

**Leadership, Power, Ethics: Leading and Managing in a
Performative Culture**

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Abstract

This thesis is a study of the experience of leadership. The aim throughout the thesis is to find ways of making sense of the idea of leadership by reference to the everyday routines of organisational life. The thesis is therefore preoccupied with the idea of “*doing leadership*” in the context of enacting specific job roles in organisations. Such an approach to studying leadership is in contrast with other possibilities that may be more theoretical or speculative in their view of what being in a senior leadership role in an organisation is actually like.

I completed this thesis whilst working as a principal/CEO of two large inner city colleges in the tertiary sector of the UK. My thesis therefore reflects also the experience of enacting a leadership role bound up with the wider agenda of public service reform. In making sense of this context I apply and develop the idea of “performativity” as signifying a particular culture (rooted expectations, ways of working, generalised assumptions about practice) that are pervasive in public sector organisations. I explore the significance of this culture for the way in which those in leadership roles (and *inter alia*, their subordinates) experience identity. I suggest too that the cult of performance management makes contingent a pervasive sense of ontological insecurity for those working in political, administrative and organisational leadership roles enacted in this context.

Against this background, I propose four key themes as a way of understanding what *doing leadership* in organisations entails: the administration of power and authority; the practice of ethics; an iconographic role of significance to others in an ongoing generalised process of identity formation; creative action. Finally, in reflecting upon the idea of leadership development, I argue that development should be understood as a movement in the emotional responsiveness (*emotivity*) of individuals to their situation and context. This I suggest arises from the practice of reflexivity. It is the ability to do this with rigour on the part of those in leadership roles that creates also new possibilities for an ethics of relating in organisations centred on the ideas of participation and emergence.

The thesis comprises four project studies. The first is a reflective narrative account of how I came to join the DMan programme in 2002. The second explores issues of leadership

relative to thinking about group processes and traditions of group analysis. The third study examines issues of identity as they emerge in the ways in which processes of power relating emerge in group interactions. The fourth study explores these same themes but in relation to the tensions that emerge in the interplay of norms and values informing human actions and conduct. The thesis includes a fifth study which focuses on issues of methodology and the significance of personal narratives of experience to a wider process of academic research.

This thesis is explicitly one written by reference to a particular theoretical perspective. This perspective is best described by reference to the idea of complex responsive processes. I account for and describe this perspective in each of the project studies. It was with a view to working explicitly with this perspective that I joined the DMan programme. The work in this thesis is intended to constitute an active intellectual engagement with the idea of complex responsive processes. It is not the intention of the thesis simply to exemplify a fixed set of ideas. The thesis is therefore aiming also to be a contribution to the thinking of complex responsive processes as a set of ideas still in development. I remain committed to the view that the idea of complex responsive processes provides a powerful medium of critical ideas through which life in organisations and patterns of human relating can be understood. Whilst the thesis does not set out to justify a case for the idea of complex responsive processes, a recurrent theme is an exploration of the implications for understanding organisational life in general that arise from adopting the perspective of complex responsive processes relative to those presented by other traditions of thinking.

Introduction

This thesis is a study of the experience of leadership. My aim throughout the thesis is to find ways of making sense of the idea of leadership by reference to the everyday routines of organisational life. My preoccupation in this thesis is therefore with the idea of “*doing leadership*” in the context of enacting specific job roles in organisations. I contrast this approach to studying leadership with other possibilities that may be more theoretical or speculative in their view of what being in a senior leadership role in an organisation is actually like. The theoretical perspectives that emerge in my thesis are therefore borne of a process in which I attempt rigorously and critically to reflect upon what I believe to be my lived experience of this role. I believe that by focusing in this way, deliberately and in detail, on the everyday aspects of the experience of individuals it is possible to develop new thinking about what can be said to be really happening between and for people enacting senior managerial roles at work.

The focus of this study is therefore my own lived experience of working as a principal and CEO of two large inner city colleges of further education. Further education colleges are part of the UK public sector and as such have been the subject of a great many government reform initiatives during the past twenty years. My study of leadership, power and ethics is therefore bound up with my own experience of working at a senior level in organisations that have been most directly affected by what is often referred to as the “public sector reform agenda”.

The experiences of which I write are also influenced by the fact that for most of the eight years in which I worked at CEO level in further education my responsibility was to lead and manage institutions judged at different times and in differing respects to be failing. I think that this experience is of particular significance to my thesis for two reasons. The first of these relates to a tenet of policy which states that intervention by the agencies of government in the affairs of incorporated public sector institutions is in inverse proportion to their effectiveness. This means that in my work as the head of a failing institution I

have experienced the sharp end of such intervention processes and have in this event had to become adept myself in the management of the politics of such processes. I have also observed the impact of the negative judgements of such agencies on the emotional responses (in terms of the experience of shaming and a sense of labelling, identity and loss of self confidence) amongst the very large numbers staff members needed to support an institution of over 20,000 students. The second aspect of this key experience follows from the first in that I would argue that the potential of otherwise normalised processes of power relating is most starkly evident, or most fully revealed, at the extremes of what are regarded as acceptable normative behaviours by those believing themselves to hold the reins of accountability. I believe that I have worked in a sustained way at the edge of such boundaries of tolerance and that my thesis is informed by the demands of such an experience.

During the eight year period which provides the background to my thesis, the colleges for which I was responsible were subject to three full inspections by the relevant government agencies (FEFC 2000: OfSTED 2002, 2004). On each occasion, the published reports of these agencies reflected highly complimentary judgements about the quality of the leadership and management processes that the respective inspection teams had observed. Throughout this period I can therefore evidence the fact that I was regarded as one of a group of high performing college principals with a reputation for addressing the performance management issues of failing institutions. To this extent I would think of myself too as a member of the post-16 education sector establishment. But as time went on and my experience of this job role matured I found it increasingly difficult to reconcile the sense that I had of myself as an educationalist with my actions as a principal and CEO. Indeed I would go so far as to argue that colleges are now implicated in the furtherance of a vision of economic competitiveness that views such organisations as being simply part of a national supply chain of productive human resources. This I would argue is a development that has largely displaced the idea of education (at least in the traditional liberal meaning of the term) in favour of a pedagogic model that is exclusively training and skills oriented. It is in the context of this broad policy shift and with issues of institutional leadership in mind, that I increasingly found myself struggling to make sense of, or justify, the purpose of what I felt myself to be *doing*. By *doing* I refer here both to the management of an educational process *per se* and therefore also to the individuals charged with teaching and other support roles in educational organisations.

As I argue later in my thesis, a reaction against what we perceive to be the status quo of the prevailing order of our lives does not necessarily result in a cynical or stoical response. On the contrary such experience can be the source of great personal creativity as it necessitates a search for new sources of meaning. The experience of not being able to make sense of what is going on around us is therefore of itself often a powerful impetus towards finding new narratives and new ways of understanding. Reading back over my thesis and the component project work I have felt very much this positive sense of a search for new ways of thinking about and understanding the wider implications of the bigger processes of change and movement of which I found myself to be a part.

Such experience can however also become associated with other emotional responses that are connected with being in some way, however small, in the position of an outsider. Stepping across this threshold, from insider to outsider status, carries with it also the deconstruction of the many narratives that sustain the belief structures of those who remain insiders. For me, this experience was fundamental to opening up for myself a sense of enquiry about my own emotional responsiveness to work. It was also significant for developing my interest in the experiences of those around me and for whom I was responsible. And although I do not attempt in this thesis to suggest that my experiences are also those of others, I do believe that in the course of developing a reflexive approach to understanding my own experience I have illustrated the ways in which globalised social processes are enacted in the micro-detail of individual lives. To this extent, I lay claim also to saying something in this thesis about wider patterns of working relationships, power and ethics across the public sector in the UK. I think too that the themes of my thesis resonate equally with the experience of public sector change in other developed economies and particularly those of the USA, Canada, Australasia and Western Europe where a similar policy agenda of reform has been played out.

I identify the emergence of what I have described in this thesis as a performative culture with a distinctive and complex emotional *habitus* on the part of those whose life experience shapes and is shaped by the assumptions and practices of this culture. This I think of as a pattern of emotional responsiveness in which a sense of ontological anxiety is all pervasive. Further, I have come to regard the provocation of such anxiety as being a core component of the repertoire of modern managerial practice. This insight is important

to the nature and development of my thesis because as I develop the narratives of experience that make up the main project studies I draw attention to the ways in which leadership in organisations is explicitly a function associated with the management of power and a particular ethics of conduct in which relationships between adults at work are largely infantilised. My thesis therefore also tries to rework a way of understanding leadership issues from a different ethical standpoint. This is one that recognises each person as being implicated in an ongoing process of interaction within which their individual gestures and responses form part of an ongoing and emergent figuration of relationships. This is a process experienced, I argue, as a living present in which a sense of self is itself an emergent quality of this relational process. In this different, and I would argue participative, view of ethical relationships in organisations, we are required to acknowledge that our actions taken in pursuit of finding our own *locus* of security and identity are the limiting case framing the opportunities available to others also to be fully recognised.

My thesis comprises four project studies. The first is a reflective narrative account of how I came to join the DMan programme in 2002. The second explores issues of leadership relative to thinking about group processes and traditions of group analysis. The third study examines issues of identity as they emerge in the ways in which processes of power relating emerge in group interactions. The fourth study explores these same themes but in relation to the tensions that emerge in the interplay of norms and values informing human actions and conduct. The thesis includes a fifth study which focuses on issues of methodology and the significance of personal narratives of experience to a wider process of academic research. This study is inserted between projects three and four because this order reflects the sequencing of my work through the programme. It is therefore located within the thesis in a manner that illustrates also the movement and development of my thinking in the course of research.

The project work for this thesis arose in a genuinely emergent way. My interest in the events that form each of the three substantive narratives (that is in projects 2, 3 and 4) seemed to arise spontaneously. I did not plan in advance to structure the thesis around these incidents. I understand the emergence of these contexts in my attention as in part also an unconscious response in me to events reflecting a much bigger process of movement in my thinking and responsiveness as this developed through the programme.

Although each of these projects is linked by a common theme of enquiry each also explores this theme from a different perspective or context of issues. For example, in project 2 I engaged for the first time with the disciplines of the thinking that is associated with group analysis. In project 3 by contrast, I would say that my focus shifts to an exploration of issues of power and the implications of understanding this in terms of a particular phenomenology. In project 4 I move on again and attempt to make sense in detail of the ethical/moral implications of how norms and values come to play a part in shaping the nature of our responses to each other at work. In the study of methodology I engage directly with the implications for research of personal narratives and signposted some of the philosophical justifications for seeing such narratives as being significant of wider social phenomena than might be implied by their quasi-autobiographical nature.

This thesis is explicitly one written by reference to a particular theoretical perspective. This perspective is best described by reference to the idea of complex responsive processes. I account for and describe this perspective in each of the project studies. It was with a view to working explicitly with this perspective that I joined the DMan programme. I understand my association with the idea of complex responsive processes to be one of active intellectual engagement and not one of apostolic conversion. I hope that my thesis is also therefore a contribution to the thinking of complex responsive processes as a set of ideas still in development. I remain committed to the view that the idea of complex responsive processes provides a powerful medium of critical ideas through which life in organisations and patterns of human relating can be understood. The thesis does not therefore set out to justify a case for the idea of complex responsive processes. A recurrent theme of the thesis is however to explore the implications for understanding organisational life in general that arise from adopting the perspective of complex responsive processes relative to those presented by other traditions of thinking.

Project One: A reflective narrative of experience*

Getting started

At first I found it hard to get started with this piece of writing. I realise that years of early academic and professional conditioning incline me to be more comfortable in writing from an academic or technical perspective than from a more personal and reflective position. I can't remember the last time I wrote something at any length and made such extensive use of the personal pronoun: "I". I have attempted to be rigorously personal and not to use my own experience to generalise. I believe however that lot of the felt experiences that appear in various places within this narrative are generalised across the public sector. In private conversations with peer colleagues and learning sets involving other public sector CEO's and senior managers, I have found that many share the reactions that I have articulated to politics, the pressures of work, the turn of current events and thinking in relation to public services.

Context of experience

I place my personal and professional reactions to what is happening within the UK education system, within what is now a substantial body of critique that questions the value of the performative approaches which dominate thinking about policy and practice (Fielding, 2001: Gleeson & Husbands, 2001: Shelley, 2002: Strathern 2000). I want to make explicit the fact that I believe that there is a need for different ways to be found for talking about purposes, relationships and outcomes in education from those that predominate today. A writer who seems to me to share this view is Michael Fielding (reader in education at the University of Sussex). Fielding (2001) has embarked upon a

* This version of my reflective narrative is 5,000 words shorter than the original project. I have edited this project down in order to accommodate longer pieces of writing in later projects. After completing Project 3, I wrote an extended reflection on issues of methodology. I wanted to include this in my final portfolio and have therefore reduced this narrative also to accommodate this additional piece of work. This edited version omits much of the detailed descriptions of the organisations and FE context in which I worked prior to and during most of the DMan programme. Looking back over this narrative I am confident that the description of the principal personal themes that preoccupied me to the point of joining the DMan programme has been preserved in the editing process.

project that attempts to redefine the notion of a “good school” in terms that relate directly to Macmurray’s (1961) philosophy of the person. As such he is challenging and trying to find alternatives to current priorities and approaches.

By drawing upon Macmurray in this way Fielding is introducing the work of a moral philosopher who was himself influenced in his own thinking by the American pragmatists and whose thought processes were formed during the same historical period as those of Mead (1934), Elias (2000) and Foulkes (1990). I think that Macmurray with his focus upon the ideas of the personal and persons in relation is offering a moral and ethical framework that is also compatible with the insights associated with the ideas of complex responsive processes.

Timelines

My career in senior management in further education started in earnest in 1987 when I was appointed to my first head of department post. The period immediately following this has been coincident with the really big legislative changes that have engendered the process of modernisation in education that is now all pervasive.

There have been three distinct phases of change linked to the ‘modernisation agenda’ over the past fifteen years. Decentralisation: In the first phase (1988) attempts were made to decentralise accountability for resources management and to incentivise qualitative improvements in institutions’ educational performance by linking these to financial benefits. At the same time a raft of measures were introduced to stimulate performance measurement and benchmarking. Marketisation: In the second phase (1993) in post-16 education a marketisation process was introduced as the over-arching powers of elected local authorities were displaced by the creation of a national funding agency (The Further Education Funding Council, FEFC) that had no planning powers. Bureaucratic centralisation: In the third phase (2000) there has been a massive consolidation of the pseudo-marketplace established in the 1980’s but with a dramatic increase in the degree of ‘control’ exercised from the political centre via the formation of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), a £7.5bn ‘agency’ with enhanced powers for funding, planning and intervention. In this phase too, there has been a quadrupling of agencies associated with inspection and audit: i.e. process control functions.

The changes in 1993 were a major attempt by government to introduce free market disciplines and dynamics into the further and higher education sectors. Although this process was being mirrored across other parts of the public sector (the health service and transport being the most obvious comparators) it went further in a single step in the college sector than elsewhere. I would argue that the FE college sector is still unique in the degree to which it operates at the leading edge of the “marketisation” of the public sector.

In 1989/1990, that is to say, very early on in this change cycle, the college at which I then worked started to run into financial difficulties as a result of not having the information systems in place to account for its activity in a way that satisfied the local scheme of delegation. Funding flows to the college were not being optimised and it was apparent that the gearing within the Local Education Authority’s allocation formula would mean that the college would lose out to its neighbouring institution year on year at an accelerating rate.

As this problem developed and other senior management solutions could not be found, the principal asked me to take on the responsibility for sorting out the planning side of the college’s activities. In taking this step, I moved from having a focus on teaching and learning to administration and business management. I think that the pre-occupations of my job roles since then have meant that only in the last eighteen months have I really returned to thinking in depth about education and the role and purpose of institutions. Looking back, I know that I was both excited and anxious about this job change and the step change in responsibility that it entailed. It turned out that the job played to many of my technical skills of analysis and organisation.

In 1992, I was promoted to be the college’s deputy principal and during 1992 and 1993, I project managed the process of college incorporation. This was the formal process by which colleges became independent incorporated bodies and thus independent of local education authorities.

In 1994/95 I had my first encounter with managing a process of downsizing, delayering and restructuring. This happened as an outcome of the fact that financial delegation brought with it both a long-term period of cost reduction and local responsibility for managing its effects. Fourteen staff members were identified for redundancy in order to

bring costs into line. At the time no one in the college had any experience or knowledge of how to go about such a task. The information gathering and forward planning therefore took place in an atmosphere of great secrecy and it was my responsibility to prepare this ground. I think that it was in this context that I also had my first exposure to the idea of controlling the flow of information across an organisation, of orchestrating the modalities of a consultation process for which outcomes had already been pre-determined, of managing set piece events that maximised the advantageous position of management, of ensuring that the 'right' people came out as winners in the process and of shutting myself off from the personal implications for others of the decisions that were to be made.

In 1996, I was appointed to my first post as a college principal.

The college to which I was appointed was one of the early serious casualties of incorporation. The principal and senior management team were both hostile to and not competent in working with the disciplines of the new independent sector. The college and its difficulties had assumed a fairly high profile in education and, at times, the national media.

When I arrived in the summer of 1996, the college faced the real prospect of closure. An inspection report just published had failed the management (and, as it turned out, significantly over graded the academic work). The crisis in the college had built up over a two year period, during which time militancy on the part of leading members of the staff and student unions had reached extremes of behaviour that were unprecedented in the college sector. The college had run out of cash and had in the 1995/96 year already spent two thirds of its cash allocation from the funding agency for 1996/97.

My induction to my new job was therefore rapid. I think that I have had the unique experience in education of taking up a new leadership role accompanied by a team of auditors and accountants who, in the light of the cash position of the college, were looking for evidence of fraud. During the first six months of my job and working with this team, I put together a recovery plan to secure the future of the college. Critical elements of this plan involved leading complex negotiations between the funding agency and the college's governors as well as finding new bankers. I had to secure a substantial overdraft to create the working capital required to get the college back into a cash positive position.

I realised quite early on in the recovery process that the college had lost a lot of ground to its neighbouring and therefore competitor institutions as a result of the turmoil that it endured prior to and during the period of my being the principal. I often found myself explaining this fact and therefore also the limits of what could be achieved in the future to a wide range of different audiences (to senior civil servants, governors, politicians, staff), most of whom had no personal or professional experience against which to benchmark the seismic scale of events that had been the life of this particular institution.

The future seemed to hold few prospects of further success. Not surprisingly our neighbours had used the period of our intense introspection to devise and implement strategies for building and development, they had strengthened their position in the market place of which we were a part, they had matured in their ability to deal with the new environment to an extent that we had not. Many of our competitors were much larger than us as a result of a merger and rationalisation process that had taken place between 1988 and 1992. They had the benefits of economies of scale to absorb the cost pressures that were emerging as a key feature of the newly marketised sector. Our geographical positioning put us at the edge of two clear sub-regions for post-16 educational provision and not at the centre. The college was in real danger of being marginalised in a process of change that was being driven from the centre but enacted in particular ways at the local level.

During 1999/2000 with the support of two boards of governors and the FEFC, I led and managed the merger of two colleges to create a new multi-sited institution of 20,000 students working right across the centre of London. The new institution was one of the ten largest general further education colleges in the Learning and Skills sector in England.

Values, norms, motivations

There is now an emerging generation of managers whose knowledge and experience has been formed during the last fifteen years. Indeed there are a number of people who have been members of management teams that I have headed and whom I now meet as they, in their turn take on the senior positions of headship within the college sector. I had already

worked in further education for ten years before these changes came about and so many of my reactions to the present arise from what is now a long view of the change process.

I started my career in the inner city and have remained there ever since. I cannot say that working in inner London was a deliberate decision in that as a newly qualified teacher I applied for a number of jobs in different parts of the country but as soon as I started teaching in a big inner city college, I realised that I had found my place. Years later when I started to apply for principal's jobs I explored options outside of London but realised when I went for interviews that I felt completely out of place outside of the inner city. I think that my passion for this work is partly missionary, partly connected with an inner sense of vocation, partly political, partly an addiction to the intensity of the issues and the pace of working in an inner city context. At a yet more personal level, the cosmopolitan nature of the inner city affords to everyone the opportunity for both anonymity and identity and I have always found this to be a compelling reason for establishing roots in London.

I trained to teach in 1978 by taking a one-year postgraduate programme specialising in post-16 work. The middle term of the programme was spent on teaching practice placement in a college. In my case I was sent to a large inner city college with buildings in Whitechapel, Shoreditch and the City. Although I expected to be asked to teach a range of academic subjects I found that over half of my schedule was assigned to working with young students on vocational and pre-vocational courses and teaching what was then described as "communication & life skills". As a result of this experience I got introduced to a team of very experienced teachers who I discovered were working in areas of curriculum development and classroom practice that were at the leading edge of change, engaging young people and adults who, with very high levels of social, economic and educational disadvantage, were being encouraged into the formal post-school educational system for the first time. When I finished my teacher training, I applied to this college for a permanent post and was fortunate to be appointed. My job role was assigned almost exclusively to working within this team and with this new cohort of learners.

I spent the next seven years of my career, in a variety of roles, totally immersed in the teaching, learning, curriculum, organisational and funding issues associated with this area of education. The students with whom I worked over this period divided broadly into three categories: young school students aged 15+ who were deemed to be failing in school and

with a history of very challenging behaviours; young people aged 16-19 with low or no history of prior achievement in school and who lacked most of the competencies and capabilities required for employment; adults who had long histories of being marginalised socially and economically for reasons of their poor prior educational attainment. Many of the students with whom we engaged in this period were of ethnic minority origin and most came into the college for programmes that started to be funded specifically to address issues that now would fall within policy descriptor of social inclusion.

Working with these students was of itself hugely challenging and not least because we were creating the curriculum as our practice evolved. Groups of us were working in about six colleges across London. Other similar clusters of people were engaged with similar themes in other inner cities such as Birmingham, Sheffield and Liverpool. Many of the younger students brought with them habits of behaviour and language that had led to their exclusion from school. Many of the older students were lacking in basic self-confidence and suffered greatly from the effects of low incomes, poor housing and attendant learning difficulties. Race issues were prominent in the life of the inner city at this time and the political militancy of both left and right groupings was felt within the student population as within the wider community.

Working in this area of education transformed my view of the teacher's professional role. It was only possible to be effective on the basis of being a participant in a group process by working at the same level as the rest of the group albeit with a specific and different role within the group. All of the norms of formal didactic teaching styles to class groups were irrelevant to this setting. All learning arose from individually negotiated and agreed undertakings.

The focus of the professional in this setting shifted dramatically *from* teaching in the didactic sense *to* learning as a collaborative and participative activity. Practice moved from the idea of the group as an undifferentiated class to the individual. Each student had their own learning plan, was encouraged to self-assess their own work and to maintain their own record of progress. Achievement was accredited on a mutually agreed basis and marking was generally done in pencil and always in the company of the student. The teaching spaces were intensely resource rich with a wide range of individual and group learning activities and options to accommodate a suitably unpredictable process.

Sometimes two teachers worked together in the same classroom; learning materials were developed collaboratively and pooled. Teaching teams worked collaboratively and reflectively in relation to programme management and student support issues.

I found this experience to be deeply formative. It also contrasts greatly with the content of the experience that has formed much of my work in the later stages of my career. I find, whenever I go back to this period, that it informs how I see the world in a way that has shaped the distinctiveness of my perception. Firstly, I think that the principles that informed the practice of this particular period have remained with me throughout my career. And still in senior management roles I am preoccupied with the creation of person centred pedagogy and of seeing this reflected in an institution's educational character. My formative teaching experience was also counter to the current orthodoxy of what constitutes the good in educational practice today. The difference is so great that at times I struggle to make sense of my memories of the experience. I think that a great deal of really valuable transformative experience for individuals came out of a curriculum that was not accredited, not planned on the basis of nationally determined curriculum standards, not minimised by resource constraints, not diminished by a preoccupation with the conditions of service of the teaching staff. I remember this period as a time of innovation, commitment and clarity of purpose.

Equally, I have found moments of real personal achievement and creativity in my life in management and in particular in my work as a college principal. I believe however that it is simply not possible to sustain the technical, emotional and physical demands of my professional role without a clear sense of purpose and personal authenticity. By this I mean, that there is a felt articulation between the doing, the knowing and the believing aspects that conjoin the agent and the subject.

I started out in my professional life heavily influenced by the writing of John Dewey (1938) but without understanding his wider intellectual context as an associate of Mead and the American pragmatists. Paulo Friere (1972) and writers of the Freudian left such as Eric Fromm (2002) also influenced me: I was and remain fascinated by Gramsci (1971) and his ideas about the influence of the intellectual and cultural on power relations and social structures. So in my early days I was happy to engage with a project that was at odds with the liberal educational traditions that constituted the dominant discourse in

education at the time. I thought that much of the determination of what could and should be taught to whom reflected the self-centred interests of schools and teachers, was deeply prejudiced by class bias and thoroughly disadvantaged those other than the already privileged and professional middle classes. My commitment then, as now, was to inclusivity, equality of opportunity and to redress some of the balance between social advantage and disadvantage.

Leadership as a specific context of experience

Much of my current job role as a college principal requires me to make others feel confident that I am in control. Being in control fits with other expectations such demonstrating leadership around a clear statement of mission and vision for the institution, producing strategic, financial and quality improvement plans that have clear improvement and growth targets associated with them. I am in some way judged by a wide variety of audiences to be personally accountable for the achievement of such plans and targets. It is as if I have the power to influence all of the circumstances required to achieve these outcomes. I think of this as an act of making the unknown and the unknowable both certain and knowable for those for to whom I am accountable. In the case of many staff members I sense that this view of me extends to an expectation that the I (the *leader*) will absorb and manage the impact of change that is *outside* of the organisation in a way that preserves the continuity of habits and relations *inside* the organisation. Whatever they do or do not do, *I* will ensure that we all continue to go on as before.

Managing the object of this attention entails a repertoire of responsive gestures, a *technique* of communication. This draws upon intuition and an evolved use of language that places stress upon the possible and the probable as against the inevitable or the certain. I rely to upon my experience of years of using the unexpected as an opportunity to create a new initiative and at the emotional level an intuitive sense of what resonates with those around me. I am sure that I survive by responding in the moment to the sensed needs of specific individuals and/or groups. The private aspect of this process, what enables me to sustain this performance, is an inner strength arising from a resolve that lies deep within my subjective self-awareness. I understand this to be anxiety tempered by a sense of belief in a legitimate purpose or goal.

Becoming a principal of a college is, I think, as transforming an experience as becoming the CEO of any organisation. For the first few months I found that it was difficult not to be over-awed by the significance that I appeared to have assumed in and around the life of the college. Everything about what I did or did not do was the subject of comment. In the very early stages of my appointment a group of staff researched and wrote a pen-portrait biography of me based upon talking to their contacts in other colleges that I had worked in previously. I find now that people who I have never personally met “know me” and have views about what I am “like” both as a person and to “work for”.

It was in the context of coming to terms with the scale of responsibility that I had and the impact that it was having upon me at a personal level that I first started to explore seriously the issues associated with leadership and organisational change. Although I had been a frequent participant in management training events and had become introduced to a lot of the theory associated with these issues in MBA classes, it was only as a result of these new experiences that I set out to find coherence between my theoretical knowledge and my everyday work in practice.

When I began my work as a college principal in 1996 I faced a great deal of hostility from key groups of staff. The atmosphere in the college was at times quite frightening as these groups of staff and students had used the opportunity of weakness on the part of the previous principal to establish a climate that was intimidatory. A lot of staff had had experiences of being threatened in a variety of ways during periods in which strike action and the occupation of buildings or parts of buildings had been undertaken. My appointment to the college was also coincident with a period in my life where I was gaining experience of working therapeutically with a systemic practitioner and I therefore found myself trying to make sense of what was happening organisationally from perspectives that I would describe as traditional managerial but also from the point of view of how people were relating and how I could use my influence to build positive ways of relating.

Coming to the DMan programme

It was in this context, that is one of personal and professional transition, that I joined (November 1997) the strategic leadership programme at the Roffey Park Institute. Roffey

was a profound experience for me in that I was introduced both to the practice of working in learning sets (i.e. group based collaborative enquiry to support my own learning) and the application of complexity theory to theories of management and change. My imagination was excited, radically and fundamentally, by the thinking around complexity and organisations that I encountered at Roffey and I developed a real thirst for wanting to understand aspects of this work in much greater detail. After finishing the Roffey programme I read Ralph Stacey's textbook, Thomas Kuhn's book on scientific revolutions (Kuhn 1968) and Gleick's study of chaos (Gleick 1987). It took me some time though to discover the possibility of the DMan programme at Hertfordshire.

In the period between my first discoveries of these ideas and joining the doctoral group at Hertfordshire, I have continued to explore in my own reading and through my practice, a variety of archetypes of leadership, Senge's learning organisation theory and the applicability of the insights of systemic therapeutic practice to organisational change. More recently, in reading G H Mead and Norbert Elias I have found it easier to explain the object/subject tensions that arise for me in my working life and the fundamental paradox of having to be (seen to be) in control of the destiny of an organisation whilst knowing at the same time that I am not. At least, not in a straightforwardly systemic way.

The change process at work in the education sector forms part of a bigger political agenda that is modernising government. At its root is 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 entails ever-greater degrees of central control. The object image of the organisational leader that accords with this political world view is cybernetic and what is projected as a result is an associated definition of role that puts leaders (principals, head teachers, NHS trust managers, service managers) in a position that is apart from the organisations in which they work.

These object characteristics are replicated at every level of organisational life. They translate into the individualisation of job roles, the intensification of personal accountabilities and ever greater expectations of individual self-sufficiency. The performative culture of public service organisations therefore translates inter institutional benchmarking into intra individual comparisons of performance, value and contribution. I would say that the stresses placed on individuals by the intense functionalisation of roles

and relationships that is a feature of educational institutions today is in long run untenable in the personal and human sense of *being*.

For myself, I do not see solutions to these issues in old political ideologies anymore than I believe that what is being created in the living present of our lives will solve the problems that are held up for solution. I sense in the idea of complex responsive process a radical alternative to systems thinking. The idea of complex responsive processes puts the unpredictable agency of persons in relation and interpersonal communication at the centre of this level of explanation. In so doing this thinking invites a radical reappraisal of the nature of relationships within the context of organisational life. It is, I think, to an understanding of the ethics and morality of leadership in this changed paradigm for thinking and acting to which I am drawn and which may well form the substantive theme for my later research and writing.

Project 2: Leadership, Power & Problems of Relating

Introduction

This project arose from an experience that I shared with a small group of senior managers who were participating in a leadership and management development programme. My contribution to this programme was to be an input on the institution's strategic plan priorities and to talk with the group further about my "vision" for the future. This previously agreed agenda was never enacted. What emerged instead in my work with the group was a conversation that involved all of us in drawing out a great many fantasies, fears, feelings of anger and anxiety about the context in which we were working together and our relationships. Central to this process was a conversation about me, my leadership role, their power (or their perceived/alleged lack of it) and their relations to both their own line managers as well as with those they manage. In this experience I was reminded of the singular and singleton status of the leader in a group.

Bion, Nitsun, basic assumptions, anti-group

In the early stages of my reflection upon this experience I placed great reliance on Morris Nitsun's *anti-group* thesis to explain the group processes that I observed and in which I felt myself to be a participant. Nitsun ascribes the idea of the *anti-group* to processes whereby powerful and reactionary forces take hold of groups leading to the possibility of the abandonment of the group's project, the destruction of the group itself or, potentially, its creative transformation (Nitsun 1996). I have found the *anti-group* explanation increasingly unsatisfactory. This is for the following reasons.

Firstly, Nitsun's thesis is rooted in a tradition of psychodynamic analysis which treats the individual as a self formed separately from group processes of interaction. This perspective has the tendency to locate causality in either the individual or the group and by implication to treat the group as being of itself a meta-personality whose behavioural characteristics can be identified and analysed *as if* it were a singularity. Here the social context acts as a trigger mechanism for the release of individual or group pathologies that

in some way are rooted back to archaic traits of the human psyche. Nitsun's example of the influence of changes in the National Health Service upon the emergence of *anti-group* responses in health service "sensitivity" groups is an example of this approach (Nitsun 1996; pp. 91 – 101).

Secondly, Nitsun's work relies heavily on notions of projection, introjection and projective-identification to explain the emotional responses of individuals to each other. Increasingly these concepts appear to me to be based upon a metaphysical understanding of human interaction. Individuals are therefore assumed to be able to exchange psychic contents between each other. This position takes no account of the biologic nature of the human form and therefore of the relationships existing between bodily interaction, feeling, emotion and consciousness explored by writers such as Damasio (1994, 2000) and Solms & Turnbull (2002). Further, I would argue that Nitsun's thesis relies upon a dualistic view of the body-psyche relationship which is incompatible with these other perspectives.

Complex responsive processes

By contrast a perspective informed by the idea of complex responsive processes, situates the idea of self in a social context as being *formed by* and *forming* at the same time patterns of social interaction out of which individual emotional responses emerge. In this explanation it is interaction, the cycle of gesture and response between individuals occurring within the temporal structure of the living present, which is the context within which causality is located. Human interaction is therefore the context in which the self is formed (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw 2000; pp. 35 – 36). In this perspective causality shifts from being found within individuals or groups (i.e. the responsibility of) to the wider social contextual circumstances that form and are formed by their interactions.

In working with these themes, I have found that the perspective that is used for explanation has profound consequences for thinking about action. In psychodynamic perspectives for example lines of thinking develop that follow an *if then* logic that is familiar to systems thinking. That is to say, there is a cause and effect relationship between behaviour and context that is predictable. I found too that in working from this perspective I was drawn to locating the responsibility for my emotional reactions with other group members. In this sense my experience was of being the object of their projections, a theme that is common

in much psychodynamic literature concerning the relationship between the leader and the group. Alternatively I felt drawn to blaming myself. In this scenario, the group's reaction to me was the product of feelings that I was responsible for creating, an output resulting from my pathological, anxiety creating, input. This tendency to locate responsibility with the personality traits of the leader resonates too with much of the leadership and management theory that is mainstream today and which builds on personality archetypes, often drawn from Jungian psychology, to construct developmental models for leaders and leadership roles (Stacey 2003. pp. 129 – 156: Hay Group 2002).

By contrast I have found that working with the idea of complex responsive processes has drawn me to thinking about the way in which our perspectives of reality and our emotional world of experience are both *formed by* and *forming* the social context and the character of human interaction in a perpetual process of construction and reconstruction. I have become interested too in what social convention in general and processes of organisational power relating in particular enable us to reveal about our feelings and emotional responses to each other. I am attempting to understand some of the emotional processes at work in groups in organisations by using a specific institutional case study as material for reflection. Specifically, I am exploring the relationship between the leader, the group and the emotional responses that emerge as the felt experiences of participants in this nexus of interactions.

Threats to identities, shame and fear

Presently I experience a sense of uncertainty about how to go about doing my job. I came into senior leadership positions in education with a sense of purpose that was strongly rooted in my experiences of teaching and of working with students. As I progressed through the promotional ladder my practice became informed by the themes of modernisation that have swept through the whole of the public sector in the UK. Now I find myself working in a context that both challenges and compromises fundamentally the principles that drew me to the work that I do.

Policy at the macro level is determined in a way that now encompasses, at the same time, the design of service structures to ensure its delivery. This is manifest in frequent and highly complex centrally driven restructuring initiatives, the centralisation of control over

resource-allocation and decision-making and the emergence of new regulatory bodies whose sole function is audit and compliance across the system. In this context the perception of perverse institutional behaviour is translated into the failure of individuals. Heads of institutions are now caught up in a burgeoning process of bureaucratic controls designed to limit their scope for local decision-making only to those that are consistent with the design intentions of their political masters (Fink 2001).

Threat, shame and fear have also become dominant tools informing the management disciplines that have been implemented across the public sector. I object to these developments. At the same time, as the head of major institution, I am implicated in the wider management processes which rely upon such tools. This is a paradoxical position and one which makes me feel unclear about how to frame my professional practice in a ways that are relevant and effective to the organisation for which I have responsibility and which make sense to me in ways that I feel to be authentic and ethical.

I was once much more comfortable with implementing the changes that accompany the modernisation process. I was comfortable too with being seen as a high-performing principal able to implement change in line with this Agenda. Now, seven years on in my experience of being a CEO, my early naiveté has gone. The early optimistic influence of writers such as Senge on my thinking has evaporated. I no longer believe that individuals realise vision. I do not have faith in the bigger vision that is the Agenda of our time. I sense that my feelings of discomfort with this Agenda and sense of its ultimate pointlessness allied to the impact on my behaviours of my experience on the DMan programme may have had something of a destabilising effect on my relations with peers, my immediate team and those that they line manage. I am aware that a wider awareness amongst others of changes in my interests, attitudes, behaviours has evoked a response that has been positive and negative at the same time.

In May 2002, eighteen months after its formation from the merger of two other large and relatively underperforming institutions, Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) inspected the new college. The college was judged to be “inadequate”. The process of inspection was painful for everyone in the institution. The inspection report was highly critical of the teaching in a number of departments and this challenged profoundly the self-image and certainties of many staff. This was especially the case for those who had long-

service histories and who in a range of contexts had been most resistant to the imposition of new working practices, targets and performance standards. The leadership and management of the college were judged in the same process to be satisfactory. For me and my team, this outcome was of considerable political importance but across the institution it evoked strong feelings of being blamed and shamed. These feelings were accompanied at the same time by many other strong reactions: for example, that those deemed by their peers to have been underperforming were being called finally to account.

Institutions have to respond to inspections with action plans intended to address areas of “weakness”. For an “inadequate” institution this is a particularly challenging process since there are multiple agencies that police the process of “improvement”. In our case I faced great pressure from some sections of my board to “deal with” the teaching staff associated with areas of work judged to be underperforming and to “root-out” those who were responsible. Although I refused to do this I found myself adopting positions in public in which I was uncompromising in terms of not tolerating what had been judged as unacceptable professional practice (a *we-identity* aligned with a threatening authority) and at the same time supportive of individuals in their attempts to work within the wider context of their job roles (a *we-identity* aligned with colleagues facing a threatening authority).

Norbert Elias wrote extensively about the issue of *we-identity* in his study of relationships in a small urban industrial community. Elias’ theory was that groups form identities in order to manage processes of power relations within which individuals experience the phenomenon of established and outsider relationships (Elias & Scotson 1994). The formation of insider/outsider, them/us, we/they relations is now endemic across the public sector and has emerged as a powerful feature of the process of distancing policy makers from service providers as one group set targets for the other group to “deliver”.

Increasingly my experience is of trying to hold a problematical *at the same time* position of paradoxical responses, of being a fully aligned risk managing agent re-enacting and/or reiterating the wider power dynamic at work in the sector generally and questioning, in practice, the implications of this enactment process. I am aware of the extent to which I and others of my peer group (in education and other sectors) engage in a process of self-censorship in the public arena in order to maintain this balance between remaining inside

the 'we-identity' of the political mainstream whilst feeling increasingly concerned about what it takes to sustain such a position.

A Narrative Account

I arrived at the residential programme and met the two facilitators (Facilitator-1 & Facilitator-2). Facilitator-2 started talking about the group. He was very complimentary about the group and said that they were all talented and committed. A key issue for them however was that they felt "disempowered" in relation to their line managers (i.e. the members of my team). Also they had talked late into yesterday evening about me and their "fear" of me. Facilitator-1 commented that they had also talked about the large group process that I had initiated and that they did not like it. In response to a question from me, F2 offered the view that the "fear" issue was in some way personal to me and to my relationship with the group. It was not therefore a more general function of my role. The facilitators' view was that I should be careful to be positive about what the group had to say and to welcome their suggestions for change. They felt that it would be a good idea too if I discussed directly the "fear" issue with the group.

I was not prepared for this interaction. I felt Facilitator-2 to be behaving in a way that was quite aggressive towards me. I did not recognise what I understood to be my relationship with the individuals in the group in Facilitator-2's comments. I was aware of myself becoming deeply anxious about the idea of being with the group. I felt as if I was going, in some way, to be exposed during the work group session. I felt too as though I was being both judged and manipulated by Facilitator-1 and Facilitator-2 to ensure that my responses to the group were in some way consistent with their view of what my relationship with the group should be like. This manipulation extended to the way in which I was permitted to enter the workroom. Rather than simply going into the room, Facilitator-2 explained that it had been agreed that we would wait to be collected by someone from the group. I understood this role-play to signify an intended change in the power relationships that were assumed to exist between the group ("disempowered") and me ("empowered"). The act of invitation and of being escorted into the room somehow seemed to represent new roles and territories. To enter into these I was to be granted, rather than to assume, permission.

“Appreciative inquiry”

The session proceeded with C announcing in a comment that was directed particularly to me that individual members of the group were going to make presentations about their work. C said that people would review an aspect of the group’s discussions so far, in turn, and I would be invited to comment at the end of this process. We were into the script and I was to take the role of audience.

The presentation process started. I cannot now recall the detail of what each person said or the sequence in which they made their presentations. The following points do however stand out in my recollection of the proceedings.

The behaviour of each individual was in some way breathlessly hyperactive. It turned out that the feedback process both they and I thought would take a considerable amount of time was over and done with within ten minutes. In fact so quick was this process, that when the last person sat down there was something of a stunned silence in the room as everyone looked to me to make the validating (or not) response that Facilitator-2 had primed me to make in his opening remarks. As it happened I resisted the temptation to make a direct response about the content, not knowing what such a response could or should be, but I did respond to the anxiety in the group by saying something in the form of “Wow!, and you have only been here 24 hours. Can we start again?” In context this had an ice-breaking effect and made everyone laugh. The laughter and the fact that I had provoked it seemed immediately to move us all on. Suddenly I felt in touch with them as a group and as individuals with whom I felt some familiarity away from the centre to which we had all come.

The group had generated a huge volume of physical material as a result of their work together. This material was distributed over three of the walls in the room and on various flipcharts. It communicated a sense of very intense and physically frenetic activity. One wall was covered with yellow stick-it notes each of which appeared to contain a key point of reflection or observation. Another wall had large sheets of white paper attached to it. Here the group had summarised the findings of a pre-course activity in which the facilitators had asked them to interview at least four other members of the organisation about what they found “inspirational” about working in the college: this exercise was

described formally by Facilitator-2 as an “Appreciative Enquiry”. On a third wall the group had constructed what appeared to be a huge and quite bewildering collage that spread to the ceiling in that they had suspended a variety of objects that were connected by threads to the array of materials that had been pinned, glued, stuck, tied and variously appended to the display. The materials had been given to the group in a large cardboard box. As the meeting unfolded and as I reflected upon its proceedings after I had left the centre, the box itself started to assume great significance as a metaphor for other unconscious processes that I felt had taken place in the group.

To receive feedback about this construction, its meaning for the group and the wider organisation we all got out of our seats and stood like spectators at an art gallery around this object as the presenter (E) talked about it. As she reviewed the meaning of each element of the collage (the materials included paper, cloth, modelling clay, wire, CD’s, string, pins, hand drawn signs and symbols and more) she reached out and used very physical, tactile, gestures (touching, smoothing, squeezing) to accompany her verbal explanations. It was clear that the participants felt the importance of this object for them. It seemed clear too from their demeanour that the facilitators felt considerable pride in this object as an outcome of the work of the group.

When we sat down again together and after the moment of laughter had passed a silence descended upon the group. In that moment I was struck by how much ‘play’ had emerged between the participants in the period between C announcing their script and the end of the presentations. This I felt was reflected in their skittishness with each other, gestures of personal self-deprecation that referred in a self-referential way to roles that they had taken-up (or newly discovered) in the short time that they had been together as a group, they seemed unusually solicitous of each others feelings and aware of the nervousness that each felt in presenting for the group to the power-presence that I seemed to represent for them. Later when we did talk directly about the fear issue one of them (B) introduced the word “daddy” to create a sense of the role that they felt I in someway represented for them. My affirmation or dismissal of their efforts appeared painfully important to this context and I felt both embarrassment and a sense of shame at the apparent reality of this. I sensed the difficulty that arises for all of us caught up in the dynamics of organisational power to encounter each other with equality of status in our individual engagement with the complexity of our roles. The power differentials that inform our working lives somehow

enforce a requirement for us to enact dependency in the presence of an authority figure where in other aspects of our lives we are perfectly able to act authoritatively in our own right and how too, we are all caught up in processes that reiterate these relationships up and down the line management structure.

The conversation turned to their concerns regarding their sense of “disempowerment”. As soon as we started to talk about this it was apparent that the focus of their concerns lay in the line management relationships that now exist between them and their own managers. Here their sense was of being the subject of top down pressure, one way communication and endless tasks to be completed within limited or tight deadlines with conflicting and different messages also being attached to the communications between them and different managers.

What I observed as being shared in this conversation was a fantasy of organisational life in which most of the pressures of real issues of relating to others had been removed. Issues such as organisational structure, line management, power, responsibility and accountability had all been in some way dissolved. Nobody mentioned their own participation as line managers and it appeared that the group had no conception of the possibility of the college requiring a senior team other than their own, now self-organising group entity. None of the group appeared to acknowledge how they may have responsibilities both individually and collectively to shape the nature of the interactions that take place within the management group as a whole.

My overwhelming impression of the group in this part of the discussion was that in dealing with the emotional material that had emerged in their time together they had sought refuge in a fantasy from which all the interactions associated with the messiness of the material organisational world had been abstracted. They described a sense of their relationships with others in their organisational life as being wholly “top down”. In fact they had become so attached to their sense of being at the absolute bottom of a downward chain of command that when invited to reflect upon their responsibilities for the management of others and therefore how they might be perceived in that process they all floundered having not factored this into their considerations.

The “fear” issue

With forty-five minutes to go before the end of the session and sensing that the timing was right both for the group and for me I decided to broach the “fear” issue. I told the group that I would like them to discuss directly with me their perceptions of what I, through my own behaviour, might do specifically to help with the issues that had been raised. An immediate silence descended and everyone looked at the floor. Eventually, conversation started to flow again.

A spoke first. A said that for his part he did not find me a “frightening figure at all”. In fact he found me to be very approachable but he thought that the inspection and its outcomes had put a lot of pressure on everyone and it was known throughout the college that we all had to “sort things out” or else jobs would be at risk. In A’s view the size of the college as it is now constituted and my apparent remoteness from the day-to-day life of the staff created an impression of distance and uncertainty about what I was going to do if the changes that were perceived to be necessary did not happen. A’s intervention seemed suddenly to normalise the atmosphere in the room and I, relieved personally by his gesture of solidarity with me, felt more relaxed about carrying on with the discussion.

B has worked with me in a variety of management roles since 1987. B’s view was that things were different now in that for the first time I was recognised as having a really strong team around me. These people in turn expected more of them in their roles and it was clear to all of them that they had to take more responsibility for difficult management decisions themselves. Since the merger had taken place I had also become a more remote figure in the college both for all of them and for the staff in general. It was now much more difficult for them to know what I was thinking.

E said that she too found me quite approachable but felt that there were real problems with my visibility around the college. She said that whenever she saw me in meetings either with them as a group or with staff she always found me to communicate a really strong sense of vision about where we should be going as a college. She went on to say staff found me ‘inspirational’ when I talked to them about our work and purpose as an institution. My apparent absence from the day-to-day life of the staff was therefore a real

problem for them as managers because no one was now engaged in this communication with staff members.

F referred back to the earlier part of the conversation in which he had talked in quite a theoretical way about empowerment and ownership. He went on to say that he thought it was “natural” for people to be anxious about the chief executive because in the end this was the person who had to make things happen and be accountable if they did not. He then went on to talk about football managers who had to get results or get sacked.

G spoke about the impact of the merger and the anxieties that this had caused generally. The fact that a number of managers had lost their jobs in the process had added to a general feeling of insecurity. Her view was that she and her peers simply responded to tasks issued by members of my team. This she felt, diminished their opportunities to contribute in a full managerial capacity.

H’s view was that from her perspective the key issue was one of familiarity. She felt that many people were fearful of the new leadership team collectively. The fear issue was not therefore particularly personal to me. She said that staff from the college of which I had not been principal felt me to be very different from what they had been used to before in their previous principal. She went on to say that all of the new leadership team members were felt by that group of staff (i.e. 50% of the new college) to be “very different”. They expected things to be done and had a determination about them that they had not been used to before.

The group broke up for lunch. I said my goodbyes and left them to continue their work with the facilitators. Their task for the afternoon was to make sense of our discussion of the morning with a view to forming action plans for their return to college.

Sense-making

What emerges from this narrative, I think, are a number of organising themes that informed our experience of being together. Firstly, the group met in the context of anxieties that had been unresolved in the aftermath of merger and compounded by the inspection outcome.

These related both to the future of the organisation and to that of key individuals (of which I and they were exemplars) working within it. Secondly, there were anxieties arising from threats to identity for all of us. How were we to understand our new roles in managing in the new larger college? How were we to go on together having been labelled as “inadequate” by Ofsted? What would I do in response to this? Thirdly, there had been a sharing within the group of aspects of our worlds of emotional experience (fear of me, of the situation, of the future) that had not happened before. Fourthly, there was a collective attempt in the script, albeit orchestrated by the facilitators, to experience a process of renegotiation of the power relations between us. Fifthly, we struggled to make sense of our fantasies about power, this both in terms of what I represented to them (validating, judging, deciding) and what they felt they missed (empowerment).

Psychodynamics

Nitsun uses the idea of the *anti-group* to develop Bion’s observations about basic assumption behaviours in groups and to redress also what he regards as an over-optimistic view of the therapeutic capability of group analysis. This overstated optimism Nitsun attributes to Foulkes’ influence on the group analytic tradition (Nitsun 1996; pp. 32 – 34).

Bion’s approach to groups was psychoanalytic. For Bion, the group is a context that reveals aspects of the individual psyche otherwise not evident in dyadic analytic relationships. The individual in effect arrives in the group as a preformed entity. The group is therefore a situation in which the individual enacts or realises aspects of self rather than is created as a self as in the thinking of Mead and Elias. Central to Bion’s thesis is the idea of the individual and the group in tension. Bion argued that people are group animals despite needing to find expression in individuality. For Bion the group is therefore an essential context of human experience but one that also holds the inevitable contradictions that arise from conflicting impulses within human experience. This theme (of groups as contexts that are required by the social nature of being but contradicted by desires for individuality) is, I think, of great importance to understanding the particular and determinist perspective in relation to action that a reading of Bion might invite. Bion’s approach would lead naturally to the view that groups will always be contexts that will arouse regressive behaviours amongst group members. This is for the reason that in Bion’s view the tensions immanent within the individual/group relationship will give rise to the

emergence of behaviours that are rooted in the archaic conflicts of the origins of social life (Bion 2001)

In building upon Bion's position, Nitsun identifies behaviours within groups that are regressive to the point of destruction. Here basic assumption behaviours become so extreme as to go beyond the boundaries of what the group can contain. In such an instance, the group falls apart (often in acrimony) as the defences represented in the heightened *anti-group* behaviours of group members become too powerful for the group to hold. By contrast, Nitsun also draws attention to the transformational potential of the group – a process that he argues can release great creativity and focus on the group task. Here Nitsun claims that a transformational process unfolds within the group, a process which he characterises at different times as movement between polarities (anti-group and work group being the binary poles of what he describes also as a dialectical process) or as thesis, synthesis and antithesis (a. anti-group; b: group in transformation; c: work group).

Anti-group and 'pro-group' are the two poles of experience that define the development of the group. Within the interplay of the two, the group itself is decentred as a static object: it is constantly in movement between the opposing modes. The anti-group represents the collapse of the dialectic in the direction of destructive processes leading to group pathology. The nature of the group pathology will vary in relation to the dominant mode of disturbed experience in the group. ... this could take the form of fragmentation as part of the a regressive response, the empathic gulf created by failures of communication, the deadness and despair of the depressive mode, the violence and surrender of the aggressive mode, or the combination of several such modes in the constellation of group-destructive development. (Nitsun 1996; 204)

Complex responsive processes

In developing an argument for understanding group processes in terms of complexity theory and specifically the idea of complex responsive processes, Stacey draws attention to the dualism within Nitsun's attempts to locate the *anti-group* within a dialectical process of group dynamics. Stacey contrasts Nitsun's dialectic that poses the idea of movement between polarities (which he locates within a Kantian tradition of thinking) with one drawn

from Hegel in which “the tension of oppositional forces creates a new dynamic in which the opposition remains but with its meaning altered”. (Stacey 2003; 283)

Here then is a different possibility for understanding the emergence of destructive forces in groups that focuses attention away from the idea of intra-psychic phenomena and the power of archaic fantasy to the social context and to the sense-making processes of human interaction. Here too the relationship between the individual and the group changes. For both Bion and Nitsun the individual and the group exist at different levels of experience interacting with a social context. Psyche, body and group are split off from each other, interacting as separate entities but sharing, in the group, a common temporal context. Stacey however follows Elias in arguing that the individual and the group are simply different aspects of a single process of human interaction. In this sense, the individual and the group are located in continuous social processes of formation where both regress and progress are constantly possible, where emotion, feeling and meaning emerge socially from the enabling constraints of interaction itself. In this dialectic there are no polarities only an ongoing emergent process of movement within which relations and meaning are perpetually created and recreated by the participants. Stacey’s perspective allows for the abandonment of the idea of dynamics collapsing into polarities but introduces instead the possibility of seeing patterns emerging in processes of relating that enact stuckness, that transform destructively, that engender new creativity. In Elias’ words:

..in adopting a wider, dynamic viewpoint...the vision of an irreducible wall between one human being and all others, between inner and outer worlds, evaporates to be replaced by a vision of an incessant and irreducible intertwining of individual beings in which everything that gives their animal substance the quality of a human being, primarily their psychical self-control, their individual character, takes on its specific shape in and through relationships to others. (Elias 2001; 32)

Social objects

G H Mead elaborated a powerful thesis of social control arising for human beings in relation to the existence, in the field of human perception, of three types of object: *physical objects* present in the natural world, *scientific objects* present in consciousness (but not necessarily present or realisable in the natural world) and *social objects*. It is in

social objects, recognisable in the differentiated patterning of self-similar gestures and responses of associations of human beings that the values, ideologies and attitudes that constitute the raw material for social communication emerge. For Mead, social objects evolve in a manner that is both emergent and, analogically, similar to physical and organic processes of change. Schools, hospitals, churches, factories etc. are all recognisably the same social objects of a century ago. The form of such objects has changed in an emergent way as society has developed new manners, fashions, technologies and working practices. Both the social object and its emergent form are reproduced in the symbolic interaction that occurs between living beings in the course of their own social existence.

Using Mead's perspective it is possible to understand the emergence of the phenomena of mind, self and society as the product of a multiplicity of interactions occurring between individual human bodies. In this process conversations of gestures involve the interplay of significant symbols that in the medium of language, enable the communication of meaning. Mead's concept of social objects is therefore fundamental to his conceptualisation of processes that lead to the construction of meaning in the consciousness of human beings. I want to argue here that Mead's conception of the social object is important for an understanding of the wider situational context (of social, political and cultural influences) which in specific relational conjunctures evokes the emotional responses attributed by Nitsun to the idea of *anti-group* (Mead 1934, 1938, 2001, 2002). Events or processes that threaten established identities would constitute such a conjuncture.

Douglas Griffin's work on the emergence of the modern form of organisational leadership contributes further to this understanding (Griffin 2002). Griffin locates the idea of leadership in philosophy, the history of ideas and the ethics of human freedom and gives meaning to the idea of leadership as a contemporary social object in the Meadian sense. Griffin therefore draws attention to the importance of leadership as a concept that has a contemporary meaning derived from Kantian rationalism. He draws attention also to the importance of systems theory and cybernetics as disciplines of organisational and social management control that reached their high point in the mid-twentieth century. Griffin describes the emergence of a now dominant intellectual formation that views the world in terms of parts and wholes and which therefore splits off the individual from the collective of human experience. Here, managers locate themselves outside of the organisational systems that they exist to control. Here too, leaders sit at the apex of pyramidal

organisational structures apart from the organisational whole that also contains the senior and middle managers and employees for whom they are responsible. The organisational whole (now containing the leader) is in its turn accountable to a board for delivering enhanced shareholder value (as in the private corporate sector) or enhanced social value as in the not-for-profit or public sector context.

In drawing attention to the reification of roles (particularly the leadership role) that is central to a systems perspective of organisations, Griffin then also explores the implications of this for processes of relating and therefore the wider ethical issues of human freedom. Griffin argues that the dominance of a perspective that regresses individuals, groups and organisations into part/whole relationships is significant for the emergence of organisational forms in which power-holding is both individualised and assumed to be located at the organisational apex. Such a location is accompanied by an equivalent de-powering (or disempowering) of others who occupy lower levels of the organisational hierarchy. These organisational structures facilitate the instrumentalisation of power and the deliberate orchestration of its use (expressed in line management structures, employment contracts, appraisal systems etc.). Encoded as norms in the dominant discourse of organisational life, these power structures are enacted also in the self-regulative compliant behaviours of employees.

Affect, performativity, justification

Norbert Elias has drawn attention to the way in which changes in the globalised social context of the late twentieth century continued to iterate with changes in the affective condition of individuals (what he described as the “affect economy”) and which found expression in the intensification of processes of individualisation. Elias’ concepts of *habitus* (the socially evoked affectual composition of individuals) and *figuration* (the socio-historic character of the net of interdependencies that constitute society) are essential terms that inform an understanding in the present and therefore of being a participant in emergent processes of social formation (Elias 2000; pp. 450 – 483). As highly dynamic process concepts they draw attention too to the ongoing ways in which the technologies of power are elaborated in the *social objects* of contemporary perception and made concrete in the language structures of everyday conversation:

..individuals have to subordinate their self regulation in speaking to the social regulations of their communal language. If they do not, the possibility to communicate with each other via a language is brought to a standstill. (Elias 1991; p. 63)

Lyotard and others have identified the emergence of *performativity* as the rationale acting as the driving force of post-modern government policy in relation to education (Lyotard 1979, Ball 2001, Fielding 2001). In the UK the successful *delivery* of current education policy is believed, by ministers to underpin aspects of national life as diverse as economic competitiveness, health, crime, urban regeneration and family policy. The shift to performative judgements by politicians, policy-makers and their compliance agencies has in turn led to the emergence of models of acceptable (and unacceptable) leadership, management, individual professional conduct and of course, of organisational performance. Organisational shaming too has become an essential part of the tool-kit of inspection agencies whose remit and operational processes read like a script abstracted from Foucault (1991). Public sector inspection regimes therefore use all of the technologies of individualisation, scrutiny and judgement that Foucault identified in his analysis of the emergence of contemporary forms of socio-political control.

Shotter's work is important here. In his reflections on the idea of the manager as "author" or "scientist" he points out that managers:

..can not just innovate as they please, for the fact is, not just 'anything goes' – they cannot be authors of fictions, which bear no relation to what the unchosen conditions they face will 'permit', or afford. Their authoring must be *justified* or *justifiable*, and for that to be possible, it must be 'grounded' or 'rooted' in some way in circumstances others share. (Shotter 1993; p.149)

The issue of *justification* is central to understanding leader/group dynamics in organisations since it points to the way in which the enactment of power through organisational roles configures relationships between people. In my view Shotter's use of the idea of *justification* also draws attention to the ways in which *action* is legitimated through language meaning. Leaders therefore act legitimately when their behaviours conform to ways that are described by the word "leadership". These behaviours are in turn

validated in a context which is the power relations which give definition to the word. In Mead's terms this could be understood also as the social relations that give form to the social object of leadership. To act or to suggest action in ways that are outside of these established norms will therefore create uncertainty, anxiety and great threats to identity for those who might find themselves on the receiving end of leader behaviours that might appear dangerous or simply maverick. I think that Shotter is therefore highlighting the intense pressure that arises from organisational discourse for leaders and followers to behave in ways that conform to normative assumptions. In the public sector normative behaviour by a leader would, for example, include the active and energetic embrace of performance management and TQM-type managerial language. Thus for an institutional head to question for example, the legitimacy of setting SMART targets, or worse to refuse to set SMART targets, as part of an organisational improvement strategy would be an act of rebellion against orthodoxy, the formal agencies and systems of control and commonsense itself. Such a gesture would be *unjustifiable* to the extent that it would amount to act of professional suicide.

Shotter also discusses the ways in which power is used to construct orthodoxy which at its extreme translates into what he, after Bhaktin, describes as monologism. This:

..at its extreme denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and responsibilities, another *I* with equal rights (thou). With a monologic approach (in its extreme or pure form) another person remains wholly and merely an object of consciousness. Monologue is finalised and deaf to the other's response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge it in any decisive force. (Shotter 1993; p. 62)

I experience daily the requirement to act in ways that are *justifiable* in terms that Shotter describes. I, in my job role, have identity in a socio-political context dominated by performative judgement making. In my public life I judge and am judged on this basis. The language that I use at work is drawn from the monologistic argot that frames countless policy initiatives, statements of targets and improvement initiatives. When I refuse to use this language I know that I am being as clear in my dissent as if I were to be wearing a badge of political protest. With my peer colleagues I participate also in acts of public self-censorship that collude in and reproduce the power relations that constitute the structures

control across the public sector. I am explicit about my feelings in relation to all of this with only a very few close colleagues.

My experience is that the dominance of performativity in the life of public sector organisations has created amongst managers intense feelings of fear (of failure) and anxiety about just doing their jobs. Once triggered, these emotions readily flood into the realm of public relationships. The emotional responses labelled as regressive by Bion and further theorised by Nitsun can be understood in this context. In the performative context of the modern public sector, leader and leadership (individualised, visionary, a single locus of ethical and professional accountability) are placeholders for meaning that has acquired cult status of the kind that Mead explored when writing about the significance of religious impulses in social life. Of the idea of cults and their values Mead wrote:

... the cult of a community becomes very concrete, identifies itself with the immediate history and life of the community, and is more conservative than almost any other institution in the community. The cult has a mysterious value, which attaches to it that we cannot fully rationalise and therefore we preserve it in the form, which it always has had, and in its social setting. It tends to fix the character ofexpression.. (Mead 1934; p. 296)

The world occupied by managers in the public sector is dominated by the performance cult. It is therefore simultaneously monologicistic in Shotter's terms (totalitarian in Lyotard's) and densely impregnated with systemic processes of shaming. The responses that Nitsun labels *anti-group* therefore can be shown to emerge in the interplay of gesture and response in a context whose social objects are redolent with power, threat and personal destruction.

The paradox of presence

In my discussion with the group I felt that the fear that I represented, as presented by F2, was strongly linked to narrative themes of *presence* and *absence*. I felt that my real or imagined absence was altogether more anxiety creating for the group than my presence.

The fear of my presence was, I thought, fairly straightforward. In this context I understood myself to exist for the group as a judging, authority figure with the perceived ability to create (by appointing and promoting people such as those present in the room, by validating their work) and destroy (by “getting rid” of people, by not-validating their work efforts, by not valuing them as persons). As a figure in the presence of the group I, like any other CEO in a public or private sector organisation, therefore carried the potential for their annihilation. In the narratives of G and H this potential destructiveness was not just characteristic of me but had also been seeded in the wider leadership group. Yet as a leader both present to the group and with an aura of potential destructiveness it seemed clear that the group also felt this power to be hugely constructive, protective and important to them. Their knowledge of me (crystallised in their conversations and fantasies of the past thirty six hours of being together) was that I (not them) could be relied upon to do things to protect them and the institution, that they would and could not contemplate. The actions of the leader, with the power to employ, promote, demote and dismiss are therefore an important element of processes in which personal identities are both constructed and deconstructed in the organisational context.

The paradox of the co-existence of destructive and creative forces within a single action embodied in a single person or gesture is, I think, a powerful and almost too complex reality for managers in general to both recognise and hold. The wider socio-political context which attaches to leadership the requirement that leaders are one-dimensional makes this ambiguity intolerable. It is in this context, the reification of organisational power into the social object of leadership, that I have come to understand the extraordinary degree of fantasy that surrounds the CEO role in organisations. Stereotypes arise in the shadow conversational world of organisations that are allied to these fantasies. Mead’s observation about religious attitudes and the emergence of cult values is of relevance here. The cult idea, in this case the potency of the leader, has a mysterious value that is difficult to fully comprehend and rationalise, it is none the less preserved in its form in its social setting. The idea of leadership in its contemporary form as described by Griffin, has about it this same cult quality in which the individual leader’s capacities are idealised (in the expectations of the group) and functionalised (in their ongoing relations with others) (Griffin 2002; p. 195).

The cult of individualised leadership is interlinked therefore with the cult of performance management. Performance management is predicated upon the individualisation of responsibility and accountability at every level of the organisational hierarchy. The leader, at the top of the organisational pyramid, is therefore both the primary energiser of this process and the individual point of ultimate accountability. I know from experience that in my job role my actions are articulated in power relations that are consistent with the dominant discourse of public sector performance management. I am aware too of my own vulnerability arising from my exposure to the judgement of others.

The paradox of absence

But if the idea of *presence* evokes powerful symbolic meaning around the CEO role, the idea of *absence* seems to me to be more intricate and complex in its significance. From an intrapsychic perspective both Bion and Nitsun have emphasised the importance of the perception of an absent leader to the emergence of basic assumption behaviours in groups:

..The *absence* rather than the presence of directive leadership awakens regressive forces in the group. The frustration of the members' wish for explicit leadership unleashes powerful, archaic fantasies concerning the leader and the nature of the group. In attempting to give the group structure and direction, the members resort to the primitive organisation of the basic assumptions. In some respects, these satisfy deeper longings but they erode the capacity of the group to think and to work. ...I [suggest] that for all their apparent 'groupiness', basic assumption groups are *anti-groups*: their regressive formations undermine group functioning in the sense of coherent interrelatedness. (Nitsun 1996; p. 109)

In this particular instance, the group referred to my absence in a number of ways including my reduced visibility in the day-to-day lives of the group itself and their staff since the merger. This made me a more remote figure. Not just physically remote but remote also in a way that seemed to have detached me from the feeling and emotional life of the institution. I had become remote in the sense of having in some way absconded from an earlier more intimate and nurturing set of relationships (referenced by A and G in their narratives). In turn this perceived remoteness appeared to have enhanced the fantasy within the group about my supposed retributive powers. These had also grown

exponentially (magnified yet further by the perception of threat to the institution that had emerged as a result of the poor Ofsted inspection outcome).

My absence too, meant that my power to influence staff members' attitudes to their jobs and to the wider institution had been reduced (E's fantasy: Who would now take responsibility for communicating vision, for being inspirational?). The consequential impact of my absence in other contexts (B's mythology around the 'vacuum' that I had left behind after leaving a job earlier in my career) had been brought into the narrative of this group and added further coloration to their feelings towards me. Underneath these observations lay also a further concern that I really might leave the college in this difficult period either by being in some way sacked (F's fantasy about CEO's and football managers) or by getting another job (as I had done before, in B's fantasy).

The experience of absence and remoteness clearly changes the social context of relationships in a significant way. The intimacy of social interaction that is central to processes in which identity is constructed and secured are no longer available. Uncertainty therefore arises in this movement with respect to the ongoing relationship between the leader and others. People once able to rely upon the leader now find themselves exposed to taking on attributes of leadership in relation to others. This experience they find threatening and anxiety creating as the processes of formation of identity and self become subject to significant dislocation and reconstruction. Relational patterns start to change right across the organisation. I think that the group were giving voice to this experience in our organisational context.

Normative discourse and disclosure

The activities of the group also generated material that related to norms of action and behaviour in the social object of leadership. The material displayed by the group therefore represented the publicly permissible conversations of leaders and managers, that is, those areas of discourse that are recognised as having legitimacy within mainstream conventions. The conversational themes of the group were restricted to what managers should feel good about attending to such as strategy, planning, vision and change. The world of experience that appeared to have risen to the surface for them in their discussions of the preceding thirty-six hours could not be given the same status or treatment for it is in relation to these

more emotional aspects of human relating (i.e. those involving experiences of fear, anxiety, vulnerability) that managers might be most open to feelings of guilt, shame and embarrassment. Such feelings cannot readily be acknowledged or witnessed in a form as tangible as visual displays or other constructions of the group. In such an event the construction itself would make concrete the need for other kinds of discourse and experience to be attended to which in their own way create deep anxiety for group members. Set against the cult of performance management within which the leader is permanently rational and judged by an assumed ability to get results, public admissions of other kinds of experience that attest to feelings of vulnerability assume a degree of perversity that will inhibit their expression.

The process of scripting, in the way in which the facilitators and the group sought to manage our interactions, seemed to be designed to eliminate risk, to inhibit the emergence of something unexpected, to contain the idea of development or indeed that of novelty. This attempt at orchestration was itself then a gesture of the group that was designed to invoke a response in me that accepted their interpretation of how *it* would be from now on. I think of the script as an attempt to change the dynamic of the power relations that the group felt to exist between us. I felt that the facilitators had encouraged a kind of behaviour within the group that did not acknowledge power relations as a fundamental aspect of organisational roles. Instead, the group had been encouraged to enact a game that would be of no real use to them, or to me in my relations with them, beyond their short stay at the residential centre. This script was therefore, I felt, also an invitation to me to join in this play in order to surrender a contentious and anxiety creating voice.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have drawn attention to the work of Bion and Nitsun in order to make sense of the experience that I have narrated. But both Bion and Nitsun approach the issue of individual and group relations from an intra-psychic perspective. Individuals arrive in the group as formed selves, they exchange (through processes of projection, introjection and projective identification) pre-formed psychic material. They are entities within a bounded whole. This position contrasts greatly with that of Mead and Elias where the self emerges in social interaction. Here the individual and the group, located in a social

process, are always being formed in an unbounded nexus of interdependent relationships – the “network” to which Elias refers in the Society of Individuals (Elias 2001; p. 32).

Going further with this in terms of Mead’s theories of social interaction, the experience of this conversation was a process of gesture and response out of which meaning emerged. Mead’s sense of the dialectical relationship that is the interplay of gesture and response offers a way of understanding the emotional experiences of group participants in ways that are rooted in physical interaction rather than metaphysical projections and introjections. In Mead’s dialectic, gesture by one is only meaningful in terms of the response that is called forth in the other. My interaction with F2 exemplifies this. I had no means of knowing what F2 anticipated in the response that his remarks about fear aroused in me. F2 certainly was not conscious of the thought processes with which I was engaged and have described in the early stages of this project. But in our process of interaction my emotional dispositions in relation to the planned event were changed fundamentally from those with which I arrived at the centre. This change in me affected directly my behaviour in and with the group throughout the conversation and beyond: hence my current writing. In my interaction with F2, meaning that was not anticipated emerged. Put another way, the intention of the gesture was evident only in the character of the response.

Other aspects of the conversational process can be understood in similar terms. In their gestures and responses prior to my arrival, the group shared their thoughts and fantasies about their roles, our wider working context and me. The *reality* that emerged from this process was manifest in the collage and their collective narrative about our organisation. In our ensuing conversation propositions about this *reality* were renegotiated. Alternative hypotheses about the organisation emerged and were adopted by all present as new truths with which we would work and go forward together. One example of this was the way in which we discussed and negotiated a different understanding of the status of members of this group relative to their own line managers and also the way in which the group came to think differently about their relations with those that they line managed. My relationship with each member of the group was also altered as a result of the gestures and responses that flowed between us. We acquired new knowledge of how we could be together. This influenced our sense of identities in relation to each other. It affected materially our feelings and behaviours towards each other.

I want to suggest therefore that the experience of the conversation that I have described can be understood by reference to a social, as against psychodynamic, explanation of a personal emotional world arising in the process of the continuous weaving and reweaving of self (Rorty 1991, p93). This is a context within which the individual and the group are simply aspects of one process of interaction.

The creativity of conflict

I want to argue here also that these interactions were bounded more by the power relations given by the social context of our meeting (i.e. the centre, the focus on work, the presence of facilitators, our organisational roles) than by tendencies for any of us to regress in ways influenced by archaic psychodynamic forces. From a social constructivist perspective it is vital to understand the contribution of the wider context of power relations to the patterning of the emotional responses of individuals drawn into interaction one with another. The good group/bad group juxtapositions that are evident in the work of Nitsun and Bion are incompatible with the process perspective of Elias and Mead. In Mead's writing on conflict and integration in the formation of Society he draws attention to the anti-social implications of "impulses" for self-protection and for self-preservation. He goes on to say however that these same impulses lead to collaborative associations that enhance processes of social protection and of social assistance (Mead 1934; p. 305). So within the Meadian dialectic the anti-social and the social coexist in paradoxical relation to each other. Individuals are united by a common social interest:

..and yet, on the other hand are more or less in conflict relative to numerous other interests which they possess only individually, or else share with one another only in small and limited groups. Conflicts among individuals in a highly developed and organised human society are not mere conflicts among their respective primitive impulses but are conflicts among their respective selves or personalities, each with its definite social structure.

(Mead 1934; p. 307)

In this passage, Mead is emphasising the social dimension of self and personality. This seems to me to offer an alternative way of making sense of my interaction with the group of managers whose residential session I had joined. In Mead's terms any change in the

social relation of individuals entails a change in the nature and meaning of self. It is in working with a recognition of this paradox of interdependence that “leading is no longer split off from the nature of leadership” and within which an ethical approach to leading and managing in organisations can both be recognised and practised (Griffin 2002; p. 207). Our conversation characterised this process. In the conversation there was a movement, akin to an ebb and flow, of recognition occurring between us. Fantasies and perceptions were adjusted. I revealed aspects of my experience not otherwise known to the group. They in turn also revealed to me a world of emotional experience of which I was unaware. We experienced our interdependence even if we did not acknowledge this in a formal or explicit way. Selves were, to some extent, recast.

Leadership as paradox

In the process of writing this project I have become very aware of my experience of the paradoxical nature of leadership as a process of being and not being in control. Further, I would argue that an act of acknowledging feelings of not being in control, either in verbalisation or in gestures that push back the responsibility for knowing and solving, is both essential to a process that enables others to experience their ability to act in the moment but deconstructive of the social object of leadership around which organisational power relations are substantially configured. This deconstruction is fraught with risk. It has the potential to discredit the incumbent leader by creating the appearance of being an outsider in a context where insider relationships are contingent upon the enactment of behaviours that are normal and therefore consistent with commonsense ways of being and doing. Equally, the deconstruction of the idea of knowing and solving on the part of the leader, will engender great feelings of anxiety on the part of those for whom the leader is an object of safety and security in a world that is perceived to be turbulent with change and impregnated with threat. It is clear to me however that it is important to find an approach to leading and managing that seeks an ethical basis in emergent processes of communicative action. This means working as an engaged participant in the interactions of those struggling with all of these tensions in the living present of their experiences of life in organisations.

Project 3: Leadership, Power, *Figuration* and the Emergence of Identity

Identity as an emergent process

In this project I aim to explore some of the ways in which identities emerge in the context of relationships at work. In using the term identity I am referring both to an individual's sense of self (a social object to oneself) and at the same time to a social object arising in the perceptual field of others. Whilst the assumption of identity is therefore what enables us to become known to ourselves it is also what enables us to recognize and to be recognized by each other as more than physical objects in our perception. Identity is social and relational in character. It is identity and the specific characteristics that this assumes for each of us in relation to one another which gives rise to our sense of individuality. An argument of this project is therefore that identity is a social process that entails an ongoing dialectical relationship between the *I* and the *me* together constituting the reflexive, social self of human experience. Identity, I argue, is formed by and forming, at the same time, the social relations in which we are all at all times engaged throughout our life process.

I am therefore interested in the possibility of using my own experiences of being in a network of social relations at work to explore the ways in which identities are formed in processes of social interaction in organizations. I am seeking also to explore more fully the implications of this process for how we can *be* in the presence of each other as we engage in our various work roles.

As I think about these ideas I think too about the ways in which power relations enter into, are essential to, the process of identity formation and its ongoing reproduction in a context of social relations. It is because our life experiences are situated in contexts of power relating that our identities emerge. Power relations are what enable and constrain the way in which identities develop and come to be reproduced in our interactions. It is for example, in the social contextual character of processes of power relating that the differentiated roles that we take up throughout our lives emerge: husband, parent, office worker, chief executive and taxpayer. Such roles provide contexts in which we enact

patterns of behaviors that are recognizable also to others within our socio-cultural milieu. Roles therefore confer upon us a license to act in ways that are both enabled and constrained by rules of conduct that we know by virtue of other, generalized, processes of socialization.

It is also in the movement of the power relations associated with such roles that contexts arise in which our identities come to be threatened and in relation to which we can experience great waves of emotional anxiety and/or trauma. Threats to identity therefore emerge in contexts where our habituated patterns of social relations are subject to change such that our familiar ways of doing things cannot be sustained. In organizational life these situations are exemplified in events such as reorganizations, mergers, or the appointment of a new line manager. Threats to identity can also take on coercive qualities that act powerfully to constrain the actions of individuals and so invoke compliant behaviors. Yet to understand the ability of such behaviors to constitute a threat it is important also to understand what it is that confers this quality upon some gestures and not others. Here it is important to understand something of what it is that an individual will have invested in their sense of the character of their identity. For a gesture to find its meaning in the arousal of an anxiety state some material (income, status, autonomy) or emotional (fear, humiliation, shame) consequence has to be anticipated.

I am arguing here that identity has to be understood as the product of human interaction. It is therefore made known both in the silent conversations that we conduct with ourselves and in our public interactions with others who form the network of social relations in which we are participants. Our organizational lives are but one particularly significant aspect of such interactions. As we participate organizationally we enact *figurations* of relationships in which our identities are formed by and formative of those other identities that we recognize within our network or milieu of acquaintance. There is therefore, no juxtaposition in this process between our job roles and our individual selves. We do not take on these roles as if we are putting on a coat. As I argue this point, I am aware that I am adopting a position that is different from that of many other writers whose thinking greatly influences views about organizational life and leadership and management in the UK public sector at the present time.

Mainstream perspectives

In Senge's work for example there is a transparent differentiation between work roles and identities: "We are trained to be loyal to our jobs – so much so that we confuse them with our identities." Senge goes so far as to argue that such confusion needs to be understood as an example of the learning disabilities of contemporary organizations. Senge goes on to argue that the tasks associated with a job role should in some way be separated from the "purpose" of the greater enterprise of which they are a part. Senge is arguing that identity can or should be attached to individuals' sense of purpose about their work but not to the performance of the tasks that go to make up their job. Put another way, notions of identity are not to be found in what constitutes the real lived experience of being at work but in a somewhat reified context of a sense of higher purpose (Senge 1990; 18)

This same juxtaposition is to be found in other influential writers such as Argyris, whose focus on organizational learning also leads to a perspective in which the individual in some way holds an identity that stands against the meta-identity of the organization in which they work. Argyris' work draws heavily upon personality theories in which individual action is assumed to be motivated by an impulse to self-actualization. The ideal of the fully self-actualizing individual is here accommodated by the implementation of *fusion* strategies that are intended to align organizational and individual goals. Argyris' subsequent theories of single and double loop learning are attached also to thinking about model leadership and management styles that can be used to condition the circumstances in which individuals' behaviors will be adjusted towards specific behavior outcomes. This is a model of agents acting in systemic part/whole relationships not of actors engaged in processes of reflexive interaction (Argyris & Schon 1974; Argyris 1957).

From another perspective Charles Handy, writing about power and influence in organizations, describes also a context in which managers can elect to adopt a range of different situation specific behaviors that will gain them influence in the workplace. In response to such behaviors, it is envisaged that subordinates will adjust their behaviors by the use of psychological responses that include compliance, identification and internalization (Handy 1999; 143). In this writing Handy shares an approach with that of the emotional intelligence theories of writers such as Goleman (1996). Goleman has attempted to identify good and bad emotional states that lead to high or low organizational

performance. More recently Hirschhorn, also writing from a perspective that focuses on “emotion” has explored the need to rework authority in what he describes as post-modern organizations. Hirschhorn’s argument is that managers should make greater use of displays of feelings and engage in emotional risk-taking to create climates of engagement and participation for their subordinates (Hirschhorn 1998). The issue here is one of the relationship between a felt sense of personal identity in contrast with processes of identification with the goals and objectives of the organization.

Taken together these perspectives are representative of a dominant discourse within management theory that draws upon the traditions of philosophic liberalism, humanism, psychoanalysis and systems theory. As such there are a number of organizing themes within the arguments of these writers that recur in “good practice” thinking about leading and managing in organizations today.

Firstly, there is a common assumption that managers act from a position of being in control or with the capability (if they get “it” right) of being in control of the intellectual and emotional worlds of their subordinates. This is in parallel with the assumption that they are also in control of the work of their organization. Secondly, managers’ behaviors are assumed to be constrained by system blockages that are generally manifest in the non-compliant behaviors of their subordinates. This may be attributable to factors as diverse as organizational barriers to learning, communication difficulties or the repression of emotions. The manager’s role is therefore in some way to unblock such problems in order to secure an alignment of attitudes, behaviors, resources and organizational performance. Thirdly, the managerial task is therefore often also associated with the goal of attaining a symmetrical organizational culture within which individuals’ attitudes and behaviors are aligned with the vision, mission and goals of the organization as articulated by the CEO and senior managers. Fourthly, managers are always assumed to be observers and instigators rather than participants and subjects of the relational processes that characterize organizational life. In this sense the managerial position is always one that is situated outside of an envisioned context of interaction. Managers intervene as regulators and designers. My argument is that this is not the case. Leaders and managers are always caught up in an intense struggle of ongoing power relating in which their participation is wholly reflexive. In this regard senior managers are paradoxically in control and yet not in control of their situational context to the same degree as is the case for any other

participant. Their organizational locus is also as constrained by power and threats to identity as it is for any other participant. The key differentiator for senior staff in organizations is that their power chances in these ongoing processes of interaction are more heavily weighted than for their subordinates.

The perspective of complex responsive processes

Since becoming engaged with the thinking that I associate with the idea of complex responsive processes I have become alert to the ways in which sense-making processes (how we order our experience, how we frame our actions) emerge in the conversations of gestures that are constantly iterated between people. When very senior colleagues meet together I now notice that very paradoxical occurrences emerge. For example, meetings between such people are not random. They appear in diaries well in advance of the occasion. They have an etiquette and structure that is highly formalized. In my experience of these events people generally arrive with a sense of agenda and an awareness (conscious and unconscious) of the conduct that they should observe throughout the proceedings. Yet from the moment of being together the interactions of such people seem to me to assume an order and flow that is never predictable and seldom, if ever, what was anticipated. In saying this I am not suggesting that it would be right to think of work meetings as free form occasions. Organizing themes seem quickly to emerge. These too create patterns in these interactions. The conversations that take place are steered by the agenda and yet not steered at the same time. At the end, someone will often try to summarize what took place in such a meeting, as if to assert the legitimacy of their witnessing or participation in the events that have taken place. Even at this point there is a process of negotiation taking place about what it is that everyone present has experienced. In the actions that flow from such occasions, further iterations of human interaction emerge. And so it goes on. The character of what is happening appears both constrained and unconstrained at the same time. So the conversational process always seems to be pregnant with risk. It holds the prospect of transformation in the ways in which participants make sense of what is happening around them and yet, finally, to be constrained within the conventions of the social relations that constitute the etiquette of how we in some way believe that we can be together (Shaw 2002: Stacey 2001)

This project departs from the themes of what I have described as a dominant discourse. My interest is in the identity formation issues that emerge in processes of interaction amongst senior managers. I participate in such a process when I am together with my peers. I observe and experience processes of *being together* in which we are all exposed constantly to identity threats associated with our situation. I recognize and feel the influence in this context of those power dominant individuals who constitute the senior echelons of the civil service and government. I am interested therefore in the vulnerability of myself and of these other individuals. This is *the* experience that we all live and share throughout our working lives. I am interested too in how, from the theoretical perspective of complex responsive processes, our participation together can be understood and described in a way that reveals something of the nature of power as a mediator in the process of our being together.

I have structured the project around an exploration of a series of interlinked themes which formalize a consideration of work meetings as a context relevant to a theoretical discourse concerning groups and group relations. Firstly, I attempt to relate my own experiences at work to Norbert Elias' concept of *figuration*. Secondly, by pursuing G H Mead's phenomenological explanations of gesture (his conceptualization of objects and time in perception) I offer a socio-biological explanation for what in the Foulkesian tradition of group analysis is referred to as resonance. Mead's account of the way in which inter-bodily awareness emerges in our individual perceptual fields of experience is, I think, also akin to Foulkes' concept of the foundation matrix which he described as the background of common experience that is instinctively shared between us by virtue also of a common inheritance that is species and culture specific. This I believe to be important since the same insight viewed from different perspectives of causality gives rise to radically different explanations of what is going on in human interaction. Thirdly, by shifting my attention from the foundation to the dynamic character of group processes I want to draw attention to Mead's conceptualization of the role of what he described as significant symbols in the conversational process of gestures passing between people in interaction. Here I will argue that Mead's organic and evolutionary explanations of the emergence of patterning themes in social interaction needs also to be complemented by a formal consideration of power. This is particularly with reference to the way in which political power comes to constitute a social object of our experience that is bureaucratized and reproduced in authority structures that constrain social processes of conversation and

restrict (as against, constrain) our capacity for creative action . By exploring these themes in this way, I think that it is possible to reconstruct the composite elements of a narrative of experience that in turn exemplifies Elias' idea of *figuration*. My interest is therefore in describing the process of identity formation as it emerges in the *figuration* of relations in contemporary organizational life.

A meeting

In this narrative I describe a meeting in which I was a participant.

This was a meeting also involving several heads of large post-16 educational institutions in central London, of which I was one, and the Director of the local area Learning and Skills Council. Two of the Director's officials were also in attendance. The Director is the local head of the regulatory body that now oversees the work of all post-16 education in England excluding higher education. The Director in question is responsible for an annual budget in excess of £200m. In combination those present in the room represented a spending commitment equal to 85% of the Director's annual budget. This meeting was of people who are recognized in their respective organizational contexts as having very considerable power and between whom complex patterns of interdependent power relations exist.

The iconography of power

We sat down around a block of tables that had been arranged into a square. The meeting began. The meeting was chaired by the Director. Flanked by her two officers she reminded those present that this was one of a series of informal meetings that we had agreed to have in recent months. As she mentioned the word "informal", one of the officers started to circulate a written agenda whilst the other one moved his pen in what seemed to be to be clear gesture of minute taking. I wondered at the use of the terms "we" and "informal" to describe our proceedings and how the feelings of others in the room may have become affected by the mixed messages of the opening remarks and gestures. From the background conversations taking place between the principals in between these meetings I know that everyone else has said that they feel that these meetings are not an option: we have to be at them; we do not like them; we have no choice; these are her

meetings not ours etc. Prior to the formation of the LSC the principals of the large general further education colleges (GFE) would meet with the predecessor regulatory bodies as a discrete group. Now we meet with the Director in the company of other institutional heads who we do not regard as being a part of our particular bit of what is now termed the “learning and skills sector”. The seven heads of the GFE colleges continue to meet privately. We have formalized an identity for ourselves. This has been agreed through each of the college’s boards and we have now developed our own distinctive brand name. This is intended to signify our intention to work collaboratively together. We try hard to do this but struggle often to establish real common ground that can be the basis of substantial collaborative work. Our commitment to each other is tempered by the underlying competition that exists between our institutions. At the same time however, our brand identity helps us to cohere as a group relative to those whose desire it is to remove our claims to unique, different or special status in gatherings such as the one now occurring. Our sense of solidarity therefore fluctuates according to context. Our ongoing relationships are continuously and paradoxically collaborative and competitive at the same time.

I understand the collective feeling amongst the GFE principals to be one of resentment at the downgrading of our status with respect to the new regulatory body. The heads of very small institutions have been accorded equal voices in these provider meetings. We worry about the extent to which others, not visible to this meeting, may also have gained access to the Director and her regional staff team.

Both in her tone and in her reference to informality I sensed that the Director was seeking to create in the room an ambience of relaxed intimacy in which she intended that we would all speak openly and contribute freely. My attention is always drawn to this feature of the Director’s way of conducting business. She makes frequent references in meetings of this type to the idea that “we must all work together in partnership”. Whenever she says this I find myself wondering what precisely she means. It seems to me that the power differences between us mean that we are plainly not a partnership except and insofar as our action together is always complementary. As an agent of the regulatory body, we are accountable to the Director for the public funds that we receive. Both parties are bound together in a paradoxical power relationship involving complex role plays of authority and accountability.

In the meeting I am aware that I think of the Director's informality as a pacifying gesture influencing the relations in the room in a particular way that she experiences as accommodating. I know that I see such gestures also as signifiers of her own unconscious anxieties borne of her role. The Director is believed to be close to retirement age. She is 10 – 15 years older than the average age of the rest of the people in the room. The Director is also a highly experienced operator in this milieu. Prior to the formation of the LSC she had a national role in a predecessor body. Because it is believed that the Director could retire within the next twelve months a recurrent theme in the conversations of my peers is about what she is like and what her successor will be like. The successor always emerges in these considerations as a source of great anxiety amongst us. There is something about the context and the style of the Director's opening remarks that have a powerful effect in terms of laying the foundations for an emergent sense of we-ness being together in this room.

As we were still in the opening stages of the meeting someone drew attention to the fact that we were meeting in this room and not in our usual location. Normally we meet on the 9th floor of a large office building in central London. On this occasion we were in a much older building in another part of the city. There seemed to be a strong affectual awareness amongst everyone in the room of this different location. Everyone noticed that this new room was extraordinarily well appointed. I remembered having been in this room a few years ago when it was just a working office for a group of fairly low-grade officials working in an off-shoot of a different government department. The cultivated drabness of civil service offices had now been replaced by décor and furnishings that communicated a sense of exclusivity. We were in the London office the national Chairman. The Chairman is one of a number of private sector executives brought in by the Government, as part of its wider reform process, to run major public sector operations. It was clear to all present that the Chairman's expectations of his working environment were not those of the previous occupants of the room. As this information was shared with the group it was apparent that everyone started to assume a great interest in the room itself. In simultaneous gestures of interest we made exaggerated motions of looking and noticing what was in the room.

The Director seemed self-evidently proud of the fact that she was the gate-keeper for this experience. That she had been allocated this room for a meeting when her own building

was not available seemed to signify a proximity and/or intimacy on her part with the Chairman and the national centre of power. She seemed to grow in presence by this association. There was a ripple of polite banter around the room about the Chairman as we all shared in the Director's more intimate associations with him. In the movement of these gestures I felt that we were in some way being drawn together in an inner sanctum of privilege. This seemed to strengthen the momentary feeling of we-ness amongst the group. Here was an invitation for us, present in this moment, to feel and be as at one with the iconography of power that was signified by the room itself. As this awareness moved around the room a collective group identity was being invited in the iteration of the action of noticing our location on the part of each participant. For each person the sense of being privileged over others was made concrete. For the group, this was a moment of private and shared experience through which some other more transient experience of solidarity could be aroused.

The emergence of organizing themes in the flow of conversation

The Director suggested to us that before we started on the agenda proper we ought to take a few moments to reflect upon last week's national conference of colleges and in particular, the speech given by the Secretary of State. As she extended this invitation I noticed that her body posture changed. She sat back slightly in her seat. Her expression suggested a benign half-smile. An air of expectancy descended upon the room. It was clear that we were being invited to participate in a celebration of this speech and to welcome the good news of the extra billions that, it was implied, would shortly be made available in our negotiations about next year's funding allocations. There is something about the imposition of a ritualized celebration of ministerial speeches in these settings that I find disconcerting. I always feel that these invitations are confrontational. What is being presented in such invitations is an opportunity to make a gesture of public association (or disassociation) with the objectives of government and *inter alia* its agencies. Often, these invitations are associated in a semi-personalized way with the individual character of the minister or Secretary of State in question. There is frequently a knowingness of the other (conveyed in the solicitous tone of the invitation) that will be introduced to these moments. These invitations are often proffered, as in this case, by someone with a vicarious but direct association with the individual political play-maker or their immediate team of civil servants. I liken this experience to that of participation in a ritualized declaration of fealty.

On such occasions I have the sense of being enveloped by the contemporary etiquettes of political power. At such moments, no gesture is insignificant. Every gesture conveys an attitude about association and belonging. Such moments are always a test of the insider/outsider credentials of those present. I noticed also that at such moments no one voices dissent or fundamental disagreement.

The immediate response to this invitation was muted. Someone interjected with the suggestion that a rumor was already circulating to the effect that the benefits identified by the Secretary of State might not be as suggested by the headlines in the education media. The mood in the room started to change and the Director, adopting a more formal posture, sat forward in her chair to listen. Someone in the room then asked if anyone else had confirmation of the suggestion that the Secretary of State met the lecturers' union ahead of the conference and agreed with them that the extra money being made available by government would fund their current demand for improved pay. This it was said would explain the union's sudden and unexpected withdrawal of a threat of strike action. A third person then confirmed that they too had heard this rumor whilst at the conference. Another person then confirmed that they knew this rumor to be a true reflection of what had happened. The weight of rumor and the certainty of the last speaker combined to convince those present that this was indeed an accurate version of events. A more somber mood descended upon the room as it was realized that a substantial element of the money promised as additional by the Secretary of State was already in circulation in the sector in the form of a special grant already linked to lecturers' pay. This was a centrally controlled grant offered to institutions on the basis of offering pay incentives for enhanced performance: the "something for something" approach signposted in the Secretary of State's speech. It was *apparent* to everyone in the room that references to "new" money in the speech might, in reality, turn out to refer in the main to the consolidation of special grant monies already circulating in the system.

It is difficult to describe the atmosphere of despondency that descended upon the room at this point. The majority of the principals present have been in their jobs for some time. Everyone has had experience of making staff redundant in response to the cost-reduction measures imposed on the sector by government since 1993. Everyone believed that the Secretary of State had promised pay rises to the lecturers' union behind the backs of the college employers. In the moment of this meeting the *reality* to which we were attending

was that the government had focused on the presentation rather than the substance of what we all saw to be a major problem.

The conversation in the meeting moved on. Much of the Secretary of State's speech had been centered on the implementation of the government's latest reform proposals (DfES 2002). One feature of these proposals is to introduce yet further performance targets for the post-16 sector. These include the introduction of floor targets (levels of performance below which institutions must contract not to fall) and stretch targets (differentiated improvement rate targets reflecting an individual institution's ability to "stretch" its performance beyond its current baseline outcomes). In addition, the proposals include a new performance indicator to be described as a success rate. The threat of success rate measures is a cause of great anxiety amongst college principals as these have the effect of resetting baseline levels of measured performance to what will appear in public as being a very low level. This will create the appearance of great opportunities for improvement and establish a margin within which ever more intense processes of target-setting and scrutiny and orchestrated public-opprobrium for failure will be applied.

The language game of commonsense rhetoric

The introduction of success rate targets highlights the nuances of meaning that exist in language use between rhetoric and reality congruent experience. By this I am pointing both to the distinction between what is said and what is said means and that which exists between presentation and substance. A proposition stated in one context of meaning (i.e. what Wittgenstein described as one particular language game) has a completely different meaning when it reappears in another. The issue of success rates is a specific example of this. In the language game of the public presentation of a political agenda for change the idea of increasing the numbers of people who it can be said are achieving their planned qualification outcomes speaks to an idea of the social "good". As a proposition it appears absolutely reasonable. When we are able to move into the language game of specialist knowledge where both practical and technical meanings are combined with insight into the deeper significance of this as a statement of power, the meaning of the proposition becomes quite different.

In the extreme, a political proposition that speaks to the social good can be felt as a deeply threatening personal attack to those able to decode the specific action implications of what has been said. It is only those who are able to comprehend the significance of the nuances, the understanding of what “what is said” means who can be included in the dialogue. Non-specialists (including of course the majority of the media and the public at large) who operate in a linguistic field that is outside of the scope of this nuance may (perhaps from their own local learned experiences) distrust such presentations but they can only make sense of the headlines. The obtuseness of the special circumstances and practices that inform each branch and sub-branch of the management of the public realm, the essential preoccupation with a morass of micro-detail associated with the technocracy of the management process, is therefore isolating and so, silencing. The degree of explanation required to include someone from outside of the dialogue in an established point of shared understanding and meaning is too great. The political and thus media onslaught on public sector performance operates exactly in this way. No one can defend the accusation that performance is poor on a basis that illuminates the technocratic procedures used to inform such a judgment.

This dominant discourse is what constitutes the commonsense of experience. Commonsense is reproduced in a conversational process whose patterns of discourse are themed by an articulation of what Mead described as the cult values of the social milieu. What are truly dominant commonsense propositions now (as witnessed in pages and pages of the media) are the twin cults of performance management and continuous improvement. This mechanism, the exploitation of the nuance of difference existing between language games, is the means by which these cult-values are taken up in the active experience of professional roles. These themes were explored and developed extensively from a different perspective by the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci in his study of the relationship between ideas, language and the dynamics of hegemonic political power. Gramsci described commonsense as a “conception of the world that is followed in normal times” (Gramsci 1971; 327) where the “principle of causality” is applied in a way that

identifies the exact cause, simple and to hand, and does not let itself be distracted by fancy quibbles and pseudo-profound, pseudo-scientific metaphysical mumbo-jumbo. (Gramsci 1971; 348)

In the irony of this statement, Gramsci characterizes commonsense as a mode of discourse in which complex argument is treated dismissively and then dismissed in favor of Truths self-evident from the experience of everyday life. Gramsci identified commonsense as a central tenet within his theory of political hegemony. Commonsense, argued Gramsci, “does not permit of any action, any decision, or any choice and produces a position of moral and political passivity”. (Gramsci 1971; 333) Like Mead, Gramsci saw conflict (in the realm of ideas) as being fundamental to processes of personal and social transformation:

Critical understanding of self takes place therefore through a struggle of political “hegemonies” and of opposing directions, first in the ethical field and then in that of politics proper, in order to arrive at a working out at a higher level of one’s own conception of reality. (Gramsci 1971; 333)

The Secretary of State’s speech is itself a powerful statement of both commonsense argumentation and the character of the modern political process. The speech is structured in the form of series of exhortations, instructions and the repetition of assumed statements of truth and fact. It is variously ingratiating of the audience, searching for solidarity, presuming of common ground and attacking (Clarke 2002).

Narratives and legitimating

The truth of this speech and its significance in praxis is to be found in the narratives of experience that emerge in the responses that are made to it. An important aspect of this narrative building process is that of the interpretation of the policy context to which the speech refers made by both the LSC and the Department. The LSC’s interpretation is conveyed in *LSC Circular 03/01: Success for All – Implementation of the framework for Quality and Success* (Learning and Skills Council 2003). This was issued as a “consultation” document in January 2003. It is a dense document packed with detailed information about the technical basis of the new performance management regime, the monitoring, supervision and intervention arrangements that will be established. It contains a considerable amount of information about the new “trust in FE” agenda that is part of the Secretary of State’s pledge to work in partnership. It also contains a great deal of information about the steps that will be taken when this assumed basis of “trust” is found

to have been breached by evidence of underperformance. Here it is evident that the penalties for failure will be in proportion to the level of expectation that a relationship based on “trust” would assume. In reading *Circular 03/01* it is hard to discern the hand of ministerial friendship that is conveyed in much of the speech.

Another stage in the narrative building process is to be found in the ways in which the people sitting in the room with me are making sense of these developments. This was manifest in their individual and collective feelings of anxiety and their struggle to make sense of these meta-propositions about change and performance from within their local circumstances. The performance of inner city institutions always benchmarks at a level that is below that of others in the shires and provinces. The Secretary of State’s announcements, it was feared, would potentially threaten all of the institutions represented in this meeting with being judged negatively. The perceived threat was that of being categorized variously according to the language codes of the scrutinizing bodies as “unsatisfactory” or as having “serious weaknesses” or as “inadequate”. The senior staff members present in the room were and remain very conscious of the potential consequences for them as individuals of falling foul of such categorization.

Further themes in the conversation of the group: insider-outsider relations

We were now well into the meeting. Talk of the introduction of yet more performance indicators elicited an outburst from another of the principals present. She expressed “real concern” about the implication of all of this for her college and asked the Director when we were to be given the detail of how these new arrangements would work. Two of the newer principals expressed their concerns more mutedly. In so doing, they adopted a demeanor towards the Director that was deferential. In the tone of their communication they conveyed their recognition that the Director held the ability to judge them, that she can give to and take from them. They appealed to the Director to “give us all the support and information that we will need in order to respond to these new challenges”. This exchange introduced unexpectedly a new dynamic into the room. Enveloped by the informality of the meeting the Director suggested that she too was very unhappy with the development in relation to performance indicators. This she explained was because although it is the college’s (“providers” in the new argot of the Learning and Skills Council) who have to “deliver” these, she and her team will be judged by the centre to

have failed if “things don’t happen in our area”. This observation provoked some in the room to ask the Director about the pressures that she is under. In response to this the Director shared with us several anecdotes from her own experience (having to seek approval for quite low level decisions that should be taken locally, being forced to use standard letters written at the centre in her local correspondence, being summoned to the centre and told how to operate a variety of review procedures) in which she emerged as the victim of a dictatorial and centrist management process. It is on the basis of sharing this experience that the Director then made a direct appeal to us as a group to make sure that “we get it right” in our locality. Acknowledging that she cannot deliver her targets single-handedly, the Director, I realized, was working hard to join us all together in a we-identification against a bigger “they”. In this instance the outsiders became her senior managers, the central team at the national Council. As these anecdotes are shared a bridge is created momentarily between the Director and everyone else. The anecdotes are also in their way minor indiscretions. The stories are disloyalties that communicate a sense of isolation and a need for belonging elsewhere with us. We, hearing these stories, took them up into our own narratives as we shared the Director’s sense-making of her own position in her organization.

This gesture by the Director represented for me a sudden but fascinating movement of the power relations in the room. As we sat in relation to her, she now sat in relation to her own line managers. The Director’s stories evidenced a dynamic of organizational power relations in which centre and the local exist in contradictory tension with each other. The Director’s gesture of disloyalty, made in the exceptionally local context of this room, also drew attention to the systems, structures and anxieties that motivate national Council officers to behave towards her in a way which arouses in her the same feelings as are being felt by us. Whilst the Director appears to have a power-dominance in relation to us this is a much more paradoxical relationship than the formal structures would suggest. These dynamics are reflected in the text of Secretary of State’s speech and in the documentation that the DfES is producing to support its new *Success for All* strategy. I have therefore come to understand the Director’s indiscretions as a response to the pressures being applied to her by senior LSC officers who, themselves, are in the grip of anxiety borne of the mistrust made public that now exists between their organization and the Department. Their ever more aggressive demands for the delivery of targets placed upon the Director and through her, us, is a function of their own sense of vulnerability to the judgment of

those in the Department who are one step closer to the centre of power. Sitting in this room, it seemed clear to me that we are all enacting processes of gesture and response that combine into a particular *figuration* of power relations in which threats to identity are central to the dynamic of relational processes.

Encouraged by the rising feeling of fellowship in the room the conversation moved on to consider the detail of other targets that we would also be required to meet. These particular targets relate to the numbers of people participating in post-16 education in central London.

At this point, I asked the Director if she could bring us all up to date with the progress that her team were making with establishing the numerical basis upon which we were going to agree the increased participation targets for the 2003/04 year. As I introduced the question I explained the history of my attendance at earlier meetings where this issue had been acknowledged as being a major problem for the new Learning and Skills Council. I said that I wondered if, in the light of the new target setting processes that were to be implemented, the issue of knowing where we were starting from and where we needed to end up had been resolved. If so could we have a copy of the analysis to help us with our own planning?

From her response it was clear that the Director did not particularly welcome this question. My compulsion to ask this question was borne of a desire to disrupt the mood of 'solidarity' that was present amongst those in the room. My question was intended to dislodge the fantasies that inform the performance management regime to which we are all subjected. I wanted to challenge the integrity of the idea of 'progress' that is so central to the justification of current practice in the administration of public services across the UK. I know that I feel some exhilaration, a sense of freedom and of being in touch with a personal core of motivation, in the moment that I problematize, or disrupt, in a public way the fug of conformity within which my professional life takes place. I have a sense that such gestures are cumulatively career limiting in their effect. As I speak, I am in touch with the idea that this intervention is reckless. I find myself, nonetheless, invigorated by taking the position of dissident. Without such opportunities for the expression of an alternative truth I would feel no more than a cipher of processes with which I feel great disquiet.

Shortly after this interchange, the meeting came to a close. As I walked back to my office I reflected upon what I feel to be the grinding poverty of imagination that lies beneath the surface of the performance management regime in the public sector. I thought too about the implications of having to factor the additional demands of these new targets into our management processes and to find ways of making sense of these for the people working in the organization. Finally, heading back to my office I tried to make sense of how my experiences of working between the institution and the agencies of public sector reform, at the interface of this politics, inform my relationships with those who teach and study at the college.

Foulkes and Elias: Psychoanalytic and social paradigms of explanation

It seems to me that it is important to be clear about the implications of the explanatory paradigm for the way in which we make sense of experience. I have asserted the importance of understanding identity and group processes as phenomena of social interaction. But it would be possible to explain what was taking place in this room using insights drawn from a psychoanalytic paradigm that draws upon Foulkesian theories regarding group processes and the individual/group relationship. In this sense, the meeting could be treated as an exemplar of the Foulkesian concept of the matrix. This approach is potentially attractive because, unlike the dominant discourse of contemporary management theory, it draws attention to interaction in the construction of human experience and therefore raises questions regarding power and ethics in the conduct of relationships at work. “Matrix” is suggestive of interdependency in human relations. This is qualitatively and significantly different from the perspectives on power, and therefore the assumed authority of the individual to act, suggested by the writers who I cited at the beginning of this paper. The work of S H Foulkes, the acknowledged founder of group analysis, therefore points us in a direction of an explanation that assumes substantially different implications for power and power relations than would be found in the dominant discourse regarding the work of groups and teams at work. The reflexive quality of human interaction is fundamental to Foulkes’ insights.

Thus Foulkes argued that as people come together “transpersonal processes” occur which give rise to what he observed and described as the group matrix: “When a group of people,

by which for our purposes I mean a small number of persons, form intimate relationships they create a new phenomenon, namely, the total field of mental happenings between them all.” In arguing for the idea that ‘mind’ is transpersonal phenomenon Foulkes was also anxious to avoid the problem of collapsing the idea of ‘mind’ as process into the idea of ‘mind’ as object. To capture this view of ‘mind’ as a transpersonal process, Foulkes used the term dynamic group matrix. Thus:

I do not talk of group mind because this is a substantiation of what is meant and is as unsatisfactory as speaking of an individual mind. The mind is not a thing which exists but a series of events, moving and proceeding all the time. (Foulkes 1990; 224)

Although Foulkes was not consistent in the way that he treated this assertion (he did for example, make reference to the idea of a “group mind”) he also introduced the concept of resonance to describe the largely unconscious processes that constitute the ways in which people in a group sense and relate with each other. Resonance was the subject of another essay by Foulkes in which he developed this idea further and in the following terms:

...resonance is a good example of communication taking place without any particular message being sent or received, being in fact purely instinctive. In the group-analytic group individuals not only resonate on a large scale to each other, simultaneously and reciprocally, but also to the group as whole and particularly to the group conductor, who in turn is influenced by his own resonance. (Foulkes 1990; 299)

I want to argue here that Foulkes’ concepts of the dynamic group matrix and inter-bodily resonance are valuable both to deconstructing and understanding our experiences of relating to others in the context of organizational life and specifically that of work meetings such as the one that I describe in the foregoing narrative. Whilst Foulkes’ conceptual frame is helpful, because he wrote from within a psychoanalytic paradigm it was difficult, in the end, for him to fully elaborate these concepts as social and bodily processes of interaction. To explain these phenomenon Foulkes therefore made recourse to a series of metaphors that describe the transpersonal occurrence of the matrix as being like X-rays which pass through individuals and of individuals in groups as being like the

component cells of a more complex biological structure (Foulkes 1990; 229) In his essay on resonance Foulkes explains the feeling state of sensing other bodies also in terms the metaphysical language of psychoanalysis. Resonance, he argues, “has affinities and relationships to transference, projection or introjection.” (Foulkes 1990; 300)

Other writers (Dalal 1998; Stacey 2003) have explored the tensions in Foulkes’ writing between social and psychoanalytic themes in his explanations of group phenomena. It is the presence of this tension in Foulkes’ writing that led Dalal to contrast his radical social perspective with his conservative Freudian view. Whilst I do not intend to re-engage with the detail of these critiques of Foulkes’ work, I do think that the concepts of matrix and resonance are helpful reference points for understanding further what was occurring in the meeting that I described in the foregoing narrative. But to avoid the danger of lapsing into metaphysics I will set out to maintain a consistency of approach which treats these phenomena as social, biological and cognitive processes rather than as intra-psychic. Such an approach I believe to be consistent also with the conceptual framework of complex responsive processes. In this, as against the psychoanalytic paradigm, it is the thematic patterning of social interaction occurring between us in the living present of our experience together that forms and is formed by our feeling states and emotional responses.

In contrast with Foulkes’ psychoanalytic approach to the group matrix, Norbert Elias’ conception of *figuration* always remains social. Elias therefore substitutes a theory of human action linked to the occurrence of conscious and unconscious interpersonal processes, to an action theory that is consistently social. Within Elias’ theoretical frame power and power relations are always central to an explanation of what can be observed to be occurring between people acting in groups at any scale of social aggregation.

Elias therefore used the concept of *figuration* to describe patterns of interaction between people from which particular affectual predispositions (*habitus*) emerge. In Elias’ work, *habitus* and *figuration* are dialectically related in that they form and are formed by each other at the same time. It follows that the idea of *figuration* is closely associated with that of power relations. I would argue that in Elias’ work it is the configuration of power relations extant within an identifiable historical conjuncture (e.g. mediaeval Europe, late twentieth century capitalism) that acts as the dynamic shaping *figuration* (Elias 2000). My narrative regarding the meeting is an example of this process. It is therefore the emergent

character of the relative positions of the individual participants to flows of power and power relating that create the appearance of 'structure' in their relations with each other in this meeting and through which their relating together is mediated. We are there together acting in a way that pays regard to the Director's entitlement to regulate our conduct. Our behaviors towards each other are enabled and constrained by our sense of individual authority relative to each other. In part this is a function of the size of our institutions. But other factors are in play. We recognize each other in terms of our length of service, our assumptions about each other's experience and professional competence. To some extent our presence or absence from the Association of Colleges conference also conferred a status that affected our power relations together. Those who attended the conference had an immediate point of reference with each other (shared experience) and claim to truth in discussing the event (as witnesses). The statements of these individuals were, to some extent, privileged in the group relative to those who were not present. Insider/outsider relations were being played out in subtle but perceptible ways within the group all of the time that it is constituted in this room. Group and individual identities were being constructed continuously in the ebb and flow of this relational process.

Figuration and habitus in the micro detail of individual lives

Two questions have arisen for me in reflecting upon Elias' theories of *figuration*. Firstly, is it possible to understand our own immediate individual life experience in terms of Elias concepts of *figuration* and habitus? Secondly, can I situate myself and, for example, my work experience within a concept of *figuration*? Writing of network phenomena in human relationships Elias commented:

To get a closer view of this kind of interrelationship one might think of the object from which the concept of network is derived, a woven net. In such a net there are many interwoven threads linked together. Yet neither the totality of the net, nor the form taken by each thread in it, can be understood in terms of a single thread alone or even in all the threads considered singly; it is understood solely in terms of the way in which they are linked, their relationship to each other. (Elias 1991; 32)

When I start to think myself into Elias' metaphor, I start to locate myself in patterns of personal/impersonal, direct/indirect, close to/far from relationships. Also I start to

recognize all of my relationships as having all of these characteristics at different times and in different contexts. There are people with whom I have close and regular contact. I would say that they are integral to my everyday experience of being at work. I include my immediate team of five other people in this category. The chairman and vice chairman of my governing body are also in this group. Most of my other immediate relationships within the organization are mediated through these relationships. I am aware that for a lot of the time I am at work others know me via the interactions that I have with the few people that I manage directly. With some people, particularly those who have worked in the college for a long time, I have a relationship that they and I experience more personally but in a way that is not wholly aligned with the line management structure. With other new staff members this is not true and not likely to be possible. When I speak to small or large groups of staff or when I attend college functions, I am aware that I am present in a capacity that is paradoxically personal and impersonal at the same time.

As I reflect upon my work experience in this way and conceive of my participation in the meeting that forms my foregoing narrative account, I understand myself to be an actor in a *figuration*. My participation is forming this *figuration*. At the same time, the actions that signify my participation to others are formed by them and their interactions with others also present. In this sense, *figuration* becomes an exemplar of the iterative concept of human relating.

Objects, time and perception

Earlier I drew attention to the room in which this meeting took place and to the fact that we were sitting around tables arranged in a square.

Looking around the room it was possible for the most part to see only those parts of people that were above the sight-line of the table top. For those people directly opposite it was possible to see more of their lower bodies but these were partially obscured by the depth of the table top and the angle of their seating positions. The overall effect of this seating arrangement, as in so many meetings of its type, was to reduce the physicality of interaction to gestures that are evidenced from upper body movements (including facial expressions) and speech. In this meeting, also as in many others, no-one got up from their seat or in any other way disturbed this established pattern. In reflecting upon this meeting

I have found myself becoming increasingly preoccupied with this image. That is the image of a group of people sitting in a room, dispersed in a formalized arrangement of the spatial structures of their interrelationship, immobilized in their seats and evident to each other only in the physicality of their upper bodies. At the same time as I describe this scene in a way that is limited and restrictive of certain possibilities for interaction, in my narrative I feel that I have hardly scratched the surface of what could be observed and described in relation to what occurred between those who were present.

I am struck by the significance of our non-verbalized gestures for the quality of our ongoing interactions. In this meeting, as in so many others, it was the minutiae and the nuances of the detail of these of interactions that provided a source of tension to our drama of being together in a way that made the silent, but sensed, presence of others fundamental to our experience of being in the room. In my narrative, the Director's half smile, her leaning forwards or backwards, my silence, the deferential demeanor of others, the changing tempo of bodily movement in the room, the restrictions upon bodily movement, are essential to the emergence of patterns of power relating that get taken up in later phases of the social act (the cycle of gesture and response that constitutes a conversational phase of interaction) that entails spoken dialogical communication. The immanent pathos of our being together was in the tension created in our bodily separation (our physical anomie) contrasted with our struggle to find meaning in our conversational interactions together

It is therefore in the thematic patterning of our observations, the images that arise in our mental frame, that we come to recognize the identity of others. As in this process of recognition we come to know others so we are able to recognize ourselves. This theme was represented by Hegel in his account of the dialectic of recognition in the following terms:

Each is for the other the middle term, through which each mediates itself with itself and unites with itself; and each is for itself, and for the other, an immediate being of its own account, which at the same time is such only through this mediation. They *recognize* themselves as *mutually recognizing* one another. (Hegel 1998; 93)

Whilst the act of observing is a function of biology, recognition is a social process. My narrative only makes sense if my description of the identities of the participants is in some

way credible to those reading this script. By credible I mean that these descriptions hold together in a reality congruent way that can be recognized from the manner in which I have connected these identity labels with descriptions of actions and interpretations of motives. This is a function both of the biology of perception and it is socio-culturally specific. At the same time, it is clear that I am using “identity” as a word that is synonymous with particular sets of attributes and that I am not attempting to describe all of the attributes that might be associated with the people who form the cast for my narrative. As I open up this line of thinking I feel myself being drawn to questioning what it is that I really am describing when I talk about being in a meeting with a cast of characters whose identities I describe with such confidence. The characters that I depict remain physically fixed in time and space. They do not move relative to one another. Movement occurs in the thematic patterning of their processes of relating: these are perceptual, emotional and conversational. Identities form and reform in the dialectic of recognition that goes on in the living present of their being together. The transformational character of this process is to be found in the feeling and knowing states of the participants as these are enacted in their ongoing relations with each other.

Take for example the Director's revelations about her anxieties about her own job role. In the moment of this revelation the Director's identity is transformed within the group. Her power relation to the rest of us becomes ambiguously framed as she takes up the role of one who is both in authority and fearful of those whose authority she represents in her relations with us. The meaning of her presence in the room is adjusted in ways that could not have been anticipated when we entered the room. Even now, in my act of writing about this event, I am reproducing an experience of this readjustment and recasting the Director's identity as I reconstruct it and as my reflections are taken up by the readers of my essay.

It seems to me that when we are in the act of participating in large or small group processes, of which meetings in organizational contexts are an example, we enact circumstances in which our action as living bodies always appears discontinuous. As our participation, our presence in relation to one another, is an unbroken process of being, feeling, emotion, gesturing, our experience of this and the experience of others with whom we are in relation, is colored by the turn-taking character of our silent and public conversations. In this sense we encounter a world of gestures and one in which we always

experience a sense of present and past. Our action takes place in a context of an anticipation of the future: what will happen or might happen next. As this world of gestures becomes more complex, non-verbal and verbal gestures combine to form the significant symbols of human interaction.

Significant symbols

As I reflect upon my participation in the event described in my narrative I readily relate to the Meadian account of the ways in which my feeling state (and that of others present) in that moment emerges in a social context. It is not the product of a single mind or located within a single physical body. I am aware then, that my experience of being present in this situation arises from my responses to a complex range of signifying physical and social objects: the building, its location, the décor of the room, the formality of the setting, the clothing of the participants, the social objects of the roles that they have taken up in society, an awareness of the wider patterns of conduct upon which the meaning of these roles is contingent, the fear of not behaving in way that is consistent with this socially ordered pattern of conduct. My point here is therefore that it is in our cognitive and emotional responses to this emergent world of gestures that our identities also emerge as a continuous process of creative enactment.

Mead drew attention in his work to the difference between the ideas of gesture and significant symbol. He identified this difference as being brought about when a gesture from one to another:

..not only brings the stimulus-object in the range of the reactions of other forms, but that the nature of the object is also indicated; especially do we apply in the term significance that the individual who points out indicates the nature to himself. But it is not enough that he should indicate this meaning – whatever meaning is – as it exists for him alone, but that he should indicate that meaning as it exists for the other to whom he is pointing. (Mead: 1922, 160)

For such a process to occur it is necessary for the individual to exist as a social object to their self. In order to use gesture in the significant manner described by Mead a reflexive awareness of oneself is a prerequisite. Mead's explanation of how such awareness arises

for humans is both biological and social. Biological in the sense that the human brain has evolved to a point where it has the capacity to offer reflexive images back to the individual and social to the extent that this reflexivity is nurtured as part of a wider process of socialization that occurs through childhood:

The self arises in conduct, when the individual becomes a social object in experience to himself. This takes place when the individual assumes the attitude or the uses the gesture which another individual would use and responds to it himself, or tends so to respond. It is a development that arises gradually in the life of the infant ...and finds its expression in the normal play life of young children. In the process the child gradually becomes a social being in his own experience and acts toward himself in a manner analogous to that in which he acts toward others. Especially he talks to himself as he talks to others and in keeping up this conversation in the inner forum constitutes the field which is called that of mind. Then those objects and experiences which belong to his own body, those images which belong to his own past, become part of this self. (Mead: 1922, 160)

Mead's comments regarding socialization and the reflexive nature of human consciousness as prerequisites of self he developed at length in Mind, Self and Society and used also to elaborate his concept of the *I-me* dialectic (Mead: 1934). This concept is fundamental to Mead's social psychological explication of the idea of identity and its emergence in patterns of social relations. For Mead "me" was the reflexive representation of what he described as "the organized attitudes of the others which we definitely assume and which determine consequently our own conduct so far as it is of self-conscious character". In Mead's thinking, "me" references the idea of the socialized individual whose patterns of conduct follow rules established within the social order. "I" by contrast signifies the novelty arising from awareness of individual action: "The novelty comes in the action of the 'I', but the structure, the form of the self is one which is conventional" (Mead: 1934, 209. Mead thought of "I" and "me" as phases of the self and in so doing was proposing a dialectical process in which, at the same time, the individual and social character of self-identity is formed by and forming the social context of human action.

Earlier in this paper I referred to Gramsci's conceptualization of common sense as a way of attempting to explain the social significance of the rhetoric of the Secretary of State's

speech. I was interested in this from the point of view of the thematic patterning of what (after Wittgenstein) I described as the language game of performance management in the public sector. Situated in the theoretical context of Mead these observations take on a specific meaning in that the rhetoric of this speech, which comes to constitute a common sense representation of the social object of the Good in contemporary life, is a representation of what he described as a “generalized social attitude”. These are the “common responses” to situations that emerge in the interactions of collectives of individuals and which, once bureaucratized, come to constitute the social objects that we recognize as institutions (Mead: 1934, 261)

Mead explained the existence of social institutions by reference to the same socio-biological thinking that informed his theories regarding the nature of individual selves. For Mead, the individual and the social are aspects of a single dialectical process of human action. For this reason he extended his observations regarding the constraining relationship that he observed between an organism and its physical environment to the social sphere. In his comments on America for example where he describes “political control” in terms of the action of self-government as a “generalized principle” of life for the whole community, it is clear that Mead saw this as being analogous to the regulative relationships that exist in nature. To explain exactly how it is that individuals take on behaviors (taking the “role of the other”) which in their collective expression appear as socially ordered Mead made reference to the significance of the moral authority that such “generalized principles” or “organized attitudes” come to assume in individual lives. Institutionalized responses become synonymous with the manners (or customs) of a community and come to be indistinguishable from morals. In the end, it is the moral authority of the generalized other, against which individuals critique and control their own conduct, allied to the charisma of leading individuals in society that for Mead explains the phenomenon of society, social order and social stability. (Mead 1934; 255 - 256, 263 – 267)

Truth, power, *figuration* and identity

Earlier in this project I have drawn attention to the emergence of themes in the interactions taking place within the group that created insider/outsider relationships. I suggested that this was what was happening in the way in which the Director moved towards us by

challenging the legitimacy of the processes of her own organization. This gesture transformed the Director's identity within the group. She became, in a way that was never fully resolved, one of us instead of one of them and yet not so at the same time. I also drew attention to the way in which the act of noticing the room in which the meeting took place had the effect of contributing to the emergence of something akin to a sense of collective identity. We, selected, privileged by virtue of our roles, to be present in this place at this time together. What I am describing here are processes that are both social and cognitive. There is a process of differentiation taking place that is social. This process explains why we are here: it is to do with our jobs and their contemporary relevance to the power relations that pertain to the administration of public education. At the same time however, we noticed aspects of each other that in this specific context gave particular meaning to our being together. Our identities, limited in their character to our recognition of each other as senior officers, principals, CEOs, an executive director, meant that a particular kind of conversation could take place between us and one that we would not conduct with a different constituency.

As I return myself to the thought of sitting in the room, it seems clear to me that we are all engaged in an active process of *figuration* that is a local exemplification of Elias' bigger sociological argument. Everyone in the room has formal powers that are codified in statute. Our relationships are formalized by the frameworks of accountability that exist between the Secretary of State, the LSC and institutions. Our professional identities are contingent upon our ability to act in ways that remain consistent with this codification. Woven between us therefore are both the atavistic power relations of emergent human interaction (what will always be true) and the socio-specific relations that are a function of the political power structures of the present and the configuration of the organs of state. The Secretary of State's speech and our preoccupation with its meaning signifies the importance of state power and state Truth to the ongoing viability of our present sense of ourselves. What is felt to be True is what emerges as the criteria determining what will or will not be selected or legitimated in the identity formation process. Foucault offers an explicit rendition of this association in his narrative of the relationship between Truth and Power:

...truth isn't outside power or lacking in power; contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the

child of protracted solitude nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth – that is the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true, ... (Foucault 2000; 131)

This speech requires us to make an accommodation to the Truths that the Secretary of State articulates in our way of being together in the room and in our wider organizational relationships. His position in government gives him a command of the discourse of commonsense to which none of us can aspire. The objects of our perception that form the institutions of power through which he operates and of which we and the Director are integral parts are therefore forced into our emotional world of experience. They give rise to our anxieties and the feelings of threat that we experience as we reflect upon our respective abilities to sustain the relational context upon which our identities are built. Our affectual conditioning arises from the interplay of these gestures (represented in the speech, the Circular, the Department’s encoded messaging, the imposition of a more intense performance management regime) and our responses to them.

Elias made frequent references in his writing the idea that civilizing processes flow from centrifugal and centripetal movements of power. The emergence of modern state structures is, for Elias, a function of the centrifugal movement of power. I think that this conceptualization is important also to understanding the interactions taking place in the meeting that I have described. My argument here is that we are at present living through a spurt in the dynamic of political power relations which in the UK context can best be described as centrifugal. The size of the political majorities of the Thatcher and now Blair governments has in turn led to the emergence of relations around the centre of power that have all of the characteristics of courtly life. The shift to the post-modern performative political focus of contemporary governments as described by Lyotard has been accompanied by both a focus on managerialism and access to power by merit rather than election. The emergence of a new meritocracy has been accompanied by particular distortions in the political process. Progress by personal connection and recommendation has now become an endemic feature of public life in the UK where once it was the provenance of a social elite.

Everyone sitting in the room can locate their position (professionally, personally) within this structure relative to the centre of mainstream political power. These shifts to centralization have resulted also in the Centre having a much greater interest in what is being said by and about people such as those sitting in this room. On a national scale, this grouping represents a power elite totaling no more than about 600 individuals. The Director is not very far removed from ministerial power. Between her and the relevant minister is the CEO of the LSC and a senior civil servant. Between the principals (especially those of the larger institutions) and ministerial power there is an equally short step. All of these people intermingle in the social-political hubbub of public life that surrounds the conduct of mainstream educational practice in the UK. When the Secretary of State speaks to the national conference of college senior managers he is speaking to an audience that is more real in his mind than abstract. The politics of this meritocratic world therefore matter in a material way to the shaping of the realities of the life experiences of those present. It is in the sense that Foucault would apply the idea of *Truth* that this power, reproduced in our social relations, comes in turn to animate the power relations at play between us in the room.

Three Questions

I started work on this paper in order to explore three questions.

The first of these questions arose in the context of a progression viva interview in which I was asked how I would account for the way in which my research efforts would make a contribution to knowledge and practice. The judgement that such a contribution has been made forms a key part of the assessment process leading to the award (or not) of a doctoral degree. After the viva interview I started to think about this question in terms of the deconstruction of its underlying propositions. These I understand to be expressed in the words “contribution”, “knowledge” and “practice”. As I reflected upon the question that was asked, it seemed to me that I had not clarified in my own thinking what each of these words might be taken to *mean* in such an examination context and therefore how I would or should argue my response. As I thought about this even more, I developed a sense that the question also states unconscious assumptions about knowledge as a stock of something that by virtue of contribution goes up. This seemed to me to be redolent of other assumptions that prevail in the national and corporate policy context with regard to education and training and concerning the ideas of a knowledge economy and knowledge management. Here there is what I take to be a belief, now an orthodoxy of public policy, that there is a direct relationship between the economic performance of the nation or the firm and the stock of knowledge held by its citizens or employees. Universities are very much a part of the drive to knowledge growth understood in these terms. I therefore started to question whether the academic criteria that inspired the viva question sit within this context of assumptions and how I understand the nature and utility of enquiry processes other than via this paradigm.

The second question arose to some extent from the first. This question emerged in the debate that developed within the CMC group concerning the distinctions between complex

responsive process thinking and action research. In thinking about the issues that started to emerge in this debate I found myself struggling with how to understand or, using a word that is germane to much of the rest of this paper, *justify* the merits of one mode of discourse relative to another. This I think was because whilst I find the difference in the form of ideas, argument, and ‘truth claims’ between the two conversations as being self-evident, what I think of as the performative implications of this difference seems less clear. Put another way: I could, and still can, see how individuals and research communities can adhere in a highly committed way to a particular mode of discourse or debate. What I feel less certain about is the consequential effect of such differences as they manifest in the real world actions of such individuals or in the actions of others influenced by their thinking.

My third question is a more personal one. As my participation in the research process goes on I realise that I find it quite difficult to describe how this experience is affecting my practice and that of others with whom I work. More particularly, I can see two lines of argument with regard to this question that are neither essentially inclusive nor exclusive of each other.

Firstly, my behaviour at work is in reality not significantly different now from how it was when I first started working on this programme of research. This is because how I behaved then and how I behave now is essential to doing my job. On this basis, I do not need to think of how I was doing my job in terms of notions of worse/better, less skilled/more skilled, less competent/more competent. However I was judged to be performing, e.g. against criteria set by my board prior to joining the doctoral research group has, I might argue, remained unchanged. But the significant differences to have occurred over this period are less tangible (to third parties) but no less significant to me. This I understand as a transformation in my personal narrative about my work, its context and my own relations with those I encounter in different settings. Secondly, although I can evidence ways in which my practice has changed these have not been meaningful in a wider organisational context such that others could point to a quantum of difference in the way things “are around here”. So I can say that I have tried to run meetings differently, draw senior managers into a large group process, bring to the surface of my consciousness the nature of my impact on others in relational contexts at work. But in relation to all of these things I would say too that they have been very messy, imperfect and at times dangerously misunderstood fumbblings on my part to recognise with integrity my role as a participant in

a process whose actions are informed by particular thoughts about conduct and being. I would therefore struggle to feel confident in mounting an argument that any of this implied something as grand as “a contribution to practice”.

The structure of this paper follows my attempt to grapple with these questions. In the first part I take up the arguments of Richard Rorty and Donald Davidson with respect to belief, truth and justification. I do so with the intention of exploring further the issue of meaning in relation to the ideas of “contribution” and “knowledge”. In the second part of the paper I review the work of Habermas in terms of his understanding of the nature of discourse and how different discourses are justified. Here I try to link my own thinking about the idea of differentiation between discourses (the complex responsive process/action research debate) to Habermas’ concept of justification. In the final section of the paper I return to Elias’ work on involvement and detachment in order to theorise the nature of my own experience of the relationship between enquiry and being.

What it means to contribute to knowledge

Richard Rorty: Fuzziness and Solidarity

I want to begin responding to these questions by taking-up Richard Rorty’s position on the ideas of belief and truth and in turn of the relationship between belief, truth and justification. Rorty’s position on the meaning of these ideas sits within the traditions of philosophical pragmatism. His position on the idea of truth as absolute insight is clear:

Pragmatists – both classical and ‘neo’ – do not believe that there is a way things really are. So they want to replace the appearance-reality distinction by that between descriptions of the world and of ourselves which are less useful and those which are more useful. When the question ‘useful for what?’ is pressed, they have nothing to say except ‘useful to create a better future’. When they are asked ‘Better by what criterion?’, they have no detailed answer, any more than the first mammals could specify in what respects they were better than the dying dinosaurs. (Rorty 1999a, 27)

For Rorty there is no point at which a positivistic claim to truth can be satisfied. His argument is that all claims to truth rest upon a combination of interpretation and justification. And if this is the case, Rorty argues, why not simply give up on the idea that human processes of enquiry can ever gain access to ultimate or absolute Truth. The key question of legitimation for Rorty therefore relates not to ways in which claims to truth can, by being grounded in the absolute, resist refutation but upon their utility as beliefs for the sense-making processes that inform ongoing human interaction. In Rorty's philosophy what can be justified is what is true. The insights of dominant intellectual traditions therefore take on the mantle of truths because it is these ideas and traditions that, in the moment that they are taken-up, have survived. "Justification is always justification from the point of view of the survivors, the victors; there is no point of view more exalted than theirs to assume (Rorty *ibid*, 27)".

Rorty's position on truth and justification draws attention both to the idea of discourse and to that of ethics. From Rorty's perspective truth emerges as a result of contention arising in the flow of debate. As such truth is contingent equally upon the historical-cultural determinants of what is acceptable as justification and upon techniques of argumentation rather than to appeals to an absolute (Rorty 1998, 32-33). This for example is how Rorty understands the nature of scientific enquiry. It is also the basis upon which Rorty has argued for a sense of equivalence in the status of creative modes of understanding experience relative to science. Rorty refutes the idea that science is, for all its claims to reason and empiricism, *per se* closer in its representation of reality than art: "The image of the great scientist [should] not be of somebody who got it right but of somebody who made it new" (Rorty 1991a, 44). Rorty's exhortation is therefore to abandon the pursuit of an absolute truth and to focus on what "works" and what can be justified. It is clear also that Rorty's position only makes sense in the context of the practice of a participative ethical standpoint. Like Dewey and Mead before him, Rorty is optimistic about the capacity of American liberal democracy to enable (in the long run) the enrichment of the human condition in processes of fully engaged and inclusive citizenship. Whilst I declare myself to be sceptical of Rorty's optimism in this regard, this point is important insofar as Rorty's philosophical position in relation to the possibility of (what I will call) *true belief* is contingent upon the existence of political and ideological pluralism and an understanding of this in terms of the claims of the advocates of American liberal democracy. Rorty himself actively embraces the idea of fellowship with other "non-authoritarian"

philosophies (Rorty 1999b, 238) as essential to such flowering. Rorty says that on this basis he is content with “fuzziness” in lieu of certainty. It is fuzziness, or *solidarity* in the face of the unknowable, rather than certainty, that provides the impulse to dialogue and an ongoing search for meaning and understanding.

In Rorty’s philosophy of Truth I therefore detect also an empathy with the Gramscian concept of hegemony. Here intellectual order, the socio-politically legitimated acceptable standpoint, emerges in processes of power relating. Such order however also entails vigilance and maintenance on the part of the “victors”. Dissent, the ongoing struggle for air-time on the part of the vanquished, is however critical both to maintaining the integrity of the dominant discourse and as an ongoing process of conflict holds out the permanent possibility for a transformation in the nature of what is deemed to be right.

In terms of my preoccupations in this paper, I take Rorty’s concept of fuzziness to be significant of how a legitimate contribution to knowledge can arise in the absence too of a belief in or commitment to a positivist view of certainty. I believe that Rorty is arguing here that as each of us struggles to make sense of what is going on around us, we create new narratives of experience that become woven with those of others into an architecture of understanding that enables us all to go on together. Solidarity, it seems to me, signifies both that we each have the ability to recognise the sense-making struggles of others and to collaborate with each other in co-evolving new ways of understanding. These Rortian attitudes, seem to me to be directly germane to the research activities that I associate with the idea of complex responsive processes and to the product of research outcomes informed by such a way of thinking. These are most often detailed and extended reflective narratives of experience that integrate (weave, in Rorty’s terms) the intensely localised character of individually recalled life experiences explicitly with a critical theoretical perspective. A key issue for Rorty in this process of enquiry, as for researchers sharing a similar prospectus of fuzziness, hope and solidarity, is that of relativism and therefore the accusation that giving up on a positivist notion of Truth leads to an intellectual cul-de-sac in which all articulations of subjective experience are assumed to be equally valid as profound insight into the nature of the human condition.

Rorty’s abandonment of Truth makes sense understood as giving up on the idea of finding a point of ultimate empirical or positivistic explanation. In substituting belief and

justification for Truth Rorty is arguing for a different measure of what is to be accepted as evidence of real. I understand Rorty to be arguing that justification is a process undertaken in relation to belief and that there is no need to go beyond belief in order to say something that is legitimate about the world and our experiences. Here it is important to appreciate that whilst the fundamentals of Rorty's position are grounded in Dewey and pragmatism, much of the way in which he specifies the ideas of truth, belief and justification derive from his debates with the philosopher Donald Davidson. This issue, the validity of first person experience as authority, is what has preoccupied much of Davidson's work and what has led him, in his debates with Rorty, to develop notions of community as a basis or context within which the veracity of individual experience is tested relative to a wider claim to legitimacy. Davidson, I think, shifts the locus of concern from a preoccupation with either the absolute or the purely subjective to ways in which significant universalised meaning emerges intersubjectively. Davidson's concept of *triangulation*, to which I refer below, is therefore a metaphor to describe the occurrence of an emergent inter-subjective reality. This is then a basis upon which claims to Truth can be made which are neither appeals to a positivist sense of the absolute nor simply witnessing of purely subjective experience.

Donald Davidson: Belief, Community and Triangulation

Davidson's philosophy, like Rorty's, is preoccupied with the issue of how it is that we can have certainty with regard to anything that we might think that we know about our environment and our experiences of being a part of it. Here I want to summarise what I take to be Davidson's argument because I think that he, in combination with Rorty, has much to offer that is relevant to thinking about both the mechanics and [academic] legitimisation of shifts in thinking that result from enquiry processes. I think also, that the way in which Davidson appears to resolve the question of how we can say that we 'know' anything is relevant to the thinking of complex responsive processes and particularly to my conviction that the idea of complex responsive processes posits simultaneously both an object of research and a process of enquiry.

Davidson proposes that each of us is always in possession of three types of knowledge: knowledge of our own minds (for which we have unique first person authority); knowledge of "what is going on" in other people's minds; knowledge of the world around us. The

issue for Davidson is that whilst each of these “varieties of knowledge” exists relative to a single commonly shared reality, none on its own can be said to provide a basis upon which authoritative statements about the nature of the real can be made:

no amount of knowledge of the contents of one’s own mind insures the truth of a belief about the external world. The logical independence of the mental works equally in the other direction: no amount of knowledge of the external world entails the truth about the workings of a mind. If there is a logical or epistemic barrier between the mind and nature, it not only prevents us from seeing out; it also blocks view from outside in. (Davidson 2001, 207)

From this Davidson argues that it is only possible for us to make assertions about the nature of the real in the form of belief statements that is, propositions as to the nature of what is true. It is this ability, that of responding in belief statements to the experiences of sensations of being in a commonly shared real world, that enables us to exist as rational social animals. In reading Davidson and reading across from Davidson to Mead I interpret his reference to “making statements” as being directed both into a social world of intersubjective communication and as directed to ourselves in the silent conversations that we enact and experience as mind.

But if as Davidson and Rorty both propose, statements of belief are as far as we can get in our accounts of our own and others experiences, how are we able to discriminate between beliefs that are legitimate (in the sense of their reality congruence) from beliefs that are simply mistaken or false. Equivalently, how do we get from a purely individualised or subjective representation of real-world experience to a position that is socially or objectively valid? Further, how is it that our beliefs are able to inform reliably our actions and the actions of others whom we encounter in our social relationships?

I understand Davidson’s answer to these questions in the following terms.

Davidson argues that the origination of belief is in sensory experience. For Davidson it is because we inhabit a real world in relation to which we have experiences and because this world is commonly shared by others with self-similar attributes of perception and intelligence, that we make assertions through the medium of language to one another about

the nature of this experience. It is in this way that we are able to have what we understand to be beliefs. Beliefs are therefore what arise for us naturally as the way in which we process sensations. It is evident here that Davidson, as Rorty, Mead, Dewey and other more contemporary writers in the neuro-biological sciences, rejects mind-body dualism in favour of the kind of “somatic-marker” thesis of body/mind sensation as elaborated for example by Damasio (1994; 2000). Thus for Davidson the world is pre-given to our experience. As such its relationship with the emergence of belief is causal in that our interaction with the world beyond our own bodies leads us to experience the sensations upon which our beliefs and our hypotheses concerning the beliefs of others arise. But how is it that our personal experience of being is able to be validated sufficient for it to form a basis for action for ourselves and for our interactions with others?

Here Davidson offer’s two explanations of how such a validation process actually occurs in the ongoing conduct of human relationships. The mechanics of this process Davidson describes as *triangulation* and which he represents in the example of a situation involving a threefold interaction: “two or more creatures simultaneously in interaction with each other and the world they share”. (Davidson 2001a, 128)

[*triangulation*] is the result of a threefold interaction, an interaction which is twofold from the point of view of each of the two agents: each is interacting simultaneously with the world and with the other agent. (ibid)

Davidson’s argument here concerning the emergence of meaning in human interaction is clearly of the same kind as that of Mead’s thesis of gesture and response. Like Mead, Davidson argues that the triangulation process occurs between animals as it occurs between humans. Davidson is drawing attention to the ways in which the behaviour of most creatures is both fundamentally social in relation to each other and their species in relation to a pre-given environment. The distinction that Davidson makes between humans and the rest is, as Mead, in the use of symbolic forms to communicate meaning. Here Davidson draws directly upon the thinking of Wittgenstein to illuminate the enabling constraints of language as a communication medium between humans. But it is in terms of belief and how the ‘reality’ of individuals’ beliefs is authenticated that Davidson, I believe, offers views directly pertinent to the thinking of complex responsive processes. By taking the *triangulation* idea further and into the medium of linguistic communication Davidson

situates validation in processes of complex social acts and argues that language (as social not private to an individual) is a context in which assumptions with regard to belief are normalised between subjects inhabiting the same primary reality. It is therefore only through the social exchange/interchange of propositions about what is going on around us that we are able to determine the true/false nature of our beliefs. It is the social process of interpretation which guarantees:

that both a large number of our simplest perceptual beliefs are true and that the nature of these beliefs is known to others. Of course many beliefs are given content by their relations to further beliefs, or are caused by misleading sensations; any particular belief or set of beliefs about the world around us may be false. What cannot be the case is that our general picture of the world and our place in it is mistaken, for it is this picture which informs the rest of our beliefs and makes them intelligible. (Davidson 2001a, 213-214)

Rorty and Davidson: Some Implications

The arguments of Rorty and Davidson seem to me to invite thinking about the product of enquiry processes in terms of challenges, transformations and movements in the nature of the propositional beliefs held by the enquirer. This I understand to be in the same conceptual terrain as that of the idea of the dialectic of negation in Hegelian philosophy. The radical difference between the position of Rorty and Davidson and that of Hegel however would be in the absence of any concept of the absolute as a point of destination occurring somehow at the end of the dialectical process. The idea of a contribution to knowledge and to practice is therefore to be understood qualitatively and not in terms of quantum.

Taking Rorty's argument about desirable ways of seeing scientists (as creators of new interpretations rather than solvers of problems) it seems clear that individuals who engage at depth with almost any kind of research problem will experience and be experienced by others as fitting in to their social nexus differently in the course of and after the event from how they were before they began. In Rorty's philosophy our beliefs, as our representation to our selves of our experience of the real and how it really is, are pretty much one and the same thing.

I regard beliefs as states attributed to organisms of a certain complexity – attributions which enable the attributor to predict or retrodict (mostly retrodict) the behaviour of that organism. So the web of belief should be regarded not just as a self-weaving mechanism but as one which produces movements in the organism's muscles – movements which kick the organism itself into action. These actions, by shoving items in the environment around, produce new beliefs to be woven in, which in turn produce new actions, and so on for so long as the organism survives. (Rorty 1991b, 93)

Davidson I think draws our attention to the significance of community to research enquiry and practice. Davidson's position on meaning as emergent from *triangulation* implies that participation in processes of critical discourse with others is fundamental to securing the legitimacy of the propositional nature of research findings. However structured, research is only validated in a wider community of argumentation. To reject a positivist standpoint in relation to truth necessitates the substitution of a model of the monadic empiricist researcher as isolate for one that makes essential participation in a social process of enquiry.

The question that arises in the recognition of the essential requirement for a researcher to be affiliated with a community of practice (or discourse) is how that community, in its turn, legitimates its collective belief structure relative to that of other, possibly contending, communities.

If assumptions regarding the legitimation for a process of enquiry shift from truth to justification and from an individual to a social perspective, what are the implications? What are the routines of argumentation that would be associated with the idea of justification once the idea of truth (in the evidentially verifiable sense) is abandoned, how do/can communities of enquirers establish or seek to establish, the integrity of their own webs of belief relative to those elaborated by others? Here I want to turn to Jurgen Habermas and his arguments concerning communicative action theory and discourse ethics.

Justification and Discourse

Jurgen Habermas: On Universalisation and Critique

In working with Habermas argument, I am going also to signal what for me is an essential connection between what Habermas describes as justification and what I think of also as differentiation. I think of the linkage between justification and differentiation as important for the following reasons. I situate my own present research experience and thinking within a specific context of discourse: complex responsive processes. Quite apart from the issue of how I attempt to justify my 'findings' as a result of working within this frame, there exists also the related question of how does/is working with complex responsive process thinking different from other modes of enquiry such as, for example, action research. The issue of justification therefore seems to me to be also one of differentiation. Justifying a particular way of working will necessarily draw out points of differentiation. The act of justification of itself will lead to the development of an argument in which there is discrimination between different interpretations. Arguments, it seems to me, have boundaries. The integrity of a position or view of the world is sustained on the basis of its difference relative to that of others. In terms of simple set theory this means that all processes of argument are at the same time inclusive and exclusive. The dynamic character of a line of argument is therefore to a large extent in the degree to which it sustains the paradox of being at the same time permeable and malleable in the face of alternatives yet able to sustain its inherent integrity. This I think, is what Rorty is referring to in his idea of fuzziness and what I think of as implied by the idea of discourse. This, in terms of the arguments of Rorty and Davidson, as I suggested above, is because whilst the great majority of our beliefs are true beliefs, we all adhere to many that are not. Argument between participants in a shared discipline of enquiry and between adherents to different views therefore has the effect of testing and moving the boundaries of true as against false belief. (Davidson 2001b, 199-202)

In the context of arguing for the validity of his theory of discourse ethics, Habermas has suggested that there are two steps necessary for any process of philosophical justification. Here, as suggested above, I take the idea of justification to signify also the idea of differentiation. Habermas argues that the first step in this process is one of establishing some principles that amount to the universalisation of an underlying argument (Habermas

1990, 116). I think that Habermas' principles of universalisation apply to the idea of complex responsive processes to the extent that this way of looking at the world is itself contingent upon an acceptance of the transcendental significance of particular ideas relating to complexity theory, emergence, teleology and power. Habermas' second step therefore relates to the idea that validity claims emerge in processes of critique (Habermas 1990, *ibid*). Habermas' work on communicative action theory highlights also the importance of seeing argument as being essential for creativity. New possibilities for thinking, understanding, relating, are conditional upon both the identification and representation of differences between "interlocutors" and their capacity to sustain a process of discourse concerning these differences.

The process of critique of the work of others therefore has two effects. The first is that critique enables a demonstration of difference and so has the potential also to illuminate underlying validity claims. The second, is that critique is a process that invites development. The action of developing a critique of the work of others has, except in instances that are purely ideological in character, a reflexive dimension to it that takes the forms of both private conversation (silent conversation occurring between oneself and the other) and public debate. Both processes give rise to change in the form of new insights, thoughts, critical expositions etc. which are transformative and unpredictable. For these reasons, processes of critique are paradoxically at the same time efforts to universalise a claim to Truth and a means of establishing new Truths: Truths not yet captured by or available to the original line of argument.

By extension, creative possibilities cease to exist at a point when all of the parties to a debate find themselves in agreement or where some are excluded by the action of others who refuse, for whatever reason, to engage with them. This argument introduces important issues of ethics in relation to the conduct of claims to truth as evidenced by what Habermas thinks happens when dialogue is felt to be no longer possible. In relation to his more general action theory, Habermas therefore sees social conduct in terms of actions emerging either from a context of active discourse in which norms of purposive relating are recognised by the participants (though not necessarily also on a basis of consensus) or from what he describes as strategic behaviour on the part of one (the most powerful) acting alone against the other:

Strategic action can be considered as a limiting case of communicative action; it occurs when ordinary language communication between interlocutors breaks down as a means of maintaining consensus, and each assumes an objectifying attitude toward the other. (Habermas 2001, 12-13)

For the purposes of what I am trying to explore here in relation to methodologies, I want to draw attention to what I see as three of the significant implications of Habermas' theoretical position. The first is that the coexistence of contradictory or contending positions is essential to the process of substantiating the validity of any one claim to truth. This is for the reason that without difference no one claim to truth has criteria against which its relative attractiveness can be evaluated. The second is that sameness neutralises creativity and is more likely to be evidence of totalitarianism than of consensual agreement. The third links Habermas back to Rorty and Davidson. Where Davidson refers to triangulation, Habermas refers to values and normalisation. Both are referring to a social context as the basis of legitimation of what constitute *true beliefs*. It is therefore in the social context of what is generally held to be true that the appearance-reality issue is resolved. It is resolved in the first instance relative to the membership of a particular community of enquiry (they understand their own boundaries of agreement and disagreement) and in the second instance in a general social context which will or will not tolerate the group's existence. This I think, links back also to Rorty's point about the historical-cultural determinants of the grounds that establish the bases for justification: beyond the margin of this tolerance, there is censorship, heresy and book-burning.

Habermas (2001, 15-16) is helpful too in terms of situating the thinking of complex responsive processes within a broader epistemology. In developing his own communicative action theory Habermas has developed "a framework to differentiate between different construction theories of society". Four models are identified.

First model: *the knowing subject*. Habermas contrasts the ideas of Kant and Husserl with those of Hegel and Marx but sees similarities in their focus on a knowing or judging subject. "Constitutive theories attribute the process of [social] generation to an acting subject. The subject can be either an intelligible ego modelled after the empirical individual subject or...a species subject constituting itself in history".

Second and Third models: *structuralism and systems theories*. In these models, Habermas argues, the generative social process is understood in terms of deep structures that are without subject. “Structuralism models these on grammar, whereas systems theory thinks of them as self-regulating”.

Fourth Model: *speech and interaction*. “Here we are dealing with the generation of interpersonal situations of speaking and acting together – that is, with the form of the intersubjectivity of possible understanding”. Habermas cites G H Mead and Wittgenstein within this category.

My argument is that complex responsive process thinking is situated within the fourth of Habermas’ generative social models. Much of the writing that is now associated with complex responsive processes is also in the form of a critique of writers whose work would be associated with Habermas first, second and third models. From the perspective of complex responsive process thinking, other discourses (e.g. complex adaptive systems theory, psychoanalysis, learning organisation theory, autopoietic theories) are felt to offer analogies or insights that are helpful. At the same time, they are held to offer only partial or inaccurate explanations. Systems thinking, it is argued, cannot explain the nature of human interaction. It leads to a false prospectus. Systems thinkers, notwithstanding their power dominance in our current cultural context, are simply wrong. Complex responsive process thinking therefore asserts the necessity of process thinking, an understanding of concepts of emergence, transformative teleology and power relations for a valid reality-congruent mode of enquiry.

Habermas’ framework of generative theories of society is therefore helpful at a high level in differentiating complex responsive process thinking from other dominant traditions of Western thought. This approach also illuminates something of the nature of the universal validity claims that differentiate complex responsive process thinking from other generative models that presuppose a dynamic which entails the intersubjective or symbolic interchange occurring between social agents. The limitation of Habermas’ framework in this particular context is that it does not assist particularly with the process of differentiating complex responsive process thinking from other modes of discourse that can also be situated within his fourth model of generative theories.

Stacey and Griffin have taken up just this issue in their critique of action research. At the outset, they draw attention to the apparent similarities between complex responsive process thinking and action research but go on to say:

....there are fundamental differences between the two approaches and these may not be all that immediately obvious because although both use the same words, they have different meanings. In particular, the words action, participation, relationship, experience and emergence have substantially different meanings in the two approaches. (Stacey & Griffin 2004, 1)

Stacey and Griffin then go on to argue that there are significant differences between the two approaches. Action research, it is argued, takes a metaphysical and systemic view of the world: this is not the case with complex responsive processes. Action researchers adopt a participative view of human relationships that is linked to an idea of spiritual or ecstatic ways of establishing interconnectedness between individuals. Further, action research sets a systemic view of social phenomena apart from the notion of the individual: complex responsive process thinking sees the individual and the social as different aspects of the same phenomenon. Stacey and Griffin also point to differences between the approaches with respect to learning and action theories and ethics.

By focusing in this way on language and the use and meaning of words, Stacey and Griffin seem to me pointing to an idea that is very important to a sense of wider debate which is that it is the underlying narratives linking these words together, rather than the words themselves, that are significant of radically different action consequences. This I take to be consistent with Rorty's view that each of us is no more than a web of beliefs that is formed and reforming at the same time in ways that both enable and constrain our abilities as actors (Rorty 1991, 93). So in this sense, it is the narrative account which makes use of a particular set of words that is significant in action terms: it is not the semantics of word meanings and definitions per se. To the extent that it is in our ongoing reflexive narratives that we have a knowledge of ourselves, our personal narrative structures are also those which form our principal filtering devices both in terms of what we notice about what is going on around us and how we frame our individual action responses. Rorty too makes

this connection in a series of propositions in which he argues that we can “treat our desires as if they were beliefs” and that “beliefs are habits of action” (Rorty *ibid*).

To some extent, this view also assists with providing an answer to what I think of as the “so what” question: So what if one group of researchers believe in a connectedness with ecstatic ways of knowing, other than that another group believes them to fantasists or to be acting in the grip of a false consciousness? What is it that makes the belief statements of action researchers objectionable other than another underlying belief about the consequences of the beliefs of action researchers as a basis for social action? I would argue that strictly, there is no directly performative response to these questions. Once it is clear that there is no distinction to be made between the narratives of those whose minds are preoccupied with the thinking of action research and their social action the issue of value and legitimacy becomes one tested in a wider social process involving argument and counter argument. Equivalently, those engaged with the thinking of complex responsive processes will in their ongoing social interactions with others experience these with a particular and qualitative difference. Their actions too, will be different but not necessarily imbued with a greater degree of “rightness” other than that which is accepted in the community as right for the occasion. The performative legitimacy of these knowledge narratives is then established in contexts of power relating. These too are essentially social; life in organisations being an instance of wider social power relating processes that enable some belief structures to be justified as knowledge with performative utility rather than fantasy or false consciousness.

Issues of Practice

Norbert Elias: Problems of Involvement and Detachment

When I try to draw the foregoing themes together and to understand them in terms of my own experiences of work, of living outside of work, of research and its impact upon me in terms of the changes that I am aware of in my attitudes, feelings and emotional responses, I am drawn to Norbert Elias’ thesis regarding the ideas of involvement and detachment.

I reflect upon the past three years of life at work as being amongst the most demanding of my career. I understand these demands in terms of the physicality of sustaining a heavy

workload whilst experiencing great personal stress. I have also been exposed in ways new to my experience to the effects on large numbers of colleagues of the application of arbitrary power, mass shaming and the sustained use of orchestrated threats to identity as a vehicle for assuring compliance and conformity. I have been deeply challenged in this experience in terms of sustaining and reworking my own narrative of myself as a senior manager and have lived through many occasions in the last thirty-six months where I have found it difficult to maintain my confidence in my abilities. Additionally, as the head of an organisation employing 1,000 individuals and working within a complex web of interdependent other relationships, I have had to take account in my personal dealings at work, of this context as it has affected large numbers of people in a wide range of positions of authority or non-authority relative to the organisation. For these reasons, I have come to identify my felt personal experience of this period of my professional life, with Elias' reworking of Poe's narrative concerning the Fishermen in the Maelstrom. Thus when I write about Elias in my reflections on methodology it is with a sense of personal identification with the themes that he is exploring.

After reading the essay The Fishermen in the Maelstrom (Elias 1987) I was intrigued to understand what it was about Poe's original story that had captured Elias' imagination so profoundly. What had Elias noticed in his reading of Poe?

The title of Poe's short story is *Descent into the Maelstrom* (Poe 2003). The story is set in a fictional location within sight of the coast of Norway. It is also the narrative of a survivor whose life has been transformed by the experiences that he is retelling. Poe's literary device is to locate the voice of the story with a narrator to whom the fisherman in his turn told his own story. This has the effect of drawing the reader into the piece as a witness to the events. The background descriptions of the landscape and seascape draw the reader also into the locale of the story from which, close to the horizon, the terrible events of the maelstrom are retold. Poe's literary devices are, I would argue, intended to arouse in the reader the kind of affectual intensity of response, to be as one in the situation, as that later described by the fisherman in his own account. I think therefore that Elias experienced this story in his own creative imagination as an experience of high emotivity sufficient to trigger his reflections about involvement and detachment.

More specifically, my hypothesis is that Elias' imagination was excited by a particular

passage in the story in which the fisherman recounts his direct experience of being in the maelstrom. The point here is about the observation of detail. I think that Elias was attracted to the way in which Poe describes the fisherman's emerging sense of awareness. At first, we encounter the fisherman overwhelmed by the scale and intensity of his situation. But as he looks out from his position in the boat he notices, against the vastness of the background of the raging ocean (the "wide waste of liquid ebony"), increasing points of detail. The fisherman becomes preoccupied in his thinking with the flotsam that he observes riding the sides of the whirlpool into which he is being sucked. He progressively itemises and then differentiates this material.

Both above and below us were visible fragments of vessels, large masses of building timber and trunks of trees, with many smaller articles, such as pieces of house furniture, broken boxes, barrels and staves. I have already described the unnatural curiosity which had taken the place of my original terrors. It appeared to grow on me as I drew nearer and nearer to my dreadful doom. I now began to watch with a strange interest, the numerous things that floated in our company. I must have been delirious for I even sought amusement in speculating upon the relative velocities of the several descents toward the foam below. (Poe 2003, 102)

Later, towards the end of this passage, the fisherman reflects:

how what I observed was, in fact the natural consequence of the forms of floating fragments....and how it happened that a cylinder, swimming in a vortex, offered more resistance to its suction, and was drawn in with greater difficulty than an equally bulky body of any form whatever. (ibid, 104)

At which point in the story, Poe cites Archimedes' *De Incidentibus in Fluido, lib 2* as a reference source to substantiate the scientific integrity of the observations of his fictional character.

What Elias is noticing in Poe's story is the portrayal of a subtle but significant movement in the relationship between the fisherman, his physical (or situational context) and his emotional response to this context. The fisherman never ceases to be fully immersed in this context. Poe does not depict him as in anyway rising above it, or being in control of it:

the narrative point is that fisherman is able to use insight into his situation, to hold himself back from his fear, in order to act in a way that alters his position relative to the prevailing flow of events. Significantly, the fisherman's insight is not the function on his part of the direct application of scientific knowledge or equivalently that of a scientific method. He recounts to the narrator how later on, after his survival, he asked a school teacher whom he knew to explain the science behind his observation about the buoyancy of large cylindrical objects. The key point about the fisherman is really that in the situation of crisis, he is able to intuit a course of action by arresting, taking command of, his affectual responses. I think that Elias was drawn to this example because in so much of his writing about language, power, social formations and individualization he attempts to understand antecedent conditions of what he describes as "not knowing" in order to explicate the processual changes necessary for "knowing" to come about. In Elias general thesis about change there are no absolute beginnings. This is a recurrent theme throughout all of his writing and one to which he refers explicitly in his "Two Fragments: Reflections on the Great Evolution" (Elias 1987): i.e. his narrative about the emergence and subsequent cultural dominance of scientific method. For Elias, the human capacity to intuit new ways of understanding reality contexts interdependently with adjustments to the physical and affectual relationship occurring between people and their environment (social, physical) is part of the explanation for breaks or leaps between epochs characterized by movements in knowledge and understanding.

As I have become drawn further into Elias thinking about involvement and detachment I have been interested too in the connections between Poe's story, Elias' use of this story as a metaphor for wider human processes and Freud's writing about anxiety. In his introductory lecture on anxiety Freud distinguished two categories of anxiety state: neurotic anxiety and realistic anxiety. He devoted a considerable part of the lecture to explaining why anxiety states can lead to paralysis in the form of an inability to act. He also linked anxiety to the flight response. In his analysis of what anxiety is for, Freud attempted to understand its significance by describing an optimal response to a perception of danger in terms recognizably the same as those associated with the procedures of scientific method:

..the only expedient behavior when a danger threatens would be a cool estimate of one's own strength in comparison with the magnitude of the threat and, on the basis

of that, a decision as to whether flight or defense, or possibly even attack, offers the best prospect of a successful issue. But in this situation there is no place at all for anxiety... (Freud 2001, 394)

How then to understand the utility of anxiety? Freud associated anxiety with “preparedness” for action and described the affectual state of anxiety as one which provides a “signal” (what Rorty might call a “raw feel”) leading to action. In Freud’s terms, anxiety is a stage in a more complex social act. Freud argued that for anxiety to have this “expedient benefit” its generation had to be “limited to a mere abortive beginning”. Beyond this point, anxiety has the dysfunctional effect of immobilizing the capacity for action.

To summarise: my argument is that Elias used Poe’s story as a metaphor for the situations that arise in human experience where individuals take on the feeling of being overwhelmed by the strength of the forces which they feel to be arraigned against them. The degree of anxiety that they feel in relation to such situations shifts from being a stimulus for effective action to being the cause of paralysis. Reading Elias’ essay it is clear that he intended, and indeed used, this metaphor to apply variously to what he argued was the relationship between pre-scientific communities and nature, double-bind situations in contemporary international relations (Elias is preoccupied in this essay with the arms race and the cold war of the mid-twentieth century) and the more micro level experience of individuals. What Elias was able to characterise in the use of Poe’s story as metaphor therefore were common aspects of the human condition in which the character of action is formed in the interdependent relationship existing between individuals’ emotional responses and their sensed experience of their wider environment.

Throughout his essay, Elias moves between references to the environment that are physical and social in nature. It is in the development of Poe’s story as metaphor that Elias develops also his key concept of *emotivity*. Elias uses the idea of emotivity to scale what he depicts as degrees of involvement and detachment experienced in the feeling states of individuals in response to their environmental conditions. I therefore interpret the way in which Elias juxtaposes involvement and detachment as polarities in a range of potential emotional responses also in terms of an extension of this story as a metaphorical device.

What I think Elias is attempting to illustrate here is that *emotivity* takes the form of an enabling constraint in relation to all human action.

Elias' argument is that involvement and detachment cannot in reality be thought of as polarities. No one can be detached (emotionally) from their own experience. Yet Elias also observes from multiple narratives drawn from science, art, tribal cultures, narratives of experience and fiction that in different socio-cultural contexts and over different spans of time, people have demonstrated varied abilities to constrain their affectual responses to their surroundings. The human ability to pacify nature via the application of technologies of control he argues, has been the result of a long run process in which humans have constrained their "momentary impulses" in order to evolve technologies that have given them "mastery" (short of catastrophic natural disasters) of the natural environment. This he describes as a *process* of detachment. In the example of the Fishermen in the Maelstrom this theme recurs in another form:

The fisherman found himself involved in a critical process which at first appeared wholly beyond his control. For a time, he may have clutched at some imaginary hopes. Fantasies of a miracle, of help from some unseen persons, may have crossed his mind. After a while, however, he calmed down. He began to think more coolly; and by standing back, by controlling his fear, by seeing himself, as it were, from a distance like a figure on a chess-board forming a pattern with others, he managed to turn his thoughts away from himself to the situation in which he was caught up. (Elias 1987, 46)

Later and more theoretically he goes on:

The parable of the fisherman underlines the functional interdependence of a person's emotional balance and the wider process to which it is geared. It brings into fuller relief the possible circularity of this relationship. ...High exposure to the dangers of a process tends to heighten the emotivity of human responses. High emotivity of response lessens the chance of a realistic assessment of the critical process and hence, of a realistic practice in relation to it; relatively unrealistic practice under the pressure of strong affects lessens the chance of bringing the critical process under control. (ibid, 48)

What I find significant in these passages from Elias are the following:

- he is specifically not proposing a simple dichotomy between involvement and detachment as polarities in a binary model of feeling or awareness states
- he is however describing (what I am going to call) a *reflexive process of emergent self awareness* in which the interdependence of all relationships is at the same time fully recognised
- he is also describing processes in which an adjustment to the character of self-awareness (new knowledge) changes the character of agent action responses
- he highlights too the possibilities for “fantasy” oriented responses and “realistic practices” to be present at the same time in an action response subject to the “emotivity” surrounding the felt experience at hand.

First Person Authority

Elias’ analysis of *emotivity* as constraining the emergence of both reality congruent knowledge and reality oriented action is, I believe, fundamental to any argument that I would make about what is distinctive in what we are doing when we are working explicitly with the thinking of complex responsive processes.

Although I have referred to changes in my sense of thinking and belief as a result of undertaking this research process, I believe that the major contribution of this work to my practice is that I have been able to sustain my ability to carry on in what might otherwise have been an intolerable situation. This I attribute to the fact that in the process of enquiring about myself, my role, my relationships with others, my situation in a complex figuration of interdependent relationships with others, I have experienced a movement in my emotional responses to this organizational context. Nothing much in a sense has changed other than my feelings regarding my position in relation to what is happening around me: I can explain this differently and in ways that make sense as I observe them

everyday. Moreover, I can check my re-formed narrative with the narratives of others also engaged in processes of enquiry that question fundamentally many of the commonsense propositions that are supposed to account for 'how it is' in organizational life today. I have new cues, new sensitivities, and new ways of reading what is going on. This I believe to be what Elias describes in his reference to detachment. Elias' use of the idea of detachment, I believe, should not be confused with the idea of disengagement. I am now no less involved emotionally than I was when I started out on a process of research enquiry. I am referring, by reference to personal experiences of being and reflecting about being. also to a dialectical process of negation that is a movement in the nature of experience itself.

From time to time when participating in large group processes during residential meetings of the whole research group on the Doctor of Management programme I have found myself feeling disconnected from a lot of the conversation going on the group when the talk was about the pressures of the course. Many of those in the group said that they found the programme quite onerous and demanding: the reading, writing, the anxiety of examination, the pressure of deadlines. For me, the experience has been quite the reverse. I would say that I have found the time that I have spent engaged with these activities as the reason that I have been able to carry on with my job over the past two years. Being engaged with this work has transformed, literally, my ability to make sense of what it is that is going on around me and how I understand my role as an agent acting in relation to others. In saying this, I am not saying that I feel more right than anyone else in how I account for what I believe to be going on. What I am referring to is my own sense of a new/different coherence in my narrative account as it occurs in my silent conversations with myself and in conversation with others.

The emotional intensity of my experiences at work feels not to have changed. My emotional responses to the present context of my institution and how this affects the people with whom I am working are no less intense: feelings of shame, anxiety, anger, paranoia, tiredness, highs and lows, etc. remain daily present. At the same time however, I am aware that the emotivity of these feelings, my sense of being taken-over by them and the relationship therefore between how I feel and how I act has changed. Now, I would say, I catch myself (shaving in the morning, on train journeys, walking between meetings, during waiting time) working reflexively with *how I feel about how I feel* in situations that have

just occurred or which might be about to occur. In this process, I sense a readjustment in the balance between what I just feel and what I am starting to explain.

What I am trying to do with these personal reflections is to mirror from my experience of working through an enquiry process the process that aroused Elias' interest in relation to the story of the fisherman. This, I think, is in the way in which the detail of the situational context is noticed alongside intense reflection concerning the nature of the interaction occurring between the individual and their environment. It is this reflexivity that I believe to lie both at the heart of Elias' thesis about involvement and detachment and the research methodology that I associate with complex responsive process thinking. I would argue that it is in the multiple iterations of reflection that movement in the character of personal narratives occurs. This is for the reason that the narrative is woven repeatedly in the light of new stimuli in the form of conversations with peers and supervisors, changed patterns of reading, the disciplines of writing and most importantly, the act of working and reworking a personal narrative in the silent conversation that occurs with one's self. The process that I am describing here seems to me to be very different from that described by action researchers. In working reflexively with my own experience I am not seeking to understand this in terms that are either ecstatic or metaphysical. I do not attach to my inquiry a *telos* that infers a notion of the Good. I do not have the expectation that the results of my research will translate into outcomes that are recognizable in organizational terms as a radical break with the past or with the status quo: I do not see myself as having the power to achieve such an outcome.

What I do see being different however is my relationship with those around me as we all go on at work trying to provide leadership and to make sense of our experiences. In this way, I think that the changes that I have experienced in the course of my work on the doctoral programme have enabled me to be much more responsive, as a characteristic of how I enact my leadership role, to others as their struggles for identity, authority, personal meaning and engagement. To this extent, I am confident that the character of my participation has changed. If I return to the questions of knowledge and practice that I raised at the start of this paper, I believe that I could offer a response about my contributions to both of these that is in the affirmative. But I would do so on the basis of Rorty's argument about doing things in a way, however imperfectly, that is *new* rather than on the basis of uncovering some yet to be discovered Truth about life in organizations. I

think too, that I could argue for the validity, as a basis of research, personal narratives of experience. The case for these being a particularisation of social processes in general is I believe overwhelming. But this, of course, is because I adhere to a particular way of arguing about the construction of true beliefs. And I take from Rorty and Davidson the idea that the legitimacy of any statement of true belief is always going to be contingent upon the strength of argument that one can mount to defend the propositional validity of the greater web of true beliefs of which it is a part.

Conclusion

It is therefore largely in these terms that I understand my participation in the work of the doctoral group at the University of Hertfordshire. Firstly, after five years of background reading and thinking about ideas of complexity and complex responsive processes I decided to seek to locate myself (intellectually, relationally, professionally) as a participant in an ongoing conversation conducted in depth with regards to these issues. Secondly, I regard myself now as a participant in the development of a discourse within which a particular set of propositions about human relating are core. I am therefore engaged with others in an activity of enquiry with the objective of understanding life in organisations as an aspect of more extensive social processes of human interaction. The view that I would take here is that this engagement is directed explicitly at the pursuit of knowledge. Agent actions however flow from the interdependent relationship that always exists between their own selves and the self creating webs of others. Changes in the character of our understanding, how we rework or recreate the web of beliefs that are essential to our sense of self, have a recursive relationship with perception and perception in its turn, with action. It follows, I think, that to structure a high level process of enquiry around the pursuit of knowledge has at the same time both the consequences of being an end in itself and a stimulus to changing the character of individuals' actions in their responses to one another.

The research process, the grounds for collaboration between us, I find hard to justify on the basis of pre-determined assumptions about contributions to practice. It strikes me that such expectations are fraught with uncertainty and issues of measurement. I do not therefore see the work on the doctoral programme in terms of some linear notion of progression or betterment with regard to the performance of operational tasks at work. I would argue therefore against the idea that the notion of a contribution to practice can or should be

equated with the idea of *training effect* as it applies to competency driven personal development programmes. This is not to say, however, that the experience of engaging with complex responsive process thinking is neither intended to change nor leads to change in how we are as participants in the life processes of organisations. It is however to argue that the character of such changes is likely to be inconsistent over time and space, unpredictable in relation to its marginal or significant impact, conflictual relative to prevailing organisational norms and to entail, to some degree, a new struggle in the life of the individuals concerned for accommodation within their organisational setting.

Judged from my own experiences of all of this where Rorty uses the idea of fuzziness in relation to issues of completeness in domains of thought, I would be inclined to suggest the idea of messiness to describe the effect of changes in one's thinking about life in organisations upon the equivalent domain of action: that is, the working live enactment of changing belief structures.

Project 4: Seeing Leadership Differently

Introduction

In January of this year (2004) I resigned from my post as principal of a large inner city college of further education to take up a new post as CEO of a national charity working with young people across the UK. Coincident with my resignation I received a copy of the first report from the Learning and Skills Research Centre arising from a new national project that investigates “effective leadership for improving performance in post-compulsory learning”. Living with the experience of resignation from one organisation and career path and the thought of starting a new job at the head of a very different type of organisation made me particularly alert to the questions, themes and issues raised in this report. Reading it triggered a series of personal reflections about my role, the personal and organisational meaning of this and the wider context in which I enact it.

The Leading Learning project

Leading Learning: International Comparator Contexts (LSRC, 2004) is a significant report because of its provenance (sponsored by a major government department) and audience (the current leaders and senior managers of further and higher education in the UK). Copies of this document were sent to the principals/heads of every post-16 institution in the further and higher education sectors. It was sent also to ministers and senior policy-makers charged with tackling the leadership problem as they perceive it to exist across post-16 education. In the past ten years the post-16 learning and skills sector has moved progressively to the centre of government policy with regard to the drive for economic competitiveness and prosperity. Within a policy paradigm of a globalised knowledge economy, education and skills, and therefore the leadership of the key institutions charged with delivering the national education and skills agenda, are issues of frontline policy and political significance. The research questions of the report, therefore, reflect the policy debate taking place amongst ministers and senior policy-makers in relation to the nature of what is deemed to be effective leadership and how this can be nurtured within the wider public sector reform agenda.

The questions those engaged in the Leading Learning Project are concerned with are set out in the following terms on the cover of their document: “What is leadership, who makes it happen and how does it improve organisations?” The report, therefore, sets out to discover whether “researchers and practitioners in other public services in the UK and abroad have found answers to these questions”. Interestingly, the principal conclusion of the report is that a great deal of further ‘empirical’ research is needed.

I reflect upon my particular interest in this report in the following terms. I have been in senior management roles in education now for a lot longer than I ever was a teacher. Whilst I have worked in further education for twenty-five years, I have been in non-teaching management and leadership roles for eighteen of these. Now I approach the later stages of my career also working in a leadership capacity, albeit in a different organisation and sector of employment. Throughout this period, I have engaged in a great deal of personal development activity as a participant on training and academic programmes of various sorts in an attempt to come to my own understanding of the questions posed by the LSRC researchers. I have never felt confident of my understanding of what “leadership” in organisations actually *is* nor of my ability to explain or account for what I do in a leadership role that accords with the kind of well-ordered typologies so often presented by organisational theorists. Notwithstanding my efforts I, like the researchers, have never been able to answer these questions in a way that has proved satisfying. At times, coming away from a particular encounter with a new set of ideas about leadership and management, I have found myself to be in the grip of what I thought would turn out to be this critical insight: I think of my enthusiasm for Senge’s work (1990) on the learning organisation as the most significant of such experiences. After a period of immersing myself in the ideas associated with *The Fifth Discipline*, I found that my every day experiences of being with others at work would give rise to circumstances that contradicted the explanatory force of these insights. I could no longer make sense of what I believed my experiences to be in terms of the theoretical position with which I had aligned my then current thinking.

The terms of reference presented by the Leading Learning researchers are, I would argue, suggestive of a series of other unstated assumptions about causality that are a feature of the thinking that dominates present discourses about leadership and management. For

example, effective leadership is said to *cause* improved performance. By implication, ineffective leadership is a barrier to improving performance. It is therefore implied that leadership constitutes a function in organisations, the parameters of which can be defined, trained for and directed at specific outcomes. Further, the idea of training for leadership (as represented for example in the further education national leadership college initiative launched in 2003) implies that it is possible to identify and develop a national cohort of leaders equipped with essential skills and knowledge whose behaviours at work will result in desirable organisational outcomes. Then the nirvana of continuous improvement will be realised; institutions will stop ‘failing’; targets will be met; and policy objectives realised. Adversity would be explained by events occurring outside of human control: random, catastrophic events that no one can foretell or be held accountable for. The logic of the argument is in the idea that persons can be developed and then guided in peer and other support networks, whose behaviours at work will shape only the positive desirable outcomes of continuous improvement understood, of course, in terms of the performance management criteria against which such judgements are determined.

In their comprehensive review of the literature the LSRC researchers identify six leadership typologies: transactional leadership; transformational leadership; servant leadership; empowerment, super-leadership and self-management leadership; synergistic leadership; distributed leadership. Against each of these typologies they describe a series of behaviours that in some way exemplify the description. Transformational leadership for example entails engendering “high levels of motivation and commitment amongst followers/members in order to achieve high performance”. This is in contrast to transactional leadership where the focus is on “leader-member relations” and “situational contexts”. Super-leaders however act as “teacher and coach rather than dictator and autocrat, therefore increasing employees’ feelings of personal control and intrinsic motivation. Defined as ‘someone who leads others to lead themselves’ super-leadership is linked closely to self-management leadership and stresses the ‘person-centred’ aspects arising in situation theory....”. (LSRC, 2004, pp5-8)

In conclusion, the LSRC researchers identify two possible approaches to thinking about a leadership development strategy. The first follows the lines of a competency model in which lists of personal attributes and skills are identified and against which individuals are then trained. The second approach acknowledges that the behaviour of those in leadership

roles is “contingent on the situations faced and also dependent and interdependent on the behaviour and response of others. In such situations, leadership should be regarded as a dynamic and living activity, an ongoing process of emergent interaction with emergent properties” (LSRC, 2004, p11). In recognition of this latter possibility, the researchers recommendations are that programmes involving such activities as 360 degree feedback may be a more valid part of a larger process understood as a “leadership development journey” than training focused upon notions of competency. But whilst they acknowledge the difficulties inherent in “specifying” universally valid leadership typologies and suggest a need to view the behaviours of those in leadership roles against the particularities of their context, the researchers go on to offer a model setting out in four quadrants a Learning and Skills Research Centre Leadership Framework. This attempts to match the dimensions or possibilities for leadership behaviours according to contexts described as prescribed; collective; emergent and individual (LSRC, 2004, pp10-16).

The researchers’ task is to answer a question posed in three parts: What is leadership? What is effective leadership? How does effective leadership result in improved organisational performance? Working backwards, the critical question is that of organisational performance. This is because the researchers are tasked with the problem of discovering and describing the kinds of behaviour on the part of individuals in designated responsibility positions that lead to organisational effectiveness. The question of what constitutes organisational effectiveness is not one that the researchers pay any attention to. Rather, they incorporate the generalised assumption that effectiveness is evidenced by continuous quality improvement. This too is self-referential in that both “quality” and “improvement” in public sector organisations are defined in terms of an organisation’s perceived ability to meet targets and service standards set by the policy agenda prevailing in government. Not only are the targets set in this way, so too are the definitions or measurements of effective performance. So for me, the underlying question being explored in this research, as in so many other publicly funded research projects of this type, is that of how behaviours that have a negative impact on the achievement of perceived system objectives can be identified and eliminated and by contrast, how positive behaviours can be identified, modelled and inculcated. How, in effect, can a leadership ideal be realised?

Complex responsive processes and the thinking of G H Mead

By contrast with this thinking, my argument is that the leadership role in organisations should be understood in a radically different way. I think that it is possible and meaningful to professional practice to do this in terms of the thinking associated with the idea of complex responsive processes (Stacey et al, 2000; Stacey, 2001). This idea I take to refer to the way in which our experience (conscious and unconscious) as human beings emerges from the patterning of interaction occurring as we act with others socially together in a living present. This is a creative temporal process in which action in the present is stimulated by a sense of a future yet to come in the context of accounting for the past. The idea of living present encapsulates this sense of perpetual temporal process: action occurring in a spatio-temporal locus oriented towards a future, influenced by and influencing accounts of the past, that in turn is realised in experience as an ongoing sense of the present. From such a perspective, human relating:

is understood as communicative interaction in which power relations emerge. Individual minds/selves and social relationships, individual and collective identities, are all understood as aspects of the same phenomenon, namely, relating. There is no separation between individuals as one level and groups, organisations and societies as another level. (Stacey, 2001, p6)

To take such a perspective it is essential in my view to stand back from the systems paradigm in which those in leadership and management roles are seen as agents situated in a part/whole relation to their organisations. Rather, I would argue that leaders and managers in organisations need to be understood as participants (albeit with a specific and qualitatively different kind of power weight from that of other participants) in an ongoing process of human relating. The conduct of leaders and managers is, as is that of others, enabled and constrained by the emergent qualities of the localised power relations that form their lived experience and in relation to which their own conduct is integral. Within this different way of thinking about leadership and management, I think that it is therefore necessary to understand the importance of power and power relating to processes of identity formation. I think too that the frailty of identity formation processes, the immanence of chaos in working lives and the struggle for personal survival in a living present, are of fundamental significance to understanding the nature of leadership in

organisations. For each of us, the development of a personal narrative account that makes sense to us of our presence in our ongoing relationships with others is fundamental to our life process. Irrespective of whether we work in the public or the private sector, most of us spend a large part of our lives doing this in the context of organisations (Knights & Wilmott 1999; Czarniawska 1998). Understanding leadership, I would argue, is foremost a question of understanding the nature of our participation in human processes of relating and therefore of ethics. It is this argument that I want to develop in this project.

This argument, I believe, can be sustained without recourse to the kind of typological models of human relating and behaviour that typify so much modern management theory. Here I am referring to the tendency to construct diagrammatic representations of idealised behaviour modes as if these represented real individual strategic choices. The implication of such thinking is that leaders skilled enough for the task are free to select, using their reasoning powers, behaviour types (preferred leadership styles) according to their judgements regarding context. The LSRC research is based on such thinking where it is implied that leaders can, by a process of rational choice, select behaviours to maximise their influence and so optimise their power weight relative to the perceived goals/needs of their organisation. This thinking, I would argue, is symptomatic of the extent to which cybernetic assumptions have become entrenched in a dominant discourse which links the performative characteristics of organisations (for example, continuous quality improvement) directly with the application of models of leadership behaviour.

Here I want to introduce the thinking of G H Mead and specifically his conception of social objects (Mead 2001; 2002). By social object Mead meant something that arises in perception and which is other than a physical object or an object purely of our imagination (so-called scientific objects). Social objects are the generalised patterns of gestures and responses emerging from human interaction. Social objects are, at the same time, our perceptions of action on the part of others and the feelings or tendencies to action that are aroused in us as we participate socially one with another. It is our ability to hold such objects in our reflexive awareness of our social environment that enables us to be actors within it, just as it is our perception of physical objects that enables and constrains our action in the physical world. Objects in perception are what Mead described as the “stuff” of images and then ultimately, once signified in words and language use, the material through which we are able to communicate our sense of our experiences to others as

significant symbols. Social objects, argued Mead, allow us to frame responses to our social context as we are able to both generalise and symbolise in language and word structures patterns of human interaction.

Understood in terms of Mead's philosophy, *leadership* refers to particular socialised tendencies for action and as such is a type of social object that both enables and constrains ongoing patterns of human relating. It is in specifically the social dimension of this process that I am interested for the purposes of thinking about leadership. In the concept of social object, Mead, to my view, creates a powerful link between an account of how we experience the world phenomenologically and how, arising from the way in which we order this experience, we are able to act, where action is constrained by the emergence of particular mores of social conduct, and how, in turn these are reflected in the language symbols that we use to socialise our experience:

Ideas are closely related to images....Since the symbols with which we think are largely recognised as word images, ideas and images have a very close consanguinity ... Particularly do our habitual responses to familiar objects constitute for us the ideas of these objects. The definitions we give of them are the sure signs by which we can arouse identical or like attitudes in others. I am [interested] in the fact that as organised responses of the organism they enter into the experience we call conscious. That is, the organism responds to these organised attitudes in their relations to objects as it does to other parts of its world. And thus these become objects for the individual. (Mead 2002, 97)

For Mead, institutions such as the church or a political party were good examples of what he meant by social object. For example, a church is a building. But the church is also more fundamentally a particular aspect of ongoing social processes of group formation in which human beings enact self-similar behaviours expressed in the form of roles that are taken-up (priest, parishioner) and associated with which are other complex sets of behaviour involving attitudes, assumptions and rituals. Leadership and particularly that reflected in the notion of a chief executive officer is, I would argue, a social object in the Meadian sense of the term. Understood in these terms *leadership* is clearly social and relational. As an object codified in language, leadership is constituted in the assumptions and values regarding the conduct of individuals occupying particular social roles.

Leadership can therefore only occur relationally. As with Hegel's master/servant example, leaders can only enact leadership in the presence of followers. It is this process of mutuality, of recognition in the Hegelian sense, reproduced in human interaction that enables leadership identities to emerge. Recognition is the normalising aspect of conduct which in turn provides sufficient stability for identity to be felt and perceived across time and space.

Mead, however, also developed his thinking about the relationship existing between social objects and social values. Indeed, Mead argued that one of the functions of institutions was to preserve their identity via the preservation of the values with which they were associated in society. At times, as in the instance of the church, the values represent what Mead described as "idealizations" of what the institution should be but which it does not in reality fully represent. Mead's attack on what he perceived to be the hypocrisy of the church should be understood in terms of this argument. Such values, Mead suggested, take the form of an allegiance to a cult: "cult values". Mead saw the preservation of cultishness as being contingent upon a particular psychology which he described as follows:

The psychological technique of maintaining .. a cult is the presentation by the imagination of a social situation free from the obstacles which forbid the institution being what it should be, and we organise social occasions which in every way favour such a frame of mind. (Mead, 1923, p240)

and

The emotional attitude in the cult of an institution flows from the very obstacles that defeat its proper functioning. We may become profoundly interested in the reform of an institution for better service, but if we wish to appraise it emotionally, we envisage the wrongs, the vice, the ignorance, the selfishness' which the ideal of the institution condemns, and which frustrate its operation. (Mead, 1923, p241)

My argument is that the dominant discourse regarding leadership and the expectations of those deemed to occupy leadership roles in organisations can be understood in terms of Mead's observations concerning social objects and cult values. These attributions have a

particular socio-cultural history that Douglas Griffin has described in his review of the emergence of our contemporary sense of leadership as a phenomenon via Kant of eighteenth century philosophy. Griffin also describes this in terms of the development of systems thinking and its application to organisations. Leadership, therefore, involves taking up a role whose meaning exists in the practice of social relationships between people. It is only on this basis that leadership is functionalised in ongoing processes of human relating. As these relationships, patterns of mutual recognition, become reproduced in the turbulence of the wider social process, so too are the possibilities for individual behaviour enabled and constrained. As Griffin has observed:

All cult values, those esteemed by various groups in society as good or bad, as harmful or beneficial, are seen as grist to the mill of everyday social interaction in which they become functional values as the source of conflicts which both sustain identity and bring about change. Cult values are a vital part of the past and, as they are functionalised in the movement of the living present, social and personal identities are recreated and potentially transformed as people together construct their future. (Griffin, 2002, 117)

Mead argued that there is no such thing as an absolute value. By contrast leadership theorists, such those engaged in the LSRC research programme, are participants in a process the aim of which is both to define absolutely the meaning (value) of organisational leadership and to functionalise this meaning as a norm of professional conduct. This process is of itself an exemplification of processes of power relating within which one group seeks to legitimate its perception of the good as a norm of social conduct more generally. Since we recognise exceptional cases relative to norms it is the normative conditions attaching to leadership roles which enable identities to be formed by those acting within such roles and those acting in relation to them. Since the issue of the determination of norms is clearly also an issue of power, conflict and authority it becomes too one of ideology.

If these issues apply to the determination of the idea of what is leadership in organisations, the practice of leadership is itself also fundamentally about the administration of power and authority sufficient to sustain the stability in patterns of human relating for identity

formation to occur. These power relations, I would argue, involve simultaneously the coincident actions of those in authority whose ongoing behaviours reproduce the mechanics of shame and threats to identity and those of their designated followers. Thus normative behaviours are also established by all of us in the context of the movement of these power relations as we take-up the attitudes of what Mead described as the 'generalised other'. By this he meant the habits, routines and expectations that are associated with particular social roles and functions. This is the social process that Elias described as figuration (Elias 2000) which he understood as the perpetual movement of relations between people as they enable and constrain each other. Management processes I would argue work in just this way across a continuum of compliance, the dimensions of which range between coercion and consent, to establish the roles in which individuals' identities at work are constructed and ordered according to the primary perceived tasks of the organisation. It is therefore necessarily an aspect of the social object of leadership, as it is presently configured, that the supra-administration of the ordering of power across an organisation be identified ultimately with the person deemed to represent the apex of the organisational hierarchy. Understood in terms of power relating, it is clear also that a process of leadership is a process of conflict. Since individual identity emerges in the movement of power relations occurring between bodies acting in the living present, identity itself is always in construction and always at the edge of chaos.

I would also argue that, in taking the social object of leader, one who occupies a perceived leadership role will also necessarily become an object in the affectual responses of those to they are directly and less directly related. Emotion, I would argue is aroused in anticipation of, in the course of and in reflection of interactions between living human bodies. Processes of human interaction are both enabled and constrained in contexts of power relating. Power relating of itself implies differences and inequalities. At its most basic, the interchange of speech acts between individuals entails turn-taking. This requires knowledge and acceptance of rules and a willingness to take and to let go of positions of pre-eminence in the movement of a relationship. In a more complex organisational setting, turn-taking includes notions of entitlement as to who is able to say what to whom, when and in what context. And as this process of interaction is amplified across the organisational context and intensified in its scale and detail so then we are all caught up in patterns of behaviour whose themes and counter themes challenge and create risk for our abilities to sustain our presence, recognition and identities in relation to and with each

other. Modern organisations are places of high anxiety in which threats to identity are a norm of the processes of power relating that underwrite their apparent cohesion.

My narrative, presented in the next section, explores these themes. In it I attempt to shift the locus of my presence in the organisation from one who in the dominant paradigm would be viewed as someone in high level control to one who is clearly a participant. I attempt in the narrative to expose something of my own vulnerability to others as I, a participant actor, work also within the constraints of power and affect to sustain my own identity. I try also to illustrate in this narrative the significance of my presence for the identity of others with whom I am associated. I try to present a sense of how my gestures elicit responses from others which in turn transform the meaning of my actions both in terms of their social significance and my own affectual responses. Finally, in my narrative account, I attempt to exemplify the emergent nature of conflict and to point also to its destructive and creative possibilities in a way that would be consistent with Mead's concept of creativity.

A meeting

It is 7.30 am on a Wednesday morning and I am sitting in the company of my chairman in an 'Italian' coffee shop in the middle of Covent Garden in central London. This is our now regular meeting place for our weekly one to one meeting. These meetings are always in the diary. If one of us cannot make it one week (for example, my chairman's job role can take him abroad quite often) then the agreement is that we cancel but turn up as arranged for the next one.

The practicalities of simply being in this coffee shop at 7.30 am in the morning mean that I have to start my day at 5.30 am in order to get a train early enough to make sure that I am on time. Most weeks, my job involves me in an evening meeting of some sort. Often, these take place on a Wednesday. The ritual of my meeting with the chairman can therefore mean that I may leave home before 6.30 am and not get back before 11.00 pm. It is not uncommon for me to have more than one evening commitment of this sort a week. On occasions, when I am working with a particularly full diary of meetings and appointments or managing some especially stressful project or other aspect of my job, this Wednesday morning meeting will have the effect of stretching my working week to the

extent that by the weekend I have the sensation of jet-lag: a disorientation with respect to time and body function.

Suburban train services in London are notoriously unreliable and sometimes, my train will be late getting into Waterloo station. I remember on one occasion during a particularly cold period in the winter, waiting for forty-minutes for a train to arrive as a result of various delays and cancellations. Aware of my chairman sitting at our meeting place waiting for me, I called him on my mobile phone to apologise for being late. He did not answer and I got put through to his message service. I caught myself thinking how absurd it was to be standing completely alone so early on a freezing cold winter's morning that it was still pitch dark, apologising for being late for a meeting. I was aware too of my mounting feelings of stress and anxiety at not being able to explain my lateness and the prospect of arriving so late that the meeting would be pointless. Anxious too that my reason for lateness would not be understood and that my chairman might think, simply, that I had missed my alarm and slept in. I recall also having stood on the station in the grip of a rising feeling of panic at the idea of lateness and wondering just how early I would have to get up and get a train in order to fully hedge the risk of delay.

My chairman is a senior executive in a multi-national energy company. He has worked for the same organisation for over thirty years. He joined this company immediately after leaving university and as his career has developed, he has risen to a role that makes him responsible for a number of the company's operations' in Europe. I feel however that the ritual of our Wednesday morning meetings is part of a process in which we, rather pointlessly, enact stereo-typical public/private sector differences. Me: feeling resentful at the idea of turning-up for what in the winter is a crack-of-dawn encounter with the person to whom I am most directly accountable. He: adamant in his insistence that the demands of business upon business executives are such that a meeting of this kind and in this place is a reasonable everyday sort of occurrence. For these reasons, my attitude to these meetings is always ambivalent. I do value the opportunity that these meetings give for us to be together regularly on a private basis. At the same time, I feel the timing of the meetings, his insistence upon them happening, even if some weeks he gets up and leaves after thirty or forty minutes, are part of a ritualised display of petty authority. I know that I would not suggest such an arrangement myself. I am conscious too of my sense of feeling unable to challenge this ritual on a basis that would enable these meetings to happen with

the same regularity but at a different time. In sensing that such questioning would be a confrontation, my feelings of petty-tyranny are reinforced. I sense that my affectual response to this ritual has become one of tiredness. It is a routine that I know that I do not want to have to sustain into the indefinite future.

My relationship with this man is undoubtedly the most significant of my working life. When I was appointed to my first principal role eight years ago, he was the vice chairman of the board of governors. Apart from two years in that period he has been 'my chairman' ever since. This is a particular relationship of personal and professional intensity that I share with no one else. It is only when in a CEO role that it is possible to experience the particular qualities of such a relationship. Anyone other than the CEO will experience such a relationship second hand. How he and I judge this relationship is, therefore, critical for our ongoing ability to continue together, for the perceived integrity of key organisational management processes and for the wider reputation (internal and external) of the organisation. The chairman sets my annual objectives on behalf of the board. He also conducts my appraisal and makes recommendations to the remuneration committee of the board with respect to my terms and conditions. The chairman is also my unofficial sounding board and confidant in the way in which I am able to mediate or represent the views of senior managers to the board and/or my first line of defence and support when something 'difficult' has to be done or has gone wrong. I therefore have to be open with my chairman but not to the extent of revealing the full extent my doubts, anxieties, the full detail of what is not 'going right' in the institution, such that he would lose confidence in his sense of my ability to be in control of my job and the institution.

What I say to the chairman is therefore always in some way based upon some assessment of the risk of what I am making available to him. As I write this, I realise that I am describing a process that is far less deliberative than it appears in text. I think of this awareness as the application of a process of self-restraint that operates mostly in an unconscious reflexive way as the chairman and I move through our conversations together. I am aware too that this is how people respond to me when they interact with me at work. Somehow being present in the face of authority constrains what it is that each of us feels that we can say in a way that reflects our sense of risk. The disclosure to a present authority figure of what appear in the moment to be our innermost anxieties can in turn carry the implications of destructiveness of ourselves, our identities, in our relations with

this other. My sense is that what any of us is willing to disclose to another is also in some way related to the degree of apparent distance that exists between us in terms of hierarchical order or position. As a CEO, I am conscious of working always with narratives that are very highly mediated by this sense of anxiety that is conveyed by the role and which, in this narrative, I am exploring in my relationship with my chairman.

The CEO/Chair relationship is therefore paradoxically at the same time one of intimacy and distance. On balance, I have come to experience this relationship as being integral to the feeling of ultimate isolation that is so characteristic of being the head of an organisation and particularly one that is subject to great pressures for change, scrutiny and accountability. Caught in the middle between my senior team colleagues and the chairman I will often find myself reviewing with them, in our context of confidence, aspects of my relationship with him that I and they may experience as being particularly difficult or problematic: for example, second guessing his possible reaction to an event, proposal, or issue. By contrast, I also find myself being open with him with regard to personal tensions, performance issues, anxieties within the senior team. The more I have worked with the dynamics of this relational process, the more I have come to understand it as essential to what holds us all together (he, the board of nineteen others, me, my team of four) in that these apparent betrayals of confidence – me talking with him about them, me talking with them about him and at other times, they and he talking together about me – are what I would describe as essential contexts of discretion in which we are each co-creating a sense of identity and place in the unfolding life of this particular organisation.

Today, much of our conversation has been taken-up with a discussion of the recent events that led to the dismissal of a staff member for financial dishonesty. Prior to this meeting I sent a report on the events in question to the chairman. Since I have to chair appeals' panels following instances of staff dismissal, I am not directly involved in first line disciplinary hearings. I am also required to maintain an independence of view of these proceedings so as not to prejudice the outcome of a possible appeals process. In reality the closeness with which I and my team work means that it is very unlikely that a process of this sort will be going on in the institution without my knowledge. I think this also in some way exemplifies the differences between the organisational processes that are acknowledged openly and the more covert processes through which power and authority is administered. On this particular occasion however, the profile of this event within the

organisation means that I do know quite a lot about the background. My attitude to what has happened and to the dismissal of the staff member is tempered by the fact that whilst I believe him to have acted in a way that was technically dishonest, I also understand this to have occurred in a context where the conduct of his line managers and other weaknesses inherent in some key financial procedures invited his subsequent actions. Indeed, I understand his anger at his treatment, which he communicated to me and to certain other senior staff members with some force, to be also a reflection of his sense almost of entrapment by the organisation. His argument was that he did what he did in order to get his job done despite the best efforts of others. I know him to feel scapegoated and I know that I have some sympathy for his feelings. Equally, having attempted to explore this nuance in a senior team meeting and on a previous occasion with the chairman, I am aware that to err too far onto his side would make me appear tolerant of financial dishonesty in the eyes of other senior staff, the chair and possibly also auditors and the regulatory body. I feel myself to be in conflict with the norms of behaviour expected of someone in my position. As I sense my awareness of this, I am aware too that I have been treading a very fine line in trying to encourage others involved in this case, including the chairman, to see the 'unacceptable' actions of an individual as having emerged from an organisational context rather than from individual pathology. I am aware that I am now pursuing this person's dismissal on the basis of expediency rather than with genuine belief in, or commitment to, this course of action.

Knowing the chairman as I do over many years, I know that he will approach this particular problem with an unqualified commitment to demonstrating probity. There is unlikely to be the slightest opportunity for what I think of as greyness in our approach. His instinct will be to publicise as much of the detail of the case as possible to the full board, following a thorough exposure of issues and debate within the audit committee. Only if I am very lucky, or persuasive, will he agree to holding off reporting all of the detail of the problems that have arisen to the regulatory body.

As our conversation develops, I sense the tension between us on this issue. I sense particularly the chairman's body-language as he stiffens in his seat slightly to signify that on this issue he will not be persuaded to moderate, or to fudge, our intended course of action. I feel myself to be pushed quite forcibly from the grey-zone of the political fix (where after many years I now feel both to be the most comfortable and the most

productive) into the black and white zones of no compromise. As I start to argue for a more discrete, less public process of resolution and follow-up, I feel myself lacking in any confidence that my line of argument will result, if I push it, in other than a highly polarised argument from which I will have no option but to back down given our relative and respective authorities. As I accede to the chairman's proposed 'no other option approach' my mind is already turning to just how I will implement the outcomes of our agreement following this discussion. Will I, yet again, find a way of satisfying the chairman's wishes and instructions and yet at the same time limit the knowledge of these issues and this conversation to those who, in my judgement, will know what to do with the information such that the task can go on of maintaining the front of an every improving, well-ordered organisation which does not attract undue attention from the regulators or accumulate yet further negative points on the institutional ratings' scale. Already, in the flow of this conversation, I am aware that my mind has turned to the issue of how I will go about executing this task.

Conflict, power, emergence

In the narrative of a single meeting with my chairman, I am trying to draw upon features of my everyday experience to explore how those in leadership and management roles actually come to frame their actions and what it is that they can be said to really do. In this way, I am contrasting my sense of lived-experience with what I encounter as abstract descriptions of experiences of leadership or leadership in action as proposed in the kind of accounts such as that of the Learning and Skills Research Centre. Such accounts seem to me to be predicated on the idea that the attitudes that we adopt towards each other, our behaviours, what are perceived by others to be our actions, all result from strategic choices that we are able to make as individuals. There is in this approach what Douglas Griffin has described as a set of assumptions in which action is seen to flow from the thought processes of autonomous individuals and significantly where thought always precedes action. This of itself reinforces the linearity of assumptions with respect to the movement of experience through time (Griffin, 2002. p21, p206). Within this paradigm it is also conceivable to think of anything as being possible subject only to the imagination of the leader, his/her persuasiveness of others and barriers to their actions. It is easy to see how such a process of thinking would result in the idea of responsibility being located in an individual or a group of individuals (Hirschhorn 1998, 73).

It is significant also, I would argue, that the search for models of good conduct is accompanied by linear assumptions with regard to time, change and the 'management of change'. The conduct of the good is therefore that which is believed to lead 'an organisation' towards its pre-determined goal state. This thinking is reflected in the language that is used to describe the range of available behaviour modes that those in leadership positions can choose to deploy. This thinking is often translated graphically in the use of spatialised taxonomies in which assumed behaviour types are presented as discrete binary option choices and represented in diagrams suggestive of the possibility of achieving an alignment between behaviours, contexts and desired outcomes. Individuals, it is implied can be taught to recognise when their behaviours are 'transformational' as against 'transactional'. They can be enabled to recognise when their operational context is characteristically 'emergent' or 'prescribed' and so modify their attitudes and behaviours to ensure that they act in a way that will align context, behaviour and outcome.

Relative to my particular organisational context, my chairman and I occupy the two key positions of power. Viewed from the perspective of this dominant discourse concerning leadership in organisations it might be argued that my chairman and I are uniquely placed both choose our behaviour-style and to determine a course of action. Yet when the distant gaze of abstract management theory is replaced by the intensity of a personal narrative account of lived experience, it is apparent that this is not what we are doing. When engaged in these conversations, we are not acting in a way that would indicate to a close observer an ability to determine a course of action or behaviour in any way that could be construed as simply rational or the result of strategic choice. Our actions in relation to each other and to our wider context are prescribed by a context of power relating that is both codified in the regulations that govern our formal relationship and which arise simply from our being together as two human bodies. We struggle to make sense of the meaning of our context and association. Decisions that we make are more like hypotheses that we manage momentarily to agree upon and then seek to test in subsequent action. There is no certainty in any of our deliberations and no foreknowledge of outcomes. The tension that exists between us, which is paradoxically creative and inhibiting, appears to reside in the movement of our feeling states, the arousal of which appear in the patterning of the gestures and responses occurring between us, making it easy or difficult for us to reach agreement. We are engaged with a reality and creating our own reality at the same time.

Between the chairman and I there exists what is now a personal relationship of long-standing. We have in some way learned how to be together in this relationship. We meet in a context where our affectual responses to each other are patterned over many years of rehearsal. We can anticipate each other's responses to issues, to our own moods, thinking, and demeanour. But at the same time, we encounter each other afresh and with anxieties borne of the paradox of knowing and at the same time not knowing what will emerge from our interactions. Our personal biographies are radically different. This applies both to our professional backgrounds as it does to our more personal family histories and routes to our present positions. So in the background of our being together there are aspects of our deep, private, experience that we bring which colours our attitudes to authority, power, status, and role. This background we have acknowledged from time to time in short snatches of narrative, personal biography, anecdote. Being together for so long has meant too that milestone events in our personal lives have occurred which we have acknowledged to each other: family illness, births, deaths, and job changes. We know too something of each others politics and therefore predisposition to acceptance of matters of policy. We have from time to time talked with each other about our motivations for doing the jobs (mine paid, his unpaid) that we do in relation to this organisation.

Within the formality of our roles we are both conscious of the regulations that inform how we can be together. The roles of CEO and chairman of a further education corporation are set out in the statutory articles governing the conduct of the affairs of such a body. There are things that I am entitled to insist upon (rights and responsibilities) and over which I have authority that are not given to the chairman and vice versa. This circumstance has also a paradoxical effect on our relationship since for either party to insist upon their entitlement to action in accordance with the formal regulatory framework would be taken by the other as evidence of the breakdown of our ability to relate productively. So our being together is conducted on a basis in which we speak from behind the wall of these authorities without ever acknowledging them as a boundary.

Our interaction is also taking place within an infinitely multi-faceted context. There are the ongoing events that appear as milestones in the life of the institution and to which our attention is constantly being drawn. The attitudes of others (our assumptions and estimations of these) appear very concretely in our deliberations. If I/we agree to do A or

B; what will persons or bodies X or Y say or do? We are highly sensitive to the affectual conditions of others close to us who are physically absent but, at the same time, highly present in these conversations. Will persons C or D be upset, offended, pleased, minded to recognise us differently, more positively as a result of what we agree to say or do as a result of this interaction? We talk too about how to influence others; how to get our way; how to make our point; how to plan for the conduct of a meeting in which the outcomes that we desire occur. In summary, our conversation is an exchange of propositions, speculations, uncertainties, and fantasies. Our actions are framed according to the extent to which we are able to feel confident of any of these as a basis of reality. And as we go on together, I for my part, have no sense of whether my fantasies about the chairman's reasoning for us meeting in this way resonate in any way with his own conscious or unconscious motivations. I have no means of knowing whether what I experience as an imposition, an aspect of the irrationality of someone who cannot or will not compromise another set of commitments, is in fact a gesture of absolute altruistic generosity and fellowship. To explore the question would of itself take the relationship dangerously close to the edge of what we have negotiated as being common ground.

Further, when I reflect upon the outcome of these meetings that is, what is different at 8.30 am from what I believed to be the case at 7.30 am, they are always unpredictable. Something occurs between us which is not as I could have fully anticipated when I and he walked through the door. I would say that these interactions, as all instances of human relating, are a process in which we co-create the sense of reality into which we act and as we meet over and over again, each week we iterate this co-creative process. At times, when we have not been able to meet for one reason or another, I will experience a sense of loss or disjuncture. This I experience sometimes as a relief (a feeling of being let-off from the ritual of this meeting) and at others as a source of anxiety (the loss of a triangulation point). When I think of my experiences of meeting and working with my chairman in this way, I recognise what it is that I spend most of my time doing. I think of this kind of interaction as being typical of how I experience what my life is as I enact my job. The form or pattern of relating obviously changes but not, I would say, in a dramatically significant way. Most of my time is taken up with meeting people on a one-on-one basis (members of my team, significant others involved with the administration of the further education sector, individual staff members). At other times I will sit in or chair meetings of small groups of staff. Less frequently I will interact with large numbers of people from

inside or outside of the organisation. Whatever the context, I think of the substance of what I experience in a leadership role as being the same. It is an experience of interaction with others within which the specificity of what emerges is not predictable and not within my control.

Here I want to return to the thinking of G. H. Mead. Embedded throughout the above narrative is Mead's concept of the social object. Indeed, without a sense of what Mead referred to in developing this concept, none of us would be able to make sense of the ways in which we categorise each other and the sets of behaviours in relation to which we recognise such categories. To describe myself as a leader, a principal, a CEO and my chairman in similarly terms, is to make use of a Meadian sense of the social object that makes sense of our places and roles in the vocabulary of organisational life. Put another way, as we hold a sense of these objects to ourselves of our positions relative to each other, we take-up (again, in Mead's terms) a sense of what he described as the 'generalised other'. By 'generalised other' Mead referred formally to the "organised social attitudes of the given social group (or of some one section thereof) to which he belongs." (Mead 1934, p156). In Mead's terms, it is in our ability to take on this attitude that we are each able to adhere to a sense of 'me' as distinct from a sense of 'you': that is, of the other. For Mead what he described as the I-me dialectic, is the reflexive relationship of awareness of oneself in a social context that enables identities to be established and reproduced.

If I relate this Meadian conception to my interactions with my chairman, it is clear that neither of us has open to us the possibility of framing a course of action which is either wholly outside of the conventions of our role, or more significantly, beyond what either of us would be willing to recognise as appropriate to the conduct of our roles. Further, what we will permit or allow of each other, will of itself be a function of the qualitative characteristics of this recognition process. Here I am referring particularly to the degree of anxiety which each of us feels in relation to the extent to which we adhere rigidly to what we believe to be the socially contingent behaviours of the role. To exemplify this position, I would contrast the attitude of my current chairman on issues of probity to that of a previous chairman. In one instance, my relationship is with an individual of the left whose career path has been shaped in the context of a highly bureaucratised globalised corporation. In the other instance, my relationship was with an individual whose expectations of behaviour in public life were informed by a background of working in

banking, as a director of a small company and with political belief in the tenets of Thatcherism. My experience of the opportunities for difference in the direction and quality of interaction has been that these lead to radically different experiences of being together and in turn of action. The issue is of the qualitative differences of behaviour arising from the way in which the notion of role, or social object, or sense of the ‘generalised other’, was taken-up in the lives of the individuals concerned. The qualitative differences that arise in the instances of these relationships are, I would argue, a result of a tension between the norms (of the generalised other) and the values of the actors: the *I* engaged in a reflexive awareness of *me* judged in relation to the social norm. Most often in my relationship with my chairman, these distinctions emerge as a source of real interpersonal tension in contexts where I take a more expedient view of what would be the best thing to do in the moment from the one that he takes.

Values

Generally, I find that my chairman has a fairly fixed view of how I should act as a public servant in relation to the application of the rules and regulations as they might be strictly interpreted. By this I mean that if the regulations suggest that *B* should be disclosed in response to circumstance *A*, then he would expect me to comply fully with such a requirement or, at least, as he would interpret such a gesture. My view of these situations, however, tends to be much more expedient: my instinctive responses are always to give only what I perceive to be obliged to disclose or what it is that I judge ‘them’ to need. So whilst I recognise what I think of as technical-legal boundaries to the conduct open to me in most situations, I will probably tend in most situations to favour actions that minimise disclosure to the regulating body and which maintain (as I see it) a positive image of the institution, myself and my senior colleagues in the wider political context that we inhabit. Put another way, I recognise myself as being highly sensitive to the maintenance of my identity and that of my close colleagues in relation to those to whom I am technically accountable. My chairman sees this too, except that where he believes that his duty is to demonstrate probity in what I take to be its purest form, my belief is that I need to pay continuous attention to maintaining the appearance of being in charge and in control of the affairs of the institution. So what I judge to be appropriate for disclosure (the good) will often be different from his which will be more closely aligned with a literal interpretation of our apparent obligations (the right). This is fundamentally a conflict over identity and

identity reproduction recognisable in terms of Hans Joas' argument about the way in which values and value differences emerge in action contexts:

...values do not always originate in the eruptive form in which charismatic visionaries experience and proclaim them. They can, rather, derive their impetus from a difficult balance between experience, articulation and the stock of interpretations available within a culture. But experiences of self-formation and self-transcendence are indispensable in every case. (Joas, 2000, p165)

and

In the action situation there is no primacy of the good or the right....In the action situation, the irreducible orientations to the good. ... encounter the examining authority of the right. In these situations we can only ever achieve a reflective equilibrium between our orientations. Certainly, the extent to which we subject our orientations to this test may vary. (Joas, 2000, p173)

My argument here is that movements in power relations arising from the perception of identity threats are critical to enabling and constraining individuals' willingness to satisfy the test of the good against an uncritical interpretation of the right. My sense of this is that the good and the right are likely only to appear the same in circumstances where action in accordance with the right entails no threat to an ongoing sense of identity. In my relationship with my chairman, this difference of perception is both fundamental and contingent upon our respective status as executive and non-executive servants of the organisation. The personal cost to my chairman of acting strictly in accordance with the right is always likely to be less than the cost to me or to anyone else occupying a chief accounting officer role.

This tension arises continuously in our relationship. The purpose of the conversations taking place between my chairman and myself is always in some way oriented to action and action on behalf of the organisation. It is, therefore, always the case that these conversations involve some evaluation of a personal or social expectation of what would be a good or a right action as against what might be a realistic or possible action. Sometimes, we will agree that a good course of action is both possible and consistent with

our sense of the right action to take. At other times, we are not in agreement about this. In the instance of the narrative account that I have presented here, we were not in agreement about the right and the good with respect to the staff member who had been judged to have been guilty of financial dishonesty. So what is occurring between us is a struggle of sorts for dominance in terms of the understanding of the balance between the good and the right in this instance and it is the outcome of this struggle that will determine a course of action. The manner of the mediation of these value conflicts that arise between us are, I would argue, fundamental to understanding in general the idea of leadership based on an ethics of participation. I would argue that both the impulse to assert value differences and the ability to resolve them is what combines, in human interaction, unconscious pre-reflective responsiveness with processes of power relating.

The attitude that I adopt in challenging or not challenging my chairman is a function of my perception of power. It is also an emotional reaction to threat. The impulse to challenge however arises from an unconscious pre-reflective sense of what is right judged in some way in terms of the movement of the *I-me* dialectic of which Mead wrote, I am or am not comfortable with the sense of myself that I have when I visualise myself in an action setting. I do not want to be party to the dismissal of a staff member. This is in conflict with the sense of right and good to which my chairman adheres.

In the course of the everyday routine of many hundreds of instances of such differences what emerge as norms become evident as thematically consistent patterns of behaviour. These in turn have the capacity to become amplified and consolidated as ‘the way in which things are done around here’. What is being formed in the local iterations of these relationships, such as the one that I have described here, is what other organisational theorists struggle to identify as organisational cultures. In another context, writing of his experiences as a group analyst, Stacey identifies three aspects of the relational process in which he sees unconscious processes shaping the quality of interaction between individuals in interaction with one another. These he identifies as: feelings and the extent to which one’s awareness of these shapes behaviours; unarticulated themes that pattern communicative action and processes of power relating; habituated modes of behaviour that are repeated as skilful performances which enable an avoidance of danger in the form of a traumatic articulation (Stacey, 2003, 159). My argument here is that these factors are not particular to what might be understood as a clinical setting or experience. Rather, they are

factors fundamental to understanding how each of us is reproducing our identities through an assemblage of social objects that we take up in the enactment of our roles. This process, in its turn, is a social one involving participation in processes in relation to which, as actors, we are paradoxically in control and not in control at the same time.

Leadership, I believe needs to be understood afresh as occurring in the nexus of this paradoxical movement of relationships.

Affectual responsiveness

In my narrative, I describe a range of feelings that I have about my job that are very present to my conscious sense of myself in role. I sense myself also as a roulette player, one who in this present context has managed to sustain the front of winning but who finds the anxiety of this front now too much to also sustain. What I think of as the emotional dynamics of a leadership role have, in my experience of doing such a job, been a highly significant aspect of the work. Outside of the literature that focuses explicitly on psychodynamic perspectives of work, this aspect of the experience of leadership seems to me to be relatively under-explored. Yet at a time when a great deal of writing seems to recognise the high degree of fantasy that surrounds expectations of the CEO role, in the public sector at least, this thinking has not moved much beyond exhortations to discover one's emotional intelligence, the application of psychometric assessments to appointment processes and the use of psychological typographies in team building strategies. In some way, I suspect that the resistance to thinking about the emotional dynamics of leadership roles, within the policy-forming domains in which studies such as the LSRC paper are located, is due to the possibility of compromising the ease with which it is assumed that blame, shame and accountability are played out.

What the LSRC researchers, and others engaged in similar research (Hay Group, 2002), are offering is a leadership mythology based upon a reified and sanitised representation of organisational change and the roles of staff occupying senior positions. Organisational leadership in the public sector takes place in a context of intense scrutiny and pressure to deliver organisational performance targets that are disaggregated from national outcome measures (Shore & Wright, 2000). In responding to this pressure, those in leadership positions focus on two key variables: the management of information and the terms and

conditions of employees. The focus on information is critical to the supply of evidence of the achievement of performance indicators and so too of the institution's targets. The focus on terms and conditions of employments iterates as a response to pressures also to increase performance at lower rates of unit cost. In my own experience of working in institutions deemed to be 'failing', the intensity of the focus on such issues is in direct proportion to the degree of assumed 'failure'. Such pressures are sustained by the intervention of regulatory, audit and inspection agencies. These regimes apply right across the public sector and the fracturing of individuals leading organisations under this pressure sometimes surface in the national media as scandals concerning the manipulation of data, the pursuit of speculative business ventures or the emergence of sudden and catastrophic financial failures.

'Leadership', as a process enacted by individuals in the public sector, is situated in this narrative context. It therefore entails the administration of the power centre that enables tighter control of the organisational processes. In my experience, this is the fastest way of demonstrating 'improvement' and it is also a whole organisation issue that demands of every employee an acceptance of higher levels of personal control, scrutiny and conformity with standard operating procedures. Leadership is therefore, in part, also a process that entails the imposition of new work disciplines upon a group of employees, justified in terms of the importance of being judged effective. Most often, such changes are accompanied by other more radical attacks on traditional working practices that are deemed to be out of date or inefficient. This in turn has resulted in wholesale contractual change across the public sector: new terms and conditions of employment (flexible contracts), contracting out, restructuring, down-sizing service reorganisation, merger and consolidation.

These processes I would argue engender great waves of anxiety, feelings of loss and threats to identity of those caught up in them. They also engender potent insider/outsider feelings as all of these processes entail the identification of winners (those promoted whose status and salaries are enhanced, retained, moved to 'better', 'safer', more secure jobs) and losers (those demoted, made redundant, and side-lined). A leadership/CEO position is therefore one that necessarily carries also the potency of any mythic role that is associated with the appearance of absolute powers of creation and destruction. Quite apart from the deep psycho-social phenomena of the kind that Eric Fromm (2002) explored in his analysis

of the attachment of followers to leaders, these quite cathartic but 'normalised' organisational processes will engender intense affectual responses in amongst those caught up in them.

Seeing leadership differently

My narrative attempts to describe a personal case study of the lived experience of occupying a leadership role. In the detail of my interactions with my chairman, in reflecting upon issues of power, norms and values I have tried to demonstrate that the real task of leadership occurs in such processes of interaction with others and in the degree to which our responsiveness to the other opens up new ways of acting and being together. I suggest that the relational process that I try to exemplify in this instance of my interactions with my chairman, is one that those in leadership roles replicate in similar but different ways in their interactions with others across the organisational context. I have also drawn attention to the intensity of the affectual dimension of the relationships with which those in leadership roles become engaged. Here I would argue that the particular intensity of these are in some way to be accounted for by the fantasy that in our culture surrounds what is an iconographic fixation with the power of individuals to be responsible for others, for the control of the flow of events and for the assurance of stability and continuity in individual lives. None of these attributes is remotely real. Sustaining the front of this role over a long period of time amongst a fairly stable community of the same individuals is therefore draining of the capacity for responsiveness of the kind to which Mead referred.

Writing of how he is attempting to recast the relationship between therapist and group in working from a complex responsive process perspective, Stacey describes his attempts to become a full participant in the life of the group. This he describes as one that entails a commitment on his part to recognise and to seek to change his behaviours relative to the embedded expectations of group members. This he argues is an attempt to dispel the myth of the absolute power of control of the group leader whilst recognising at the same time the unequal power ratio that exists between the leader and other group members. Stacey cites too instances in which he seeks to break the conventions of silence and distance adopted in the conventional demeanour of the therapeutic group leader by using strategies to intervene in the flow of conversation occurring within the group in order to challenge and to explain. Finally, Stacey indicates how, in seeking to change the nature of his interaction with the

group, given the power differential, his gesture has the potential to be amplified in the interactions of others and in so doing engenders movement in the nature of felt identity amongst those present (Stacey, 2001, pp 155-161). I relate to this text as a powerful instance of how changes in our own sense of self can inspire us to reframe the nature of our participation with others and therefore also to work with a heightened sense of what Mead described as responsiveness to community. Of itself, this does not imply a view of ultimate causes or ultimate ends. It presents simply a commitment to finding ways of participating fully as an individual in processes of human relating that acknowledge power and authority differentials and recognise the presence of others in the ongoing transformational processes.

My experience of leadership is not what I find described by researchers such as those engaged in the LSRC Leading Learning Project. I do not experience myself as an individual free to make strategic choices about my behaviour in relation to others. My local circumstance at work involves me in an ongoing struggle, working with a small group of others, to make sense of our place and context in order to frame agreements that enable us to act into a living present that we perceive to be pregnant with threat, insecurity and uncertainty. As we engage in this process together we, in relation to each other and ourselves in relation to other staff members, experience intense movements in our affectual responses. These give coloration to our ongoing interactions as in the social context of our being together the emerging themes and patterns of our responsiveness to each other become ordered in an ongoing process of power relating. The leadership position, I would argue, is a locus of power in this process. It is a reference point the particular qualities of which give stability to these emerging patterns of relating over time and across space. Leaders are participants in this process and leadership identities emerge too in the flux of the power relating process. It is in the recognition of this fact, in noticing oneself as a participant and in being responsive to the immediate others who are the community to which Mead referred, that an ethics of leadership behaviour emerges.

Synopsis and Critical Appraisal

Introduction

The following is a synopsis of the four projects that I undertook during the DMan programme at Hertfordshire. I have included in my portfolio a separate extended reflection addressing the issue of methodology and for this reason, methodological questions are not taken up in this synopsis. In the synopsis I have tried to review the principal themes that have emerged in the course of my research work. The synopsis is structured in a way that follows the evolution of these themes through this work rather than as a précis of each of the projects.

The process of personal reflection that was the subject of project 1 was an important experience for me. This was both in terms of the act of producing a summative picture of how I came to be at the threshold of the DMan programme and in the emotional responses that I experienced in connection with the act of disclosure that this project represented. I therefore begin the synopsis with some reflections about the content, form and experience of project 1 and draw attention to the implication of this body of experience for shaping the work that I went on to do in the later projects. The synopsis then goes on to draw out the issues and implications in my work of the following themes: anxiety, ontological security, power, ethics and leadership. As I review these themes I try to provide some background referenced against the material of the projects and further reflections concerning the UK public sector as a context for research and reflection about life in organisations. Finally, I comment briefly on how the experience of this programme has impacted upon me as a practitioner.

Reflection as an act of disclosure; the provocation of anxiety

In project one I began for the first time to write about my career experience in a serious and critical way. By this I mean that in working through the exercise of the first project I became engaged with a critical appraisal of my role and career experience rather than

taking it for granted. I also found the experience of the process of doing the first project to be personally significant in that I began to think very differently about the nature of human experience and the consequences of writing as a medium of communication.

I found writing from a first person perspective difficult at first. There is, I think, something particularly challenging about writing from the perspective of the first person: “I”. This is a perspective that is rare in academic traditions of writing which in general I would argue, recognise the voice of the third person as a voice of objectivity. Equally, this first person “I” is seldom the perspective taken by a professional voice. Here the pronoun is taken to be too subjective, too individualising of broader themes or issues and too personal to be reflective of a wider reality. In writing I discovered also that taking the perspective implied by of a first person narrative has the capacity to arouse great feelings of personal anxiety. I found too that this anxiety was more intense than any other that I have experienced in relation to any other writing that I have done in the past. I attribute the arousal of these feelings to a significantly different kind of accountability that flows from taking a first person perspective and I want to illustrate this by reference to a fantasy that I experienced often in the course of the DMan programme.

In this fantasy I started to share my projects with the people who were the immediate participants in the events that I described. In responding to this gesture, the recipients are variously critical, dismissive, angry and blaming. Some recipients pass on my work to others such as members of my board of governors, civil servants as well as policy-makers and politicians with whom I have had close dealings. As the fantasy develops and my feelings of anxiety mount, my relationships with such individuals change for the worse as I am discovered to be harbouring views that are deemed to be unacceptable to one occupying my job role. Suddenly the whole fabric of my relationships at work is compromised by what I have written about my experience. This fantasy has no redeeming features. In the end my position is too compromised for me to continue in my role. It is as if I, in my writing about my experience, have been the subject of a compromising media exposé.

In the early stages of the DMan process I felt some sense of security from the regulation that ensures a two year post-completion confidentiality period. Later, having agreed to the publication of some of my project work in a book series, I found myself preoccupied with

an editing process in which initially I felt driven to sanitise some of my initial observations, interpretations and narrative account of events. In short, I wanted to make the process of personal reflection more acceptable to an imagined reader of the text who I feared might associate my narrative too closely with me or who might recognise in the narrative an attack upon their own contribution to or perspective on the events described.

During the course of the DMan programme, I encountered many research student colleagues who believed that to sharing the product of their reflection might in some way endanger their position at work. Throughout the writing process we, as a learning set and as a larger group, used the convention of a running header in our papers that read “confidential”. This it was believed provided the essential security blanket under which it was possible to write and to explore our own individual worlds of work related experience. Late on in the programme I engaged at length with the idea of first person narratives of experience as a legitimate research methodology and I have included this piece of work in my final portfolio. But during the course of working on the DMan I felt an ever present interest in how one could account for the background anxiety feeling that was a definite aspect of my own experience and that of others in the group. What is it, I found myself wondering, that requires us to be so guarded? Why is it that narrating our experiences might be construed as so threatening or subversive to others that we have to insist upon codes of strict confidentiality? What is the taboo of first person narratives of experience?

From other experiences that I recall from my past, I am aware that research *per se* can give rise to great feelings of isolation. Whilst in this programme I have not experienced the same kind of isolation I have felt a level of anxiety that has been altogether different. As I played in my imagination with the idea of disseminating my reflections, this fantasy of making more open in real-time my reflection process, I realised that the capacity for being and for feeling rejected by others in response to a personal narrative is considerable. In one sense, this is an odd thought in that each of us makes sense of our experiences in conversations with others based upon constructing and sharing personal narratives. Writing a personal narrative of experience should therefore be quite a comfortable experience as it is also arguably the mode of sense-making in everyday discourse.

The difference between these two apparently similar processes is however significant and it is to be found in the nature of the power relating that occurs between individuals engaged

in face to face conversational processes as against those involved in writing and the responses that it engenders. By this I mean that in the moment of a face to face interaction, we are able to sense the boundaries of what is or is not acceptable to our ongoing relation with the other before whom we are present. We can intuit, read, encode, decode the permissible from the inadmissible. Conversations are to this extent performances in which we, each as parties to a process, invite the other into a mutually negotiated zone of shared and commonly referenced experience (Goffman, 1959). When we cannot sustain such a performance we find ourselves caught up in rows, heated arguments and at times the irretrievable breakdown of a relationship. The ability to draw another 'in' is the mechanism of gossip, of insider/outsider relationships, of processes that create groups and sub-groups.

The success of our everyday conversational life is therefore contingent upon our ability to know how to negotiate intersubjective encounters. This is not quite the same for writing. Writing entails a statement of feelings, beliefs, intentions, observations etc. that is altogether more concrete. Writing is a kind of evidence that endures beyond the moment of one's immediate encounter with text. The nuances of negotiated meaning, of hedged references and allusions that occur and which are the substance of the kind of politicised conversational processes in which we are all expert practitioners, certainly when we are at work, are not available in responses to writing. Writing is an act of declaration, a fixed point or place that is open potentially to endless interpretation, debate and argument. But, unlike the processes of face to face dialogue, the writer cannot go back: he or she cannot renegotiate the meaning of what was written to the extent that the renegotiation of the meaning of what was said remains possible. He or she cannot undo or deny the written word. Writers cannot prevent others engaging in processes of active interpretation. The meaning of the gestures of all communicative action are to be found in the responses that such actions arouse in others. Writers are often by definition physically and temporally distant from their readers. The capacity for control, for responding to the other, for being an ongoing participant in the co-creation of meaning are therefore substantially diminished. It is therefore in relation to the specific form of writing as a medium and the first person narrative as a mode of expression that this sense of risk, anxiety and potentially threat to one's ongoing sense of self is located.

I therefore understand my concern to preserve the privacy of the research process in terms of an anxiety about being found out: of being discovered to be antagonistic towards prevailing policies, attitudes and ways of working, rather than of being discovered a protagonist. First person narratives require us to acknowledge our experience to ourselves and to others. A consequence of this is that writing, except in the instance of self-censorship, closes off the opportunity to leave unsaid the observations that may lead to one's exclusion from a network of established relations. Writing and publication may put at risk one's ability to sustain the performance necessary for a role taken at work to cohere. A reluctance to share the early product of this reflective process therefore seems to me to derive, in particular contexts, from a form of paranoia; anxiety about the possibility of, or potential for, a subsequent attack upon oneself. Such anxiety strikes me also as being wholly justified and one worth taking seriously.

Emotion, insight and cultural context

In the process of this writing I therefore started to engage with my own emotional world of experience and to confront the implications of this for my role as a practitioner leader heading a large and complex UK public sector body. By drawing attention to my own feelings and *position* in this way in project one, I discovered later, that this was a basis for exploring more widely the responses of others to me and to a bigger sense of context in which work in the public sector is conducted. I began to make sense of my experience as an agent forming and being formed by the continuous iteration of the themes that inform the conduct of organisational life in this sector. I believe these themes are definable and quite limited in number. Taken together, these themes represent a powerful set of normative ideas about conduct, responsibility and purpose. Experienced in this way, in the repetitious and regulated conduct of everyday organisational life, the repeated experience of living with such themes is the experience of a specific 'culture'. By culture here I am referring to processes of ongoing human interaction in which codes of conduct, presumptions about attitudes, demeanours of consent and tolerance of particular and directive ways of working, constitute an experience that takes on a definite character. In the writing of G.H. Mead this notion of character assumed a wider philosophical significance in the idea of the "generalised other". This is the sense that we each have of a larger social context against which our own conduct is judged, which defines the sense that we have of ourselves ("me") and in relation which we define also our sense of personal

accountability. Since the late 1980's this sense that I have of an emergent and specific form of work culture is described frequently also as the "modernisation agenda" or as the process of "public service reform".

In project one I started to explore the idea of leadership (i.e. leadership as a subject of academic enquiry; as an aspect of contemporary thinking about organisational life and change; as a moral and ethical standpoint) from the perspective of my immediate life experience as it arises from being in a designated or recognised leadership role at work.

On re-reading my first project, I am struck by the feelings of disorientation that it still arouses in me. I read in the project a narrative account of a person who was possessed of great certainty in terms of their grasp of the right and the good. Over time this sense of certainty is increasingly tempered by the awareness of being implicated in a process of change that has changed fundamentally the value context in which educational institutions operate. But this loss of certainty has not been replaced by another, different more right or more left wing ideological vision: just a set of quasi-existential questions about meaning, conduct and authenticity.

My thinking about education and the practice of teaching was influenced by three key thinkers: John Dewey (1938); Paulo Freire (1972); Carl Rogers (1967). I locate the work of these writers within the broad intellectual traditions of the liberal and humanist political left. I found the left liberal consensus within which I worked at the end of the 1970's to be immensely energising. I felt encouraged to work with others in the development of new creative classroom practice. There was a tangible impetus towards new thinking about curriculum and course development. It was the left in the profession that first responded to issues of social exclusion and inequality in access to educational opportunities. Sharing this thinking with others in the early stages of my career, I became very involved with many new initiatives to engage disaffected young people and disassociated adults in learning. But I remember too that at the same time I was noticing that there was often considerable negligence when it came to focusing on outcomes for students. Examination pass rates in inner city schools and colleges were often dismal. There was generally a lack of what might be described as a duty of care in such institutions. The unionisation and power of the professional teaching workforce was, I believe(d), a critical factor that reflected a preoccupation with vested self-interest rather than a concern for the educational

needs of the client group. As someone involved with the development of quite radical new alternatives to what was then mainstream education I found myself often in conflict with prevailing attitudes towards what constituted admissions' policies, academic standards, acceptable classroom behaviours, teaching and learning styles and approaches towards assessment. As my career developed, I saw no contradiction between the modernisation process, the contribution to this process of senior managers acting locally at institutional level and my personal sense of ethical commitment to establishing a fully inclusive educational system. Whilst I felt fully committed to modernising the education service and to making it more responsive to the needs of an inner city population, I felt no sense at all of alignment with the ideological imperatives of the politicians who were driving the reform agenda.

It was only later, some 25 years after the start of what has felt like a lifetime's commitment, that I felt an overwhelming sense of exhaustion: a sense of service to a cause devoid of ethical intent. I think that it was for these reasons that I found myself attracted to the work of Macmurray (1935, 1957, 1961), McIntyre (1981, 1998), Rorty (1980, 1991, 1999) and the contemporary thinking about education of Michael Fielding (2001). Each of these writers has in some way identified the importance of an ethics of mutuality, respect for others and a recognition of intersubjective dependence to a sustainable democratic society. Such themes, I discovered as my work on the DMan progressed, resonated also in the work of Mead (1934, 1938), Elias (1991, 2000, 2001) and Foulkes (1948, 1990) who I have come to regard, in terms of primary source material, as the writers whose work provides the cornerstone for thinking also about the idea of complex responsive processes.

Performativity and ontological insecurity

Looking back over the four principal projects of my portfolio I recognise now that the issue of anxiety emerges as a substantial theme. Here in this synopsis I have described something of my own feelings of anxiety in approaching the task of making sense of my experience in senior management in the post-16 sector. This I see as arising in the anticipation (rightly or wrongly) of the responses of others to a reading of my perspectives on my experience and the implications of this for what it might signify more broadly about me, them and our shared organisational experience. In project's two and three I explored

this theme as it appeared in quite different contexts but amongst groups of people working within the same overall organisational context. The unifying features of the two case studies are I think to be found in common experiences which involve specific types of power relationship and *inter alia* the conscious and unconscious responses of people experiencing fundamental threats to their sense of identity and of self.

The issue of anxiety and the sense of ontological insecurity that it signifies is well documented by writers concerned with the relationship of the self to modern industrial and post-industrial societies (Giddens, 1991: Fromm, 2002: Fineman, 2000: Hirschhorn, 1990, 1993: Stacey, 2003: Taylor, 1989). What I have explored in these projects however is the way in which these themes are played out in the micro-detail of everyday, routine working relationships. I have also, I would argue, drawn attention to the emergence of the issue of ontological insecurity as being at the centre of, or fundamental to, the essential character of working lives in public sector institutions. Here I think it is important to differentiate between the general feelings of anxiety that are common to all human beings engaged in the process of sustaining their sense of self in relation to others, the *I-me* dialectic of which Mead (1934) wrote so extensively, and a specific context of experience in which the provocation of deep feelings of ontological insecurity is an explicit action taken by those with power and designed to assure conformity of behaviour on the part of those in some way responsible to them (Lawrence, 2000). This second, and more specific dynamic I associate directly with what I and others would describe in the UK context as the rise of a particularly performative orientation to policy in relation to the management and delivery of public services. This I believe is allied to a recurrence in recent political history of what Elias described as a “centrifugal spurt” in the concentration of political power (Elias 2000).

In project three, I drew attention to what I consider to be the courtly nature of dominant political power relationships in the UK today. This I see as deriving from a number of complex and inter-related factors: the phenomenon of the past twenty years of political parties forming governments with very large parliamentary majorities; the decentralisation but increased regulation of public service delivery under the managerial aegis of unelected non-departmental government bodies (quangos); the emergence of a centre-right consensus which posits a post-industrial vision of the West as a knowledge producer in a globalised economy; the centrality in the ideology of the political centre-right of the idea of “performance” and “delivery”. The re-emergence of these courtly political relationships

in, to use Giddens (1991) term a period of high modernity, has in the absence of other local centres of democratic opposition brought senior managers into direct face to face relationships with the administrators of central government policy. At a local and regional level such people are, I would argue, the new commissars of a particular kind of anti-democratic but devolved national government. To be brought into direct interaction with such people is to encounter a caste of political functionaries every one of whom is as caught up in processes of performative accountability as those in relation to whom and for whom they administrate. In project 3, I exemplify this caste in the person of the Director to whom I refer and her officers.

In ways that are still new to life in the public sector in the UK, personal accountability for the delivery of performance targets linked to the main electoral and finance allocation cycles of government, has become entrenched in what I refer to as the micro-detail of everyday lived experience. This I think posits a particular kind of work ethic: one in which ongoing ontological security is contingent upon one's ability to sustain a performance of success in a context which does not admit of the possibility of systemic policy failure but which localises the causes of underachievement in the personal capabilities of individual unit managers.

In projects 2 and 3 I explored the ways in which individuals in senior management roles are in different ways implicated as agents of such processes of power and control and at the same time subject to the waves of ontological insecurity that such processes engender. I focused on these issues by way of making sense of an event, involving myself and group of senior managers, that took place during a management development event held at the Roffey Park Institute. The importance of project 2 to my overall thesis is that it was my first attempt to make sense of the events that I described in a way that took account of my own part as a participant in the co-creation of the relational process that I describe. It was also the first occasion in which I explored the implications of adopting different theoretical, or critical, perspectives for the nature of an emergent narrative.

In beginning to work on project 2, I was deeply affected by the analytical power of the psychoanalytic perspectives of writers such as Bion (2001), Hirschhorn (1991, 1993), Agazarian and Peters (1981), and Nitsun (1996). But as I worked with these perspectives, I recognised that they seemed to lead inexorably to explanations of what had occurred

which located the issue of causality within the psyches of the participant characters rather than in the emergent nature of the process of relating. This I think is consistent with a systemic view of processes of relating where the individual/group relationship is understood in part to whole terms. This is to say that the group assumes a meta identity, as in Foulkes' concept of the matrix, which is other than the relational processes occurring between the individuals present. Individual responses to a particular context are therefore understood also in terms that refer to archaic impulses rooted in some way in the psyche. In such a model Bion's basic assumptions take on the significance of reflex behaviours triggered in a condition/response-type mechanism within individuals as they respond to the group.

By contrast, I tried to make sense of the experience of the events at Roffey Park in terms of the idea of complex responsive processes which places emphasis upon the social implications of individuals relating together and upon the patterning of organising themes, such as power, which provide the context of their being together. Reactions arising in the process of being together may well be described in terms similar to those used by Bion (e.g. fight, flight, pairing, dependence) but the notion of causality is located in the social context. Causality is therefore in the iteration of patterns of togetherness in the actions of the participants, rather than in the spilling of the contents of individual characters or psyches of the participants. In exploring these themes project 2 focused also on the iconographic power of the "social object" of leadership as the kernel of processes of organisational relating.

To this extent, project 2 illuminates also the points that I was making above concerning what I would describe as a cult of performance in the UK public sector and the issue of ontological insecurity. The events described in project 2 occurred some six months following an inspection by Ofsted as a result of which the college of which I and this group were key senior managers had been judged "inadequate". At the same time, and this set a precedent still not repeated in the FE sector, the leadership and management of the college was judged to be "satisfactory". The text of the section of the report relating to leadership and management was much more strongly positive than is suggested by "satisfactory". By contrast the text of the report relating to much of the academic work of the college was highly critical. Whilst there were many and complex political and institutional factors that led to this outcome, what was relevant and meaningful to this group on this occasion was

that they had been brought together to reflect upon their own organisational roles and responsibilities at a point in time when the future for all of us, and for the staff in general, was pregnant with threat. The outcome of the 2002 inspection carried the consequence of re-inspection in 2004. The implications for everyone of failing this re-inspection were felt to be too awful to contemplate. The governing body, it was known, had given me a mandate to take whatever action I, with their support, deemed necessary to ensure success on the next occasion.

From a complex responsive process perspective this occasion exemplifies the significance of feeling states aroused in a living present for the nature of emergent relationships. Living present refers to the sense of temporal process that at the same time provides our compulsion to action and which is our experience of action itself. We each act socially in relation to our sense of the other informed by our narrative of past experience and our anticipation of the future: that is, of what in the light of past events, *it* will be like once we have acted (Stacey, 2001).

Power, power relating and the issue for identity

The issue of anxiety, that I am arguing here is the emotional response to a felt sense of ontological insecurity, points up another key theme in my thesis which is the significance and paradox of power and processes of power relating to the emergence of identity. In my own work I interpret power and power relating as referring to relational processes rather than to substances, systems or structures. This approach is consistent with a perspective that views the dynamics of human relating in terms of complex responsive processes. Within this perspective human relating is understood as emergent, a self-organising phenomena in which there are no rules *per se*, only the continuous iteration of power. Power relating therefore enables and constrains at the same time the patterning of conduct (to which the word “relationship” refers) occurring between living human bodies in interaction. Such patterning is ordered, it gives rise for example to the order that we experience as society, but it is inherently unstable, unpredictable and capable of radical transformation. Over long spans of time, the emergent and transformative nature of such processes result in the large scale transformations of society (e.g. the changes that have led to industrialisation or which have engendered political revolutions). Norbert Elias described these macro-temporal effects with the term “socio-genesis” (Elias, 2000). He

therefore depicted the relationships between individuals occurring locally in the micro time spans of individual lives, as aspects or moments of this much larger ongoing process of socio-genesis. Elias', perspective on the relationship between local events and global processes is, I would argue, akin to Gleick's perspective on fractals in which the inherent complexity of a process is replicated at any degree or depth of detail: a panoramic view is qualitatively different from but as complex as the view through a micro-scope (Gleick, 1998) . By extension the complexity that is apparent from a panoramic view of social phenomena over long spans of time (as for example, in the instance of understanding the nature of civilising processes), is evident also in a different way in the exploration of the micro-detail of individual lives.

This thinking about power, power relating and its consequent significance for understanding what is going on in human relationships (of which organisational life is but a particular context or instance) is therefore radically different from the approach that I would associate with other traditions of thought such as structuralism and systems thinking. Such differences, those between process and systems approaches, were argued out in some detail by Elias in his critique of the work of the sociologist Talcott Parsons whom he criticised for “a systematic reduction of social processes to social states” and “seemingly homogeneous components” (Goudsblom & Mennell, 1998; 125-129). Such reductionism is I would argue an inevitable consequence of a systemic or structuralist perspective and is to be found with a variety of nuance in the work of many other writers (e.g. Mintzberg, Habermas Foucault and Giddens). In the work of these writers power therefore has the character of a force or form or substance that sits outside, or put another way, acts *on*, relational processes rather than being constituted *as* the process itself. Mintzberg (1995) for example, developed a model of power in organisations based upon hard bounded static typologies which he represented graphically in his “taxonomy of organisational forms”. Habermas (1981) developed also in his theory of communicative action a notion of power as the “stabilising medium” that runs between layers of individual lifeworld experience, thus splitting the individual from the social. Foucault (1991, 1994) throughout his extensive writings on power uses the analogy of power as an instrument or tool which he characterises as having the capacity to be passed between individuals and various agencies of the state. For Foucault power is something in the possession of those in authority. It does not have the quality of an emergent relational process as in the instance of an Hegelian appreciation of the master/servant relationship. Giddens (1984),

who I believe to be greatly influenced in his thinking by Elias, developed the concept of “*structuration*” in an attempt to reconcile a systemic reification of the idea of power with a process model to account for emergence in the character of social change

I would argue that my projects 2, 3 and 4 take up the issue of power as a substantial theme and explore it in a way that is consistent with a complex responsive process perspective. Such a view therefore posits the idea of power as being immanent within the process of what G H Mead described as the social act. Power arises in the iteration of mechanisms of gesture and response as they occur between human beings engaged in communicative interaction. The thinking of complex responsive processes takes up and builds upon Mead’s phenomenology. Mead’s phenomenology pays regard also to the Hegelian concepts of *negation* and *dialectic*. These epistemological roots are therefore essential to understanding power in terms of processes of human interaction rather than as systems of behaviour (typologies) or as social structures. A perspective informed by the phenomenologies of Mead and Hegel also, I think, clarifies why our feelings of anxiety and security co-exist paradoxically in the same experience.

Mead’s phenomenology derives from his analysis of the consequences for perception and apperception (i.e. self conscious awareness) of the relationship occurring between living human bodies and the environment. In terms of the perception of other bodies (physical objects) and persons (social objects) “environment” in human relations terms constitutes the sense of other. However it was Mead’s analysis of the nature of apperception that was most central to his extended philosophy of mind, self and society. Mead set out his particular thesis regarding the socio-biological foundations of apperception in his analysis of the *I-me* dialectic. This takes the character of the reflective self (*I*) knowing, having a sense of, its social character (*me*). This is a dialectic which posits the idea that a knowledge of oneself (*I* having an awareness of *me*) is contingent upon the perception of another. That is say that reflexive self awareness (the psychological state of consciousness that distinguishes humans from other mammals) is contingent upon an innate ability to perceive the other. This according to Mead we do in two quite distinct ways. The first is physical: we perceive the other as a body in its physical form. Mead’s philosophy of the person is significant for attacking any kind of dualism in relation to the mind/body relationship. The second is social: we have the capacity to *recognise* the social character of this body. Our ability to recognise persons as being at the same time constituted as

physical bodies but also as personalities arises as a result of our capacity to recognise social objects. The third aspect of Mead's phenomenology is in the view that humans also have the capacity to construct "scientific objects": that is to say images of the other (forms, concepts, abstractions) in imagination. The essential philosophical point here is that it is our perceptual awareness of our differences relative to others, as physical bodies in space and time and as persons, that enables us to build a coherent sense of ourselves. Our sense of self is therefore a function of other socio-biological processes of discrimination. Taken to its extreme, in a world in which all human beings were physically and socially identical it would not be possible to form a sense of self.

This idea of the fundamental and paradoxical nature of difference is also central to Hegelian thinking and the dialectic of negation. This dialectic, the emergence of identity in the paradoxical coexistence of opposites, is often depicted by reference to Hegel's example of the master/servant relationship. Here the identity of the master arises only in the context of there being at the same time a servant. Equivalently servants only have such identity when viewed in relation to the role of the master. This paradoxical form, that is one in which the recognition of the difference of the other is fundamental to the possibility of becoming aware of oneself, is therefore also a general statement of the experience of human relations.

The idea of human interaction implies too the significance of the sensation of time (temporal passage) for the sense of identity. This is the awareness that we have of continuity in our knowledge of who we and others *are*: we recognise to ourselves over time an identity of similarity. Put another way our sense of identity is reproduced in the passage of time. In complex responsive process thinking this sensation is understood also as the experience of the living present. The living present is therefore our particularly human experience of the flow of time in which we sense ourselves to be in a continuous moment of the present, acting into an anticipated future on a basis that is informed by what we know to have been the past. It is in the process of this experience of the living present that patterns of communicative action emerge and are iterated continuously. Such iterations give rise to emergent patterns of conduct and relating that we recognise as the society (Mead's sense of the "generalised other") to which we belong.

The paradoxical nature of power relating, that it is at the same time a source of identity and a threat to identity, arises by virtue of the fact that identity is itself contingent upon the character of relationships that are of themselves in continuous process of formation (iteration) in time. The nature of the social act in which the gesture of one finds meaning in the response of another is a context full of risk. Our ability to sustain the performances necessary to reproduce the identities via which we are recognised and in which we recognise ourselves is therefore always dependent also upon the demeanour of others in relation to us. Power relating is therefore what is happening all of the time that we are in existence as self-conscious social beings. Our ability to sustain a confident sense of ourselves therefore relies upon our ability also to sustain the confidence of others in the integrity (or the utility) of such an identity to the meaningfulness of an ongoing relationship. On the occasions that we find ourselves unable to do this (we slip-up; we are amongst others who have no prior knowledge of our social position; we are deemed by significant others to have failed to deliver or to perform) we suffer the potentially traumatic experience of having our identity, our sense of self, threatened (Turquet, 1975). At times of acute stress or mental breakdown, such threats to identity constitute the experience of annihilation (Hoggett, 1992).

It is in the nature of a phenomenology that the principles set out represent a universalised view of the human condition. Mead however recognised in his own writing the essential plasticity of both the human capacity for affectual responsiveness and the patterns of conduct between humans that give rise to social formations. Elias too, although working from a different perspective and discipline, took a view similar to that of Mead in the development of his ideas concerning *figuration* and *habitus* (Elias, 2000). It is the idea of *habitus* in Elias' writing that provides the conceptual and iterative linkage between the elaboration of large scale social process and the specific character of the psycho-social responsiveness of individuals. In essence, Elias' principal thesis posits and elaborates an association of particular forms of society with particular affectual qualities in the psychological responses of the individuals who en masse constitute such societies (Elias 1991).

I have found the work of Mead and Elias to be particularly helpful to understanding what occurs between people at work. An argument that emerges from my project studies is that work itself is a potent source for the feelings of ontological insecurity which Giddens is, in

his turn documenting, as the psycho-social condition of an age of high modernity. This is a position that a number of other writers (Sennet, 1998: Knights and Wilmott, 1999) and particularly those working with a psychoanalytic perspective (Hirschhorn, 1990, 1998: Lawrence, 2000: Hoggett, 1992) have taken. My underlying argument with regard to the relationship between this general theme and the experiences about which I write in these projects is that the emergence in the UK public sector of a dominant discourse of performativity has had particular consequences that are manifest in the figurations of power that characterise such working relationships. They are manifest too in the emergence of a particular *habitus* amongst those caught up in this process in which the sense of a compulsion to perform drives and is driven by powerful feelings of ontological insecurity. It is this anxiety chain, or anxiety *figuration*, that is I believe the defining context of work in the public sector now.

Educational institutions; schools, colleges and universities are all places in which those working within them have become implicated in the reproduction of relationships that functionalise knowledge, the idea of “education” itself and individuals (both teachers and students) as factors of production. Performative strategies in the field of education are therefore to be understood in terms of the cult values associated with the goals of economic competitiveness and the idea of an emergent knowledge economy (Lyotard, 1979: Gleeson & Husbands, 2001: Fielding, 2001). When Giddens (1991) draws attention to politicians’ desires to “colonise the future”, he signals the dynamic link between politics and anxiety in an age characterised by a “centrifugal spurt” in the concentration of political authority. For in a context of work (the public sector) framed by a tightly supervised performative culture in which the tendency is always to posit future states in terms of the failings of present and the past, a positive sense of self for those in managerial roles is bound up with the realisation of the fantasy future state. This is a bi-polar condition where the options are starkly contrasted in terms of insider/outsider categories. It is each individual’s struggle to hold face, to sustain one’s reputation, to intuit the sensitivities of conveying the appearance of being on message, to appear always to be in control and to be an effective performer that emerges in the group dynamics that I describe in detail in projects 2 and 3.

In project 4 where I focus on a one to one meeting that took place between myself and my chairman, I explored further how the iteration of processes of power relating is also bound up with ethics. The project was an attempt to find a way of describing what leadership *is*

and what those in leadership roles actually *do* without recourse to the idealising language and typologies that characterise much of the ‘expert’ writing on this subject. This project therefore demonstrates that the actions of those in leadership roles emerge as responses either to an individual impulse to action informed by personal judgements about what is the right thing to do, or from complex conversational processes in which individuals, caught up in processes of power relating struggle to negotiate a common sense of the good and the right that should inform the character of real world action (Joas, 2000). In either event the manner of the resolution of a debate about the good and the right (that is, the tension between a sense of value and a sense of norm) and the action that emerges from this has profound implications for ethics and identity.

Project 4 therefore illustrates both the sophistication of wider processes of social control that impel us towards normative behaviours (the social objects of regulatory bodies, rules articulated in legal statute etc.) but also that individual responsiveness presents always the potential for non-conformity. The ethical struggle to pursue a course of action in the name of the good as against the name of the right can always go either way. It is the conditionality, the multiplicity of factors that might predispose an individual to act in a particular way, that each of us perceives as attaching to our uniquely personal sense of ontological security that in the moment will inform our action. Thresholds of fear and shame are clearly of vital importance here. An individual who, for whatever reason, has a high threshold of fear or of shame is more likely to act on the basis that their sense of the good also constitutes what is right. It is, I think, no accident that in the recent past in the public service context it is those who have just retired, or changed career or have been sacked speak out in these terms. Other voices, those of individuals who need for whatever reason to go on and who sense the threat to identity of speaking out, are moderated by this sense of risk.

Doing leadership

My commitment to the DMan programme was borne of a desire to understand, in ways that made sense to me, my own experience of working at CEO level in the public sector. I felt too that to be able to do this would enable me to have a sense of what constitutes the practical conduct of leadership. I say practical conduct because, as I indicated in some of the project work, I have never been able to fully reconcile the neat, simplistic and idealised

leadership typologies of traditional managerial textbooks with the stress, chaos and everyday messiness of my experience of working at the head of complex institutions. At the end of the DMan programme I feel that I have now achieved this insight. But my view of what leaders *do* in organisations and therefore of what leadership *is*, is different from most of what I encounter in standard texts and research concerning good practice in the public sector.

First and foremost I would argue that leadership, at least in public sector settings, involves a preoccupation with the administration of power and authority. As such, leadership entails paying attention to the organisational processes that create a framework of discipline in relation to which others are encouraged to focus on primary organisational tasks. Clearly, a sense of what constitutes a legitimate primary task is often what informs industrial relations and other disputes or debates that arise in the daily life of organisations. I am not therefore suggesting that leadership is always also the successful imposition of a blanket of conformity. I am suggesting however that leaders are the local advocates of macro policies as they are the energisers of processes of control designed to ensure that others enact behaviours that are consistent and compliant with respect to the wider policy orientation of their service. The actions of those in leadership roles are critical to containing within the boundaries of normative action, the actions of others whose behaviour is motivated by feelings of value that are inconsistent with prevailing norms.

In terms that would make sense in group analysis, organisations are particular examples of the large group. There is, I believe something fundamental to the nature of leadership that in analytic terms would be understood as “containing”. Containing I interpret as action intended to manage or stave off the free-flow of anxiety that would emerge in the absence of a sense of rules, boundaries or authority. Leadership roles are therefore also paradoxically implicated in the issue of identity formation for others. Leaders are at the same time the focal point for others’ feelings of ontological security and insecurity. This I described particularly in project 2 where I dealt with the anxiety responses that I in my role, with a reputation for being a strong and effective leader, evoke in a way that engenders anxiety both by my *presence* (the actions that I might take might be destructive of others) or my *absence* (someone perceived to be less able to manage the situation than me might come in my place) engender in others.

Secondly, I would argue that leadership is bound up with ethics. Leadership in organisations can still be imbued with a great deal of moral authority of a kind that Mead described when he wrote that:

[The] relationship of the individual to the community becomes striking when we get great minds that by their advent make the wider society a noticeably different society. Persons of great mind and great character have strikingly changed the communities to which they have responded. We call them leaders, as such, but they are simply carrying to the nth power this change in the community by the individual who makes himself a part of it, who belongs to it. (Mead, 1934; 216)

It seems to me that those in leadership roles have the potential to enact authority in ways that mediate the wider context of power, authority and accountability for which they, at the head of an organisation, are responsible. I tried to illustrate this point to some extent in project 2 where I described my own attempt to avoid demonising rank and file staff members following a poor inspection outcome. I gave a further illustration of this in project 4 of the staff member at risk of dismissal. Leaders have this quite unique opportunity in the life of their organisations because their position makes them a gatekeeper for some aspects of the experience of others. In my experience, recognising and trying to work with this aspect of a leadership role is a difficult and messy position from which to work. Leadership in the public sector is increasingly bound up with an expectation that individuals in such roles are de facto instrumental to the implementation of policy priorities. This I would argue is the thinking behind and justification for the huge resource commitment from central government to ‘professionalising’ leadership across the public sector. As I suggested in project 4, policy failure is increasingly associated with the failure of individuals in senior positions judged in terms of motivation and technical competence. To sustain the performance of a leadership role therefore entails also sustaining a commitment to enacting authority in a manner that is recognisably consistent with the implementation of policy imperatives. These policy imperatives are manifest in the myriad of modernising and reform initiatives that flow from ministers to agencies and into institutions. The presumption is therefore that those in leadership roles will administer (will, operationalise) these initiatives.

To this extent managers provide a linking mechanism of the kind that Mead described as existing between the community and the institution (Mead, 1934; 261). Managerial behaviours are therefore critical to enabling others whose identities are bound up with that of the organisation to take-up the more generalised themes of power prevalent in the wider community. Managerial anxiety therefore becomes deeply associated with a perceived need to be responsive to the political initiatives of others such as government ministers who appear to determine the framework of ultimate accountability within which local managers operate. In the public sector, initiatives are often short term reflex responses to large scale and complex policy aspirations on the part of ministers and secretaries of state. The anxiety of senior political figures to be seen to deliver therefore becomes taken-up eventually in the priorities and behaviours of local managers. Leadership, the work of staff with bottom-line responsibilities to ensure institutional conformity with the perceived norms of the community, is deeply implicated in the reproduction of power relationships that threaten profoundly the ontological securities of other managers and frontline staff. The cult of public service reform therefore entails often the justification for an action (by an institution) being predicated on the delivery of benefits to society at large (the community or generalised other). The pursuit of this good makes right however managerial processes in which the active shaming of subordinate others (expressed in performance targets, personal objectives, appraisal) is a normative condition of work.

Leaders therefore face daily ethical choices with regard to the extent to which, in their participation in the life of their organisations, they opt to cipher or to challenge such processes. My comment in relation to my own experience of grappling with this dilemma is that it is another instance in experience that involves a paradox of being and of not being. That is say: to sustain the necessary performance one has to be the cipher of these larger, macro, power relations. But to survive the performance ethically, in a way which can be justified as entailing also an authentic recognition of the other of the kind that Mead, Dewey, Macmurray, McIntyre and Rorty recognise, it is important at the same time to challenge the presumptions and the practices implicit in such performances. In working in recent years with a knowledge of this paradox, I would say that the experience can reasonably be described as a context of bounded uncertainty within which the ongoing sustainability of a role and a performance is continuously lived at the edge of chaos. Yet this is also an immensely creative context within which to work because the absence of certainty, security and a sense of belonging is of itself a source of inspiration in terms of

exploring new ways to reach out and engage others in dialogue about how *it* and *we* might go on together.

The third aspect of what I think of as *doing* leadership that I want to draw attention to relates to the question of iconography of power that leaders come to represent in the lives of others. It is impossible to progress into a CEO role for the first time and not experience the sensation of celebrity that such a position holds in the life of an organisation. The attentiveness of everyone within an organisation to what kind of person the CEO is, what he or she looks like, wears, eats, thinks, wants, can do, cannot do is extraordinary in its degree. This obsession with the character of the leader is coupled with a tendency to see an organisation in terms of the persona of the CEO: to locate the responsibility for the life, in its widest sense, of an organisation with the individual. In the education sector for example reference will often be made to person *a*, *b* or *c*'s school, college or university. Other major events are also personalised: person *a*, *b* or *c* will be said to have had a good or bad inspection; a good or bad financial year. The reputation of an institution is also often coupled with the name of the head of the institution: person *a* runs a good college; person *b* runs a bad college. By implication person *a* is deemed to be good and person *b* deemed to be not so good. The organisational implication of such processes is, I would argue that the identities of others become bound up with such iconography. Leaders, whether they like it or not, assume roles of very central importance to the bigger picture in which each of us senses the location of our own individual lives.

In the psychodynamic tradition, this phenomena and its implications for the emotional responsiveness occurring between individuals is often accounted for by reference to the ideas of projection and projective identification (Krantz, 1993: Schwartz, 1993). The stress that leaders experience is, for example, sometimes deemed to be the product of their introjection of the projections of sub-ordinates. People in sub-ordinate positions are said to experience stress and anxiety as a result of not being adequately recognised by those in leadership roles: hence an obsessive preoccupation in some organisations with recognition strategies. People, as in the instance of my narrative in project 2, will claim to experience feelings of empowerment and disempowerment arising from the presumed personality traits of superiors and the CEO. In response to such endemic anxieties a plethora of tools has emerged that are designed to analyse individual propensities for particular team roles, psycho-metric profiles and patterns of emotional intelligence. These are justified on the

basis that the knowledge of such data will enable leaders to adjust their behaviours in order to become more effective in managing their relationships with others. This it seems to me to be the logical extension of the idea that the primary task of those in management and leadership roles is to be in control. Latterly the concept of control has moved from a focus on production and service functions to take in also the supervision of the emotional ambience of an organisation.

From my own experience, as reflected in these DMan projects, I would argue that individuals in leadership roles cannot avoid becoming implicated in, or bound up with, the material that emerges from the iconographic potency of the role. In relation to this they do not have choices and they are not in control. Leadership can however entail a commitment to reworking the manner of one's own participation in the life of an organisation. Whilst such action will not diminish the significance of the actions of the leader in the lives of others, it can and will influence the dynamics that are associated with how people relate one to another. In taking such action, someone in a leadership role will become party to the emergence of new, transforming possibilities, which enable both themselves and others around them to see things differently. It is in the active participation in such sense-making processes on an organisational scale that each of our identities as social and organisational being are elaborated. *Doing* leadership, as I tried to suggest in project 4, entails also paying attention on one's own account of the ethics of participation in the ongoing lives of others.

My fourth point is that *doing* leadership is creative action (Joas, 1992). I express the act of doing leadership in this way to draw attention to the idea that leadership is a particular kind of process of relating that involves persons acting in relation one to another on the basis of a specific power relationship. Leadership is something that emerges in a process of relating. Leadership is therefore not the one-sided action of an individual acting without reference to a sense of the presence of another. This way of thinking about leadership refers back to Hegel's idea of the master and servant relationship and therefore also to the idea of the unity of opposites. To apply this Hegelian way of thinking to the leadership idea therefore posits also a view of the leader/follower relationship in which the characteristics of the action of leading determine and yet are determined at the same time by the characteristics of those who are led. My point here is that being led is *de facto* also creative action: the social act of leading (the gesture) finds meaning in the corresponding

action of following (the response). Neither is a possibility without the other. Here again, the implications of the Hegelian idea of a unity of opposites are far reaching in terms of the ethics of human relating in organisations and for thinking about oneself in a leadership role. This I believe is because each of us is responsible for the manner in which we enter into processes of relating with others irrespective of what we might presume to be our pre-given authority for action.

In an oblique way it seems to me that it is this ethical issue, understood in performance management terms, that management developers are trying to address with the myriad of emotional intelligence, team-type and personality or psychometric assessment instruments that are the staple of leadership programmes. I say oblique, because the search and use of such tools is of itself a recognition of the fact that managerial relationships are inherently conflictual. Most management development, at least as I have experienced it, would not see conflict (of the kind that Mead described and to which I referred in project 2) as a stimulus to creative and transformational change but as a barrier to achieving organisational objectives. Management strategies designed to smooth out such conflict are informed largely by a systemic way of thinking in which behaviours deemed not to be aligned with organisational objectives are regarded as dysfunctional. The growth of leadership training in emotional intelligence, theories about team roles, personality types and psychometric assessments are therefore all about this search for 'fit' or put another way the alignment of the human resource attributes of an organisation with its performance objectives. In my experience managers are generally deeply anxious to be given access to what are believed to be the tools of a trade. These are the "practical" techniques or equipment that will enable them to avoid conflict but achieve at the same time continuous improvements to organisational performance. My argument here is that this search for tools and practical solutions should be understood as a defensive response to the feelings of ontological insecurity that are characteristic of so much managerial work. Such tools are also often based upon tautological assumptions about the way in which leaders and managers can enable or empower others whilst maintaining prevailing patterns of power and relationship.

To understand the leadership role differently I think it is important to think of organisations as social objects in G H Mead's terms. As social objects organisations have substance in our perception because we are able to recognise the patterning of themes occurring

between individual living bodies participating together relationally in the reproduction of these themes. To this extent organisations are no more and no less than particular kinds of ongoing human relationship. Taking such a view, it seems to me that the only practical action or tool that is available to change the character of organisational life is the demeanour adopted by individuals acting in relation to each other. Given the relative power weights of the individuals involved in this process, it follows that the demeanour of those in leadership roles (their ethics of relating) is critical to such change. It was for the reason of noting the parallels between groups perceived as organisations and the insights of group analysis, that I drew attention in project 4 to Ralph Stacey's comments regarding his attempt to reframe the basis of his participation as a group analyst in his work as a conductor of therapy groups (Stacey 2003).

In this reflection I am taken back in my own thinking to Elias' thesis concerning involvement and detachment and what I regard as his key concept of "emotivity" (Elias, 1987). By his use of emotivity, Elias was describing the degree to which our emotional responsiveness to our sense of place (work, home, society) enables or disables our capacity for "reality congruent" awareness. As I argued in my reflections on methodology, Elias' position here should not be construed as implying binary emotional states. Rather, I would argue that Elias was drawing attention to the issue of the relationship between reflexive self-awareness and the capacity for action to be other than an anxiety response or defence. Central to this idea, which Elias developed from Freud (2001), is a sense that the process of evolving an enhanced capacity for reflexive self-awareness is bound up also with a heightened sense of ontological security. This sense of greater ontological security changes too the balance in perception of what constitutes risk. Risk here refers to the perception of a threat to one's sense of self either in the biological or psychological sense refer. In terms of macro-social change it was the long-run process of change in the affectual responsiveness of humans to risk that Elias attributed the emergence of what we now know as rationality. Elias' thesis is that what we describe now as rationality emerged as a substitute for a reliance upon magical and mythical explanations to account for the human condition.

Elias' thesis of involvement and detachment resonates powerfully for me when I reflect upon my own experience of working in leadership roles and how I would judge personally the significance of the experience of the DMan programme. It is, I believe, in the process

of reworking our personal narratives of experience by reference to a disciplined and rigorous process that such narratives come to be transformed. And since as Rorty (1998) has argued, the actions that we take in the real world arise from the web of our beliefs, it follows that to re-work one's personal narrative of experience will affect the nature of the actions that we take. If too the process of such reworking enables us to reduce the thresholds of emotivity that colour our responsiveness to our sense of other, it follows that our capacity for ethical behaviour will also change. This I believe to flow from the increased sense of ontological security that comes with the development of critical reflexive self awareness. Our ability to tolerate greater thresholds of risk, fear and anxiety enable us to respond to the other with a greater attention to the management of ourselves than might otherwise be the case. On a small local scale of interaction such changes are of deep significance. As with the butterfly effect upon global weather systems, such small scale local actions offer always the potential to amplify into large scale whole organisational change processes. Given the power weight of leaders within organisational life, their emotivity and reflexive abilities are of singular importance to the possibility for change and transformation of the workplace. To this extent leadership in any organisational context, is always an issue of ethics. Leaders, equipped with their own particular ontological sensibility, are always also their own instrument for change.

Implications for practice

In July of this year (2004) I started a new job as CEO of a national voluntary sector organisation. Over the past few months I have met countless people who are new to me. Like anyone coming new to an organisation I have been experiencing the excitement and difficulties of induction. Joining a different organisation has however heightened my sense of the extent to which the experience of the DMan programme, the project work, the large group and the learning set experiences has changed fundamentally how I see my work and, I think, how I am experienced by others as someone to work with.

I understand the tangible sense that I have of this change in several ways. Firstly, I am confident that I understand what is going on around me in that I have a definite perspective about which I am also confident. This is not to say that I believe myself to be right, but that I have in the course of this programme acquired a coherent perspective that enables me to hold with confidence to a consistent narrative account of what is happening. Further, I

would argue that I am critically aware of the particular perspectives that will apply to the development of this narrative since I know too why I am committed to seeing organisational life in terms of processes of interaction rather than as systems, structures or component parts. Secondly, I am clear too about how those in leadership roles can participate with others on a basis that is ethical but which does not claim to diminish the importance or significance of the particular power weight that their job has in the lives of individuals and therefore for the organisation as a whole. Thirdly, I am confident too that I know far more about what is important to my own sense of self, my own struggles with feelings of ontological security and insecurity. This change in myself, I sense, has given me the capacity to read and intuit the events of organisational life quite differently, to have strong views about the implications for others of particular modes of conduct and to feel in touch with a considerable sense of adjustment to the idea that leadership, as much of life in general, is a living paradox. This I think of as the paradox of being in a position of great independence and influence yet at the same time of total dependence upon and subject to the energy, goodwill and commitment of others.

I believe that if I have made a contribution to thinking more generally about organisations, it is by virtue of the exploration that my thesis represents of the felt experience of what I have come to describe as “*doing* leadership”. I have attempted to engage with both critical and emotional depth in an extended process intended to reveal the nature of this experience to myself reflexively as to others reflectively. Looking back over my project work in preparation for writing this synopsis I feel confident that I can say now with integrity that I have done this also with sufficient rigour to signify to others, embarking upon a similar process, the personal significance of such an undertaking. As I read back over my projects, I experience too the evidence of a person in transformation.

My thesis also, I would argue, makes clear the meaning of praxis in terms of a Hegelian sense of the unity of opposites; to theorise is also to be practical and to reflect is also to act.

Ethics: Personal Narratives as a Mode of Academic Enquiry

The personal narrative as a form of academic enquiry potentially raises ethical issues concerning the part played by others whose presence is essential to, or constituent of, the narrative context. I know from my own experience of the DMan programme that some colleagues at work who were aware of the fact that my research had something to do with college life and my own experience of this worried that I might be using them as, I quote; “guinea pigs”. During the process of writing project 2 I recall also feeling concern myself about the idea that I was drawing upon the experiences of others without in some way gaining their prior consent. As I became more involved with this process however my view of all of this changed and for the following reasons.

As I developed the four projects and therefore as the reflexive character of my work also intensified, I realised that it had less and less to do with the direct experience of others which I came to believe strongly that I could not presume or know. The subject of my narrative account is therefore always that of an emergent reflexive self. The appearance of others in these projects is therefore not the same as, or to be confused with, a presumption to have researched, evidenced, known or documented the experiences of such others. I am not presuming either to speak on their behalf or to claim that my experience of being with them was their experience also of being with me. Where I generalise from my own experience I do so in a way which is consistent with G H Mead’s use of the concept of “generalised other”. Claims to generalisation in my thesis are therefore a reflexive recognition of the world of social objects in which I am situating my own sense of my experience.

I contrast this position and perspective with that of one adopted in apparently similar work by someone taking the position of a participant observer. I would illustrate this by reference to a recent conversation that I had with two researchers who had been retained by the Centre for Excellence in Leadership to study interactions occurring between senior college staff and senior staff members of the Learning and Skills Council. In this instance, the researchers described their methodology as one in which they sat in meetings as observers and from the notes of their observations of the conduct of those present

documented the experiences of the participants. The researchers were commissioned and undertook to describe the experiences of those present with a view to determining policy with regard to training strategies that would subsequently be applied to other senior managers.

Activity of this sort is often deemed to be ethical on the basis that those being observed gave their consent prior to being observed. My argument however is that the process of documentation of such experience, even if it entails some kind of follow-up or exit interview with the participants, is questionably ethical in that it ignores the way in which experience emerges in the creation of a remembered past. Remembering, whether in silent conversation with oneself or in conversation with another, is of itself creative action and as such emerges within a context defined by power. And as with any other form of creative action, the characteristics of experience, called to mind and shared with others, are enabled and constrained by such power. This is one of the major reasons why our experiences appear to change and develop in the telling. Our perception of the other to whom we relate our experience is fundamental to shaping the character of experience itself. Clearly, the researchers in question, by presenting themselves as objective professional participant observers are at risk of ignoring the consequences for the emergent character of this remembered past (experience) for the power relationships in which they are implicated. Such work becomes more problematic ethically by the time it is written up and accepted as evidence of the experience of these others such that it can be used to train and shape the experience yet further others.

It is ethical, I would argue, to recognise that we each at all times limit knowing to our own experience. Our knowledge of our own experience and what at best are our assumptions regarding that of others, I would argue, always takes the form of a working hypothesis that is in a continuous process of iteration. Such iteration and the fragility of these hypotheses is critical to our sense of temporal flow in the continuity of a sense of self and experience. This fragility is also a source of the ontological insecurities that feature so strongly in our lived experience as human beings and latterly as participants in organisations.

In projects 3 and 4 particularly, I tried to make these issues of ethics explicit as I explored their implications for an understanding of the conduct of relationships in organisations and particularly for the emergence of conflicts in relation to social norms and personal values.

This I think is an important point for understanding the issue of power and power relating as emergent processes figuring and being configured at the same time by the conduct of persons acting in relation one to another. Uncertainty and doubt about the mind and experience of the other are both what inhibit and impel us to act. It is, I think, this power dynamic arising from the paradox of the coexistence of the known and the not known that makes human relating a process of creative action of the kind that has fascinated the pragmatist philosophical tradition from William James, through Dewey and Mead to Rorty and Hans Joas.

Clarity of mind, regarding the limitations of what one can ever know about the experiences of another is, I would argue, a critical step towards developing also clarity of perspective with regard to the ethics of relating. This movement towards clarity in the sense of a personal perspective, which entails also giving up on the presumption to be able to know the other, other than in the experience of relating, is an engagement with ethics. This too is an invitation to oneself to greater reflexive sensitivity. This point is explicit in John MacMurray's ethics of persons in relation. Not knowing the mind or the experience of the other is a central theme also in Davidson's (2001a) argument about the ethics of relating as essential to underpinning claims to truth to which I refer extensively in my reflections on methodology. This same insight is central too to Richard Rorty's philosophy of solidarity.

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