

The Identity of a 'Modernising Manager': a reflection on the use of ethnographic methods in a critical inquiry

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Context of the research inquiry – corporacy, modernisation and managerial identity

From the late 1990s, the New Labour Modernisation agenda in the UK was a major discourse and organizing influence for local government managers, with the accompanying intensification of 'New Public Management' practices and controls. The ideological context was a continuation of the 'new right' policies instituted by the UK Conservative government in the 1980s.

Corporacy took a stronger hold in UK local government as a dominant discourse in managerialist organizational culture during the 1990s, with a focus on increased corporate control of differentiated professional disciplines. New Public Management substantially reinforced and systematised organizational controls affecting individual agency in local authorities.

The advocacy of corporate culture in local authorities ultimately derives from the notion that corporate compliance and proactive commitment creates a market advantage. Culture change development programmes have been significant in local government, associated with the introduction of corporate governance frameworks. In simple terms, culture change incorporates the promotion of value orientation and associated behaviour. But from the perspective of manager's identity, corporate culture is a: 'Medium of changing the simulacra of an original identity in the organization which does not exist ... thus erasing the members feeling of the history of the organization. The history of the organization thus becomes the copied 'basic' values of the moment, and yesterday's copy is a far distant past (Schultz, 1989, p. 14). So it is likely that culture change based on the concept of corporate culture promotes images of commitment and cohesion that naturally contain inner fragmentation and/or incongruity (Lincoln and Kalleberg, 1990). This is the 'situated' context of my research inquiry.

Modernisation in the early 1990s involved varying, sometimes contending, discourses that influence practice – ranging from the 'command and control' ethos, to the discourse of governance through collaborative networks. Customer orientation is another powerful discourse entailing demands for exacting performance outcomes in the face of resource constraints. In reality, local government managers carry out their roles in the context of an accretion of extant management models and a plethora of dominant discourses.

Local government has been strikingly influenced by private sector management models – the enterprise culture has been a potent force as advocated and enforced by national Government in the 1980s and promoted continuously by subsequent national administrations. Emphasis was placed on managerialism, consumer orientation, and last but not least, performativity - the audit/performance imperative. During the period in which my research inquiry took place, there was an organisational emphasis on countering the perceived dysfunctional effects of organisational fragmentation by defining and maintaining corporate identity across the local authority.

Local government observers have commonly associated fragmentation with the marketisation of local authority services introduced in the 1980s by the Conservative Government. In the context of these research interviews, the interviewees were also using the 'fragmentation' term to refer to the increased shifting of services into networks or in other words, collaborative partnership management arrangements with other public service agencies.

Drawing on du Gay's work, my initial research assumption about the identities of managerial colleagues would have been that they had 'contingent' identities – on other words their identities were constructed as much or more so in terms of what they were not, in the face of dominant identities shaped by managerialist corporate change (du Gay, 1996, p.2). Importantly, New Public Management can be understood as being an 'identity project' (du Gay, 1996). Manager's responses to uncertainty or alienating experiences in organisations may take many forms and 'identity work' is one dimension where constructed identity could be a malleable resource at a conscious or unconscious level. Identity is a 'place' where emotional and political forces are at play in relation to the governance of the self.

Given the wealth of academic and other writing on identity and selfhood, my stance and assumptions as an organisational researcher needed to be clarified at the outset. My position is that while the 'self' is substantially socially constructed and not autonomous, there is also a capacity for reflexivity and potential resistance or manifestations of a challenging engagement with social structures.

My research inquiry – using ethnographic research methodologies

My research inquiry was partly driven by my concern with the ambiguity of my managerial position:

was I merely a subject, a 'transmitter' of organisational power – or did I demonstrate agency in my role? ... I had a corporate role – yet was the organisation 'corporate'? My intuition, or tacit knowledge, was that these questions caused my role to be a potentially fruitful site for an in depth inquiry. But it was also clear that 'conventional' research methods were not going to excavate this particular research 'site' in any depth.
(Watts, 2008, p. 216)

Discussion with my supervisors supported the use of ethnographic research methods. The inquiry deployed multiple research methods including interactive interviewing involving fifteen managerial colleagues in differentiated functions, to explore the implications of the development of corporacy for their experience of 'self and organisation'. These managers volunteered to participate in my research and they were interviewed on three or four occasions using an 'open question' interactive interview technique. The research methods were interpretive, contrasting with the context of a formal organisational structure that is essentially modernist – bureaucratic, hierarchical, regulatory and having dominant rationalist discourses.

Interactive interviewing was used because in my experience, the interactive interview method:

is always a dialogical, pragmatic activity: Narrator and researcher establish an interpersonal relationship made up of institutional, imaginative, socio – categorical and other communicative frames which are enacted by both partners during the interview
(Lucious – Hoene and Deppermann, 2000).

The interviews used open questions to explore the development of corporacy in our organisational setting including centralised direction and controls, and examined the implications for our experience of 'self and organisation'. My assumption as a researcher was that interactive interviews would generate insights into experiential meaning in a fragmented organisation – in the event, I underestimated the potential of the interactive interviews to inform my understanding of identity construction and life narrative (Whetten and Godfrey, 1998).

During the early stages of my research inquiry, I decided to include some 'generalised' opening questions to ease the opening stages of the interactive one to one interviews with fifteen managerial colleagues. The subject of these first one or two interviews was to be an exploration of self and organisation. The opening question to the managers who participated in the

interactive interviews was: 'How do you see the Council as an organisation ?' An immediate supplementary question examining our sense making proved to be important in facilitating responses, because all interviewees experienced the word 'organisation' to be particularly problematic as a descriptor of their workplace setting, just as they cynically questioned the discourse of modernisation, their identity as modernisers and the Blairite modernising agenda.

The other research methods – the reflective journal and the autobiographical exploration boosted my 'reflexive capacity'. Autobiographical exploration places issues of identity and self governance more centrally within the research inquiry. This exploration essentially set out for me more explicitly and fully the basis of my values as a public service manager in the context of the values of my parents and social background. So my understanding of the interplay between 'self', personal history and socio/economic context was greatly enhanced and contributed to my sharing of life experiences with colleagues in the interactive interviews.

My reflective journal was kept for over four years. I made an entry sometimes in the form of a 'vignette', then added a reflective note after a few days - sometimes I added a further reflective note at a later date. The 'reflective distance' was critical in generating data that was used in my inquiry. The journal content changed in quality over time, demonstrating more critical comment on issues, and a deeper reflection on personal process. I discussed journal entries in the interactive interviews and I quoted from them in my thesis.

Autobiographical exploration and the reflective journal were key sources of data on the extent of my 'agency' as a manager in a modernising role...I moved on from that role by leaving the job shortly after the inquiry was completed but before the 'writing up' period in the research process.

These multiple methods generated data for me on these and other issues that would not necessarily come to the surface using more 'positivist' inquiry methods:

- manager's 'making sense' of their identity for themselves in a contended organisational environment;
- anxiety and defensive behaviour associated with changing roles and structures;
- experience of loss of meaning in a setting where traditional values of public service have been challenged and there is a loss of autonomy vis a vis central government;
- anxiety and defensive behaviour associated with predominant managerial discourses.

Revealing self construction and self governance

In effect, the term 'organisation' had no resonance with most interviewees in their process of making sense of their experience - there was no generalised recognition amongst interviewees of the Council being an 'organisation'. The only common view of the Council as expressed by the managers was a view of a substantially fragmented 'entity'. The term 'corporate entity' was introduced after the early interviews as it was more resonant with the interviewees than the term 'organisation'.

So the corporate identity of the 'organisation' in the case of this research inquiry proved to be a contended and elusive concept despite the significant culture change programme that was being rolled out to all staff. But individual agency or self – organisation in the sense of the construction of identity using symbol or metaphor was strikingly evident. The research interviewees used the interviews to construct and express their subjective realities to 'make sense' of their experience at work. In all of these interviews there was a frank and revealing exchange that was not mirrored for me in even my closest working relationships – the interview acted as a catalyst and a 'container'.

In a number of the first action research interviews, the interviewee responded to my query about their view of the organisation, by saying that they needed to tell me about their life history

instead. They gave me an unprompted narrative account of their life, focusing on their working life illustrated by metaphor. The narrative tended to be constructed around a theme as illustrated by their type of professional or technical role, the theme being associated with a metaphor and identified by the interviewee as being a continuous thread of meaning within their lives. So, some managers were concerned to make sense of their current experience and working lives by having recourse to their life story narratives. My approach as a researcher was to be open to these interpretive metaphors as opposed to shifting the interviewee towards a more 'rational' espoused approach to organisational identity.

A life narrative can be understood as a form of individualised discourse – an alternative discourse as a more 'authentic' juxtaposition to the managerial role schema producing "the appropriate individual" (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). These issues of self construction mediated by the interactive interviews and in the autobiographical inquiry that I carried out during this research process, are highlighted by Watson in his own research study exploring 'how do managers think?' He states that:

A key theme of the research is that the concept of self is maintained as an ongoing process of strategic exchange whereby people shape their identity through exchanging materially and symbolically with others as they go through life.....managers were continuing the shaping of their lives as they spoke to the researcher about themselves and their work... (Watson, 1996, p.330).

So, in this paper I have summarised my use of ethnographic methods to inquire into my own working role, with the subsequent benefits of a depth of understanding, some surprises in terms of manager's presentation of their life narratives, and a richness of data that would be hard to surpass within the scope of the inquiry.

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