The Long, Brown Path Before me': Story Elicitation and Analysis in Identity Studies

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Abstract: This paper makes a renewed case for the value of the interview as a method for investigating the workplace identities of organisational actors. In particular it addresses interpretivist criticism that interviews merely tell us how the actor would like to be seen, rather than how they behave in practice. Adopting a narrative approach, the method combines story elicitation with analysis based on Levi-Strauss' concept of mythical thought, in which stories are analysed to not only reveal individual self-narratives but an underpinning social landscape constructed of selected oppositions within which the individual positions themselves. The paper illustrates the method and its potential by presenting the detailed analysis of one team leader's elicited story. It demonstrates how the method allows not only insight into the team leader's self-identity but insight into ongoing processes of identity work, by revealing the social landscapes that they construct, the discursive resources they select, reject, challenge and struggle with, and how they position themselves in relation to those resources through narrative. The revealed social landscape and narrative positioning also generates new insight into the particular organisational position of the team leader and the tensions inherent in their position between staff and the organisation.

Keywords: narrative, mythic thought, interviews, identity, discourse, managers

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,

Healthy, free, the world before me,

The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.

Song of the Open Road, Walt Whitman (1871)

1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with the value of interviews as a qualitative method for investigating identity. Recent research into identity has suggested an over-reliance on interviews based on a natural inclination to understand people's view of themselves (Coupland and Brown, 2012) and a failure to engage with the ways in which identity is accomplished through social interactions, by 'displaying' one's identity and gaining verification from others (Down and Reveley, 2009; Goffman, 1959) or through positioning oneself in relation to others (McInnes and Corlett, 2012). Informing this call is an increasingly cogent interpretivist critique of the interview, which is not 'a pipeline to the interiors of interviewees or the exteriors of social reality' (Alvesson, 2003: 30). Interviews are a particular form of social interaction and nothing more (Czarniawska, 2004): they are a 'contrivance' (Silverman, 2006), a particular occasion for a particular form of talk instigated by the researcher (Kelly, 2008) which creates its own social reality (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997). As a method of investigating identity the interview is therefore problematic: in speaking of themselves in the context of an interview, interviewees may present themselves in different ways according to their expectations of the interview process, the interviewer and the interview questions (Czarniawska, 2004; Mishler, 1986; Silverman, 2006). They focus on 'perspectives of action' rather than 'perspectives in action' (Snow and Anderson, 1987: 1343). Calls for additional and complementary research into 'naturally occurring' (Down and Reveley, 2009) or 'everyday' (McInnes and Corlett, 2012) talk and action can therefore be seen as a necessary rebalancing of attention from identity as self-narration to identity as daily inter-action (Clifton, 2014).

This paper takes up the challenge posed by such identity studies to make a renewed case for the value of interviews. The paper proceeds as follows. First the paper elaborates the theoretical background and conceptualises identity as an ongoing dynamic between self-identity and the regulatory effects of social

practices through identity work. Second, the paper presents an interview method which adopts a narrative approach in combining story elicitation with analysis based on a Levi-Straussian concept of mythic thought. This method enables insight not only into the self-presentations of the interviewee, but also insight into ongoing processes of identity work by revealing the social landscapes which they construct from available discursive resources, and how they position themselves in relation to those resources through narrative. Thirdly the method is demonstrated through the detailed presentation and analysis of the elicited story of a team leader working in a UK Registered Provider of Social Housing. Finally the value of the method is discussed both as a means of insight into processes of identity and into the experience and position of a front-line manager, and proposes how the method might be further used and developed.

2. Identity: the self and the social

Identity may be understood as the means by which individuals (and collectives) understand and organise their place in the world: Who am I/we, and how should I/we act? Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) model provides an insightful starting point for understanding these processes of identity, in which identity is conceptualised as a continual dynamic interaction between the self and social context. Self-Identity is the self as reflexively understood at any point in time (Giddens, 1991); Identity Regulation describes the effects of social practices on self-identity; while Identity Work is the continual process of constructing, repairing and maintaining self-identity in response to identity regulation.

Identity is thus conceived as an ongoing iteration between self-definition and social definitions (Ybema et al., 2009) in which self-identity is as much a reality as social effects; and this acknowledgement of the role of both self-identity and social effects suggests two particular aspects of identity which inform this paper and the presented method. First, and in contrast to some post-structuralist perspectives (e.g. Gergen, 2000) identity is not wholly constructed in the moment-by-moment interactions with others. One may interact with others, but may spend as much or more time (mis)remembering, reflecting on, interpreting, talking about and reimagining those interactions; and there is much evidence to suggest that individuals are able to hold enduring self-conceptions, and then act to acquire support for those self-views through the situations and relationships they choose, the identities they communicate and the responses from others that they attend to and remember (Burke, 2006; Seyle and Swann Jr., 2007). Nevertheless, self-identity remains provisional and open to contestation and challenge from institutional practices (Phillips et al., 2004) and discursive 'regimes of truth' (Kornberger and Brown, 2006: 500), from the expectations of others (McInnes and Corlett, 2012) and their responses to self-presentation (Down and Reveley, 2009; Goffman, 1959). Second, and relatedly, identity is not essentialist but multiple. Individuals occupy numerous subject positions and identities in response to different social roles and contexts (Brown, 2006; Collinson, 2003; Stryker and Burke, 2000). The processes of identity work between self-identity and social practice are ongoing through each particular occasion of social interaction (Kelly, 2008).

Researchers in identity have increasingly called for attention to be paid to 'naturally occurring' (McInnes and Corlett, 2012) or 'everyday' (Down and Reveley, 2009) talk and action. Such calls imply that what happens in interviews may be contrived, unnatural or uncommon, and that participants provide retrospective accounts coloured by reflection and selective disclosure (Clifton, 2014). However, by conceptualising identity as a continual dynamic between self-identity and social practices, the interview may be considered not as a difficulty in getting past self-presentation, but as a means of gaining insight into identity *through* self-presentation. By acknowledging the interview as a particular occasion for constructing a particular social reality (Kelly, 2008) it is possible to investigate the processes by which that social reality is produced. The ways in which interviewees make sense of and represent themselves and their experiences tell us much about how they wish to account for themselves and their actions (Czarniawska, 2004), their cultural and tacit assumptions (Mishler, 1986) and the processes of selecting, interpreting and transforming events (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997). Although interview talk may be partial and contextual it draws on resources available to the participant and with which they are familiar and concerned: it is 'cut from the same kind of cloth as the lives they tell about' (Denzin, 1989: 86). Our concern need not be with trying to establish the 'real' or 'external' nature of the practice that is being described, but with the description itself (Miller and Glassner, 2010): the way someone sees themselves and wishes to be seen. In other words, the interview as a particular social interaction is another occasion for identity work, in which the interviewee responds to the discursive resources available to them and subjectivities impinging upon them, and seeks to make sense of themselves in relation to them.

3. Identity, self-narrative and myth

In this section the paper sets out an interview method and its theoretical underpinnings, which enables both insight into the self-identities of social actors, and insight into their identity work in response to social and discursive practice. One important way in which individuals make continuing sense of themselves within their social worlds is through narrative. Narrative may be understood as a way of organising and making sense of scattered events. Narrative is more than simply stringing episodes together; it is the process of 'constructing meaningful totalities' (Ricoeur, 1981: 279) by selecting and constituting them in particular ways as functions of narrative (Bruner, 1991). It is an active process of conceptual framing (Hawkins and Saleem, 2012) and a particular way of constructing social realities (Cunliffe et al., 2004) by selectively distilling disparate and often contradictory events and experiences into a coherent whole (Boje, 1991; Boje, 2001). Individuals use narrative forms to understand and make sense of their own selves by constructing life-stories or self-narratives which provide an account of an individual's life in terms of unity and purpose (McAdams, 1985; Watson, 2009). Narrative selves are not essentialist: like any story they require the imposition of a 'counterfeit coherence' (Boje, 2001: 2) through the selection, rejection, arranging and sequencing of events, and individuals may tell multiple stories about themselves.

The role of self-narratives can be further developed through the Levi-Straussian concept of mythical thought. From his studies of South American tribes Levi-Strauss argues that myths are surface-level stories derived from 'deep structures' (Levi-Strauss, 1963; Levi-Strauss, 1983) based on oppositions such as the fresh and the decayed, or the cosmic and the earthly, and that myths describe mediating positions between these oppositions (Levi-Strauss, 1983). The significance of mythic thought is that it is 'a phenomenon of the imagination, resulting from the attempt at interpretation' (Levi-Strauss, 1983 : 5) which seeks to intuitively and temporarily integrate different realms. Narrative is the means by which deep abstract oppositions are mediated and the narrator's position in relation to these oppositions is constructed: paradigmatic (oppositional) meaning establishes spatial positioning while syntagmatic (narrative) meaning establishes an order and direction through time (Gregg, 2006). In other words the apparently simple and superficial stories we tell about ourselves and others are both founded on, and trace a mediating path through a selected and limited number of oppositions with which we construct both a social world and our position within it.

Building on the concept of self-narrative and stories as tracing a mediating path through a selected social landscape, this paper argues that interviews may insightfully contribute to identity studies through story elicitation: that is, inviting participants to choose and narrate stories about themselves which have meaning for them, and which they feel reflect themselves and their social role(s). Inviting participant stories and self-narratives has a number of advantages. First, it offers a large degree of independence to the interviewee to tell their story – and to present themselves – as they wish, without the conversation being prematurely framed by the researcher (Flick, 2009). Second, it enables the interviewee to present themselves across past, present and future rather than simply as a snapshot (Mallett and Wapshott, 2012). Third, stories can reveal some of the resources and interpretative repertoires which individuals draw on in their construction of themselves and their social worlds: the discourses which are drawn on and which are not (Dick, 2004; Hollway, 2001); and the cultural resources such as dominant story genres (Gergen, 2001), socially contextual cultural stereotypes (Davies and Harre, 2001) and the locally prescribed forms of particular communities (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001). Inviting self-narratives therefore allows the opportunity to investigate the self-as-hero at the centre of a social world: to explore the choice of story, its form and its telling; the role adopted by the narrator and the roles ascribed to others; the selected features of the social landscape which they construct; and their chosen path through that landscape.

4. Methodology – using story elicitation interviews to research manager identity

The research presented here derives from an investigation into manager identity and particularly the ways in which managers make sense of their organisational positions between the demands and expectations of those they manage and those they are managed by. The research strategy adopted was a case study carried out at 'Panorama Housing', a Registered Provider of Social Housing in the North West of England. Panorama was formed in 2006 in order to take over the housing stock of a local authority, although existing local authority housing staff were transferred to Panorama under TUPE. Panorama now employs over 240 staff and manages approximately 11,500 properties. Twenty one out of twenty two managers were included in the study, ranging across three hierarchical levels.

Data collection took place over a six month period. The primary data collection method was interviews with each of the managers studied, but data was also collected through work shadowing of individual managers, observations of team and other organisational meetings, extensive collection of internal and external documents and artefacts, and interviews with the Chief Executive and selected Directors. The purpose of this wider data collection was to build a rich picture of the organisational and discursive context in which the managers worked.

The focal point of the interview invited the participating manager to narrate a workplace incident or event which captured their own understanding of their organisational role. Participants were given this question and some broad guidelines ahead of the interview to enable them to reflect on their organisational role and to choose a story which was representative of their experience and the meanings they attached to their role, rather than having to think of a story 'on the spot'. The interviews followed three stages. In the first stage participants were asked a small number of background questions such as how long they had worked for the organisation and how they were appointed to their current role. In the second stage the manager was invited to narrate their story, during which the researcher listened carefully and only offered minimal prompts to encourage the storytelling (Wengraf, 2001). The third stage explored the story and its meanings with the manager, drawing selectively on a set of possible follow-up questions in response to the story and themes described by the manager. However, the use of any question and the order was dependent on the story told by the participant to avoid detracting from the participant's own meaning-making framework (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Wengraf, 2001). Interviews averaged just over an hour in length.

The paper focuses on the initial structural analysis of each interview text. Analysis followed the method demonstrated by Gregg (2006) which combines syntagmatic (narrative) and paradigmatic analysis based on the concept of Levi-Straussian mythical thought. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and uploaded to NVivo. Syntagmatic analysis was undertaken using Propp's (1968) categorisation of narrative functions to establish an underlying narrative structure both of the chosen story(s) and other elicited stories, and of the interview text as a whole. Paradigmatic analysis was undertaken based on identifying oppositions within the interview text and the participant's positioning of themselves in relation to these oppositions. Following King and Horrocks (2010) the interview transcript was initially read through to gain an overall familiarity with its content, with comments added using NVivo memos to capture early thoughts and impressions. Descriptive codes were then developed to categorise relevant perceptions and experiences within the texts. Subsequently, interpretative codes were developed by looking for relations between descriptive codes to form clusters, and overarching themes derived from interpretative codes to identify the abstract oppositions contained within the text.

5. Findings

Interviews with twenty one managers generated a wide range of stories ranging from the routine to the extraordinary, including managing the staff rota, a service-area redundancy process and dealing with an emergency flood in a high-rise block. However, the particular interest of the generated stories is the personal meanings for the narrating managers, and their exploration within the wider interview. The paper therefore presents the analysis of one interview with a team leader, Gemma, in some detail in order to illustrate the method and its potential for rich findings. It begins by briefly outlining the discursive organisational context in which she works.

Thematic analysis (King and Horrocks, 2010) of observational and documentary data and interviews with the Chief Executive and Directors identified three discourses which were consistently prominent. The first is one of change and improvement, which derives especially from the organisation's origins as former local authority housing stock. As the Chief Executive explains, Panorama was created to improve services to tenants, and this necessitated a change from the old council ways: as an independent social business 'we stand or fall by our performance'. The second is a discourse of transformational managers. The Chief Executive is explicit about the qualities managers should have: 'I'm not looking for supervisors. Supervisors are people who get things done, but managers are responsible for...getting the best out of people'. Managers should innovate, challenge and develop their staff and should be 'the authors' of the organisational message, not just its deliverers. A third discourse is staff engagement. The Chief Executive and Directors all talk about staff as the most important organisational resource and this is underpinned by initiatives such as participation in national and international engagement accreditations and awards, implementing staff ideas such as an in-house bistro and a quarterly staff forum chaired by the Chief Executive.

5.1 Gemma's story

Gemma is one of eleven team leaders in Panorama. Along with another team leader she line-manages twenty four customer service advisers (CSAs) in Panorama's Customer Service Centre, dealing with all in-bound customer telephone calls. Aged in her twenties she is the youngest of the interviewed managers; she has worked for Panorama for six years and been in her current role for two years. Gemma's story is a useful example because it initially appears very limited and she begins by saying that 'I haven't really got one'. Certainly other interviewees told richer and more detailed stories and were more skilled in narrative turn and style. Nevertheless Gemma establishes a simple but compelling narrative which is added to, developed and reiterated during the interview; and she establishes a paradigmatic landscape which reinforces that narrative.

Gemma's story is as follows:

> *'I mean really I haven't got any, like, specific example of anything but I would really, you know if I see my role being (pause) that I developed from the bottom upwards so, you know, I haven't come into the role that I'm doing now not knowing (pause) about how the everyday (pause) erm (pause) tasks are dealt with of being a customer service adviser so I <u>know</u> the issues that they face, I <u>know</u> the difficulties, I know the challenges and I (p) can (p) hopefully then use that experience to put, erm, things in place to make it easier, make it better. So really I've seen it from the beginning, it's grown, you know, as - and I've been a part of that change, erm, both in the Service Centre and like the whole organisation's developed a lot which, you know, I think to be made to feel part of that change, erm, is important and that. You know, I obviously see myself as contributing towards that. Erm. (Pause) And now (pause) in terms of the story it's, it's just the everyday management of (pause) the Customer Service Centre and supporting the advisers, you know, whether it's personal issues or (pause) things to do with work. You know, I'm not just there to say, you know, 'Can you get that call, can you get that call', there's a lot more to, you know, managing a team. (Pause) I don't really know what else I was going to say. (Pause) Is there anything specific you wanted out of it? Or...'*

5.1.1 Syntagmatic structure

In this initial telling of the story Gemma establishes its core: 'I developed from the bottom upwards'. In other words it is a recognisable plot of 'rags to riches' or the 'rise from the shop floor'. Read mythically, and in terms of Propp's (1968) story functions, Gemma also establishes a mythic origin story line – which Propp characterises as a 'Preparatory' function – by explicitly linking her own story of development with that of Panorama: 'I've seen it from the beginning, it's grown... and I've been a part of that change'. In fact Gemma had already introduced this early in the interview before being invited to tell her story:

> *'I mean when I joined there was four other customer service advisers so I was the fifth customer service adviser to join. And now like, we've got a team of what eighteen, twenty people so it was very small. I've seen it from the beginning.'*

Gemma's identification with Panorama's story of progress supports and reinforces her construction of her current role as a team leader who 'knows' the challenges faced by her team, because she has been there. Her identification with the organisation is also reinforced by the subsequent elements of her story hinted here and developed during the interview. She 'wanted to progress my career' (a 'Lack') and gained considerable support and encouragement from her line manager Carl who acts as the 'Helper' who assists the hero, giving her additional responsibilities and helping her with her application.

Gemma's successful promotion to Team Leader leads to a second phase of the story which develops during the interview. Promotion meant leaving her role in the team ('Departure') and having to re-establish a new relationship and to be recognised as a team leader ('Unrecognised Arrival'): 'you're having to manage people who you <u>were</u> once before'. For Gemma her age was a particular challenge:

> *'It's obviously been slightly more difficult for me with, erm (p) longstanding members of staff who had maybe worked at the Council beforehand, erm, and obviously they've got slightly different opinions (p) of how things (pause) of how things should be developed, you know. And obviously because them members of staff were quite older than myself (pause) that did, you know, age proved a bit of a (p) a barrier (p) in that way.'*

She describes two examples of implementing changes with the team in which she successfully dealt with initial resistance through listening to staff concerns and persuading them of the benefits of the changes, which she

alludes to in her original story: 'there's a lot more to, you know, managing a team'. Through the successful completion of these 'Difficult Tasks' she is able to establish a new relationship which is 'productive' and based on 'respect' ('Recognition of the Hero'). Her story, as she originally presents it, ends on a note of completion and contentment ('Wedding'): she has achieved her new role and is comfortable with 'just the everyday management'.

5.1.2 Paradigmatic structure

Gemma's self-narrative is reinforced and developed by establishing a paradigmatic landscape of selected oppositions, through which she traces a mediating path and constructs a unique positon within her personal social landscape. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given her organisational role, Gemma's paradigmatic landscape can be broadly categorised as being based on opposition between the team she manages and the wider organisation, but this opposition is based on three inter-related dimensions.

The most prominent dimension relates to experience and expertise. Syntagmatic analysis has revealed how Gemma draws on her history as a customer service adviser (CSA) in order to construct her role as a team leader who 'knows' the nature and challenges of the CSA role and who can utilise that knowledge to make improvements. She contrasts herself and her 'hands-on' experience with that of her manager, whose role is 'strategic' and 'political': 'Carl's obviously come in at a different level and he will come to us to find some information for him on the systems, you know, whereas I fully understand (pause) in a <u>working</u> environment.' Gemma further extends this to include other senior managers who demonstrate their lack of hand-on experience by occasional unrealistic requests of the service; and she critiques a training course she attended as being too theory based and which 'doesn't help you in your everyday work'. However, Gemma also faced the challenge of managing older and more experienced CSAs; and part of her response to this challenge is to contrast herself against their resistance to change and improvements. In describing how she implemented a new telephone script she explains:

> 'We were like trying to embed a bit of a, like, a, a structure to the call and (pause) you know, certain ways of doing (pause) you know certain ways of dealing with certain queries and they were sometimes like "<u>that's</u> the way we've always done it". But, you know, that's not how we're looking to go forward and we're trying to improve it and progress it so if you can try it this way it might be easier.'

Gemma constructs herself as one who blends knowledge and experience with an openness to learn and develop through her practice. She positions herself as distinct both from her manager, who lacks her practical experience, and from her team who rely on past experience before Panorama and 'the way we've always done it'. This position between oppositions reflects her self-narrative of one whose personal story is linked to that of the organisation and its growth and development: she has experienced the organisation from the beginning and remains committed to its development and being 'part of that change'.

A second dimension to Gemma's paradigmatic landscape is a tension between contrasting management styles and responsibilities. Within her original story Gemma positions herself against those who see management as simply authoritarian and directive – 'Can you get that call, can you get that call' – and with no consideration for the need to support staff in their work and with any 'personal issues'; and she subsequently describes how she sells changes to staff by explaining the reasons for it and by offering them the opportunity to give feedback and make suggestions. However, Gemma's text suggests that she has established what she feels is an appropriate professional distance from the team. She believes she is respected but she is no longer a team member and that the team have accepted "what my role was going to be". She carefully distinguishes between going out with the team on official work nights out, but not socialising with them at other times. She is prepared to enforce decisions and changes where necessary: "You know, sometimes that is the way it is and we've just got to, you know we've decided it, it's the fairest we believe, you know, so we do enforce it."

Gemma again seeks to mediate between these two management responsibilities through her own openness to change and learning:

> 'It's explaining to people the rationale behind it and give them the opportunity to suggest any ways because nothing says that the way you're suggesting is the best. People might come up with a different idea to do something. (pause) So it's just you being open to change and them being able to change as well.'

She presents herself as an example for the team: she is herself open to learning and change, as a loyal member of the organisation, and this also means she is open to ideas and challenge from the team; but in return they must first be open themselves.

Gemma constructs a third paradigmatic dimension around different the perceptions and interests of her staff and the organisation. These differences apply directly to her own role: staff see her role as managing their work environment and sorting out their problems – 'what I can do for them' – whereas Gemma's line manager and Gemma herself see her role as managing the Customer Service Centre and delivering on targets and quality. Similarly, staff do not always recognise the need to change practices or the organisation's vision of continual improvement. Here, Gemma positions herself as a representative of the organisation whose role is to bring the team towards the organisational vision and values, which is supported by her consciously creating an appropriate professional relationship with her team. However, despite a generally strong identification, Gemma also establishes some distance between her and the organisation. Senior managers do not always realise the work involved to fulfil requests they make, and the impact on the management of the team. Here Gemma draws on her operational background and expertise to critique the organisation. She herself does not wish to progress any higher up, and distinguishes between being committed to her responsibilities and incorporating her role into her wider identity:

> 'Work is not everything...I don't, I'm not, the title of it or anything like that doesn't really bother me. I'm just more concerned about the work that I do and to do it well.'

6. Discussion

This paper has argued for the continuing value of interviews within identity studies, and presented and illustrated a particular method of eliciting and analysing stories or self-narratives. In this section the syntagmatic and paradigmatic analysis of Gemma's interview text is extended and developed to consider: what this method can tell us about Gemma's workplace identity and her identity work in constructing and sustaining it; what this method can tell us more generally about the organisational position and experience of managers and especially team leaders; and some wider implications of the method and how it might benefit organisations.

Building on the concept that individuals not only construct narratives to make sense of themselves over time, but to establish a path through a personally constructed social landscape of selected oppositions, the method actively invites individuals to tell a story about themselves which reflects their experience and personal meaning of their organisational role. Analysis of Gemma's story has demonstrated how Gemma uses a simple story of joining the organisation and becoming a successful team leader in a personal way, to support her construction of herself as a particular kind of manager in a particular organisational context. Prior to telling the story and in its initial telling she repeatedly frames her story as one of mythic origins, reiterating how she was there 'from the beginning' and explicitly linking her own story of development and change with that of Panorama's. Her knowledge and experience, derived from her shared origins with Panorama, establish her new role with the team as one who 'knows' the nature of the work they do, and distinguishes her from her own manager as one who is 'hands-on' and understands the 'working environment' rather than being distant and strategic. But her origin also distinguishes her from her team, and particularly older members who rely on the 'old' ways before Panorama began and who are reluctant to change and develop with the organisation; and this positioning of herself as one who has grown up with the organisation also forms the basis for her mediation between her potentially competing management responsibilities. When balancing the need to enforce change and to engage staff with it, Gemma offers herself as an example of being open to learn and to be challenged, inviting staff feedback which she promises will be listened to and possibly acted on. But in order to earn that right to be listened to, staff have to demonstrate openness themselves and try out the change first. Similarly Gemma positions herself as a representative of the organisation in terms of bringing staff closer towards its vision of continuous improvement, but also as one who gains the trust and respect of staff through her experience and expertise which enables her to meet their immediate needs and concerns. Her narrative supports this: she has grown out of the team and into the wider organisation, and now seeks to bring others with her; but she is not a copy of her own manager. She brings her own essential expertise and fulfils a role neither he nor her team are able to do, based on a new form of operational management expertise.

The method offers opportunity to investigate processes of Gemma's identity work within the particular context of the interview (Kelly, 2008). Syntagmatic and paradigmatic analysis of Gemma's story illustrates how Gemma imaginatively constructs a self-identity through careful selection, distillation and synthesis of discursive and cultural resources which are available to her (Denzin, 1989; Hollway, 2001; Miller and Glassner, 2010). First, it is notable that Gemma draws on all three prominent organisational discourses of continuous change and improvement, transformational managers and staff engagement. Conversely, and in contrast to certain other team leaders interviewed as part of the research, she does not significantly draw on or utilise staff discourses, such as organisational failures to fulfil staff needs and interests, or identification with staff activity and practice. Her construction of her workplace identity therefore relies strongly on organisational constructions of her role and on fulfilling organisational expectations of that role – which might be expected, given her experience of having been promoted from within the team. However, Gemma also utilises the organisational discourse of continuous improvement in specific and personal ways in order to support and frame her own workplace identity and role meaning. Her personal narrative of progress 'from the bottom' reflects her commitment to organisational values; but it also allows her to construct a role in which she is distinguished from her own manager as well as from her staff, based on her operational experience and knowledge. Similarly Gemma utilises a discourse of experience and expertise in specific and personal ways. Although she uses her operational experience to distinguish herself from her line manager she does not use it to separate herself from the organisation by constructing an 'epistemologically privileged position' (Thomas and Davies, 2005: 700) in order to challenge organisational discourse. Instead she mobilises it in order to construct and support her organisational position as a team leader who uniquely blends managerial responsibilities of staff engagement and organisational loyalty with operational knowledge. Whereas some other team leaders used discourses of expertise to construct practitioner positions as an alternative to management ones, Gemma uses it to demonstrate how practitioner expertise makes her a better manager.

The particular narrative structure of Gemma's text also reveals further insights into her workplace identity. Using Propp's (1968) story functions, Gemma's story of setting out to fulfil a 'Lack' by seeking to progress her career, and then fulfilling 'Difficult Tasks' in order to achieve recognition in her new role can be categorised as one in which Gemma adopts the role of the 'Searcher-Hero'. Unlike a 'Victim-Hero', who finds themselves at the mercy of malignant events, Gemma as a 'Searcher-Hero' claims agency in her own story, in which she successfully fulfils her own personal challenge. Syntagmatic analysis also reveals that her line manager fulfilled the narrative role of Helper, who assists the Hero to achieve their goal, by encouraging her, giving her experience of more managerial tasks and giving practical assistance with her application. Gemma's text alludes to her own role now involving helping staff, and how twenty-two CSAs have been helped to gain promotions within the wider organisation; but she does not include any specific details or examples of this. Whereas some other team leaders switch between Hero roles and that of Helper to others, typically their staff, Gemma can be seen as currently adopting talk of a Helper role rather than having incorporated it into her own sensemaking. As a relatively new team leader her story remains one of establishing herself. Linked to this, Gemma also utilises a familiar story genre (Gergen, 2001). By saying that she 'developed from the bottom upwards' she alludes to the story genre of 'rags-to-riches' and invites the listener to associate her with the qualities of the hero of such a story: talent, hard work and deserved success, all of which support both her own story and her personal interpretation of her organisational role in the paradigmatic landscape she constructs.

Whilst it would be premature to claim any firm conclusions in respect of the wider organisational position of managers and team leaders from a single case, Gemma's text does raise some particular issues which are likely to be common to other managers and particularly team leaders, and suggests that the method allows some insight into different manager responses. First, Gemma's text highlights the tensions of being 'in-between' the staff she managers and the organisation. Notwithstanding her construction of a role which mediates between the two, her text reveals that she recognises the potential opposition. First level managers in particular are the immediate face of the organisation to their staff (Coupland et al., 2005; Seijts and Roberts, 2011) and therefore likely to be especially subject to such tensions between staff and organisational interests; and this method of story elicitation and analysis offers a way of exploring different manager responses to these tensions. Second, Gemma reveals the challenge faced by managers who have been promoted from within their teams, and their need to establish new relationships, roles and identities (Warhurst, 2011), particularly where they have been promoted ahead of older and more experienced staff. Third, Gemma's text suggests that managers may need to be able to construct a role in which they are able to differentiate themselves – and therefore justify their particular role in the organisation – from those they manage and those who they are managed by.

These points also suggest a potential benefit of the method to organisations. The method draws attention to the multiple discursive resources, demands and tensions impinging on managers, and their very individual responses to such resources in order to construct personal workplace identities. The method therefore offers organisations a way of making sense of different manager behaviours as different but legitimate responses to available resources and tensions, rather than constructing managers as 'good' or 'bad'. It further offers organisations insight into how organisations might support and encourage different manager behaviours through making certain discourses more attractive or easier to access and utilise. A possible development of the method and analysis of multiple manager stories would be to develop an organisational 'toolkit' or conceptual framework which would assist organisations in interpreting manager behaviours in terms of identity work and suggest appropriate strategies to develop managers within the organisation.

7. Conclusions and future directions

Interviews have been increasingly criticised for focusing on identity as a self-narrated rather than a social accomplishment (Down and Reveley, 2009; McInnes and Corlett, 2012) which produce retrospective, reflective and selective accounts of social actors (Clifton, 2014; Snow and Anderson, 1987) rather than in-situ talk and action. Whilst the limitation of the interview as a self-narrated account is acknowledged, this paper has argued that by recognising interviews as a particular form of social interaction, they can still generate insight not only into the self-identities of social actors but into the personal social worlds which they construct and the ways that they position themselves within it. Story elicitation enables interviewees to present themselves in ways that are personally meaningful and which represent how they see themselves and how they would like to be seen by others. However, by considering these presented stories in the context of Levi-Straussian mythical thought, and by applying both syntagmatic and paradigmatic analysis, the method also reveals some of the ongoing processes of identity work undertaken by the interviewee: the 'deep structures' of the social worlds that they construct through the selection, rejection and struggle with discursive resources, and the ways in which, through the surface level stories, they trace a mediating path through these 'deep structures'. Although Gemma's self-presentation is understood as particular to the context of a research interview into manager identity and it cannot be claimed that she would construct an identical identity to different audiences and in different contexts, neither is her presented workplace identity solely constructed for this interview. She draws on the resources available to her: her personal experiences and concerns, the people she works with and the organisational and discursive context (Denzin, 1989). The method therefore offers insight not only into a contextual self-presentation but into the issues, tensions and experiences of the social actors.

There are some particular ways in which the method might be utilised to further develop understanding of identity. By considering identity through the lens of self-identity rather than through identity work or regulatory social practices, the method suggests potential insights into the role of individual agency in the context of regulatory discourses and the effects on organisational practices and outcomes. One profitable research strategy might be an organisational single unit embedded case study (Yin, 2003) in which the method would enable analysis of the personal self-constructions of multiple organisational actors, and investigation into how shared organisational discursive resources are variously selected, rejected, utilised and struggled with. A second might be a longitudinal study of selected individuals to explore how individual self-constructions and identity work fluctuate and change over time, and in different contexts in response to different social regulation. Thirdly, the method offers a theoretical framework for investigating actor responses and positionings in relation to specific organisational tensions such as organisational and staff interests, discourses of public service and private enterprise, or stability and change. In each research area the method offers potential new insight by revealing the ways in which social actors imaginatively respond to and make sense of social and discursive practices, and construct new social realities.

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