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**Professional, occupational and manager identity: the role of ‘expert practice’ for being a housing manager**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this development paper is to explore some of the more emergent findings from a study into manager identity and identity work within a UK Housing Association. The primary focus of the research was on the position of managers in-between those they managed and were responsible for, and the organisation they were responsible to, and the ways in which such a position informed processes of identity work. However, a substantive finding to also emerge from the data was the role of expert practice – occupational knowledge and experience – as a significant construct for the identities and identity work of the managers studied. The paper therefore presents a preliminary exploration of these findings and suggests some ways in which the findings may open up new perspectives and avenues for research into the role of occupation and profession for constructing manager identity.

**Professional, occupational and manager identity**

Professional or occupational identity is concerned with answering the question of “who I am” in terms of “what I do” ([Ashcraft, 2013](#_ENREF_5); [Pratt et al., 2006](#_ENREF_23)). In focusing on “identity from work” ([Ashcraft, 2013: 10](#_ENREF_5)) I deliberately do not distinguish between recognised ‘professions’ and other occupations. Instead I draw on Abbott’s ([1988](#_ENREF_1)) explanation of a profession as a social construction achieved through successful claims to ownership of a work problem based on expert niche knowledge and the authority to define and regulate appropriate practice. Such claims to possess expert knowledge and to therefore be able to determine appropriate actions may form the basis of a professional or occupational identity whether or not that claim is fully recognised as a profession, such as in the case of housing management ([Casey, 2008](#_ENREF_10); [Casey and Allen, 2004](#_ENREF_11)). That is, I am concerned with the ways in which identity, including occupational identity, is discursively constructed through talk and discourses within which individuals position themselves and are positioned. I conceptualise these claims to occupational and/or professional knowledge, experience and values as ‘expert practice’.

Literature on the role of professional/occupational identity for managers has featured two overlapping themes, which both largely construct expert practice as a problem requiring some form of resolution. The first represents an increasing interest in the phenomenon of the ‘hybrid’ ([Burgess and Currie, 2013](#_ENREF_9); [Horton et al., 2014](#_ENREF_17); [McGivern et al., 2015](#_ENREF_22)). Hybrids are commonly thought of as professionals who have become managers of other professional staff and who continue to combine professional and managerial responsibilities ([Currie and Croft, 2015](#_ENREF_13); [McGivern et al., 2015](#_ENREF_22)). Studies of hybrid managers typically highlight the struggle to manage differences between professional and organisational or management values (e.g. [Aronson and Smith, 2011](#_ENREF_4); [Gleeson and Knights, 2008](#_ENREF_15); [Iedema et al., 2004](#_ENREF_18)) which the manager is required to choose between or hold in tension ([Bolton, 2005](#_ENREF_7); [Buchanan, 2013](#_ENREF_8); [Currie and Croft, 2015](#_ENREF_13)). They also highlight how the hybrid’s manager role is often perceived as a lesser, or extra role compared to their professional/occupational one ([Andersson, 2012](#_ENREF_3); [Buchanan, 2013](#_ENREF_8)) and how hybrid managers commonly re-inscribe their managerial roles in terms of acting to protect or to enhance professional values and practices ([McGivern et al., 2015](#_ENREF_22)).

A second literature stream focuses on manager development. This stream particularly recognises the fragile and contextual nature of management and how it may be thought of as an identity project of ‘becoming’ a manager brought about through talk and social relationships ([Andersson, 2010](#_ENREF_2); [Warhurst, 2011](#_ENREF_26); [Watson, 2001](#_ENREF_27)) in which managers must learn an appropriate language and behaviour, and gain recognition from others ([Andersson, 2010](#_ENREF_2); [Andersson, 2012](#_ENREF_3); [Sturdy et al., 2006](#_ENREF_24)). A particular challenge of becoming a manager is seen as being able to ‘let go’ of some of the securities afforded by a professional/occupational identity. Professional and technical expertise may be a source of organisational power ([Mangan and Brivot, 2015](#_ENREF_20)), whereas management involves the riskier act of persuading others ([McConville and Holden, 1999](#_ENREF_21)) and often lacks direct agency to get things done ([Austin et al., 2013](#_ENREF_6)). A key part of manager development is therefore seen as learning not to rely on previous expertise through which the new manager gained organisational recognition and success ([Austin et al., 2013](#_ENREF_6); [Warhurst, 2011](#_ENREF_26)), and to develop a new identification with a managerial position ([Croft et al., 2015](#_ENREF_12)).

**Manager identity in a Housing Association: the role of expert practice**

The data presented and discussed here comes from an in-depth case study of managers at Panorama Housing[[1]](#footnote-1), a North West England Housing Association with over 11,500 properties. Working within a narrative perspective of identity, the research sought to investigate the ways in which managers constructed workplace identities in the context of their organisational position ‘in-between’ those they managed and were responsible for, and the organisation they were responsible to. Twenty one managers were interviewed, from three hierarchical levels (eleven team leaders, eight service managers and two operations directors). A significant feature of the research design is that managers were invited to narrate a story about a workplace occasion or event which they felt captured their own understanding of their organisational role, and which formed the basis of the interview. The research therefore deliberately invited managers to present themselves on their own terms rather than seeking to frame their experience in particular ways ([Flick, 2009](#_ENREF_14); [Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003](#_ENREF_25)). Analysis was based on interpreting manager stories and their interview texts as particular instances of self-presentation, and sought to identify and examine processes of identity work undertaken during such a social interaction.

Although the research did not set out to investigate the role of professional/occupational identity, for sixteen of the twenty one managers ‘expert practice’ formed a significant construct for the workplace identities they presented though their chosen stories and interview talk. However, such a construct was used in multiple and differing ways not suggested by the literature on manager identity to date.

For some managers expert practice gave significant meaning to their work. This included giving personal meaning to their work and career: “The service area that I deal with, I’ve always worked in...and that’s just what drives me as a person...not being able to make a difference and see that difference in the community, I’d probably really struggle with” (Abbott, service manager). Managers also drew directly on expert practice to give meaning to their organisational role. For example Long, a team leader, told a story of leading a project to gain a Quality Mark as verification of their experience: “right from the outset they said, no, you do it, you project manage it...you’re the [one] with the local knowledge.” Expert practice may also determine service or organisational actions. A small number of managers drew on expert knowledge and practice they provided as the essential means through which the organisation is able to meet customer needs, identifying and overcoming “barriers” that an organisation might inadvertently create for customers (Bailey, service manager) or challenging “lip service” “because you will always find a different aspect...that’s not listed in the policy document” (Newton, team leader).

Second, expert practice provided a source of authority within the organisation. A number of managers emphasised the importance of expertise for their relationships with the staff they manage, and particularly the importance of having done the job that their staff do: “so I know the issues that they face, I know the difficulties, I know the challenges” (Goddard, team leader). Expert practice also offers a source of authority with which managers positon themselves within the organisation: as a means of promoting a service’s agenda and value within the organisation – “[mine]’s a complex area, it’s not... something that would necessarily be in the [average] social housing provider’s...basket of tools” (Jennings, service manager) or as a position from which to critique the organisation: “Occasionally I think that [the organisation’s] expectations are a little bit high...what sometimes we ask for is difficult” (Miller, team leader).

Thirdly, expert practice provides a means for managers to differentiate themselves. Some managers sought to differentiate themselves horizontally, in contrast to other peers and service areas as being “slightly different” (Bailey, service manager) and having specialist knowledge that other teams cannot replicate: “Our scope’s wider than...everyone else’s...I think they just touch on them, where we’re more involved with every agency” (Irwin, team leader). Others differentiated themselves vertically from more senior managers, having operational knowledge of working practices and being able to fix operational issues (Goddard and Kendall, team leaders) in contrast to senior managers who might make decisions without knowledge of their operational consequences (Varley, team leader).

The research also highlights two further areas of interest in relation to the relationship between occupational/professional and managerial identities. While expert practice played a significant role for a majority of managers, it appeared relatively unproblematic, with little evidence of overt tension between occupational/professional and manager identities, in contrast to much of the literature on hybrid managers. Managers revealed a range of ways of creatively incorporating notions of expert practice with a managerial identity. For example there were forms of what I characterise a ‘practitioner manager’ who leads a team of experts (Bailey, service manager), promotes the value of their service in the organisation (Jennings, service manager) or uses their expertise to help staff align their practice with organisational values (Newton, team leader). ‘Practising managers’ draw on their direct experience to support and mentor staff (Dawson and Long, team leaders; Hancock, service manager). ‘Professional managers’ blend practice with an organisational and managerial identity in order to bridge staff practice with organisational objectives (Goddard and Oakley, team leaders; Reed, service manager). ‘Expert managers’ draw on their operational expertise to defend the needs of their staff practitioners and to negotiate with more senior managers (Miller and Varley, team leaders). Although the research identified a wide range of ways in which a manager identity was interpreted and constructed, some of which did not reflect the organisation’s stated expectations of a manager role, there were nevertheless no clear examples of managers constructing an occupational identity as an *alternative* to a managerial one.

Second, it was notable that there was little significant difference in the role of expert practice between team leaders and service managers i.e. across hierarchical levels. Some service managers retained a strong practitioner identity, and a close identification with their staff as fellow practitioners (Bailey, Hancock, Jennings, Reed) while others drew more strongly on managerial knowledge and practice which recognises a contrasting role (Abbott, Chapman, Fleming, Tailor): “How can somebody manage us, what do they know about the service area, how this works?...It’s not about that, it’s about actually leading the team and leading the people in it and moving the service forward” (Abbott, service manager). Conversely, while practice formed an essential construct for many team leaders, some such as Oakley and Goddard were found to be developing increasingly managerial identities which draw on organisational discourses of management skills: “what I think the skill is, you try to get the best for the staff, you try to get the best out of the staff but also at the same time make sure the business objectives are met, as well” (Oakley, team leader).

**Future development and directions**

This paper deliberately invites further discussion of somewhat emergent findings which have arisen from research into the related, but distinct area identity work of managers in the context of being ‘in-between’ those they manage and are responsible for, and the organisation they are responsible to. Nevertheless I offer some tentative conclusions and suggestions for further research into manager identity and the role of professional/occupational identity.

First the findings open up potential new ways of understanding hybrid roles. The range of ways and extent to which expert practice formed a significant construct in the workplace identities of housing managers suggest that we need to look beyond seeing hybrid roles as simply a struggle between conflicting identities and which is essentially framed as a problem. For managers at Panorama Housing occupational knowledge and experience was not regarded as something to be either regretfully abandoned nor aggressively defended, but was typically creatively incorporated and blended with a managerial identity in highly individual ways. Whilst housing is not a recognised profession in the way that, say, medicine is, and might therefore be considered a less extreme case, the housing managers studied nevertheless regarded their occupational knowledge and experience as important and something which remained significant. Expanding research into more ambiguous and less recognised professions is likely to both develop our understanding of the ways in which practitioners undertake identity work as they take on manager roles, and to further develop our understanding of the wider, and complex, role of expert practice for management practice and manager identities.

Second, the findings suggest some ways of enhancing our understanding of manager identity and manager development. The findings highlight the continuing personal significance of practice for many managers, and the diverse and complex ways in which practice is used in constructing workplace identities. In doing so, they draw attention to the multiple and diverse range of discursive resources available to organisational actors, and the multiple and diverse ways to interpret and to ‘be’ a manager. Rather than viewing occupational identity and practice as a problem for managers to resolve, we might rather view it as a resource with which individuals make sense of their organisational positions, focusing on the ways in which individuals’ identity work may craft their organisational roles, as well as being crafted by organisational requirements ([Kira and Balkin, 2014](#_ENREF_19)). And we might re-frame our concern with what and how managers ‘should’ be, to a concern with who are what managers actually ‘are’ ([Harding et al., 2014](#_ENREF_16)).

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1. Panorama Housing is a pseudonym. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)