability to manage, something I tried to correct by

enrolling on training programmes, blaming others for being 'misaligned' to the business goals, or concluding that people had not interpreted the metrics in the right way, and sometimes all three. At the end of the first project, I started to question why the application of metrics did not always lead to the outcomes I wanted to achieve, and this led to a curiosity about the emergent patterns and behaviours in connection with metrics, which led to the initial formulation of my research question.

I now notice that this project depicted several painful exchanges, not least when my staff scrambled to avoid sitting next to me at a Christmas lunch, and I had not considered the challenging responses and reactions of my colleagues. The link between metrics and emotions will be picked up later in the synopsis (p.149).

Good corporate soldier or rebel: an early exploration of resistance

The other key aspect that stands out for me, in a further review of this project, is how some of my formative experience of organisational life was based around a desire to be seen as a 'good corporate soldier'. For example, in audit practice I learned very quickly I could expect a lower pay award or even to lose my job if I was not successful in my professional exams or my work was below the expected standards, and I strove to meet those standards. I also note how, in my current role, I set out to gain 'badges' and qualifications to bolster my confidence and gain legitimacy for my leadership of the group. Summarising Project 1 (P1) I now see that I present myself to be the 'hero' of the narrative. I realise that I continued to think that following the rules and showing respect to those above me in the hierarchy were the only ways that it was possible to progress my career. Having said that, I also notice that I shied away from relating that on two occasions I left employment because I disagreed with my employer about the way data was being manipulated. In retrospect, I can now see that I thought that I could either be the hero (as a good corporate soldier) or the rebel (who flounces out). What I see was underdeveloped in this project was an exploration of resistance in organisational life and I will explore this further below (p. 151).

Review of Research Project 2

Having identified the importance of my experience of metrics in P1, my narratives in P2 focussed on conversations about module performance, as rated by students in module feedback questionnaires (MFQ). The first narrative describes a meeting with my Dean to discuss feedback on my modules, with a focus on those coloured red in a traffic light (RAG) rating. The second narrative explained how I attempted to 'improve' those poorly performing modules by trying to implement a

performance review meeting with one of my staff, David, who led them. Using the HR guidance on managing poor performance, I prepared to tell David exactly where his performance was falling short of the required standards and implement a performance improvement plan. Rather than being the simple process that I had imagined this would be, I found it excruciatingly uncomfortable and became angry, ashamed, and frustrated, as did David. I had assumed that following HR processes would ensure that people were treated fairly and that I could remain detached and objective as a manager.

Particularising abstract metrics

I noticed that through my fixation on metrics, David had stopped being a human being for me and instead had become a 'red' module leader. I turned to authors on tools and techniques of disciplinary power (Stacey & Mowles, 2016; Foucault, 1997; Townley, 1990) to consider this aspect of my narrative and argued that in these processes, humans may disappear from view. When I reflect now on this project, I realise that I continued in my supposition that metrics are unbiased and objective and that as a manager I was in control of sorting out any problems in my modules. I continued to believe that metrics could tell me something that human judgement and experience could not. I see now that my thinking had moved from P1 to start to think about how the actions taken in response to metrics would lead to some form of gaming and that managing using metrics didn't always lead to the outcomes I would have expected.

The role of the middle manager

What struck me in my review of this project is the role of the Dean and the disassociation there was between his telling me to 'sort it out' and the painful conversations I had which followed. He had been determined that I needed to 'sort out' these red modules, but I now realise he had no further part to play in the actions I took. I imagine he has probably never thought about our conversation again, whereas the ongoing conversations were painful for both myself and for David. I now reflect that the Dean has been shielded from these difficult conversations, and of course he may, like Brian, have been horrified by the actions I subsequently took (although I doubt it).

The other aspect that strikes me in re-reviewing this project is how, on so many occasions, I am expected to work independently with my staff in determining how to deliver efficient and high quality modules and programmes, and yet at other times I am held to account for the metrics

related to these aspects of my role and given direction to 'sort it out'. This felt to me at the time, and when I review this now, very much like being caught in the middle.

Review of Research Project 3

In Project 3 I revisited the Module Feedback Questionnaire (MFQ) by narrating a meeting where MFQ data was collated by Subject Group into a graph and presented against an idealised measure, where some subject groups data showed them to be performing above the benchmark (including mine) and some were below the benchmark. My argument was that although metrics claim to show 'incontrovertible proof' as to who is doing well and who is not, our biases impact upon whether we believe what these metrics show (or not). I argue that we are selective about the choice of performance metrics we choose to privilege, using them to bolster our pre-existing values and beliefs, as proof that what we believe is correct, and denying, downplaying, or excusing what doesn't accord with our beliefs. I recount that when the Dean suggested that we increase the benchmark target, I felt myself compelled to speak and that a fellow HOG questioned the use of the MFQ data by asking whether we should 'measure the effectiveness of our teaching by taking the perceptions of some over-privileged 18-year-old prima-donnas?'. The Dean responded angrily, and I found myself shocked and shaken. To explore this outburst, I looked to scholars writing about conflict, conflict avoidance and conflict management.

Control, compliance and resistance (again)

Reflecting on P3, I notice the continuing difficulty in challenging the performance metrics. I experienced a feeling of futility and impotence, both in writing the project and when I re-read it now. Having now completed my P4, where I considered, drawing on Elias, how we may try to maintain patterns of relating in order to avoid challenges to our sense of identity, I now consider that I may have been complicit in continuing to propagate the use of metrics. Not only did I look good from the metrics that were being used, but also I wanted to continue to be seen as a 'good corporate soldier'. It feels difficult to argue about the metrics when we are shown to be doing well, and a critique is often deemed defensive if we do badly. I will pick this up further below (p. 159).

With this reflective turn I am also reconsidering the Dean's jabbing finger. Whereas initially I was shocked, and simply wanted to leave the conflict, I now wonder if this may have been an attempt by the Dean to take back control of the conflict that was happening and close any dissent. I wonder

now whether this was 'resistance to resistance' and an attempt to re-affirm 'who was in control'. I will reflect upon this further below (p. 151).

Review of Research Project 4

In my final project I started with a re-review of the metrics in UK Higher Education (HE) and argued that it seemed as if metrification of HE appeared to be inevitable. I drew on authors who have analysed what is referred to as the neo-liberal turn in HE (e.g., Collini, 2012,2017; Williams, 2013) and writers who looked more widely at metrics in society (Beer, 2015; Power, 2004; Muller, 2018). I argued that using metrics has an appeal, theoretically providing commensurability, accuracy and neutrality. I started to question the assumption that metrics bring all these benefits, asking why the way we were taking them up in my school was provoking competition, conflict, strong emotions and making management difficult. This became starkly evident in the lead up to and attendance of an SLT away day, where personality profiles were completed and discussed.

As I explored what happened in the away day, I researched both Elias' and Mead's ideas on identity. I considered how I may previously have ignored or squashed my doubts about how metrics were being used because of the risk of exclusion that I anticipated if I were to question their use. I noticed that my growing sense of discomfort with these metrics left me not knowing how to act.

I realise now that whereas I had previously thought of myself as an autonomous individual who could bring about change in themselves and others through conscious and rational effort, I was starting to see that I am a cultural being, necessarily dependent upon others (Stacey, 2006:191) with change occurring through a complex social process of communicative interaction. When I review this now, I see that unlike my initial assumption that metrics were being imposed 'from above' it has become obvious to me that we are all playing a part in perpetuating their use. I have come to see that the talk about and use of metrics is a social process that we all form and are formed by. The use of metrics in my school is an environment that we are all co-creating.

Metrics provoke strong emotions

I concluded the project by proposing that the processes of judgment central to using metrics are not solely analytical, scientific, non-biased processes but also relational and social processes (even if we forget that) in which we are both enabled and constrained through processes of inclusion and

exclusion, in which identity is both affirmed and re-created, and in which our patterns of interaction also change. I now notice the strong emotions I experienced, such as panic, shame and anger, seemed to be provoked when I was measured through these personality metrics.

As I look back across all four of my projects I realise that the way we were using metrics appears to provoke strong positive and/or negative reactions, such as pride when 'green' and thus performing well, or anger and shame when 'red' and deemed to be failing. I recognise now how conflicted I felt when I did well in the metrics, brimming with pride, whilst simultaneously being worried about being excluded from the subversive groups. I recognise now that if I crowed too much about my good results, next time I might not be so lucky and others may be happy I got my comeuppance, as I was with Sophie. I now initially suggest that managing using metrics seems to provoke strong emotions, which we seem to feel obliged to suppress.

[Polarisation of subjugation and subterfuge](#)

As I have reviewed this project, I have been re-reviewing my work relationships and our interactions. I notice that, whilst I explore the sense of panic and shame I felt during the away day, I also continued to feel a sense of pride and indignation and had written the project as if I was a righteous campaigner for the abolition of metrics. I observe now that I have continued to consider that I could only be a hero or a rebel and that it was only possible to either comply or to walk out. I want to explore further my polarising of my options into either acquiescing to subjugation (leading to feelings of helplessness and futility or to take flight) or resisting (in heroic acts which provoked feelings of a fear of exclusion and simultaneously inclusion with the subversive groups) in my synopsis.

As I review the project, I also found myself giggling again, at the ribald acts and gossip that I described. I considered whether these ribald acts and gossiping between some members of the SLT was a way of establishing solidarity with others, but also a form of resistance in meetings when public questioning appears to receive a swift rebuke.

4.2 Themes emerging from my projects

In this section I will elaborate further on the significant themes that have emerged in the development of my projects, before concluding with my 3 arguments. My focus has been on the struggle in using metrics as a middle manager in a UK business school. However, as my research has deepened, I have noted two further emerging sub-themes related to the use of metrics, these concern the emergence of strong feelings, and acts of subjugation and subterfuge, which I will also examine in the context of my struggle with metrics. Prior to addressing the themes of emotions and then subjugation and subterfuge, I first present the conclusions from the central themes of my study, namely that of metrics and middle managers.

Theme 1: Metrics

To support my arguments about metrics I pull together the observations I have made around the use of metrics, both to re-examine their use in a wider context in UK Higher Education Institutes (HEI) and to re-assess their use in my business school. I will then focus on what my work has highlighted about the benefits of managing using metrics.

The UK Higher Education (HE) Environment

*Datafication*⁵⁴

In my research I have explored what was happening with metrics in Higher Education and drew on authors who have analysed the neoliberal turn in this sector (e.g., Collini, 2012, 2017; Williams, 2013) and those who have written about the rise in metrics more widely in society (e.g., Power, 2004; Beer, 2015; Muller, 2015, 2018). I pointed out that there seemed to be an increasing reliance in numerical indicators and rankings to evaluate phenomena that were previously assessed using qualitative criteria, an increasing dislocation between metrics and what they purport to measure, and a move in society to demand more accountability for the value for money that is provided from organisations, typically using metrics. One of the reasons that metrics seem to be seeing a

⁵⁴ Datafication is a term borrowed from Mayer-Schonberger & Cukier (2013:78) who use it to describe the contemporary phenomenon of quantifying aspects of life that previously did not exist, numerically.

resurgence is, as Beer (2016:138) suggests, based on a faith that they are objective, fair and logical, and as Power (2004:774) suggests, hold out a Benthamite dream of ultimate commensurability. This assumption, that measuring is objective and neutral, has its roots in the enlightenment quest for rational knowledge in search of universal truths. Advocates of metrics argue that focussing on metrics will lead to improvements in the object we are trying to measure (Taylor, 1911; Drucker, 1974; Peters, 1986) with Peters coining the phrase, "...what gets measured gets done". This assumes a deterministic causality which means that managers can design, control, or exert influence to achieve a desired outcome.

Metrification of Higher Education

My research has reviewed the metric regime in HE generally and in my institution specifically. I explained how measures of a good student experience, in survey-based rankings of student satisfaction such as the National Student Survey (NSS), are being used to help to try to create a pseudo-market⁵⁵ for HE. Under an ideology of neoliberalism,⁵⁶ competition is seen to be 'good.' Ranking universities in league tables and the use of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) awards are seen as a reasonable and useful thing to do in a habitus in which the government, prospective and current students and senior leaders of universities see HE as a competitive market. Students are meant to be guided in their choice of HE 'provider' by using these ranking systems to inform their individual 'investment' in a university education. Providing this data gives 'customers' the information they need to make judgements about what product to buy. In addition to a focus on competition, there has been a focus by successive governments and their education ministers on the value for money that universities must deliver. For example, the current Education Secretary stated, "We need our universities to achieve great value for money." (Williamson, 2020b).

Another influence linked to the increasingly competitive culture in HE is the ideology of managerialism. Under the UK Conservative government of Thatcher (1979 – 1989) steps were taken to reconstruct the welfare state, with a move away from a system based on the practices and values

⁵⁵ After Williams (2013:13) I have referred to the market in UK HE as a pseudo-market because it is not a perfect economic model. Firstly, price is not set by the market itself, but by the government, by capping student fees. Supply is manipulated by bringing in new 'suppliers' by giving degree awarding powers to new institutions, by attempting to lower costs, and by increasing and/or reducing subsidies for certain courses. Similarly, demand is also somewhat manipulated. The government regulates the number of overseas students allowed to enter the UK through visa caps, offers cut-price places in FE colleges, and has at points fined universities for over-recruiting students against targets.

⁵⁶ I have used the terms neoliberalism and managerialism to encompass all form of new public management (NPM). However, I acknowledge that these are highly contested terms.

of public administration, to one privileging value for money and efficiency. The role and values of professionals (social workers, doctors, academics) became intertwined with, and subservient to, new externally derived values of efficiency, customer satisfaction and value for money with the ultimate objective of limiting public spending. Seddon, who critiques organising the public sector in this way, remarked that this was underpinned by a belief that civil servants, managers and professionals were, "...essentially lazy and self-interested and needed to be 'motivated' by extrinsic forms of motivation, carrots and sticks" (Seddon, 2008:4). So, whilst the traditional characterisation of a UK university sees university leadership founded on principles of collegiality, my research has enabled me to see that university management increasingly resembles management in any other large business, a phenomenon also highlighted by other scholars e.g., Alvesson & Spicer (2016:31).

Local Context

As well as exploring the evolution of the use of metrics in UK society and higher education, my work has also looked at my relationship to metrics and what is happening in my current context, which I summarise below. I do this because, as Burkitt points out, "...we are elements of our culture, time and place, and can never be abstracted from the social world" (Burkitt, 2008:16). This resonates with me and I suggest accords with Elias's conception of *habitus*. Elias argued that *habitus* is a constantly emerging social order that arises out of the complex interweaving of individual intentions, impulses, and actions. These patterns are constantly forming whilst simultaneously being formed by interdependent individuals arising from unique figurations of power relating (Elias, 1978:131). I interpret this as the evolving background that unreflectively structures experience, and through which social orders are produced and reproduced. Because of the implicit nature of *habitus* it is important to restate my history of working with metrics, as well as understanding my current context.

My History

At the start of my enquiry into managing using metrics it had never occurred to me that there may be any other way of managing people other than by using metrics, it was just the 'way it was'. I now see that my beliefs were heavily influenced from my time in audit practice. Whilst there are different perspectives on accounting, the audit process is based on an assumption that managers may be

working to promote their own wealth, rather than that of shareholders.⁵⁷ If this assumption about human motivation is true, then it is reasonable to assume that people need to be given a 'big stick' to try their hardest. Following this assumption, I presumed that metrics were necessary to enable middle managers, like myself, to direct staff to what they needed to achieve and to measure whether they achieved the things that were deemed to be important. There are several instances in my research where I, or others, have attempted to impose metrics in this way.

In addition, positivist accounting literature, which has had a significant influence on my thinking, suggests that measuring can (if done properly) provide an objective and neutral view of an organisation. This assumes that the relationship between metrified data and 'reality' is uni-directional: that is that metrics reflect and measure a pre-existent reality.

My Business School

Drawing on Elias's (1978) concept of habitus, I suggest that although we are all subject to longer term social processes which shape what we find ourselves talking about and how we respond, the context that one finds oneself in will also influence how one thinks and manages. So, whilst my past colours my belief about metrics, the current context I work in also influences how I practice. I now see that the experiences that others bring also colours their beliefs about the use of metrics and influences how we, together, talk about and make sense of our use of metrics. My research has enabled me to appreciate that an ideology of neo-liberalism is a temporarily enduring figuration (in that it forms us at the same time as we (re) form it) within both my own thinking, but also the institution in which I work. Much of my research is based around discussions of metrics that measure student satisfaction and assume that the student is a consumer of their education and ultimate arbitrator of what a good education is. When this ideology has been questioned (e.g., p. 76) a swift rebuke is often received. My enquiry has also shown that the assumption that competition is the way that higher education should be organised is taken up, on the whole, uncritically in the SLT and in many cases re-enforced.

Re-reviewing the above has allowed me to see how I have been previously partially blind to the ideologies and values underpinning the metrics that have been used in my business school. Whilst I have become progressively critical of the marketisation and metrification of the HE sector, I had failed to consider that this was not something someone was 'doing to me' but rather something that

⁵⁷ Having said this there is a strong vein of critical accounting scholars who argue that accounting is more closely related to a social science as it is about a system of thought designed by humans to assist human decision making which influences human behaviour.

we, as a SLT, were helping to form/reform in our conversations with one another, and therefore were both being formed whilst simultaneously reforming the neo-liberal ideology within our business school. I now see that the patterns of conversations that are happening in my school are not inevitable but rather are influenced from both the wider context of datafication and the metrification of HE, but at the same time are influenced by our habitus and the enabling-constraining nature of working together. Whilst this may make them 'unique' I also suggest these are recognisable patterns within other HEIs (as highlighted by scholars such as Williams (2013) and Collini (2017)).

Emerging Reflections on the use of Metrics

Having re-examined and summarised my work on metrics I can now see that my work polarised the use of metrics. My initial assumption was that managing using metrics was 'just the way it is' and was necessary, whereas by the time I had written Project 4 I had come to believe that metrics were inevitably bad. I had lost sight of why such tools may have been considered to bring benefits in managing. In seeking to re-understand the evolution of metrics in HE, I now identify several authors whose work helped inform my study and conclusions. These include political scientist Scott, who looked at attempts to make society legible and to classify populations to simplify state management. He argued that measuring may be necessary when trying to manage at a distance. They also include Stacey, who drew on Foucault, to point out that modern organisations may struggle to manage without such tools and techniques. I now see, drawing on the work of Scott, that managing using metrics could be used to provide synoptic information to enable us to focus efforts, which could help make managing easier and less contested. In addition, looking at Stacey's perspective has helped me to see that this may be valuable to help contain anxiety and to enable those with less experience to have procedures and create stability to enable them to carry out their work.

However, my research has also found that although metrics appear to be objective, they are not. I have described how we were likely to privilege metrics significance when they accorded with our pre-conceptions and how we used them to support our ideological position. Where the metrics do not support our pre-conceptions, we were likely to downplay their significance. Metrics certainly provide a numerical score, which appears objective, but are arrived at through making judgements and assumptions. Finally, in accordance with the arguments of Scott (1998), I contend that metrics not only measure but also help shape the things we are measuring in ways that may be both helpful and unhelpful. The metrics therefore are not simply measuring a 'reality' that pre-exists but are changing the activities that people undertake as they try to improve these metrics and change the

conversations that I, as a middle manager, am having with my staff and between members of the SLT. Scott (1998:4) reminds us that when scientific knowledge is imposed on complex environments of societies, they are almost always at risk of being inefficient, inappropriate and at times dangerous and Stacey (2012:67) points out that when we claim that tools and techniques function is to improve performance, rather than acknowledging their role as a technique of discipline, then we may lose awareness of the ethical dimension of what we are doing.

Furthermore, my re-evaluation of metrics has enabled me to see that rather than considering that metrics have agency over me, in a sense the metrics are socially constructed i.e., *we are doing this to each other*. Consequently, I now realise that this raises ethical and ideological questions about who we are and what we think we are doing, calling our values into question. The use of metrics could be used as a means of opening an exploration of what it is we do and what it is we value. What my work has shown, however, is that we can also use metrics to devalue practical judgement and to blame and shame others, which I will explore further in my arguments below.

Theme 2: Middle Managers

Initial Assumptions about Middle Managers

In the review of my research, I explain that as a middle manager I felt as if I was stuck in the middle between those 'above me' in the hierarchy and those 'below'. Up to this point I have thought of my role as a middle manager as being caught between the directives that are being given from those above me telling me to 'sort it out' and having to implement these by persuading, cajoling or simply telling those below me what they need to do. Much of the literature on middle managers agrees that their role is to take the strategic plans of those above them and deploy them by controlling and persuading those below them to carry out specific actions (e.g., Mintzberg, 1989; Floyd & Dimmock, 1991; Huy, 2001). In HE literature there is a depiction of the middle manager as being 'stuck in the middle' between organisational goals and the expectations of the staff they lead, with a focus on the lack of formal training that middle managers in HE receives (e.g., Floyd, 2016; Gonaim, 2016) or listing out the activities and competencies middle managers in HE requires (e.g., Graham, 2013).

As I have reflected on my projects, I recognise that it is not simply that I am being subjugated by the Dean and in turn subjugating my staff, but also that there are times where I (and others) also try to overtly or covertly constrain the Dean's actions (i.e. by my claiming his performance measures are like a budget, or my colleague questioning the views of over-privileged prima-donna students or our lewd gestures in response to the personality tests), which in turn he tries to resist. I also notice there

are times when my staff also carry out acts that constrain my actions and could be considered petty acts of resistance or non-compliance (e.g., rushing to sit at another table for Christmas lunch). When I first recognised this, I felt buffeted about by what was happening, with no sense of agency, and felt a need to cling, even further, to the metrics and approved procedures. In my review of my research I explained my sense of futility and feelings of being 'stuck'.

Emerging Reflections on the role of Middle Managers

I can see now how my exploration throughout my projects about how managers participate in ongoing interactions, in influential ways, has moved my thinking about the role of middle managers. Initially I considered myself to be a good corporate soldier if I followed the directives of those 'above me' and applied the rules of the organisation. I also see that I considered my only other alternative was to flounce out of the organisation as there was no possibility of resistance from within. I now acknowledge that taking this perspective has some advantages. I have shown how the use of metrics and standardised procedures may mean we don't need to take responsibility for the actions we take. For example, when I attempted to instigate poor performance management processes with one of my module leaders, I could point to the metrics to show that my judgement of his performance was 'the truth', but could also then follow standardised, sanctioned procedures to demonstrate to him, and myself, that what I was doing was what was expected from me, and therefore the 'right' thing to be doing. I recognise that I am not the only person doing this. Others have also told me they have been doing the same. As I have come to recognise the above, two things have changed for me.

Firstly, I have come to realise that once I acknowledged that claiming that metrics 'showed me things' and that just 'following the procedures' was not necessarily as ethical as I had previously presumed it to be, it became very hard to carry on in my supposition that it was possible to simply follow the rules and be a good corporate soldier. As Burkitt points out, drawing on Dewey, "...people can become aware of their habits and critically reflect on them and this happens when a situation demands conflicting responses from individuals" (Burkitt, 2008:47). I realise that previously the responses I may have had to these conflictual feelings was to assume that these things were happening because we had the 'wrong' rules, and I could find somewhere to work which had 'better' rules (and better metrics) that I could follow. However, instead I have started to see that I am not completely helpless and without agency, but rather, I have ethical choices to make about what I am being asked to do. For example, in my organisation, recognising that the dominant ideology that we operate under is one of marketisation and managerialism, does not mean that I must acquiesce or agree, but nor could I expect to overtly critique this viewpoint without expecting to be excluded.

Finally, I have come to see that we are all middle managers in some ways, or at least in processual terms this is how it feels. The Dean has expressed how his 'hands are tied' by the requirements of the Vice-Chancellor⁵⁸. I am also aware that the Vice-Chancellor feels he must account to the Board of Governors, and they in turn to the Office for Students. Simultaneously, it feels as if the Dean is powerless to get anything 'done' unless I acquiesce to persuade my staff, and nor I in turn cannot achieve much without the compliance of my staff. As Scott (1988) points out, general plans for 'good', conceived at a distance, must be contextualised locally, and will always involve negotiation and compromise. Functionalisation of values about 'good performance' involves negotiation between interdependent people. Negotiation over the results and the steps to take may provoke processes of both collaboration and resistance. Whilst I have felt subjugated when others want me to do something I don't want to do, and feel compelled to subjugate others when they don't do what I want them to do, I now recognise these as the enabling-constraining activities of working with others. This problematises the view of middle managers as simply being in the middle, whilst acknowledging that this is how it feels. Recognising that others in the organisational 'hierarchy' may be as enabled and constrained in working with others, as I have felt to be, has enabled me to think about how acquiescing or walking away may not in fact be my only choices. I will pursue this point in my arguments below.

Theme 3: Emotions

In my projects I started to look at the link between emotions and working with metrics. Despite extensive sociological literature that highlights the role emotions play in many aspects of life (e.g., Bericat (2015); Hoschild (1983)) including the role they play in reason and rational thinking (capacities said to be evoked by metrics), little research has been done to link emotions and metrics. Where these links have been made, these have largely been around social media (Grosser, 2014) or self-metrification (Ajana, 2018). Despite these studies arguing that emotions and metrics are in some way linked and insisting that emotions need to be taken seriously, to date not much has been written about understanding emotions sociologically that could be applied to the study of metrics in managing.

⁵⁸ Of course, this could also be a rhetoric of blaming those above to get something one wants; a tool I recognise because I have also used this at times myself

Beer (2016:194-195) in a coda to his book '*Metric Power*' draws on the work of Wetherell (2012,2014) to link emotions to metrics, making the case that there is a link between metrics and uncertainty. He draws on the work of Davies (2014), on neoliberalism, concluding that the purpose of measuring is not to achieve a peaceful consensus but to nurture existential anxieties. He argues that metrics, in their role as facilitators of competition, are central to the production of uncertainty and claims that this uncertainty evokes emotions. He suggests that what makes systems of measurement powerful is the affective responses that they provoke (ibid:211). He contends that a key factor in how metrics, "...produce outcomes, behaviours and practices is how they make us feel" (ibid:212). Beer's work claims that it is our *expectation* of what the metrics may capture and how we may be compared that provokes emotions.

To examine the assertion that Beer makes that metrics provoke emotions, because they nurture existential anxieties, I will turn back to Burkitt to re-examine my research and the link between emotions and metrics. Burkitt (2014) argues that feelings and emotions are how we orientate ourselves within a situation and to others in that situation (ibid:8). He sees emotions as the outcome of moral evaluation that we apply to other people's behaviour (ibid:5) and that we interpret this behaviour in ways that are, "...socially and culturally meaningful" (ibid:66). Burkitt agrees that we have a certain disposition to act according to our feelings, but disagrees with the more traditional theories on emotions, which state that this disposition equals a, "...determination to act", through pointing to a linear correlation between our emotions and our reactions (ibid:16). He rather understands this disposition as a, "...tendency to act in particular ways", as habitual patterns dependent on the social context, themselves being, "...sedimentations of past patterns of relationships" which must adapt to the situations we are confronted with and where we bring our own biographies to life in the emotional response (ibid:7). I take this to mean we will not all react in the same way to the same stimuli, but we will be affected by our past experience - which is why we may experience different emotions to the same situation. Burkitt (2014:55) suggests that our responses come from others' gestures and depend on the specific context, past experiences, personal interests and how we anticipate the chances of a likely outcome.

Emotional Responses are Socially Situated

Rather than thinking about metrics as provoking emotional responses, I consider that maybe what I experience as 'my' feelings and emotional response to managing using metrics is influenced by the intellectual assumptions about using metrics, from my personal history of being managed and managing using metrics, and the enabling/constraining relationships within the SLT where I now

work. For example, I grew up thinking that showing strong emotions was a sign of weakness and that for me to operate properly as a 'good' manager, required me to retain a sense of control and to behave in a non-emotional way that others (and I) would expect. I had assumed that this was what good professional conduct would look like. In my formative work experiences, I felt proud when 'exceeding expectations' but also afraid of failing against the targets set. These experiences have the potential to influence how I am interacting with others in the present and the sense I am making of managing using metrics and the emotions I feel. In my current context, in higher education, my experience has been of constantly feeling I am being judged as a result of using metrics. Given the powerful experiences I describe in my research of seeing others reprimanded and excluded, and of doing the same thing to those I manage, I find it very difficult to question the metrics we are using because I expect to be similarly excluded or reprimanded.

Beer acknowledges this to an extent, stating:

"We know we are being measured. We may not be sure how or to what end, but the fact that we know, makes these measures affective." (Beer, 2016:211).

However, I think he misses the point that metrics per se do not provoke emotions. Rather, I argue, after Burkitt, that our emotions are influenced by the context and socially shaped past experiences in anticipation of our expectation of recognisable social patterns. I therefore contend that there are both general and particular responses to metrics. On the one hand we feel anxious and judged or proud when metrics come into play, and I argue this is a general phenomenon, because others have told me they feel this way too. However, because of our particular histories, our responses to being scrutinised by metrics may evoke even more amplified feelings in some of us, as they did for me. Thus, I argue that it is not the *metrics* that make me feel proud, ashamed or angry, but it is my *expectation* of how those metrics may be used in the current context, based on my previous experiences, which means I experience them in an emotional way. Unlike Beer's assumption (and my original assumption in formulations of my arguments) of there being a stimulus and response which provokes emotions, I now see emotions as being constituted within a social situation, reflecting power relations as the enabling and constraining activities of others.

Theme 4: Acts of Subjugation and Subterfuge

The themes of subjugation and subterfuge became evident, only in hindsight, as I re-examined my projects when preparing this synopsis. I was forced to confront my choices about which aspects of research narrative I included in my projects, and my tendency to edit out those pertaining to

gossiping, lewd acts and other acts of subterfuge. I acknowledge, in writing a word constrained thesis, there are inevitably aspects that could be of interest, that must be discarded. However, it became evident to me (encouraged vociferously by my learning set and supervisors) that I needed to think further about the significance of these acts, both as a theme running through my projects, but also in my reluctance to include an exploration in my thesis.⁵⁹ It became evident from my reading and the resonance this topic had with peers at work, fellow researchers on the DMan, and in the wider research community, that this area warranted further exploration.

I now conclude that the reason I discarded these areas was because of two concerns. First, I felt that writing about gossip and ribaldry was not a proper academic subject and as such was concerned that my research would be seen to have less value if I pursued this route. Second, I was ashamed of how I was participating in the subversive acts, and worried about how those reading about these incidents may judge my behaviour. As I review my research, I have started to consider that these subversive acts seem to be related to something that emerges when I, or others, self-silence in the face of acts of subjugation. I am also starting to consider that these acts seem to be simultaneously bringing people together in acts of cohesion, and allowing space for dissent. Given that acts such as gossip, ribaldry and other subversive acts are written throughout my projects I will, belatedly, explore what authors have written about these acts, before making arguments in this area.

Research to Date

Given that I have only latterly come to recognise the gossip, ribald acts and other acts of subterfuge⁶⁰ as dominant in my research, I have largely not as yet engaged with much literature around this area in my projects. I initially searched other DMan students' theses to see what other scholars in my tradition may have written. I was surprised about the amount of times 'gossip' was mentioned in student's theses, but how little attention was paid to thinking about subversive acts in organisations. Flinn (2012) reviewed literature around gossip, trying to come up with a definition of it, drawing on authors such as the anthropologist Gluckman (1963). More recently, Stolz (2020) reviewed literature on gossip to understand processes of inclusion and exclusion in compromising.

⁵⁹ I reflect now that themes of subjugation and subterfuge are also things that we avoid discussing in my workplace.

⁶⁰ Scott (1990:198) lists out the types of acts of resistance to domination, those relating to status domination relating most specifically to those that occur in my research narratives. In my narratives gossip, rumour and ribaldry (which relates to Scott's area of carnival symbolism) are those most narrated. There are also acts of aggression and tales of revenge happening in my business, but I consider that the narration of these acts would be more difficult without exposing those with whom I work to potential harm.

However, there is little literature in organisational studies on subversive acts. Where it is studied in organisational literature, it is either as a by-product of inquiry (e.g., in studies of conflict such as Kolb & Bartunek, 1992) or there is an underlying assumption that acts of subterfuge are detrimental and not to be condoned, and are therefore problems that need to be managed (e.g., Baker & Jones, 1996; Therrien, 2004). There are, more recently, a handful of scholars that take up gossip in organisational settings in the context of supporting workers to 'understand how things are done around here' (e.g., Grosser et al., 2010) and as a vehicle to convey group norms (e.g., Van Iterson et al., 2011). These look specifically at the cohesive aspects of gossip. A few others look at the potential of gossip as a manipulative tool and a way of resisting power and inequality (e.g., Feldman, 1988; Meyer Spacks, 1985).

My research has led me to see that in any organisation, gossip and other subversive acts provide insight into how our thinking and conversations are transformed. If we consider both Elias' ideas around interconnectedness and inclusion and exclusion and Mead's ideas about communication, I am starting to consider that these acts are more important than I originally thought. My research has helped me to see that it is not just what happens in formal meetings that is important, but also what is happening in the gossiping and ribald acts of the members of the SLT with, and about, each other. Given that I have identified, throughout this research, that I am interested in social understandings of self, I am particularly interested in looking at authors writing about such acts of subterfuge in this tradition, namely Scott and Elias

Scott (1990): Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts.

I turn back to Scott as I have drawn on his work on "domination and resistance" and "public and hidden transcripts" (Scott, 1990:2) throughout my thesis. Scott argues that to understand what is happening between the powerful and less powerful, the hidden transcript should be paid as much attention to as the public transcript, as it confirms, conflicts or inflects what appears in the public transcript (Scott, 1990:16). Scott's point is that in oppressive regimes, it becomes difficult or impossible to discuss some things in public because of the risk of punishment/exclusion. Although taboo, these themes can and do get taken up in other ways, through gossip and other acts of undisclosed resistance.

I find Scott's study helpful in understanding public and hidden features of power, though most of Scott's illustrations are of extremely polarised situations, with clearly dominant and subordinate groups such as slaves and their masters. As such they are dissimilar from the power relations appearing in my research. It would be a big jump to suggest that there is an overt

oppressor/oppressed dynamic at play in my organisation, although I do reflect that my research narratives contain powerful examples of people expressing feelings in very strong ways (e.g., a colleague describing students as ‘over privileged prima-donnas’ or an icebreaker at an away day leading another to liken her experience at work to the ‘burning and shearing of sheep’).

Whilst Scott discussed domination, I have tried to think about the more subtle feelings of oppression happening in my organisation. For example, I would suggest that the absence of public dialogue about concerns such as how we experience the use of metrics, speculate as to why people have left the senior leadership team, or raise anxieties about reorganisations, suggest a form of subjugation of what people seem to be anxious about. I have therefore decided to use the word *subjugation* in my thesis title to show that I do not totally recognise the polarised descriptions Scott (ibid:198) refers to as “domination”⁶¹. I see subjugation as a *feeling of oppression* and note that rather than my previous thinking that ‘someone up there’ is oppressing me, I and others are also self-silencing, disciplining each other, and colluding, because of the enabling-constraining nature of working with others, along with the desire to be included and the fear of exclusion. As Scott discussed domination, he considered resistance as an inevitable response to it. Having moved away from using Scott’s definition of domination, I want to also move to a more subtle explanation of resistance. When reviewing dictionary definitions of ‘subversion’ I note that they use terms such as perverting, corrupting and undermining. Scott (1990:198) acknowledges these types of activities as a form of resistance, however I feel that subversion more accurately depicts what is happening in my research narratives.

Finally, Scott talks about the oppressed resisting those above them. He discusses resistance as the, “...infra-politics of subordinate groups” (ibid:183), implying it is only those ‘below’ that offer resistance. When reading Scott’s work and thinking about what he has written in my context, in common with other DMan researchers (e.g. Chauhan, 2019; Yung, 2013) I see resistance happening in all directions, what might be called intra-political, rather than just the infra-political resistance that Scott describes. I have described my own resistance, not just to the Dean but also to my staff. Likewise, I illustrate what I perceived as the Dean’s resistance to some of the Heads’ responses. I realise that conceiving of resistance in this way sees resistance as an individual act, which is something I have started to question. To look at this further I turn back to Elias and his concept of

⁶¹ Scott (1990:198) describes three types of domination. Material domination is something that happens when practices of domination include acts such as appropriation of labour i.e., slavery. Ideological domination is the justifications that ruling groups use for being allowed to dominate, such as class or caste (and in a UK society I might add race, sexuality and gender). Finally, status domination is acts of humiliation, insults and assaults on dignity.

figurations and processual understanding to help inform my research arguments with respect to subjugation and subterfuge.

Elias & Scotson (1994): *The Established and the Outsiders*.

Elias & Scotson's (1994) work '*The Established and the Outsiders*' has been helpful throughout my research to understand the dynamics of groups and individuals. Elias & Scotson argue that gossip may help maintain identity and power differentials of insider groups. Such gossip ascribes positive qualities to the insider group and weak attributes to the outside group. In my research, there are also examples where I describe how gossip may be being used in aggrandising and stigmatising ways. In gossiping, we surreptitiously maintain and/or create alliances and processes of alienation. I emphasise that I see no conflict in the way Elias & Scotson write about the use of gossip and the way Scott writes about hidden transcripts. Rather, they are complementary, as their analyses are of different situations and contexts.

Looking at the work of Elias & Scotson on gossip (which Scott identifies as one form of resistance), has helped me to see that gossip, as an example of a subversive act, is not only an act of resistance, but also an act of cohesion. When I turn back to the actions in my research narratives, such as the lewd gesturing, I can see that they also have the same function for us. They serve to demonstrate that we may be resistant to some of the activities that are happening in my business school, but they also serve as acts that may bring cohesion to specific groups. They enable us to not let go of what we believe in, but are small acts that bind our groups together, enabling us to carry on engaging in the 'official' game. Working out who the players are in this subversive game helps us to understand what we can get away with and how much we can question what is happening in the official meetings. Drawing on Mead, I argue I can often anticipate the reaction I may expect to elicit in the other in subversive acts, but I cannot always be sure. The response to what I have said could be unexpected and lead to consequences I have not anticipated. In gossiping and other subversive acts we may both strengthen and weaken our existing power relationships, and we may have no idea at the time which of these may occur.

I also argue that what is happening in the formal meetings is influenced by what is happening in the subversive acts and groups, and that how we respond to each other in our subversive acts is likewise influenced by the changing figurations of power in the public transcript. After Stacey & Mowles (2106:409) I propose that subversive acts can both reinforce and undermine existing power figurations by calling into question the existing values and thought styles that we experience as a voluntary compulsion to act (values) and obligatory constraints (norms). I argue that in some way we

are recognising that we are caught up in a game that we might sometimes feel is ridiculous, but we struggle to find articulate ways of calling the game into question, so instead it manifests itself behind the scenes. I argue (after Scott) that it is therefore helpful to consider both public and more hidden acts when seeking to make sense of what is happening in organisations. As Elias & Scotson (1994:175) point out, human organising is essentially a social process, which entails political activity, people, in groups, are continuously negotiating power differences and group norms and values. I suggest that my work may add further to the understanding of such acts of subversion (including gossip) in a higher education context, as my arguments below will go on to demonstrate.

Themes not explored

As a researcher I realise that I have had to make choices about what I have written within the context of word constrained thesis. These decisions are influenced by what has been unfolding throughout the writing of this thesis, through the reading I have undertaken and the interest of others in my learning set and supervisors.

For example, as I have reviewed my projects, I have recognised the gendered nature of some of the interactions I depict. To illustrate, I recognise that my critique of other females in my narratives is more antagonistic than towards some of the male characters (although it should be noted that some characters in my narratives may have had their sex changed to preserve anonymity). Similarly, when considering the emotional aspects of working with metrics, I note that quite often it is the males in my organisation that make the call for a less emotional and more rational approach to management. However, given the late recognition of gender aspects and the fact that gender studies are a wide field, I do not believe I could have done justice to this aspect in the word constraints available to me. I plan to look at this further in post-doctoral work (see section on Further work below).

Similarly, there are themes that I could have explored more deeply but, in my reading, felt had been covered by other authors and I had little to add. For example, Beer (2016, 2019) makes extensive use of the work of Foucault's conception of power (particularly referring to his lectures at the Collège de France), in setting out his own theory of 'metric power'. He makes the case for how metrics are embedded and cemented in social structures and practices and compares the 'gaze' of metrics to Foucault's (2003) descriptions of the clinical gaze, depicted in *'The Birth of the Clinic'*. Because of this I have instead focused my review of metrics in other areas, including Elias' conception of power figurations, insider-outsider dynamics and inclusion and exclusion. Conversely, when reviewing Beer's work on metrics, and comparing it to my own experience, I recognised his

exploration of the relationship between metrics and emotions as something that I had also been noticing in my work. I believe I have added new dimensions to this exploration of the link between emotions and metrics from my own experiences and from bringing in research I had become interested in around social selves and emotions as depicted particularly by Burkitt (2008,2014).

Having conducted a final reflexive turn on my main themes of metrics, middle managers, acts of subjugation and subterfuge, and emotions I now turn to explaining and concluding my main arguments. I do this from the perspective of a middle manager in a UK business school struggling with metrics. These arguments have evolved from my four projects, including the review I have done above.

4.3 Arguments

In the following, I will elaborate on the three arguments which address my main struggle and my research question around the use of metrics.

First, I argue that metrics present managers with a double bind. If managers perform well against the metrics it is not in their interests to question their success and if they perform badly, their critique of metrics is often deemed defensive. We may perpetuate the use of metrics and/or not question them by colluding in their use, either as a means of aggrandising those who do well, or stigmatising those who don't. These processes serve the fluctuating patterns of identity formation and power figurations involved. I suggest the feeling of being in a 'double bind' that emerges when working with metrics mean that we may feel helpless. However, we are not totally powerless. I have come to see that there are moral decisions to be made about what we question and how we may do that.

Second, I claim that intense feelings and emotions emerge when metrics are used. I have argued that managing using metrics in much of the HE literature privileges an idea of rationality and objectivity, and I suggest that the idealisation that metrics should make managing unemotional and objective makes it even harder to talk about how we are working together, including our vulnerabilities. I propose that acknowledging that middle managers using metrics are likely to encounter strong emotional responses, may help them increase their capacity for coping with the anxieties of feeling 'caught in the middle'. As we come to expect strong emotions, we may be able to engage, more imaginatively, in how we might act.

Third, I propose that subjugation and subterfuge are co-created in the process of managing using metrics. This is a response invoked through the ways in which we enable and constrain each other as we seek to protect our identities or change them in acts of transformation. Gossip and other subversive activities contribute to the patterns of inclusion-exclusion arising from local activities of working with others. I suggest that whilst subversion seems to take place in the shadows, these small acts may start to ripple through into the public domain. I have come to understand that subversion is a ubiquitous component of group relationships. Gossip, ribald behaviour, lewd jokes and other acts of subversion are invoked through communicative interaction of gesture-response, which simultaneously enables and constrains our relationships with others. I suggest that the gossip and ribald behaviour are not simply disparaging activities, but that they also play a valuable part in our negotiation of who we are and how we work together. This means that studies of public

transcripts whilst necessary, may prove insufficient in gaining a richer understanding of what is happening in organisations, and that studies of the 'hidden transcripts' are therefore a legitimate and useful focus for academic research.

I expand further on each of these arguments below.

Argument 1: Managing using metrics presents middle managers with a double bind, leading to feelings of a loss of agency.

From the perspective of a middle manager working in higher education I do not argue against the use of metrics. I consider that metrics are useful at an abstract level for managing at a distance when there are longer chains of command, and that they could help make it safe for those with fewer power chances to highlight puzzling things for exploration. The challenge, however, is that this requires a nuanced and critical approach to their use.

My research has helped me see that using metrics may have the function of helping us manage our anxiety about engaging in difficult conversations and may allow us to keep our vision of ourselves as being right in our judgement of 'quality' (or any other norm that may be prevalent) and as a 'good corporate soldier'. This way of working becomes habitual, it becomes the 'way things are,' our 'habitus'. However, I have come to see that whereas I first assumed that the use of metrics was paradoxical⁶² (i.e., that managing using metrics could lead to predictable and unpredictable outcomes at the same time) and would be generative, I have since come to think that managing using metrics may present managers with a double bind⁶³ (i.e., feelings of being stuck between a rock and hard place). I contend, drawing on Mowles (2015b), that their use may lead to middle managers feeling like they have a loss of agency.

My research has helped me to see that managing using metrics seems to present middle managers with a double bind because when the metrics make us look good it seems to be hard to argue

⁶² Paradox arises when two mutually exclusive self-referencing ideas both define each other and negate each other at the same time. A paradox may produce behavior which becomes stuck, endlessly repeating between two poles, or it might be generative, allowing the exploration of a particular area of human experience in more than one dimension. (Mowles, 2015b:13).

⁶³ Mowles (2015b:14) defines a double bind as two mutually exclusive negative consequences; neither choice being particularly palatable, either choice judged as 'bad'. A double bind has some of the qualities of a paradox but presents two negative choices with a further obligation to choose one of them. He also argues that there is no escape from it: a person is forced to choose between one or the other and this takes away all sense of freedom.

against their limitations, potentially because of feelings of pride, but also perhaps because we are grateful that we are the one that will not be disciplined (on this occasion). In using metrics to manage, it seems to me that when they serve to raise our standing, we may self-silence any doubt about their use (as I did in P3). If managers perform well against the metrics it is not in their interests to question their success. However, if they perform badly, any critique of the use of metrics is often deemed defensive. So, when the metrics show us not to be doing as well, we may try to play down the value of those metrics, but this may be viewed by others as 'sour grapes'.

I would initially have argued that in any game with winners, there are also losers. I describe how metrics can be used by people to blame and shame others for perceived failures, provoking strong feelings and emotions and amplifying the potential for stigmatisation and exclusion. I also explain how metrics are used to recognise success and reward those for performance of certain activities which are valued by those setting the targets. In practice, I found it is often a mixture of both. There are 'high fives' and celebrations about 'good' results, as well as shame and anxiety about not doing one's job well enough. There is also the panic about potentially losing one's job and a lowering of status, at the same time as there may be a guilty pride in 'beating' one's colleagues. I would now argue that there is never really a winner. I recognise, that whilst the current metric regime seemed to show me as 'good', it is difficult to boast about it because other metric regimes, or even the same metrics next time round, may show another outcome. Metrics appear to portray different people in different lights, not just as metrics change, but in response to the sense we make of them. I also describe my mixed emotions when I was shown to be 'good' by the metrics, because whilst I acknowledged both feelings of pride and schadenfreude, I was concerned about being excluded from subversive groups, of which I was a part.

I now argue that part of the double bind means that even though we know that metrics are not objective nor neutral, we continue to use them as if they are. It is seemingly easy to fall back into these same habitual patterns. Previously I fell into the trap of lending metrics agency, as though they had some power over me. I lost sight of the fact that they are abstractions, rather than being something that I and others were taking up in particular ways. In perpetuating this way of thinking I have come to notice how, because we are enabled/constrained by others (or indeed enable or constrain others) with whom we are interacting, and there is a risk of exclusion, it may make it more difficult to argue against the 'way things are'. I can see that I have been perpetuating the use of metrics to try to hold onto the identity I had of myself, as a good corporate soldier, and wanted others to continue to recognise me as such. In a climate where there are demands to be 'excelling' or 'continuously improving' it is possible that our vulnerabilities may be exposed. I now consider

how I suppressed my concerns about the use of metrics, not only because I was worried about the risk of being critical, but also because I was simultaneously enabled and constrained by the image I had of myself as a 'good corporate soldier'. As explained previously, it seemed to me that my choices fell into following the rules (which allowed me to abrogate myself from the actions I was taking) or to leaving the organisation (which I have come to realise is another form of abrogation from the acts that are taking place). I have come to realise that it is not so simple as saying I can only be a 'good corporate soldier' or leave.

Furthermore, I have now come to realise that losing sight of the fact that metrics are abstractions, risks us losing sight of the human beings involved and the consequences of what we are doing together. I have shown that what may then happen is that people can be de-humanised and thought about as 'categories' (e.g., 'red' or 'green'), or that we come up with solutions like 'removing failing modules', disregarding the consequences for the people being 'removed.' Once I acknowledged that claiming that metrics 'showed me things' and that just 'following the procedures' was not necessarily as ethical as I had previously presumed it to be, it became very hard to carry on in my supposition that it was possible to simply 'sort it out'. I have started to see that although the feeling of double blind makes it feel as if we are subjugated, I am not completely helpless and without agency, but rather, I have ethical choices to make about what I am being asked to do. As Burkitt suggests "...to be part of a community to which we are answerable, to feel that we belong to, we must be capable of doing more than reproducing it in a routine fashion" (Burkitt, 2008:61).

My first argument suggests that acknowledging that managing using metrics may present middle managers with a double bind, which may then lead to feelings of hopelessness and subjugation, could enable middle managers to become more aware of their habits in response to these feelings and enable them to reflect upon them. What they may then come to recognise is that that are ethical decisions to be made about what we question and how we may do that. Whilst it is not possible to step outside the panopticon-like gaze of metrics (because we are all doing this to one another) I believe that recognising the 'feeling' of a double bind may enable us to act in political ways that are more nuanced and therefore transform (or not) how we might negotiate what we are doing together.

Argument 2: Intense feelings and emotions may emerge when metrics are used. Acknowledging this may increase the capacity of middle managers to respond to such feelings when they arise.

Some protagonists of the use of metrics suggest that they make the process of managing less emotional. The value attributed to numbers is that, as opposed to expert opinion, they are impersonal (Porter, 1995:32). The authority of metrics is not only vested in our sense of their accuracy as representing something we may not otherwise know, but also in their long and evolving association with rationality and objectivity (Espeland & Stevens, 2008:417). However, my experience of managing using metrics and of metrics being used to measure my performance has led me to challenge the above assumption. Throughout my research, I have described experiencing a range of emotions when presented and working with metrics, including pride, joy, anger, shame, anxiety, fear, jealousy and relief. In addition, my research described how this was often the case for others.

Having looked at the work of Burkitt on emotions and the work of Beer on metrics, I am considering another way to think about how I to understand the emergence of strong emotions when using metrics. Namely, my experience has shown that metrics appear to evoke the very emotions protagonists of metrics claim they are designed to prevent, possibly even amplifying them, because it feels so hard to argue against them, perhaps because of the double bind I describe in argument 1. I also suggest that in my business, the positive feelings and/or sense of shame that emerge as we use metrics, are not considered to be 'rational' and our habitus in HE privileges the idea of a rational leader.

Acknowledging that managing using metrics may lead to emotional responses in both myself and others, has helped me to notice these emotional tendencies. Crying in response to being ashamed or scared, when metrics are presented, may be part of my habitual predisposition. However, recognising my emotional response to metrics (and other areas of conflict) and noticing that when I have these emotional responses I am less able to acknowledge what is happening around me and to take the position of others, has enabled me to pay attention to such moments in a slightly more detached way. This does not mean that I do not find myself welling up or find my voice hitching, but I do now find myself increasingly able to stop the dam from bursting and not be flooded with tears as much as I did before. Linking back to the theme of involvement and detachment which I explored in P4 (p. 131), I believe I now have a more nuanced understanding of the emergence of emotions in response to metrics, which plays into my capacity for reflexivity in conflictual situations. Recognising

these patterns has enabled me to increase my capacity to cope with the anxiety of the risk of being excluded. I will pick up on this theme further in the section on contributions to practice below.

My second argument therefore proposes that intense feelings and emotions may emerge when metrics are used. I contend that there are both general and particular emotional responses to metrics. The idealisation by many of the 'objective' nature of metrics may make it even harder to talk about emotions, relationships, and vulnerabilities. I propose that acknowledging that managing using metrics may lead to emotional responses may help increase the capacity of middle managers to respond to these when they arise. I now suggest that emotions are highly relevant and therefore worth paying attention to because they offer people the opportunity to expand their awareness of what is going on in social situations, to become aware of their emotional tendencies, and to reflect on our habitual responses in emotionally charged situations. I argue that the manager who is more aware of their emotional tendencies and can acknowledge that strong emotions are likely to emerge when managing with metrics may be in a better position to adapt to local circumstances and to consider their involvement in the enabling/constraining conversations in which they are engaged. It may help us increase our capacity for being able to cope with the sense of 'being caught in the middle' and we may be able to engage, more imaginatively, in how we might act.

Argument 3: Processes of subjugation and subterfuge emerge in paradoxical patterns of conforming and resisting, and of inclusion and exclusion. Subversive acts are a ubiquitous emergent pattern experienced by middle managers working with metrics.

My research has shown how the presentation of MFQ metrics and personality profiles appears to provoke acts of subterfuge. My third argument proposes that acts of subjugation and subterfuge emerge in patterns of conforming and resisting, and of inclusion and exclusion. I now suggest that acts of subterfuge may happen in all types or situations and go hand in hand with subjugation. Together subjugation and resistance (played out in acts of subterfuge) enable/constrain the possibilities for change. I now propose that both subjugation and acts of subterfuge are co-created, a response invoked through the ways in which we enable and constrain each other when using metrics in HE.

I had previously assumed that in the 'hidden transcripts' there was more freedom, that I was less constrained by power relationships or mediated by the risk of inclusion/exclusion and conflict i.e., I could say what I liked out of earshot of the Dean. However, as Scott (1990:5) suggests, we cannot describe what happens in the hidden transcript as a realm of freedom and the public transcript as a realm of necessity. What is deemed as acceptable to be said in either 'space' is ideologically driven. Expressing our opinion in ways that are culturally acceptable is as constrained in the 'hidden' transcripts as it is in the 'public' transcripts.

Scott sees a clear barrier between public and hidden transcripts because he is looking at oppressive regimes and his interest is in assessing the discrepancy between the hidden and public transcript as a way to judge the impact of domination on public discourse. What I see, in my context, is that rather than there being a 'border' between the public and hidden transcripts, as Scott suggests, there are patterns in the conversational themes that influence us in both 'spaces'. I have noticed that our hidden discussions 'leak' out into other conversations. For example, I have had numerous corridor conversations with senior members of my leadership team about the continued use of metrics and what it does to people. I now understand that in such conversations I have been 'rehearsing' with some of the heads, and with my DMan learning set, my reservations about metrics. It is potentially less risky to rehearse these arguments with more sympathetic peers in my 'in' group, away from the public space. If the arguments get a good response, then it may be safer to articulate these views in a more public space that is recognised and supported. In addition, these discussions with the subversive groups help articulate the critique and build the argument one may wish to present.

Concurrently, I am anxious to conceal some of my doubts. This is hardly surprising in the face of constant restructuring and staff turnover within the organisation. In addition, as I have pointed to above, these metrics made me look good. I can see now that what is happening in the public transcript is influenced by what is happening in the hidden transcript and how we respond to each other in the hidden transcript is influenced by the changing figurations of power in the public transcript. After Elias, I argue that they both form and are forming the patterns of interaction and the norms and values that come to dominate. Consequently, I would suggest that whilst acts of subterfuge seem to take place in the shadows (and sometimes it does break out in a 'rupture' (p. 76) which in turn got squashed) there are small shifts happening all the time. I have demonstrated that there are growing dissenting voices in the literature I have referred to (e.g., Collini (2017); Williams

(2013)) and even in the government's recent responses to the NSS⁶⁴ which shows how these small acts of dissent may start to ripple through into public domains.

I now see from my research that there is a constant re-figuring of the 'in' and the 'out' groups. We collaborate, gossip and engage in ribald acts with some, which inevitably excludes others. The groups that we do this with are also constantly shifting in their figurations. Elias (2001:12) draws attention to how what happens in social life emerges because of a process of interweaving activities and intentions of interdependent people. What I have come to understand is that acts of subterfuge towards the metrics regime are an inherent part of trying to get things done, and that seeking to silence them may stifle the opportunity to ongoing continuity or open possibilities for change. I therefore propose that both subjugation and subterfuge are co-created, a response invoked through the ways in which we enable and constrain each other, as we seek to protect our identities or change them in acts of transformation, which I have argued occurs in the presence of different values, and which can provoke conflict and strong emotions. We constantly make evaluative choices that include some and exclude others and, in this process, the balance of power may shift. I now realise that in negotiating how we go forward together when making sense of our metrics, there are shifting alliances as we collaborate and compete to ensure those metrics pertaining to us and our 'in' groups are seen in the best possible light. I have described how subversive activities contribute to the patterns of inclusion/exclusion arising from local activities of working with others.

In Scott's (1990) work above, one of the things I noted was that I did not agree that subjugation and subterfuge only worked in one direction 'infra-politically', but rather my supposition was that there were actions of subjugation and subterfuge happening at all levels of the organisation, in all directions, all the time. I had started to consider whether they acted 'intra-politically'. However, taking a social perspective has enabled me to imagine the perspective of others and what might be going on for them. This in turn has provoked feelings of guilt, pity, shame (or blame) which have helped me to take a more nuanced judgment about what their motivations might mean. One person's subterfuge may be another person's subjugation. For example, it is possible that any attempts I may make to 'shield' my staff from the metric regime that we are constantly exposed to, may be seen by others as an attempt to keep information from them. In any situation there are

⁶⁴ Whilst in the process of writing this synopsis the UK government have issued a policy paper, which includes a review of NSS. In this paper there is criticism of NSS stating that it, "...exerts a downward pressure on standards", that, "...good scores can be achieved more by dumbing down and spoon-feeding students" and that whilst, "...student perspectives do play a valuable role in boosting quality and value across the sector, there is concern that the benefits of this survey are currently outweighed by the negative behaviours and inefficiencies it drives. Universities must be empowered to have the confidence to educate students to high standards rather than simply to seek 'satisfaction'". (Department for Education, 2020)

competing goods and negotiation of what 'good' is. As we functionalise our values in everyday work, we may both comply with and resist the dominant ideology, and in that way influence (and are influenced by) shifts in what is discussed and actioned. Together, subjugation and acts of subterfuge enable/constrain the possibilities for change. I propose that whether subjugation or subterfuge and the lack of change/change that happens is seen as 'good', will depend upon whether one's power chances rise or fall as a consequence.

Drawing on my work so far, I now consider that maybe subterfuge is socially generated but individually felt. Whilst it may *feel* as if people are subjugating me or that I am subjugating them, I now consider whether this is because it is in such moments that we experience shifts in power figurations in feelings such as joy, pride, anger and shame. If there is a perceived raise or fall of our status and changing power figurations as we make judgments about who is performing well or badly, we can feel these moral evaluations as a shift in our identities, and this can feel individualising. As I noted above, even where there is a perceived victory, I felt the envy of others and the risk of exclusion for being a 'good corporate soldier', and in this my identity shifted. I am starting to think it is too reductive to understand subterfuge as merely defiant opposition to the use of metrics. General plans for 'improvement', conceived at a distance, must be contextualised locally, and will always involve negotiation and compromise. This thinking has allowed me to consider a different possibility for acting in ways which might lead to different outcomes in response to metrics.

I have now become much more aware of how I am engaging in gossip and ribald acts as I gesture and respond to others at work. I recognise this is sometimes a defence mechanism to manage my own anxieties. On other occasions, it is testing out, with others, what it might be possible to challenge in our formal meetings. I have become more mindful of how and what I say and do, both in the public and the more 'hidden' social spaces at work, and how this is affecting how I relate to my colleagues in the SLT and my staff and how they relate to me. I have become much more aware of how I am engaging in gossip and ribald acts as I gesture and respond to others. I no longer assume that we are all engaging in just a bit of 'harmless' gossip.

My third argument therefore, proposes that subjugation and subversion are co-created through organisational members' ongoing participation in interaction. The response, which may play out in gossip, ribald behaviour and lewd jokes, invoked through this communicative interaction, enables and constrains our relationship with one another. Thinking about subjugation and subversion as emergent in the interaction offers a way of thinking about how we are able to carry on relating to one another; this requires us to explore our differences and similarities as we compete and cooperate in the workplace. I would suggest that the gossip and ribald behaviour are not simply

pejorative activities as I had initially assumed them to be, but more an attempt to try to keep our work human in a metricised environment, and that this behaviour plays a significant part in the negotiation of how we work together. Rather than acts of subversion being something that should be stamped out, my experience is that it is an inherent pattern middle managers might expect to see in working with metrics, that can be either paradoxically generative or create stuck patterns of a double bind (and sometimes both at the same time).

Based on my 4 projects, synopsis and arguments I will now proceed to summarise my contributions to theory and practice.

5. Contribution of this Thesis

My research contributes to the literature on metrics, middle managers, and subterfuge in organisational life and may be of interest to other practitioners and researchers in higher education, management theory and the hidden transcripts of organisational life.

Contribution to Theory

Firstly, my thesis contributes to the study of managing using metrics. Several authors, such as Muller (2018), have looked at what happened in organisations when metrics are used to manage and highlights activities such as gaming, discouraging risk taking, and goal displacement. My thesis contributes to the research on this in UK Higher Education (HE). Beer (2016) points out the intensification of the application of metrification in managing in the past couple of decades, and links this to the rise in neo-liberalism and managerial practices. My study describes how this is happening, not just in the private sector, but also in the public sector, such as HE. It is argued that metrics are supposed to help managers because they are objective and neutral. My research finds that they are also ideological, subjective, and may have both predictable and unpredictable consequences. I suggest that when metrics are used instrumentally and there is a failure to engage reflexively together on their meaning there is likely to be a poorer relationship between middle managers and staff and patterns of blaming and shaming individuals and stigmatising teams for failures, when held up against metrics.

Secondly, my thesis brings together a better understanding of metrics and the strong emotions that may emerge in their use. Beer (2016) argues that metrics work because of their affective power. I add to this debate by drawing on authors who see emotions as patterns of relationships, making the point that it is not the metrics in themselves that make us feel emotional, but it is our expectation of how those metrics will be used, based on our past experiences, that means we have a tendency to experience them in an emotional way. I argue therefore that there is both a generalised tendency to feel emotions (such as shame, envy and pride) when metrics are involved in managing but also a particular tendency in our responses to being scrutinised by metrics, which may evoke differing emotional responses in those involved, based on our previous experiences

Thirdly, my thesis contributes to the study of subversive acts as a social and organisational phenomenon, by considering their emergence as a response to feelings of subjugation within the context of middle managers working in UK HE. Gossip as a social phenomenon has gained some credibility as a topic of research interest and academic debate in the social science disciplines. I have suggested that bringing a pragmatic viewpoint to the study of organisational gossip and its relationship with metrics contributes in another way, in that gossip and other subversive activities contribute to the patterns of inclusion-exclusion arising from local activities of working with others. For this reason, I emphasise the importance of paying attention to the micro-interactions with others in both the public and more 'hidden' social spaces at work when trying to understand how managers practice at work when metrics are used as a tool of organisational control. I also point to the importance for middle managers themselves to pay attention to patterns of gossip, rather than perceiving it as 'idle', or something that that can be done away with or crushed, or alternatively harnessed for the good by 'feeding good news into the grapevine.' I believe that this is one way in which one may act politically in ways that might increase our power chances (and reduce the risks involved, which may risk our own exclusion if found out). I am now more aware of the ethical and moral questions raised by my own contributions to gossip at work and suggest others in my field may also consider this useful. Reconsidering the work of Scott (1985) and re-evaluating this in my context of a UK HE, I also consider that studies of public transcripts are necessary but not sufficient in making sense of working in organisations. I believe that my work can therefore give some unique insights into practice for both myself and for others managing in both the HE sector in the UK and in other parts of the world where universities are coming under increasing pressure of a metricised culture. Indeed, given the interest of others in my learning set and DMan community, I think this struggle also speaks to others managing in many other public and commercial institutions. I have argued that this understanding requires us to explore our differences and similarities as we compete and cooperate when using metrics in the workplace.

The final contribution of my research is to the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating. Authors writing from this perspective take up conflict, power relations, processes of inclusion and exclusion, and communicative interactions between people, but very few have looked at the perspective of the middle manager in organisational life. Little has been written to date from the perspective of managers who are 'stuck in the middle', i.e., middle managers like myself, trying to work with metrics, whilst at the same time considering the potential consequences of metric fixation. I therefore believe that I have added to the body of literature written in this tradition.

I maintain that my research will contribute to the enhancement of understanding about the work of middle managers working with performance metrics in higher education and indeed in other sectors. Acknowledging the place there is in organisations for the paradoxical conflictual/collaborative and conforming/resisting nature of work and the emotions that may be evoked when working with metrics may support other middle managers as they try to muddle through. This will not necessarily make us more effective, but I suggest may add important aspects to our interactions with other middle managers and maybe pay more attention to those areas of organisational life that are sometimes neglected, including emotions and subversive acts. It will potentially generate an understanding of these situations and hopefully increase our capacity for being able to cope with the sense of being 'in the middle'. I argue that the middle manager who is more aware of their impact in the politics of organisational life will be in a better position to adapt to local circumstances and to consider their involvement in the enabling/constraining conversations in which they are engaged.

Contribution to Practice

The DMan programme has had a significant impact on my practice as a manager of academics and a member of the SLT of my business school. I have been invited to pay attention to what I have been doing when I have been managing and working with others using performance metrics in my organisation.

Firstly, I have come to understand that enabling/constraining relationships are inevitable processes within a social context. I have started to take a different interest in the work of my staff, not just individually, but collectively together. I have been trying to take the opportunity to sit with my staff to try to make sense of what has been happening for me and for them, to share accounts of what we have found ourselves doing, what has been working as expected, and what has not. I have argued in my research that the use of narrative brings human experience to the fore, and I also suggest that listening to the stories staff tell about the work they are involved in may open up the possibility for further reflection and thinking about new ways of working together. For example, in response to the coronavirus pandemic staff had to adapt to online learning quickly and I invited staff to talk together about this transition, focussing not only on the work-related issues we encountered, but also how this has altered our experience of working together, and what sense we can make of it. This approach has had a mixed response from staff, with some finding it generative and others

expressing that it is not 'proper work'. This has then enabled us to try to find a way to talk about what 'proper work' may constitute.

Secondly, I find now that I am more attentive to my own behaviour and more ready to consider how we are all participating in interaction, rather than (as previously) to assume that problems are located with individuals. My exploration has helped me negotiate my way through my interactions with colleagues, showing a capacity for taking the attitude of others' and, "...inclusion-exclusion dynamics created by particular ways of talking" (Stacey, 2003: 125). I have found that being more aware of my emotional tendencies and acknowledging that strong emotions are likely to emerge when managing with metrics, I am in a better position to consider how I am participating in the enabling/constraining conversations I am engaged in. In addition, recognising resistance and conflict as emergent in our everyday interaction offers a way of understanding how we can carry on relating to one another; this requires us to explore our differences and similarities as we compete and cooperate in the workplace. Recognising these patterns has enabled me to increase my capacity to cope with the anxiety of the risk of being excluded. As Stacey (2012:89) argues, "...practising the techniques of discipline is essential to sustain modern organizations, but we may be able together to ameliorate the undesirable consequences of this practice by reflecting upon what we are doing."

Finally, recognising that a focus on metrics appears to be reducing both my own and my colleagues' capacity to engage critically with one another and with our staff about what we are doing together. Once I became clear that the use of metrics is a fundamentally social process, the ethical implications and possibilities of quantification have become more visible to me. I have been considering what it means to continue working in an organisation that sometimes takes decisions that I can see may do harm to those that work for and with me. What I have come to see is that in making alliances and acknowledging the importance of these informal networks, I have become a more politically astute middle manager in the business school than previously. I have discovered more possibilities of working in a regime that sometimes makes me feel uncomfortable without retreating to either blindly following what has been asked of me, or feeling compelled to leave the organisation as I have previously done in similar circumstances (whilst also acknowledging I do still occasionally retreat to the bawdy and ribald actions in the 'hidden transcript' and threaten (in my inner monologue) to leave). For example, I have been having frequent conversations with my line manager about the impact that this relentless focus on metrics is having on me, my staff, and our relationships. This may (or may not) be moving us forward to thinking about metrics differently. I believe, however, that I have developed my capacity to live with uncertainty that bit longer, to 'sit in

the fire', explore, and negotiate the next steps into the unknown. For example, I notice that in not resorting to tears when I feel conflicted or ashamed, enables me to be more sensitive to what happens within people's interactions, and to pay more attention to both the feelings of myself and of others. I speak less frequently, but with more attention to those aspects of work that are less functional and more about how what we are doing may be impacting on how people engage in organisational life.

Concluding Remarks

Limitations

I acknowledge that my arguments are a response that have emerged for me, based on my history, my interactions with my learning set, the wider DMan community and the people outside of that community with whom I have discussed my work. This is clearly not the only set of conclusions that could have arisen from my narratives, but rather reflect my experiences, my curiosity about why metrics did not produce the responses I expected, and more latterly in the subversive acts I recognised throughout my projects. It also reflects the interests of my learning set colleagues and my supervisors. Further, as my research has focussed on my experiences in my place of work (and in meeting the obligations of research ethics, I have discussed aspects of my research and the methods I am using with colleagues including those about whom I write) this work also reflects those experiences. My participation in the DMan and the way I am now carrying out and paying attention to my practice means that those interactions will be reflected in my research in ways that it is difficult for me to account for.

I also recognise that using reflexive narratives is not without its limitations. The emotional experiences I have had, the assumptions underpinning my thinking, and my interpretations are not only not objectively verifiable, but I have found that at times I have dis-regarded aspects (such as initially discounting subversive acts such as gossip and ribaldry) because I was worried about what it was appropriate to write about and how others may view me. I also accept that narratives could be contested as being unique, making them unsuitable for drawing generalisable conclusions. However, I see narrative method as a chance to enquire into events in order to shed light on wider thematic patterns in social life. My narratives are, of course, contextually bound, but, I argue, serve as a way of illuminating human experience for others, across different contexts.

I argue that the DMan research method (which I explore in detail in the Methodology section p. 6), where our narratives are interrogated by learning set members through multiple iterations, to help them understand our work and explore the resonance and plausibility of these accounts, allows us to explore potentially multiple subjectivities in making sense of our experience. The diverse nature of my learning set and the wider research community supports this. However, as a researcher I realise that I have had to make choices about what I have written. As I have gone through my research, I have increasingly tried to stay with the, sometimes disturbing, experience of noticing my own biases, habits, norms and values. I have done this as a way of challenging the limitations of these biases and how they may be affecting my research (and practice). As a consequence of this, I fully expect to encounter new perspectives around my work, which could very well change what I think about my arguments in the future. My hope is that, for now, they may provoke new thinking in others, providing them with a way of reflecting upon and approaching their work too.

Further work

My research has not finished here. My interest in subversion is growing, whilst acknowledging that this is a topic that is not easily researched or discussed. My interest in the topic of gossip and hidden transcripts has increased during the covid pandemic where many of the 'normal' avenues for informal discussion are altered, and new forms of informal and hidden discussions have emerged. Whilst technological advances to communicate with others from a distance have increased the opportunities for people to communicate with one another, the usual coffee machine moments have been seriously diminished. Gossiping with others has moved to other platforms and vehicles, and it has been interesting for me to observe who talks in formal remote video-enabled meetings, who writes comments in the chat functions of these meetings and the form these comments take, who makes comments in other group chats whilst these formal meetings are ongoing, and who sends private messages to me during these meetings, sometimes using other electronic messaging services unconnected to the core meeting link.

In addition, I have also found that my re-assessment of the use of metrics has allowed me to re-consider my own field of experience, that of accounting. Over the course of my research, I became more and more critical of this field. However, there are accounting scholars who carry out research with a more critical view. I have become more interested in what they might say and am considering whether my research may add to the debate about how accounting practices are inextricably linked with many social problems and accounting's implication in the exercise of power. Furthermore, there is a thread in accounting research, Behavioural Finance, which to date I have not paid much

attention to, but which considers how social influences and emotions can impact on investors' decision-making processes. Whilst I am at the start of my enquiry as to whether my research could add to understanding in this area, this is something I am interested in pursuing.

In addition, issues around affect, emotions, feelings and the link between 'objective measures', is a powerful theme that I have delved into quite late in my thesis. In my business school I have been involved in various discussions about how we should just use the metrics and should not be so emotional when discussing topics together. I am also interested in pursuing whether there is a gendered nature to these observations as it is frequently the males who argue we should not let our emotions 'cloud' the issue or interfere with our decisions, and yet my narratives show some strong emotions being portrayed by men, as well as by the women.

I presented the outcome of my research in November 2020 at a workshop at Hertfordshire Business School's Complexity Management Centre Symposium, *Exploring Complexity of Conflict and Organising in the Time of Covid-19* entitled, 'The backstage effects of working with metrics'. This provided an opportunity to share parts of my research with a group of researchers and practitioners to deepen my inquiry. I also plan to attend the Complexity and Management Conference in 2021 where I hope to present the development of my thinking. It would be my intent to publish an article or, "...provocation essay" (Willmott, 1994) in 2021 on Metrics in Higher Education and I have been considering which journals may be appropriate. In addition, I have been discussing the possibility with my principal supervisor, of writing a book chapter for a series of books on complexity and the experience of managing in public sector organisations.

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7. Appendices

Glossary of Terms

ACCA	Association of Chartered Certified Accountants
AMER	Annual Monitoring and Evaluation Report
BA/BSc	Bachelor of Arts / Bachelor of Science
CEG	Chief Executives Group
DLHE	Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education
DiscoverUni	A website (which replaced UNISTATS) in 2020 to supply data about universities. It is owned and operated by the HE funding and regulatory bodies of the UK, which for England in the OfS
DMan	Doctor of Management
FHEQ	QAA Framework for Higher Education Qualifications
FTE	Full- Time Equivalent: usually refers to students but can also be staff- an aid to the distribution of resources between institutions and departments by calculating student loads.
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEPI	Higher Education Policy Institute

HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
HOD	Head of Department
HOG	Head of Group (alternatively named a Subject Group Leader in parts of the university)
HR	Human Resources
ICAEW	Institute of Chartered Accountants of England and Wales
KIS	Key Information Sets
LEO	Longitudinal Educational Outcomes
MFQ	Module Feedback Questionnaire
NSS	National Student Survey
NUS	National Union of Students
OfS	Office for Students
OMG	Operational Management Group
OVC	Office of the Vice Chancellor
P1, P2 etc.	Shorthand to refer to Project 1, 2 etc. of the DMan projects. This shorthand is commonly used in the DMan community.
PDP	Performance Development Plan
Post '92 university	Post '92 universities are those that were created by the UK Further and Higher Education Act 1992 which granted former polytechnics university status.
PSRB	Professional, Statutory or Regulatory Body
QA	Quality Assurance

QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
RAE	Research Assessment Exercise
RAG ratings	Ratings expressed by showing them coded as Red (R), Amber (A) or Green (G)
REF	Research Excellence Framework
RQB	Recognised Qualifying Body (accountants)
SAM	School Administration Manager
SBU	Strategic Business Unit
SEG	School Executive Group
SLT	Senior Leadership Team (of the school)
SOG	School Operations Group
TEF	Teaching Excellence Framework
THES	Times Higher Education Supplement
UCU	University and College Union
UNISTATS	UNISTATS is a website that allowed students and prospective students to see various statistics about university and university courses. The data is gathered largely from the NSS and data from HEFCE. It is aimed to help students make informed choices about their university education provider.
UPRs	University Policies and Regulations
UUK	Universities UK
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment

Organisational Charts

Figure 1. Management of the University

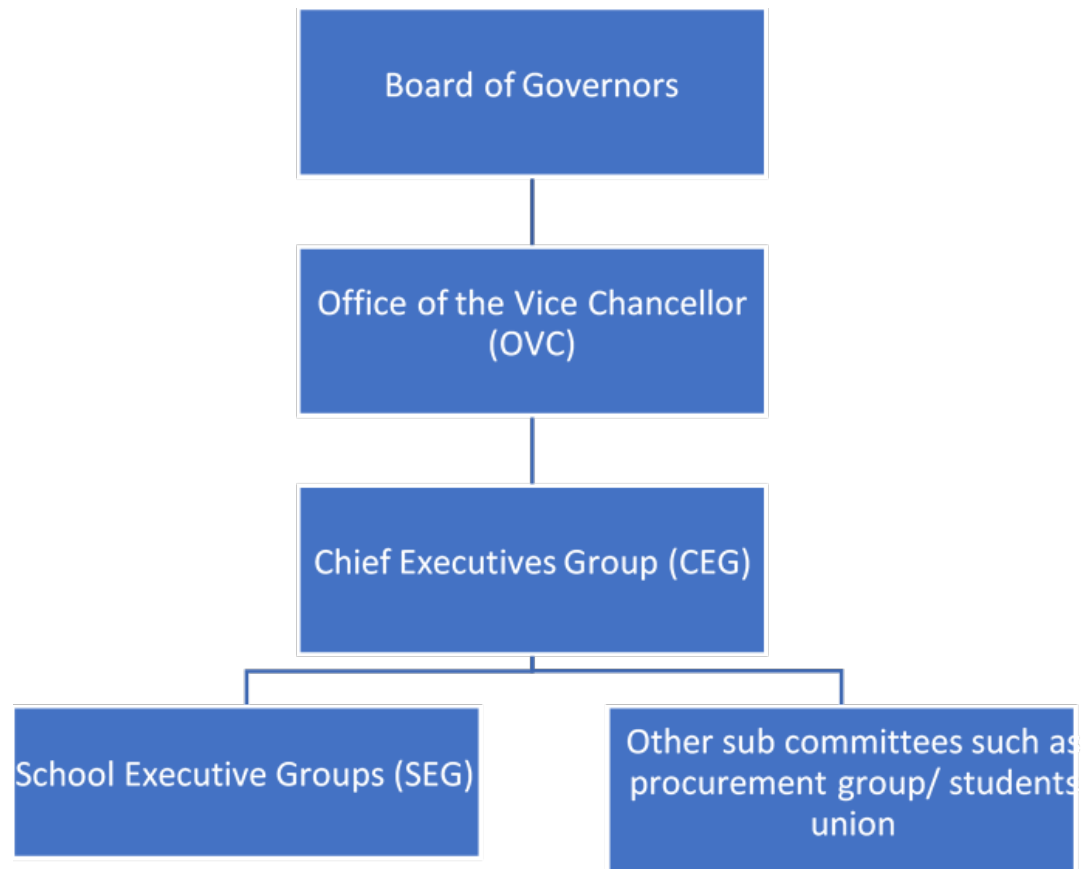


Figure 2. Management of the Business School

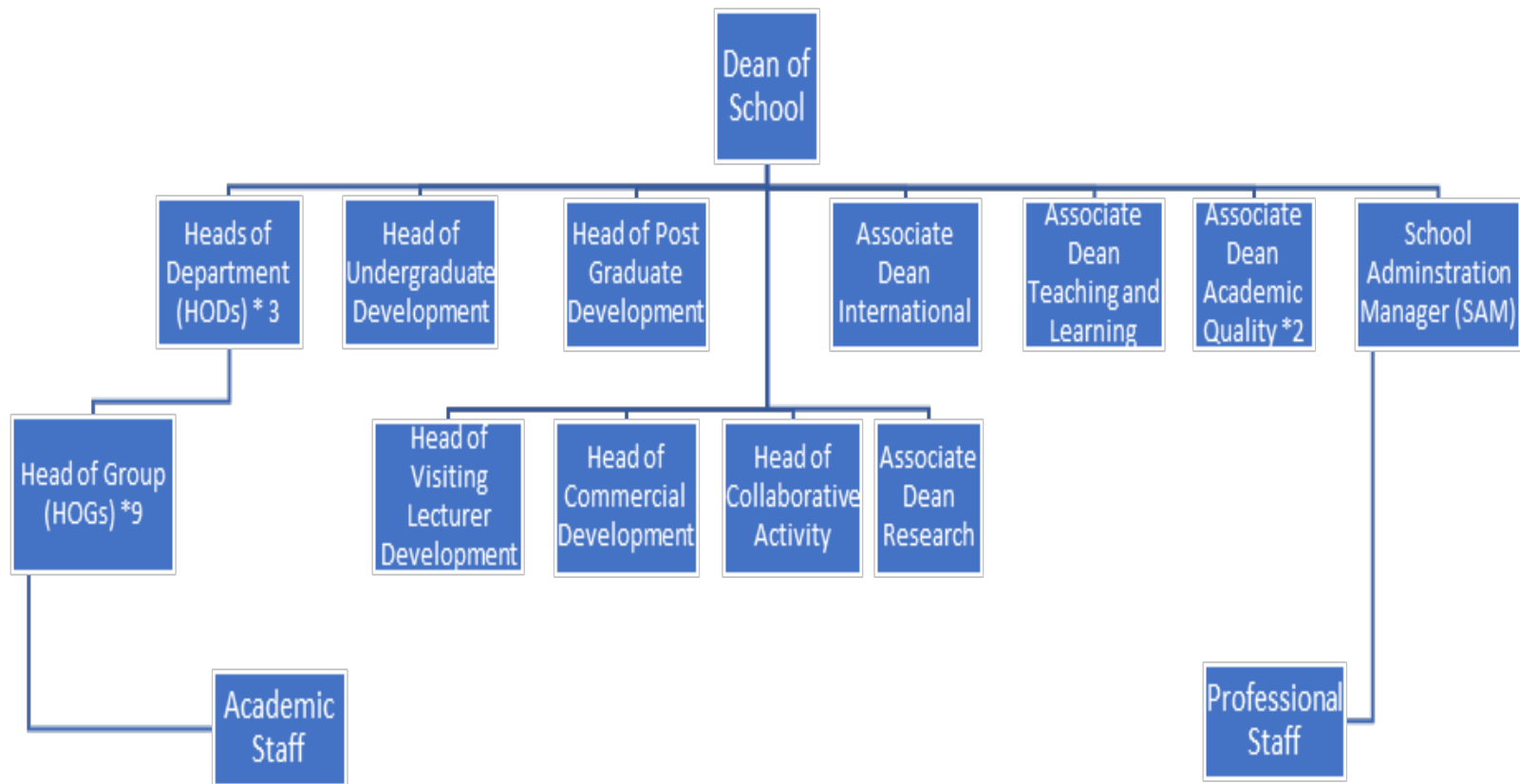


Figure 3. Management of the Business School – Just Prior to Re-Organisation

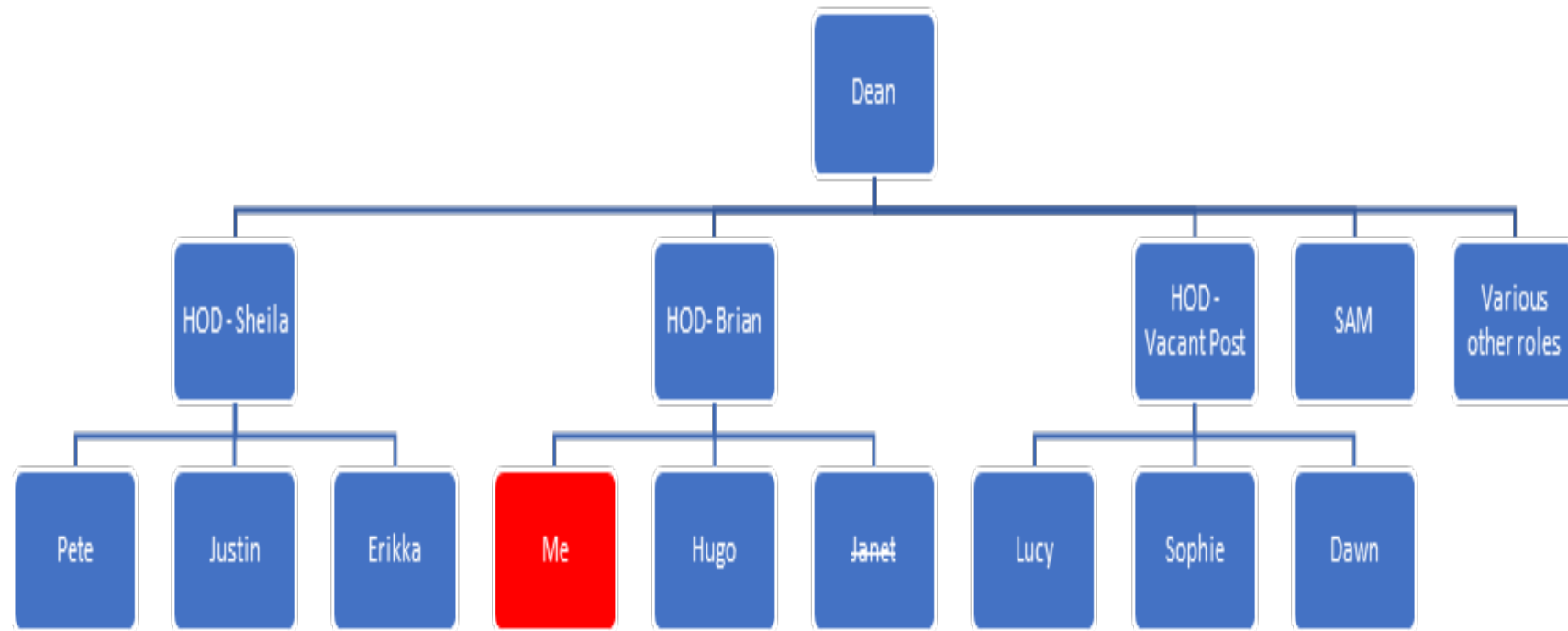


Figure 4. Management of the Business School – Post Reorganisation

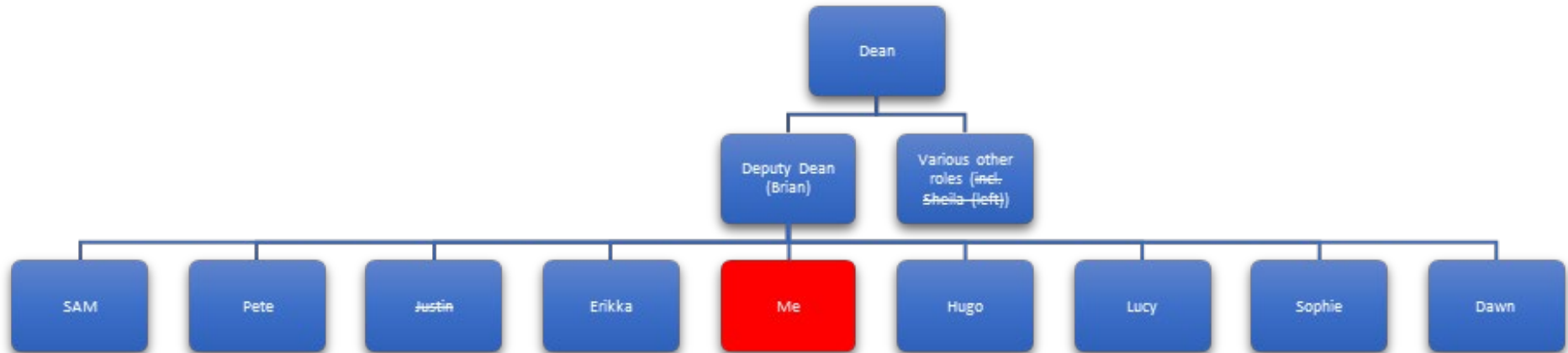


Figure 5. Team Circle

