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Managing difference? A contemporary workplace perspective on manager identity issues

Abstract

We argue for renewed attention to be given to the organisational role of managers as critical actors for organisational alignment and sustainability. We introduce the concept of the 'medial manager' as one who both manages and who is themselves managed and who embodies organisational tensions and competing demands. Drawing on identity and social identity theory we propose a conceptual framework of medial manager identity based on two key dimensions: relationships with the organisation and with subordinates, and the roles of leader and follower. These dimensions, we suggest, represent choices presented to medial managers on a daily basis and different possible interpretations of the medial manager position, which we characterise as Minder, Messenger, Mediator or Maverick. We explore and illustrate each interpretation from our own preliminary research and from the wider literature, and the implications of such interpretations for organisational alignment. We conclude by setting out our own future research agenda.

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Introduction

One way to expand our conceptualisation of management is to expand our conceptualisation of organisation. Organisations may be understood not just as producers of commodities and services but as discursive social constructions; that is, as producers of social realities (Karreman and Alvesson, 2001). Organisations are settings for, and are constructed by social actors. Organising itself may be seen as the process of sensemaking, in which social actors make shared sense of the world and enact that sense back into the world to make it more orderly (Weick et al., 2005). Organisations are therefore producers of discursive regimes which may privilege certain meanings over others (Helms Mills et al., 2010; Thurlow and Helms Mills, 2009) but they are also settings in which individual social actors make sense of themselves and seek to act out and sustain their own reflexively understood self-identities (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Clarke et al., 2009; Giddens, 1991; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Sensemaking, and thus organising, is based not only on consensus, but also on dissensus, as individuals seek to make sense according to their own identity needs (Brown et al., 2008).

Viewed in this context, managers may be understood not simply as deliverers of measurable returns but as key strategic social actors. Managers occupy positions of influence within an organisation and the ways in which they make sense of their social worlds and of themselves have consequences for the organisation and its ability to sustain consensus and alignment, both through the extent of their power to enact their sensemaking, and through their position as a potential sensemaking referent for other organisational members (Pye, 2005). As such we need to pay attention not only to what managers do in a functional sense, but to who managers are: to the discursive regimes in which they work, the workplace identities which they construct and the processes through which they manage workplace identities.

In this paper we propose a different way of thinking about managers. First, we make the case for conceptualising managers as embodying organisational pressures and tensions and suggest that our concept of the 'Medial Manager' – one who manages and is managed – helps us to move beyond mere consideration of the manager's hierarchical or functional position. Second, we propose an interpretive framework which integrates the pressures faced by the medial manager with identity theory and which characterises identity choices faced by the medial manager on a daily basis. We illustrate these identity choices with data from our own preliminary research and from suggestive cases in the literature. We conclude by examining some of the ways in which our interpretative framework could help to further our understanding of managers and their role in organisations, and we set out our agenda for further research. Thus, following Donmoyer (2000) our aim is to add to the research community's repertoire of social constructions of management. We do not claim to have developed a new theory of management, let alone solved it, but we do hope, to paraphrase George E.P. Box, that our model may be sufficiently useful.

Reconceptualising management – the medial manager

Most management literature emphasises and carefully defines the hierarchical position of managers studied. Whilst not wishing to ignore the effects of hierarchical position in terms of power, focus and scope on the individual manager, we question how meaningful such hierarchical distinctions are. First, we note that middle management, for example, despite being a commonly recognised and used term, has continued to resist a basic established

classification, such as who are the middle managers in an organisation, still less what they do (Currie and Proctor, 2005; McConville and Holden, 1999; Thomas and Linstead, 2002). Second, organisational changes such as layering and the devolution of responsibilities such as HRM, and new structures such as networks, partnerships and modular forms make distinctions between organisational layers less clear (e.g. Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Currie and Proctor, 2005; Down and Reveley, 2009; Holden and Roberts, 2004; Musson and Duberley, 2007; Pedersen and Hartley, 2008). Third, we question whether the differences in power, focus and scope implied by hierarchical position are more significant than commonalities experienced by managers at any level.

We therefore propose a new term to conceptualise a particular aspect of management: the 'Medial Manager'. A medial manager is defined as any member of an organisation who is both directly managed and who directly manages others. It may therefore include supervisors or first line managers at the lowest level, and senior managers who report to an executive management team at the highest level, as well as the sometimes problematic middle managers. The term, from the Latin *medius*, or middle, thus conceptualises the manager as being 'in-between', but enables our attention to focus on the pressures that the manager exists between, not the location of their position. The nature of being 'in-between' may be further illuminated by borrowing Currie and Proctor's (2005) description of a middle manager, in which the purpose of the role is '*translating* the intentions of others – executive management – into action' (Currie and Proctor, 2005: 1350, our italics). The 'in-betweenness' of the medial manager is between organisational intention and operation, but the act of *translating* draws attention back to the medial manager as a strategic actor who does not necessarily just push instructions downwards, but who may interpret, convert and apply macro-level executive strategy (Seijts and Roberts, 2011) into something which can be operationally realised – and made sense of – by those below them. Thus the medial manager may be understood as being 'in-between' the demands and expectations of the organisation and its aims above them, and those of staff below them.

There is a significant body of literature focusing on the importance of the role of the middle manager (which we argue is a type of medial manager) in keeping the top and bottom of an organisation aligned. Different levels of the organisational hierarchy are recognised to have different perceptions, aims and needs (Brown and Humphreys, 2006; Corley, 2004; Seijts and Roberts, 2011; Shamir et al., 1998); and middle (medial) managers are seen as being essential for facilitating communication between senior management and employees (Corley, 2004; Herzig and Jimmieson, 2006), mediating conflicting discourses (Alexiadou, 2001) and managing the effects of change, including the emotional impact, on staff (Huy, 2002). However, we wish to look beyond celebrating the contribution of medial managers and to draw attention to the problematic and paradoxical nature of the medial manager position. Watson summarises a fundamental organisational paradox: that employees are both human beings whose attachment and co-operation must be sought, and also resources which are subordinate to business needs and therefore expendable (Watson, 2008). Medial managers, 'in-between' the organisation and their staff, are essentially required to embody this paradox, and this position can present a number of challenges for medial manager workplace identity. They may find that they are required to embody contradictory discourses and roles: those of the pragmatic manager and leader able to take tough decisions for the sake of the bigger picture, and of the caring, supportive supervisor and colleague (Clarke et al., 2009; Watson, 1997). They may be required not only to enact unpopular decisions but be expected to secure staff agreement and commitment (Holden and Roberts, 2004) and publically support decisions they do not agree with (Sims, 2003), whilst maintaining the personal loyalty and

goodwill of staff (McConville and Holden, 1999). Medial managers thus try to make sense of themselves and their organisational position, and construct workplace identities from potentially contradictory resources (Clarke et al., 2009). In the next section we draw on theories of identity to further explore and conceptualise some of these challenges for medial manager workplace identities.

Identity and the medial manager

We understand identity to be the process by which a person answers the question ‘Who am I?’ by reflexively understanding and defining themselves as something distinct to others, coherent with past experience and current situation, and which provides guidelines for future actions and decision making (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). At the heart of the identity process is an on-going, iterative and reciprocal dynamic between the internal self and the external social context. How we see ourselves is dependent on how others react to the self we present (Mead, 1934) and we attempt to present ourselves in order to influence how others see us (Goffman, 1959). We continually respond to and incorporate shared social meanings to make sense of ourselves in any given time and context, and we seek to interpret and affect our social surroundings to align with our internalised, individual meanings (Stets and Burke, 2000; Swann Jr. et al., 2003). Alvesson and Willmott (2002) conceptualise this as an ongoing dynamic between Self Identity as the self reflexively understood at any point in time, Identity Regulation of self-identity through the effects of social practices and shared meanings, and Identity Work in which the individual seeks to form, amend, repair and maintain self-identity. This model of identity process allows us to properly conceive of identity as both stable and coherent, and fluid and flexible (c.f. Alvesson et al., 2008). Individuals are subject to continual identity meanings, challenges, threats and demands as social actors; but they also strive to sustain their unique self-conception through making personal sense of events and meanings, particularly in ways which support preferred versions of themselves (Brown et al., 2008).

Identity has broadly been understood to have two kinds of social expression (Stets and Burke, 2000). Relational identity conceptualises the ways in an individual interacts with others within different social networks. A key unit of social structure is that of role (Reitzes and Mutran, 1994). Roles provide meaning for and expectations of the individual’s participation in social networks (Stryker and Burke, 2000) and individuals may incorporate those meanings and expectations into their self-identity (Sluss and Ashforth, 2007; Stets and Burke, 2000). However, as relational constructs the meaning of one role is embedded in that of another such as those of supervisor and subordinate (Luhmann and Eberl, 2007; Sluss and Ashforth, 2007): my enactment of a subordinate role will be affected by whether you enact a supervisor role as I expect. Social identity conceptualises the ways in which individuals relate as members of categories or groups (Tajfel, 1972). Groups are made salient by comparison with other out-groups and establishing the positive distinctiveness of the in-group (Turner, 1975) through processes of prototypicality and depersonalisation (Hogg, 2001; Hogg, 2003) in which individuals compare themselves and other group members against the group’s distinctive characteristics rather than as individuals. Group or social identity therefore primes individuals to conform to group prototypes in order to retain group membership (Hogg, 2001) and to compare themselves favourably with other groups (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Fiol et al., 2009; Hogg, 2003).

We propose that these two expressions of identity, through relational roles and group membership, may be used to further examine and understand the dimensions of medial manager identity. Medial managers are positioned between senior/executive managers and staff, subject to demands and expectations from each. This position may first be described in terms of competing social identities: whether medial managers construct themselves as members of the organisation, concerned with the interests of the business, or as members of their staff teams, concerned with the interests of their employees. Second, it may be described in terms of competing role identities. Taking the medial manager position within the organisational hierarchy we suggest that the significant choice is whether medial managers behave as leaders or as followers.

Writing from a Labour Process Theory perspective, Marks and Thompson argue that studies of employment relations and indeed human behaviour itself cannot be done without a conception of interests (Marks and Thompson, 2010); and studies such as those by Shamir and colleagues (1998) and Baldry and Hallier (2007) suggest that staff perceive managers as having different interests to them. This leads to a particular tension for medial managers. Medial managers are subject to organisational claims on their identities: through discourses of leadership and enterprise which seek to construct them as active and transformational change agents on behalf of the organisation (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a; Du Gay, 1996; Ford, 2010; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003); and through the expectation that they will operationalise and deliver organisational decisions and strategy (Holden and Roberts, 2004; McConville and Holden, 1999). Medial managers therefore have a number of incentives to construct social identities as part of the organisation, for example because of the attractiveness of such discourses; because it supports their status within the organisation; or because it is preferable to appear part of a decision than impotent to change it (Haslam, 2004; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006). However, medial managers also have good reasons to construct social identities as part of the teams they manage. They may spend significantly more time with their teams than with their own superiors and therefore be more aware of the interests of their team members (Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe, 2005; Huy, 2002). Medial managers need to maintain personal relationships with their teams in order to effectively deliver organisational objectives and to secure meaningful engagement (Holden and Roberts, 2004; McConville and Holden, 1999). Finally, managers are themselves also employees whose own interests may conflict with the interests of the organisation.

Medial managers may occupy multiple social roles within the organisation, but we propose that the medial manager's position within the organisation, and especially their position between organisation and staff, makes two roles particularly pertinent: those of leader and follower. Leadership remains a 'perniciously vague' concept (Spicker, 2012) and is best understood as a social construction in which actors draw on a stock of taken-for-granted resources in which to accomplish different forms of life (Kelly, 2008; Pondy, 1979). However, for the purposes of this paper we offer a specific definition of leadership, in terms of a role rather than an individual or state (Hollander, 1974) as 'a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal' (Northouse, 2007: 3). The role of leader involves influence: acting beyond mere instruction to bring about intended change through social relations. Conversely, we argue (in contrast to much recent literature on followership) that the role of follower involves agreeing, responding and obeying, that is 'doing as you are told'. Drawing on Floyd and Wooldridge's (1992) conception of upward and downward influence, medial managers seen as being may be expected to carry out both leader and follower roles in different contexts. The organisation and senior managers expect

the medial manager to be followers by carrying out their strategic decisions and operationalizing them: that is, doing as they are told. However, they may also expect medial managers to make operational sense of strategy and to secure staff engagement with their decisions and with the organisation, its aims and objectives i.e. downwards influence or leadership. Staff may expect medial managers to act in their interests, to make senior managers aware of operational issues, to put forward suggestions and to represent their interests i.e. upwards influence or leadership.

Medial manager workplace identities

As we have already noted, it has been commonly assumed that a key function of medial managers is to manage and even to sustain organisational tensions, particularly between top and bottom. However, our current understandings of relational and social identities suggest that medial managers are subject to identity dualities which may be difficult or even impossible to sustain or reconcile. Leader and follower roles are understood to be relational and dependent on being recognisable and acceptable to the other. Yet there is increasing recognition that managers are both leaders and followers within organisations in different or sometimes simultaneous contexts (Collinson, 2006; Hollander, 1974; Kelley, 1988; Shamir et al., 1998). How, then, does a medial manager's follower identity in one context affect their identity as leader in another context, and the perception of their identity by those they wish to lead? Similarly, social identities are understood to be predicated on shared group interests and group prototypicality, with effective group leaders being seen as the most prototypical group member (Hogg, 2001). But how can medial managers sustain such prototypicality if they are also members of another social group with different and potentially conflicting interests, such as the organisation's senior management?

We do not claim that medial managers are bound to make choices between identity claims: studies such as those by Clarke and colleagues (2009) and El-Sawad and colleagues (2004) suggest ways in which organisational members may be able to sustain competing identity demands, for example through bracketing. However, we do argue that relational and social identity dualities represent key dimensions within which medial managers must construct, repair and maintain their workplace identities. By conceptualising the relational and social identity choices available to the medial manager we are proposing an interpretative framework which, we argue, offers new insight both into the context in which medial managers construct workplace identities, and for understanding and interpreting medial manager talk and actions at any given time. Following Donmoyer we present our interpretative framework not as a predictive but as a heuristic tool, not dictating action but suggesting possibilities (Donmoyer, 2000).

Our framework identifies four interpretations of the medial manager's position, based on whether relational identity is constructed primarily as a leader or as a follower, and whether social identity is constructed primarily as a member of the organisation or of the team they manage. We characterise these interpretations as Minder, Messenger, Mediator and Maverick (figure 1). In our discussion of these four interpretations we illustrate each of them with suggestive cases drawn from the literature: we do not claim that our interpretative framework explains those manager behaviours but that it offers a possible way of making sense of them.

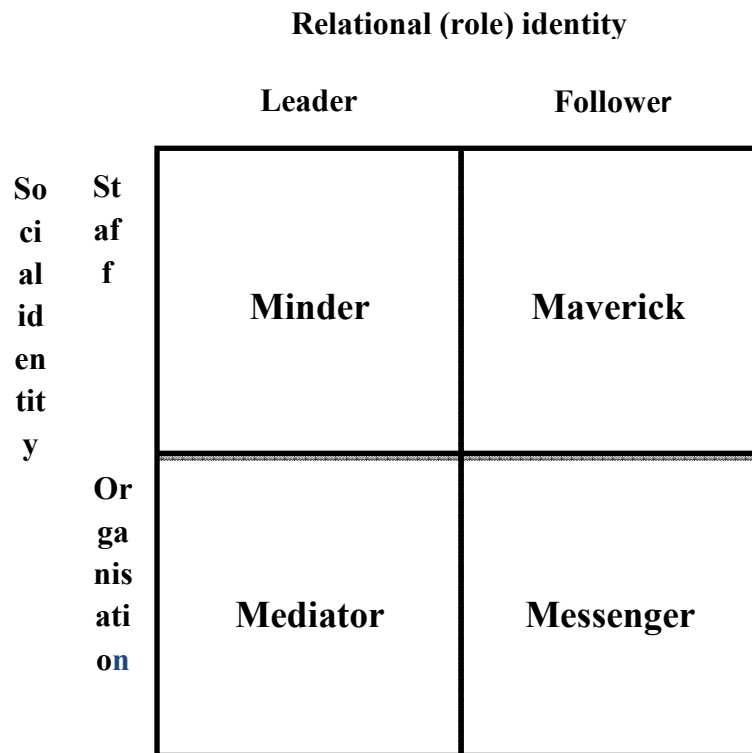


Figure 1 – The Medial Manager Interpretative Framework

We also draw on a pilot study we carried out to initially explore the interpretative framework. This study consisted of semi-structured interviews with seven Team Leaders – first level managers – in a large public-private partnership administering Housing Benefit for a local authority in the North of England, in which we asked the team leaders about their understanding and experience of their role as team leaders. Questions included ‘What do you understand to be the main purpose of your role?’ ‘Do you think this understanding is shared by others in the organisation?’ ‘How would you describe your relationship with your team?’ and ‘Have you ever experienced any tension or conflict between what the organisation and your team expect of you?’ The analysis of interview texts was conducted using a variation of template analysis (King, 2004) and a mixture of deductive and inductive methods, with initial categories being generated both from themes identified in the literature and our model, and from early familiarisation with and reflection on the interview texts (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008; King, 2004). Our aim was not to test team leader statements about their managerial practice with their actual behaviours, but rather to explore whether team leader talk suggested recognition of tensions between organisational and staff demands, and whether their talk privileged particular identity claims or discourses to which they might be subject in the organisation.

Medial manager interpretation 1 – The Minder

We characterise the Minder as one who draws their social identity primarily from the staff and teams that they manage, and who draws their relational identity primarily as a leader.

Minders may be said to construct identities as leaders of their staff team(s), accepting and adopting the group expectations of leaders, valuing the needs of the team and representing the team's interests. Three of the team leaders in our pilot study, whom we call Brian, Carol and Fiona, describe their role and organisational relationships in terms suggestive of a Minder. Carol describes this position quite explicitly:

‘My loyalty is with my staff...Because I'm there for them. It's a bit like a mum, to be honest. I'm there to develop my kids, to bring them up, bring the best out of them, and I feel like that with the team...And if push came to shove, yes, I'd always pick my team.’

These three team leaders all draw strongly on the expectations of their teams as defining their organisational role. Their teams expect them to be available as an expert source of advice and support, to ‘answer every single question’ (Carol), a role which all three accept, and all three describe their workloads as being largely – and properly – driven by the demands of the team: ‘I think a proper Team Leader probably doesn't have their backside on a chair for more than ten minutes at a time’ (Fiona). They describe equivocal feelings when required to represent organisational decisions they disagreed with and all suggest they would make it clear what their personal opinion was: some things have to be done ‘whether you or I like it’ (Brian). All three also describe themselves as representatives and defenders of their teams, escalating problems which affect the team, defending the team against capricious management decisions and protecting the team's interests:

‘And I said - Well you expect my staff to pick them up but you don't expect everyone's staff to pick them up. It's not being fair on my staff, I said, I'm not having that.’ – Carol

A Minder-type interpretation may be influenced by the distance between the manager and their staff. The closer the manager works with staff the more likely it is that they will be influenced by staff expectations and interests (Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe, 2005; Huy, 2002) and newer or more junior managers may continue to retain a strong shared identity with the team they now lead (Warhurst, 2011). However, Haslam (2004) suggests that managers may adopt what we call a Minder-type interpretation if they perceive that they cannot advance further in the organisation; and managers may also respond to particular circumstances when they are confronted by powerful and immediate staff interests. Fairhurst and colleagues (2002) report an instance where a manager had to inform a large number of staff of a substantial redundancy programme. As a result of listening to the responses of staff, their fears and their personal circumstances he tried to propose an alternative system of downsizing which would better take into account the interests of the staff as well as the organisation, but which put him in conflict with senior managers.

Medial manager interpretation 2 – The Messenger

We characterise the Messenger as one who draws their social identity primarily from membership of the organisation, and who primarily performs the role of follower. The Messenger's priority is maintaining their social identity within the organisation, ensuring they conform to organisational expectations – that is, the group prototype (Hogg, 2001) and engaging in appropriate self-presentation to senior managers. Two team leaders whom we call Andrew and Gail describe Messenger-type interpretations of their position and both emphasise their position as loyal members within the organisational hierarchy:

‘They [managers] communicate down from the Head of Service what our objectives are...they set the targets, they direct everything and then we have to carry it through, make sure on the ground level that it’s all adhered to.’ – Gail

Both team leaders describe themselves as distinct and separate from their teams and do not see their role as representing staff; on the contrary Gail refers to often simply acting as a ‘buffer’ for things that her own manager shouldn’t be bothered with, and expects and receives support from her own manager who ‘won’t put up with any criticism about you’. Although both place importance on their ability to communicate organisational messages they do not claim any active role in engaging the team in the message through their own powers of influence and persuasion. Their role is simply to communicate the message provided by others above them.

‘[Managers] know that I’ll do that and I’ll pass on that information, I will get the job done, whatever.’ – Andrew

We suggest other versions of the Messenger interpretation may be found in the literature. For example, Du Gay (1996) describes a manager who had identified that career progression could only be achieved by displaying behaviour that fully accorded with the organisation’s values. She therefore took on extra responsibilities, was seen to work long hours and deliberately understaffed her store in order to reduce costs. She was highly regarded by senior managers but resented by staff who saw themselves as having to work harder to cope with the understaffing and her long hours as presenteeism. In another example Hallier (2004) finds air traffic control managers responding to a new individualised performance management regime by ignoring or distancing themselves from staff concerns about new technology because such concerns could be construed by senior managers as failure or unwillingness to co-operate.

Medial manager interpretation 3 – The Mediator

We characterise the Mediator as one who draws social identity primarily from the organisation and who primarily constructs themselves as a leader. Unlike the Messenger the Mediator seeks to secure engagement and support from staff for organisational decisions and for organisational objectives, that is, downward leadership; and they also perform upwards leadership by advising senior managers of operational issues, putting forward suggestions and even criticisms of senior manager decisions or policies. Their social identity is not only based on being recognised and accepted as members of the organisation, but as active contributors towards the organisation, its aims and its values.

One of the team leaders we studied, Debbie, describes herself in a way which reflected a Mediator-type interpretation. She locates herself between the team below and senior management above and draws on the importance of her role to each side:

‘I’m a facilitator I suppose really, ideally to assist staff in their role and assist management in achieving their targets.’

This facilitation role extends to managing the potential conflict between the needs and perceptions of staff and managers. As the person ‘closest to the team’ she can provide managers with insight into the way the team operates to inform management decisions, and

explain management decisions to the team who 'don't have the full picture'. However, despite positioning herself as a facilitator between the two Debbie ultimately places herself on the organisational side as the 'first point of contact management...for staff'. Her text also echoes Currie and Proctor's (2005) role of translating strategy into operation through decision making and influence. She 'devise[s] strategies to deal with workload and any up and coming problems' and is 'responsible for the control and direction of the team, and the ethos if you like.'

As we have already noted, much literature on medial and middle managers suggests that they should be adopting a Mediator-type role and there are examples of managers who appears to be constructing such identities. Corley (2004) describes a global technology service provider which was being 'spun off' from its parent company and the very different perceptions and needs of senior managers, who wanted organisational identity to adapt to the changing environment, and staff who needed a consistent identity to guide appropriate behaviour and actions. During the change process middle managers acted as a bridge between the two, communicating visions down and concerns up, and facilitating a shared understanding of strategic and cultural needs. Meanwhile the manager cited by Fairhurst and colleagues (Fairhurst et al., 2002) might be described as initially adopting a Mediator-style approach, in the absence of any senior manager involvement, by trying to explain the reasons for the programme to the staff and assuring them that it was not their fault or a reflection on their performance.

Medial manager interpretation 4 – The Maverick

We characterise the Maverick as one who primarily identifies with their staff or team, and who primarily exhibits follower behaviours. This may seem initially problematic, for in what sense could such people be described as managers? We suggest that the medial manager typology is predicated on the medial manager's position 'in the middle' between the organisation and staff, and between the needs and demands of each; and that the strategy of the Maverick is to reposition themselves outside of this organisational hierarchy. Elsbach (1999) argues that individuals may have neutral identification with an organisation, neither identifying nor disidentifying with it; but that such absence of attachment may be a source for self-definition in its own right: 'I'm my own person' or 'I don't take sides, I just do my job' (Elsbach, 1999; Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004). Individuals may also draw on alternative discourses to distance themselves from the organisation such as gender, family or outside interests (Musson and Duberley, 2007) or seek to construct what Thomas and Davies refer to as 'an epistemologically advantaged position' (Thomas and Davies, 2005: 696) in which they draw on their self-constructions to reinscribe the meaning of their role, the service or the organisation. However, we argue that the key feature of the Maverick is that they do not actively or consistently try either to persuade others of their view or to create alignment. Instead their strategy is to comply with organisational requirements (self-presentation) and to carry out their role on their own terms where possible: hence a greater identification with staff and follower behaviour.

One team leader, Eric, illustrates the Maverick-type interpretation. Eric is responsible for managing the Complaints and Appeals team and therefore carries a particular responsibility for maintaining legislative knowledge. He draws strongly on his position as an expert to construct his identity within the organisation:

‘I suppose there’s a level of appreciation. People recognise that I am an experienced officer now and they know they can come to me with work-based problems... You do find that Team Leaders tend to come to me rather than anyone else.’

Eric describes close working relationships with his team, but unlike the Minder role he describes himself as being as much part of a team as leading one. His is a team of experts which supports his own organisational identity – ‘We’re a little bit different to everybody else’ – and he enjoys the fact that being a Team Leader still allows him to retain close working links with his team. His text describes a particular contrast between his organisational role as a manager and as an expert. As a manager he describes his style as ‘laissez-faire’ and primarily facilitative. He draws on his favourite pastime: ‘I’m like a gardener. I try to get the conditions where they can do their job to the best’ and contrasts his style with ‘the more forceful management type’. He is relaxed about criticism from his own manager about the way he manages his team. However, as an expert he adopts a leadership role:

‘What does the law say? You’ve got to apply that. Occasionally experience tells you that up to now [the service has] got it wrong, you’ve got to get it right in future. And if that means I have to stand up and advise [managers] and Team Leaders how to go about that, I’ll do so.’

Further examples suggestive of a Maverick interpretation can be found in the literature. Thomas and Davies (2005) describe how a social work manager draws on his professional expertise to critique a new quantitative performance management framework which, he argues, fails to address the real issues of care quality. Simply ensuring compliance with the framework would not ensure high quality care, which he continues to feel responsible for. However, he does not feel that he can continually oppose the new policy because senior managers do not want to listen. He is left to determine his own quality standards for clients whilst attempting to comply with the framework. Another aspect of the Maverick style is suggested by Du Gay (1996) in which a manager acts pragmatically to deal with the organisational tension between senior manager demands and operational reality. She is required to put all her staff through a training programme, but does not have the staff resources to also cover the store. Rather than be seen to resist the training programme or make extra demands of her staff she completes all the staff training sheets herself.

Implications for organisations and a research agenda

We have proposed that the concept of the medial manager, one who both manages others and is managed themselves, helps us to consider an aspect of management pertinent to a majority of managers – not just those classically understood as ‘middle managers’ – as embodying to some degree the differences and tensions between organisational members, and in particular the tensions between the interests of the organisation itself and the interests of its members. As such, we suggest, medial managers should be considered key strategic actors: the sense that they make of these tensions and the ways in which they interpret their position ‘in-between’ these tensions are likely to have consequences for the organisation and its ability to sustain consensus and alignment. Drawing on theories of relational and social identity we have suggested a further conceptualisation of the medial manager in terms of identity dualities: the expectations on medial managers to act relationally as both leaders and

followers, and the social identity claims from both the organisation and the staff teams that they manage.

We do not claim to have developed a new theory which explains or predicts manager behaviours or manager identity. However, we do offer our concept of the dimensions of medial manager workplace identity – leader/follower roles and organisational/staff team social identities – as a possible social construction through which to consider managers afresh. Our pilot study of team leaders provided a first opportunity to explore the possible merits and usefulness of such an interpretative framework. Whilst its very small scale, in terms of number of participants and lack of follow-up interviews or other forms of triangulation, precludes any firm conclusions, we make some tentative observations and comments on the potential value of such a social construction of management.

Our first observation is that each of the team leaders interviewed describe interpretations of their organisational role in ways which correlated to one of the four broad interpretations defined by our medial manager framework. Three team leaders suggest a Minder-type interpretation, positioning themselves as leaders of their teams with responsibilities for the interests and well-being of those team members. Two team leaders describe what we categorise as a Messenger interpretation, positioning themselves as vicarious instruments implementing organisational decisions and loyal followers of their own managers. One team leader positions herself as a Mediator, a junior member of the wider management team whose role is to actively create alignment; and one seeks to position himself outside the management hierarchy as an expert among experts, or Maverick. However, we do not make this observation in order to suggest that we are able to simplify team leader behaviour to a type. Even our single interviews suggested a variety of nuances, not explored here, between team leaders who described similar behaviours and interpretations of their position, and different responses to different identity claims and sources of identity regulation – exactly as one might expect. The value of such an interpretative framework, we suggest, is in providing a point of similarity, from which to better explore, understand and contrast the different processes through which managers come to understand themselves and their social worlds.

Our second observation reinforces our starting point. The different ways in which medial managers interpret their organisational position, and the choices they make between relational and social identities have likely consequences for their behaviours and actions and thus for the organisation. For example, the four team leaders who prioritised their social relationships with their staff teams (the three Minders and the Maverick) all referred to not actively trying to persuade their staff of the merits of a decision they did not support or agree with personally, but making their own position very clear. Such a stance does not stop the team leader and the team from implementing the decision but it has implications both for the perception of the decision by staff and their perception of senior management. When medial managers choose to prioritise relationships with the team this may mean perceptions of differences of interest between staff and the organisation being subtly reinforced (Haslam, 2004; Holden and Roberts, 2004). Similarly, Hallier's (2004) study illustrates how a Messenger-type concern with self-presentation can lead to increased dis-alignment between staff responsible for operations and senior management strategy.

Thirdly, we do not presume that medial managers will adopt a single interpretation either over the course of time or even within a moment. Although the team leaders in our pilot did appear to be describing a consistent position we were not able to thoroughly explore this through subsequent interviews or observations. We have previously noted studies which

have demonstrated how managers may hold contradictory positions simultaneously (e.g. Clarke et al., 2009; El-Sawad et al., 2004); and the case reported by Fairhurst and colleagues (2002) illustrates how a manager may respond to different demands and contexts in different ways. However, we do suggest that our interpretative framework may have value as a tool in being able to track and to interpret manager talk and actions over time, in different contexts, within a situation or even within a single utterance.

To conclude we set out our own research agenda into medial manager workplace identity and the ways in which we hope to develop our use of our interpretative framework.

Building on our pilot study we now plan to carry out a case study of the circa 35 medial managers within a single Housing Association in the North West of England. The key sources of data will be unstructured interviews with each manager but this data will also be supported by observations of individual managers and key events such as team meetings, documentary analysis and follow-up interviews to enable further exploration of issues as they arise from the data. Our case study will make particular use of narrative methods. Self-narratives and stories are widely recognised as a key means of sustaining self-identity across past, present and future (Ashforth et al., 2008; McAdams, 1985; McAdams, 2008; Watson, 2009), and as a means of organising, understanding and controlling experiences (Currie and Brown, 2003). Our interviews will focus on inviting, listening to and exploring with the interviewee stories that managers choose to tell as encapsulating their organisational experiences and what it is to be a manager.

Our aims of this study are threefold. First we aim to make a contribution towards our understanding of identity construction by providing a more detailed picture of some of the underlying processes of identity, examining how medial managers construct workplace identities in the context of multiple identity resources and identity claims, and in the context of social and relational identity dualities. We hope to be able to use our interpretative framework as a means of further exploring, analysing, comparing and contrasting the ways in which medial managers respond to workplace and other identity claims within a single organisation, and the strategies through which they cognitively manage and organise multiple and contested identities.

Second, the research aims to contribute towards knowledge of the medial manager role within the organisation. Examining how medial managers respond to competing organisational demands through identity construction processes should provide greater insight into the nature, pressures and demands of the medial manager function. In carrying out a case study of all medial managers in an organisation our research will also aim to develop insight into whether and what differences the medial manager's position in the organisational hierarchy makes to their interpretation of their role.

Third, the research aims to provide some practical insight for organisations in increasing their understanding of the medial manager role. We are wary of the use of simple matrices and typologies as a means of "explaining" organisational or individual behaviour and the inherent risks of simplifying complex processes. An anonymous reviewer of a previous version of this paper noted that consultants would 'love' our framework, and perhaps this is not necessarily a compliment. Nevertheless, we also believe that research into organisations and organisational members must be ultimately accessible to and realisable by those organisations, and we argue that our interpretative framework could bring significant insight to organisations. Differing interpretations of the medial manager role have the potential to

create multiple small-scale tensions and conflicts within the organisation, reducing organisational cohesion and effectiveness. We suggest that our framework might have two particular benefits for organisations and their understanding and development of medial managers. First, it articulates the different interpretations of the medial manager role and conceptualises them in terms of recognisable tensions to which the medial manager is subject. In other words, organisations may find it a helpful way to make sense of some medial manager behaviours. Second, the framework invites organisations to identify the most appropriate role interpretation for the organisation and to ensure that it is clearly articulated and supported at every level within the organisation such as recruitment, training, job design and decision-making (cf. Carsten et al., 2010). We hope that our research will enable us to find ways of further articulating, both clearly and faithfully, the medial manager position which will enable further organisational understanding of the nature, pressures and demands of the medial manager function, and help organisations to appropriately support and make more effective use of medial managers: to support medial managers to ‘make a difference’.

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