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**How to be a hero: the role of everyday mythologising for manager identity work**

Ali Rostron

University of Liverpool Management School

a.rostron@liverpool.ac.uk

**Abstract**

This paper extends the study of myth in organisations to the daily experience and identity work of managers, and specifically how managers determine what it means to act well in their organisational role. Drawing on Levi-Straussian ideas, I argue that an essential characteristic of myth – to link the subject and meaning of a story to a higher cosmologic realm – can also be seen in stories that individuals tell about themselves. Through analysis of two occasions of storytelling by two managers I demonstrate how in telling stories to account for themselves, individuals also construct a particular social world in which they understand themselves to be in. Further, it is the nature of this socially constructed world which determines how one should act and what it means to be good and moral. A mythological perspective has potential for extending organisational learning and capabilities by illuminating how individuals interpret not only their organisational position but the organisation itself.

**Key words:** Myth, Levi-Strauss, managers, identity work, moral accounting

Word count: 7,000

**Introduction**

It’s a middle management role isn’t it really, you get pressure from both ends. You’ve got to keep - sometimes the operational stuff or the stuff that you’ve *got* to do because of the direction of the organisation, doesn’t please the people you’re working with; and again the other stuff, the things that are going on at an operational level don’t necessarily fit [with director views]. (Fleming, Service Manager, Panorama Housing)

How do managers determine what it means to act well in their organisational roles? The above quote from Fleming, a manager in a UK social housing organisation highlights the tensions and difficulties which are implicit in the manager who operates ‘in the middle’, and who is subject to different demands and expectations from different organisational constituents, which may not be compatible of reconcilable. Moreover, Fleming’s quote hints strongly at her understanding, explored more fully in this paper, that these tensions are not simply manifested in specific and discrete instances, but are integral to the nature of the role itself. Determining what it means to act well is therefore not simply a question of decision making, or acting as a manager in particular situations, but understanding what it means to be a manager, and how to manage and negotiate multiple and competing responsibilities.

Understanding how managers make sense of their organisational roles matters. Managers are key organisational actors, who not only sensemakers but sensegivers ([Degn, 2015](#_ENREF_24)) and a reference point for others to extract sensemaking cues ([Helms Mills, Thurlow and Mills, 2010](#_ENREF_39); [Pye, 2005](#_ENREF_64)). The personal sense that managers make of multiple organisational subject positions and discourses creates social and organisational realities for those around them. Nevertheless, as the quote from Fleming illustrates, the competing demands on them of multiple others also creates an existential challenge for the manager which is still under-explored ([Bardon, Brown and Peze, 2017](#_ENREF_10); [Harding, Lee and Ford, 2014](#_ENREF_36); [Rostron, 2018](#_ENREF_69)). Thus, the questions I set out to address in this paper are: how do managers determine what it means to be a good manager, and to act well? And how do managers account for themselves as acting well as managers?

The paper proceeds as follows. In the subsequent section I elaborate the contingent and contested position of the manager in the organisation. I then draw on the work of Claude Levi-Strauss ([1963](#_ENREF_52), [1983](#_ENREF_53)) and his ideas of mythical thought. I argue that an essential characteristic of myth – to link the subject and meaning of a story to a higher cosmologic realm – can be operationalised as a conceptual tool with which to understand how and why managers account for themselves as moral actors in the organisation. In telling stories to account for themselves, individuals also construct a particular social world in which they understand themselves to be in; and it is the nature of this socially constructed world which determines how one should act and what it means to be good and moral. That is, I argue that individuals mythologise themselves as an everyday practice. In the second part of the paper I demonstrate the application of this everyday mythologising. I further discuss the value of such a conceptual tool, and how understanding everyday mythologising as moral accounting generates new and significant insight into our understanding of manager identity, of the manager position and experience in the organisation, and into the nature of organisational life itself.

**Being a good manager: the contingent nature of management**

As roles in post-bureaucratic organisations become less scripted ([Alvesson and Willmott, 2002](#_ENREF_7)) organisational actors face increasing uncertainty as to what it means to act well in their roles. This is especially the case for managers, who occupy a contingent and fragile position ([Thomas and Linstead, 2002](#_ENREF_74)). Rather than representing an objective and agreed set of functions, management roles are increasingly understood as relational ([Bardon, et al., 2017](#_ENREF_10)) and as discursively constructed by multiple subjectivities which the individual manager must make personal sense of ([Harding, et al., 2014](#_ENREF_36); [Kira and Balkin, 2014](#_ENREF_48); [Mantere, 2008](#_ENREF_57)). The organisational role of the manager is especially demanding for a number of reasons. They are both controllers and the controlled ([Harding, et al., 2014](#_ENREF_36); [Hassard, McCann and Morris, 2009](#_ENREF_37); [Watson, 1997](#_ENREF_76)), exercising power and control over those they are responsible for but also vulnerable to those they are answerable to ([Carter et al., 2014](#_ENREF_19); [Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 2003](#_ENREF_62)), and often required to implement and publically support decisions they were not involved in and may not agree with ([Ainsworth, Grant and Iedema, 2009](#_ENREF_2); [Ericsson and Augustinsson, 2015](#_ENREF_29); [Lee and Taylor, 2014](#_ENREF_51); [Lloyd and Payne, 2014](#_ENREF_55)). Despite some sustained attempts by business schools ([Khurana, 2007](#_ENREF_46)), management has not acquired either the status or the rigour of a profession ([Armstrong and Fukami, 2009](#_ENREF_8)), which establishes formal codes of conduct and constructs a particular meaning and purpose for work ([Abbott, 1988](#_ENREF_1)) and is socially recognised, such that professional identity is confirmed by conforming to such recognised practices and behaviours ([Ashcraft, 2013](#_ENREF_9)). Such taken for granted practices are not available to the manager ([McConville and Holden, 1999](#_ENREF_59)). Conversely, managers are answerable to multiple constituencies ([Day and Harrison, 2007](#_ENREF_23); [Kempster and Gregory, 2017](#_ENREF_45); [Rostron, 2018](#_ENREF_69)) who have their own expectations of the manager and how they should act. They are expected represent the organisations interests: not only to deliver organisational objectives but also to secure staff commitment to those objectives ([Currie and Proctor, 2005](#_ENREF_22); [Du Gay, 1996](#_ENREF_27); [Hassard, et al., 2009](#_ENREF_37)). However, managers may also spend significant amounts of time with the staff they manage, and need to develop effective personal relationships with them ([Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe, 2005](#_ENREF_4); [Ericsson and Augustinsson, 2015](#_ENREF_29); [Huy, 2002](#_ENREF_42)) and they may be subject to staff expectations to act on their behalf and to defend their interests ([Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe, 2005](#_ENREF_4); [Gherardi and Murgia, 2014](#_ENREF_35); [Jones and Kriflik, 2006](#_ENREF_43); [Laschinger, Purdy, Cho and Almost, 2006](#_ENREF_49)). Managers who have been promoted from professional or technical roles may also retain an awareness of and concern for professional values and operational and customer needs ([Alexiadou, 2001](#_ENREF_3); [Brown and Lewis, 2011](#_ENREF_16); [Croft, Currie and Lockett, 2015](#_ENREF_21); [Warhurst, 2011](#_ENREF_75)).

Identity studies have increasingly taken a narrative turn ([Alvesson and Robertson, 2016](#_ENREF_6); [Brown, 2015](#_ENREF_13); [Brown and Coupland, 2015](#_ENREF_14)). A narrative identity perspective argues that individuals seek to construct, sustain and repair a self-narrative, as a means of accounting for themselves as coherent and consistent in their actions over time ([Mallett and Wapshott, 2012](#_ENREF_56); [McAdams, 1985](#_ENREF_58); [Watson, 2009](#_ENREF_78)) in a recognisible syntax ([Wright, Nyberg and Grant, 2012](#_ENREF_79)): by drawing on familiar genres and scripts we accept the narrative trajectory and the ‘counterfeit coherence’ ([Boje, 2001, p.2](#_ENREF_12)) that one event leads properly to another, and that the hero of the story remains fundamentally the same character. Identity is thus inherently bound up with morality because our claim to be recognisable to another is based on being accountable for one’s actions to another, and being counted on ([Ricoeur, 1992](#_ENREF_67)). However, studies of manager identity have largely focused on the processes of identity work, and how managers respond either to significant events or daily interactions which threaten or challenge identity, rather than on how managers construct manager identities – and the nature of such identities ([Rostron, 2018](#_ENREF_69)). We need to pay closer attention to the narratives, and particularly the self-narratives that managers tell, as the means by which they account for themselves and their actions to others ([Riach, Rumens and Tyler, 2016](#_ENREF_66)). That is, manager self-narratives are grounded in their own understanding of not only what they should do as a manager, but how they should be a good manager ([Simms, 2007](#_ENREF_72)). And we need specific tools to enable us to analyse manager narratives as accounts of what it means to be a good manager, and how they have fulfilled such a role. In other words: what does it mean to be a hero in each manager’s self-narrative?

**How to be a hero – everyday mythologising**

One productive way of examining how and why managers account for themselves and their actions in their organisational position, is to read their narratives as examples of myth. Despite the increased interest in the role of stories for understanding how members make sense of and enact the organisation ([Brown, 2015](#_ENREF_13); [Brown, Gabriel and Gherardi, 2009](#_ENREF_15); [Hawkins and Saleem, 2012](#_ENREF_38); [Hitchin and Maksymiu, 2012](#_ENREF_40); [Rhodes and Brown, 2005](#_ENREF_65)), the role of myth – as a particular form of story – has received far more limited attention and remains a largely nascent concept within organisational studies ([Munroe and Huber, 2012](#_ENREF_61)). However, I propose that myth and mythologising is in fact a fundamental and integral part of human thinking and making sense of our everyday worlds.

Myth has been variously defined, but incorporates certain common features. Myths serve to link the subject of the story – a person, event or phenomenon – to a transcendent realm, through which certain features of the world are explained ([Eliade, 1963](#_ENREF_28); [Ganzin, Gephart and Suddaby, 2014](#_ENREF_34)). A key purpose of myth is therefore to locate human actions and experiences within a wider cosmology, and to demonstrate their inherent connectedness: we properly act in this way because this is how the world is. In doing so, myths draw on archetypes such as the hero’s journey or quest and overcoming evil ([Campbell, 1973](#_ENREF_18)). Myths therefore have a paradoxical quality. On the one hand their simplicity and familiarity makes them flexible resources with which to make ongoing sense of new situations ([Gabriel, 1991a](#_ENREF_31), [1991b](#_ENREF_32), [1995](#_ENREF_33)). On the other hand the same archetypal nature of myths means that they can be unquestioned and taken for granted: they construct accounts of reality which become self-evident and totalising ([Christensen and Cornelissen, 2015](#_ENREF_20)).

Levi-Strauss’s work on myths is extensive and complex, but I wish to highlight several key features of his thinking which have particular relevance both for manager identity work and the question of how managers determine what it means to act well in their organisational roles. Firstly, Levi-Strauss highlights and clarifies the concept of myth as incorporating both story and cosmology. From his studies of South American tribes he demonstrates that myths are surface-level stories which are derived from ‘deep structures’ ([Levi-Strauss, 1963](#_ENREF_52), [1983](#_ENREF_53)). These deep structures are based on oppositions, and myths describe mediating or intervening positions between these oppositions. For example, the capturing of fire to cook with mediates between raw, inedible food, or excess of water and cold, and the uncontrolled burning of the sun ([Levi-Strauss, 1983](#_ENREF_53)). Thus the meaning of a myth is not simply understood from its linear form, but more fundamentally from ‘bundles of events’ ([Levi-Strauss, 2001, p.40](#_ENREF_54)) which form the set of oppositions. Second, such oppositions are selected from a ‘virtually unlimited’ supply of elements in order to ‘simplify and organise the diversity of empirical experience’ ([Levi-Strauss, 1983, p.341](#_ENREF_53)). That is, a myth constructs a particular world from particular selected features which are to be explained: it does not claim to explain the world in its entirety. Finally, Levi-Strauss’s study and analysis of myths is focused not so much on the content of the myth itself but on the ‘constraining structures of the mind’ ([Levi-Strauss, 1983, p.10](#_ENREF_53)). Myths are not so much an explanatory tool as a way of thinking; not so much the product of human thought as the actual processes themselves ([Doja, 2008](#_ENREF_26)). Myth and mythologising is therefore not something we do in the absence of other, ‘better’ forms of knowledge, nor something we do on discrete occasions, but is how we construct knowledge itself, by making ongoing sense of our worlds. Mythologising is an everyday practice.

A Levi-Straussian conceptualisation of myth therefore offers a new and productive way of answering how managers determine what it means to act well in their organisational role and to be a good manager. Myth draws attention to the interdependency between the story being told and the wider cosmology, or landscape, to which it relates. Myths construct a particular world and order of things through selecting meaningful oppositions, and the meaning of the story within the myth is dependent on the particular nature of the landscape thus constructed. A Levi-Straussian perspective of myth urges us to pay closer attention not only to the stories that managers tell, but also to the social world that the manager understands themselves to be in, and the selected dimensions around which it is constructed. It is the particular nature of this socially constructed world that determines how one should act, and what it means to be good and moral in such a world – in other words, how to be a hero.

The rest of this paper is concerned with demonstrating the application of a Levi-Straussian mythical perspective; how such a reading starts to reveal how and why individual post-holders interpret their roles in different ways, and what constitutes success; and its implications for understanding organisations and organisational learning.

**Research design**

The research study, from which the illustrative cases are drawn, took place at ‘Panorama Housing’, a registered provider of social housing in North West England. Panorama employs over 250 staff and manages over 11,500 properties which are designed to provide affordable housing to those in housing need or who are unable to access other forms of accommodation such as home ownership. The research focused on twenty one managers operating within a range of customer-facing services such as lettings, property management, income collection and customer contact, and covering three organisational levels: first-level managers, known as Team Leaders, Service Managers and Operations Directors.

*Data collection*

Data gathering took place over a fifteen month period from September 2013 to December 2014. The primary source of data was an in-depth interview with each manager (supplemented with extensive observations of daily organisational activities, work-shadowing of managers and the capturing of organisational documents and artefacts) and it is this data that the present paper focuses on.

The deliberate choice of interviews as a research method is grounded in the understanding that, as a particular form of social interaction through which social reality is constructed ([Kelly, 2008](#_ENREF_44)), a research interview provides an 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 ([Denzin, 1989](#_ENREF_25); [Miller and Glassner, 2010](#_ENREF_60)). That is, it is recognised that an interview is not ‘a pipeline to the interiors of interviewees or the exteriors of social reality’ ([Alvesson, 2003, p.30](#_ENREF_5)): the focus of study is precisely the ways in which the interviewee seeks to present and account for themselves through a ‘commissioned performance’ ([Beech and Sims, 2007](#_ENREF_11)).

In keeping with this intent, the interviews followed a largely unstructured design which was also informed by the narrative paradigm within everyday mythologising is conceptualised. The focal point invited the participating manager to narrate a workplace incident or event about themselves which they felt reflected their own understanding of their role in the organisation. Participants were given this request and some broad guidelines in advance, to enable them to reflect on their organisational role and to choose a story which they felt was representative of their experience and the meanings they attached to their role. Story elicitation was intended to avoid premature framing ([Flick, 2009](#_ENREF_30); [Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003](#_ENREF_73)) by deliberately inviting managers to present themselves as they wished, and to enable some ‘creative rupturing’ ([Sanger, 1996](#_ENREF_70)) of the traditional interview format and the polished or corporate answers which managers may be accomplished at providing. Having listened to the manager’s story I then further explored the story with them, including: what the story meant to the manager; how the manager came to understand their organisational role and significant influences; the manager’s views on other organisational participants in the story; and their views on significant organisational actors who did not feature in the story and why they did not feature. Interviews lasted just over one hour on average; the shortest was 45 minutes and the longest was 75 minutes.

*Data analysis*

All interviews were fully transcribed and uploaded to NVivo. Analysis of the texts followed a number of stages. The first stage involved analysing the managers’ stories to identify the core narrative structure including the nature and genre of the plot and the roles played by the manager and other organisational actors. The second stage was concerned with the ways in which managers constructed a particular social world both through their chosen story and in their wider interview talk. Specifically this focused on the particular and selected dimensions from which they constructed the organisation in which they worked. A form of thematic analysis ([King and Horrocks, 2010](#_ENREF_47)) was used to identify and characterise the nature of sets of oppositions within each text, and then to characterise the overarching or primary dimensions with which the manager constructed their organisational and social world. In the third stage the analytical focus shifted to considering the manager’s perception of their position within the organisation. The interview texts were initially analysed in order to identify possible subject positions available to managers at Panorama Housing and how each individual manager responded to possible subject positions: which subject positions they recognised in their texts; how they interpreted those subject positions and what meaning they ascribed to them; and how they managed potential tensions and conflicts between subject positions. Finally the manager texts were read and analysed as instances of everyday mythologising. Here the focus of analysis shifted back to wide angle and sought to honour the integrity and coherence of the individual manager’s talk and self-presentation ([Riley and Hawe, 2005](#_ENREF_68)). In particular the analysis examined and sought to reveal the dynamic interplay between the syntagmatic narrative, the paradigmatic organisational world, and the discursive subjectivities and resources available to and impinging upon the manager, and the ways in which each might prescribe and frame the other.

In the next section, the value of everyday mythologising for furthering our understanding of how and why managers interpret their organisational positions in different ways, is demonstrated by presenting the cases of two managers in detail. The two managers have been deliberately chosen superficially representing considerable similarities, both in occupying the same organisational role, and in choosing to tell similar stories of personal success. By choosing to present two such cases in detail the paper demonstrates, through close analysis, how the mythologising of each manager serves to construct their organisational world in very different ways, and how this informs their construction of themselves as the hero of their own social world, or a good manager.

**Everyday mythologising: a tale of two managers**

***Panorama Housing: ‘a different kind of organisation’***

Panorama Housing was formed in 2006 to take over the housing stock of a local authority in North West England, with existing local authority staff being transferred under TUPE and the housing manager becoming the new CEO of Panorama. The organisation’s origins are therefore embedded in the public sector, but the CEO and senior leadership team sought to construct Panorama as a wholly new organisation which stood in contrast to the old one:

Lots of [staff] had...only worked for the local authority and whilst the job that they did in the local authority might have been fine for the local authority it was a different day, we were a different kind of organisation. We would stand or fall based on our own performance. – CEO, interview

After an initial period of stabilisation, therefore, the leadership team embarked on a programme of deliberate cultural change designed to ‘change people’s thinking’ (CEO, interview) and establish a new organisational identity and vision. This was supported by a series of restructures resulting in significant staff and especially management turnover, and by close control of organisational communications. The key to Panorama’s new identity was being a financially responsible and independent business, and continually improving in order to ‘be the best’ (Panorama website). Key discourses, evident in both internal and external texts included commercial competition and growth, customer focus, benchmarking and accreditation, and managers as both having the necessary skills to operate in a commercial environment, and to be able to manage and own the organisational vision: they are expected to be ‘authors of the message, not simple deliverers’ (CEO, interview).

***Fleming and Chapman: similar and different managers***

Fleming and Chapman are both service managers at Panorama, with overall responsibility for an organisational service (e.g. rental income, tenancy management or customer contact) and 20-25 officers who are directly line managed by two or three team leaders. Both Fleming and Chapman joined Panorama at around the same time and as part of early organisational restructures to appoint managers with the desired skills and knowledge. Superficially the stories they chose to tell about themselves are also similar, about how each had arrived to find a failing service and had successfully transformed it into a high-performing one (table 1). However, a more detailed analysis of each story, read as everyday mythologising, reveals important nuances and differences in how each manager accounted for themselves as a manager.

***Narrating the self***

Narrative analysis of the stories told by Fleming and Chapman identified two key areas of difference between the superficially similar stories: narrative plot and narrative role.

When analysed as narrative plot, Fleming’s story is relatively complex, incorporating narrative peaks and troughs, twists and turns, and with the outcome uncertain until the end. The story begins with a vivid description of the state of the failing service: as well as performing poorly, staff were fearful and distrustful of managers who had blamed them for **Table 1 – Mythological analysis of manager stories**



**Table 1 – Mythological analysis of manager stories**/continued

their inability to effectively manage the service and their own poor decision-making: ‘[staff] were always waiting for the door to open and for them to fall through, they were always waiting for the rants, they were waiting for the attack’. Fleming had some immediate ideas for improving performance by re-organising workload distribution, but then suffered a personal setback when she attended a meeting with directors and was unable to provide any convincing account or explanation of the service’s current performance. She realised that she needed a detailed understanding of the service, and be able to analyse trends and predict future performance, in order to give directors ‘confidence’; and she started to gain some recognition from one director that ‘one of the things you can always count on is when I turn up to a meeting I’m always prepared’. She also started to make progress in changing the culture of her team, and encouraging them to trust her, particularly by being open and honest and admitting to any personal mistakes. Nevertheless, there were further challenges: some team members remained anxious at having to work near a manager, and a 360 degree appraisal suggested that her initial enthusiasm and strong performance had waned, which was a personal shock. Fleming’s story is therefore one of continual struggle, of success in spite of failures, and achieved through personal determination: ‘it’s what you do from that point...do you then break down or do you pick yourself up and shake yourself off and move forward’.

In contrast, Chapman’s story describes a much more certain trajectory. Like Fleming, Chapman was recruited to turn a failing service around, but Chapman’s story starts with a conversation with the CEO:

I think when I joined, he recognised that, you know, I was driven and I wanted it to work, so he spoke to me directly and he said it doesn’t matter how much it costs. You tell me what we need to make it work, and we’ll make it work.

Whereas Fleming’s story involves continually having to prove herself as a manager, Chapman’s begins with clear recognition of her abilities from the organisation; and her subsequent story is essentially an account of her personal vision for transforming the service and how she then successfully implemented it, through creating a culture of success and personal development amongst staff, which involves encouraging talented staff to excel and then gain promotion to other parts of the organisation. Like Fleming, Chapman also adopted a personal approach, paying close attention to staff, their work and lives outside, but Chapman’s success is immediate from the beginning and continues throughout her story: ‘I’m enthusiastic and I’m a good motivator, and I just encourage people’. Moreover, as well as transforming her service area, Chapman’s vision of creating a culture of high performance, high commitment and investment in staff has also been taken up by the whole organisation:

The more I’ve sold it, the more I’ve said it, the better it makes sense really... [directors] just jumped on board....I’ve always thought that’s the best way to do things, and that’s what I’ve just instilled in the business...I’ve brought that in myself, in my vision.

Chapman’s story is largely one of unambiguous success: the hero has the abilities to meet the task ahead and there is little doubt that she will eventually succeed.

Role analysis reveals further significant differences between the stories told by Fleming and Chapman. Fleming’s story is populated by a range of characters who also have a significant role in her story. Former managers are cast as villains whose destructive effects Fleming has to struggle to overcome. Fleming’s staff are significant as constituents that Fleming needs to convince and reassure as to her own qualities and credentials as a manager, as are directors, whose performance meetings and appraisals might be read as tests that Fleming struggles to pass. In Fleming’s story, achieving success as a manager is hard-earned and dependent on overcoming and convincing many different others. In contrast, Chapman’s story is of the hero coming into the organisation with a clear vision and delivering it successfully with no obstacles: ‘When someone says we’ll give the blank canvas and you do what you want, that’s exactly what happened’. Whilst there are other characters in her story, they do not significantly impinge on her narrative arc: they are already, or readily become convinced by her vision and abilities, and act as a support to the central narrative trajectory of managerial success.

***Constructing a social landscape***

As well as differing in narrative plot, the stories of Fleming and Chapman also derive from differing ‘deep structures’ ([Levi-Strauss, 1963](#_ENREF_52), [1983](#_ENREF_53)) with which each manager constructs the organisational context in which they act. Fleming’s story constructs a social landscape based on an overarching opposition between the demands and expectations of senior managers in delivering organisational objectives through service performance, and the capacity and capabilities of staff to deliver those objectives. It is an opposition which impinges directly on her own role as a manager:

It’s a middle management role isn’t it really, you get pressure from both ends. You’ve got to keep - sometimes the operational stuff or the stuff that you’ve *got* to do because of the direction of the organisation, doesn’t please the people you’re working with; and again the other stuff, the things that are going on at an operational level don’t necessarily fit [with director views].

Within her chosen story, and within her wider interview text, Fleming recognises the needs and expectations of each as equally legitimate. Directors are rightly concerned with maximising performance, and expect to be given answers when performance is not as expected; and Fleming accepts that she is accountable for her service: ‘I’m under no illusions, I have a set of priorities I have to deliver on, if I’m not delivering on them, I know’. Equally, however, staff have finite capacity to be able to deliver performance, and experience the effects of too much attention and pressure from managers: ‘just basically putting it all on the officers’ shoulders was making them less productive’. Their behaviours and performance are determined as much by their manager’s example as their own attitudes: negative behaviours such ‘being there to get the pay to go home’ are the direct result of being pressurised, blamed or seeing their own manager under stress and worried.

By constructing her organisational context in such a way, Fleming also constructs a particular meaning for her story of service reform. Fleming herself framed her story thus:

It was really a quite unique sort of situation when I started because there was a sort of distrust downstairs and anxious nervousness upstairs. So it was this position where there were problems with relationships on both sides and trying to address both of those relationships in different ways was quite unique.

Her story begins with the exacerbating effects of previous managers, who were unable to effectively manage the service themselves and who then failed to shield staff from the effects of their failure; and it ends through Fleming both recognising and being able to resolve the demands of each, by establishing confidence in herself as an effective manager. Her ability to explain and predict performance gives confidence to directors, while staff can be confident both that they can fulfil performance expectations through Fleming’s workload reforms, and that they will be shielded from undue pressure from above. As Fleming herself says: ‘I’m effectively the insulator’, keeping each party happy but also separate from the other.

In contrast, Chapman’s story constructs a more abstract and complex overarching opposition between individual and collective interests. Chapman’s text is infused with a number of related oppositions incorporating a wide range of stakeholders including staff, team leaders, peers, directors, other service areas, tenants, and the organisational leadership, but which coalesce around the assumption that individual and collective interests cannot be equally met. For example, she contrasts the needs of the ambitious staff member who may look for opportunities outside their service area of organisation, with the service’s need for stability; and relatedly, the need of the service to ‘keep hold of their best people’ in order to deliver high performance with the benefits to the wider organisation if a talented individual is promoted elsewhere. She contrasts the opposition between public and private sector organisations: public organisations are concerned with delivering services to everyone whereas private companies are concerned with making profit for themselves through efficiencies.

Such a social landscape creates a quite different meaning for a story of service reform. Within this landscape, service failure is not a result of ineffectiveness or bad intentions, but a lack of insight; and service reform requires everyone – staff, managers, other services and directors – to think in new ways. The resolution of the story is achieved through Chapman’s personal vision. It is she who can see and do what no one else can, and who is able to persuade others of her vision of new ways of working: that the individual and collective interests can indeed be creatively integrated to the benefit of each. By supporting the career ambitions of talented staff the service will benefit from increased motivation in the short term; and by creating a culture of success Chapman will be able to continue to attract new talent and establish an organisational role as a talent pool: ‘that’s a *great* way to join an organisation’. By reinscribing the private sector value of organisational success, Panorama can save money by reducing delays and errors – ‘[If] it’s a bad experience it’s a costly experience’ – and become the best at delivering what customers want:

Before stock transfer that was definitely the opinion of customers that we’ll *give* them the service, but *now,* it’s on *request*, so we’ll deliver what they’re asking for. It’s not: this is what you’re gonna be given – [it’s] this is what you’re asking for and we’ll try and deliver that for you. And you know, every day we’ll give great customer service and we’ll enhance the reputation of the organisation.

Whereas Fleming continues to recognise the tension between directors and staff, but insulates each from the other, Chapman does not so much mediate between but overturn oppositions. Nevertheless, like Fleming she also constructs a very personal and embodied form of mediation: it is her personal vision which is driving the new ways of working and thinking. She identifies strongly with her service area and with her team: ‘I try and tell my team that they’re representing me, so if they make a mistake I make a mistake’ and she is proud of her achievements: ‘it *was* in my vision, you know, of how are we going to do things’.

***Responding to discursive practices***

A key element of everyday mythologising is that it is both informed and constrained by the discursive context in which individuals act and are acted upon, and is also the means by which individuals respond to and make sense of such discursive practices. As already highlighted, Fleming and Chapman both work in the same organisation in similar roles, and told similar stories about overcoming service failure. Nevertheless, analytical focus on how each manager responded to their discursive context also reveals important differences.

For Fleming, the context of a failing service can be seen as helping to determine the available positions from which a social landscape might be constructed. Service failure and the responses of former managers reveal the tensions between organisational and staff needs, and Fleming recognises two competing subject positions in her interview text: as a manager of a service area responsible for delivering organisational objectives, and as a manager of staff with responsibilities for staff needs and interests. However, by constructing a social landscape based on vertical organisational oppositions between top and bottom, Fleming also chooses to recognise and foreground both subject positions: she accepts responsibilities towards the needs and expectations of both the organisation and its concern for performance, and of staff and their wellbeing. Fleming’s particular positioning of herself within a social landscape through her story of service reform also informs and is informed by her organisational and social context. In her story she constructs herself as taking personal responsibility for her actions and mistakes, and being willing to learn and change in response. She recognises the right of each to make claims on her and seeks to understand and then to fulfil their expectations of her. In other words she seeks to act morally to each constituency. However, her particular positioning by which she mediates tensions between organisational and staff needs, as an ‘insulator’, also informs the ways and extent to which she recognises each subject position. Rather than being the ‘author of the message’ and seeking to bring staff and the organisation into closer alignment, Fleming positions herself as the essential insulation between the two. Similarly, her commitment towards staff is limited to protecting them, rather than actively defending or acting as their representative upwards.

Like Fleming, Chapman’s text recognises subject positions of being a manager of a service area and as a manager of staff, but in very different ways. For Chapman, the context of a failing service creates a space to establish a new vision. Her story of service reform constructs her as a successful, incisive and transformational manager, and this identity both induces and supports recognition of, and responses to organisational discourses which align with this, such as continuous improvement, high performance, achievement, and agential managers who are ‘the authors of the message, not simple deliverers’. Chapman’s story of service reform thus explicitly constructs her as a manager who fulfils Panorama’s expectations and values. However, rather than owning the organisational message, Chapman goes further and authors her own message of her vision for service and organisational success. By being able implement her own vision, Chapman is also able to construct a particular interpretation of a subject position as a manager of staff. Rather than responding to expressed staff needs, Chapman offers her vision to them and invites them to seek to develop their skills and careers with her support; and rather than identifying herself with staff and their needs or work, she invites them to identify themselves with her and to see themselves as her representatives outside and inside the organisation. This is further supported by Chapman’s construction of a social landscape of oppositions based on individual versus collective interests. Organisational alignment is entirely possible, but it requires all others to align with Chapman’s personal vision.

***Everyday mythologising: how to be a good manager***

The preceding sections have demonstrated, through a close analysis of interview texts, some of the key processes of narrative identity work – narrating the self, constructing a social landscape and responding to discursive practices – and the complex interplay between these processes.

The stories that Fleming and Chapman told, and the ways in which each sought to present and account for themselves as managers, both strongly reflect the organisational context in which they work. Both told stories of reforming failing services and of achieving success, in accordance with Panorama’s focus on high performance, continuous improvement and competitiveness, and to ‘be the best’, and which reflect Panorama’s demands for agential, commercially aware and skilled managers. Social context for Fleming and Chapman is a powerful determinant of the kinds of stories they might tell about themselves and the resources with which they may present and account for themselves: both recognise and seek to comply with what it means to be a successful manager at Panorama. However, within this context, the individual self-narratives of each manager also interplay with organisational discourses. A close reading of each manager story of service reform has revealed important differences of nuance and meaning, and analysis of processes of everyday mythologising has uncovered the ways in which Fleming and Chapman recognise, interpret and position themselves within their social context as service managers in very different ways. Through the particular context of service failure Fleming recognises the demands and expectations of different constituents – directors and staff – of her as a manager. She constructs a social landscape around such tensions and demonstrates, through her story of service reform, how she is able to mediate such tensions through acting as an ‘insulator’ between the two and giving confidence to each. In contrast, for Chapman service failure provides a context in which to demonstrate the need for new thinking and a vision, and her story of service reform serves to position Chapman as the one who can see, and then steer a course through old assumptions and failed ways of working.

**Discussion and conclusions**

In this paper I have sought to critique and extend our understanding of managers and their organisational roles, by examining how managers determine what it means to act well, and to be a good manager. In the context of multiple discursive resources and subjectivities, what it means to act well as a manager depends on how the individual manager interprets and constructs the organisational world in which they act. The Levi-Straussian-based construct of everyday mythologising provides a conceptual tool for both understanding and analysing how managers – and other individuals – determine what it means to act well. Myths are a distinctive form of story which are grounded in the interdependency between the narrative of human actions, and the wider cosmology, or landscape, in which those human actions take place. Everyday mythologising is to both construct a particular and personally salient social world from selected dimensions; and to tell a story of appropriate human actions within that world – in other words what it means to be a hero within that social world. Through the close and detailed analysis of just two cases, I have not sought to produce a typology of ‘good managers’ but to uncover and analyse some of the specific processes of mythologising – narrating the self, constructing a social landscape and responding to discursive practices – and the interplay and interdependence of such processes. By reading and analysing two manager accounts of themselves as everyday mythologising, I have been able to demonstrate how and why each manager constructs a highly personal interpretation of a similar role, and what it means to be a good manager.

The insights generated by the construct of everyday mythologising have implications for how we understand and research both managers and organisations. Firstly, everyday mythologising draws renewed attention to the role of moral accounting for managers and how they make sense of their organisational roles and selves; that is, their identity work. Both Fleming and Chapman recognised the different claims and expectations of organisational constituents and sought to account for themselves as acting morally in response to such claims: Fleming by establishing the common ground of ‘confidence’ in her for both staff and directors, and Chapman by creating a culture of success which allows her to generously support the ambitions of talented staff and the needs of the wider organisation. Both Fleming and Chapman recognise management as an inherently relational and ethical enterprise ([Holt, 2006](#_ENREF_41); [Leavitt, Reynolds, Barnes, Schilpzand and Hannah, 2012](#_ENREF_50); [Watson, 2001](#_ENREF_77)). However, studies of management morality and ethics have tended to treat ethics as an external, objective construct against which managers might be measured, and commonly construct manager ethics as manager decision making in specific, problematic situations ([Kempster and Gregory, 2017](#_ENREF_45); [Leavitt, et al., 2012](#_ENREF_50); [Shotter and Tsoukas, 2014](#_ENREF_71)). The perspective of everyday mythologising highlights that ethics is woven into the fabric of management practice itself, and that we need to pay greater attention to how managers themselves account for their actions as right and good.

Secondly, everyday mythologising highlights the role of imagination in organisational life. Gabriel ([1995](#_ENREF_33)) argues for the limits of the rational organisation and its ability to control organisational members: there exists an ‘uncolonized terrain’ ([Gabriel, 1995, p.478](#_ENREF_33)) characterised by fantasy and desire, into which members can temporarily retreat. Stories and myths, he suggests, can provide important forms of such an unmanaged terrain, out of reach of managerial attempts at control, in which events and official narratives can be symbolically refashioned to provide emotional pleasure and relief. A mythological perspective further suggests that rather than existing, albeit significantly, in the organisational margins, the imaginative retelling and accounting for ourselves through stories is a fundamental part of organisational life. As managers (whom Gabriel casts as those seeking to exercise control over members) Fleming and Chapman are not simply organisational stooges. As both controllers and the controlled ([Harding, et al., 2014](#_ENREF_36); [Hassard, et al., 2009](#_ENREF_37)), they make imaginative and personal sense of their organisational position, what their organisational world is really like and what it means to act well within it. The imagination is not something that individuals simply retreat to, or utilise strategically; it is the very way in which we creatively construct a ‘counterfeit coherence’ ([Boje, 2001, p.2](#_ENREF_12)) out of the ‘virtually unlimited’ supply of available materials ([Levi-Strauss, 1983, p.341](#_ENREF_53)) to make sense of our world and out place in it.

This suggests an entirely alternative way of looking at organisations. As well as resources rationally controlled and organised for the achievement of a shared and coherent purpose, organisations might equally be understood as a multiplicity of co-existing social worlds which are constructed and re-constructed by its members. Fleming and Chapman act both in a shared construct of the organisation called Panorama, with its organisational story, values and purpose, and also in an individually constructed organisational world whose meanings require subtle but significantly different actions and stories to account for oneself as a good manager. These personal constructions have implications for the sensemaking of others around them ([Degn, 2015](#_ENREF_24); [Helms Mills, et al., 2010](#_ENREF_39); [Pye, 2005](#_ENREF_64)): the extent to which they sought to align organisational and staff interests and perceptions, and the ways in which organisational members understand their place in the organisation and relate to other organisational actors and constituencies. The executive managers of Panorama actively sought to construct a shared organisational discourse and shared understanding of management, and undertook deliberate sense-breaking and sense-giving activities ([Pratt, 2000](#_ENREF_63)). Nevertheless, while Fleming and Chapman both reflected common organisational discourses, they also constructed their own personal versions of the organisation, with consequences for how they determined what constitutes good and moral actions as a manager. Even the most totalising institutions have limits to the effectiveness of their disciplinary power ([Brown and Toyoki, 2013](#_ENREF_17)); but additionally individuals must necessarily engage imaginatively with the social worlds in which they find themselves, to make a personal and selective sense out of the multiplicity of discursive resources. Rather than being regarded as colourful or decorative additions to organisational life, the stories which individuals to account for themselves might be better regarded as the stuff of organisations themselves.

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