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Who are Managers?
Discourses of Identity-Work

In this chapter we will begin to take a more critical perspective by looking at different Discourses – ways of thinking about and constructing – managers and their identity-work, each based on alternative assumptions about the nature of social and organizational realities. These various ways of theorizing highlight the complexities of being a manager and offer ways of rethinking who managers are and who they could be.

Chapter 1 offered probably the most common definition of managers – as members of the organization who get things done through other people. This sounds incredibly simple, but if you speak to anyone who is a manager they will tell you that the devil is in the detail … in other words it's easier said than done! We also looked at some of the early studies of the roles and work activities of managers (Table 1.1), many of which still form the basis for management training and development activities today. This work draws mainly on a functionalist perspective, which assumes there is a real social reality 'out there' with roles and accepted ways of behaving into which we have to be socialized in order to be good members of organizations and society.

While much of management theory and education in the latter half of the twentieth century (and still today) is about constructing the 'ideal' goal-oriented manager, CMS highlights the problematic nature of this task. Critical studies of managers and management are often based on two assumptions: managing is about identity-work and is performative.

Managing as identity-work

This is the notion that being a manager and developing a management career is not about performing pre-determined and regulated roles, but is about identity-work – how managers actively try to shape their identities and make their presence meaningful to themselves and others. So what is the difference between the role-based studies we saw in Chapter 1 and the identity-work studies we will now examine? Roles are often generalized across individuals as relatively fixed categories (e.g., Mintzberg's disturbance handler and negotiator) within which managers

have to act. They often become ideals that are used to judge whether someone is a good member of society or an effective manager. Identity-work is a more 'wholistic' and fluid concept, concerned with a whole person, based on each individual's life history and, as we will see, is *always emerging* within our interactions. It therefore makes sense to talk about managers in terms of their identity-work rather than fixed managerial roles.

Tony Watson defines identity-work as 'the mutually constitutive process in which people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity and struggle to come to terms with and, within limits, to influence the various social identities which pertain to them in the various milieux in which they live their lives' (2008: 129). In other words, we try to shape a coherent sense of our identity as we try to balance the expectations relating to the 'social identities' (e.g., manager, student, mother, accountant) that relate to us, with our everyday experience and our own sense of self – not always easy to do! Notice that from an identity-work perspective, people are always active in shaping their identities – i.e., they have *agency* – whereas in the roles approach they tend to be passive – accepting their roles as given and something to be trained into. It's also important to note that from a critical perspective, identity-work is often a struggle as we try to deal with our own and others' interpretations of what we should be doing and who we are (Reedy, 2009; Warhurst, 2011). Let's take an example: you are a programme manager responsible for getting new products to market by coordinating a team of people from research and development, manufacturing, engineering and marketing, all of whom have different ideas about what your role should be. You have no authority over team members from other functions and the company's process management model doesn't clarify this. Your manager sees you as a 'facilitator and integrator', and you find yourself trying to figure out what this means by spending a fair amount of time talking to people, understanding team members' concerns and expectations, and building relationships to establish your credibility. In doing so, you are engaging in the struggle to shape your sense of identity.

Managing is performative

Performativity is based on John L. Austin's (1962) idea that words are not just words, they *do* things and create action. For example, 'You are an average employee' or 'You are now promoted to human resource director', has an influence on how a person acts – in the latter example on the ways we expect HR directors to behave and talk.

Feminist philosopher Judith Butler has done much to develop the notion of performativity, particularly in relation to gender-identity. Let's look at some of her ideas because they pave the way for looking at performativity in a management context. In *Gender Trouble*, first published in 1990, Butler draws on Austin's notion that words do things to argue controversially that gender is performative: gender and identity do not exist per se, but are ongoing and open, created, maintained and refashioned in our desires, words, gestures, acts and in social discourse. We might have the illusion of a given and stable gender-identity, but it is an effect, a 'repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (1990: 43–4). We learn to act and dress like men or women.

There is an extensive body of functionalist-based management scholarship carrying the assumption that theory informs practice by establishing a 'set of repeated acts' for managers, management students and management educators (see Chapter 1). But these theories are not just about actions and behaviour, they are also about language – creating accepted ways of talking (discourses with a small 'd'). Forbes Magazine[1] recently came up with the 45 most annoying and meaningless business phrases that management students learn and take into practice. This language is authoritative because it brings actions and identities into being and yet at the same time can conceal hidden meanings and implications. For example, 'empowering' often means giving employees more 'freedom', which means taking on additional responsibilities without any additional pay.

For Butler, gender and identity are performed and come into being through language: they are neither fixed nor free-floating but 'performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (1990: 33). Elizabeth Kelan (2013) looks at the performance of gender and the identity struggles of female managers and MBA students to 'appear professional'. She argues that dress plays an important role in becoming a manager and that this is easier for men than women, because women have to balance complying 'with a masculine script for leadership' and also 'be readable as women' (2013: 48), i.e., not appear too feminine or too masculine. Kelan's study draws on Butler's argument that gender and identity are political because they are constructed and performed with particular interests and goals in mind that privilege a masculine culture and identity and exclude others. But while Butler calls for subversion, Kelan uses media images of businesswomen (e.g., from the magazine *Management Today* and the TV programme *Sex in the City*) to help students reflect on identity issues and make judgements about how to position themselves as a manager. Studying social

and organizational life through language, dress and other images is known as *semiotics*, which we'll explore further in Chapter 4.

Performativity, gender and identity politics are important concepts for managers to understand – because words not only *author* actions and construct the identities and behaviours they supposedly describe, they also give *authority* and power over others. How do words such as 'manager' and 'employee', and business school jargon such as 'Management by Walking About' construct the very behaviours and actions they supposedly describe? Gender, identity and 'management' are all located in a history of repeated practices and D/discourses that influence the way people act and interact. As we will see in the various Discourses of identity-work that follow, some authors see managers having little choice in selecting their identity, while others believe managers have a choice in challenging and constructing their identity.

We will now look at various D/discourses of identity and identity-work around being and becoming a manager, and will end by looking at the main theme of this book: that whether you are a CEO, a production, finance or marketing manager, *managing is a relational, reflexive and ethical practice*. In other words, managing is embedded in relationships with people, in what we say and do, and therefore we need to understand the crucial nature of language and our everyday communicative practices.

Discourses of managerial identity-work

A review of the literature on the nature of managerial work and manager identities reveals a range of approaches, underpinned by assumptions from realism to social constructionism, determinism to free will, and coherence to fragmented and free-floating realities and identities. At the risk of oversimplifying, these approaches draw on the different assumptions of reality we discussed in the previous chapter and relate to whether the authors believe that:

- There is a real social reality out there that exists independently from us (*realism*) or we shape our social realities in our interactions and conversations (*social constructionism*).
- We can discover a universal and unified definition of managerial identity (*realism*) or that managerial identities are socially and/or linguistically constructed and therefore relative to time, place and personal experience (*social constructionism*).
- The manager is a passive instrument on which identity or cultural meanings are inscribed, or she or he exercises free will and interpretive choice in deciding what to do and who to be.

- Managerial identity is a social, an individual and/or a relational attribute.
- Managerial identities are coherent, contested or somewhere in-between.

Where you fall on these issues will influence not just how you think about management, but also how you manage and interact with employees. For example, a 'real' reality means that you probably expect people to conform and act in the right and rational way. Socially constructed realities mean working with people to understand different interpretations and perspectives and negotiate some shared sense of what might be happening. Table 1.1 highlighted some of the earlier studies, which tend to view identity from a realist, mainly passive, coherent and socially attributed or determined perspective. A number of contemporary studies have taken more of a constructed and contested view, discovering that even managers themselves find it difficult to define their identity and articulate what it is that they do (e.g., Sims, 2003; Thomas and Linstead, 2002). Tony Watson and Pauline Harris suggest this opaqueness means managers' identities are always emerging, and that management is a social process in which managers make 'their worlds at the same time as their worlds are making them' (1999: 238). Thus, identity-work is precarious and managers often feel insecure and vulnerable.

Let's have a look at some of the different ways of talking about and constructing managerial identities. I've summarized these in Figure 3.1.

Managers as rational agents: real reality

> Ra·tion·al (adj): Able to think clearly and sensibly, because the mind is not impaired by physical or mental condition, violent emotion, or prejudice.[2]

As we have seen, the twentieth century was dominated by rational models situated within a realist perspective that attempted to define generalized characteristics of managerial work, managerial functions, activities, roles and competencies. These models helped systematize and legitimize management as a profession by bringing the logic of technical rationality, 'scientific' principles and objectivity to management – and also to behaviour in organizations. For example, early theories of motivation draw on the premise of 'rational economic man', a perfectly informed individual who makes choices based on weighing the costs and benefits of each course of action and who is motivated by money (recall Frederick Taylor's work). Management students also search for

Figure 3.1   Discourses of identity-work

rationality – wanting to know the right answer, the right way of doing something and how to get to the 'truth' … because to be rational is to be right … and to be right gives you power and legitimacy. This goes back to Max Weber's ([1924] 1947) argument that rational-legal authority is essential to bureaucracy – and bureaucracies should encompass rational systems of measurement and control.

Much of management practice, research and management education is based on the principle of rationality. Charles Kepner and Benjamin Tregoe (1965) published *The Rational Manager*, an influential text that identified a rational process of decision-making. There's now a

Kepner-Tregoe worldwide consulting organization offering solutions to human and organizational problems. This is achieved through the KT Way®, which focuses on reaching the right decision through rational thinking (with emotion and subjectivity removed), and a rational process of situational appraisal, problem analysis, decision analysis and potential problem (opportunity) analysis. As is typical of rational management, these processes are 'universally applicable and involve analytical thinking'.[3]

While this might sound very logical and acceptable, from a critical perspective we need to examine the ideas of rationality and rational managers more carefully. The pitfalls of rationality were brought sharply into focus in the recent UK Mid Staffordshire National Health Service (NHS) Foundation Trust scandal. A public inquiry was established to investigate high patient death rates and complaints about appalling patient care between 2005 and 2009. The 2013 Francis Report,[4] which makes harrowing reading, identified numerous problems including: poor leadership, a dysfunctional surgical group and management thinking dominated by financial control and statistical targets such as reducing waiting times. This led to a focus on the means (information systems, budgetary controls and performance management systems), rather than the ends (patient care and well-being). In the process, patients and employees were de-humanized and their experience ignored (remember the criticism of evidence-based management?). The report also condemns the Trust's culture of 'self-promotion rather than critical analysis and openness' (2013: 44) – an observation supporting the need for more reflexive managers.

So rationality is contested both conceptually and practically. If there *is* one rationality, then why do we have disagreement and conflict? Surely, we'd all come to the same conclusion and organizations would run perfectly – unless of course you have to deal with 'irrational' people who are not objective and make decisions based on value judgements! And yes, this statement is made tongue-in-cheek, because it raises the question, 'Whose rationality is the right one?' The contested nature of rationality can be seen in a 2008 article, 'How Apple got everything right by doing everything wrong', in which Kahney talks about CEO Steve Jobs' counter-rationality and includes the following quote: '"Steve proves that it's OK to be an asshole," says Guy Kawasaki, Apple's former chief evangelist. "I can't relate to the way he does things, but it's not his problem. It's mine. He just has a different OS."' I'm not advocating that managers be assholes – I'm merely pointing out that there's more than one 'operating system' or rationality. That what might seem perfectly rational to the manager making a decision, may seem irrational to the person implementing the decision.

In addition, rationality, as Gareth Morgan ([1986] 2006) points out, is political because managers use rationality to justify and achieve their own personal, work and career interests. Having worked in and with a number of organizations, experience tells me that on a day-to-day basis, organizations encompass many different rationalities. And maybe it's just me, but I have never been able to successfully apply the seven 'rational' principles of a more organized life, the ten steps to fitness, or the five stages to financial and/or career success because life is not that simple (or perhaps I'm just trying to rationalize my non-rationality?!).

Another major critique is that rationality carries a subtext of binary oppositions:

Rational	Non-rational
Control	Chaos
Intellectual	Emotional
Neutral	Subjective
Mind	Body
Male	Female

This goes back to French philosopher Derrida's work. He argues (1978) that words derive their meaning from their opposite, for example, good/bad, male/female, organization/disorganization. So when you use one term (e.g., rational), you are implicitly drawing on its opposite (non-rational). Think about the interrelationship of opposites when making a decision about an important issue – we may try to think about it rationally, but emotions, feelings about the people involved, and perhaps even a fear of being wrong, all play through that 'rational' decision.

Derrida also argues that we privilege one term over the other, for example, it's better to be rational than non-rational. The privileged term becomes an unquestioned norm against which we evaluate people, and which can favour one group or person over another. An example of the impact of this privileging process is the criteria used in performance evaluations and managerial competency models, such as 'objectively identifies problems' and 'calculates impact of actions' (see the Hay Group (2001) Manager Competency Model). What this means is that managers can use the term 'rational', intentionally or otherwise, to justify their interests and legitimate their authority, because being rational is good and right whereas being 'irrational' (or not subscribing to one particular version of rationality) is wrong. *Rationality is thus based on who has the power to decide what is rational* – an issue we'll explore further in Chapter 4.

Managers as actors: performed realities

A contrasting Discourse to that of managers as rational agents is that of managers as actors. This draws on Erving Goffman's (1959, 1961, 1967) work on dramaturgy, the idea that we are all actors engaged in ongoing performances of the real. Within a dramaturgical perspective, identity is a *dramatic realization* of a social role, consistent with social norms and expectations, and organizations are social dramas or 'theatres' consisting of many different performances coordinated to achieve organizational goals. Managers are actors, acting out pre-existing performance scripts and roles (identities), managing performances and defining the roles and scripts of others. Individuals and teams cooperate in performances and follow routines: pre-established patterns of action. Many organizations now have corporate communication departments which stage elaborate productions such as annual general meetings, government press releases and product launches (see Biehl-Missal (2011) for examples of 'business as show business' performances). Goffman differentiates between frontstage and backstage performances. Let's say your organization is introducing a new information management system. Your frontstage performance will probably include meetings and presentations to employees, with an official script about the necessity and value of the new system. Backstage performances might include behind-the-scenes preparations and conversations with other managers about the problems of the new system and doubts about it ever working! So frontstage performances are about managing the impressions of others through appearance, actions, language, and so on. Simon Lewin and Scott Reeves (2011) found that interprofessional teamwork between doctors and nurses at a large UK teaching hospital occurred more often backstage than frontstage. Frontstage activities such as ward rounds were structured, task oriented and often brief, in order to give patients an impression of collaboration. Backstage performances, such as ad hoc hospital corridor conversations, were used for more in-depth and sometimes emotional discussions about patients and treatments. Indeed, Goffman says that any dissent should be relegated to backstage and that deviants from a frontstage norm are often marginalized.

So from a dramaturgical perspective, managers as actors see frontstage performances as strategic interactions where they deliberately act their identity to maintain a common audience perception. However, Goffman says that we present a *face* or *mask* (an image of oneself) in front of different audiences. For example, we might present the face to employees of 'I'm a good manager because I involve you in decisions', and the face of 'I make sure my employees toe the line' to our boss. Or we might present an image to avoid losing face when we make mistakes or fail (see

Helena Liu's 2010 study of leaders as 'failure framers' for examples). Ian Greener (2007) found within the UK National Health Service that senior managers collaborated in a face-saving performance to conceal the erosion of clinician power and allow them to believe they were still in charge. The senior managers achieved their agendas by paying deference to clinicians and getting their agreement on issues frontstage. This allowed the clinicians to believe they were still in charge, and yet they had to comply with the agreed decisions or they would lose face. So while the senior managers were acting out their identity within prescribed scripts, they were also improvising to achieve their agendas.

Managing in a dramaturgical context means creating a play (or a series of plays) with plots, various scenes and characters or roles for organizational members. Isn't this idea rather far-fetched? Maybe not – I put on my suit (costume) to come to work, I interact with people at work differently from the way I interact with friends and family (frontstage compared to backstage), I set goals and plans to achieve them (plots), talk to peers about how to present an idea or to members of my department about a change in work systems (scenes), create job descriptions and person specifications (character), etc. In Goffman's sense, managers are actors involved in *impression management*: presenting a positive social identity of being a credible manager who can successfully stage managerial performances. The relationship between impression management, language and identity was noted by one of my students:

> During my early days as a manager the one item I found most difficult was that of language. I pride myself on being an extremely honest person and truly believe in what DS [a guest speaker] told us, 'Without trust societies and economies fall apart.' My early observations of other leaders, was their tendency to use words that often seemed misleading. Instead of admitting to the mistake of over-hiring staff they would emphasize their frugalness in performing layoffs. Instead of confessing that they made a bad hire they would characterize the terminated manager as a disappointment to all senior management. In hindsight, these managers were choosing their words carefully, or framing, in an attempt to define a reality different to that I saw. I found it difficult to participate in what I considered dishonest games …

As well as performing a coherent frontstage performance, these managers were also engaged in face-saving, which caused a personal dilemma regarding conformity for my student who later found himself overlooked in a management reorganization.

Of course this raises the question as to whether managers who are good actors are being savvy manipulators and disingenuous in their relationships? From a managerialist perspective, impression management is just part of the repertoire of tools available to ensure the achievement of organizational goals. From a critical perspective it can be about faking emotion and identity (e.g., Tracy, 2000) as managers and employees find themselves required to act in ways they find stressful and humiliating – what Heather Höpfl (2002) calls performed hypocrisy. For example, for a short time my daughter had a job as a teller in a US bank. Her manager told her that she had to learn to smile more 'authentically' and to better project the 'WOW! factor' to customers, which Lauren felt meant being overly perky and inauthentic – something she just couldn't do!

For the rational manager, emotions are to be erased, masked or managed in organizational life. We rarely consider emotion on management courses and if we do it's often in a disembodied way as the characteristics of 'emotional intelligence' (something a manager needs to have). In my daughter's situation it was about *emotional labour*, being required to display – to act out – specific emotions on the job. Arlie Hochschild's 1983 study of Delta Airline flight attendants drew attention to emotional labour, the idea that emotions are turned into commodities from which the organization can profit. She found that flight attendants were required to 'love the job' and to smile. They were trained to manage and act out required emotions and also in anger-desensitization. Some attendants coped with the emotional requirements by separating their 'real' and 'fake' selves, but then had to deal with feelings that they were being insincere. So there are personal costs to emotional labour as employees and managers experience ethical dilemmas, emotional conflict and feelings of inauthenticity: Is this really who I am? Can I act the part and feel good about myself? These are struggles of identity and relationships: aesthetic labour diminishes spontaneity of feeling, genuine civility and concern, and can be perceived as calculated manipulation. To what extent is it morally acceptable to require employees to *be* in a particular way – because this form of labour is not just a performance, but relates to identity, emotions and our sense of self.

In contrast, Jenna Ward and Robert McMurray (2011) found that GP (doctor) receptionists learned to manage and suppress their emotions in various ways during the long, intense and often stressful periods they were dealing with patients. In this context, in contrast to the emotional excesses Hochschild's employees were expected to present, a degree of *emotional neutrality* was important in helping receptionists deal with the stress.

Does this indicate that managers need to be more reflexive about what they do and what they ask their employees to do?

Managers of meaning: linguistically constructed realities

This Discourse addresses how managers create shared meanings and common definitions about situations that will then form the basis for action. It comes from a different tradition to that of Goffman's performance. Both relate to the notion that we construct our social realities in our interaction, but whereas Goffman sees performance as a collaborative, ritualistic, more-or-less prescribed and deliberate performance, managing meaning involves a greater degree of spontaneity, responsiveness to our surroundings and individuality, in the sense that our personal life history also influences our identity. The management of meaning tends to draw from Karl Weick's (1995) work on sensemaking and from a narrative and storytelling tradition. It also emphasizes the importance of language in shaping meaning and organizing action.

Let's begin with Weick, who over the last 30 years has done much to develop the notion of sensemaking in organizational life. Weick (2001) sees sensemaking as *committed interpretation* – people interpreting meanings and trying to define situations and justify their actions within a context, where social anchors and commitments influence action and where interactions create social commitments. For example, managers behave in ways towards employees because … it's their role, their boss expects it, they've been trained to do so, the bottom line requires it … and those actions create commitments both from themselves and others to act in a particular way. They shape meaning by picking up these social commitments and cues in situations to create (talk into being) a coherent story of events.

As managers talk, they are not only communicating and shaping meaning, they are also creating and maintaining culture, strategy and action. Boas Shamir (2007) talks about strategic leaders and managers shaping meaning around five key areas: the environment, performance, vision and goals, ways of achieving goals, and the organization's ability to progress towards goal achievement. They do so by shifting between plain talk and rhetoric – symbolic, poetic and emotional forms of speaking (Gowler and Legge, 1996). But managing meaning is also about identity-work, because in creating meaning, managers are invoking their own beliefs about who they are, their personal knowledge and intuition and acting to maintain their identity and others' perception of that identity. Let me illustrate these ideas with a brief excerpt from

my conversation with the vice president of a US public utility (see Cunliffe, 2001: 363):

> My job has turned to high risk since deregulation – even though it is still highly regulated. Before it was real easy. Now I feel like Paul Revere's horse – it was the horse that ran from Charlestown to Lexington – Paul yelled – nobody remembers the horse! That's the way I feel! [laughter].

Notice the shift from plain talk about 'deregulation' to rhetoric (Paul Revere's horse): it was the rhetoric that connected and gave me a sense of how he felt about the situation and his identity. His rhetoric generated a much more powerful and empathetic response in me than if he had said, 'I get little recognition'. Rhetoric can therefore be powerful in shaping meaning.

Managers therefore manage meanings and influence others through their language and the way they talk. Thomas, Sargent and Hardy (2011) studied how managers negotiated meaning around a change initiative in a telecommunications company. They identified the communicative practices that occurred in meetings, for example, how managers used affirming statements to agree with alternative meanings proposed by others, and dismissing statements that rebuffed such meanings. They also tracked the strands or themes that emerged, changed and developed around particular issues in the discussion.

A number of authors have explored how managers make meaning through storytelling. Creating a story is seen as a way of shaping meaning about our experience, working out our identity and also shaping action. David Boje (e.g., 1991, 2008) has studied storytelling in organizations over a number of years. He argues that storytelling is a way for organizational members to create meanings about the past, present and future because stories provide some continuity with the past and also help fashion the future. There's a great example of this on YouTube, where a 28-year-old Steve Jobs 'performs' his 1983 Apple keynote speech, introduces the by now classic 1984 Macintosh advert and re-energizes a demotivated sales force.[5] It's well worth watching. Notice the music, the build-up of the story of a heroic Apple versus the monolithic IBM, the symbolism and rhetoric of the Mac TV advert, and the response of the audience. A masterful manager of meaning!

So good managers and good storytellers are able to create and tell stories about events, people and heroes as a means of connecting employees to organizational culture and practice. Stories are also ways of handling the hurt of organizational experience (Watson, 2001). Imagine the stories employees may tell to help them deal with layoffs,

bullying or inequitable treatment. Managers often tell stories in their everyday conversations. I noticed in one of my conversations with a vice president of a health care organization that he told a lot of stories (Cunliffe, 2001: 365). When I asked him to explain something, he often told a story. When I commented on this, he responded:

Mike: and I do a lot of that. For me probably the most effective way in dialogue is to tell stories and use analogies and to make pictures ...

Ann: … it can be very persuasive …

Mike: Yes, […] by native style I'm much more a storyteller. Matter of fact sometimes for presentations I've written fables and presented ... a particular Board of Directors – I remember we were struggling with an issue about strategy and where do we go, and they had a very difficult time seeing themselves in the picture – right? – and what they were causing to happen in the organization. And so I wrote this about 6–8 page fable and read it at the board meeting, about the Middle Ages, and likened our organization to a marauding band that had to support itself off the land at the same time it was trying to ... and they got it! They could find themselves! And it was very helpful.

Ann: Did they make those connections with themselves?

Mike: Oh yes, it wasn't subtle [laughter]. It just moved it out into a safer context in which for them to see themselves, for them to say this is what we're doing. Is this a problem we're causing ...?

So in this example, the vice president sees his identity as a natural storyteller and uses stories deliberately to shape meaning and actions of his board of directors in a very different way.

David Sims (2008) suggests that managers engage in identity-work by narrating themselves as the main character in a coherent narrative or story. For example, a colleague might ask us why we made a decision or acted in a particular way, so we explain by pulling together and connecting what we see as all the events, reasons, feelings, who said what to whom, what we did and why, etc., to *narrate* or plot a story and at the same time establish our credibility as a manager. Sims examines five stories he told over a period of time when re-shaping his identity from an academic to becoming a manager: stories of gaining experience, cleaning the stables, creating bliss, entrapment and life after death. This always involves a degree of uncertainty because we are learning as we go along,

we try out stories that may be contested or ignored by others, and we may fantasize new identities based on observations of how other managers or fictitious characters act. Such characters can be seen in TV programmes such as *Mad Men* – about macho and ambitious executives in a fictional US advertising agency – or *The Thick of It* – centring around the aggressive and manipulative Malcolm Tucker, director of communications at the fictitious UK Department of Social Affairs and Citizenship. But we also have reality TV shows such as *Undercover Boss* (franchised across many countries) where the owner of a business takes on the undercover identity of an entry-level employee usually to learn to become a better manager – a media-based example of identity-work at play?!

Sims (2003) argues that middle managers are particularly vulnerable when engaging in identity-work because they are in career transition and have to deal with the differing expectations of senior management and subordinates – and both expect 'good' stories that are meaningful and will hold their attention. They often find themselves having to tell stories to subordinates that they themselves do not believe, or stories that later may be publicly discredited by senior management. So they are constantly trying to save face and maintain their sense of identity.

To summarize, managing meaning is about managers shaping understanding and creating stories to organize action and help them enact and work out their identity in their talk and interactions with others. This means creating stories and characters that are plausible and resonate with others. Managing meaning is not performing a script (as in managers as actors), but involves a 'willingness to forgo planning and rehearsing in favor of acting in real time' (Weick, 2001: 299). For Weick, if we are overly concerned with technique and scripts, then we are often poor improvisers, and because managers have to deal with ambiguities, uncertainties, contradictions and discontinuities, they need to learn to improvise. It's also important to note a major difference between the Discourses of managers of meaning and managers as rational agents. Instead of privileging one meaning (the right one) and one side of a binary opposition (i.e., rational versus non-rational), managers of meaning recognize that meaning-making is ongoing, subject to multiple interpretations and the interplay of binary oppositions, in that managers focus both ends of the binary, for example, resilience and routine.

Managers as discursive subjectivities: performativity and fragmented realities

Let's begin with what is meant by 'discursive subjectivities'. This perspective draws on poststructuralist thought, which addresses how

knowledge, institutional structures and language systems (Discourse with a capital 'D') and language and talk (discourse with a small 'd') shape realities and regulate what is seen as 'normal'. So scholars taking a D/discursive approach study the relationship between language, social action and social theory. Knowledge plays a disciplining role in this process because it consists of unconscious rules and practices that determine: what is 'good' knowledge; what are 'good' standards for judgement; who are experts; and therefore who can control meaning and speak for others. These practices are riddled with power, because they privilege particular ideologies, social structures, institutional practices and groups over others (Foucault, 1970, 1972). In terms of management, this means examining how talk, written text, physical and symbolic artifacts, and broader social, historical, economic and ideological forces shape management theory, practice and identity.

As I outlined in Chapter 1, many poststructural studies draw on the work of Michel Foucault (1980, 1988), who argued that the subject (identity) is the product of various discourses and forms of knowledge. In Foucauldian terms, D/discourse constructs and categorizes the individual and is inscribed on our bodies – structuring our behaviour, desires and ways of talking. This turns us into a *subjectivity*, a site where D/discourses of power and control meet and organize identity, and in the process create conflict by subjecting us to forces and practices with which we may disagree and may either conform or try to resist. Identity – subjectivity – is therefore inscribed, image-driven, contradictory, fragmented, elusive and power-ridden.

There are at least two distinctions in the managers as discursive subjectivities Discourse from the previous ones. First, this Discourse is not about identity-work, but *identity regulation* – managers as discursive subjectivities are not actively involved in creating their own identity, but subject to discursive, linguistic and structural forces over which they have no control. Second, managerial subjectivity is performative, but in a different sense from Goffman's performance. In *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Judith Butler differentiates the two: performing is a conscious performance of a ritual, while performativity is concealed in performance and is discursive – a powerful form of speech that produces actions and an *unconscious* reiteration of a norm or social category.

Subjectivities are also multiple and fragmented as different D/discourses create competing pressures. Alison Pullen (2006) examines the subjective identities of middle managers within broader social discourses and gendered organizational discourses, arguing that managers' identities are sites of negotiation and contestation. This issue of contestation is highlighted in Darren McCabe's (2008) study of a UK bank. Employees and managers struggled with contradictory organizational Discourses of the 'enterprise

self', as they were required to focus on the customer, use initiative, be a teamworker and take responsibility for their actions, yet also be a submissive, self-shackled by cost controls, individual evaluation systems and autocratic decisions.

Let's take a hypothetical example to see how managers can be viewed as discursive subjectivities:

> You work in XL as a middle manager. The company currently stresses transformational leadership, performance metrics, organizational agility and creative partnering, as expressed in the company value statement. These are four significant organizational discourses reinforced by the CEO's speeches to the media, and in meetings with senior managers and middle managers (discourse). You have been through programmes training you to be visionary, charismatic and proactive; how to control department costs and performance through measurement; how to monitor and adapt quickly to technological advancements and market changes; and how to be more flexible in working across department boundaries to improve productivity and quality. Yet managers are evaluated and rewarded individually on whether their department is under budget, and whether they have met production targets on time. Five years ago you had the authority to do what it took to make something happen, but now you have to get pre-approval for anything that involves expenditure over £500, and the process can take anything from six months to a year depending on the amount of justification required by senior management …

> The four organizational Discourses, along with discursive practices such as training, appraisal and information systems, regulate the identities of managers by requiring specific actions and behaviours. As the manager, you have to make choices about what to do and which identity to take at any particular moment in time: an inspirer of others, an enforcer of performance standards for individual employees, an innovator who is subject to close controls, and a collaborator with others as and when needed. You are frustrated trying to balance the demands of each, by trying to be proactive while feeling like a puppet because you have no authority and spend your time producing statistics. You try to remain positive with your staff, while remaining distant from your boss who trots out the company line. Most middle managers in your organization just keep their heads down and focus on meeting short-term goals, while complaining to each other about conflicting demands. Some

are deliberately uncooperative, and refuse to attend any more training sessions. You feel torn in different directions and struggle to find a sense of coherence, and find yourself becoming less and less committed to the organization …

This example attempts to show how managers can be constructed as multiple and fragmented subjectivities – as effects of D/discursive processes, tossed between contested meanings and shifting fields of power, which they accept – i.e., passive dupes of identity regulation. It also illustrates that some managers may actively subordinate themselves to the demands in order to be rewarded – or may passively resist by opting out.

There are those who argue that this way of thinking about the identity of managers is overly pessimistic. Are we just products of external forces? Can we be creative in resisting imposed identities? Or are we somewhere in-between as simultaneously consentors and resisters? Russell Warhurst (2011) offers a more optimistic reading of managerial identity than the 'discursively deceived demons' (2011: 275) conceived of by the identity regulation model, finding MBA students in his study 'actively embracing identity formation opportunities' (2011: 270) and questioning managerial decisions they accepted previously. Mary Phillips and Deborah Knowles (2012) also believe that there are alternative performativities. They use Butler's ideas to argue that entrepreneurial subjectivities are performatively constructed through 'repeated acts' and dominant discourses that are masculine, e.g., entrepreneurs are 'self-made men'. Women entrepreneurs are often subject to masculine discourses (be aggressive, decisive, self-confident) that make them invisible and their life difficult if they try to adopt male norms because they are seen as lacking 'male' credibility. The other possibility is that women can 'do' (perform) entrepreneurship differently from this male discourse. Viewing managers as discursive subjectivities can offer a different way of thinking about what, or who, managers are and how they relate to their surroundings.

Relational and reflexive managers: questioning socially constructed realities

The corporate leaders we interviewed indeed produced an extensive list of qualities they desired in future recruits, but almost none involved functional or technical knowledge. Rather, virtually all their requirements could be summed up as follows: the need for more thoughtful, more aware, more sensitive, more flexible, more

adaptive managers, capable of being moulded and developed into global executives. (Barker, 2010: 59)

I begin with this quote from a recent formal review of London Business School's MBA programme because it illustrates the need for reflexivity and relationality – for managers to be more thoughtful and sensitive. I would, however, question the idea that we can and should 'mould' people – an issue we'll address in the next chapter. I believe the important question is: *What might such 'thoughtfulness' look like?*

Relational and reflexive managers are people who recognize that they, along with others, 'author' or shape social and organizational realities (culture, policies, structure and practices, etc.) in everyday conversations and interactions. In doing so, they accept responsibility for creating those shared realities and question how their assumptions and actions impact how people experience those realities. This Discourse therefore embraces social constructionist assumptions and a critical approach by examining what we are taking for granted when interacting with and managing others … which is what much of this book is about.

A social constructionist approach to managing was first proposed by John Shotter (1993), who argued that managers are 'authors' shaping organizational realities from a 'chaotic welter of impressions', and in doing so try to negotiate some kind of shared meaning and create new possibilities for coordinating actions and moving forward. Indeed, when you ask managers about their experience, they rarely talk about structures, roles, scripts or performances, but about how they are continually trying to make sense of ill-defined aspects of their work: about feeling pushed or pulled in different directions, the dilemmas they face in terms of who they are and what to say or do. One of my interests over the last 15 years or so has been to develop this idea and explore what relationality and reflexivity means in practice for leading, managing and designing organizations (e.g., Cunliffe, 2001, 2009; Shotter and Cunliffe, 2002).

The Discourse of relational managers draws on the alternative ways of understanding language, reality and communication that we discussed in Chapter 2. Organizational realities and identity-work occur in our conversations and relationships with others: in what we say, *how* we say it and how we interact with others. This differs from the Discourses of managers as actors and managers of meaning because it goes beyond performing roles and scripts, beyond the words used by a manager, to the *living conversations* (Bakhtin, 1986) and dialogue *between* people. In other words, relational managers assume that we do not live, act and talk in isolation, we are always in relation to others whether they are present or not. We create meaning, action and try to

shape our identities *with others in relationally-responsive and dialogic interaction*. However, because managers have influence, they play a crucial role in authoring these relationships. These ideas re-vision manag*ing* as a continually emerging, embodied and responsive practice, *a way of being and relating* – rather than the conventional view of manage*ment* as a series of disembodied activities or roles within an already existing reality.

Managing is therefore about who we are, because our actions, our ways of making sense and shaping our world are not separate from us, they do not stem from a detached knowledge of the world, but are intimately linked to who we are, what we feel and say, and how we engage with our surroundings. We are therefore always engaged in identity-work, whether or not we realize it.

Where does reflexivity come in? Reflexivity recognizes that talk and action, self and others, are interwoven and therefore it's important for managers to *question how* they relate with others. This means thinking about the assumptions we hold about people and how such assumptions influence the way people may respond, understanding how others may view the world and creating opportunities for open dialogue. This was underscored by one of my EMBA students, who commented:

> I think the point is that it is always about how you are affecting other people. It always has been. The problem is that we are not aware of the importance of focusing on how we interact with others. We do not stop to consider how we affect others and how our actions could result in showing disrespect for their values. By considering people as a means of accomplishing tasks that need to be completed, you are essentially stripping them of their 'humanness'. You are treating them as a commodity, a means to an end.

While many management education programmes emphasize the need for reflection, few move towards what I believe is fundamental to managing organizations in responsive, responsible and ethical ways – *reflexivity*. So let me begin by explaining the difference between reflection and reflexivity.

Have you ever completed a personality or a management style questionnaire? If so, then this was used as a tool to help you reflect on your personality type and become a better person and/or choose an appropriate style. These questionnaires categorize you in comparison to types or norms that are deemed to exist. For example, using the Myers Briggs personality types you could be an ISTJ (introvert, sensing, thinking, judging) person, and knowing this can help you choose the best career. *Reflection* – whether about personality, people, management or

organizational problems – is based on a realist view of the world as consisting of concrete objects and patterns of behaviour that we can measure, categorize and develop a theory or model to explain. Reflection is also associated with assumptions of a person as a rational being with an inner consciousness, who can think logically, analytically and in an objective way. Indeed, John Dewey (1910), one of the best-known authors in this field, argued that reflection and a logically-trained mind are key to becoming an educated person. This was further reinforced by Donald Schön (1983), who argued that competent professionals engage in reflective practice as a means of dealing with complex and uncertain situations. They do so by *reflecting-in-action*, engaging in a reflective conversation and constructing an understanding of the situation using a repertoire of personal experience and situational knowledge. This reflective conversation involves framing and reframing the problem, finding alternatives and judging the possible impact of alternative courses of action. Reflection means standing back and looking at a situation in a logical way.

Reflexivity draws on social constructionism to emphasize our responsibility for shaping our world. It goes deeper than reflection by interrogating what we might be taking for granted as we interact with other people, try to make sense of our world and create knowledge. So managers as reflexive authors routinely engage in a more critical and questioning stance, as seen in the comment below from one of my EMBA students:

> I have become more critical of my goals and the means of attaining them. This has opened me up to a deeper examination of the truths/ assumptions that I've held which has led to many questions, the pursuit of these questions – not necessarily their answers – are taking me to a next level of understanding.

Elsewhere (Cunliffe, 2003, 2009), I've suggested that reflexivity is situated in constructionist and deconstructionist approaches, and that the former can be linked to self-reflexivity, the latter to critically-reflexive practice. Table 3.1 summarizes the main assumptions of each approach.

As relational and reflexive authors, managers engage in both. But what does this mean? Being *self-reflexive* means accepting our responsibility for shaping our world: questioning our ways of being, relating and acting and thinking about how, in our living conversation with others, our assumptions, words and responses influence meaning and help shape organizational 'realities' and identities. In doing so, we question the limitations of our assumptions and our sensemaking; whether we respond defensively or openly to people; and the multiplicity of meanings and

Table 3.1   Assumptions underlying reflexivity

Self-Reflexivity	Critical-Reflexivity
Social and Organizational Realities:	*Social and Organizational Realities*:
Emerge in everyday conversational activities.	Constructed through discursive and non-discursive practices.
'Realities' are shaped and maintained in language and talk.	'Realities' are fragmented, fleeting and contested.
Organizations are language communities and/or communities of social practices.	Organizations are discursively constructed sites of power, discipline, normalization, marginalization and resistance.
Self:	*Self*:
Selves and identities are shaped in everyday interaction.	A subject constructed and normalized through discursive practices.
Language:	*Language*:
What we say, and how we say it, shapes meaning and creates and reproduces social realities.	The separation of words and objects. Meaning is constantly deferred and constructed through binary oppositions.
Knowledge:	*Knowledge*:
An implicit and indexical knowing, sensemaking within contexts, knowledge as interpretation and insight.	A political process of the production of temporary texts, 'facts' and 'truths', and the consumption of such texts.
Self-Reflexivity:	*Critical-Reflexivity*:
Exposing the situated, tentative and provisional nature of our social and organizational realities and knowledge.	Destabilizing and deconstructing truths, ideologies, language, overarching narratives, single meanings, authority and disciplinary practices.
Exploring how we constitute our social and organizational experience and identities in everyday interaction.	Revealing and interrogating assumptions that privilege particular groups.
Exploring multiple meanings and interpretations.	

Source: after Cunliffe (2009)

voices we may or may not hear in our relationships and interactions with others. Being self-reflexive forms a basis for exploring how we may personally act in responsible and ethical ways.

Critical-reflexivity draws from critical theory, poststructural and postmodern commitments to unsettle the assumptions underlying theoretical,

ideological and organizational positions and practices. This means complicating rather than simplifying, questioning rather than answering or accepting, looking for paradoxes and contradictions rather than order and patterns, thinking about what lies unsaid as well as what is said, and recognizing multiple perspectives rather than imposing an ideology or worldview. As critically-reflexive authors, managers aim to create more critical, open dialogue and more responsive and ethical organizations, by:

- Examining assumptions of rationality underlying decisions.
- Engaging in debate about the purpose, practices and impact of organizations (profit, community and environmental well-being, etc.).
- Questioning 'normal' taken-for-granted strategies, policies, programmes and organizational practices as a basis for understanding how and why these practices might impact people and exclude them from active participation in organizational life …

Critical-reflexivity involves questioning and turning ideas and assumptions back on themselves, which raises another aspect of Derrida's work – that of *deconstruction*. Deconstruction is a way of reading texts to reveal underlying assumptions, contradictions and how they might privilege one truth or position over another. The TV 'mockumentary', *The Office*, is an interesting example of a media deconstruction and examination of managerial identities, 'rationality' and organizational culture. The programme reflexively draws attention to inappropriate and exaggerated management behaviours and practices – and how employees resist these – by poking fun at them.

Joanne Martin (1990) brought deconstruction into the realm of Organization Studies when she deconstructed a story told by the CEO of a multinational corporation to illustrate the company's concern for women. The story centred around a pregnant female employee who arranged her Caesarean section around the launch of a new product she had been involved in developing. The company provided a closed-circuit television by her bed so she could watch the launch event. Martin provided alternative readings, one of which reframed the story as a male employee, in the same situation, undergoing heart by-pass surgery. She argued that in both cases, the action illustrated a breach of the public (work) and private (personal life) divide, but in counterposing the two stories, the Caesarean example illustrated not a humanistic concern for the well-being of women, but a desire to maintain work productivity.

While deconstruction might seem like an academic and pointless linguistic exercise, I believe it is important to managers because deconstructing organizational texts such as policy documents, mission and media statements, emails, and management systems and actions, can sensitize us

to hidden assumptions, silenced voices, to who or what is privileged, to alternative interpretations and to the consequences for organizational practices – intended or otherwise. Deconstruction can also help us raise a most critical question for managers: *Could what seems to me to be the 'reality' of the present situation be otherwise? Are there unnoticed openings for new possibilities and for taking a new direction?*

Relational managers therefore accept responsibility for their part in shaping organizational realities by engaging in a critical and self-reflexive questioning of what they, and others, are taking for granted. This means questioning not just the means, but also the ends – the impact. The news has been full of examples of what can happen when organization policies and practices based purely on the bottom line remain unquestioned. One such example is the UK's PPI scandal. PPI, payment protection insurance, was designed to help customers repay loans and debts in the event of job loss, illness, etc. This seems like a good idea because it offers protection for both customers and the bank. However, banks began to impose high sales targets on their staff to 'encourage' them to sell PPI to customers. If targets were not reached, penalties were imposed on individuals and branches. Employees were therefore pressured into selling – and mis-selling – insurance. Banks are now required to compensate customers who were forced into buying PPI. Perhaps if those who imposed the targets questioned the underlying motives – to maximize profit and increase efficiency – and considered the potential impact on staff and customers, they might have taken a more judicious approach. The point is that self- and critical-reflexivity are crucially tied to ethical management and leadership.

I often find when discussing the relevance of reflexivity with managers that their initial response is: we can't question everything all of the time or we'd *never* get anything done! I agree. It's about knowing what's important to question, and being aware of how we relate to others. As one manager in my EMBA course wrote:

> … by caring, by empathizing, by questioning the assumptions behind systems, and by keeping an eye on what is truly important. That's a challenge for me. My experience, in 25 years at ___ Corporation, is that many of those systems have contributed to the success of one of the most successful companies in US history. But there *are* two ends of the 'manage' spectrum … (Cunliffe, 2001): manag*ing* and manag*ement*. Manag*ing* is a way of being and relating – a continually emerging, embodied practice. Manag*ement* is a series of disembodied activities. And balancing the two, I believe, is critical: just as it is in the implementation of any philosophy, system or habit. A leader can spend too much time on

facts and details, concrete steps of implementation, HR policies and procedures and the like. A leader can also overly focus on being philosophic and questioning – to the neglect of proven leadership tools, principles and techniques as taught by the likes of Peter Drucker and Henry Mintzberg. So maintaining a balance is important...

To summarize, relational and reflexive managers see social and organizational life as emergent, socially constructed and inherently ideological and political. They challenge taken-for-granted organizational practices and, in doing so, emphasize their responsibility for managing in more responsive ways and helping shape new, more collaborative and inclusive forms of reality.[6]

Summary

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight different Discourses of management, of which the more contemporary ones focus on the idea of managers as always engaged in identity-work. As such, one is always *becoming a manager*. Foundational ways of framing management as rational and neutral both legitimate and constrain managerial action and normalize identities. And even though the Discourse of managers as discursive subjectivities challenges the legitimation of management, its focus on identity regulation doesn't leave managers much option for change. In contrast, the Discourses of managers of meaning and relational managers offer not only a different way of thinking about who managers are, but also a different way of *doing and being* a manager.

I also highlight that whether we are managers or employees, we cannot separate ourselves and our relationships with others from our work. What we do, how we act and how we think about our work, how we interact with others, is closely tied with our emotions and our identity – with who we are. Many of the managers' and students' comments I include throughout the book are statements of identity-work: of emotional struggles at an individual or a collective level. The relationship between emotion and identity at work is a crucial one for managers to understand, but one that's often ignored.

Finally, I want to argue that rather than uncritically reproducing fixed representations of management and management identities, reflexive managers seek various conceptualizations and critiques of management as a means of exploring possibilities and rethinking how they would like organizations and management to be. We'll explore this in more depth in the following chapter.

Notes

1. www.forbes.com/sites/groupthink/2012/01/26/the-most-annoying-pretentious-and-useless-business-jargon/ (accessed 4 September 2013).
2. *Encarta World English Dictionary*.
3. See the Kepner-Tregoe website, www.kepner-tregoe.com/knowledge-center/articles/developing-a-thinking-organization-part-ii (accessed 13 September 2013).
4. See the executive summary at: www.midstaffspublicinquiry.com/sites/default/files/report/Executive%20summary.pdf (accessed 4 September 2013).
5. www.youtube.com/watch?v=lSiQA6KKyJo (accessed 4 September 2013).
6. See Cunliffe (2009) for further discussion.