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**‘It was a different day, we were a different kind of organisation’: the role of myth in a hybrid organisation**

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**Abstract:** Hybrid organisations have becomean increasingly common feature of the public sector, but the presence of competing institutional logics represents significant challenges for such organisations. This development paper contributes to our understanding of such challenges by adopting a mythological approach and examining the role of the organisational story in a UK housing association. A preliminary analysis suggests that the deliberate mythologising of the organisation by its leadership team as a different and unique entity creates a compelling account of how and why the organisation adopts new business practices for the delivery of social outcomes. Moreover, this myth serves as an essential gravitational field for organisational members, either to cleave to, or to position themselves in relation to, even when drawing on alternative social logics. Full analysis will further clarify the role of myth as a sensemaking tool for hybrid organisations, and the nature and range of member responses.

**The challenge of organisational hybridity**

The public sector has become increasingly populated by forms of hybrid organisations. Hybrid organisations are characterised as being rooted in more than one sector ([Billis, 2010](#_ENREF_2)), typically the state, the market and/or civil society, and therefore incorporating multiple and competing institutional logics and stakeholder interests ([Johansen et al., 2015](#_ENREF_15); [Thomasson, 2009](#_ENREF_29); [Vickers et al., 2017](#_ENREF_31)). A variety of drivers have facilitated the emergence of organisations with both a social and commercial orientation including the exposure of public services to commercial practices ([Caperchione et al., 2017](#_ENREF_6); [Pedersen and Hartley, 2008](#_ENREF_24); [Van Bockel and Noordegraaf, 2006](#_ENREF_30)), reductions and uncertainties of state funding ([Morrison, 2016](#_ENREF_19)), and the entry of private companies into public services ([Manville et al., 2016](#_ENREF_17)). Research in hybrid organisations has thus particularly focused on how competing interests and logics are managed, both at the organisational level and for individuals: for example, development of new governance and accounting structures ([Ebrahim et al., 2014](#_ENREF_9)), how managers make decisions in the context of competing logics ([Johansen et al., 2015](#_ENREF_15)), and how organisational members interpret the meaning of their organisational roles ([McGivern et al., 2015](#_ENREF_18); [Oldenhof et al., 2013](#_ENREF_22)).

One area where research has been more limited concerns the interplay between organisational and member sensemaking, and how individual actors make sense of the organisation’s identity, as well as their own role as a member of it ([Reissner, 2017](#_ENREF_27)). Another is a tendency to focus on the problematic nature of hybrid organisations, such as issues of mission drift, rather than the potential creative and generative possibilities afforded by institutional tensions ([Vickers et al., 2017](#_ENREF_31)). This paper starts to address both of these by presenting the case of a hybrid organisation, a UK housing association, and analysis of both its construction of a new and positive organisational identity, and the differing ways in which organisational members responded to that organisational identity. In doing so, I make use of myth as an innovative analytical lens.

**Myth in organisations**

Despite the increased interest in the role of stories for understanding how members make sense of and enact the organisation ([Brown, 2015](#_ENREF_3); [Brown et al., 2009](#_ENREF_4)) the role of myth remains a largely nascent concept within organisational studies ([Munroe and Huber, 2012](#_ENREF_21)). I argue, however, that myth represents an essential form of human thinking and sensemaking ([Doja, 2008](#_ENREF_8)). A key purpose of myth is to locate human actions and experiences within a wider cosmology, and to demonstrate their inherent connectedness ([Levi-Strauss, 1983](#_ENREF_16)). In doing so, myths perform an explanatory function as to how and why things are as they are, and how one should therefore act in the world ([Eliade, 1963](#_ENREF_10); [Ganzin et al., 2014](#_ENREF_13)), and they achieve this particularly through the use of archetypes – such as the hero and the villain – ([Campbell, 1973](#_ENREF_5); [Moxnes, 2013](#_ENREF_20)) images and symbols ([Bathurst and Monin, 2010](#_ENREF_1); [Starr-Glass, 2002](#_ENREF_28)). Myths therefore have an important paradoxical quality. On the one hand their simplicity and familiarity makes them flexible resources with which to make ongoing sense of new situations ([Gabriel, 1995](#_ENREF_12)). 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_7)) and with the potential to disguise tensions and ambiguities ([Hodge, 2010](#_ENREF_14)).

**Research design**

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. The original research aim was to investigate how managers constructed workplace identities in the context of multiple constituents and particularly the potentially competing demands of the organisation, staff and tenants/customers. The research was conducted within a narrative paradigm. One key data set was interviews with 21 managers based on story elicitation, with managers invited to tell a story about themselves in their organisational role which they felt reflected their understanding of it and its meaning for them. A second set of data focused on the discursive context of the organisation, and drew on extensive work shadowing and observation of managers and organisational activities, and the collection of internal and external documents and artefacts. One feature revealed through analysis of this data was a highly pervasive and consistent organisational story. It is this story, and my developing interest in the role of myth in organisational life, that has resulted in this preliminary revisiting of the data in order to examine how the particular challenges of a hybrid organisation are negotiated.

**A different kind of organisation: the myth of Panorama Housing**

Panorama was established in 2006 following the stock transfer of local authority housing. In line with many other such transferred housing associations ([Pawson and Smith, 2009](#_ENREF_23); [Preece and Ward, 2012](#_ENREF_26)) Panorama’s leadership team set out to deliberately create a new organisational culture. The story of Panorama, which was told to me separately with some consistency by both the CEO and two directors, and which was widely reflected within organisational discourses and member talk, can thus be read as an explicit attempt to create a mythology of Panorama.

The myth of Panorama has three key parts. The first concerns the organisational origins:

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

The story establishes Panorama as a completely new organisation, clearly breaking from its council past and roots, despite the fact that staff, housing stock, infrastructure and tenants remained the same. The council is constructed as representing an older, simpler and less demanding order which is inadequate for the new ‘different day’. In contrast Panorama will ‘stand or fall based on our own performance’: it will be judged on what it delivers by tenants and its investors and it is responsive and innovative, adopting new practices where required. The myth of Panorama therefore establishes business practices and a commercial logic as essential for delivering services in a new environment: the old council ways ‘might have been fine’ once but are now in the past.

The second part of the story constructs Panorama as a shared vision. A significant moment came after the first three years when the new organisation had been established and performance driven up:

Once we’d achieved both targets within the first three years it was a case of, well what next - who *are* we, *really*...how do we want to develop as an organisation...because we included all our stakeholders at that stage in its development, they were able to help to shape it, own it, understand it – Executive Director, interview

Panorama’s direction and activities are constructed as not only shared by all its stakeholders – staff, tenants, investors and local agencies – but actively decided by them. Panorama’s new vision and practices belong to everyone. The myth therefore constructs a rather more benign alternative to the extensive restructuring and staff turnover that took place, and the stated intention of the CEO to achieve a cultural change. It also establishes consultation as an answer to the logic of democratic accountability lost following stock transfer from local council governance: having had the opportunity to take part in deciding the organisation’s vision, stakeholders are now an integral part of it.

The third part of the story sets out where Panorama is now. At a staff briefing the CEO commented:

I don’t think we fully understand what we’ve achieved. [The borough] is a better place because of the work that you do. It just seems to be in our DNA to want to improve, to want to get better. We’ve never been satisfied with standing still – CEO, contemporaneous notes

Panorama’s successes are not just in housing but have improved the whole borough, and this has been achieved through the organisation’s need to continue to improve: that is, its commercial and competitive drive. Commercial logics are again mobilised as the means by which social improvements can happen; but now the commercial drive is reconstructed not as a choice but as something natural and inevitable: ‘it just seems to be in our DNA to want to improve’.

**Member responses to organisational myth**

The myth of Panorama is that a commercially driven and professional business is the only way to successfully achieve social outcomes; and that those social outcomes are achieved in part because the organisation’s stakeholders have been fully involved in the organisation’s direction and decision-making. The language of professional business was certainly pervasive within the organisation: not only managers but staff appeared to be comfortable referring to Panorama as ‘the business’ and using terms such as ‘growing the business’, ‘sustainability’ and ‘balance sheet’. However, the stories elicited from 21 managers offers the opportunity to examine more precisely how members respond to the myth, and preliminary analysis suggests two broad types of response.

***Embracing and co-opting***: A number of manager stories echoed or reproduced the organisational myth of professional business practices improving delivery of social outcomes. For example, two managers told stories about how they transformed failing services through the implementation of more business-focused working practices. Four managers told stories in which they personally developed as professional managers, building on, extending or even compensating for technical knowledge by developing management skills. Such responses could also subtly re-work the organisational myth: for example one manager’s story concerned how she helps tenants to increase their income to meet their rental obligations and therefore helps the business to remain financially viable: ‘if we get the money in then that’s a success story’. With such stories these managers reflect the dominance of Panorama’s business logic and positon themselves as managers in Panorama’s desired image.

***Challenging:*** However, just over half of manager stories challenged the Panorama myth and the dominance of a commercial business logic by reinscribing a social one. Several managers characterised parts of the business as ‘stuck inside the building’ or ‘upstairs’ with little idea of the realities in the community or the operational needs. Other managers were not overtly critical but positioned themselves as providing the essential expert knowledge and experience to enable the organisation to fulfil its social obligations: for example, helping to identify particular, hard-to-recognise social needs when ‘everything isn’t black and white’. One manager in particular drew on her housing and community knowledge to challenge the validity of Panorama’s focus on key performance indicators, and argued that they do not always reflect real outcomes for tenants or staff:

It would be easy for me to say that I’ve come here and [performance was poor] and seen that as a priority...what I was trying to look at was a wider perspective rather than it being just about performance, about the benefits of understanding the dynamics of the team, the situation the team were in – Service manager, interview

Nevertheless, such stories do not challenge the legitimacy of a business logic, but its sufficiency. By drawing on the logics of social needs and outcomes, managers were able to position themselves as providing essential knowledge and expertise to the professional business and to provide a necessary counter-balance. That is, they create new space for themselves within the myth of the professional business rather than setting themselves up against it.

**Discussion: next steps and potential contributions**

This paper has presented a very preliminary re-analysis of data that was originally collected with a different research aim. Therefore the next steps are to develop a full new analysis of the data. However, this initial analysis indicates some potential contributions.

Firstly the case of Panorama suggests that myth can function as a key mechanism for enabling organisations to manage and to transcend competing institutional logics. The Panorama myth provides a compelling account of the organisation as a business that has grown out of (in both senses) its former council roots; and this myth appears to operate as an essential gravitational field within the organisation. Nearly half of the managers interviewed told stories which positioned them as closely orbiting the myth of a professional business delivering social outcomes; and although the remainder reflect the stronger centrifugal force of alternative logics, their stories remain positioned in relation to the organisational myth. The strength of the Panorama myth might be interpreted as a case of ‘disciplined selves’ ([Foucault, 1979](#_ENREF_11)) as a result of organisational sensebreaking and sensemaking ([Pratt, 2000](#_ENREF_25)). However, from the context of sensemaking in a complex environment it might also be read as a necessary tool to enable organisational members to make sense of themselves and undertake their daily activities ([Johansen et al., 2015](#_ENREF_15)). Second, and relatedly, the case of Panorama provides an opportunity to investigate in further detail the particular ways in which organisational members respond to a powerful organisational myth, the extent of its totalising, the ways in which it can be re-worked to suit the purposes of individual actors, and how possible alternative myths may be revealed in their re-working ([Munroe and Huber, 2012](#_ENREF_21); [Reissner, 2017](#_ENREF_27)).

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